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Maternity Leave Benefit for Researchers: A Case Study of FAPESP's Maternity Leave Policy

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ABSTRACT

The proportion of researchers by gender has proven virtually equal in Brazil. Maternal life often occurs concomitantly with a researcher's career development, raising the need for policies that can prevent these two spheres from colliding. Eight years ago, maternity leave benefit was first considered by research funding government agencies. In 2013, the São Paulo State funding agency (FAPESP) also joined efforts towards the gender inclusion agenda. This article analyzes the application of the Ordinance PR nº 08/2015, which guarantees the maternity leave benefit by FAPESP. The article also aims to identify room for improvement in the application process and factors that could contribute to its full realization: a complete break from academic activities during the four-month leave period, without prejudice to the development of the researcher's career. Its findings observe a culture of academic productivism that affects the application of the benefit in various ways, imposing significant difficulties for grantees who wish to benefit from it. We believe that the results may influence the institutional stakeholders that surround maternity leave benefit as a whole.

KEYWORDS

Maternity leave; women's academic careers; academic productivism

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decade, the proportion of Brazilian female academics among named and gendered author profiles in research activities across all areas has increased. Between 2011 and 2015, the proportion of researchers by gender was balanced; women corresponded to 49% and men represented 51%. Data indicated an increase of 11% when compared to results of the previous survey (period 1996–2000; Allagnat et al., 2017). This growth raises interest, given that—in addition to the demands typical of academic activity that are common to both genders—female researchers are faced with supplementary challenges when they wish to combine a professional project with having children. Results of recent work from Ceribeli and DaSilva (2017) shows that the struggle to juggle professional activities with maternity represents the determining factor of women's decisions to withdraw early from the labor market. The question is whether that is different in the academic world.

The Brazilian labor market is regulated by the Consolidation of Labor Law (CLL),¹ which grants maternity leave to workers without prejudice to either position or salary. However, in the Brazilian academic ecosystem, the overwhelming majority of researchers are remunerated through research scholarships, resulting from the approval of projects by public funding agencies. Importantly, a research scholarship does not result in an employment relationship between grantees and funding bodies. Also, fulltime grantees are not allowed to perform complementary activities. Therefore, researchers are not entitled to any benefit established by the CLL. Professional relations in Brazilian academia have no centralized regulatory body, except for the macro oversight of both the Ministries of Education, and Science, Technology and Innovation. The dynamics of the relations between academics and institutions are predominantly governed by the rules of whichever funding body is supporting them on a specific project or program. For instance, in 2006, the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq)—under item 6, "Obligations of the Scholarship Holder" of the norm RN-017/2006—stated that scholars should cancel or suspend their scholarship should circumstances such as illness, maternity, absence for training/course occur (CNPq, 2006, para. 6.1).

Maternity leave benefit for researchers only became a reality in 2010, when CNPq, alongside the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), established that grantees of both agencies are entitled up to a four-month extension period, should a birth be confirmed during the course of post-graduate programs (master's or PhD; CAPES, 2010). In 2013, FAPESP approved the maternity leave benefit for its grantees in concurrence with the federal agencies. FAPESP supports the academic community of São Paulo state, which represents 51% of all national scientific production (Fapesp faz 50 anos e mira meio ambiente, 2012). It is the pioneer among the 26 state agencies and holder of a substantial portion of Brazil's overall science funding. In 2017, FAPESP's budget was around

BRL 1.5 billion (FAPESP, 2018), while the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do estado de Minas Gerais, the agency holding the second highest budget, accounted for only a fifth of this, with around BRL 300 million (FAPEMIG, 2018).

The question is: How was the maternity leave benefit received and accommodated amongst São Paulo's academic community representatives? This article considers the disadvantageous conditions facing Brazilian female academics in relation to their male counterparts. The discussion considers the influence of maternity on the academic careers of women. FAPESP's Ordinance PR nº 08/2015 is the central object of this case study.

AIMS

This investigation sought to better understand the role and influence of maternity leave policies on the career development of female researchers. Through the experience of the São Paulo state academic community and FAPESP's funding framework, the authors sought to identify opportunities for improvement in the full application of the benefit—understood as the granting of a complete pause of research activities during the four-month leave period without losses for either the research outcomes, or the development and consolidation of the career of the researcher.

