

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Life as a “Part-Time” Scientist

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By Dr. Ambily Banerjee
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Within the Faculty of Life Sciences, I am yet to encounter a part-time researcher. Why has this species never successfully evolved within the ecosystem that we call academia?

When I returned to work eighteen months ago after my maternity break, I was offered the option of working part-time, as the law demands. I chose to try it out for a month, working three days a week. During this time, I realised two things: I had to rely heavily on my colleagues to cover for me on the days I was off, and my project moved ahead at a grindingly slow pace. Neither of these scenarios was acceptable to me. As someone who had dedicated three years of hard work towards obtaining a Ph.D. I couldn't envisage throwing away a rewarding career in favour of full time motherhood. But my family was also my first priority. So, like many working mothers I came up with a compromise. My day starts at 5am, and I work my full time hours by 3pm. Although some people still class me as a part-timer, as I am normally leaving work by the time they come back from lunch, I am happier that I get a few quality hours with my child everyday.

However, when the culture demands long hours and weekends, how is the “part-timer” treated? If you are lucky, most people are diplomatic and adjust to you leaving earlier in the day, or not being there on certain days. But the obvious problems still exist – you miss out on good talks, meetings abroad, interesting projects, and almost all the socialising essential to maintaining a good working relationship with your colleagues. Although I don't work beyond my basic hours, I also cannot afford the luxury of coffee breaks and long lunch breaks, or those interesting chats in the corridor. Time has become a very precious commodity and every minute counts – literally.

Has it made me a better scientist? Although this is hard to quantify, it has certainly made me more focused, systematic, patient, and empathetic. I have to be more organised to ensure my work is finished in a limited number of working hours in the lab, often running experiments simultaneously to save on time. I am also much more tolerant of other peoples circumstances, as I now understand that they may be inconvenienced by my schedule.

Recently, I took a rare opportunity to attend a ‘Women in Science, Engineering and Technology’ Forum addressing Equality at UCL. I was astounded to find out that within my department (Anatomy), although the male to female ratio is 50:50 at the researcher level, this drops dramatically to 80:20 for lecturers and professors. In addition, while 33% of male professors serve on high level executive committees, 0% of female professors at UCL do. These findings are supported by the ASSET survey¹ (2004) which found that the male : female ratio for Professors is 4:1, and for Heads of Department 7:1.

There are two issues here that could be preventing women from breaking the glass ceiling. Firstly, women are more likely than men to have taken a career break, as well as requiring more flexibility when returning to work. Secondly, and irrespective of their family commitments, many women suffer from a lack of confidence as they perceive less encouragement to apply for promotions, and less good prospects. It was clear at the forum that several women also felt that they didn't want to serve on “boring” committees. This term was repeatedly used, but in my mind we feel bored only by what we don't understand. If women are not willing to dedicate some effort towards taking on responsibilities and entering the male dominated circles of power, we only have ourselves to blame for not breaking the glass ceiling.

As for the lack of women beyond post-doc level, I believe this is down to a single critical factor – the funding for the researcher changes dramatically. The onus is on the individual to bring in the funding for their research. In this situation, how can a woman, who may be limited in the number of hours she can spend at work, compete for the same pot of money with colleagues who are dedicating much longer hours? I believe that this problem requires consultation with the funding councils to develop innovative proposals for encouraging more women to continue with an academic career.

In companies senior managers / directors are known to job-share, so why is this not being discussed as a viable option within academia? Two women could run a lab together, applying for funds in a job-sharing format. If both parties are equally enthusiastic about the subject area, and can agree upon a working pattern that allows overlap and handover, why would this approach not work? After all, partners (husband and wife teams) are frequently found to be sharing group leadership responsibilities. When I raised this issue at the forum, I was told by a very senior member of the academic staff that the MRC in particular would consider applications from

¹ Athena ASSET Survey of Career Development in SET disciplines (2004)
 (http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/athenaswan/CMembers_ucl.htm)

two women, as 'the Science is what determines the funding'. Yet, it is not advertised by any funding council, and I wonder how many women would be brave enough to submit such a grant without prior knowledge that such a concept won't be ridiculed. But the emphasis has to be on women to come up with solutions that suit their needs. Unless we think outside the box and are daring enough to come up with novel ideas, we won't give the next generation of female researchers any better a chance of succeeding within an academic environment.

Personally, I have never believed motherhood is a valid excuse for not realising one's potential. In the last two years, far from working fewer hours, I have taken on additional responsibilities trying to plan my future career, and gain the relevant experience. Although this has meant stretching my work into my "relaxation" time, I have benefited enormously from learning new skills. As a direct consequence, I have more confidence in my own abilities and feel better prepared for what the future holds.

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