Motherhood takes a toll on women's career

ANI  Mar 18, 2012, 12:00AM IST

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Motherhood is taking a toll on women's scientific careers, researchers say.

A new study at Cornell University has revealed that 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.

"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," said Cornell human development professors Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci.

"It is time for universities to move past thinking about underrepresentation 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women in science solely as a consequence of biased hiring and evaluation, and instead think about it as resulting from outdated policies created at a time when men with stay-at-home wives ruled the academy," said Williams.

Williams 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 appeared in the March-April issue of the journal American Scientist.

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