Child Rearing, Sexism, and Sexual Harassment
As Barriers To Tenure For Female Assistant Professors

IHELG Monograph

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CHILD REARING, SEXISM, AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT AS BARRIERS TO TENURE FOR FEMALE ASSISTANT PROFESSORS

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Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, the women's movement has focused both on opening the doors of the workplace and increasing the accessibility of senior ranks and administration to women. The effort to increase women's participation in the workforce has been largely successful: women now represent 46% of the civilian workforce. However, the entry of women into the ranks of power and authority has proved more elusive. There have been expressions coined (the glass ceiling, the velvet curtain) to represent the seemingly impenetrable upper echelons which only few women reach. While entrenched sexism is often blamed for the difficulties women have had rising in the hierarchy, this factor may be only one of the causes. Many working women of today are now also mothers. The factor of child rearing necessarily plays a role in women's careers, yet there has been a tendency to ignore or downplay the traditional role of women as mothers.

The goal of the women's movement has been to increase the choices and options for women, encouraging them to move away from their traditional roles into ones which would provide financial rewards, power, and/or status. While there have been calls for child care centers, maternity leaves, and flexible hours, these have been less urgent than the insistence on gaining equal employment access and equal pay for women. To gain equality for women, many in the woman's movement have underscored the basic similarities between men and women and de-emphasized the differences.

Differences between women and men, by and large, are made; that is, gender is not a natural category based on essential differences between the sexes...It is a cultural choice, not a biological imperative, that assigns the responsibility for raising children to [women]" (Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1990, 4).

The potential problems of childbearing and child rearing for working women is often lost in the discussion of gender.

Despite the ubiquitousness of gender associations and stereotypes, the cultural emphasis on separate spheres, and social arrangements to maintain them, reliable gender differences turn out to be very small and unstable and their magnitude is inconsistent across situations. This suggests that persons learn wherever there are any opportunities to practice behavior, and that gender provides only one set of role expectations" (Lott 1990, 95).

Although women, including working women, generally take the most responsibility for their children, this fact is often ignored. When Felice Schwartz, president of Catalyst, an organization formed to increase options for working women, suggested in an article in the Harvard Business Review (1989) that some working mothers may be willing to "trade some career growth and compensation for freedom from the constant pressure to work long hours and weekends" (Schwartz, 1989), there was an immediate outcry. Although some responded that this was a needed suggestion, others retorted that these ideas were "dangerous and deplorable" and that "In the disguise of helping women succeed in corporations, the article perpetuates the worst kinds of biases and stereotypes--the very prejudices that have hindered women's advancement" (Harvard Business Review, 1989).
Mothering is an absorbing and time consuming endeavor. Although some women are willing to give up having children for the sake of their careers, and some women may be willing and able to delegate their mothering responsibilities, others find they are not so inclined. These women will continue to bear and be the primary caretakers of their children. If the energy and time which mothering requires of working women are ignored by institutions in which they work, this 'blindness' can lead to a misinterpretation of the working mother's commitment and abilities. Divided attention for a period of time must be understood as a temporary situation existing while the needs of children are the greatest.

As in other fields, women have made laudable inroads into universities. Women received over 44% of earned doctoral degrees in 1991 (Ottinger and Sikula, 1993) compared with 13 percent in the late 1960's (Solomon, 1985). Women make up 32% of full time faculty in higher education (Ottinger and Sikula, 1993), a rise from 25% in 1970 (Solomon, 1985). While women have gained access into the junior ranks of the academy, their attainment of senior ranks has been less impressive. At doctoral-level universities, women make up just 10% of the full professors and 25% of associate professors (Academe, 1992).

Many theories have been offered to explain why female professors have not gained tenure or reached the senior ranks at the rate or in the numbers which would be expected. Analysis has focused on sexism, sexual harassment, and the cold and hostile environment which some have found at universities (Sandler and Hall, 1986). Other studies have questioned and examined the quality and quantity of work by female faculty (Hamovitch and Morganstern, 1977; Cole and Zuckerman, 1987). These studies have not focused on time conflicts for women faculty with children.

