Women quit careers in science to be parents

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SCIENCE NOTES
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If you take a look at the science faculty at American universities, you’ll discover a disparity: Women are underrepresented in the so-called “hard sciences.” The “math-intensive” fields.

Why? For some people, the answer seems obvious. Women are the victims of sexist discrimination—in hiring decisions, the funding of research projects, and the acceptance of publications.

But recent evidence argues against this interpretation. When Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci analyzed data on the career progress of men and women in the sciences, they discovered some good news. Controlling for the quality of the applicant’s resume, the researchers found that men and women were getting funded and accepted for publication at equal rates. And hiring? Women were actually a bit more likely to get hired.

While discriminatory hiring practices may have held women back in the past, it no longer seems to be the problem.

But the gender disparity remains. Why aren’t there more women scientists on the tenure-track?

The answer, it seems, is parenthood. Many female PhDs want to become mothers. And they don’t think life on the tenure-track is compatible with their plans.

In a new study published in American Scientist, Williams and Ceci note:

“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.”

What now? That’s what I’d like to know. Williams and Ceci see their research as a wake-up call. As Williams says in a press release,

“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women in science solely as a consequence of biased hiring and evaluation, and instead think about it as resulting from outdated policies created at a time when men with stay-at-home wives ruled the academy.”

And I’m thinking more broadly of all the people—men and women—who might have stayed the course if they had found more flexibility in academia.

Does good science require that a researcher devote himself to a 60-hour work week?

Do we really think that the only important contributions to science are going to come from people who have
sacrificed their family lives?

Obviously, the answer is no. Important discoveries have been made outside the context of the modern, high-stress tenure track. It’s not the only way. If the academic life resembles a highly-competitive monastery, it’s because human beings have structured that way for social reasons.

Moreover, it’s not clear to me that society benefits by weeding out scientists who want to experience a bit of family life.

If we make it easier for these “family types” to contribute, we might end up with more intellectual diversity.

And that, I think, would be a good thing.

**image of mother with microscope and child ©iStockphoto.com/Rudyanto-Wijaya**

### 4 Responses to Women quit careers in science to be parents

1. **Science mom** says:  
   February 17, 2012 at 6:18 pm
   Unfortunately, you really cannot have it all. I worked very hard to get a Ph.D. with a lot of publications, I did a post-doc at an Ivy league school, got a tenure track position at a university and even got tenure. Then, I had 2 kids, lost my NIH funding and even though I am tenured, I’m in trouble and could lose my position after all that work since I have no external funding. It kills me, but after I had kids, my priorities changed. I lost my edge to some extent and managing a research lab and two young children is very difficult with no family around. Kids get sick, a lot. Plus, my husband has the same career as me. In fact, he got his position because they wanted to recruit me, but now he is doing very well while I am perhaps going to lose my job. This type of position really does take 60-80 hr weeks to compete. You have to live science. If you lose that focus, it’s over. My husband is an equal contributor in terms of caring for our kids, but I need to take care of all the household things like the bills, organization, etc. Plus, kids just want their mommies more sometimes. I do not know what the solution is or if I will survive and flourish again, but the whole thing is rather depressing at this stage in my life. Something needs to change, but I do not know what the answer is. A lot of it is because I lost my edge and focus since my husband is still doing well. It definitely a complex issue and I do not think there are any simple solutions.

2. **Joan** says:  
   February 17, 2012 at 6:10 pm
   As a Ph.D. scientist, I see so much of what you speak of in this blog. Great post and a good summary of the trouble with staying in academics as a woman and a mom.

3. **Beth** says:  
   February 17, 2012 at 6:54 pm
   I disagree that the institutions have to change. There are a lot of careers that demand a 60-hour work week and people who don’t want to make the personal sacrifice to pursue those careers simply don’t. The change needs to come from the last remaining of segment of society who have contributed practically nothing to the gender equality movement: fathers. Husbands and fathers have seen very little change in their family roles since the 70′s. Individual exceptions absolutely exist, but mothers are still providing most of the child care and taking care of the home even when both parents are equally employed. Why is a 60 hour work week incompatible with being a mother but not a father? I’m sure it is incompatible for many of the men and women who decide against it simply because they don’t want it, but for many more it is because in the case of father, a 60 hour work week ends by coming home and beginning their family time with a little “help” around the house thrown in. For most 60-hour a week mothers, they leave work and take primary responsibility for all household tasks their husbands are not so gracious to help with.

   It can no longer be thought of as a women’s movement because women have come as far as they can come without better buy in and cooperation from men. You cannot have an equitable workplace until you have an equitable home. Employers have done their bit, time to bring the homefront out of the 70′s.

4. **Erin** says:  
   February 17, 2012 at 10:22 pm
   Both my husband and I were in science graduate school together. About 5 years ago, we finished up, and left academia for good. And I’m so glad we did! We might have had a life full of stressing over tenure clocks and submitting endless applications to find positions in the same city, living somewhere we didn’t want to, putting off a family or not having time for one...

   Instead, we live exactly where we want, we both work at home part-time (those science degrees translate...
to a pretty good pay rate as a consultant), and can share the care of our two young kids without needing daycare, while still having plenty of time for fun. Tell me why I should have stayed in science, again?
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