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Women and Work: Heavy Lifting, Part II -- Discrimination Against Mothers in the Workplace

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In the last post, we talked about the problem of pregnancy discrimination against women in hourly jobs -- cases where mothers were refused simple accommodations that would help them have healthy pregnancies. Discrimination against pregnant women and mothers is a huge problem for working-class women, for whom a single missed day at work could mean that they lose both their jobs and the ability to support their families.

Professional women, by and large, are more likely to have flexible schedules and are more likely to be given paid maternity leave than working-class women. It seems pretty unlikely that, say, a lawyer or a professor would be fired for asking for an ergonomic chair to make pregnancy more comfortable. But that doesn't mean that they're immune to the effects of discrimination against pregnant women and mothers. In fact, a recent article in The American Scientist by Wendy M. Williams and Stephen J. Ceci proposed that discrimination against mothers -- not against women in general -- is almost single-handedly responsible for the gender gap in the academy in science and math-related fields.

And a staggering gap it is. According to the article, women in math-intensive fields such as chemistry, physics, mathematics, engineering and computer science make up only 4.4 to 12.3 percent of full professors, and only 16 to 27 percent of assistant professors. The article assessed several possible causes for this gender gap and dismissed several of the more popular ones, including an ability gap (Larry Summers' pet theory), a stronger desire for work-life balance than comparable men, and general sex discrimination. In fact, according to one statistic in the article, women were actually more likely than men to be hired for tenure track positions, proportional to the number of women who apply.

But only 20 percent of the people applying for tenure-track positions are women. Women are gone long before tenure becomes an issue. The reason, the study's authors propose, is that tenure track requires potential professors to demonstrate incredible productivity, a willingness to work long hours, and the ability to relocate for a job. The most demanding years in the process usually happen when candidates are around ages 30 to 35 -- which, as it happens, are also key years for starting a family. As a result, "[o]nly one in three women who accepts a fast-track university job before having a child ever becomes a mother," and "[a]mong tenured scientists, only 50 percent of women are married with children, compared to 72 percent of men." As the articles authors write, "For women who want to have children and a career in science, the picture is not pretty."

This holds true outside of science and math, and outside of the academy. One study found that mothers were 79% less likely to be hired, 100% less likely to be promoted, and offered $11,000 less in starting salary than non-mothers, making discrimination against mothers by far the strongest form of gender bias. For examples outside the laboratory, just look at law firms, which demand a level of commitment similar to academics that also typically peaks in employees' early-to-mid 30s. While nearly 50 percent of incoming attorneys are women, the percentage drops to a mere 15 percent at the equity level.

The statistics are similarly grim in business. The American Scientist article cites a study that found that ten years after graduation from an M.B.A. program, only 52 percent women with children work full-time and full-year. Having kids may be a choice, but the choice has dire consequences for women and not for men. That's literally the definition of discrimination.

Williams and Ceci put forth a series of policy suggestions for how to eliminate or diminish the brain drain that takes place in the academy as women start having children. Their suggestions include educating women about the potential consequences of taking time off or pursuing alternative career paths, instituting a part-time tenure track, or allowing primary caregivers to stop the tenure clock while their children are young.
This is all good advice, although it's worth noting that these policies also exist at many universities but are underutilized because of the perception -- and often the reality -- that they make the stigma of motherhood worse, not better. Penn State, for example, has a system in place for parental leave, but in a study conducted between 1992 and 1999, only seven parental leaves were reported out of 500 professors who had children. "Those who utilize the policies may be viewed as uncommitted and, at worst, experience the ultimate failure for an academic in the denial of tenure," the study noted. And while many universities have policies that allow professors to stop the tenure clock, tenure review committees often aren't even apprised of the policy -- which of course effectively negates it.

The burden professional mothers carry is, by and large, metaphorical, but that doesn't mean it doesn't weigh them down. And if we continue to refuse accommodations to pregnant women -- whether those accommodations are help lifting a 50-pound box a more flexible tenure timeline -- gender inequality isn't going anywhere.

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