In the university setting, the possible conflict for women between career achievement and having a family may be exacerbated by the tenure system which requires new faculty to prove their effectiveness as teachers and accomplished researchers in a circumscribed and relatively short period of time. Only tenured faculty may move up the ranks in academia. Tenure was begun at a time when primarily men made up the faculty at universities; women had the responsibility for homes and children. The tenure system, which remains essentially the same as it was in the early part of the century, may present a particularly severe deterrent for women faculty who are also mothers.

Before the recent women's movement, however, there was acknowledgment of the conflict for faculty women which time with their children presented (Newcomer, 1959). As the number of women faculty with children began to increase, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education published a thorough report and analysis of the situation affecting women in education of the day. It identified the problems which women have in academia. The low representation of women among the faculty and lower salaries,

[indicate] clearly that a serious problem of discrimination exists and that the problem is particularly acute in leading research universities and in the departments and schools in those universities that have traditionally had predominantly male faculties (Carnegie, 1973, 136-7).

The report also stated,

During the decade of the most explosive growth in the history of higher education, the 1960's, women lost ground as a percentage of members regular faculty ranks in four-year institutions, especially at the associate professor level, and gained ground only at the instructor level (Carnegie, 1973, 110).

The findings of the 1973 Carnegie Commission study included an articulated concern about the problem for academic women with children.
Probably the most serious handicap facing married women desirous of a teaching career in higher education, especially in research-oriented universities, is that in the very age range in which men are beginning to achieve a reputation through research and publication, 25 to 35, married women are likely to be bearing and rearing their children (Carnegie, 1973).

Little attention has been focused on this issue since that time. Only recently has women's struggle between the traditional responsibilities for their children and the entrenched tenure system garnished some attention (Hensel 1991; Tilghman 1993). At the same time, there has been scant institutional awareness of the responsibility of faculty women who are mothers, as evidenced by the continued adherence to a rigid probationary time period before the tenure decision. For those women who have or who want to have families, this may present a major obstacle.

Women are often in their late twenties by the time they have completed their graduate training. If they wait to have a child until after they gain tenure, many of them will be in their mid-to late thirties and face the possibility of decreased fertility. "Many in my own generation chose to forgo child-bearing until the security of tenure had been granted, only to find that their biological clock had stopped ticking" (Tilghman, 1993). Successful career women in many areas are now reporting on their desperate attempts to have children later in life, finding it was too late to conceive naturally, if at all (Fleming 1994).

Recently, some universities have acknowledged that the birth of a child may affect the available time for a faculty woman. Consequently, over the last few years new policies have emerged which allow child care leave opportunities (Finkel and Olswang, 1995). In spite of such policies, however, a recent study showed that few faculty women take advantage of optional child care leaves, and only 30% take the full paid maternity leave, reporting that they fear their colleagues will question their commitment to their careers (Finkel, Olswang, and She, 1994).

This study asks faculty women themselves to evaluate possible impediments to their achieving tenure. In particular, this analysis focuses on the responses of female assistant professors with children five years and younger and compares the effects of sexism, sexual harassment, and child rearing on their perceived opportunities to gain tenure.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

This study took its subjects from a large, public research university classified as a Carnegie I Research University, one of the members of the American Association of Universities. This university has characteristics which are similar to other institutions affiliated with Association of American Universities. Like other AAU institutions of its size and stature, women are found less frequently in the senior ranks and more often in junior ranks (Ottinger and Sikula 1993). At this school, women represent 10% of the full professors, 22% of the associate professors, and 41% of the assistant professors, statistics which mirror other Carnegie I Research Universities.

A questionnaire was sent to all 189 female assistant professors employed at the institution, and included questions on their families, their intentions to reproduce, their plans for care of children. The questionnaire also included a list of fourteen possible impediments to tenure, including "sexism," "sexual harassment," "time with children," as well as activities normally associated with the work of professors such as teaching, research, and committee responsibilities.
RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Demographics

Of the female assistant professors in this study, a large majority are married (78.5%) and more than half have children (55.4%). In spite of the social changes of the last twenty-five years, the responsibility for the children still often falls to the female of a couple. The findings of this study supported that observation. When asked about sharing the care of their child, 56.9% indicated that they (the women) did the most, 31% indicated that they shared the care of their children about equally, and 10.3% indicated that their spouses or partners did the most.