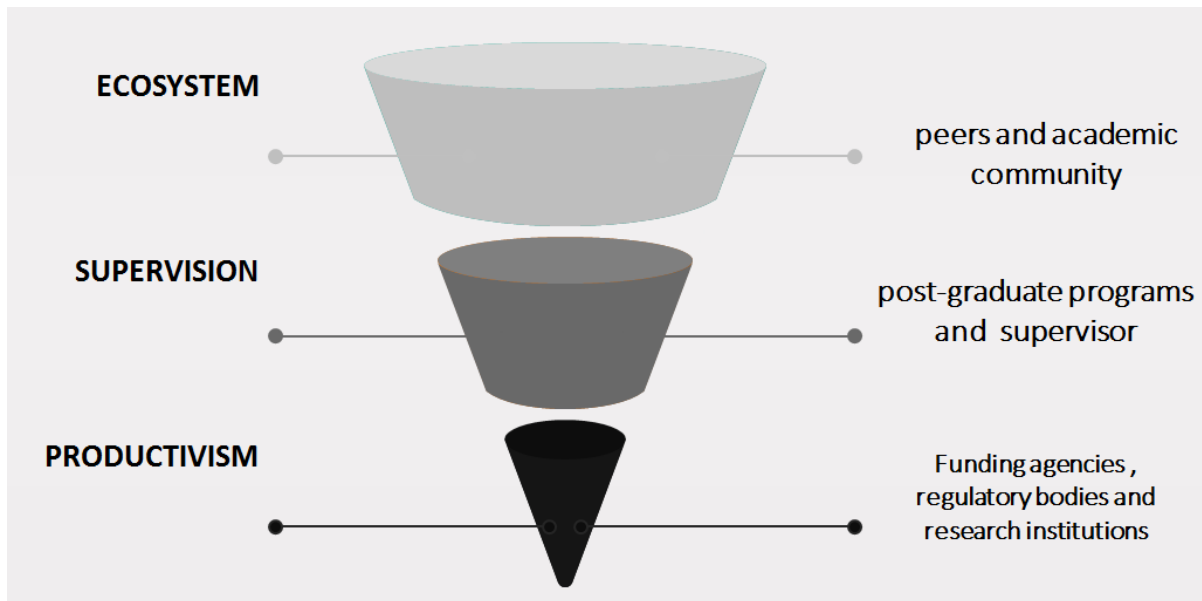
To achieve this macro objective, the following three specific objectives were established: First, to consult official FAPESP documents that instrumentalize the ordinance, and analyze the range of adjustments included in order to accommodate the ordinance terms. Second, to uncover the experiences of grantees receiving the benefit. Thirdly, to identify any obstacles encountered during the benefit application process itself.

Between May and August 2018, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with five São Paulo researchers. This article evolved from the theoretical framework that supported the data collection and interpretation of the results, followed by the documentary analysis used to support the findings gathered through the interviews. Excerpts of the interviews and anecdotal examples are provided throughout the article. Conclusions and assembled findings are gathered in the final considerations. It is hoped that the results can reduce the number of female researchers who, despite investing heavily in their academic formation, upon becoming pregnant, let go of, or halt, their academic trajectory. It is also hoped that the results can contribute to overcoming the dilemma faced by scholars who feel the need to choose between research and motherhood.

Furthermore, this work is also aimed at analyzing the dynamics surrounding research institutions, funding agencies, and researchers. From an economic standpoint, the abandonment of ongoing projects, for whatever reason, represents a waste of government resources, as well as time and energy invested by the researchers. This article may contribute at a macro level to the optimization of Brazilian research funding logic.

METHODOLOGY

Linking bibliographical, documentary, and field material (via semi-structured interviews) allows for the identification and association of influencing factors in the application of maternity leave benefit in the academic environment, as represented in Figure 1.



Source: Infanger and Correa, 2018.

Figure 1: Influencing factors in the application of maternity leave benefit in the academic environment.

Given the scarcity of literature on the topic in a Brazilian context, this article stems from research of an essentially exploratory nature. The research began with a literature review focused on authors and texts that engage with the concept of academic productivity (Bianchetti & Sguissardi, 2009) and issues surrounding maternity leave (Lyness, Thompson, Francesco, & Judiesch, 1999). This review evolved to encompass the gathering of documents made publicly available by FAPESP, specifically those referring to the granting of the benefit.

The five women interviewed by the authors provided an illustrative cross-section, as their backgrounds are diverse. They include variations in academic level, from undergraduate to post-doctorate; in age groups and family structures, from single mother to married with children; as well as in their facing of obstacles accessing the maternity leave benefit itself, from the decisions of supervisors to institutional impediments.

