

## Gaslighting and its impacts on the career progress and wellbeing of female academics, an article by Dr. Shumaila Yousafzai



### Gaslighting and its impacts on the career progress and wellbeing of female academics

Female academics are often subjected to gaslighting, a form of psychological abuse in which their reality is distorted, and they are made to question their own perceptions and experiences. This can have a detrimental impact on their career progress and wellbeing. In this blog post, from my personal experience and talking to my female colleagues, I discuss the effects of gaslighting on female academics and what can be done to challenge and mitigate its effects.

#### What is "gaslighting"?

Gaslighting, a malicious albeit subtle form of psychological abuse, is a strategic communication tactic that is used by an abuser (gaslighter) to emotionally manipulate and undermine a person's or an entire group's (gaslightee) perception of reality by denying facts, their experiences, the true nature of the environment around them, and their feelings (Sarkis, 2017). Sue et al. (2007: p. 273) further defines gaslighting as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults directed towards the gaslightee." Focusing on the gendered nature of gaslighting, Churchwell (2018) refers to it as a psychological warfare aimed at a systemic sabotage of feminine perspective by trivializing women's concerns as imaginary. These manipulations create a "hostile social environment" that feels disorienting until the gaslightee begins to doubt her own sense of reality and wonders, 'Am I the problem?' (Kivak, 2017; Richie, 2012:43).

The term "gaslighting" derives from the 1938 stage play 'Angel Street' written by Patrick Hamilton and in 1944 directed by George Cukor into a film 'Gaslight'. Set against the background of the profound changes in women's roles after World War II, the movie 'Gaslight', like many other Hollywood movies of that time showed powerful, charming men managing to deceive strong but vulnerable women into giving up their own perspective. For instance, the movie 'Gaslight' tells the story of Paula and her manipulative husband Gregory. Paula is unaware of the jewels that she inherits from her aunt (murdered by Gregory). Bent on possessing these jewels, Gregory convinces her to return to London to live in her aunt's old house.

He then sets about the task of systematically deceiving her by flickering the gaslights and when Paula notices it, he insists she is imagining things. He takes objects from the house and accuses Paula of stealing. Since Paula has no recollection of having done this, he questions her memory and perceptions and confirms his 'suspicion' that she is mentally unstable. Consequently, Paula finds herself in a vicious downward spiral and Gregory ultimately achieves his aim of distorting Paula's sense of reality such that she accepts his imposed reality.

## How is gaslighting manifested in academia?

Gaslighting of female academics has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon and a pernicious problem, as women strive to secure a place in the field of academia. For female academics, gaslighting can be especially damaging due to its capacity to impede their career success and wellbeing.

In particular, women in academia often face subtle yet pervasive undermining behaviors from colleagues and institution leadership, who are frequently male. This creates an insidious environment of implicit bias, which can lead to reduced trust, lowered self-esteem, disengagement from activities and other damaging effects for the target academic. It is therefore essential that educational institutions develop policies to recognize these behavior patterns and provide appropriate support for affected individuals.

There are several ways in which gaslighting can manifest in academia. Gaslighting tactics to sow doubt and confuse an individual, can range from microaggressions such as undermining comments and dismissive body language to harsher forms like denials of accomplishments or outright lies. Gaslighting most commonly occurs when male colleagues try to undermine, discredit, and invalidate the knowledge, accomplishments, and expertise of their female colleagues by making patronizing comments about their qualifications or experience.

Gaslighting can also involve assigning her a lesser role in collaborative projects. Another tactic used in gaslighting is the use of condescending or dismissive language, which can make the woman feel belittled and invalidated and internalize imposter syndrome. Another example of gaslighting is when male colleague constantly takes credit for the work done by their female colleagues and downplay their contributions, leading to their work being undervalued and unrecognized. While this form of psychological abuse can happen in any setting, it is particularly prevalent in academic circles due to the hierarchical power structure present in these environments.

In academic settings, gaslighting is commonly used as a means of suppressing female representation and advice. For instance, when women provide expertise or critical feedback, they may find that their comments are overlooked or dismissed by those in power, with men quickly capitalizing on their ideas under the guise of originality. Such incidents not only hinder her access to opportunities but also devalue her work and authority; if others in the field view her as unreliable or forgettable, she will struggle to make important strides in her potential career paths.

For example, a woman scholar is constantly belittled and condescended to by her male superiors, making her feel like her work is not important or valued. As a result, she becomes less likely to speak up or offer her ideas, even when she has valuable insights to contribute. This can lead to her being excluded from important meetings and decision-making processes, hindering her career advancement.

Gaslighting can also involve the manipulation of information or the withholding of resources or support. For example, a woman may be denied access to certain data or resources that are crucial for her research, or she may be excluded from important meetings or decision-making processes. These tactics can make it difficult for the woman to effectively pursue her research and can also make her feel isolated and unsupported within the academic community.

Examples of gaslighting can include female academics being talked down to in situations such as a classroom or board room setting, being denigrated for pursuing interests outside the male-dominated norm, or facing unwarranted scrutiny from colleagues over decisions made professionally. These behaviors actively work against female academic progress, subtly planting seeds of doubt and eroding confidence over time.

