Under the Table: Race and Gender in Promotion and Tenure

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Under the Table: Race and Gender in Promotion and Tenure
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Are “Family-Friendly” Policies the Best Thing for Women?:
Some Preliminary Thoughts

Executive Summary

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Since some of the questions I will raise later in this talk may be somewhat controversial, and even counterintuitive coming from a professional woman, I feel obligated to present my personal and professional *bona fides* right from the start.

I am currently serving as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Rutgers University in New Jersey; for the past few years I have also held the title of Director of the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity. Over the course of my 30 years at Rutgers I’ve been an Assistant Dean for Faculty Personnel in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, an Associate Dean in the same unit, an Associate Provost for the New Brunswick campus, and since 2003, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, with jurisdiction over the three Rutgers campuses (New Brunswick, Newark, and Camden). In all of those roles, part of my job has been to oversee the faculty tenure and promotion process in terms of adherence to the university’s policies and procedures, and the AAUP (recently the AAUP-AFT) contract. Since Rutgers has upwards of 120 or 130 promotion cases each year, that’s a lot of promotion dossiers over a 30-year period.

With regard to my personal qualifications to speak on this topic, particularly the issue of women faculty and so-called “family-friendly” policies, I am, obviously, of the appropriate gender, and have also been through that rough time when one is trying to establish both a family and a career. I have three children, all in their twenties now, who I gave birth to when I was in my thirties and working full time. I finished the footnotes for my dissertation when I was on maternity leave (three months, without pay) with my first.
Babies two and three turned out to be twins, so that added a little fillip of interest to the whole thing. It is, indeed, exhausting to be a working mother—it’s also exhausting to be a mother who doesn’t work outside the home. I have always encouraged my various bosses to hire working mothers, because they’re so grateful to get to work in the morning—it’s the only time when they can finish a cup of coffee before it gets cold.

I will return to the issue of working mothers, in particular working mothers who happen to be tenured or tenure-track faculty. But first I’ll discuss where I see the other part the topic of race with regard to tenure and promotion.

At Rutgers, I am pleased to say that minority faculty do very well at tenure and promotion time, with an almost 100% rate of success. The issue for us, and I think for many colleges and universities around the country these days, is not one of failing to tenure and promote, but rather of an ultra-competitive hiring and retention environment. We work very hard to attract diverse faculty to Rutgers, at both the new assistant professor and the tenured level. Our salary structure is flexible enough to permit us to be able to match almost any other offer a candidate may receive, our location is desirable, and our student body itself is very diverse and thus interesting to many diverse faculty; we are often able to attract such faculty to Rutgers at the assistant professor level. Unfortunately for us, and to the benefit of some of our neighbors in this very city, we have become known as an excellent training ground, and our faculty are often raided (such an ugly term) by the better-endowed private colleges and universities that surround
us. So, recruitment and retention, and not tenure and promotion, are really the issues that we struggle with most concerning our minority faculty.

With regard to female faculty, we are also in good shape statistically along many indicators. For instance, in the 2006 AAUP study of Faculty Gender Equity Indicators, Rutgers is among the best in terms of women’s average salary as a percentage of men’s, by rank. The tenure and promotion rate for female faculty is on a par with that of male faculty; both are quite high. Still, there are nagging doubts that all is not as it should or could be. The faculty is still preponderantly male. We have fewer female department chairs at Rutgers than many of us would like. Women are underrepresented at our highest faculty ranks, and among our endowed chairs. We have too few women deans. What, then, is going on?

