

Alone in the Ivory Tower

A new study from the University of Utah shows that women in academia have fewer children compared to other professional women -- primarily because it takes longer to achieve the job security of tenure -- and concludes that gender equality in the "ivory tower" has come at a cost.

The study is being presented this week at the 2008 annual meeting of the Population Association of America in New Orleans by Nicholas Wolfinger, co-author of the study and associate professor of family and consumer studies at the University of Utah.

By analyzing data from the 2000 U.S. Census, Wolfinger and colleagues have shown that the number of babies in professional families vary widely by discipline and by gender.

The data shows that professors have fewer children than either doctors or lawyers, but more surprising is that female professors have the lowest number of babies of all. Although male faculty are 21 percent less likely than male doctors to have a baby in their households, female faculty are 41 percent less likely than are their female physician counterparts.

"For female professors, the lower birth rate compared to women in other professions is not a product of differences in income or marriage. They truly are more likely to be alone in the ivory tower," said Wolfinger. "We also found that female faculty are the most likely (13 percent) of the three professions to be separated, widowed or divorced."

The results are compounded when academics marry each other. Male professionals who are married to doctors or lawyers, or whose wives are out of the work force, are more likely to have babies than male professionals whose wives are academics.

"Many studies have examined the effects of childbirth on professional success, but few have considered how career choice affects fertility," says Wolfinger. "If women are sacrificing families for their jobs, the sexual revolution has not come nearly as far as might otherwise be expected."

A fundamental challenge for women choosing an academic career, while also wanting to start a family, is the time it takes to achieve job security in higher education, which is known as tenure. Getting tenure makes it more difficult for faculty to take time out for children than either medicine or law, but it makes it particularly difficult for women.

On average, professors achieve tenure at close to 40 years of age, which biologically is past the prime childbearing age for women. This may be why female academics, unlike members of other professions, are most likely to have children in their mid to late thirties.

In contrast, depending on length of residency, many doctors and physicians will have careers in full stride by their early to mid thirties.

In addition to higher salaries, both physicians and lawyers have more options for part-time positions and the relative ease of moving between jobs. Faculty who do not achieve tenure but wish to stay in academia usually have to relocate.

The study is limited in that data on type of employment is available only as broad job classifications. More detailed information with regard to type of physician specialty, sector of legal employment and type of academic institution could reveal further differences in birth events.

Wolfinger and co-authors Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden from the University of California, Berkeley, have been collaborating in the area of gender and family formation for several years. As a result, a program to promote family-friendly policies for higher education can be found at <http://ucfamilyedge.berkeley.edu> .

Source: University of Utah

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