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# **Academic Mothers and Their Experiences Navigating the Academy**

When I began writing this manuscript on the subject of mothering and teaching in the academe, I understood I would be writing from my own experiences and from the discussions I had with colleagues over the years who were also mothers with small children at home. I do not have research findings, for I have not conducted a study on the subject. I then realized I had not read any documentation on the subject either. Why had I not come across articles in journals that described the struggles and limitations of mothers who teach, or explored the barriers experienced by mothers who start a family after they enter the academic arena, or statistics that support the vastly different experiences male academic parents must have over female parents? As a professor in the discipline of community health sciences surely at least one journal article would have crossed my desk that examined health, stress, teaching and mothers in academe. Is it that this area of research is not perceived as important, therefore neither researched, funded nor written about? Yet we know that women are under considerable stress when juggling home and family life, nurturing children, developing their research portfolios, publishing in peer reviewed journals, competing to bring research funds to the university and getting tenured. We know that women struggle with these expectations because women talk to each other about their difficulties. It appears that this is the praxis that is making the experiences of mothering and teaching in academe a reality, but it is not documented in the type of journals most revered by the academy.

I must clarify that a plethora of documents in the field of motherhood exists in non-academic publications. My quest to find peer-reviewed articles or chapters on the specific topic of being a mother and teaching in the academy was unsuccessful and I was disappointed. I found materials that addressed other

issues related to women in academe and I have used them as resources for this paper. A description of these resources are provided below.

The lay of the land for women teaching in academe is that gender discrimination is rampant and women's contributions and accomplishments are de-valued. Women earn less than their male counterparts when matched on a host of variables including: credentials, discipline, publication history, teaching experience, grant funding awarded, appointment status, etc. (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Sosin, Rives and West, 1998; Winkler, 2000). The gender-based wage gap does not appear to be diminishing, as West (1995) noted that female full professors were earning 89 percent of the salaries of males in 1982 and 88 percent in 1995. A wage gap still exists even after controlling for productivity, where women earn 7-10 percent less than men, and in the sciences the wage gap can be as large as \$18,000 (Winkler, 2000).

Women occupy more entry level appointments than men, have a lower starting salary than men, have more disruptions (often tied to family responsibilities) to their career path than men, and hold fewer tenure-track positions (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Liberal Education, 1991; Watzman, 1999; and Winkler, 2000). Also observed is that female scholars rise through the ranks at a much slower rate than do males (Watzman, 1999; Williams, 2001; Winkler, 2000). Studies indicate that over the past 10 to 12 years, the situation for women in academe has not changed significantly and only continues to provide more evidence of gender-bias in the academy (Glazer-Raymo, 1999).

A larger number of women compared to men drop out of academe at all stages of their career; a larger percentage of women do not obtain tenure; and a larger percentage of women are not promoted or are promoted at an older age than men (various studies as cited in Winkler, 2000). It is estimated that female applicants have to be 2.5 times more productive than the average male applicant to be viewed as equally competent (Winkler, 2000). There exists a general belief that the power and authority of men in academe are natural and appropriate attributes, while they are considered unattractive or unprofessional in women faculty (O'Connor, 2000).

In December of 1990, a summit brought together 165 former women college presidents to discuss campus issues and share information. Despite the continuing gains, it was noted that women were still choosing not to pursue leadership positions or were delaying important choices about their academic careers, preferring to follow different goals at different times in their lives (Liberal Education, 1991) and make the decisions not to further their career in order to have children (Cullen and Luna, 1993). Men, it seems, have goals that do not differ significantly over time and the attrition rate of men from the university scene is much lower than for women. For women, the family clock is ticking as does the credentials clock, which limits options for them when making time-sensitive choices such as starting a family and becoming a mother (Liberal Education, 1991).

Clearly, the academy does not provide women with an equal playing field

as for men and it differs in its expectations of men versus women. Men and women have differing experiences when working in academe, because the gender inequalities are often “subtle, elusive and normalized via everyday practices such as networking and the construction of identities and opportunities” (Husu and Morley, 2000:138). How does this biased milieu impact mothers with careers in academia?

The narrative I have prepared draws on my experiences as a mother with two very young children and recently tenured faculty member. I also draw on the little research and documentation that exists and thread these accounts and ideas as appropriate throughout. The manuscript is divided into three sections: timing the arrival of babies; fears as experienced by women faculty members who are mothers and the perception of these women by others; and ideas and suggestions to help change the experiences of mothers teaching in academe.

