

Keep women in academia by providing childcare, historian urges universities ^[1]

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Childcare is the single biggest problem for female academics, but too little is done to help, suggests Cambridge University historian Patricia Fara.

A leading British historian has called on universities to provide more support for childcare to reduce the number of women who leave academia before they reach the peak of their careers.

Starting a family remains one of the greatest obstacles for women who are building their careers as university researchers, but too little is done to help them, said Patricia Fara, a historian at Cambridge University and president of the British Society for the History of Science.

Because income disparity means men still often receive larger salaries, it is women who typically take on much of the responsibility for childcare, including the morning drop-off and collecting them from school. A 2016 report into pay inequality from the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that women in Britain earn on average 18% less than men, and that the gap balloons after women have children.

The pay gap widens steadily for 12 years after the birth of a first child, leaving women on 33% less pay per hour than men, the report found.

"If universities really wanted equality they would invest more money in childcare," Fara said at the Cheltenham Science Festival. "It is the single biggest problem."

The lack of women in senior positions is acute in the fields of science, technology and medicine, where a 2014 report from the Commons science and technology committee found that only 17% of professors are women. The report found no single reason for the lack of gender diversity, but said the steady attrition of women – the so-called "leaky pipe" – resulted from "perceptions and biases combined with the impracticalities of combining a career with a family."

In the sciences in particular, short term contracts and the high likelihood of having to move home to take up positions in the early stages of a career adds to the uncertainty and insecurity of working in academia.

Fara was at the festival to speak about Marie Curie on the 150th anniversary of the scientist's birth. The youngest of five children, and born to poor school teachers in 1867, Curie went on to study physics and maths at Sorbonne University in Paris. She later discovered radium and polonium with her husband Pierre, and became the only woman to win Nobel prizes in physics and chemistry.

Curie faced discrimination throughout her career, and was subject to damaging grillings in the media, despite making breakthroughs that paved the way for nuclear physics and cancer therapy, and which transformed the role of women in science.

"She showed that you don't have to be either a scientist or a normal woman," said Fara. "You can be both a scientist and a normal woman."

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