

Tenure Track, Mommy Track

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My husband and I married while I was a graduate student in computer science at M.I.T. “Don’t have children until you finish,” cautioned a friend, the wife of a history professor. I nodded easily. I was then twenty-five. At twenty-eight I completed my doctoral thesis. “Don’t have children until you get tenure,” warned a member of the faculty. I was leaving to become an assistant professor at Wesleyan University. This time the nod didn’t come so easily. Tenure is typically a seven year process, and my husband and I wanted a family. I didn’t want to wait until I was thirty-five to begin one.

Choosing which came first was not hard for me. The security of tenure was important, but children were more so. If I had tenure at thirty-five, but was then unable to have children, the pain would have been unbearable. I knew I could handle the opposite situation. I had my first child at thirty-one, my second at thirty-three. At thirty-four I have my family even if I don’t have academic permanence.

All along I felt that the choices were more mine than my husband’s. We both raise the children. I’m the one who’s pregnant. I have the fuzzy brain for nine months; I’m the one who can’t go off to conferences during the late months of pregnancy and the early months of nursing. My work suffers, my energy flags, my batteries fade. I’ve lost about two years of research in the first five years after my Ph.D. (What I’ve gained is immeasurable — but not the subject of this essay.) So I get 51% of the vote. As it turns out, we both voted for children first, tenure second, so it was no contest. But there’s a price I may yet pay in my career.

In the new professional world of recent years, many women face the hard choice between career and family. That decision is particularly sharply etched in academia: the average Ph.D. degree requires five to seven years of study after a B.A., and a tenure decision generally comes seven years after that. The years between the degree and tenure are the years one proves oneself: as a scholar, a professional colleague, a teacher. They are not the years

for distractions, the languor of pregnancy, the time-consuming demands of infants and young children.

“Are you a serious scholar?,” says the academe, “ Publish (or perish). Lecture. Go to conferences. Are you a concerned professor? Advise students. Serve on university committees. Establish yourself as a teacher and a researcher.”

Tenure is a seal of approval, the university’s vote of confidence in a professor’s abilities and direction. Having tenure, a scholar can take the long view and tackle problems that may take years to come to fruition. Those first years after the Ph.D. are crucial for developing momentum and establishing one’s professional reputation. It’s also the time many of us want to have children.

I chose to — and was lucky. I didn’t know I’d be in a state of torpor for nine months of pregnancy, but I also didn’t expect the burst of creative energy that followed the birth of each child. That energy more than made up for those lost nine months. Every academic mother has a different experience, but all of us face the ticking of those simultaneous clocks of tenure and the childbearing years.

Academia doesn’t help. Few universities have maternity leave. Those that do ignore what happens next. For example, my university has an excellent maternity policy (one semester’s leave at two-thirds salary), but no daycare facilities, despite over a decade’s lobbying by male and female faculty. Thus my kids are at a center forty-five minutes away. I can’t attend late afternoon colloquia or faculty meetings. Last year my husband and I were both invited to spend our sabbaticals at a university where we would have great research opportunities. Lack of daycare there meant we couldn’t go.

Of course, American business and industry aren’t much different. In general, maternity leaves are inadequate and on site daycare is rare.

Fifteen years of affirmative action haven’t substantially improved things. To talk about women in academia is to talk about tenths: nationally one tenth of all full professors are women, less than one tenth of the tenured faculty at the most prestigious institutions — the Ivies, M.I.T., Stanford — are women, only one tenth of the current Ph.D. recipients in science are women. It is hard to hire women — there are so few qualified — but then the universities do little to keep us.

The lack of women sends a discouraging message to our brightest students, male and female. Few women go on to pursue graduate degrees, fewer still to teach. This percolation effect extends down the line, and at less prestigious

institutions, there is a similar lack of women. By example — or lack thereof — universities and colleges are telling their students that women do not succeed as scholars. We are effectively eliminating half the research talent this nation has to offer.

I didn't meet a female mathematician until I was twenty-five. Despite the smoke signals, I was convinced women could be mathematicians. (I can thank a sixth grade math teacher — male — for that.) When I decided to become a professor, it was because I loved mathematics. I wasn't married, wasn't thinking of children or timing, or any of the issues that are now so crucial. Had I been, my decision might have been different.

There's a touch of the priesthood in the academic world, a sense that a scholar should not be distracted by the mundane tasks of day-to-day living. I used to have great stretches of time to work. Now I have research thoughts while making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sure it's impossible to write down ideas while reading "Curious George" to a two-year-old. On the other hand, as my husband was leaving graduate school for his first job, his thesis advisor told him, "You may wonder how a professor gets any research done when one has to teach, advise students, serve on committees, referee papers, write letters of recommendation, interview prospective faculty. Well, I take long showers."

The tenure process was established in an era when men had professions and women had babies. Women now have professions as well as babies, but the academic world hasn't changed. Yet universities can afford to be farsighted. My two maternity leaves in two years seemed like a lot to several of my colleagues. ("You shouldn't vote on this," complained one, "You're never here.") I see it as two maternity leaves over a lifetime. Even if a faculty member chooses to work half-time for ten years, that still leaves thirty years for full-time scholarship and teaching.

There are any number of complex reasons why women have not reached the top echelons in a variety of sectors. This is a simple, avoidable one. Fellowships, maternity leaves, on site daycare can make a huge difference. Universities should be leading society on this one. As long as they make it difficult for us to be professors and mothers, they are engaging in a policy which effectively keeps a significant segment of women off the faculty.

Small changes can make a great deal of difference. Universities have flexibility, and they can use it without sacrificing standards. A few have adopted a "stop-the-clock" policy: if a woman takes time out — a semester, a year — for maternity leave, the tenure clock is set back that semester or

year. Others allow a temporarily reduced teaching load, but at a reduced salary. This allows faculty members to concentrate on research and babies at a crucial time. Some fellowships exist that free women from teaching duties.

These solutions are not without problems. A delay on tenure creates pressure because it extends the probationary period. Colleagues who are sympathetic to lowered teaching loads because of professional commitments often look askance at those who request it for personal reasons. Many untenured women cannot afford to risk the option. Fellowships are few and far between. But these changes are a start.

They helped me. My university's generous maternity policy gave me time after childbirth to catch up on the research that I had been unable to do while pregnant. A government fellowship has just given me more time during the years when my children are young. I am one of the lucky ones. Many women are not, and they leave — or don't enter — academe. Solutions cost money. So does the lack of solutions, but this doesn't show up on the universities' balance sheets. Instead, we, as a nation, are paying with a growing shortage of scholars and researchers.

At the time she wrote the article in 1988, Susan Landau was Assistant Professor of Computer Science, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT; when it appeared, she was Research Associate Professor of Computer Science, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Now she is Senior Staff Engineer at Sun Microsystems Inc.