

Quality Assurance of a "Booster Program" for Gender Equity in the Academia: From Vision to Practice

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Abstract

Even as the 21st century unfolds, it is well recognized that women in the academic world struggle more to secure research funding and are still largely underrepresented at the level of full professorship, the highest post possible within universities and colleges. To rectify this gender-based inequality, a mid-sized academic college initiated an original program named "Booster" aiming for it to provide the optimal framework for creating a nurturing space for the promotion of prominent female faculty members, mainly to the high rank of "professor." The aim of this research was to find whether the booster plan has fulfilled its rectifying objectives according to the quality assurance model of the Plan - Do - Check - Action (PDCA) cycle. As a research method, an evaluation study was selected to examine the operation of the program, mainly from the perspective of the participants. The evaluation of the program was combined with both quantitative and qualitative assessments. The main finding indicated that the participants in the program had reported a high-level satisfaction. It was also found that the vast majority of the participants mentioned their understanding of promotion procedures as the most important tool they acquired in the program. The main importance of this study is in adding knowledge about ways to identify the "blind spots" and weaknesses of academia that shape the unjust "leaky pipeline" structure in gender contexts, from the stage in which women enter academia, through their tenure-ship track as faculty, to the processes of promotion up the ranks.

Keywords: *Quality Assurance, Evaluation, Gender Equity, Female Socialization, Higher Education.*

Introduction

Gender Equity in Academia

The modern era has brought with it significant changes, in practice, to a variety of organizations. Most notably, today's organizations, whether educational, economic, voluntary, or even coercive, such as the military, strive to create an organizational culture that is more ethical and fair, especially gender wise. These affected academia as well, and alongside the academic promise of allow a diverse group of people access to the worlds of knowledge and ethics, academic institutions gradually undertook to endeavor to advance gender equality vis-à-vis students and faculty alike.

While "affirmative action" policies towards minorities and women has emerged as early as the mid-1960s in the United States by decree of President Linden Johnson (Dallek, 2005), Western academia in general and Israeli academia more particularly, have been lagging behind in committing to gender equity (Diogo *et al.*, 2021; Zippel *et al.*, 2016).

Research shows that gender inequity in any social structure is highly resistant to change (Britton 2017; Roos *et al.*, 2020). Being an elitist social construct, originated and nurtured by males, the academia acts accordingly, and even to these days, it manifests gender-based differences that affect its female members' professionals, as work performed by women tends to be underestimated, underpaid and gender inequity tends to persist (Roos, *et al.*, 2020). Even as the 21st century unfolds, it has been firmly and scientifically established that women struggle more to secure research funding and are still largely underrepresented at the level of full professorship, the highest post within universities and colleges (Stepan-Norris and Kerrissey, 2016).

While in earlier times these differences could be at least partially attributed to the predominance of male students, nowadays, although female graduates outnumber male graduates at the Bachelor and Master level,

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and that the graduate rank at the doctoral level is gender balanced, at the top of the academic pyramid women are nevertheless poorly represented at the highest levels of academic status (European Commission, 2021). Israeli researchers (Amir and Almog, 2021) have identified the barriers to gender equity at the senior levels of academia as composed of two groups: one consists **overt barriers**, such as expectations of women to bear the burden of caring for the family, difficulty in striking a work-life balance (using the definitions and expectations embodied in the notion of a "good" and "bad mother"), and refraining from harming the spouse's career path (barriers of continuing with postdoctoral studies abroad). In the second group are the **covert barriers**, such as the meritocratic academic ethos according to which academia is blind to gender and scientific excellence is the only criterion for professional success and evaluation, as well as the barrier of academic governance that left male hegemony in academic institutions intact and determined female socialization in academia in accordance with those mechanisms of male power.

In order to deal with gender inequity in Israeli academia, the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) of Israel's Council of Higher Education launched a special five-year plan budgeting proactive steps to promote gender equity in a program known as "The Equator." Achva Academic College's Chancellor for Gender Equity submitted an innovative and detailed program for receiving the budget, which it won. The research proposed here examines and evaluates the impact of this unique program, carried out in a particularly sympathetic climate, set by the institution's President. Special emphasis is placed on estimating the degree of the program's success and on the possible inference of policy-making principles and programs in light of the findings of its implementation.

Gender Equity at a Disenfranchised Periphery Academic College

The academic college at hand was established as a public college to meet the growing demand for higher education in the southern Israeli periphery and functions as a multicultural college, serving mainly female students, 97% of whom are first generation to higher education, with almost third of them descending from the ultra-traditional Bedouin-Arab community of the south. Initially, the college consisted of two adjacent institutions: a college of education (under the supervision of the Ministry of Education) and a college of sciences (under a university supervision). The unification of the colleges commenced in 2012 and after a decade long process, the college is now recognized as "independent" and budgeted by the PBC. The academic college has good opening data in terms of gender equity, both in terms of the ratio of men to women and in the percentage of women who have reached senior academic ranks. The entire academic staff consists of 370 lecturers, of whom 240 are women. The college has eight women at the academic middle management level out of the 8 existing positions.

Despite the many advantages listed above, there is a gender bias in favor of lecturers in the higher academic ranks, and the gap becomes acute at the rank of full professor.

