



Why Are There So Few Female Prosthodontic Teachers?

Although the majority of dental students today are women, they are hugely under-represented in most dental faculties. Why is it, for example, that only 14% of the editorial board of the *IJP* is female? Female students perform just as well as their male colleagues and yet do not succeed to the same extent in pursuing an academic career. Is this because women are less competent or less interested in an academic career? Needless to say, both explanations seem very unlikely.

There are many temptations that lure people into private practice, so it takes truly intrinsic motivation to strive for an academic career in which demanding teaching responsibilities are combined with clinical practice and research activities. It seems to me that a woman's desire to pursue an academic career is put more to the test than a man's for a number of reasons.

The most important reason is the search for a good balance between professional and family life. Starting a family often coincides with the time when a woman's professional career is also taking off. Although having children need not affect a young mother's professional drive, it will put a lot of things into perspective. In daily life, professional priorities must be weighed against priorities at home. This often creates an internal conflict that leads to feelings of inadequacy in both tasks. This tension can be reduced by fathers who contribute equally to the daily tasks of family life. Along with the quest for equality in professional life, the same goal exists in family life. Although a new generation of fathers has emphasized the importance of this concept, in many cases the mother will still (want to) take the final responsibility for the family. Further, those men who are eager to take on more family responsibilities may encounter professional obstacles themselves, since such a role is even less accepted in our society.

Of course, we should not deny the biological and psychological differences between men and women, which make complete equality very difficult and perhaps not even desirable. Situations in which both partners are able to display unlimited professional ambition are rather exceptional. In those cases, the domestic and family tasks must often be delegated and require a high level of flexibility and reflection on a regular basis.

Women as well as men will find it easier to succeed professionally only when some sense of harmony has been achieved personally. Academic and professional institutions must provide support to women who are balancing professional and family life. Of course, because children have the fortunate tendency to grow up, family needs will change over time. However, during the period that family life is most demanding, young professionals should receive more support. It must be taken into account that young parents will be delayed compared to their peers. In the academic world, this problem could be addressed—and already has in some institutions—by taking into account a young student's family responsibilities when appraising scientific output.

There are also inherent female characteristics that may hamper women in a competitive professional environment dominated by men. Women are often less assertive and competitive and more straightforward and modest, with a tendency to focus on their tasks rather than actively championing their output. Many women also have a different way of networking that is more personal and less political and goal-driven. These may be noble characteristics; however, they will not serve women in acquiring that coveted position.

Still, there are women who do succeed in academics despite demanding family lives. These role models are indispensable in encouraging and actively supporting young female academics. The lack of women in academic positions is not just a problem for women, but also for the whole academic community. Academic environments must allow a variety of individuals to develop and thrive. Diversity, in all aspects, enriches a community.

Dr Joke Duyck, DDS, PhD
Department of Dentistry, Pathology, and
Maxillofacial Surgery
Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium
Joke.duyck@med.kuleuven.be