

Tuesday June 5 2012

Women lag behind men in making it to senior rank of tenured professor

Su-Mei Thompson and Lisa Moore have drawn attention to the hurdles that women face on the Hong Kong academic career ladder in their article ('Study in bias', May 25).

This is a subject I feel strongly about as an academic at the University of Hong Kong for more than 30 years, and as a mother of three.

Whether mothers or not, single or supported by partners, women lag behind men in making it to the senior rank of tenured professor.

However, the pressures on young women academics who hope to earn tenure and start a family have become especially pronounced.

If they are lucky, academics will have completed their PhDs and find themselves in a tenure-track position around the age of 30.

They normally have a six-year grace period in which to prove their teaching, administrative and research productivity before coming up for tenure.

In the arts and humanities, the primary criterion for tenure is at least one book and a string of articles.

The current system does not take sufficient account of the fact that this period often coincides with women academics' prime child-bearing years, and ignores the ways in which young mothers are thus disadvantaged vis-a-vis their male peers.

Women academics who have been schooled to be high achievers will want to attain the same level of performance as their male colleagues, but it is likely to take them longer if they have children.

Yet time is against them in the current system, where they are awarded tenure after six years or are out.

While maternity-leave terms have certainly improved, they do not change the fact that childcare is a long-term and labour-intensive commitment which only begins in infancy.

The present tenure-track system needs to become more flexible to accommodate women who are struggling to cope with the demands of a young family and at the same time engage in the essentially solitary activity of writing a book.

At the top of the academic hierarchy, we need both men and women who are sensitive to the importance of family life, whether it is the care of young children at the start of a university career or of elderly parents towards the end of it.

Maureen Sabine, professor, School of Humanities, University of Hong Kong