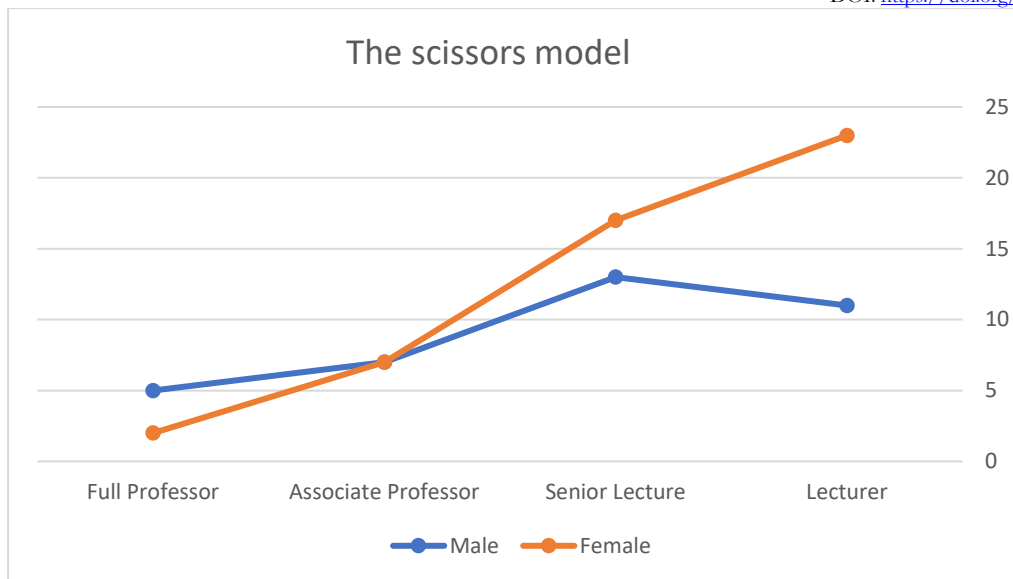


Figure 1: The Scissors Model (in absolute numbers)

Although there are more female lecturers than male lecturers in the senior faculty ranks up to the rank of professor, it is easy to see that there are more male professors than female ones from professor rank upwards.

In order to rectify the scissors shape of its faculty, the college initiated and formulated a unique program that aims to provide the optimal framework for creating a safe, all-women safe space for "boosting" the promotion of pre-identified prominent female faculty members, mainly to the rank of professor, as well as to designate them to fill in leadership positions in the college. The program was submitted in a competitive process to the PBC's "Equator" initiative for gender equity, and upon being highly evaluated and praised, it won the highest score among other competing colleges. In light of its high score, the proposal earned the college a special budget designated for the implementation of a "Booster program" to promote the academic status its female faculty members.

The Booster program has been defined as intensive support and various interventions intended to benefit promising female researchers, who are part of the core faculty at the college and are eligible for a rise in rank (senior lecturer, associate professor, and full professor). The program was structured along the lines of vast theories and practices that point to the advantages of an all female surroundings to female achievements (Bailey et al, 2020).

The program, still taking place this year, is designed to meet the main needs of a core faculty member wishing to undergo a promotion process and offers a variety of support measures for this purpose, such as: additional research budgets, special workshops, teaching aid, research aid, mentoring, networking, peer reviewing, accompaniment for a research proposal, additional budgets for designated activities to increase the amount and improve the quality of research, and more. All these practices were enretrained during the program in accordance with a need mapping process. The needs were mapped and set after the participants got selected by a special stirring committee, composed of the college's President and two other non-faculty professors, providing together an objective and professional perspective on the selection results. The faculty members selected were assigned to two different routes of support: personal and general. The personal route supported the more highly appraised faculty in terms of its growth and advancement potential, who received larger budget supplement and closer mentoring by specifically named "deam mentor" assigned to each participant due to the President's involvement in recruiting the mentors. The program was intended to last about two years with monitoring and periodic evaluation, the expected output being the acquisition of superior research skills and the rise of the lecturer to the planned promotion level or, at least, the significant development and promotion of her body of research crop to initiate a rank promotion process.

The program is supported by an accompanying "Shared space" WhatsApp application and periodical round tables, where the participants can share their thoughts, questions, and achievements regularly.

The aim of this research was to find whether the Booster program has fulfilled its objectives according to the quality assurance model of the Plan - Do - Check - Action (PDCA) cycle.

Continuous improvement is a set of repetitive actions designed to increase the capacity to meet organizational requirements. The PDCA cycle is actually a sequence of actions that aim at improvement by solving quality problems and bringing new solutions (Sokovic, et al, 2010). The first step of the cycle, "Plan" (P), is associated with identifying the possibility of changes and organizing them. It sets the aims for improvement and designs an action plan which will facilitate the objectives. It is necessary to detect the problem at hand, analyze factors affecting it, produce solutions, and develop a strategy of implementation. During this step, every future action should be supported by means and methods.

In the next step, "Do" (D), the developed plan is implemented within the organization so as to raise quality and eradicate the causes of the problem.

The "Check" (C) step refers to assessing and evaluating whether the solutions led to adequate results. If the implementation is found appropriate, it is followed by the fourth step - "Act" (A), if not - one should return to step 1 - "Plan" (P).

