

Hitting the wall

I landed my dream job: a tenure-track position at a primarily undergraduate institution near my hometown where I would develop a new neuroscience major. I entered that position the way one enters a marriage: expecting it to last forever, assuming I would give it everything I had, hoping that—while it would not always be easy—it would be worth it. Soon, though, something seemed amiss. It felt kind of like sexism—but not exactly. Whatever it was, I experienced it from both women and men, from the department chair to the administrative assistant. It was only after many years and a career upheaval that I learned there was a legal term to describe it.

Relatively early on, an administrator asked me to meet with every member of the department to tell them about my teaching schedule. It was odd. None of us knew anyone else's schedules, and mine wasn't particularly unusual, just Monday-Wednesday-Friday. Was this just a normal part of being a junior faculty member? If it was, then why didn't I know the schedule of a colleague who started with me? I had just returned from maternity leave.

One morning, my 2-year-old son had a serious fall and I needed to take him to the emergency room. When I got to campus the next day, a colleague stopped by. He told me that, at lunch, he had heard about what happened and had said to everyone there, "Hey, if I had a dollar for every time I fell on my head, I'd be a millionaire."

Maybe he thought it was funny. I saw it as suggesting that I had foolishly overreacted and shouldn't have let my son's injury take me away from my academic work. I had seen colleagues go out of their way to cover one another's classes when they needed to take a pet to the vet, go to the dentist, or attend their Friday jazz practice. Why was the reaction to me so different?

Later, when the department chair position opened up, I was not invited to apply. I had created and directed one of the most popular science majors on campus and had been unanimously granted tenure. I was also pregnant with my third child at the time.

The sustained effort necessary to succeed in the face of this behavior consumed inordinate energy. I learned to seek out colleagues from other departments and look into administrative guidelines when something didn't feel right. I spent a lot of time trying to anticipate where the next challenge would come from. As I gathered my



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materials to apply for promotion to full professor, I thought, "I cannot do this anymore." I handed in my resignation. Initially my provost did not accept it. However, another administrator said, "It's time. It's time to be home with your children," and then circulated an email to that effect. I felt like my career had been derailed, and I didn't understand exactly why, except that—as this last comment made clear—it was related to the fact that I'm a mother.

When I regained the mental space to reflect on what happened, and after much research, I finally came upon the term "maternal wall bias," now broadened to "family responsibilities discrimination." I learned that some of what I experienced reflected attribution bias, when everyday actions—

taking a child to the doctor, choosing one teaching schedule over another—are interpreted through negative stereotypes of parents, and particularly mothers, as scientists. I learned about leniency bias, when the same work standard is applied more strictly to parents. And I learned that the more children one has, the more severe the bias. It was both validating and maddening to confirm why I had been so marginalized.

I cannot change what happened to me. But I can share what I learned so that both nonparents and parents will be aware that this kind of discrimination is not only unacceptable—it's illegal. After all, this is our responsibility as scientists: When we learn something that may fundamentally impact the future of our fields, we share it. ■

Sharon Ramos Goyette is currently a visiting lecturer in psychology at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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