The script used in the semi-structured interviews was built through a line of questioning that involved (1) the academic context in which the maternity leave was requested; (2) intricacies of the scholarship framework; (3) family context during the maternity leave period; and (4) the work environment upon their return. The interviews were transcribed and submitted to exploratory content analysis

(Bardin, 2011), emphasizing their convergence and divergence via the combination of narratives and the theoretical lenses employed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Academic Productivism

In the mid-1990s, Brazilian post-graduation programs (PPG) were subject to changes in their management style, evaluation processes, and funding schemes (Bianchetti & Sguissardi, 2009; Kuenzer & Moraes, 2005). These changes affected not only the academic production quality beyond the institutional, but also the personal lives of master's and PhD students and assistant professors. Among the changes, two stand out: (1) shortened final delivery deadlines and quality streamlining of the research developed at post-graduation level (Kuenzer & Moraes, 2005); and (2) PPG assessments associated with compensations or sanctions in the form of scholarships (Bianchetti & Sguissardi, 2009). Due to these changes, coordinators, professors, and students find themselves under increased pressure from ratings, rankings, and impact factors. More importantly, the changes created a competitive environment between PPGs, which has affected the academic institutions themselves. A significant issue therefore is the constant pressure for productivity.

Brazilian regulatory bodies do not regard universities as work-intensive organizations that demand labor force mobilization when compared to other production factors. Hence, through the lenses of current productivity criteria, the productivity of universities may always remain inferior to more capital-intensive organizations (Santos, 1989). The most visible factor brought to the fore in the interview narratives was the emergence of a productivist culture within the academic ecosystem—a culture that could be mitigated via calendar adjustments, the possibility of a total break from academic activities, and a reduction of demands during such a leave period, guaranteed stability upon return and measures to ensure the health of pregnant researchers at work. This support is aimed at reducing the sense of guilt that is common upon returning to work (Millward, 2006) and contributing to the longevity of scholars in their chosen area of research after becoming mothers (Lyness et al., 1999).

In the context of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009), it is noticeable that the Brazilian scenario follows a global trend (Hess, 2005). Chau (2003) draws attention to the fact that universities are increasingly losing the characteristics typical of academic institutions and are taking up those of business organizations, in which productivism primacy is cultivated. To what extent does this logic threaten the academic careers of researchers who have the ambition to balance an academic career with family life?

Maternity and Work

An increasingly frequent challenge women face is the promotion of some level of balance between maternity and career. Maternity transforms the demands placed upon a woman insofar as it influences her identity and imposes extra responsibility, especially in the first two years of her children's lives (Alstveit, Severinsson, &

Karlsen, 2011). Upon returning to work, women may feel divided between the demands of maternity and the maintenance of their value to the organization (Millward, 2006). In attempting to manage this double identity, they may experience a high level of tension and are challenged to factor in both their professional and family lives (Houston & Marks, 2003).

While the academic sector is frequently perceived as a flexible and family-friendly working environment, the competitive nature of research funding is predicated on a typical career path (Bell, O'Halloran, Saw & Zhao, 2009) and the increasing use of metrics developed for and by people with fulltime, continuous careers actually present substantial barriers to successful part-time careers, and the re-entry of people to academia after a break to raise children (Bell, O'Halloran, Saw & Zhao, 2009; Lawrence & Garwood, 2011; Women in Cell Biology, Dean & Marincola, 2002; Sax et al., 2002).

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Documentary Analysis

In the documentary analysis, formal instruments used in the granting process of the benefit were collated. The aim was to identify the potentials and limitations of the processual framework of the policy's application. The documents analyzed are listed below²:

- Ordinance PR n^o 08/2015 (FAPESP, 2015)³
- National Scholarships Grant Agreement (FAPESP, 2018)
- Amendment to the National Scholarships Grant Agreement
- Requests Results Announcements
- Amendment Request Change in Scholarships duration

The Ordinance PR n^o 08/2015 permits the extension of the scholarships for up to 120 days whenever a child is born during the course of a scholarship period. However, a review of the FAPESP's legal instruments revealed a notable absence of mentions of the procedural changes necessary for implementation in accordance with the provisions of the Ordinance. In its fourth article, the Ordinance establishes that information available, both on FAPESP's website and in the Grant Agreement, must be updated upon the announcement of any changes. Yet, in the 2018 Grant Agreement, references to the changes formalized by the Ordinance, specifically regarding possible extensions due to maternity leave, are not present. Furthermore, in the section "Sanctions for Missing Deadlines," exceptions that may make it possible to exempt the grantees on maternity leave are not considered. By not mentioning the possibility for extensions, item 9.1.1 leaves room for sanctions to be applied in contradiction of the extension that changes the initial term of the agreement.