"Act" (A) relates to the application of the implemented solutions. (Kirand, 2016). The PDCA cycle of quality assurance can be never-ending. The knowledge gained from the previous stage becomes the basis for the next cycle and hence, for further improvement (Sokovic et al., 2010).

Research questions: Is the program working according to its original plan? How did the program participants experience it? How satisfied are they with the program? What are the outputs of the program? What lessons can we learn from the program and how can they be improved in future faculty advancement programs?

Methodology

Research Method: As a research method, an evaluation study was selected to monitor the execution of the program, mainly from the perspective of the participants. Evaluation studies are considered to have an impact on the prevailing policy and long-awaited social change (Friedman, 2005).

Research tools: The evaluation of the program was combined with both quantitative (scales) and qualitative (open questionnaires) assessment. The combination of mixed methods will enable elicitation of the required information from different angles to provide informed answers to the research questions.

Research Population: After publishing a call for participation directed at the female college lecturers to join the Booster program, an expert committee of professors was established to serve as an admissions committee for selecting the participants. The committee classified those who were accepted into two group routes: a general route (10 participants) and an individual route (8 participants) who received an improved set of facilities. Those accepted to the program meet all the criteria in the 10XC model (Zamir, 2017):

Competence - academic ability and aptitude,

Calculations of pain & gain - wise decision-making,

Character -the character required for an academic career,

Commitment - commitment to the promotion process,

Communication- very good communication with students, superiors and colleagues,

Curiosity - scientific inquisitiveness,

Coping - ability to cope with the 'bumps in the road',

Courage - the courage to be in the center,

Collaboration - Cooperation with other researchers,

Celebration - Celebrate all the way to the goal.

Ethics: Transparency: The researchers informed the participants about the existence of an evaluation study accompanying the program, and received their consent for their cooperation in the form of a dialogic evaluation. In addition, the anonymity of the participants in the program has been maintained.

Findings

Responses to the questionnaires revealed four main themes divided into subcategories. The first theme was the participants' degree of satisfaction. The second theme pertained to the participants' acquisition of main academic tools through the program. The third theme revolved around the program's direct outputs, and lastly, the fourth theme raised was about the participants' personal perspective over the program.

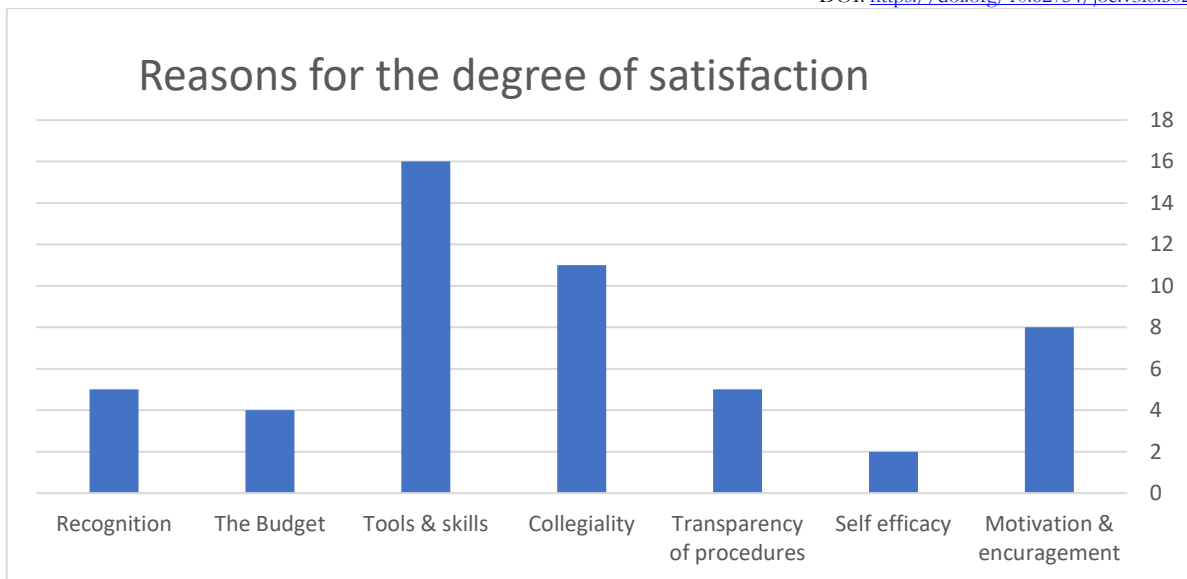
First theme: The participants' degree of satisfaction of the and the reasoning behind it

Weighting the lecturers' responses on a scale with 10 being the highest degree of satisfaction, revealed that the level of satisfaction of the lecturers in the personal framework was 9.75, while for those in the general framework the average was 8.95.

