

## FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with Professor Ameeta Jaga.



### **Ameeta Jaga, Ph.D.**

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Experts Panel Link: <https://wfrn.org/expert/ameeta-jaga/>

**WFRN - How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?**

**Ameeta** - I was introduced to the field in my master's program in 2007 where I completed a dissertation on work-family enrichment. At the time I was working as a corporate organisational psychologist, I had a two-year-old son, and I was studying. While managing these multiple roles was tricky, I also felt excited by being able to engage in different roles that each had distinct requirements of me. In turn, I learnt unique skills from each role. The field of research was inherently interesting and meaningful to me. When I joined academia in 2009, I knew that this intersection of work-family roles would be my research field. From the personal insights I gained in my master's research, and being a fourth generation Indian in South Africa, I delved into a Ph.D. on the work-family conflict of Hindu women in South Africa to explore culture's influence on work-family experiences. I have continued to grow in and contribute to the field ever since.

**WFRN - How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?**

**Ameeta** - My first real engagement with WFRN was attending the 2016 conference. I had met a few work-family scholars before at other work-family conferences. Meeting them again at the WFRN conference felt like reuniting with friends. The special interest groups and committees that I joined at the WFRN allowed me, as an early career scholar, to establish research collaborations that remain strong today. I value being able to leverage the diverse perspectives from topics, methodologies, and contexts that I encountered through the WFRN conferences and by being a member of the network.

**WFRN - Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?**

**Ameeta** - My current research project is about understanding how gender equality (via breastfeeding at work) is understood in 21st century South Africa. This work draws on southern theory to prioritise context while underlining global inequalities in knowledge production. The research recognizes that location has implications for how we understand breastfeeding at work in the global South. In this context, histories of colonization and indigenous gender orders continue to shape how women respond to work conditions and manage work and family demands.

As a whole, this project has aimed to work with unions, employers, government, and the workers themselves, to democratize knowledge. Further, our goal is to ensure that the practical solutions emanating from the research improve the quality of lives of low-income women in their efforts to combine breastfeeding and employment. This work also focuses on what the global South can offer the work-family field, by asking different questions and offering new ways of understanding work and family, beyond just Southern examples to fit Northern theories and frameworks.

*I have also started to lean on this line of thinking and southern theory for understanding global responses to COVID-19. Specifically, I am interested in Covid-19 policies which assume universalism without proper consideration of the importance of context and locality. These policies can be problematic, particularly in responses to work, family and employment issues in the global South.*

### **WFRN - How does your research connect to social policy?**

**Ameeta** - *Findings from my breastfeeding at work project are rooted in the context of clothing factory workers in South Africa who are mostly women, black and poor. This context serves as a starting point to develop policies that also serve the needs of low-income working mothers in South Africa. The research showed that legislative rights to breastfeed, or even the possibility of organizations adopting a Northern-derived concept of workplace childcare facilities, do not work for these mothers. These Northern-based policies are not sensitive to the particularities of the local context and the consequential lived daily struggles that these women face as they navigate mothering and paid work.*

*Using a collaborative approach, our research findings have informed provincial government policy. Forms of support for breastfeeding women at work now extend beyond legislated breastfeeding breaks to an expanded range of informal and formal support. The collaborative approach to policy reform was important in not only allowing an exploration of the complexities of promoting breastfeeding in the workplace, but also showing that more traditional policies and policy-making processes are unlikely to effectively respond to the needs of mothers and managers. Our work is helping to expand social policy conversations and offers new avenues for exploring joint action and research for meeting these mothers' needs to work and breastfeed. Simultaneously, our work addresses social issues that the country faces regarding food insecurity, malnutrition, poverty, and gender inequality.*

### **WFRN - Does your research inform workplace practice? How?**

**Ameeta** - *The development of work-family policies and practices, in this case to support breastfeeding at work for low-income women, should be developed with diverse sets of stakeholders, but especially the low-income women themselves to ensure that policies meet their needs. Once policies and practices are developed, it is vital that organisational leaders raise awareness of employees' entitlements to these benefits. This can increase a sense of duty among supervisors and managers, while improving low-income mothers' confidence in asking their supervisors to use the breaks to express milk.*

*This research also informs workplace practice by highlighting the importance of offering support for workplace breastfeeding prior to the mother taking maternity leave, as many mothers make decisions on whether to cease breastfeeding while on maternity leave in preparation for returning to work. Most conversations with mothers about their breastfeeding needs in the workplace, if they take place at all, occur too late. In addition to recommending the provision of*

*supportive facilities (such as a private space and breastmilk storage), immediate supervisors play a critical role in enabling mothers to combine work and breastfeeding. This is especially the case in low-resourced contexts of low-income workers in South Africa because supervisors tend to share similar lived experiences as the workers.*

**WFRN - How do you integrate work-family topics in your teaching and/or training? Do you have an assignment or approach that is especially effective?**

**Ameeta** - *In my teaching approach, similarly to my research, I find it important to focus on context. I teach a section about work-family in an occupational health psychology master's level course. Here I draw from the ideas of photovoice as a method to create dialogue. In one assignment, the application of photovoice turns the focus inward to ask students to record, reflect and communicate their perspectives about the work-family interface from their context.*

*The students take photos of people, events, places, symbols, or objects that reflect their understanding of the work-family interface. They then provide a narrative for five photographs including responses to questions such as: How might the image relate to your lived work-family experiences or perceptions? (including reference to theories that underpin the phenomenon, critiques of existing theories, relating the image's meaning to work-family constructs and empirical findings), Why might this challenge or beneficial opportunity exist?, What contextual issues are at play?, and What can be done about improving the quality of work-family in this context? The students conclude the assignment with a brief reflection on how the assignment benefited their understanding of the work-family interface.*

**WFRN - What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field?**

**Ameeta** - *Given the current focus of my work on low-income women, and from my vantage point of the South and the colonized, I am excited about the possibilities that the South and theories from the South (e.g., Bhabha, the Comaroffs, Connell, and Mbembe) can offer to the field of work-family. I believe it promises counter-intuitive perspectives, new knowledge forms, and nuances to understanding work-family from populations that have largely been excluded in orientating our views of how people inhabit this world. We are witnessing ways that the global North is becoming more like the South, with rising inequality, poverty, informal economies, and migration - and facing greater insecurities and instabilities - as we have seen in the COVID-19 pandemic. These occurrences affect work-family formations and conceptualizations, yet these realities are those that the South has had a long-term engagement with. Consequently, the global South's strength in insights into these particular encounters could be fruitfully incorporated into contributions of work-family theory, methodologies, intellectual framings and agendas.*

*If we think of our role as researchers to help find relevant and practical solutions to improve the quality of people's lives and solve global problems for the social good, then we also need to think more flexibly about how we conduct research. Breaking down disciplinary silos by forming*

*interdisciplinary research groups that include collaborations between the North and South can help us to better address complex social problems that affect work-family issues across the world. These collaborations, however, need to be those of equal powers so that work-family scholars from the North and South can together develop questions that allow for plural views that are both sensitive to local contexts and globally generalizable, to build relevant theory and practice.*

## **ABOUT THE WFRN**

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

During 2021, the WFRN will host a series of virtual conference events. We look forward to our next in-person conference June 23-25, 2022 in New York City.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website [WFRN.ORG](https://wfrn.org). To become a member, please click on this link <https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/>.