

Dear Editor,

Ambily Banerjee's letter was very thought-provoking and expressed the frustration that I think many of us academic mothers feel, in being expected to participate in the academic equivalent of running a marathon with a concrete breeze block strapped to one leg. It's hardly surprising that even the most academically athletic mothers do not make it to the finish line, or, if they do, they find themselves pulling up at the rear. It's also not surprising that many ambitious women with a dislike of failure choose to avoid altogether a competition that is so stacked against them. Indeed, it is a testament to the power of human curiosity (and optimism) that so many even decide to try.

Can we do anything to make the competition a little less unbalanced? In fact, UCL has been trying hard to do this, with management-led initiatives such as the Gender Equality Working Party and the Athena charter. Admirable and welcome though these efforts are, they have not yet percolated to ground level to improve the daily lives of staff, and it seems to me that a more 'grass-roots' approach is also needed.

One of the things that has struck me about the experience of working motherhood at UCL is how much I have had to figure things out almost entirely on my own. In every other domain of my working life I am bombarded with information, help, training sessions, questionnaires, assessments, feedback, guidance and mentoring, but on this one most important and difficult area, management has been amazingly silent. For some time I wondered if I was the only working mother in the whole university. I have discovered, of course, that there are many others, and many very successful ones, but they don't wear placards advertising their maternal status and so those coming along behind are unaware of their existence. They are, therefore, also unaware of the variety and ingenuity of the solutions that different women have devised to the breeze-block problem.

Why do we not share these solutions amongst ourselves? It is notable that one thing we women could be doing, but are not, is harnessing the power of the support network. Academic men have been networking for centuries; that is how they get ahead and then also help each other get ahead - women, for some reason, have held back from forming similar structures. I think this is unfortunate, as support groups are a fantastic resource, for mothers especially. One of the things that greatly helped me in the early stages of motherhood was an internet discussion group that I stumbled upon, comprised of 150-odd women with babies who are the same age as mine. Because of this group I have always had an enormous pool of advice and support

for almost any problem that arose, and so have sailed happily through many of the parenting problems that more isolated mothers agonise over. Ten years later, we are still together and this group remains the first place I turn to for parenting advice and support. The one thing it does not help with is career management, as these women are mostly not academics.

It seems to me that a similar resource at UCL - an internet discussion group for women - could help fill this last gap. I imagine it as a place where women (not necessarily mothers, and not necessarily academics) could gather, virtually speaking, to talk, to ask advice about anything from childcare and housework through how to work with the procedures (and yes, tedium) of male-dominated committees, whether to confront one's boss over going for promotion, how to get grants and publications or deal with teenage angst. It could also be a place to vent frustration or even just exchange gossip; something men have been doing in their clubs for generations. I believe a resource like this could potentially benefit women at all stages of their careers, being an information and support group for those starting out and a forum for mentoring and passing on of experience for those in more senior positions. Such a group might also lead to pooling of physical resources (equipment, childcare, holidays?). It could be anonymised so that women could admit to problems or anxieties, or seek advice, without worrying about exposing vulnerabilities that they (rightly or wrongly) believe could jeopardise their careers.

If anyone is interested in such an idea please let me know (k.jeffery@ucl.ac.uk); if there seems to be a critical mass of interest I'd be more than willing to set something up. The intellectual power embodied in the women of UCL is a huge resource that I think should be harnessed in service of helping us all to get ahead. If we unite, we can also become a force that could change practice at UCL.

Yours sincerely,

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