Name	Support type	Score	Reasoning
A	Individual	10	"The program promoted [me] on several levels: in the promotion process, in talking about the "behind the scenes" of the promotion, at the level of goals, in the social support emerging from the program, providing partnership rather than loneliness, budgetary support, and helping to move ideas and projects forward."
B	General	10	"The program has boosted morale, to promote [things] and advance academically, and it also provided practical tools."
C	Individual	10	"The program content was relevant and focused on promotion, there was a comprehensive treatment of the submission of research proposals"
D	Individual	10	"The program involved pleasant, enriching and fruitful sessions"
E	Individual	10	"The program has resulted in exposure to topics, the promotion of teaching and research abroad, knowledge about grant submissions, consultations with peer, and the college's commitment to promote female researchers."
F	Individual	9	"The program is a group framework that enables shared learning and honest discourse in deliberations on the subject of publication. The program provides a significant addition to the research budget and the helpful guidance of a mentor."
G	Individual	10	"The program constitutes a warm and professional framework for academic activities: personal attention, encouragement, relevant content selection, access to mentors and guest lecturers"

H	General	9	"The program as a community that allows you to think and learn together. The workshops that were very relevant and instructive."
I	Individual	9	"The program is a platform for research advancement, assistance in promotion to the rank of senior lecturer, I have attached myself to a successful and promoting mentor and have been granted a budget, as well as the decision on how to use it."
J	General	9	"The program provided knowledge, connections, inspiration from colleagues, meaningful insights into the promotion process. The program has not yet given me the ability to write a grant request."
K	General	9	"The academic horizon, which until now has been vague, has converged in a certain direction. "With the help of program peers, from different stages in the academic advancement track, I was exposed to challenges and was able to think about how to prepare for them better. The program presented excellent, enlightening, and thought-provoking lectures, as well as instilling motivation to implement and focus things."
L	General	7	"In some of the sessions I got good ideas and inspiration. Some of the meetings that were about how to submit research proposals were less relevant to me."
M	General	10	"Satisfaction with the mentor and the encouragement and support for research work. Work in the program group is fruitful and creative."
N	General	8.5	"The program gave a sense of efficacy for research and advancement. The group encourages motivation and creates partnerships. The lectures are fascinating, the mentor believed in my ability and really tried to help. I still need guidance in collecting and processing qualitative data. The program led me to academic independence."
O	General	10	"The vision of the college management has found a way to create a group of female researchers that encourages and supports research and promotion. The information and practices given in all the sessions were important and relevant."
P	General	8	"The idea of a program for researchers and brainstorming is excellent and very important."
Q	Individual	10	"A lot of thought, good intentions, faith and resources were invested in the project. The project is motivating. The workshops, enrichment, individual sessions and support are important for the advancement and in-depth understanding of the processes. There is a feeling of a team that participates in consultations and celebrates successes. The group provides support and a sense of community and belonging."
R	General	9	"The program is a unique privilege."

From the above theme, seven categories of reasons for satisfaction can be derived: acquiring research tools and skills, peer group membership, motivation and encouragement, recognition, transparency of the advancement process, budgetary support and a sense of efficacy.

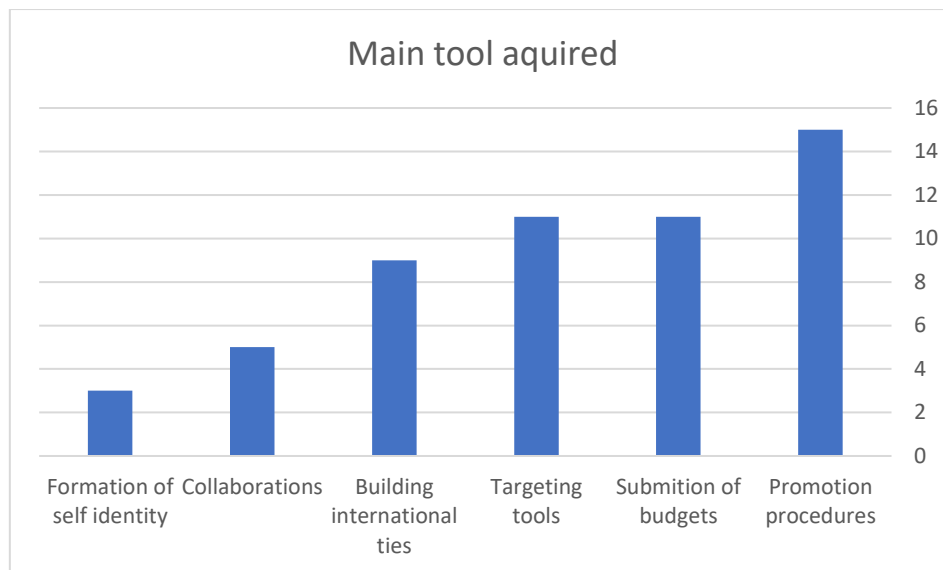


Second Theme: Participants' Acquisition of Main Academic Tools Through the Program.