Childcare

Child care has been a central issue for working women with young children. Forty-eight percent (48.1%) of female assistant professors with children responded that the availability of a child care center at the university would very much affect their ability to get tenure while 34.7% indicated that a child care center would not affect their ability to get tenure.

Almost half of the respondents with or without children reported that difficulty in obtaining child care would not to be a major barrier to the achievement of tenure. However, while there were no significant differences to this response between older or younger respondents or those with older or younger children, analysis showed that female assistant professors without children reported that difficulty in obtaining child care would be a barrier to their achieving tenure significantly more than female assistant professors who already have children (p < .05). This result indicates that those female assistant professors who do not have children anticipate that the care of the child may be a significant barrier to tenure, perhaps becoming a factor in their decision of when or if to have children.

Impediments to Tenure

The results of the survey showed that there were four factors which were considered to be serious impediments for more than 40% of the female assistant professors: Lack of publications, Too much time for Teaching, Time Required by Children, and Too much time on Committees. Sexism, was included in the group of six impediments which were a serious impediment for 20% to 39% of the female assistant professors. Sexual Harassment was listed with three others as serious for less than 10% of the respondents. In this analysis, Time Required by Children, Sexism, and Sexual Harassment will be analyzed in more detail.

Time Required by Children as an Impediment to Tenure

The factor of children is a potent factor in female assistant professors’ lives whether or not they actually have children. It was considered as among the most serious impediments to tenure, surpassed only by Lack of Publications and Too Much Time for Teaching--both activities which are essential to the work of a professor.

The history of women in the professoriate was one of childlessness. While this trend is no longer the rule, many female assistant professors still choose not to have children. Thirty percent (30%) of the female assistant professors in this study have decided never to have children. Of this number, 45.9% report that their decision not to have children was influenced "a great deal" by their career plans.

Almost half (49%) of female assistant professors in this study have postponed having a child. Thirty-four percent (34.2%) of these reported that their careers influenced their decision to postpone having a child. Comparison between the female assistant professors by age showed that significantly more female assistant professors 39 and younger had postponed having a child than female assistant professor 40
and older. This indicates that the tendency for women to postpone childbirth remains strong for younger women. In addition, more than one-third (38.3%) of the female assistant professors who postponed having children because of their careers reported significantly less satisfaction with their opportunities for family life than women who postponed having children for reasons other than their careers (p < .05).

The percentage of all female assistant professors (with or without children) who indicated that "Time required by Children" presented a threat to tenure was 42.9%. Further analysis revealed that 59.1% of female assistant professors with children reported "Time required by children" to be a serious threat to tenure, a larger group than for any other possible impediment. Even more striking was the response from female assistant professors with a child five and under, for whom "Time required by children" was a serious threat for 82.1%. There was a significant difference in response to this question when women with children were compared with women without children and when women with children six and older were compared with those with children five and under. (See Table 1.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Serious Impediment</th>
<th>Some Impediment</th>
<th>No Impediment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>42.90%</td>
<td>18.10%</td>
<td>39.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>47.10%</td>
<td>19.50%</td>
<td>37.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>22.20%</td>
<td>11.10%</td>
<td>66.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>13.90%*</td>
<td>13.50%</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child &lt;5</td>
<td>59.10%*</td>
<td>21.20%</td>
<td>19.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child &gt; 6</td>
<td>82.10%**</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
<td>03.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &gt; 40</td>
<td>43.20%**</td>
<td>27.00%</td>
<td>29.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 39</td>
<td>42.60%</td>
<td>14.90%</td>
<td>42.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43.80%</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>36.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01

The responses to this question strongly support the notion that female assistant professors with children perceive that "time with children" is a serious impediment to tenure. Almost all female assistant professors with young children perceive "time required by children" to be a serious or some impediment to tenure.

These responses indicate that children play an important role in the lives of female assistant professors and is perceived as a serious threat to tenure for more female assistant professors than any of the fourteen impediments, including sexism or sexual harassment.

