



Combining Academic Career and Motherhood: Experiences and Challenges of Women in Academia

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with how women in academia with children combine and balance the needs of professional responsibilities and family life. The paper explores the barriers that they encounter and how they respond to them, and what personal and professional supports enable or disallow them to reach their fullest potential in both roles. This study draws on primary data gathered through methods of questionnaire and interview. The findings point that women in academia face unique challenges, which require further investigation so as to create an academic environment which is supportive of women trying to balance a career and motherhood.

Keywords: Women in academia, motherhood, challenges

Introduction

In recent decades there has been a significant change in the field of higher education in India, where an increasing number of women has entered the academic field. Yet, there is a clear evidence of a “glass ceiling” that is preventing women from reaching the top-ranking academic positions on parity with men. Even in countries with highly sophisticated family-friendly policies such as it exist in the Nordic countries; women are still not ascending the academic hierarchy at the same rate as men¹. Given the fact that research productivity is often a central factor in promotion to senior levels, the research activity undertaken by women clearly represents critical points in their career trajectories.

Today, unprecedented emphasis is being placed on research as key requirement for advancing in ones academic career and promotion. While research represents only one aspect of the academic work, it remains almost universally a job requiring a high level of commitment in terms of time and effort. Research is a complex set of intellectual, social, environmental and cultural activities, it also does not occur in a vacuum, it requires development and nurturing². Apart from dealing with the demands of research and publication, academic work literally never ends, where faculty has to deal with teaching, attending seminars, workshops and other workloads. There is considerable pressure to be productive and apparently the pressure is heavier for women with children. For instance, women tend to shoulder a greater proportion of domestic work than men, and they typically balance multiple conflicting roles – academician, mother and home maker. And when domestic work is coupled with a busy academic life, their research activity becomes sidelined.

There are many factors which create barriers to women's advancement with research productivity. These include the long-standing gendered division of academic labour that sees women more concentrated in teaching activities while men focus on research and publishing³. It is well known that research is an activity more valued for promotion purposes than teaching. Another factor that is often considered a limit to women's research development is that they have less access to academic networks which are vital for a successful research career⁴.

Both men and women as academician professionals and parents struggle with the task of achieving a balance between work and family life, however the challenge for women is greater than for men, given the simple logistics of the biological clock, the physical demands of pregnancy and childbirth, the gendered expectations of family obligations, and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the “second shift” through maintenance of children and home⁵. For academic mothers, one of the most time consuming aspects of their lives and a source of significant professional, personal and marital stress is the fact that many feel as though they work a ‘second shift’ at home. This aspect is seen to have a negative impact on women's research capabilities. In such a situation research is the only thing that can be put off in a schedule filled with teaching, research and children⁶.

Further, cultural expectations which persist about women's responsibilities and capabilities have a negative impact on the careers of women⁷. It can lead to interruptions in their academic career and serve as major barriers to their research and publishing activity. This social expectation about the roles women and men are supposed to perform are extremely difficult to alter. They remain universal, even in a country as progressive as Sweden where gender equality permeates all governmental policies⁸.

Keeping in mind the many challenges faced by women in the academia the paper examines the factors that support or impede their professional and family responsibilities. It suggests policies and practice that higher educational institutions might adopt to enhance the research productivity and performance of women academics.

Methodology

The data used for the analysis is based on research undertaken in 2012 on a representative sample of women from Mokokchung district of Nagaland. An open-ended questionnaire was designed for self-completion. The questionnaire elicited detailed information from twenty seven women relating to their socio-economic background, distribution of the working time between the various faculty responsibilities, challenges faced being a female faculty, how they adjust professional and family life, sources of support and tension in performing the dual role, relationship with spouse and the domestic division of labor within the household, specifically hours spent on childcare and household tasks. A qualitative in-depth interview was conducted to supplement and enrich the interpretation of results obtained from the questionnaire. The results from this research work provide a broader perspective on the relevant issues and allow for generalizations to be made.

Women selected ranged in age between 30-50 and their length of service ranged from 4-24 years. The age of the children ranged from 3 to 20 years. The respondents came from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds such as Economics, Education, Sociology, Political Science, Botany, Chemistry and English.

Table-1
Structure of the Sample by Disciplines

Area of Discipline	Sample (%)
Botany	11.11
Chemistry	7.41
Education	14.81
English	14.81
Political Science	18.52
Sociology	18.52
Economics	14.81
Total	100

Results and Discussion

The chief impediment to pursuing research among women is lack of time generally and the fragmentation of available time by way of performing multiple roles. Though opinion differed on what constituted the greatest time challenge, one of the persistent complaints among them related to the unpaid second shift at home. Studies have shown that societal expectations for women to provide care are central to women's assumption of these responsibilities⁹. Table 2 shows in a rather obvious way

that a large number of women take care of their children by themselves. This reflects the relatively high level of collective assumption that women are responsible for children in our society. The Naga culture generally stereotypes caregiving as feminine work. This is reflected by the fact that, women are still expected to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare, even among the highly educated participants in this study. The following comment is typical of this point of view: "In addition to performing professional responsibilities, we are expected to perform duties as wife and mother at home"

Table-2
Childcare Responsibilities (%)

Primarily by myself	37.04
Primarily by my husband	14.81
Equal share between me and my husband	22.22
Primarily by family members/helpers	25.93
Total	100

It is apparent that though the women academics work full-time, they still carry the burden of domestic and childcare responsibilities. The expectation of working a 'second shift' at home creates multiple stressors for women (Hochschild, 1997). Stress for women has been linked to many adverse outcomes, including chronic illness and disease¹⁰ and increased psychological distress¹¹.

