

'Integrated' workers, committed to professional and caring responsibilities, will help transform gender imbalance.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/06/23/promoting-a-new-model-of-the-ideal-worker/

6/23/2015

Meghan Froehner recently spoke to Cynthia Sanborn, the Director of the Centro de Investigación de la Universidad del Pacífico (CIUP), and María Balarín, an Associate Researcher at the Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE) on gender dynamics in think tanks and research positions. The researchers offered their views on issues such as overt and subtle biases, the role of care, and possible strategies for addressing gender issues in the workplace.



As a former student of gender and development and a researcher with experience in a women's policy think tank in Washington, D.C., I developed a series of questions as a prompt for women on the role that their gender identity plays in the workplace. Are there barriers to women succeeding in think tanks? If so, what are they? Are women funnelled into certain policy issues or do they themselves choose to work on different topics than men? Does gender shape the way discourse and research is developed? Do men and women apply different methodologies?

I spoke with Dr Cynthia Sanborn who provided her perspective as Director of one the top think tanks in Peru ([CIUP](#)). I also had the opportunity to speak with María Balarín of [GRADE](#) and author of a useful chapter in the group's recent publication that [reviews the international literature available on women in the social sciences](#). Both women are involved in [Grupo Sofía](#), a voluntary organisation that works to improve the visibility of women in the social sciences in Peru

How do you recognise and deal with sexism and discrimination within an organisation?

Sanborn spoke about discrimination and casual sexism that still pervades in Peru. She noted that there seems to be a generational shift away from direct forms of discrimination, with younger male workers adopting more egalitarian views of their female colleagues. What does persist are more subtle barriers to women advancing, such as being overlooked in meetings or in the organisation of conferences and assumptions about researchers' commitment to their work when they adjust their schedules around care activities.



Image credit: [Morgan4uall Pixabay \(CC0\)](#)

She argued that a key tool for recognising barriers and raising awareness, which is at the unique disposal of research organisations and think tanks, is having discrimination as an issue area for research and debate. CIUP has, indeed, had discrimination as a line of priority work for six years, conducting both testimonial and experimental research as part of the [Peru Sin Discriminación](#) project. Sanborn believes that research in this field has helped to raise staff's sensitivity to gender disparities, as well as racial and ethnic differences among others.

What are the pipeline issues for women in think tanks?

Part of the problem of today's underrepresentation of women in senior positions is a lack of a *pipeline of female scholars* in the past. Another aspect of this issue is that there is now more competition in Peru for talented scholars in the public sector and women are being courted by new government agencies such as the Ministries for Social Inclusion and the Ministry for Women's and Vulnerable Populations. A final challenge to the pipeline has to do with where women see openings for themselves professionally now and in the future.

Women might not imagine that they would get the professional support they need at institutions when they do not see other women working. This dynamic is played out in how women are represented in research areas within the social sciences as well. Women tend to be more highly represented in the fields of anthropology, sociology and social policy while steering away from more male dominated fields of economics, public works and engineering, and foreign policy.

CIUP has tried to address these pipeline issues by making conscious efforts to help women researchers feel supported and not marginalised within the institution. They do this by engaging women researchers in CIUP activities, promoting them for grants and graduate studies, and supporting their work for publication.

How do think tanks treat workers with care responsibilities?

Echoing commentary from [Priyanthi Fernando](#), Sanborn points out that in theory, research positions can be more family-friendly than in other sectors, because key phases of the work can be carried out from home or from anywhere with a computer and internet connection and at any time of the day.

There is much less need to be in an office everyday than other fields, especially in the writing stages, which is

largely an individual process with collaboration taking place in the form of edits and commentary sent via e-mail. However, the implications of this can be that work runs into all parts of personal life and become a twenty-four hour practice. Additionally, in the case of university-based think tanks, such as CIUP, where teaching is a big part of researcher's duties, or for thinktankers whose positions involve other duties like management, outreach or research dissemination, more time in the office might be a necessity.

Sanborn mentioned that women may be more comfortable asking a woman supervisor to exercise flex-time options, which underlines that having more women in leadership positions will help perpetuate more equitable representation of men and women.

She has noted an uptick in men also requesting flex-time for care activities in recent years and hopes this indicates a shift towards more equitable divisions of care. A cultural shift towards more equal sharing of care labour, although beyond the scope of institutional interventions, would relieve pressure for women to compete in a predominantly male breadwinner model in the workplace, where workers are assumed to be fully supported by a committed household and with no responsibilities of their own beyond formal work.

Selected Findings from Maria Balarín's paper on [women in the social sciences](#):

My conversation with María Balarín of [GRADE](#) began with a discussion on how to structure thinking around women's participation and ascension in think tanks. An essential consideration, Balarín noted, is that think tanks, in contrast to academia for example, do not have a clear career progression. The lack of a structured career path and the fact that think tankers can come from highly varied backgrounds makes identifying challenges in the achievement of gender equity a complex project.

