

# Leaving the Ivory Tower: Factors Contributing to Women's Voluntary Resignation from Academia

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*The more complete the despotism, the more smoothly all things move on the surface.*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1881

Over the past decades, women have entered nontraditional fields, have received advanced degrees in ever increasing numbers, and have been appointed to university positions, despite the biases in the hiring, tenure, and promotion of female faculty on which the feminist literature has focused.<sup>1</sup> Yet significant proportions of women are choosing to leave academic positions before reappointment and tenure decisions. I would like to explore the reasons for that choice.

A significant percentage of the women among my fellow graduate students entered academic positions and then left several years later. I noticed the same phenomenon among female colleagues at universities, and now I am beginning to see my own female graduate students consider leaving academia almost as soon as they are hired in faculty positions. Reasons for leaving (or thinking about leaving) vary. One woman was the token woman in an all-male department. Another felt that she could not perform the discrepant roles of researcher, teacher, and administrator at the high level she desired. As the only black woman in an all-white department, she was asked to serve on too many committees and was needed by too many students. A number of women said that they did not feel appreciated by their colleagues and received little support and encouragement. Many indicated that research and teaching on women's issues were devalued by their colleagues as not serious, "hard-core," or related to their discipline. And one woman explained that her greatest fear was that she was learning how to play the academic game only too well; she needed to leave academia before she lost her personal sense of integrity.

At least one study has taken note of this phenomenon. A 1983 Smith College report on gender ratios in tenure appointments indicated that equal numbers of men and women were hired at the junior faculty level, yet more men than women came up for tenure.<sup>2</sup> The major factor accounting for this imbalance was the high rate of voluntary resignations on the part of female faculty. Specifically, 9 percent of the women, but only 2.5 percent of the men, resigned voluntarily before the first reappointment, and an additional 10 percent of the women and 5 percent of the men resigned voluntarily after at least one reappointment. In contrast, the gender ratio of involuntary departures (terminations) was equal.

The women who left Smith College reported the following reasons: (1) barriers to conducting research, including high student contact, unrealistic departmental expectations, unsupportive environment, and unsympathetic colleagues; (2) heavy teaching demands, including the need to serve as role models for female students, lack of support for women's studies courses, heavy advising loads, and lack of feedback on teaching; (3) psychological factors, such as stress generated by pressures on junior faculty members, perception of lack of control and lack of information, and anxiety about evaluation by others; and (4) social and family life concerns, such as social isolation and competing demands from spouses and children. Interestingly, male and female faculty did not differ in their levels of scholarly activity (number of publications and presentations), even though women often felt that they were not as productive as they would like to be. Because Smith is a small, all-female college, its findings may not apply to other academic

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institutions. However, studies of female faculty elsewhere, and of women's psychology and role functioning in general, indicate that a variety of institutional, interpersonal, and psychological factors may contribute to voluntary departures by female faculty members.

### Institutional Factors

When they enter occupations traditionally dominated by men, women are often expected to perform conflicting roles in the work setting.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the academic arena, the female sex role stereotype may not correspond as closely as the male sex role stereotype to the requirements of the faculty role. Sandra Bem has indicated that women are more likely to describe themselves as shy, soft-spoken, warm, tender, and gentle, whereas men are more likely to describe themselves as self-reliant, assertive, analytical, competitive, and ambitious.<sup>4</sup> The latter attributes may better suit the academic role as it currently exists.

Second, students and colleagues may have different expectations for male and female faculty. Female professors matched in rank and teaching experience with male professors receive lower teaching evaluations from students, particularly from male students,<sup>5</sup> yet male faculty members are more likely than female faculty members to exhibit such behaviors as willingness to cancel a class.<sup>6</sup> Female faculty receive greater demands for student contact and support than do male faculty; however, female faculty receive better performance evaluations from students when they use a highly structured teaching style than when they use an expressive, nurturant teaching style. Teaching style does not influence evaluations of male faculty to the same extent.<sup>7</sup> Thus, female faculty face greater role conflicts and are generally perceived as less effective teachers than are male faculty although they value their role as teachers more than do males.<sup>8</sup> This difference may result in strain and discontent on the part of women in academic positions.

Third, women appear to value affiliation and approval more than do men, who seem to be more motivated by achievement aspirations.<sup>9</sup> Cathy Widom and Barbara Burke found that female junior faculty, compared with male junior faculty, are more likely to value working with competent people, being respected by others for their ability, having a meaningful job, and doing valuable work. The only factor in this study that males valued more than females was a good salary. Thus, it seems that women may be at risk for leaving academic settings where they get little positive feedback or where they do not feel esteemed or valued.

Finally, academic institutions may directly discriminate against women. In a study by L. S. Fidell, 155 psychology department heads responded to ten descriptions of hypothetical candidates for faculty positions. The descriptions of candidates were identical in all aspects except gender (implied by first names). Department heads were significantly more likely to indicate that they would hire female candidates at the assistant professor level and male candidates at the associate professor level.<sup>10</sup> Lora Liss interviewed female faculty members at one university about perceived sex discrimination at their institution and found that the majority reported little evidence of discrimination, even though an examination of personnel practices at this same university indicated gender discrepancies in initial appointments, promotion, salary, and tenure. Indi-

vidual women—at least at this campus—may thus be mistakenly attributing lack of advancement to personal rather than institutional factors.