Formal Benefit Granting Process

Among the observed obstacles to the full application of the benefit, is the fact that responsibility for the submission of the extension request rests with the supervisor. The benefit process starts with its validation by the supervisor in charge of the research project. The supervisor must agree with the extension period, as well as with the adjustments in the timeline and associated deliverables. The terms of the Ordinance do not make reference to the benefit's governance, nor to the prominent role of the supervisor in the process. The instrument that formalizes the benefit, the Amendment to the National Scholarships Grant Agreement, does not mention the maternity leave benefit, nor the adjustments in timeline and deliverables, referring instead to a general extension of the scholarship period. In practice, the adjustments are generally open to interpretation, also on a case by case basis.

Interview Analysis

The interviews conducted as part of this research provide a rich picture of the reality faced by scholars when reconciling maternity and academic demands. Interviewees were anonymized and designated E1, E2, E3, E4, and E5. For example, E4's account illustrates the dynamic conflict between supervisor and scholar regarding the woman's professional decision to return after her maternity leave period: (1) being embarrassed due to her decision to be absent from the lab, which contained material potentially hazardous to her pregnancy; (2) use of her own resources to cover the expenses of an intern, in order to maintain the progress of her lab work during the pregnancy; (3) being coerced to compensate for the two-month remote working away from the lab while pregnant; and (4) upon return, being coerced to suspend breastfeeding due to frequent absences from the lab. Through a rather intense narrative, E4 reported having suffered from postpartum depression and suicidal thoughts. These adverse circumstances in the medium-term resulted in the abandonment of her scientific career.

Partially, this explains why women who return from maternity leave are often overtaken by a stark feeling of failure. On the one hand, they believe they will not be able to care for their children properly, whilst on the other, they feel insecure for having left behind their commitments and, upon returning to work, for not maintaining a satisfactory performance (Millward, 2006). In addition to the changes in the way women see themselves post-childbirth, a contributing factor to their engagement at work is the way in which their relationships with their peers are conducted. The support offered by colleagues and line managers can contribute to their re-integration into the organization, and to a subsequent reduction in the levels of tension that often result from efforts to reconcile maternity and work (Houston & Marks, 2003).

E3's narrative illustrates the importance of collegial support. Upon returning to her university, E3 would often hear insinuations that her grant might have been better used if allocated to a researcher able to dedicate him- or herself fully to the research, specifically, someone who did not need to be frequently absent due to childcare. E5 reported a similar experience: in her doctoral thesis viva session, a member of the examining board included in his remarks the fact that "her thesis worked out to be very good, despite the complications," in reference to the

pregnancy period experienced by the scholar. As the interviews show, regardless of gender, peers and supervisors often make decisions contrary to the needs of mothers and pregnant women.

A complication due to the lack of formally established adjustments was also reported by E3, whose pregnancy took place during the course of her FAPESP doctoral scholarship. As she successfully concluded her PhD viva during the third month of her maternity leave, her ties with the research institution ended. As a consequence, her four-month maternity leave period was reduced to three. The bottleneck that impeded the flow of benefits was the inconsistency between the PhD completion date and the adjusted timeline, which were a month apart. According to E3, despite FAPESP's approval of the four-month period, her research institution did not grant her the same extension. This governance issue in the benefit flow derives from a direct dependency between the benefit application and the research institution's approval.⁴ Once the maternity leave benefit is no longer recognized by the research institution, as the shared experiences of the participants show, the additional months are perceived as a general extension of the project duration rather than an actual leave period.

For various reasons, all of the participants felt compelled to preserve their participation in their respective projects and/or in co-related academic activities, even at a minimal level. For E1, whose daughter was born during the post-doctoral FAPESP scholarship period, there were demands for the production of an article during the second month of her leave period. She justified her decision to engage in the article production based on the need to remain academically active, should she wish to maintain her competitiveness. This is supported by Halpert and Burg (1997), whose work shows that maternity leave is considered a complete break from research projects, consequently causing prejudice towards the work of the researcher. In addition, as discussed in the previous section, the prominent role of the supervisor allows for a subjective decision-making process to take place. While E3's supervisor convinced her to reimburse FAPESP for the final (fourth) month of maternity leave in order to preserve the funding of the research group, E1's supervisor made efforts to rearrange the entire team's work in order to create favorable conditions for her to make the most of her maternity leave.

Overall, the interviews presented academia as a non-inclusive environment for mothers—as can be seen from E2's experience. As an undergraduate research scholarship holder, E2's child was born a month after her scholarship ended. Hence, she was not entitled to paid maternity leave and as a consequence, she had to delay for a year her plans to follow on with her academic career and pursue her master's.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We noted the absence of any regulating authority governing the relationship between scholars and supervisors in research institutions. A conclusion drawn is that the FAPESP benefit concessions are limited by the conduct of PPGs and the supervisor's consent. Estrangement and the lack of participation of the academic community and institutions—particularly the PPGs—present significant obstacles to

those applying for maternity leave benefits. It reinforces the idea that all social actors involved must change and align in order for the proposed value behind the change to be incorporated and a new attitude adopted (Eti-Tofinga, Singh & Douglas, 2018).

