How Motherhood Stalls Women’s Academic Careers

Frank Kalman - 3/5/12

A lack of women in certain tenured professorships isn’t necessarily due to sex discrimination or lack of ability — it’s because of their choice to have kids and raise a family, according to a recent study.

In an era of progressive corporate diversity programs, some universities have yet to fully adapt from the age-old structure of tenure-track professorships. As a result, women are fading from the ranks, especially in intensive fields like mathematics and science, said Wendy M. Williams and Stephen J. Ceci, researchers from Cornell University and the authors of an article titled “When Scientists Choose Motherhood,” which appeared in American Scientist.

As the argument typically goes, women drop out of math- and science-intensive academic professorships or change their focus because of an apparent lack of ability in those areas. But Williams and Ceci write that, as of 2005, men and women were “almost equally represented among college math majors, and women tend to get better grades” in these courses.

“The most important concept is biology limits women to procreating in a certain window,” said Williams, a professor in the department of human development at Cornell. The age at which many post-doctorates are just entering the rigorous demands of a pre-tenured professorship — between 28 and 33 years old — is the same age when women are most likely to start having children.
But Williams said many women would prefer not to wait until after they earn tenure — which could be as late as age 40 — to have kids, so they end up leaving the job altogether.

Lisa Pierson Weinberger, an employment lawyer and founder of Mom Esq., a legal practice dedicated to parents’ needs, said it’s about time universities get more in line with corporate America in developing diversity practices to better accommodate working mothers.

“I think a lot of companies and universities are saying, ‘It’s not really our problem ... you’re making a choice to have a child. We don’t really have anything to do with that,’” she said. “I don’t think companies can hide behind that any longer. This is just the reality of our world.”

The researchers also dismiss the notion that perceived difference in career preferences among genders is an adequate explanation for the discrepancy.

Despite research that says females have more of a preference to work in fields like biology, medicine, animal science and psychology, Williams and Ceci argue that these fields are equally “as valuable and satisfying” as engineering or mathematics — areas where, as of 2007, women full-time professors represented only 4.4 to 12.3 percent and just 16 to 27 percent of assistant professorships in the top 100 U.S. universities.

Ceci said part of the problem is the tenure system at many universities is antiquated. It's still based on the framework put in place when aspiring professors were mostly men who lived in dormitories on campus and dedicated every hour to research and teaching.

Therefore, because men are not biologically burdened with having to make the choice between having children or continuing their careers, a larger percentage tend to stay on track and make tenure, the researchers said.

Some academic institutions have begun to experiment with practices to help eliminate the disparity, Ceci said. The University of California system has experimented with providing tenure-track women with various childcare options during summers or when kids are sick. It also has some experimental initiatives aimed to ease the transition for tenure-track female professors when they are gearing back into their teaching and research after just having a child.

Yet both Ceci and Williams suggests that a broader change to the norm is still needed. “It’s only happening in some places, and it’s only happening on a limited basis,” Williams said.

Perhaps universities could take a page out of the playbook of high-demand corporate professions, where women are constantly juggling near-80-hour weeks and raising children. One practice some in the corporate space have adopted is flex scheduling that gives working mothers the ability to work half- or part-time for certain periods while continuing their work, Weinberger said.

Or in the case of a tenure-track professor, as Williams and Ceci suggested, universities could create a half-time system, where women are able to decrease their obligations for a certain period of time without having to abandon their aspiration to reach a tenured professorship.

Joan Disler, an equity partner with law firm Epstein Becker & Green, P.C., is an example of someone in a similarly intensive profession who was able to arrange time to raise her small children while continuing to pursue a high-ranking position in her field. She said it was when the first of her two sons was 9 years old that she decided to spend more time at home raising her children.

When she was aspiring to make partner, Disler said she had hoped the firm where she worked at the time would allow her to reduce her hours in the office — with the thought that she would be able to return and pick up where she left off. The firm obliged.

“I have to tell you that during those years that made all the difference to me,” Disler said. “When I felt that I no longer
wanted to reduce my hours, the firm helped me [get back on track].”

Weinberger said most organizations — depending on the size and type — are legally required to provide mothers and fathers with maternity leave options once a child is born. But organizations — academic institutions included — should also be proactive in making sure career-oriented mothers are able to stay on track in their jobs during their pregnancy, as the child is born and once they return to work full time.

Disler said Epstein Becker & Green has a Women’s Initiative group designed to provide its female employees with networking resources and similar benefits. These resources are available to all women at the firm but can be especially valuable to those just returning from a maternity leave and looking to get back on track, Disler said.

In the case of tenure-track professors in the university system, major change is needed, Williams and Ceci said. Half-time tenure-track positions are one option. Further experimentation with practices seen in the corporate world is another.

“It’s going to take someone at a very high level [of the academy] to change the rules and allow these things to happen,” Ceci said.

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