Motherhood detrimental to careers in science

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Study finds that biased hiring and evaluation not sole reason for under-representation of women in science.

ITHACA, NY — Women with advanced degrees in math-intensive academic fields drop out of fast-track research careers primarily because they want children – not because their performance is devalued or they are shortchanged during interviewing and hiring, according to a new study at Cornell University.

“Motherhood – and the policies that make it incompatible with a tenure-track research career – take a toll on women that is detrimental to their professional lives. Even just the plan to have children in the future is associated with women exiting the research fast-track at a rate twice that of men,” report Cornell human development professors Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci in the March-April issue of the journal American Scientist.

“It is time for universities to move past thinking about under-representation of women in science solely as a consequence of biased hiring and evaluation, and instead think about it as resulting from outdated policies created at a time when men with stay-at-home wives ruled the academy,” said Williams, who founded the Cornell Institute for Women in Science, a research and outreach center that studies and promotes the careers of women scientists.

For the study, Williams and Ceci analyzed data related to the academic careers of women and men with and without children in academic fields, including math-heavy ones. They found that before becoming mothers, women have careers equivalent to or better than men’s. “They are paid and promoted the same as men, and are more likely to be interviewed and hired in the first place,” Williams said.

The study builds on previous research by Williams and Ceci published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showing that women in math-intensive fields did not face discrimination in hiring, publishing or funding.

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