

Report of the survey „Research and Motherhood“, August 2008

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Summary

This explorative survey among members of the network “European Mothers in Science” was conducted in order to get some information about reconciling science and family from those doing so in everyday life. The aim was to learn about their thoughts and feelings which may be relevant to know about for those who are interested in increasing the proportion of women in higher scientific positions – particularly if they have family to care for. Although the sample is rather small with only 21 respondents, the results show some interesting tendencies. For example, do most female scientists in this survey return to work less than six months after child birth and they have been very active in academic life also after becoming mothers. Yet, the majority of the participants in the EMIS survey say they had difficulty combining family life with scientific activities. The highest obstacle in this respect was the fact that many academic activities took place after normal working hours and thus opening hours of child care facilities. Closely connected with this was that children could not be brought to conferences and meetings. Both are hurdles which could be less prohibitive if the right measures are taken. The same is the case with regard to the wish for more family-friendliness at work. These preliminary results should be analysed in more detail in a European wide representative comparative survey.

Aim of the survey

In many European countries the under-representation of females in higher academic positions has been addressed both in science, politics and the media. In addition, the questions why women who do reach higher academic positions tend to have fewer children or be childless compared to male colleagues have been focused on. Beyond the fact that this may be due to individual preferences and circumstances, information so far indicates that the “research business” and career paths the way these function in most societies today are often incompatible with family life. This may be true of course also for other types of jobs as well and for families where both parents have full-time jobs. It may be expected that also young male researchers who want to prioritise family life meet the same career obstacles as women. Nevertheless, the focus of this survey is on mothers in science.

The aim of this survey was to get a first insight into which issues seem to be of particular importance to female scientists who have children or would like to have a family in future with regard to combining family life and research.

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Variables

The survey covers 23 questions ranging from number and age of children, length of maternity leave, reconciliation of work and family life, research activities, wanted policy implementations, background variables of respondents and spouse/partner.

Sample and field work

The survey was carried out among members of the network “European Mothers in Science - EMIS” who were registered in March 2008. The survey was carried out on-line from 1st until 30th April 2008 and could be accessed via the membership area of the EMIS Internet pages.

Among the about 60 registered members ² 38 started the survey, and 26 finished the survey. The drop outs may be explained by the fact that the survey had to be finished in one, there was no possibility to save answers and return at a later point to finish the questionnaire and submit the answers. Among the 26 respondents five are for various reasons excluded from the results presented in this report. Two of the respondents do not yet have children and will be presented separately at a later point. Three were excluded for technical reasons. The report is thus based on the analysis of 21 respondents

Data file

44 Variables /21 Cases

SPSS file

² EMIS was launched in June 2005 and grew continuously to include more than 100 researchers from all countries and disciplines by end of 2007. When the Internet pages were re-launched in summer 2007 many members could not be traced due to changing email addresses. The previous Internet system did not provide an own login account which allowed members to change affiliations.

Results

Background information

More than half of the 21 respondents in the net sample have the German citizenship (12). The others come from various European countries including Austria (1), Italy (1), Norway (4), Portugal (1), Romania (1) and Slovakia (1). The citizenship varies slightly from the country respondent is working in. The majority (13) work in Germany, 3 respondents work in Norway and one respondent work in France, Italy, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom. 1/3 of the respondents is between the age of 26 and 35 and 2/3 between the age of 36 and 45.

Academic situation/background

The academic disciplines of the respondents include science, social science, humanities, medicine, psychology, economy and architecture. 13 respondents hold a doctoral degree, 4 a diploma or master's degree and 4 a post doctoral "Habilitation." 2 of the respondents are professors four have a working position as associate professors or equivalent and another four work as assistant professors or lecturers. Almost 1/4 are post-docs and 3 respondents are PhD candidates. Three respondents arrange their work position into several of the above mentioned fields. Almost 2/3 are employed at university or similar and 1/3 work at a research organisation. 2 respondents work at an organisation with research related work. 2/3 work full-time and 1/3 part-time and one respondent was on maternity leave at the time the survey was carried out.

