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Op-Ed - By Elizabeth Currid-Halkett
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Family and career: Women in academia lose faith in having it all
More female doctoral students are backing away from the high-pressure academia race at the starting line, trading career ambitions for having a family.



Academia may be losing top talent because many female graduate students feel that the tenure-track pressure cooker and having a family are almost impossible to balance.

(Bonnie Dain / For The Times)

I recently had coffee with one of my top doctoral students, a woman in her late 20s. After years of slogging through data sets for her dissertation, she told me she would finish her doctorate in public policy but not pursue a career in academia. Stunned, I asked why. She was about to get married and hoped to start a family, she said, and she'd concluded that she couldn't be the mother she aspired to be and a contestant in the pressure-filled tenure-track race at the same time.

Colleagues at other universities tell me similar stories of star female students either abandoning career ambitions or "underplacing" themselves — turning down prestigious fellowships and accepting jobs at less competitive universities — so they can focus on raising children and enjoying family life.

My student may represent a worrisome trend: young, talented and gifted academic women giving up at the starting gate because they believe that "having it all" is a fiction and what they really want is marriage, a family and all the personal stuff that makes life worth living.

Family is becoming more important to young women. A recent Pew Research Center survey reports that, after steadily rising for decades, the participation of women with children in the labor force has declined somewhat since 2000. And though women between the ages of 18 and 34 say they place importance on their careers in greater numbers than in the past, they also put much higher store on marriage and family life. Some 37% of the respondents said that having a successful marriage was "one of the most important things" in their lives, up from 28% in 1997. More remarkable, 59% said children were one of the most important things in life, compared with 42% 15 years ago. Overall, women ranked children and marriage — 94% and 84%, respectively — as among the most important things in life.

In forming her opinion that family life and academia were incompatible, my student told me, she had talked to graduate students she knew at other universities. They all had noticed how many unmarried female professors taught at their schools, and how many of those who were married didn't have children. Indeed, a recent survey of female academics found that only 1 in 3 became mothers during their university careers, and just 44% of them married (compared with 77% of their male counterparts). The survey also revealed that 38% of the surveyed female faculty regretted not having had children or not having had more children.

More telling, another survey shows that young women are clearly mindful from the outset of the potentially painful choices that may lie ahead. Mary Ann Mason, a law professor at UC Berkeley, surveyed 8,000 doctoral students in the UC system in 2008. She found that more than half of all female candidates felt that having children would hinder their careers, and that fear of being held back postponed many academic women's child-rearing, sometimes permanently. As a female doctoral student in engineering told Mason, "I failed my PhD exams when my son was 6 months old and breast-feeding. My advisor suggested I finish with a master's."

Other women, like my student, decide not to pursue an academic career at all. Though 40% of female students aspire to a research-driven academic position at the beginning of graduate school, that figure drops to just above 25% as they carry on their studies. As Mason concludes, academia may be losing top talent because many female graduate students feel that the tenure-track pressure cooker and having a family are almost impossible to balance. Almost half of all women (48%) surveyed cited children as a very important reason for shifting their career goals (versus just 21% of men).

For me, there was no agonizing choice between career and family. I eagerly jumped on the tenure track. I had no thought of a serious romantic relationship with a man, let alone marrying or having a child. I had more important things to worry about, like how many academic journal articles I'd published and which of my research papers under review would be accepted.

When I met my future husband after my first book was published and my second was on the way, I still wasn't thinking motherhood. My schedule continued to dictate our calendar. The "up or out" tenure process means that if you don't get the promotion, you are effectively fired without getting a second chance.

Then, four months ago, I gave birth to Oliver. The profound joy his existence gives me daily is something I couldn't have imagined before becoming a mother. Yes, when I found out that I was pregnant, the careerist in me was slightly terrified. Would it affect my tenure decision? Would morning sickness make me less productive?

Of course, motherhood isn't for all women, and I do love my job. But what's alarming is that too many women driven to succeed in a career may miss the experience of motherhood because they believe "having it all" is a fiction.

During our discussion over coffee, my student said I was one of the rare women who'd managed to get married, have a baby and get tenure before the age of 35 (I was awarded tenure three weeks before Oliver was born). Her observation did not make me proud. It made me heartbroken that she felt the pressure to choose before even entering the workplace.

We need to find ways to make serious careers and family feasible for women from the outset, not just focus on helping women manage the conflict deeper into their careers. The future of academia, science, medicine and business may depend on nothing less.

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