It is worth noting some of the key findings from [her study](#) [pdf] as they provide critical insights into the nuances of the nature of women's experience in academia -and also applies to many think tanks:

- Despite growing numbers of women enrolled in higher education, there is still a marked underrepresentation of women employed in academia and an especially low number of women in high-level positions. This does not speak of think tanks specifically, but it is a relevant finding as the relationship between academia and think tanks is tightly bound to each other.
- Women are self-selecting or incentivised into 'feminine' issue areas and administrative-heavy work. Balarín speaks about a horizontal and vertical segregation of men and women in research. A horizontal segregation by subject area where women are concentrated in the arts, social policy, humanities, and health; while men are more concentrated in areas that also tend to be more prestigious and higher paying, like economics and the hard sciences. And a vertical segregation exists where women hold more positions with higher levels of administrative duties but lower levels of prestige, authority, notoriety, and remuneration.
- A large portion of the underrepresentation of women in academia is due to more subtle gendered mechanisms that affect both how women are valued in an organisation and how they assess their own professional value. These subtle and often unspoken mechanisms present themselves as a preference for 'masculine' behaviours that women tend not to be socialised in. One manifestation of this is that women are discouraged from applying for promotions in early stages of their careers while men are often encouraged to do so.
- The ideal academic worker is someone who exhibits preferred masculine qualities, including prioritising work above family and personal commitments. This makes it difficult for women, who tend to have greater care responsibilities, to excel and advance in academia. They often make up for the strain on their time by decreasing their time invested in research activities, which is the activity most central in creating notoriety for oneself as a researcher, and instead prioritise teaching and administrative responsibilities. A greater integration of family and professional life is severely lacking in order for women to be able to succeed.

What steps and interventions are effective for increasing women's presence and influence and improving

gender equity?

- **Self-Assessments:** as described above, Sanborn cites self-assessments as a great place to start a conversation about the state of gender equity in an organisation and movement towards combatting institutionalised gender barriers.
- **Affirmative Action:** making an active effort to recruit and promote more women will shift the gender balance within an organisation, as long as this is accompanied by continued efforts to include them in core activities and not marginalise them around the table. This will hopefully counteract tendencies for women to drift into other sectors.
- **Mentorship and workplace supports:** Sanborn placed significant importance on professional development for junior and mid-level staff. She favours less a one-on-one style of mentorship, which can be highly asymmetrical and foster dependency, and prefers fostering an environment of support among staff. This would include gender-sensitisation of leadership to encourage women to speak and be heard in collaborative and informal spaces, where their voices are often lost. It would also mean fostering junior women researchers across all research areas so they are not only streamed into certain policy areas.
- **Funding benefit and support systems:** Throughout this series, benefits and supports for workers, especially those with care responsibilities have been cited as an essential component of retaining and fostering women's participation in think tanks. Sanborn proposes a possible strategy, important especially for smaller and start-up organisations, of working with donors who prioritise gender equity to help fund their overhead and staff development budget with the goal of not only better capacitation of staff but also improved gender equity.
- **Creating spaces for women thinktankers to organise:** Balarín cited spaces for women's organisation as a key step for women thinktankers to recognise and develop strategies for improved gender equity, such as the Grupo Sofía initiative. Because they are outside of workplace spaces, they can provide women with an opportunity to identify and discuss subtle and institutionalised barriers and challenges without creating an accusatory dynamic. They can help women sort out what gendered dynamics might be at work in their organisations, maintain strong networks and not lose confidence in their work, which [some claim](#) to be an important factor in how women fare in the workplace.
- **Consolidating research and perspectives:** Research that helps create consensus while attempting to aggregate different experiences, such as Balarín's publication and some of the literature we've cited in the [topic page](#), is important for building a base for advocacy and action within different think tank communities, whether regional or subject-based.
- **Promoting a new model of the 'ideal worker':** Lastly, Balarín argues that an important practice for women thinktankers or organisations who aspire to assess gender dynamics in their organisations and work towards greater gender equity is to promote alternative conceptions of the ideal worker. Balarín's paper discusses the current model of an ideal worker that is based on gendered assumptions of workers as individuals who are supported by carers in the home so that they can devote all their time and effort to professional activities. Balarín emphasises the importance of promoting new models of 'integrated' workers, who are committed to both professional and caring responsibilities as a crucial aspect to overcoming more nuanced gender barriers. Ideally, valuing a model of an integrated worker should be valid and desirable for both men and women and could lead to a greater transformation of gender relations in the workplace.

This is the fifth post from a series running at [OnThinkTanks](#) on [Women in Think Tanks](#) (join the discussion on [#womeninthinktanks](#)), edited by Meghan Froehner. This post was written by Meghan, on this occasion based on interviews with Cynthia Sanborn, Director of [Universidad de Pacífico's research centre \(CIUP\)](#), and Maria Balarín, Associate Researcher at the [Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo \(GRADE\)](#). The series is accompanied by

a [Topic Page on Women in Think Tanks](#). If you would like to edit a series [please get in touch](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author:

Meghan Froehner is a research consultant specialising in gender and development. Most recently, she worked with the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, DC analysing the role of gender and care burdens for post-secondary students in the United States. She holds a Master's degree in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK.

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.