Family situation

More than half of the respondents have two children (52,4 %), 33,3% have one child and 14,3% have three or more children. The age of the children range from 6 months to 14 years so all the respondents are "young mothers" with 87% of the children being ten years old or younger. All except one are married or living with partner and in 60% of the cases the partner is not a scientist. Among those married or living with partner about 75% of the partners work full time and 15% part-time. One partner is on paternity leave.

52% of the respondents returned to work within the first six months of the birth of the first child. Another 33 % returned to work before the first child was one year old. This pattern is the same also after the birth of the second and third child. The vast majority are back to work before the child is one year old.

Combining research and family

The question what has been most important with regard to the reconciliation of work and family life the respondents were asked to arrange six categories according to their importance. The numbers in Table 1 refer to only those who marked this category to have been the most important. Table 2 gives the results to the question "Which policy implementations would you like to see for the future with respect to the reconciliation of science and family. Here too, the respondents were asked to number the answers from 1 to 6 according to their importance.

Table 1: What has been/is most important with regard to the reconciliation of work and family life to the respondent³

| | In % (N=21) |
|---|-------------|
| Affordable child care facilities | 38,1 |
| Opportunity to work part-time, flexi-time, home office | 23,8 |
| Partner who takes his share of child care and household | 19,0 |
| Family-friendly working environment | 9,5 |
| Maternity/paternity payment, child benefit etc. | 4,8 |
| Other | 9,5 |

38,1 % of the respondents say child care facilities have been the most important in order to reconcile work and family life, followed by flexibility at work and support by partner. Maternity/paternity payment did not play a major role so far. However, as can be seen from Table 2 below 14,3 % consider this as most important with regard to future policy implementation. Also with regard to family-friendly working environment only 9,5% say this has been the most important for combining work and family so far, but 28,6% consider this the most important future policy implementation, only affordable child care facilities is more important. 14,3 % would like to see more support for dual career couple in science. For those 9,5 % who state that “other” has been the most important to them this includes above all grandparents and other family members as well as friends and neighbours. With regard to “other” policy implementations the issue of “restructuring academic careers as such“ is addressed as well as a “change in attitude from colleagues towards people who work part-time.”

Table 2: Most important wanted policy implementations with respect to the reconciliation of science and family⁴

| | In % (N=21) |
|--|-------------|
| Affordable Child care facilities | 42,9 |
| Family-friendly working environment | 28,6 |
| Opportunity to work part-time, flexi-time, home office | 19,0 |
| Supporting dual career couple in science | 14,3 |
| Maternity/paternity payment, child benefit etc. | 14,3 |
| Other | 9,5 |

³ The question was: “What has been/is the most important to you with regard to the reconciliation of work and family life?” Please number the answer from 1 to 6 starting with what is/has been the most important to you=1 and the least important=6. The categories were: child care facilities (nursery, full-day kindergarten, after-school care etc.), opportunity to work part-time, flexi-time, home office etc., partner who takes his share of household and child care, family-friendly working environment (i.e. possibility to bring children when kindergarten/school closed, cooperative and supportive boss and colleagues), financial support (maternity/paternity payment, child benefit etc.) and other.

⁴ Which policy implementations would you like to see for the future in respect of the reconciliation of science and family. Please number the answers from 1 to 6 where the most important to you=1 and the least important=6. The categories were: Providing affordable child care facilities (nursery, full-day kindergarten, after-school care etc.), opportunity to work part-time, flexi-time, home office etc., family-friendly working environment (i.e. possibility to bring children when kindergarten/school closed, cooperative and supportive boss and colleagues), Financial support (maternity/paternity payment, child benefit etc.), Supporting dual career couples in the science and other. Particularly, in the field of policy implementations many respondents evaluated several of the implementations as very important instead of ranking the importance. Also in some cases the default value “1” was left instead of ranking the items which could bias the results. Thus the answers of the two questions were controlled for each case and each variable and if necessary excluded from the analysis.