Having a PhD has increasingly become a prerequisite for academic employment and career progression. Out of the twenty seven respondents, just four of them had completed their PhD and even among them, once married their research activity took a backseat. Many of them lack the required skills to undertake research within their disciplines. Therefore, many were caught between meeting the changing University requirements knowing they needed to have research experience and publications to apply for academic promotion but at the same time, heavily involved with teaching and household responsibilities.

Many women feel that their career advancement is limited after having children. For example, they cannot travel freely to attend work-related conference, training and meetings. And in certain cases they travel less or not at all to accommodate the child, even if they recognize the downsides. Raising children is often seen as competing for the time and attention needed to succeed in highly competitive academic field. Even though most of the women use helper in some form or another, they usually felt that they, not their husbands, were expected to shoulder the primary responsibility for anticipating the needs of their children, a task which can be psychologically and physically consuming.

When it came to discussion on balancing the needs of professional responsibilities and family life, responses were mixed. Very few women opined that they have achieved a reasonable balance between professional and family life. Many of them still found it a constant struggle. While work remained important, but so was being a parent. They find themselves

routinely struggling between multiple tasks such as meeting the demands of research, publication, teaching and family responsibilities. The following comments are reflective of such a conflict:

"Taking care of children takes time, emotional investment, and energy. At the same time academic work is equally demanding".
"Dividing time between family, fulfilling a mother's duty as well as giving quality education to the students leads to work-family struggles"

"Work (professional and home) never ends in terms of quantity"

Women were asked whether their relationship with their spouse was based more on traditional or egalitarian gender roles. In the former, the wife's emphasis is on the home, while the husband's is on the working world, even though the wife belongs to this world as well¹². Whereas, in an egalitarian marriage, equal emphasis is placed on work and family for both husband and wife¹³. As the perceived primary breadwinner, the needs of a husband in a traditional marriage come first, including rest and relaxation in nonworking hours. Wives, working or not, maintain responsibility for household chores and related women's work, while their wage-earning activity is viewed as supporting or supplementing the primary breadwinners efforts. Husbands thus hold both power and prestige in a traditionally oriented marriage, and their labor is confined to one realm, while wives labor may span both the home and the working world¹⁴.

While few women in the study described their husbands as "enlightened," in that they did an equitable share as father and husband, the majority had husbands who were personally and professionally "supportive" but had limited involvement in the household and childcare responsibilities. Even though marital equality is considered a goal worth pursuing by contemporary couples, actual practice of equality in marriages is more in theory than in practice. Household and childcare responsibilities are still largely viewed as a "woman's issue" by the society no matter whether the women has a career or not. For many women, attempt to bring balance between work and family disrupts the standard timetable for their career progression.

It is pertinent to mention here that many of the women appear to spend more time on activities which are regarded to be less productive in terms of research productivity. To check this argument the analysis looked at the amount of hours per week that women spend in the various faculty responsibilities, such as, teaching, research, advising students both formally and informally. Among all the faculty responsibilities women tend to devote more time in teaching and advising students, an activity which have little importance in terms of career progression and less on research work. This indicates that women are more keen to identify their strengths as teachers, not as researchers. This implies a strong teaching ethos among women. Such observation is also supported by research findings which report a more positive orientation by women towards

teaching as part of professional life than was the case with men¹⁵. However, it seems necessary to underline the fact that academic careers and opportunities of promotion are above all determined by research outcomes. A few of them did identify actual teaching loads as a challenge, but, on the whole, teaching and interacting with students was talked about in extremely positive ways.

The women respondents were asked for suggestions about what need to change in order to feel more validated and supported professionally. The following comments were expressed by the women respondents.

"In addition to providing motivated mentoring to the junior faculty, it is important to train and encourage all faculty, especially the seniors, to become good mentors"

"Without substantial spousal support, it is difficult to meet the norms and expectations of academic excellence"

"Husbands attitude towards women as helper and homemaker need to change"

"Unless domestic support systems develop, it is difficult for women to excel professionally"

"Women need a release time for research"

Conclusion

The purpose of the research paper was to examine how women in academia with children combine and balance the needs of professional responsibilities and family life, what are the research barriers they face and how they respond to them, and what personal and professional supports enable or disallow them to reach their fullest potential in both roles. The data revealed that many of them are struggling to strike a balance between the expectations of academic work and family life. These findings are not surprising given the consuming nature of academic careers and motherhood. Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences and challenges of women faculty, especially those with small children, and respond proactively to their needs.

Greater support and understanding of work-family stress experienced by women in academia are clearly called for. Such a step may improve job performance and satisfaction. Therefore, institutional policies that help faculty deal with professional and home responsibilities will both enhance the quality of the educational environment, making it more attractive to academic women, and help them fulfill professional and personal duties. This will provide institutions with necessary returns on the investment that they make in their faculties. It will also encourage more high-quality individuals to consider academic careers.

Keeping in mind the fact that it is very difficult to break through research barrier, small funded projects can be very useful starting points for universities or academic institutions seeking to help women advance their academic research careers. There

is also a need to raise women's consciousness on research front. One way of doing it is through workshops. Also needed are mentoring and access to professional networks especially keeping in mind the fact that many women have little research experience. Good mentoring is important especially for the junior at the start of their career. Women academics also need to create strong local, national, and international research networks, if possible, which would open up research opportunities. There is a need to highlight successful women researchers within the institution who would act as role models and mentors especially for young researchers.

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