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UCT professor challenges masculine workplace norms and advocates for epistemic justice



Professor Ameeta Jaga.

Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

African perspectives on work and family are significantly underrepresented, despite the continent's rich cultural, geographic, and ethnic diversity. This is one of the many challenges addressed by Professor Ameeta Jaga of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) [School of Management Studies](#) during her recent inaugural lecture.

Her lecture, titled "Balancing acts: Mothering, womanhood, and employment," explored the complexities of motherhood in the workplace and the impact of gendered norms on working mothers, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

Professor Jaga's research draws from her personal experiences and challenges what she describes as "masculine workplace norms." Her work is rooted in feminist methodologies, particularly photovoice, and aims to achieve epistemic justice by advocating for more inclusive workplace policies. Central to her research is the need for better support systems for breastfeeding mothers and policies that address care work burdens, often referred to as 'the Motherload.'

Introducing Professor Jaga, Faculty of Commerce dean, Professor Suki Goodman, highlighted the global impact of her work. "Her research is accessible and impactful. Her approach to work-family research is pioneering. I think it is safe to say that she is the most prominent South African academic in the global working family's researchers' network – and while playing on the international stage, she remains active and grounded at UCT and at home. She is driven by excellence and powered by heart."

Professor Jaga's journey into this research field began with her PhD in 2010, where she explored "Work-family conflict among Hindu working mothers in South Africa" and laid a strong foundation to get a glimpse of "the tensions between masculine workplace norms such as the expectations of an always available worker; one who's busy does not need to pause for reproductive reasons or attend to unpaid care work".

Reflecting on her career, Professor Jaga shared: "Growing up, I had a plurality of experiences with culture and belonging. At the time [of doing my PhD], I had a one-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. I had left my corporate job to join academia, as I experienced corporate culture to be hostile to employed mothers and those from diverse cultural backgrounds and values."

Her lecture also addressed the impact of decolonisation movements, such as #RhodesMustFall, on her evolving academic perspective. She emphasised the importance of adopting a southern positionality to understand gender, poverty, inequality, colonialism, and race within the work-family interface in South Africa. She said this approach was not intended to create a north-south divide but to foster a more inclusive, global understanding of these issues.

Breastfeeding

Professor Jaga has also been at the forefront of addressing workplace barriers to breastfeeding, a topic that gained her attention during a 2015 workshop aimed at establishing an African research network on working families. She learned that South Africa had the lowest breastfeeding rates globally at just 8% in 2012. Recognising a gap in workplace-related research on this issue, she examined the barriers preventing women from breastfeeding after returning to work.

Her research extends to low-income mothers' experiences, many of whom are sole breadwinners and must care for their families from a distance. She has identified several key insights through her research:

- The breastfeeding practices of mothers were shaped by familial and community networks of care and spatial legacies of apartheid due to absent fathers, young mothers and a lack of formal support systems.
- The breastfeeding discourse overlooks the harsh reality faced by many low-income women in South Africa who deal with unemployment, precarious housing, teen

pregnancy and high crime; and this leads to breastfeeding becoming less of a priority.

- Focusing solely on structural barriers to breastfeeding and employment overlooks potential agency within organisations, particularly line supervisors because empathetic supervisors provide breastfeeding support and initiate conversations to that effect before mothers give birth to help overcome those barriers.

Looking ahead, Professor Jaga plans to extend her research to include low-income fathers to address the infrastructure failures that make care work, particularly in the context of poverty, unbearable. Her work continues to challenge existing norms and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of the work-family interface, particularly in African contexts.

Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News.

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