

Women in science promote work/family life balance

 simplyblood.org/2017/04/women-in-science-promote-workfamily.html

ISEH Headquarters

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Work/family life balance is a “thing” now. It’s out in the open. It is the subject of blog posts (like this one), the focus of graduate seminars by invited speakers, a hot topic at mentor/mentee meetings. It has come out of the closet, so to speak – it is now acceptable and acknowledged that taking time for your family, friends, to take a vacation, or even enjoy hobbies as a scientist, is reasonable. Not only is it reasonable, it’s important. I argue that this shift in attitude towards a more balanced view on work and family life in science can be attributed to the growing presence of women in science. And it comes from the absolute and definitive need of working women to balance work and family life in order to be successful. (I should note at this early juncture in my post that I acknowledge that not all women choose to have families; but it goes without saying that women necessarily have to make that biological choice, whereas men do not.)

Despite many advances in gender equity in our society, the burden of housework and childcare still falls disproportionately, on average, on women. This occurs even in, and despite of, a multigenerational shift towards households where both individuals are working full-time. I’m not here to argue that men aren’t contributing more to household duties than they have before – they are! But the Bureau of Labor Statistics still says that women contribute more often to household duties, and when they do, they spend more time doing so. The reasons for this are many and varied and way beyond the scope of this blog post. However, the point here is that in most cases, working women are obligated to both work

while simultaneously attending to their family life. The onus has historically been on women to figure out how to make this whole balancing act work. And it's not easy. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center Survey, working mothers with children are three times more likely to say that being a working parent made it more difficult for them to advance in their career as compared to fathers. Among scientists, the statistics for women with children advancing past the post-doctoral level have been relatively bleak. Having a family or planning to have a family is one of the biggest factors that influences the decision of women (but not men!) to pursue a tenure-track position in the sciences. Perhaps female postdocs and PhDs are dissuaded by the continuing leak of women with children from the academic pipeline once they have acquired tenure-track positions. In a field traditionally dominated by men, the pressure on women to produce while still managing family responsibility often doesn't add up. In this context, what does balancing work and family life really mean? For me, as a postdoc with two small children, it meant just managing to take care of my family and work at the same time. It meant that my mornings were full of babies and feeding and diapering and hustling to daycare, and my evenings were full of shuffling kids home, feeding and diapering and bedtimes. Of course, my husband helped. Of course, he was intimately involved. I know that he too strived for balance in order to meet the needs of our family. Somehow, though, for men this is (still) considered more of a choice. For women, this is (still) more of a requirement-- particularly when small children are involved-- and somewhat of a make-or-break for career advancement. During my postdoc, between my "limited" work hours of 8am to 5pm, I literally ran from bench to bench, getting as much as I could done in lab during those hours. I became a model of efficiency, doing in 8 hours what used to take me 12-14. I organized my experiments months in advance and had every day planned out. I used the evenings, after my kids were asleep, for data analysis or writing, sometimes with a glass of wine. I considered this to be an achievement of work/family life balance. And despite the historically negative association between parenthood and productivity among scientists, I firmly believe that the time that I was required to shut off my work mode and take care of my family made me a more efficient and productive worker. Females colleagues of mine with families have expressed a similar sentiment. In contrast, some of my single postdoc friends complained that they could never escape "work mode"; they had trouble breaking away from lab-- out of habit, out of guilt-- and that it negatively impacted their productivity and their motivation. Everyone benefits when work/life balance becomes a "thing". As the number of women in tenure-track and tenured positions increases, as the number of women in science with families increases, we can help transform the basic premise that life as a scientist can involve a balance between working and family life. Out of necessity, we can change the dialogue to make it more reasonable for women (and everyone!) to succeed in science -- with spouses, and with children. As just one example, I was fortunate to move through labs that readily accommodated work/family life balance. Did I work very hard during my doctoral and post-doctoral work? Yes. Was I expected to be in lab all day and all night? No. Both of my mentors had families. One is a married man with four children, and his wife had chosen to give up her very successful scientific career to raise their family. As such, he was well aware of the duality I faced as a young married woman

beginning my career. He went above and beyond to support me both financially and logistically as a graduate student with an infant. My other mentor is a mother of three and held me to high standards while simultaneously understanding that I had other obligations that I needed to attend to. Both of these mentors modeled work/family life balance on their own terms, and allowed me to achieve success in a way that was compatible with having a family. This is one way that work/family life balance becomes more normalized.

Unfortunately, my experience is probably still far from the norm. I know of many female graduate students who were effectively kicked out of their lab when they informed their advisor that they were having a child. I also know many of my male colleagues who similarly struggle with balancing family life with their burgeoning careers. But now, we get together over beers (or kids' playdates) and talk about how we manage everything. We go to new faculty seminars on what work/family life balance means and how best to promote this among our colleagues and our mentees. Work/family life balance is not only beneficial for women or for women with families. I'd like to think that by establishing work/family life balance as the norm for everyone, we endeavor to fashion more efficient, motivated (and contented!) scientists. I choose to expend the balance of my time taking care of my young family; other colleagues might use that time to go skiing, visit an older family member, or read. By making work/personal life balance the norm, we effectively make it more reasonable for everyone to achieve, and by doing so, break down the barriers that continue to limit diversity in science.



Anna Beaudin, PhD

ISEH Publications Committee Member Assistant Professor
UC Merced