The survey also included a question about academic activities and qualifications respondents took part in after their child/children were born.⁵ The results given in table 3 show that more than 80% of the respondents have been active in several typically academic areas after becoming mothers. Even when it comes to international research networks and projects more than half are/have been involved and almost 30% have even been on research visits abroad. Less than 5% did none of the activities.

Table 3: Academic activities after birth of child/children (multiple answers)

| | In % (N=21) |
|---|-------------|
| Participation in national/international conferences | 90,5 |
| Publishing books and articles | 85,7 |
| Scientific qualification | 85,7 |
| Teaching | 81,0 |
| Participation in international research networks/projects | 52,4 |
| Research visit abroad | 28,6 |
| Other | 9,5 |
| Did none of the activities | 4,8 |

Out of the 20 respondents who were active in one or more of the academic activities listed above 85% answer “Yes” to the question whether they had any difficulties reconciling these typical scientific activities with family life. Table 4 shows the answers to the question why it was difficult for the respondent to participate in the activities.

Table 4: Reasons why it was difficult for the respondent to participate in scientific activities (multiple answers)

| | In % (N=21) |
|---|-------------|
| Activities often took place outside normal working hours | 57,1 |
| Had no possibility to bring children along to conferences, meetings etc. (too expensive, no child care provision during conferences, meetings etc.) | 52,4 |
| Had no access to sufficient child care facilities | 19,0 |
| Had no financial means to pay for child care | 14,3 |
| Had no partner/family member who could look after child/children | 14,3 |
| Other | 28,6 |

It should be emphasised that the numbers given in table 4 are based on only 21 respondents. Nevertheless, it is quite interesting that the main difficulty in combining academic activities and family life is that these types of activities often take place outside normal working hours.

⁵ The question asked was s.o.:”Now, working as a scientist is not just a question of how to organise everyday life with children. Qualification and activities include teaching, conferences, writing articles etc. which demand travelling and busy evenings and weekends. Which of the following activities did you take part in after your child/children were born? The answer categories were Participation in national/international conferences, publishing books and articles, participation in international research networks/projects, scientific qualification (PhD, Post-doc, Habilitation etc.), research visit abroad, teaching, other and did none of the above activities.

The second difficulty “no possibility to bring children to conferences and meetings” is probably closely linked with the first difficulty: if activities take place outside normal working hours you need child care outside normal working hours as well in order to participate in the activities. Of course, there will always be a necessity to have conferences and meetings outside normal working hours. Nevertheless, the organisations of seminars, meetings, (guest) lectures etc. should be carefully examined by universities and research institutions who want to provide a family-friendly environment. What for a single researcher seems to be a nice and intellectually stimulating way to finish a working day or spend the weekend is for a researcher with family obligations often an immense organisational and expensive task.

Some of the other difficulties mentioned by the respondents were long distance between workplace and home, partner’s limitations to take part in child care, long hours and a lot of organisation to carry out activities, sleep deprivation and no social life, difficulty in combining research with a sound family life.

Future issues to be addressed by EMIS

Finally, EMIS members were asked if they have particular issues they would like the network to pursue. Issues addressed were:

- Mentality change in society - that women can be excellent researchers and mothers.
- The evaluation of track record. Track record is evaluated in comparison to some kind of "standard CV" which is the CV of male or single colleagues.
- More women fellowships needed that take into account that women may need special support to reach the same professional achievements (for a woman with children it is very very difficult to set up your own junior research group in a highly competitive field).
- Fellowship deadlines should be made more flexible.
- Extra costs for childcare during meetings/workshops should be part of a proposal; - a fund available for people during pregnancy / on maternity leave that helps keep the business going.
- How to make it possible to work part-time as a scientist/scholar and still being able to pursue an academic career.

We plan to take these up in future surveys and invite all interested readers of this report to contribute their ideas and questions that may arise. We thank those who have already provided feedback and will consider their suggestions in future survey(s).