

Results of the Survey of Canadian Graduate Students and Pregnancy/Childcare Concerns

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Last fall/winter I conducted a survey titled "A Survey for Canadian Women Graduate Students in History." There was also a version for men. The survey was somewhat inspired by the *1991 Report on the Status of Women Graduate Students in History in Canada* (CHA Bulletin Volume 17, Number 1). In that report, it was clear to me that women in particular faced a struggle to balance their careers and their families. Women felt discriminated against for choosing to have children, or they delayed having children for fears of how it would impact their careers. Among my friends and peers, I have been hearing similar concerns, and I wanted to see if this was still an important issue for Canadian graduate students in history.

I sent out my online survey over H-Net Canada, the list-serve of the GSC, and also on individual graduate history society list-serves. One hundred and twenty five students responded (eighty-one women and forty-four men), numbers that I think attest to the interest that graduate students of both genders have in this issue. Of the women, 70% of the respondents were between 23-31, and 80% of them did not yet have children. The respondents were (roughly) evenly divided among MA students in 1st and 2nd years, and PhD students in years 1 through 5. The men's numbers were very similar, but the respondents tended to be somewhat older, with 73% of them not having children. I also asked respondents about their partners, if they had one, and what they did. Of the women with partners/significant others, 68% of the partners were not also graduate students. However, 58% felt that their spouse could not support them both if necessary. Of the men with partners/significant others, 62% were not graduate students, and interestingly, 76% felt that their spouse could not support them both if necessary.

Most women who had children felt that their families had slowed down their progress through the program, but many noted that it also forced them to be more focused on their work when they had time. The men also noted that their children slowed down their work, but also that they helped put things into perspective. One noted that "When you have a child you realise what the most important thing in life is."

When asked whether they had ever felt discriminated against because they had children, some women said yes, while others said no. One woman wrote that she had a job offer taken away when the department discovered she was pregnant. In answer to this question, most women noted how they had a hard time

balancing being a mother and an academic. They had difficulties finding time to socialize with department members, attend conferences, and network – things that often take place after regular work days. Women explained that they have a tough time choosing between spending time with family and school work. Most men said that they did not feel discriminated against, although some noted that they didn't get research job offers, or that they felt that they weren't taken as seriously. Other men felt that they were encouraged or supported by their departments when they had children.

When asked about their future plans, the vast majority of both women and men who did not yet have children were planning on having children. I also asked if the respondents had any fear or concerns regarding having children during their graduate studies. Many women expressed concern about not being able to give enough time to either their children or their studies. One woman wrote: "I am concerned that I do not spend enough time on my studies or with my child and I feel guilty if and when I spend more time with my child instead of on my studies (and vice-versa)." They feel pressure to finish quickly, but worry it will be difficult to do so with children. Many women also expressed concerns over finances, about childcare, and about how they are perceived by their peers and their department. Men also expressed serious concerns about having children – the main one being finances. The ability to afford children was the main fear expressed, as well as being able to balance work and family responsibilities. One man noted "I can't imagine being able to fund and finish my PhD if my wife became pregnant."

I asked respondents if they had delayed having children, and about half of the female respondents noted that they were delaying having children due to their schooling. One woman noted that "the deal we made was not to even talk about it until school is over." Many want to be finished their dissertation first, or feel that they simply can't support a child as a student. Of those who were not delaying, many stated that they were not planning on having children, so it seems that the majority of women who do want children are delaying. Of course, as women age, it can become more difficult to conceive, or to have a healthy child, and women worry about this also. Another woman noted: "I expect and fear similar pressures and concerns upon entering the job market." Seventeen men (out of forty-four) said that they were also delaying having children.

When asked what time women students felt it was best to have children, the vast majority stated that there was no “best” time, or even a “good” time, to have children. “It is frustrating to think that if I did want to have a child soon after I finished, both my partner and I would have to wait until either one of us, or both of us, were comfortably employed, which could take a while.” Another woman insightfully reminded us that “Children are a blessing whenever they come.” Men also agreed that there was no best time, although some argued that having children during graduate school had its advantages. The vast majority, however, suggested that after school, once they had begun their career, was the best time. One man responded that “Children ... force you to put their needs before your own, and that is a great thing, because it is so easy for us as academics to become full of ourselves and our own career ambitions. The fact is that the best teachers and researchers I have known have virtues of humility and generosity in common and children help develop these virtues.”

I asked men and women if they had received any useful advice on having children. Most men said no, but a few replied that they had been advised to wait to have children. One woman noted that her “supervisor made it clear to [her] that few female academics have more than one child and the majority do not. She then asked [her] to think seriously about [her] career.” Another noted that “My supervisor and I don’t talk about me getting pregnant. I’m sure he’d have a heart attack if it happened.” Finally, one supervisor made this suggestion to their female student: “Try to find a partner with a real job who can earn money so you don’t have to worry.” Women in particular wanted more positive advice on the issue of balancing their careers with their families.

In response to the question of whether they felt their career would suffer if they had children once they gained employment, many were worried that it might. Some also suggested that their careers would progress more slowly. One respondent noted “From what I know, it is not an easy road to go down if you are a woman, which explains why, it seems to me, many women professors either do not have children, or do not work full time.” Some men also felt that it would be difficult to balance both. One noted that “Academics seems to require a certain selfishness, particularly with one’s time, that does not easily lend itself to family life.” Another acknowledged that his career might suffer, but noted that he’d “suffer in other ways if [he didn’t] have children. Better to suffer career-wise than family-wise.”

When asked about whether women felt that male graduate students were also affected by having children, most women recognized that men and women face different challenges with children. Many women mentioned breastfeeding as the main difference that caused more problems for women. Most men acknowledged that women bear the brunt of the work with children. One noted that his “sense is that female graduate

students (or even younger female professors) are looked down upon for having children. It is believed that they will not excel in publishing and research if they have children.”

While many women planned to have children once they gain full-time employment, they also expressed concerns about being able to handle it all, about tenure time tables, fear that they have waited too long, or fear that their career will suffer as a result of having children. Some men expressed fears as well, but not as many as the women respondents. One man succinctly noted “Planning on having children. Concerned. Concerned about tenure. Do not feel that anything can be done.”

I asked what men and women felt their universities and departments could do to help. An overwhelming number of people wrote about the need for more on-campus daycares, more flexibility, part time options, being allowed to bring children to conferences, or their offices etc. There seemed to be an agreement that there is a need for more information, and better awareness about maternity (and paternity) leave policies. Some respondents also suggested that changes need to be made to the tenure process, something that has been much talked about elsewhere, especially by American women academics. I also asked if they thought the CHA could do anything to help, and most noted that talking about these issues is a good thing. Many also said they wanted more advice and information, and that they were interested in sharing experiences and learning from each other. I am investigating ways that the GSC might be able to facilitate discussion and share experiences online. I also want to note that the CHA’s online book *Becoming a Historian* has a section on “Balancing ‘Life’ and Graduate School” at <http://www.cha-shc.ca/becoming%20a%20historian/chapterfour.shtml>

Additionally, we anticipate having a session at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the CHA in Ottawa titled “Babies in the Archives, Kids in the Classroom: Parenthood in the Academic World.” The roundtable would be co-sponsored by the Canadian Committee on Women’s History and the Graduate Student Committee of the CHA, and would include several historians who will share their experiences and advice with us.

In conclusion, men and women generally want both children and successful academic careers, and have concerns about how they can achieve both. I hope that sharing ideas and experiences might help young historians achieve both. Please check out the website of the GSC for more survey results. <http://www.cha-shc.ca/gsc-ced/en/index.htm>