### Interpersonal Factors

Research on women's interpersonal roles suggests several possible reasons for early job resignation. First, academic careers and family commitments may be less compatible for women than for men, forcing women more than men to choose between the two. Only half of women with doctorates in science are married, compared to 90 percent of men.<sup>11</sup> Female faculty also have high rates of voluntary childlessness. Whereas 75 percent of women in the general population have had children by the time they are thirty and over 90 percent have done so by the time they reach forty, a survey by Sara Yögev and Andrea Vierra indicated that female faculty are much less likely to have children by those ages. In fact, at the university they studied, none of the married or ever-married female faculty had had children by age thirty and only half had done so by age forty.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, male faculty are much more likely to be married and to have children.<sup>13</sup>

Employed women who are married and who have children continue to have primary responsibility for housework<sup>14</sup> and child care.<sup>15</sup> Although men who are married to employed women are more likely to perform household and childcare tasks than are men whose wives are not employed outside the home, employed women still assume most of this work.<sup>16</sup> Such dual-job women report work overload and role conflict because of competing demands on their time. Furthermore, career women are more likely than are men to view their spouse's career as more important than their own.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, married women appear to be more limited than are married men by geographic constraints. Gerald Marwell, Rachel Rosenfeld, and Seymour Spilerman reported that women in academia are more likely than their male counterparts to view their spouses' jobs as deterrents to moving to other geographic locations. In this study, only 7.1 percent of men remained in the same urban area when changing jobs, compared to 33.3 percent of women. When married men and women did move to other locations, men were almost twice as likely as women to attain a higher academic rank in the process.<sup>18</sup> Given these geographic constraints, women who are dissatisfied with their jobs may leave the academic realm altogether, whereas dissatisfied men may move to academic institutions in other locations.

### Psychological Factors

Brenda Major has argued that individuals' subjective evaluations of their actions are far more important in determining satisfaction than the objective status of these same actions. Perhaps to maintain a belief that the world is fair and just, perhaps to preserve a sense of personal control rather than view themselves as victims of uncontrollable circumstances, individuals who fail are likely to blame themselves for this failure. Women in academic settings can respond to unjust situations in a number of ways: they may try to change the institution or situation, devalue their career as unimportant, devalue themselves or their contributions, or choose a different career altogether. Given women's relative powerlessness in the academic hierarchy, "for a variety of self-protective reasons, women may internalize their status rather than acknowledge

the extent to which they are unjustly treated by society."<sup>19</sup> Thus, cognitive/affective factors may strongly influence women's decisions to leave academic positions.

My own research on fear of failure in college students indicates that females are significantly more likely than males to endorse evaluation anxiety, high internal standards (perfectionism), and low self-esteem as reasons for procrastination in the academic domain.<sup>20</sup> These failure-fearing individuals are likely to link academic ability and success with self-worth as a person.<sup>21</sup> Procrastination serves to preserve self-worth, as individuals who complete a task at the last minute can attribute failure to their delay rather than to lack of ability. Unfortunately, they also tend to attribute success to luck rather than to ability or intelligence. Similarly, other researchers have found that women tend to attribute success to external factors such as luck, whereas men tend to attribute success to internal factors such as ability.<sup>22</sup> Because fear of failure appears to be more common among women and because women are less likely to take credit for their success, female academicians may feel less secure in their jobs. This insecurity may be exacerbated by the relative lack of external structure and feedback in academia, where research is self-generated and deadlines are often self-imposed.

Pauline Clance has coined the term "impostor phenomenon" to describe the sense of intellectual "faking" often experienced by high-achieving women. Despite objective success, women who experience the impostor phenomenon doubt their abilities and believe that it is just a matter of time until they are discovered to be incompetent. They report generalized anxiety in the work setting, conflict about their roles, and suspicion of positive feedback. They also tend to decline opportunities for advancement lest they be revealed as failures. They may attribute their success to chance, to physical attractiveness, or to affirmative action policies working in their favor.<sup>23</sup> Such self-doubting women who reside in academia may choose to resign from their academic positions early rather than undergo the tenure process.

Although men and women have comparable levels of general self-esteem,<sup>24</sup> men score higher than do women on self-evaluation of ability and performance.<sup>25</sup> Female faculty members rate themselves lower than do their colleagues in teaching ability, number of publications, and professional reputation.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, male faculty members view themselves more favorably than do their colleagues. Women's negative self-appraisals may contribute further to their insecurity and thus to self-imposed early departures from academic positions.

Finally, as I have explained in an earlier review of the research on coping with stress, women are more likely than are men to use passive or avoidance coping strategies (i.e., strategies that serve to reduce the emotional reaction, but leave the stressful situation intact). In contrast, men are more likely than women to use problem-focused coping (i.e., strategies that serve to alter the stressful situation). It is not yet clear why women choose less problem-focused coping; however, as I have speculated, differences in perceptions of control may account for part of the variance.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, there are numerous factors that may help account for the rates of voluntary resignation by women from academic positions. Although some of these factors arise from actual discrimination and others from women's socialization, all

significantly affect women's self-worth. The gradual erosion of women's worth in academia is subtle and frequently covert, and often leads them to blame themselves rather than the structure of academic institutions.

It is not my intention to argue that women should avoid intimate personal relationships, parenthood, or nontraditional styles of work because of the potential incompatibility of these roles with the academic setting. Rather, institutions need to change in order to accommodate the needs of women, if indeed these institutions envision that women will maintain positions in academia. Nevertheless, these changes are of a magnitude that cannot be achieved rapidly or even in customary ways. Perhaps only a societal revolution can effect such all-encompassing change. As Louise Mitchell wrote in 1890,

In rebellion alone, woman is at ease, stamping out both prejudices and sufferings; all intellectual women will sooner or later rise in rebellion.<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

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