Name	Main tools acquired
A	"I acquired the skill of focusing – the areas of research, directions of investigation and examination of partnership projects, a proposal for a research fund. I learned what optimal promotion is, doing for the heart. Awareness of the situation, the purpose, the path, and oneself is key to being able to respond to the various opportunities. I found a way to consult with the peers for fruitful decision-making."
B	"I learned about the importance of submitting grant requests, the importance of establishing relationships with academic institutions abroad and about the requirements for promotion."
C	"I have acquired a focus skill for writing research proposals; how to get budgets for teaching abroad."
D	"Grant submission tools and means of professional exposure."
E	"I acquired tools to apply for a grant from the ISF, submit a proposal and believe in the chance of winning. I learned about the importance of giving a lecture at an important conference abroad and making connections for the future. I have implemented what is required to ensure the promotion."
F	"I learned how to prepare a detailed research budget and plan research time accordingly and write a proposal for a research fund (ISF). I gained in-depth knowledge of the promotion processes."
G	"I have acquired many tools and insights on how to strengthen an academic portfolio for promotion, how to prepare and submit research proposals to competitive grant funds and how to integrate into teaching and research abroad."
H	"I learned ways to develop international connections. I finally understood how the promotion process works."
I	"I acquired rules for working according to a defined and detailed budget as well as for working in a research team to support the promotion process. I got an idea of possibilities for academic work abroad."
J	"Focus on publications and enhancing expertise"
K	"I gained knowledge of how things work and how to benefit from potential ties. I acquired a network of female colleagues to consult with, to connect to a joint study or for a mutual support conversation."

L	"I became familiar with the types of grants, financing options, possibilities of working abroad and the requirements for promotion. I learned to be part of a group. It gives me additional motivation."
M	"I received excellent materials at the end of each study unit." "I gained the ability to consult with my mentor."
N	"I met researchers for collaboration and templates for quantitative and qualitative research. I understood the paths of progress, and no less importantly, I formed a sense of belonging and efficacy."
O	" I acquired tools for building the promotion portfolio, tools for formulating my personal scientific profile and how to write my "story". I refined ways to create collaborations with researchers around the world."
P	"I acquired information."
Q	"I learned how to understand the expectations of a competitive research fund as well as the theoretical and methodological writing skills required. I broadened my horizons in order to consolidate my professional identity as a researcher."
R	"I developed an awareness of the importance of creating a strategic plan for progress. I acquired knowledge about the processes of promotion and teaching abroad and understood the importance of international relations. I received assistance in formulating a proposal for the BSF."

From the above theme, six categories can be derived regarding the main tools acquired as part of the program: Understanding the promotion process, submission of grant request, tools for focusing, building international ties, collaborations and forming one's own identity.

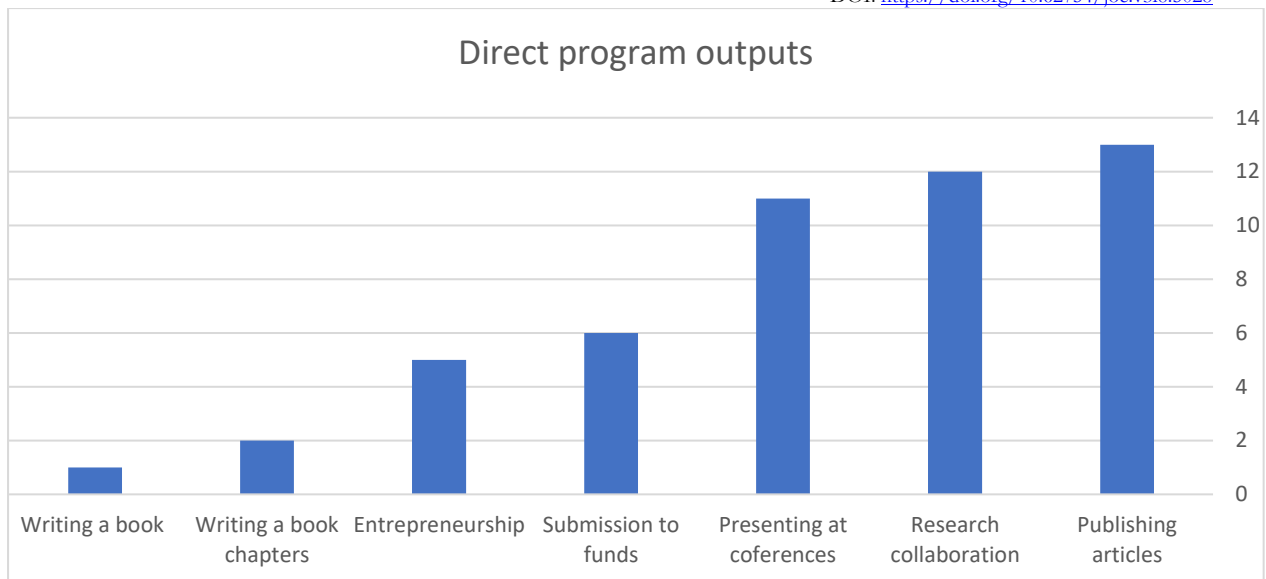


Third theme: Direct program outputs

Name	Direct program outputs
A	Publication of two articles in English; merging research fields; presenting at a conference and publishing an article abroad; two collaborations in the US; submission to a research fund in Israel; reviewing an article in Hebrew in Israel.
B	Three conferences in Europe and Israel; writing an article and another article accepted to Q2.
C	Sending an article for review; writing 5 articles at the same time; cooperation with Europe and the United States; presentation at a conference.
D	Writing a book.

