

# Academic career or family?



**The struggle of establishing a successful academic career while starting a family drives many researchers, in particular, women, out of academia. Pausing the academic clock and individualizing performance assessment may thus help reduce gender inequalities in academia.**

An academic career typically starts with a PhD, followed by several years of postdoctoral and/or industry experience, which hopefully culminates in the successful application for a faculty position. Researchers often move countries and institutes, working long hours, travelling to conferences and dedicating most of their time and effort to their research and publishing their results – typically on short-term contracts. Once in a faculty position, one needs to set up a new lab, teach, secure funding, hire and train students and postdoctoral researchers and establish oneself as an independent researcher. Many would argue that this is when the real stress starts, because the career clock is constantly ticking on the way to tenure and permanent positions. By that time, researchers are typically in their mid- to late thirties, if everything goes to plan, which it often does not, because, well, life happens.

Nobody said it was easy to pursue a career in academia, and discussions are ongoing about the negative effect such competitive career trajectories may have on researchers<sup>1</sup>, from a mental and physical health perspective to the loss of diversity and innovation. However, a topic that is perhaps not talked about enough, is the challenge of starting a family while on this highly competitive and time-sensitive career path, which concerns all parents, but may affect the birthing parent more, not only owing to pregnancy but also due to [the unequal share of family responsibilities between parents](#). In particular, key crossroads, for example, getting your postdoctoral paper(s) out and securing and starting a faculty position coincide with the age at which many researchers would like to start a family. So, when is the best time then? During your PhD? During your postdoctoral research? When starting your own group? Once you have tenure? Certainly, various professional and personal considerations are at play here. One important aspect, however, is the (lack of) support one gets from the academic system.

In this issue, [Natalie Boehnke and Liangliang Hao](#) outline how the lack of adequate parental leave conditions and limited support on a department, faculty and funding agency level can negatively affect career trajectories for researchers with childcare responsibilities, particularly women. Boehnke and Hao argue that navigating the health and time constraints associated with starting a family may be a major reason for the low representation of women at

**“navigating the health and time constraints associated with starting a family may be a major reason for the low representation of women at the assistant professor and full professor levels in STEM”**

the assistant professor and full professor levels in STEM<sup>2</sup>. Giving birth or adopting or fostering a child takes a toll on academic productivity, which should be accounted for in academic career assessments. Support mechanisms are especially important if physical or mental medical complications arise. For example, postpartum depression can span multiple years, affecting approximately 1 in 6 women<sup>3</sup> – a topic that is rarely discussed in the context of academic life.

Better parental leave conditions, unified policies and mechanisms to create a supportive campus climate, individual tenure-maps and flexibility at the funding agency level may help new parents better navigate their careers. Notably, parental leave conditions are suggested to make an impact. For example, Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce paid parental leave that is shared between parents, and the proportion of women among heads of institutions in the higher education sector in Sweden is among the highest in Europe ([41.7% compared with 23.7% for EU28](#))<sup>2</sup>. However, looking at STEM, specifically engineering, women still only make up 16.88% of grade-A staff (equivalent to full professorship position) in Sweden ([16.95% in EU28](#))<sup>2</sup>. [STEM certainly faces many layers of challenges when it comes to gender equity](#). However, these data suggest that parental leave conditions alone may not be sufficient to support women with childcare responsibilities in their academic careers – at least not in STEM; instead, support structures on all levels may need to synergize.

It may all come down to the competitive (and misogynistic) nature of the academic system, expecting researchers to always be on top of their game and putting their careers first. Thus, parenthood may be perceived as negatively affecting the commitment and dedication of researchers, especially women<sup>4</sup>. A path forward may therefore be to not only acknowledge that starting a family requires time off from academic duties and research, but to actually pause the academic clock. However, this will only work if a career pause is truly (and not negatively) accounted for in the assessment of academic performance, from the PhD up to the tenure level and beyond.

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