



Australian Federation of University Women Inc.

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May 4, 2008

The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for the Status of Women
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Plibersek,

Re: An Equity Problem for Female Postdoctoral Fellows

We would like to draw your attention to some equity issues relating to female postdoctoral students and maternity. It was mentioned during the meeting that you kindly arranged between AFUW and your adviser, Monika Wheeler, but not really explained in detail.

The problem is not that postdoctoral fellows are ineligible for paid maternity leave. Their eligibility is very much the standard one prevailing in Australian universities, i.e. three months paid leave with an option of additional unpaid leave. The problem is with the effect of having children on their immediate and long-term career prospects.

The immediate and most simply-solved problem is that no extension of the tenure of the fellowship is given when a woman takes maternity leave. A postdoctoral student currently working at Harvard University but hoping, on return to Australia, to be able to continue an academic career and to have children, has described the situation in this way:

If you are awarded a four year grant, at the end of those four years you have to demonstrate your level of research productivity and you are then compared against your peers to compete for the next four years of funding. You are "allowed" to take up to one year off during that time to raise a child but at the end of the 4 years you are given no allowance for the fact that you were likely to be at least 25% less productive than your colleagues because you took a year off. In science, you effectively lose your job/funding if your productivity during that period is not competitive with your peers. During a period of unpaid leave, you also end up forfeiting those months of salary that you would otherwise have been paid. It seems to me that this is a ridiculous situation and one that would be easily remedied at no cost to the funding body by simply allowing a suspension/extension of the fellowship tenure for the duration of the maternity leave taken.

There is a further way in which the time factor contributes to the current career disadvantage of a woman postdoctoral fellow who takes maternity leave. Eligibility for many grants is

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determined in respect of 'years since PhD'. The correspondent quoted above points out

For example one grant is only available to people who are 7-14 years post-PhD. So if you finished your PhD 9 years ago you will be competing with people at a similar level, but if you had two children in those 9 years it is going to be very hard to prove that you have been as productive as your peers who have not had children. It is these types of time constraints that are the biggest problem.

A change of the time-scale from actual years to 'research-active years' would be a way of solving this problem. It appears that some US universities are adopting a system whereby the research clock is stopped for a year whenever a woman has a child. Accordingly a woman who has had a child in the five-year period post PhD will be assessed for research productivity against those who are four years, not five, from their PhD.

AFUW strongly recommends:

(a) that where a postdoctoral fellow takes unpaid maternity leave, the tenure of the fellowship be extended for an equivalent period.

(b) that the productivity of women researchers who take maternity leave be measured against available 'active research' time, in order to maintain equity of assessment in the highly competitive arena of gaining research funding.

We look forward to receiving your response. This letter is also being sent, with appropriate minor modifications, to Julia Gillard in her capacities as Minister for Education and for Workplace Relations, Dr Caroline Perkins, Branch Manager of the Equity and Structural Reform Branch of DEWR, and the Chairs of Universities Australia, the Australia Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council. We really do hope to see this situation remedied,

Yours Sincerely,

(Dr) Jennifer Strauss AM
President, AFUW Inc.