**Sexism as an Impediment to Tenure**

The effects of sexism on female professors in universities has been viewed by many historians and social critics as potentially very destructive (Simeone, 1987; Hewlett, 1986). In this study, sexism was viewed as a serious threat to tenure by 33.6% of female assistant professors and was viewed as not a threat by more than half, 57.1%. T-test analysis reveals that female assistant professors with children six and older more frequently (41.1%) report sexism to be a threat to tenure than those female assistant professors with children five and under (28%) (p < .05). Although female assistant professors who are
40 and older report sexism as a threat to tenure more frequently (37.8%) than female assistant professors who are 39 and younger (19.7%) this difference according to age was not found to be significant. Although sexism remains a problem for female assistant professors, it is not reported to be a problem as frequently as is the factor of time required by children. (See Table 2.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Serious Impediment</th>
<th>Some Impediment</th>
<th>No Impediment</th>
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<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>33.60%</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>57.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>32.00%</td>
<td>19.40%</td>
<td>58.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>38.20%</td>
<td>19.20%</td>
<td>42.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children</td>
<td>30.20%</td>
<td>22.60%</td>
<td>47.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>34.90%</td>
<td>17.50%</td>
<td>47.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child &lt;5</td>
<td>28.00%</td>
<td>12.00%</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child &gt; 6</td>
<td>41.10%</td>
<td>21.10%</td>
<td>36.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &gt; 40</td>
<td>37.80%</td>
<td>15.10%</td>
<td>47.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 39</td>
<td>19.70%</td>
<td>21.90%</td>
<td>48.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.

Sexual Harassment as an Impediment to Tenure

In this study, "sexual harassment" was found not to be a particularly potent impediment to tenure for female assistant professors. "Sexual harassment" was perceived as a serious threat by only 8.4% of all respondents. There was virtually no difference in responses between female assistant professors who were married or not married, between female assistant professors of different ages. Although there was a difference in response between female assistant professor with children (13.6%) and those without children (2%), these were not found to be significant. (See Table 3.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Serious Impediment</th>
<th>Some Impediment</th>
<th>No Impediment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
<td>5.80%</td>
<td>85.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>8.50%</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
<td>86.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>84.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
<td>9.80%</td>
<td>88.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>13.60%</td>
<td>3.00%</td>
<td>83.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child &lt;5</td>
<td>14.80%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>85.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child &gt; 6</td>
<td>15.80%</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
<td>79.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &gt; 40</td>
<td>9.50%</td>
<td>3.80%</td>
<td>86.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 39</td>
<td>7.60%</td>
<td>7.60%</td>
<td>84.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Written Responses

Ninety percent of female assistant professors wrote additional comments to this survey. Most frequently mentioned were concerns about children, lack of time to get things done, the need for flexibility and part-time options, lack of support for women with children, in terms of difficult meeting times, and narrow interpretations of success in academia. Some examples follow:

My lack of academic success is a direct function of... the choices I have made particularly with regard to my decision to remain part-time during the early childhood years and into adolescence of my children.

Where does any of this fit in with the reality of a woman's life?

Because I have decided to spend time with my young children I have less time to do the required research. My chair and colleagues know very little about these decisions.

I am dissatisfied in the sense that I know that I cannot now be at my most professionally productive... All of this stuff—children, life, books, research—takes time—so, who came up with the 6 year formula???

Written responses to the questionnaire indicate that female assistant professors value their time with children and want changes in the university—not in their behavior—which will allow them some leeway in their attempts to gain tenure.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The data from this study show that female assistant professors perceive their careers are strongly affected by "time required by children." In addition, many faculty women postpone or even do not have children as a result of their careers. The data indicate that those faculty women without children anticipate that the time commitment which children require will negatively affect the time they have for scholarly pursuits. Female assistant professors who have decided not to have a child because of their careers were significantly more dissatisfied with their opportunities for family life than were either women who otherwise didn’t want children or those who had children.

Female assistant professors with children report that the time required by children reduces the time they have to fully devote to their jobs, creating barriers and impediments in their achievement of tenure. For women with children five and under, over 80% perceive that "time required by children" is a serious impediment to tenure. Many faculty women with children wrote in the anecdotal section of this study that they chose to spend time with their children knowing that this time might jeopardize their professional positions.