E	Presentation at an international conference in June 2022; writing a grant application for the ISF; receiving two invitations in 2023 to be a conference Keynote speaker; invitation to organize and chair a conference at Trinity, UK in 2024; a multinational symposium to be held in Rotterdam, Netherlands in April 2023; submission of a grant from the BSF in partnership with researchers from Georgia, USA.
F	Publishing an article rated Q1; progress in further comprehensive research, with completion of two more articles and their submission for review.
G	One article was published' an article that was accepted after corrections, submission of an article to a journal; an article for a conference published in a book; two articles in preparation and two articles in collaboration.
H	Two articles; presentation at two conferences; book articles; submission of an interim research report; development of international ties with two entities from different countries.
I	New research; writing an article in English and a number of other articles in Hebrew.
J	Presentations at two international conferences; two articles for journals, planning to present at four conferences next year, one abroad, one in Israel and two more hybrids on Zoom; partner in two projects.
K	One research; participation in a conference in Europe
L	Participation in conferences and cooperation with researchers; research in collaboration, proposal for research collaboration with Chile, initiative of organizing a conference in Israel.
M	Participation in conferences in Israel and abroad; initiative to translate a book from Arabic; many articles under review; chapters in a book in Hebrew,
N	Two research proposals in collaboration; three articles in the process of being written, and an article under review.
O	Initiatives: writing 3 digital textbooks and two digital learning spaces; participating in a district conference and writing one article in English.
P	0
Q	Collaborative research, two articles and assistance; initiative: thinking for international teaching and significantly improving the proposal for a competitive research fund (ISF)
R	Article under review; writing a proposal for BSF in collaboration with a researcher from the US; conference in Switzerland and writing three articles; Initiative: research pilot, writing an article with the shared ethnography; signing up for the next academic year to specialize in writing a book.

From the above theme, six categories can be derived regarding direct program outputs: article publications, collaborations and merging of research fields, participation and presentation at conferences, submission to foundations, initiatives, writing book chapters, writing a book.

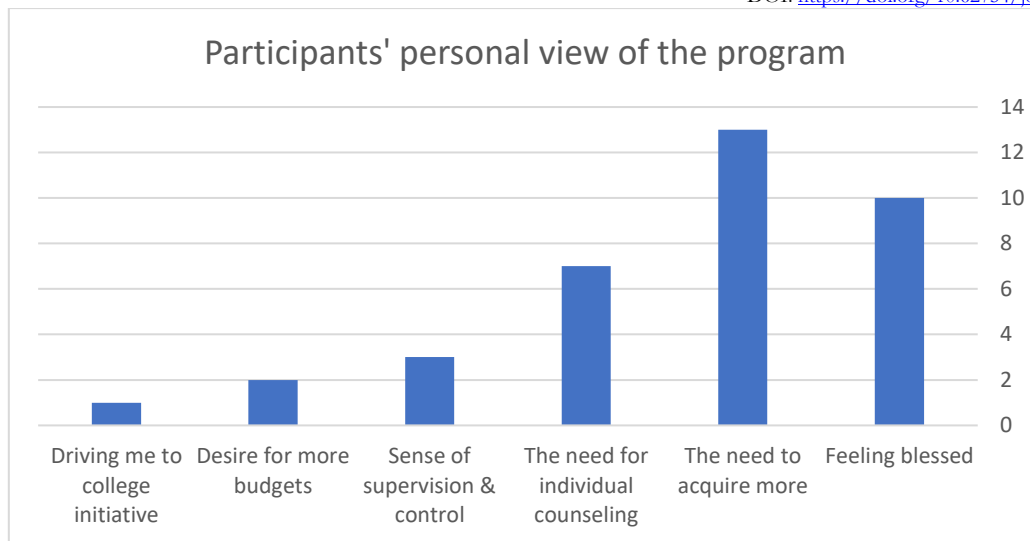


Fourth Theme: Participants' Personal Perspective Over the Program

Name	Personal perspective over the program
A	"I am happy to attend a meeting that talks about preparing the file (not only technical-logistical, but what to write and how? in the part of the research biography and in general). The mentor didn't tell me anything new, just gave a "food for the journey". I would have liked a more supportive accompaniment in the sense of opening doors and opportunities. I would be happy to have a session on preparing for presentations at conferences, assessing the quality of ratings of publications, opening notification sites for conferences and acquiring skills of promoting goals at conferences. I am grateful for being a part of such a group of women and see in each one someone to learn from and with. I would also like to hold "frustration" sessions and, from the problems, offer a variety of ways of coping. I experienced some confusion over conflicting recommendations. It is a wonderful and opportunity to take part in such a program and is not to be taken for granted."
B	"The issues of teaching abroad and the session on promotion procedures were very practical and tangible. The processes of making the group advisory and collaborative were excellent. <u>Points for improvement:</u> The sessions on submitting to funds were less effective in my opinion. Individual sessions and counseling were needed. <u>I would also love to contribute and present to the group.</u> "
C	"A well-organized plan. I really appreciate the opportunity."
D	"I hope that the familiarity and friendship with the participants will lead to the establishment of a "college research institute".
E	"To be preserved: the Forum. To be improved: Individual mentoring sessions focused on tips for winning grants."
F	"I would like discussion sessions and presentation of products, an addition to the budget, and sessions that add knowledge and academic skills."
G	
H	"Consider giving the stage to the participants as well. Each of us has gained important experience in academic endeavors and we can learn from each other. I am willing to contribute information I have accumulated vis-à-vis the ISF. I would like to receive individual consultation in order to reach the next rank."
I	"I would like more opportunities for dialogue, sharing and deliberation."