### **Timing the mommy track**

In 1995 Brock University hired me on a tenure track appointment. I completed my Ph.D. three years prior, was married but did not have children yet, and living in Toronto. My husband and I were trying to start a family but immediately upon the acceptance of the appointment I went into a mode of calculating when the best time to have a baby would be now that I had a scheduled academic year to work with. I have since learned that most female professors contemplating parenthood go through this process. I expected the stressors I would be facing with teaching very large undergraduate classes, starting my research portfolio, trying to submit manuscripts to journals, living separately from my husband during the week and coming home on weekends (as the commute was 1.5 hours one way), nurturing my career to meet my eventual goals of becoming tenured and promoted. Adding the stress of trying to get pregnant followed by mothering a child seemed daunting and made me feel even more anxious. Of course we did get pregnant but later experienced our first of three miscarriages. I’m not proud to admit that I felt relieved to be off the baby track for at least a few months so that I could better focus on my career’s demands, knowing that I would return to the same dilemmas running through my head at a later time. It would not surprise me if some professional women at some point in their career felt relief when discovering they did not conceive that month, as it reduces some stress.

Robin Wilson (1999) writes about female professors who say they feel pressure to plan their childbirth for late spring and early summer, as such a delivery time would be the least disruptive to the academic calendar and community, and secures them the most time at home with their infants. This rationale reflects the concern women have for other colleagues versus themselves which is likely based on the perception as expressed by colleagues. Such pressures are usually subversively expressed and never openly discussed or documented. Women risk annoying their colleagues who may be forced to fill in for them should their baby be born during the teaching months of the

academic year (Wilson, 1999). This is not an uncommon concern among untenured women faculty. While some universities and colleagues are generous with paid maternity leave, others are not, and institutional policies vary enormously. Also some universities will stop the tenure clock for 6 months to 1 year for assistant professors, but this “benefit can cause resentment and taking advantage of it can doom your career” (Wilson, 1999: 14).

For some women the timing of the birth is of paramount concern, as they feel a disruption of any sort is hazardous to their career, and worry that they will have difficulty getting back on track. Administrators can use the woman’s absence as leverage for giving her poorer evaluations, delaying career advancement, or giving her difficult courses to teach that no other department member will take on (Watzman, 1999; Wilson, 1999). A colleague at Brock spoke of her dilemma in economic terms saying that over the years she invested so much time and effort into securing herself the career she desired most, she wanted to minimize her time away from the university in order to remain visible, active and not lose the momentum of productivity (her “return”) she felt she needed to remain competitive for tenure.

### **Fears of the new mother in academe and the perceptions of these mothers**

Despite newer university policies that offer parents choices concerning their leaves (time off, reduced course load, etc.), women fear taking time off to become a mother will hinder their chance to reach their goals of tenure and promotion and that they will have forever lost their opportunity for advancement (Wilson, 1999). A colleague and friend agonized over this fear and was conflicted due to it from the moment she started her appointment until her first baby was born 4 years later.

When I took one year off for maternity/parental leave I feared that upon my return I would be seen as a different person (less capable), and that I would be taken less seriously (my mind would be on my children). Of course I was a different person, I was now a mother of two very young children, but I remained the same untenured assistant professor working her way through the ranks in a professional environment that still favours males over females. This perception of me was realized when a tenured male colleague in another department saw me for the first time since my leave and asked “Oh, so you DID come back. Why? Don’t you want to be with your kids? I mean, that was the point for having them, wasn’t it?” (He is my age, he has four children of his own, his wife stays home with them). This assumption stunned me and led me to think that other males in academe might have the same expectation of their fellow female colleagues who are mothers. So I was more surprised to realize the surprise from male colleagues who had written me off from ever returning to the academy because I became a mother, than I was to notice a change in perception about me or my abilities.

I still feared that the perception of me would be that I could no longer keep

up with my responsibilities or carry the weight of running our program, and that the quality of my teaching and research would suffer because I have young children at home. That perception was realized when it came time to give me an annual merit rating based on my overall performance, productivity and teaching evaluations, and I was given a lower rating than in my previous year despite having more publications and improved teaching evaluations. After discussing my disagreement with the Chair about his evaluation of me, I learned that he later raised the rating, but likely due to the Dean's persuasion and not my arguments.

I also feared that having two small children at home would not permit me to spend enough time to work on the goals I wanted to achieve professionally, and so I accepted it would take longer for me to reach my goals and tried to relax about the timing of it all. I wanted to mother my children when I got home and not do grading or writing manuscripts or grants into the night as was my pattern before they arrived, as my career demands remained the same. However, there was a significant shift in how I spent my time at home, after all, I had youngsters waiting for me and my husband, and roughly 2 hours to spend with them before we put them to bed. I still had work to complete and class preparations to review before I went to bed, and also used time on weekends to catch-up. My career demands remained the same despite my new "mother" identity.