Sexism, while perceived as a serious impediment for one third of the female assistant professors, was not a problem for the majority. This is still a problem which needs to be attended to in universities. Sexism was reported to be a serious impediment significantly more by female assistant professors with children six and older than by those with children five and younger, although this difference was not related to the age of the mother. Future research can further explore why faculty women with older children seem to confront more sexism than others. Sexual harassment was perceived to be a serious impediment to tenure for a small minority of female assistant professors.
While the issues of sexism and sexual harassment have garnished much attention as creating problems for female faculty, it appears from this study that the issue of children may now be the most salient factor in creating impediments to tenure for female assistant professors. The problems produced by sexism and sexual harassment were obvious and blatant, especially as women first entered the academy in larger numbers, the more subtle issue of children, which now affects more than half of female assistant professors, has been almost ignored.

Many working faculty women will want to have children and will want to spend time with those children while retaining the right to fairly and equally compete in academia. Changes to maternity leave policies, while an important beginning of awareness of the issue of children for faculty women, do not confront the continuing problem of lack of time which confronts women who are raising children. It does not seem reasonable that the increasing number of female assistant professors who want to have children may be forced to leave the university simply because the years during which they must prove themselves for tenure coincide with the years during which they are needed most by their children. This issue requires a rethinking of how and when we grant tenure.

Rather than continue to ignore the struggle of female assistant professors with children, universities must begin to develop policies which acknowledge and mitigate the additional impediments these individuals face in their attempts to gain tenure. Talented female assistant professors who have spent years gaining an education should not be forced out of universities because of rigid and inflexible policies or administrators who refuse to implement revised and more sensitive guidelines. New policies will also allow faculty women who have given up the hope of having children, the least satisfied group in this study, to reconsider their decision. It will be left to future research to determine if policy changes might also affect talented and highly educated women who choose work outside of academia because of the perception that families are incompatible with academic work. Policies aimed at supporting female assistant professors with children may increase the number of women who achieve tenure, which, in turn, may affect the number of women who reach the higher levels of academia.

It is, then, the structure of the institutions in which faculty work, not women faculty who wish to bear and raise children, that must be changed. Any such institutional guidelines which systematically keep a class of individuals from reaching senior status (only 10% of full professorships at research universities are held by women) should be reconceived; the probationary portion of the tenure system must allow for the differences children make in the lives of female assistant professors. While some working women will relegate the care of their children to others, many women, as shown in this study, will want to be the primary caretakers of their children. Energy must go to changing institutions to accommodate these working mothers, rather than to condone squeezing women into rigid and inflexible organizations. Felice Schwartz conveyed the distasteful message that many talented working women are now losing their positions because of intransigent institutional structures which do not allow them to time to care for their children. The data from this study suggests that women faculty also perceive this to be the case.

Changes in the tenure decision process does not mean that we must lower the standard of high level work which is required to achieve tenure at top research universities. However, new ways to determine suitability for tenure must be devised. In some institutions, the fixed six-year probationary period for tenure has already been relaxed when a faculty person has a child (Finkel and Olswang, 1995). It is unknown at this time, however, how effective such extensions will be. The evidence that maternity leaves are underused (Finkel, Olswang, and She, 1994), suggests that faculty women might also be reluctant to use tenure extensions if they perceive that this will reflect poorly on their commitment as faculty.

Other possible changes in the tenure decision process should be explored. These can include the quantity of published material required for tenure, especially as it relates to the quality of material published; the relevance of effective teaching in the tenure decision; and significant contributions to the faculty community through service to the department. Options of part-time work in the form of reduced research, teaching, or community service during critical years of child development can be explored.
Adding significant numbers of years to the tenure decision process in coordination with part-time work, as well as flexibility of part-time and full-time work, should be explored as possible options. Taking maternity leave, now used only by a fraction of the eligible female assistant professors, should be encouraged for all those who have a child.

The data from this study demand a response: female assistant professors perceive that they confront serious impediments to tenure as a result of "time required by children." In order for universities to remove these perceived impediments to tenure for women with children, the fact that women have children and that these children require time must be openly and fully acknowledged. Changes in university policies to better accommodate women faculty who have the responsibility of bearing and caring for young children must be made. In this way, female assistant professors with children will begin to have a more equal chance at tenure, and will also become eligible for entrance into the higher ranks and administration of the university.

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