J	"An inspiring and rewarding program. I am proud to be part of such an inspiring group of women."
K	"Thank you for the warmth and honesty of the staff. I have the sense of an academic home, of a collegial culture of support and encouragement, mutual help and empowerment and a decisive influence on the realization of my academic abilities. It is important to talk about ways to become more efficient in writing so that you get more out of your products. I hope that working in research groups, or participating in the Booster program, will help with this."
L	"I suggest a writing workshop and tips from experienced writers."
M	"I'd like to mention the great investment and personal attention to each one. I am aware that the group is heterogeneous, and I see the group wisdom. I will gladly contribute to the group in relevant fields of knowledge. I would add a platform for the publication of each new article by one of the group members. On a personal level. I would like to continue to conduct a dialogue with the president and the person in charge of professional advancement in an attempt to remain with the unique contribution and not give it up for standard formal needs."
N	"Thank you for the opportunity, the possibilities and the assistance at important points in my development."
O	"I would like this group to continue as a community of reciprocally beneficial peers and have the research authority available for any questions and consultation. I suggest a fixed time frame, for example, two hours a month when you can meet one-on-one or in groups according to the needs of the women researchers."
P	"I would like a larger research budget for editing articles."
Q	To be preserved: An ongoing and intensive process of research and group discourse that is very fruitful and opens up future directions of thought and action. Suggestion for improvement: a workshop on writing and publishing articles, exposure to additional mentors and career stories of influential women in academia. Individual mentoring was less successful because flexibility – which is welcome of course – can result in an insufficiently advancing process. I am grateful for the personal attention, caring and vision, it is a great privilege to take part in this special team."
R	"Peer-group learning is contributing and meaningful. Getting guidance on my file at the beginning of the year could have helped me focus; high-quality publication platforms in my field, which declare a relatively quick review time and for which I can adapt my writing. I suggest a lecture on action research – a particularly relevant genre in education. A session on ethics in scientific publishing (not at the basic level of the ethics procedures we are all familiar with, but in relation to substantive issues and dilemmas that arise around research and publication, personal dilemmas, etc.). Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this unique initiative."

From the above theme, six categories can be derived regarding the participants' personal views of the program: a sense of gratitude, a need for more knowledge, tools and skills, a need for individual counseling, criticism, desire for additional grants and budget, and college initiative.



Discussion

The Booster program was born out of a realization that gaps in academic ranks between male and female faculty are substantially affected by the gendered structure of society infiltrating the academic world and reflects the gendered power relations and biases disadvantaging women in academia as well as elsewhere. The program is groundbreaking because, for the first time in academia, valuable and scarce resources such as time, money and expert manpower have been channeled towards gender equity in academic promotion within a non-university academic college, normally perceived as being at the margins of budget allocations for research purposes. To ensure the quality of the program and to maximize its potential effect, an evaluation plan was designed, the findings of which were formulated along four main categories: satisfaction, acquisition of tools, outputs, and participants' personal view of the essence of the program.

According to Morse (1997), satisfaction refers to the level of fulfillment of the needs, desires and aspirations of the individual. Satisfaction depends on what the individual expects from the world, and what he or she actually receives. When we came to examine the degree of satisfaction of the program members, we treated them as employees of the organization but also as apprentices in a unique program within the framework of their workplace.

Work satisfaction is defined as the measure of employees' satisfaction with their role and work environment, which includes reference to the level of interest, motivation, manager-subordinate relationships, dynamics with colleagues and the compensation received. Efficient and productive organizations have a culture that encourages employee satisfaction (Bhatti and Qureshi, 2007). Studies indicate that employees will be more loyal and productive when they are satisfied (Harter *et al.*, 2002).

The first finding indicates that the individual framework group in the program reports a high level satisfaction both in absolute values and relative to the general framework: the average satisfaction of the personal framework group was 9.75, while the average satisfaction of the general framework group was 8.95. According to Hallam *et al.* (2004), who conducted satisfaction studies among students assigned to streamed classes, a high level of satisfaction was found among students in the stronger class. Accordingly, it seems that the very fact of division into statuses strengthens the satisfaction of the participants and strengthens their self-image. An absolute majority of the participants (16) noted that receiving research tools and skills reinforced their sense of satisfaction. Since the goal of the program is to build a promotion portfolio and as a derivative, achieve a higher rank, the acquisition of a "toolbox and skills" is a prerequisite for academic research that will enable them to write and publish many articles of the required academic quality.

Most participants also referred to the group and its members as a factor in their satisfaction. It seems that the ability of the group members sharing knowledge, developing authentic communication, and supporting each other constitutes for them a cardinal contribution to their professional, personal and organizational development. Many studies point to the protective role that colleagues have in the workplace. For example, peer support, mutual help, and knowledge and information sharing are associated with low levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Ducharme *et al.*, 2008). Maslach and Jackson (1982) also found that a casual conversation with colleagues about experiencing difficulties can neutralize burnout and tension among employees. It seems that despite the likelihood of generating tensions in a competitive environment, the program participants were wise enough to develop a supportive learning community for its members.