Part of what’s going on, of course, is a reflection of the national picture for women in the general labor force. In 2007, a report released by the American Association of University Women showed that just one year out of college, women working full time already earned less than their male colleagues, even when they worked in the same field; the pay gap continued to widen as the years went on. Most alarming for a second-wave feminist like myself, and I believe most significantly, the report went on to note the following:

“The division of labor between parents appears to be similar to that of previous generations. Motherhood and fatherhood affect careers differently. Mothers are more likely than fathers (or other women) to
work part time, take leave, or take a break from the work force—factors that generally negatively affect wages. Among women who graduated from college in 1992-93, more than one-fifth (23 percent) of mothers were out of the work force in 2003, and another 17 percent were working part time. Less than 2 percent of fathers were out of the work force in 2003, and less than 2 percent were working part time. On average, mothers earn less than women without children earn, and both groups earn less than men earn.” (AAUW 2007 Research Report, “Beyond the Pay Gap,” Executive Summary, p. 2.)

The first question that comes to mind for me is, whatever happened to the nineteen-sixties and -seventies goal of co-equal parenting?

But what does this national phenomenon concerning women in the work force have to do with tenure and promotion policies, particularly in the collective bargaining context? Just this: In a well-meaning effort to assist women faculty in their careers, many collective bargaining agreements, or university policies where the faculty is not organized, now include “family-friendly” features that have made it all too easy for women faculty to slow down or sidebar their careers, diminish their lifetime earning power, and also diminish the impact of women at the highest levels of university life.

The current Rutgers AAUP-AFT contract (Article XVI) offers an example. While path-breaking a decade ago, it now contains fairly standard provisions in this area. At Rutgers,
a female member of the faculty who has a “short-term disability” caused by pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, or childbirth is guaranteed full salary for the first six weeks of the short-term disability. In addition, new parents (both male and female) are eligible to receive eight weeks of release time from teaching and committee service obligations, unless the dean determines such release would place an undue burden on the department. Further, and most germane to our discussion here, “A faculty bargaining unit member who continues to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of his/her faculty appointment may request an exclusion of one year from the probationary period when serving as the principal or co-equal care giver under the following circumstances: when he/she becomes a parent during the first five years of the probationary period, or became a parent within one year prior to appointment at the University….“ Two such exclusions may be taken during the normal six-year probationary period.

What this means, of course, is that faculty members, and they are almost always female faculty members, who avail themselves of that benefit will have tenure packets that look different than the packets of those (mostly male) faculty who do not have time taken out of the tenure stream, thus raising questions among members of tenure committees at various levels of the university’s long process of tenure review: Do those years out of the tenure stream “count?” Shouldn’t they expect a greater degree of research productivity from someone eight years out from the initial date of hire instead of only six years out, as in a “normal” tenure packet, even though two years have been taken out of the probationary period for family reasons? How are they to assess all this?
In an attempt to address this issue, the following language was added to the AAUP-AFT contract (Article XIV) a few years later:

“A candidate who has had time excluded from the probationary period may, upon written request, choose to have the University evaluators, evaluative bodies, and outside evaluators informed that his/her record is to be reviewed in the same manner as the record of a faculty member with the normal probationary period. Faculty members shall be informed of this option via the 30-day letter (Appendix F-1 of the Academic Reappointment/Promotion Instructions.)”

It’s not clear if this language has clarified anything for anyone.

With regard to the status of women in the profession, I believe that the recent interest in part-time tenure-track appointments only makes things worse for women faculty. An admittedly speedy review of the literature on this option where it currently exists indicates that those taking advantage of it are overwhelmingly women, which means that those delaying the time to tenure—and the salary increases and career advancement tenure brings—are overwhelmingly female. As Joan C. Williams asked in a 2004 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “The question is, Will such choices ultimately help women or hurt them? Won’t the overwhelming majority of those on a half-time tenure track be women? Is this just another recipe for a mommy track?” (Joan C.

As a second-wave feminist, I do fear that many so-called “family-friendly” policies, being taken advantage of almost exclusively by women faculty, are, in fact, creating such a mommy track. Policies that extend the time to tenure, remove women from the mainstream of departmental life and governance, and delay the salary increases and job security that tenure brings, also retard the full movement of women faculty into the upper reaches of the professoriate and into influential administrative positions. As they say, “further research is (clearly) required,” and I look forward to hearing your thoughts and observations on this complicated but vitally important issue.

Executive Summary.

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