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The Upshot

A Family-Friendly Policy That's Friendliest to Male Professors

Economic View

By JUSTIN WOLFERS JUNE 24, 2016

The underrepresentation of women among the senior ranks of scholars has led dozens of universities to adopt family-friendly employment policies. But a recent study of economists in the United States finds that some of these gender-neutral policies have had an unintended consequence: They have advanced the careers of male economists, often at women's expense.

Similar patterns probably hold in other disciplines, too.

The central problem is that employment policies that are gender-neutral on paper may not be gender-neutral in effect. After all, most women receive parental benefits only after bearing the burden of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and often, a larger share of parenting responsibilities. Yet fathers usually receive the same benefits without bearing anything close to the same burden. Given this asymmetry, it's little wonder some recently instituted benefits have given men an advantage.

To succeed at top universities, academics must finish graduate school, find a job as an assistant professor and then race to establish themselves as

world-class researchers before being evaluated for tenure. Succeed within seven years and you have a job for life. Fall short, and you're fired.

It can be a particularly difficult path for women, for whom this career pressure typically coincides with prime childbearing years. Making matters worse, while many early-career male academics are supported by stay-at-home wives, women more typically wed husbands with their own professional career pressures.

To combat these disparities, many universities have adopted tenure-extension policies that give new parents greater flexibility. Typically, this means extending the seven-year period of tenure evaluation, usually by an extra year for each child. In practice, these policies are usually gender-neutral, giving dads an extra year to establish their reputations, just like moms. Universities typically adopted such policies in the 1990s and early 2000s, while about one-fifth chose not to do so.

Three economists — Heather Antecol, a professor at Claremont McKenna College, Kelly Bedard, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Jenna Stearns, a doctoral student at Santa Barbara — evaluated these gender-neutral tenure-extension policies in important new research.

The policies led to a 19 percentage-point rise in the probability that a male economist would earn tenure at his first job. In contrast, women's chances of gaining tenure fell by 22 percentage points. Before the arrival of tenure extension, a little less than 30 percent of both women and men at these institutions gained tenure at their first jobs. The decline for women is therefore very large. It suggests that the new policies made it extraordinarily rare for female economists to clear the tenure hurdle.

Shelly Lundberg, an economics professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who was not involved in the study, told me that while she had long "suspected that these policies had an unintended negative impact on women," the magnitude of the effect surprised her.

The researchers compiled new data on the career trajectories of all

untentured economists hired over the last 20 years at the 50 leading economics departments, and coupled it with details about policies instituted by those universities that extended the tenure clock for new parents.

The authors compared promotion rates before and after these gender-neutral parental policies were adopted, relative to trends in comparable institutions that did not alter their policies, while also accounting for an array of influences, like where each economist was trained.

They found that men who took parental leave used the extra year to publish their research, amassing impressive publication records. But there was no parallel rise in the output of female economists.

Perhaps this reflects the physical toll of pregnancy, the difficulties of a complicated birth, the extra task of nursing or simply an unwillingness to shirk parenting duties. Whatever the cause, the findings are exactly what you would have expected if becoming a parent exacted a greater career sacrifice for women than men. By giving men a relative advantage, these gender-neutral policies appear to have effectively raised the tenure bar for women.

Alison Davis-Blake, dean of the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, said these findings "clearly conform to what I see on the ground every day," adding that "the extra year for men just disadvantages women."

The problem, said Ms. Davis-Blake, is that "giving birth is not a gender-neutral event," recalling that during her pregnancy, "I threw up every day." She argued, "Policies that are neutral in the eyes of a lawyer are not neutral in fact."

This accords with what I've seen among my own colleagues. Male economists typically approach parenthood with few concerns about possible professional consequences. Women, however, are often counseled to delay motherhood until they have been evaluated for tenure.

I expect this research to provoke some difficult discussions at universities. Better policies could help economics — not to mention the sciences and other fields — look like less of a boys' club.

The University of Michigan, where I work, recently adopted a tenure extension policy that explicitly recognizes the effects of pregnancy, childbirth and related medical conditions. Ms. Davis-Blake said that at the business school, “men don’t get extensions unless they have clear and compelling circumstances.”

At this point, so few universities have adopted policies that treat mothers differently from fathers that researchers can’t assess them precisely.

Ms. Stearns, one of the study’s authors, noted that gender-neutral policies aren’t, in themselves, bad. Standard parental leave policies outside the academic world offer a benefit that “is the same for men and women — both don’t go to work for six weeks.” She argued that parental leave is a case where gender-neutral policies may specifically help women by “decreasing stigma about use.”

The tenure extension policy that she analyzed, though, “is unique in that it is designed to change productivity evaluations of new parents.” Gender neutrality in this case may be more problematic, she said.

Economics remains a male-dominated field, and the research shows that policies fueled by the best intentions of universities have made an imbalance worse. Three female economists have shown that the tools of economics — which enable a careful assessment of incentives and constraints informed by real-world data — suggest that a more nuanced policy would lead to better outcomes. It leaves me wondering how many other policy mistakes we could avoid, if only we had more female economists.

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