The vast majority of the participants (15) mentioned their understanding of promotion procedures as the main tool they acquired in the program. From this we can derive the insight regarding the great importance of explaining these procedures. One of the most notable is that wherever there are policymakers with far-reaching implications for the lives of the individual, there is a strong desire on the part of the affected subordinates to promote the idea of shedding light on organizational processes. This reduces informed biases, restores and strengthens mutual trust but mainly provides information on how to fund their activities in accordance with the requirements of the organization (Meijeret *et al.*, 2015; Florini, 2007).

The preliminary feeling of the participants prior to joining the program, was that there was not enough transparency regarding promotion procedures and that these "behind the scenes" processes were actually shrouded in ambiguity. To dispel this feeling, the head of the college appointments committee was invited to present the criteria for transition from one rank to another. It is not surprising that after her very informative lecture, the participants felt that this information was, in fact, an essential tool for them to succeed and navigate their way up the academic ladder. Most participants noted that the direct outputs from participating in the Booster program were writing papers (13), collaborating on research (12), and presenting at conferences (11).

Writing articles and presenting at conferences is a common activity for the participants, and therefore it can be assumed that the program strengthened and even empowered this trend. On the other hand, the program created research collaborations by its very nature as a platform for open encounters between women who are experts in their field, who aspire to expand their research niche and improve it in tangential fields, in terms of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. It also seems that the participants fully understood the message of the program regarding the importance of collaborations with researchers in Israel and abroad for promotion purposes. Various scholars have described in detail the advantages of peer collaboration. Beer, *et al.* (1990) pointed out that collaboration is necessary for innovation and for success in a competitive environment. Similarly, Thomas (1992) showed that cooperation is associated with a high degree of satisfaction for collaborating colleagues, quality working relationships, and high-level organizational performance. At the organizational level, Contractor and Lorange (1988) found a positive correlation between peer collaborations and high levels of efficiency and profitability for both the individual and the organization. Only one participant was able to handle the process of writing a book. It seems that the limited duration of the program did not allow for the writing and publication of a book.

The vast majority of the participants made suggestions that they believed would improve the program: the suggestions focused on the need for knowledge, tools and skills (13) and the need for individual counseling (7). One of the most notable is that optimal communication, both organizational and interpersonal, promotes the organizational climate and improves the performance of the organization (Zamir, 2014). Traditionally, the two organizational communicative approaches of "top-down" and "bottom-up" have created the distinction between a centralized and a de-centralized system. While in the "top-down" communication approach messages are mainly transmitted from those in authority to subordinates (information, regulations, instructions, directives, reprimands, etc.), in the bottom-up approach, subordinates are actively involved and contribute to the discourse from within their world of knowledge and experience (Crespi, *et al.*, 2008).

Alongside the expression of some criticism, the participants' suggestions for improvement show how greatly they were involved in the program and how strongly they wanted to contribute and not just receive.

There is a clear, direct, and open communication that is not afraid to put forward efficiency proposals even regarding a program that gives them a rare springboard for promotion.

Only two participants expressed a desire for a larger budget. It is possible that the marginality of the financial interest is due to the personal traits of the participants, but the assumption that this might also be for reasons of gender should not be dismissed. Studies have found that men and women differ in their behavior regarding the negotiation of monetary remuneration. In general, women tend to behave more conservatively in negotiations and are less likely to initiate negotiations than males (Babcock *et al.*, 2006). Women often feel less entitled to higher wages than men (Xiu *et al.*, 2015). Barron (2003) found that most women asked for an average wage while most men asked for a higher wage. Barron showed that men tend to claim to know their value and therefore are entitled to higher wages, while women tend to indicate that they are not sure about their value and therefore they tend to claim that they are entitled to the same amount that other women receive. Moreover, women are more likely to feel anxious during financial negotiations.

The study's limitation is related to the method of evaluation in relation to the direct outputs of the Booster program. In other words, in order to assess the outputs of a program, the maturation process of the participants must be taken into account more broadly. Over time, people change and grow so that maturation can affect outputs. It is possible that some of the participants could, over time, improve some of their academic performance in writing, academic ties, grant request submissions and appearance at conferences, even without the contribution of the program (Frey, 2018). At the same time, in favor of the program, it should be noted that no attrition was observed, that is, any withdrawal from the program (Nam and Toneatto, 2016). On the contrary, none of the participants quit, and the program management received requests from additional lecturers to join the program, after learning from their colleagues about its qualities.

The main importance of this study is in adding knowledge about ways to identify the weak points in the "leaky pipeline" in gender contexts from the stage in which women enter academia, through their absorption into faculties, to the processes of promotion up the ranks (Gasser & Shaffer, 2014). The next stage following this evaluation is to disseminate the Booster program - an original nuanced artifact developed as an advancement tool for female faculty - as an innovative means of promoting gender equity in academia that can be adopted by other academic institutions. Heavily financed by the state, the program's proven success can inspire other such subsidies to public academic institutions, where gender gaps in ranking is prevalent and persistent. The investment in female faculty, rendering them academic seniors, is a one time actions that renders the institution's body of female scholars ambassadors of change, who can now pass on to their younger peers their newly acquired promotion-related skills. On the organizational level, the institution itself now holds a structured program for its next generation of scholars - both men and women - who can benefit from having the program applied to them, even if not in its entirety, due to budgetary constraints.

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