How Can We Support Women Professors' Pregnancy and Caregiving Demands?

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Academia is full of advice—both solicited and unsolicited. In my ten years post-Ph.D., I can confidently say that one of the areas I have received the most advice and been asked to give the most advice in centers around when it is the "right" time to have children. I remember asking this question, too, and found myself largely inundated with advice and myriad signals that the "right" thing to do would be to work hard, get tenure, and then think about having children. I followed this advice, and found myself post-tenure with a baby, in a pandemic to boot, and left wondering why I waited so long and where the support really was to help academic mothers.

I decided to tackle this issue—where the support was, and how academic departments and leaders could better support women —with an amazing team of researchers in a focal article we published in Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice in 2023. Within the article, we sought to not only establish the realistic (i.e., women are having children in academia and struggling), moral (i.e., it is the right thing to do to support women and build a support system), and financial (i.e., we want to retain women) cases for supporting the pregnancy, postpartum, and caregiving demands for academic women, but to also identify ways that department heads could better support women as key leaders at universities.

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KEYWORDS

Caregiving; Gender issues in academia; Motherhood; Work-family support

Although many solutions are incredibly expensive (e.g., paid parental leave, on-campus childcare, financial support for childcare or adoption), several solutions were incredibly affordable—and even free. For example, department heads can help support women—both during pregnancy and postpartum—by **providing resources and referrals for childcare programs, working to reduce service loads** (and, critically, communicating to other faculty that reduced service loads are not something "owed back" later or to be viewed as "less work"), **creating flexible teaching plans** (e.g., shifting to online teaching; making sure courses are scheduled during hours when childcare exists), and **creating family-friendly events to make sure women are not unintentionally excluded from functions** (e.g., only relying on departmental happy hours for socializing).

Of course, members of college campuses who are not department heads also have a critical role to play as allies. **Being present for women and listening to their concerns is the first step to signaling support; taking time to educate oneself about caregiving needs and advocating for women is the second step**. For example, allies should voice concerns when serving on institution- or department-level committees that can be mobilized to create more supportive and flexible practices. Additionally**, when serving on performance or promotion evaluation committees, allies should speak up and interrupt these meetings if pregnancy or caregiving demands are used as evidence of an individual's lack of commitment, or ignored when considering someone's tenure case (e.g., concerns with research pipeline gaps, lower service during caregiving years).**

Supporting women with caregiving demands won't be solved overnight. But creating strong norms from department heads and allies can help dramatically shift the conversation.

References

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