And the fear I felt most often was that I would let my career drive my life as it did before the children arrived. Would I possibly risk losing touch with my family for the sake of my tenure, promotion and career? Would that make me a "bad" mother? Would my children and husband suffer? I wondered why I do not hear about men grappling with these same dilemmas. It would appear, from my perspective, that the structure of the university validates perceptions that reflect society's mentalities and expectations. In other words, it is not expected that men concern themselves with child care and family nurturing issues, as it is a generally assumed stereotype in society that men's focus should be on keeping up with the demands of their academic career to further their advancement. This is not a new reality, although societal expectations of men are slowly changing. However, for women the reality of being mothers teaching in the academe is not yet fully validated because women's career socialization and advancement in the academy is based on the experiences of men, for which "mothering" and "birth/baby" and "parental leave" are awkward concepts to fit in. Again from my perspective, changes in policy to support mothering faculty and fathers are starting to impact the experiences of women because very slowly the language and words attached to their experiences are being heard and making them a reality – even if not previously documented.

It is also my observation that fathers who are faculty have not experienced the juggling of home life and career to the same extent that women have, mostly because their support system is in place when they begin their academic careers, or the family is already established by the time males enter the academy. Also, society does not expect fathers to sacrifice their career advancement for the sake

of the family. As is the same for any other professional working mother, if a child becomes ill, it is typically the mother who is called upon and expected to adjust her schedule, leave work to pick up the child and nurture her/him back to health. Although a faculty member's schedule has some flexibility, caring for sick children or being the backup person should the babysitter cancel is not something easily accommodated when classes have set schedules and 400 students are waiting. From my own experience and collective anecdotes, mothers with sick young children at home are not comfortable working and teaching at the university, as they would rather be caring for their child. Further, most often it is the mother who takes children to appointments, sports activities, and classes outside of school. Female faculty find it very difficult to also juggle time for taxiing their children when career responsibilities are mounting and the pressures from the academy to perform and produce like their male counterparts remains relentless (personal communications/anecdotes with colleagues).

When today's professional woman decides to become a mother, her personal identity takes on a shift that many other people including herself may not be able to predict. Women who teach are perceived as more nurturing than male teachers, even if they are not mothers (Cullen and Luna, 1993; Winkler, 2000). This social perception and expectation of women over men is not uncommon to workplaces internationally (Winkler, 2000). Students tend to take advantage of this perception and ask female faculty over male faculty for extensions, letters of recommendations or special privileges. A few years ago a male student approached me saying he had a final exam schedule conflict and would I approve that he write my exam at another time. I inquired if the student asked the other professor for a schedule change to which he replied, "No, I figured you'd be nicer about it than him." "Oh, how's that?" I asked. "Women teachers are more motherly and they are better at taking care of students." Despite my scornful expression, the student pushed the permission sheet toward me to sign, seemingly unaware of the gendered-biased perception he demonstrated and possible offense to me. I contemplated whether my "matron" status influenced his perception of my nurturing qualities or if he would have assumed the same had I been childless at the time. His expectation reflects the sobering reality that young students need to be re-socialized when entering higher education institutions if women are going to be valued and recognized for their accomplishments as male faculty are.

A few articles describe women with promising academic careers who prepared throughout their graduate studies for an academic appointment and when a position was offered they declined because the position involved having to relocate, which the women chose not to do for the sake of supporting the needs of their husband's career advancement or having a family (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Williams, 2001; Winkler, 2000). Here the perception is that the man's career needs are valued more, and the expectation is that women work their own career advancement around their husband's. After spending many

years preparing and training to succeed in academe, women lose their opportunity to realize their goals when partners are unwilling to relocate (Williams, 2001). The nature of the beast is that faculty appointments are only available at post-secondary institutions, and these facilities are few in most larger communities. Presumably then, experienced and qualified women academics with young children are the least able group to cease opportunities in neighbouring cities, particularly if their partner can not or will not relocate to suit her career needs.

I suspect a potential backlash is on the horizon. In an effort to protect their investment of trained and qualified academic proteges, graduate programs may quietly start to select strong females who are perceived as highly career-oriented, driven and not seemingly likely to interrupt their career advancement for the sake of having a family or partner who will not relocate. Administrators of post-doc and fellowship granting agencies are becoming more concerned about providing resources and training to women when these same women may not actualize their goals when they become mothers (Williams, 2001). It is argued that their enrollments keep other promising candidates out of programs with limited positions and resources (Williams, 2001). The perception is that it is the woman's decision not to return to her career path, however I argue that it is the social and political contexts of her gender-biased workplace that should be examined and challenged, not the woman's choice to become a mother.

