Description

Avril works her way through graduate schoolby working hard to complete courses, carry out research, and eventually earn her PhD. Consequently, she also earns an academic position at a leading university. After a few years as a faculty member, she decides to start a family. This ends up being her introduction to gender disparity.

Some people might see academia as a profession that offers flexibility and a relaxed environment. However, this is not always the case. Overwhelmingly, just like Avril, many women in STEM fields cite the difficulty of balancing family obligations and academic work as their biggest challenge. Rebecca Calisi, a neurologist and assistant professor at UC Davis, says it clearly: “I could tell you about how women who deign to pursue a career and have a family are often sentenced to the expectations that we must work as if family did not exist – and parent as if work did not exist.”

Motherhood and Gender Disparity

So, what are some of the causes of gender disparity? There are many, but with respect to motherhood, traditional gender roles and a lack of support for new mothers are the most significant. This is evident in academia as new mothers miss out on important opportunities for funding, fellowships, and publishing.

Traditional gender roles date back to the past but are still very much present. Women, not men, were the ones who were expected to give up their career in order to stay home and raise the family. While not clearly stated, this is still expected today. These accepted roles still affect how women in STEM view their careers. Some might ask: “Isn’t it my role to be with my child rather than at work?” And once they assume the role of a stay-at-home mother, career opportunities could pass them by.

In some countries, the U.S. for example, there are no strict laws concerning maternity leave. This lack of support, in turn, adversely affects women in STEM. It also continues the concept of vertical segregation: the limit placed on genders to attain specific levels of responsibility. The responsibilities of motherhood and the lack of support lead to less opportunities for career advancement for women. In the end, new mothers might be left with a difficult choice: a career or a family.

What the Studies Say about the “Penalty for Motherhood”

According to an 8-year long study, 43% of female faculty in the sciences either leave the field or go part-time after having their first child. This is in contrast to 23% of men who do the same after becoming new fathers. Clearly, women are more often expected to make the sacrifice of giving up on their career goals. However, if women in STEM do decide to further their careers after having a child, they still face an uphill battle.

Another study done by the Universities of Bath and Turin followed 262 male and female scientists over a 10-year period. It analyzed their citations (how often their work is quoted by other researchers), publications, and funding opportunities. The research showed a clear “motherhood penalty”. Female scientists with young children were far behind the number of citations, funding opportunities, and publications of their male counterparts. This could be due to many factors, including lack of time to travel to conferences, less time for research, and less opportunities for collaborative work. All of these are necessary for women to further their careers.

How Can Academia Solve this Problem?

There has been some progress in gender equality over the past decade. However, academia still needs to work to solve the problem of gender disparity in the STEM fields. Virginia Valian, a psychologist at the City University of New York, sees the issues of gender disparity and the penalty for motherhood as a structural problem. Fortunately, with more studies being done, more solutions are being presented.

These solutions include:

- Increased opportunities and funding for travel and research.
- Clear paid maternity leave or flex-time policies.
- More focus on the female research experience, including monitoring course loads, number of publications, and quality of mentoring.
- More initiatives like the Boston University Women in Economics and the Women in Science at Yale (WISAY) need to be launched.

Possibly with these measures taken, many more such as Avril will be able to rise higher up in the ladder in academia.

What are your thoughts on these issues? What are your experiences with gender disparity in academia? Have you known professors or researchers who have had to deal with the challenges of balancing their family with their careers? Please share your thoughts with us in the comments.

Category

1. Diversity and Inclusion
2. Publishing Research
3. Understanding Ethics

Date Created

2019/03/02
Author
eneditor