

EDITORIAL: 'WOMEN IN ACADEMIA' SPECIAL FEATURE

By Catherine Sebastian and Rachael Dobson

In our last issue, we received a thought-provoking letter from a female neuroscientist detailing the difficulties she experienced as a new mother trying to juggle family commitments and a successful career¹. As this is a complex issue, and one likely to be of relevance to our readership, we decided to advertise for responses to the letter. As you can see from the breadth of responses published here, the issue is both emotive and controversial.

Our two letters from senior female academics, Professor Uta Frith and Dr Kate Jeffery, are both, on the whole, cautiously optimistic. Both have combined exceptionally successful careers in science with motherhood. Prof. Frith has recently been recognised as a Woman of Outstanding Achievement in Science, Engineering and Technology by Research Councils UK. Her letter clearly demonstrates that women can have it all – if they are prepared to work strategically. Clearly, academia and motherhood are both full-time jobs, and there is little to be gained by martyring oneself and attempting to take on both as such. Prof Frith talks of 'sensible management of resources,' and that includes our own time and expertise.

Similarly, Dr Jeffery discusses the ingenuity and resourcefulness that women need to surmount what she terms 'the breeze block problem', i.e. in the academic workplace, it is as if women are asked to compete in a marathon with a breeze block strapped to one leg. The situation isn't one of total equality of opportunity between men and women, but there are many things women could be doing to lighten the load; this includes helping and supporting each other more.

But not everyone agrees that women are solely handicapped by the logistics of juggling twin responsibilities. Martin Sewell comments from the alternative perspective: that true gender equality in academia (or any other field) is neither possible nor desirable. Tangible biological differences between the sexes, he argues, mean that men and women have different abilities, motivations and goals.

It should be mentioned that the issues discussed here are by no means confined to UCL. In the months since our last issue, articles have appeared in high impact academic journals such as *Nature*² and *Current Biology*³ discussing the glass ceiling in science

specifically; and in more generalist forums such as the BBC⁴ and *Times Higher Education Supplement*⁵. The column space provided in professional journals shows that science is increasingly valuing the long-term contribution of its women. Indeed, it is a massive waste of resources for highly-intelligent and highly-trained individuals to leave a profession due to a short-term shortfall in financial and practical support in mid-career. The more general articles put issues in academia in context: the UN reports that women are still discriminated against worldwide; in many countries this is facilitated by laws which explicitly favour men; in others, discrimination is more subtle. In Britain, and particularly at UCL, we are lucky enough to be among the most fairly-treated women in the world. But there is also recognition that there are still issues to be resolved.

It may be that the UCL Human Resources department is psychic. No sooner had we thought (in a fairly leisurely manner) that we might try to follow up the issue of gender in academia, than an invitation to such an event arrived from UCL HR. Entitled "Mind the Gap", UCL's first gender equality conference covered a range of issues facing women in academia. But far from simply lamenting remaining inequalities, it had a strong focus on policies that UCL and other institutions have been adopting in order to combat them. These are discussed in more detail in a review of the event by our Biomedical Science editor, Rachael Dobson, and in a summary by one of the speakers on the day, Julie Ashdown.

The pieces published here seem to raise as many questions as they answer. Certainly, the strength of feeling expressed suggests that there are still important issues to be tackled, such as enabling women to surmount the 'breeze block' problem. But will good management and innovative policy be enough to achieve this, or do we need grass-roots change in society as a whole? Arguably, until it is socially acceptable and economically viable for men and women to share the burden of childcare equally, women will always face difficult decisions at some point in their careers. If we listen to the evolutionary arguments mentioned by Martin Sewell, this unequal burden is inevitable. But is it not possible for us to transcend this limited programme? And if so, how much do we really want to?

¹ Banerjee, A. (2008) *Opticon* 1826, 3

² Brumfiel, G. (2008) Data show extent of sexism in physics. *Nature*, 452, 918.

³ Nüsslein-Volhard, C. (2008) Women in science – passion and prejudice. *Current Biology*, 18(5), R185-R187

⁴ Women face bias worldwide – UN.

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7331813.stm>>

BBC, 5th April 2008

⁵ Oxford, E. (2008) Still second among equals. *Times Higher Education*, 27th March.

Perhaps because the original letter was written by a scientist, the replies (though covering a range of viewpoints), are overwhelmingly also written by scientists. It would be fascinating to hear from other disciplines. Do historians face similar problems, or are bench scientists particularly disadvantaged because of the need to put the time in at the lab? What about other groups in society? Do men who choose to take on an equal burden of childcare face similar difficulties, and can anything be done to help them? What about socio-economic status? Prof. Frith mentions that in the early years it can be useful to have parental support for expenses such as childcare. But does this discourage individuals from poorer backgrounds from pursuing an academic career? Somehow I think that the current feature will not be the end of the debate here at *Opticon1826*.

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