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Where -- Not When -- Should You Have a Baby?

By SARANNA THORNTON

I am in the unusual position of being a tenured female economics professor with four children. I had my first baby three years after completing my Ph.D., the next a few years later, the third during the year of my tenure decision, and the fourth two years after that. And between the births of my second and third children I radically changed my research focus from monetary economics to pregnancy discrimination.

I was changing jobs, and the college where I was interviewing didn't have a maternity-leave policy. Thinking that I wanted more children, I negotiated my own policy with the dean of faculty after receiving a written job offer but before signing a contract. That dean later collected on the favor by appointing me to serve on a committee to draft a faculty maternity-leave policy. And the more I researched existing college and university policies, the more I was astounded by the amount of illegal discrimination that I found. I decided that I had to make others in academe aware of this problem.

Prior to the late 1970s, more than 90 percent of full-time faculty members in the United States were men, and they negotiated for changes in their benefits and work environment in order to shape the workplace to meet their needs. For example, during the years following World War II, college and university professors, most of whom were husbands and fathers, bargained for employer-subsidized health insurance, paid sick leave, phased retirement, and other benefits that enabled them to better provide for themselves and their families.

Then, in the decades following the 1972 extension to higher education of federal prohibitions against sex discrimination, more women sought and obtained positions as full-time faculty members. According to data from the American Association of University Professors, in 1979-80 women made up 22.9 percent of the faculty at all higher-education institutions, except those without ranks. In 2002-3 it was 36.9 percent. If current trends in the number of women earning Ph.D.'s continue, the percentage of women entering the professoriate will likely increase further.

Mary Ann Mason, the dean of the graduate division at the University of California at Berkeley, has studied the faculty of the UC system and found that 55 percent of women with tenure there have children -- suggesting that paid maternity leave, paid child-rearing leave, and other family-friendly policies would probably be desirable benefits for a substantial number of professors. So it shouldn't surprise anyone that many female faculty members are following the example of generations of male professors by negotiating for those sorts of employment benefits, to change the workplace to meet their needs.

Making family-friendly policies available and altering the academic culture so that professors won't be afraid to take advantage of them are widespread changes that will take time to accomplish. But according to data from the U.S. Education Department, there are tens of thousands of professors who could utilize such benefits as paid maternity and child-rearing leave right now.

Women seeking to combine motherhood and an academic career in the current climate must ask themselves when is the best time to have children. Mason's analysis of data from the 1979-95 National Science Foundation's Surveys of Doctoral Recipients indicates that male faculty members who start families within five years of receiving their Ph.D.'s are 38 percent more likely to earn tenure than are women who do the same. Women who have babies more than five years post-Ph.D. achieve tenure at the same rate that childless women do. Although some universities help younger faculty members by allowing them to stop the tenure clock or work part time while on the tenure track, the schedule for earning tenure is still less flexible than that for getting a Ph.D. or winning promotion to full professor.

Because institutions and even departments within an institution vary in how accommodating they are to professors with children, women trying to balance a career and a family should ask not only when, but where, they should have a baby.

Here is my advice. It's better to have a baby:

- On the tenure track at a comprehensive college, where the highest degree granted is a bachelor's or a master's. My research indicates that those institutions were significantly more likely than Ph.D.-granting universities to have policies about maternity and child-rearing leaves that comply with the minimum mandates of the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978) and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. (Caveat: Just because administrators have enacted a compliant policy doesn't mean they actually follow it.) In addition, Bob Drago, a professor of labor studies and women's studies at Pennsylvania State University at University Park, surveyed more than 4,000 chemistry and English professors. He found that institutions granting only bachelor's and master's degrees were more likely than Ph.D.-granting universities to be rated as family-friendly by both male and female faculty members.
- At a public college or university. According to my data, public institutions are more likely than private ones to have policies for maternity and child-rearing leave that meet the minimum standards of federal law -- and privates are more likely to have illegal policies. Why? Typically state attorneys general make sure that public institutions comply with employment law. (Still, see the caveat above.)
- At an institution with a written policy for maternity and child-rearing leave. (Look for it in the institution's faculty handbook, often conveniently online.) When colleges have ad hoc policies instead of written ones, a pregnant professor typically ends up at the mercy of her department chairman or the dean who decides how to apply the policy to her. Because a woman's childbearing years usually correspond to the years when she is a junior faculty member, if she doesn't like the offer of the chairman or dean, she is not in a good position to negotiate. When the policy is in writing, the professor can simply announce her pregnancy to her chairman -- with a copy of the written policy in hand, if necessary.
- At an institution with a generous leave policy. (Again, check the handbook.) No two pregnancies are the same -- even for the same woman. Childbirth may be easy and uncomplicated, or 36 hours of labor may be followed by medical complications. And every baby is different -- some sleep 20 hours a day and rarely cry; others cry most of the time and rarely sleep. Some female faculty members will want to return to full-time teaching as soon as possible after having a baby; some won't. So it's enormously valuable to have a variety of generous options to choose from, with no pressure from your department to return to work immediately.
- If you have a private office. Before accepting a job, ask if you will have one -- but don't explain that you might be bringing a baby in to share it with you. It's much safer (politically) to bring your baby to campus if you don't have to worry that the baby's babbling or crying will disturb your office mate. (Another caveat: Even a private office

probably won't keep a howling baby from bothering your colleagues.) And women who plan to breast-feed or use a breast pump while at work will find it easier if they have a private office.

- At an institution with day care on or near the campus. Then if you choose to put your baby in day care, not having to travel far to the day-care facility shortens your commute and makes it easier to slip over between classes to breast-feed.
- At an institution where senior colleagues regularly bring their children (of all ages) to work. When scheduling on-campus interviews, ask for a late-afternoon tour of certain facilities that just happen to be places where colleagues' children are likely to be if they are on campus after school -- department computer rooms or lounges, for example. If you do see children there, casually ask your guide who their parents are.

Being able to bring the baby (and older children) to the office can make balancing work and motherhood easier -- especially for mothers who are breast-feeding, as most mothers with high levels of education do. And it's much easier to bring children to work when that's already a common practice for senior professors.

- At an institution where the norm is faculty colleagues who are proud of having lives outside of work. Check their personal Web pages to see if they include extracurricular information. Also, while making conversation over dinner ask your potential colleagues how they like to spend their leisure time. If they aren't proud to have a life outside of work, they are more likely to resent a mother (or father) who takes time away from work to be with children.
- At an institution that values output more than face time. Ask your potential colleagues where they like to do most of their work: office, lab, home? Some work -- like reading journal articles, answering e-mail messages, and grading papers -- can be done just as easily at home as at the office, and it may be very hard to get to campus if you have morning sickness, or a sick baby or one who isn't sleeping through the night.
- At an institution with plenty of senior female professors who are mothers. Some faculty members think women must choose between motherhood and an academic career. If your colleagues have already disproven that to those who will be judging you, you are more likely to get tenure. Just be sure to wait until after you have a written job offer to ask potential colleagues outright if they have children.

Because the average age of female Ph.D. recipients is 34; because female assistant professors with children typically spend 90 hours or more per week on their job, housework, and child care; and because the flexibility in the timetable for earning tenure is limited, female graduate students who would like to have both children and an academic career should think carefully about when and where to have a baby -- long before they seek their first job.

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