



Being a mother and a scientist: the experience of a senior scientist

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When looking at woman scientists of my generation, I realize that I am one of the few successful senior scientists with children. The proportion of women at the professor level is pretty low, much lower than the proportion at the assistant professor level and at the PhD student level. This is known as the 'glass ceiling' effect. An aspect that is not often looked at is the impact of motherhood. Indeed, I am convinced that it plays a key role and has multiple impacts:

- The first impact occurs after PhD when doing a post-doc and competing for a more stable position. This usually occurs at the age of 30-35 years old, the age when women realize that having children might start being difficult from a biological point of view. Some women quit science, others postpone a potential child with the risk of not being able to have one later (I know several colleagues in that case) and only few try to combine the stress of a starting professional career and motherhood.
- The second major impact relates to the practical aspects of raising young children. This has not really changed between my generation and that of my young female colleagues: Where can I find a day-care? Will I get financial and logistic support from my government or institution? This might have improved in some countries (USA or Germany for example) but it did not really change in my own country, France because the support level has always been very high compared to other countries.
- The third impact might be in fact the most important. It is the mental load: women cannot resist thinking permanently about the well-being of their children and family; as a consequence, they accept or even anticipate responsibilities that will take time away from work. The children are seen as the first priority and the professional aims come second. Examples: Who takes care of the child when he/she is sick? Who does not want to leave children for long hours at the day care after school? Who goes to school meetings to see the teachers? etc. When children get older, the nature of the questions changes but the mental load remains unchanged. The consequence is a generally smaller amount of time dedicated to work for mothers and that for a long period of time over their professional career.

Universities and research laboratories can help improving working conditions or criteria for promotions but major improvements will only occur when mental load is better distributed within couples and when social perception changes in the society.