

## **Academic Mothers and Work-Family Balance**

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Women across different disciplines, countries and cultures are underrepresented in careers in higher education. The terms “leaky pipeline” and “pyramid problem” are used to describe the tendency of women in academia to occupy the lowest levels of the academic hierarchy (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). Women who do climb the academic ladder often remain single, become separated or divorced, or produce fewer children than they wish (Baker, 2010).

### **Factors Contributing to Work-Family Balance for Academic Mothers**

Factors that contribute to the ability of women to balance academic and parental roles (Comer & Stites-Doe, 2016):

1. Phase of a woman’s career (i.e. pre- or post-tenure) and her family life cycle stage
2. Extent to which a woman’s partner shares the household and childcare responsibilities
3. Institutional and societal factors (e.g. whether the university is research or teaching focused, work-family culture at the university and in the society at large and easy access to childcare on campus or in the community)

### **Experiences of Academic Mothers**

Women who choose to combine a full-time academic career with responsibilities of motherhood experience high levels of stress and work-family conflict (Baker, 2010). Themes revealed in a qualitative study (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009) during interviews with 10 women in Canadian Universities who had their first child or were pregnant while pursuing tenure included:

1. Feelings of vulnerability due to maternal status compared to their male colleagues who were parents or their non-parent colleagues of either gender
2. Sense of isolation from their non-academic peers and their female academic peers who were childless
3. Feeling inadequate when trying to fulfill both work and home related responsibilities and feeling that they were not able to do justice to either
4. Feeling an overwhelming amount of stress and pressure even while they were on maternity leave or right after they came back to work
5. Lack of acknowledgement and structural support at work
6. Despite these challenges the women spoke about the ways in which their lives had been enhanced by combining these roles

### **Implications for Policy and Practice (Young & Wright, 2001; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Halpern, 2008)**

1. Creating an academic culture that supports flexibility and celebrates diversity
2. Promoting a general understanding throughout academia about the challenges inherent in balancing motherhood and an academic career
3. Address discrimination in current tenure standards and processes and provide clear and consistent tenure criteria
4. Concrete measures such as providing drop-in child care on campus, offering a pre-tenure semester sabbatical, developing supports for mothers with sick children, providing

mentoring arrangements and linking faculty mothers with other faculty mothers to help support academic mothers

5. Concrete transitional support in the form of release time from teaching and student supervision and providing research personnel such as graduate student assistants
6. Providing new hires with information that will allow them to negotiate for better work schedules. It is important to make new faculty aware of the rights and benefits such as “stop the clock” and parental leave options available to them. Tenured faculty need to ensure that by using these benefits the new faculty are not negatively evaluated.
7. Accrediting bodies can ask all colleges and universities about the policies and procedures they have in place for faculty who are also caregivers. This will force campus administrators to consider how they fare in this area relative to other similar institutions.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some policies and practices in your work setting that help create a healthy work-family balance for academic mothers?
2. What are some policies and practices that you think if adopted, will be helpful for academic mothers?
3. What are some ways in which you think we can advocate for academic mothers?

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