During the data collection process, the authors had access to emails exchanged between the researchers interviewed and FAPESP's representatives before the Ordinance's publication, in which FAPESP staff members suggested the interruption of the respective projects with no alternative that could properly accommodate the needs of a new mother and a newborn. This was also confirmed by the documents consulted and the interviewees' narratives. The fact that the Ordinance is not mentioned in the Grant Agreement, nor communicated broadly amongst the academic community, contributes to the tortuous path applicants must navigate in order to access the benefits and, on occasion, the triggering of extreme situations, such as those mentioned by the interviewees.

It was also observed that the relationship between FAPESP and the São Paulo state academic institutions is not ruled by regulation. FAPESP does not possess governance capable of influencing changes in the modus operandi of the institutions with regard to researchers, as it does for the academic production levels.

Given the fact that the academic productivity of both students and supervisors relies strongly on the assessment of the program and associated research scholarships provision, situations such as (1) refunding a month's scholarship payment due to the failure of the research institution to acknowledge the leave period; (2) lack of support from the supervisor during both pregnancy and breastfeeding in a contaminated environment; and (3) pressure to keep up with productivity levels during the leave period, reveal that the struggle for the full application of the maternity leave benefit does not only lie within the institutional sphere—the metrics of academic production that the post-graduation programs are subject to—and puts pressure on researchers via the "publish or perish" framework. The authors conclude that the factors required for the application of maternity leave benefit are not limited to FAPESP's governance, and that the crux of the issue may be the imposition of an academic productivism that weakens the ties of sympathy between peers and the academic community as a whole.

Practical Implications

In order to tackle the issues raised by this article, the authors make the following recommendations to relevant stakeholders:

- The benefit must be institutionalized by the regulating agency of the post-graduation programs, CAPES.⁵ This way post-graduation programs will respect the rights of academic mothers, enabling them to take a total break from academic activities and be ensured an adjusted calendar.
- A constructive discussion on paid maternity leave between scholarship holders and senior researchers is encouraged, enabling peers to cultivate a more understanding perspective.
- The adaptation of legal instruments that regulate the granting of the

scholarship. Hence the sanctions associated with such instruments would no longer be applied automatically to grantees on maternity leave benefit.

- Make space for initiatives that promote more positive connotations of pregnancy for researchers who have, for example, an equally high potential for a successful academic career. As reported by the interviewees, pregnancy is commonly considered negative, posing a barrier to the consolidation of an academic career.

Moreover, the existence of maternity leave benefit within FAPESP provides the basis for the full spectrum required for an adequate provision to support new mothers who rely on research funding as their main or sole source of income, while temporarily halting their research activities to care for their newborns. However, in order for an adequate solution to be reached, FAPESP must enforce gender inclusive policies upon the institutions it funds in the same way as it does with research outputs and related demands.

In conclusion, for researchers of a reproductive age, all-encompassing maternity support is necessary so as not to discourage them from pursuing a family. According to Lyness et al. (1999), when an organization promotes policies that support maternity, the decision to have a child becomes more personal and less governed by considerations about employment. Support that involves the professional environment and research institution, as well as the funding agency behind the scholarship and the academic ecosystem, is needed.

ENDNOTES

¹ In Portuguese, CLT - Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho, (Presidência da República, 1943)

² The documents not listed on References section were provided by the interviewees and refer to official communication made by FAPESP to them.

³ On May 14, 2019, FAPESP signed the Ordinance 05/2019 (<http://www.fapesp.br/8484>), whose central aim is to regulate the concession of an extension period in the scholarships granted by agency due to Maternity Leave. The ordinance 05/2019 revokes the previous one, 08/2015. While the existing terms were kept, additional content was included. In terms of the gender inclusion agenda, the policy has advanced as (i) it contemplates a broader range of scholars - including Technical Trainees and Scientific Journalists, (ii) provides practical orientation for scholars to proceed with in accessing the benefit, (iii) makes reference to the need of acknowledgement by both beneficiary and supervisor upon the benefit's request and (iv) mentions the extension comprehending both the deliverables timeline and financial reporting. The Ordinance terms are to take action from June 13, 2019.

⁴ This relation is contemplated by item 14, paragraph 14.1.1 of the Grant Agreement, 2018 version. (FAPESP, 2018)

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