### **How to improve the teaching mother's experiences**

Research in Israel has shed some light on the challenges faced by women in academe leading to recommendations that are sensitive to the gender imbalance in the academy. Although he does not focus exclusively on faculty who are mothers, Watzman (1999) has observed that 56 percent of undergraduates are women, but only 8 percent are full professors. Female academics in Israel are concentrated at the lowest rungs of academe and are under-represented at the tenured and top levels (Watzman, 1999). The same patterns are evident at most American universities (Winkler, 2000). It is suggested that Israeli institutions not discriminate against hiring older women who have taken longer to complete their studies in order to raise their children. Such discrimination does not encourage strong academic women to return to the academy to teach students who would otherwise benefit from their knowledge, skills and experiences. Instead, they are being punished for taking time to raise their family and juggle the demands to they complete their studies (Watzman, 1999).

Postdoctoral requirements should be made more flexible for women with young children (Watzman, 1999). To my knowledge, such recommendations have not yet been implemented in Canadian or American universities or colleges. Formal consideration is lacking for the needs of women with children who may not be able to produce research work at the pace expected of them during the critical years before they come up for tenure (Watzman, 1999).

Many female graduate students are shocked to learn what is required of them when seeking a good university position (Williams, 2001). They need extra advising from their academic mentors if they hope to have a family while at the university and still meet their career and personal goals (Williams, 2001). They also would benefit from discussions of life after graduate school and have opportunities to discuss the job-search process and the implications it has for their personal lives. The competition continues to be tougher and tougher, and married women, particularly with children, need to understand the limited choices they will face (Williams 2001).

A study by Cullen and Luna (1993) suggested that mentoring awareness can help reduce the barriers to a mother's career advancement to tenure and pay. Methods used included the promotion of sponsorship where more experienced women in academe introduced the "protege" to her own network, wrote letters of support, made recommendations, etc. Coaching the protege by teaching her "the ropes" and providing feedback also proved to be helpful. Other aspects included role-modeling, counseling and the offer of friendship (Cullen and Luna, 1993). However, they caution that not all women are very helpful to other women, suggesting that more senior women may have negative attitudes and frustrations, be envious or jealous of junior faculty struggling with new motherhood issues, when they had even less support as young mothers (Cullen and Luna, 1993).

Faculty associations can play a role in the advancement of women who are mothers. In consultation with women better policies that support mothering opportunities and promote career advancement can be developed and implemented. Extra time to apply for tenure should be offered to faculty who are mothers. The academy must work harder to retain faculty members who are mothers, and dissolve the male-oriented atmosphere that oppresses women, particularly mothers. Finally, the processes for advancement and recognition are based solely on the experiences for men. Academe needs to redefine and re-socialize what has always been a male serving process and offered little consideration for mothers teaching in the academe.

### **Conclusions**

The future appears bleak for women academics. West's (1995) research found that the percentage of full-time women faculty in American higher education increased only 5 percent (from 26 percent to 31 percent) from 1920 to 1995 despite the gap between the percentage of women on faculties and the percentage of women recipients of PhDs almost doubling over a 13 year period (from 1981 to 1993). Women's under-representation on the academy is a constant concern. Jennie Farley summarized the frustration of many American faculty women by stating that women find it discouraging "that at this rate of change, it will be the year 3000 before they are as well represented on the faculty as they currently are in the student body" (1990:202).

From my personal observation, there are a series of differing "camps of



mothers” on campus, each carrying different burdens related to mothering and teaching when they were appointed, each having different experiences at mothering and teaching that change over the decades. The groups include senior faculty women who came to academe later in life and whose children were mostly grown at the time; women at mid-status whose children were young when they entered the academy; and younger academics who become first-time mothers only after a few years into their academic career and while untenured. And then there is a group of women on campus who are childless by choice and either single or married. Each group of women have dealt with varying degrees of difficulty related to balancing their emotional feelings concerning how they mother their children and how they mother their careers. If a poll were taken, I would venture to guess that all women faculty with children would express some feelings of dissatisfaction concerning the nurturing they give their families versus their careers, and how juggling them both well is almost impossible. Are we doomed? No, but the struggle is not over.

What is missing in the academy for young academics are role models to support them to become respected scholars, excellent teachers and wonderful mothers. Also missing is the level playing field that all academics need to succeed and achieve their desires without having to experience gender-bias, stereo-typing, discrimination or the devaluation of themselves or their parenthood. Higher education needs to redefine the work place culture to allow for the special skills and characteristics of mothering women. Additionally, higher education needs to redefine and re-socialize the male-stereotyped role of administration and dismantle the gender-biased environment that exists, as women with families are achieving a stronger foothold in the academy (albeit slowly). Having a successful professional life should not be a tradeoff to a happy family life.

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