Gaslighting undermines an individual's perception of reality and can be damaging for female academics if it goes unchecked. The effects of gaslighting on women's mental health and wellbeing in academia can be far reaching and long lasting. In addition to increasing levels of stress, anxiety and depression, it can cause physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue and sleeplessness. It has also been found that women who are subjected to gaslighting may become socially isolated due to fear that speaking up will result in further personal attacks or criticism from those with more power or authority than them. The resulting lack of support from colleagues then leads to further isolation from the academic community which can eventually

lead to a sense of professional imposter syndrome – where individuals downplay their achievements out of fear that they don't really deserve the recognition they have achieved. It is critical that female academics are aware of gaslighting tactics and have the support they need to recognize and counteract them when they arise.

### **How gaslighting impacts the academic community?**

In addition to the personal impact on individual female academics, gaslighting can also have broader negative consequences for the academic community as a whole and for wider social structures. If women are not able to fully contribute their expertise and ideas due to gaslighting, it can lead to a loss of diverse perspectives and a homogenization of thought within the academic field. By silencing female voices through systemic oppression such as gaslighting, there is a risk that important research insights may be overlooked. This is significant because these perspectives could contribute valuable new information which would benefit society as a whole.

Similarly, when people feel unsupported in their professional environment it can discourage further contribution from underrepresented groups who may not have accessibility resources such as mentorships or funding. This means that certain topics will go unexplored due solely to gender bias which reduces diversity within academic discourse; something which could potentially limit innovation in fields like technology or medicine where diverse ideas bring fresh solutions and valuable insight into existing problems.

### **How to deal with gaslighting in the workplace?**

Gaslighting can have a destructive impact for the victims and diminish their productivity, particularly in the academic setting. It is therefore important to be equipped with some strategies for recognizing and managing it. While the situation can be stressful and difficult, female academics must realize that they are not powerless against a gaslighter's tactics.

Identify the warning signs. If you suspect you are being gaslighted at work, it is important to recognize the warning signs and take steps to protect yourself from further damage. These could include situations when someone at workplace is trying to invalidate your knowledge, accomplishments and expertise. This could also include questioning or discounting your experience, belittling or making patronizing comments about your qualifications, or using derogatory language when referring to you. Once you have identified that the person is attempting to gaslight you, it is important to respond appropriately, advocate for themselves and to speak up when your ideas or contributions are being dismissed or marginalized.

One effective way of responding to gaslighting is by calmly and clearly communicating how their words and behaviour make you feel. This can help them understand how their words are affecting you, without being overly confrontational. For example, you might say something like "I feel disrespected when you question my qualifications" or "I feel undermined when you make comments about my lack of experience". It is also important to set boundaries and be clear that this type of behaviour will not be tolerated in the future. Another way of responding is by challenging false statements made about your achievements or knowledge base in a non-confrontational manner. For example, if someone makes a statement such as "you don't know what you're talking about", instead of getting angry and defensive, calmly explain why they are wrong with facts and evidence. You can even go one step further by educating them on the topic at hand with relevant information that strengthens your argument.

Regain control of the situation. When faced with gaslighting in the workplace, it is important to work towards regaining control of the situation.

Defensive tactics, such as familiarity with one's own rights, can be helpful for refuting accusations and undermining a gaslighter. Additionally, studying clear documentation of any relevant events can also help to objectively disprove any false information presented by a gaslighter. Take note of any manipulation tactics used by colleagues or line managers. If your opinion is repeatedly ignored or others attempt to distort your interpretation of reality, these are tell-tale signs of gaslighting. Writing down evidence that counters the manipulative statements from those around you can help to arm yourself against any negative influence they may try to exert. It is also beneficial to speak up assertively when needed in order to maintain personal boundaries and feel secure in expressing one's thoughts and opinions.

Construct a support mechanism. It can also be helpful to seek support from colleagues or mentors who can offer advice on how best to navigate difficult conversations involving

mentors who can offer advice on how best to navigate difficult conversations involving gaslighting or provide emotional support during difficult times. Seeking support can also be useful in reinforcing one's own name and reputation, while discussing previous experiences and seeking advice may help you better understand the situation. Finding an ally in academia who understands the dynamics of power imbalances can give you greater confidence in responding effectively and professionally when encountering gaslighting tactics.

Seek professional help and engage in self-care. Finally, it is important for female academics experiencing gaslighting to take care of themselves both physically and emotionally. Self-care should involve setting aside time for relaxation activities such as yoga or meditation; engaging in hobbies; spending quality time with family members and friends; eating nutritious meals; getting enough rest; exercising regularly; journaling; reading inspiring books; listening to uplifting music; reaching out for professional psychological support if needed; practising positive self-talk and taking breaks throughout the day for reflection and mindfulness exercises. These activities will help boost your energy levels and enable you to confidently confront any form of discrimination or belittling behaviour directed towards you in academia so that no one can diminish your sense of worth ever again.

### **Can we turn up all the lights?**

In conclusion gaslighting has become an all too common occurrence within academic circles. Gaslighting is a harmful and insidious form of abuse that not only has devastating consequences for individual targets but also presents serious implications for wider society, limiting opportunities for marginalised voices. It is important for academia to recognize and address the issue of gaslighting in order to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all researchers and scholars. It is therefore essential that steps are taken both preventative measures put in place such as anti - discrimination policies mentorships programmes targeted at those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness about issues like unconscious bias. Only with concerted efforts from all sides will we begin see meaningful progress towards true inclusion within academia.

For all of my colleagues in academia who are experiencing gaslighting, remember that gaslighting is not your fault, and you deserve to be respected and treated fairly in the workplace.

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