

Getting even: Female researchers continue quest for professional equality

The Business Journal of Phoenix - June 15, 2007 by [Angela Gonzales](#) The Business Journal

As more women in Arizona are becoming scientists, the glass ceiling is keeping them from reaching top spots and salaries at universities and other research institutions.

Women in science say it could be a combination of the good ol' boy network still strong at work, coupled with duties at home with husbands and children.

Joan Rankin Shapiro, who has a medical degree and Ph.D. under her belt, said women make less money in science the same way they do in the business world.

"Women scientists, even though who have been productive and successful, very often are well below the men in salaries," said Shapiro, who serves as vice president of research at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix.

She thinks inroads are being made even though the number of women who chair medical departments probably can be counted on one hand. As in other professions, women are no less qualified than men, causing them to work harder to prove themselves, she said.

"What we have to do is continue to work toward change," she said.

"We need to continually remind people that those of equal position and merit deserve similar compensation, but we also have to be flexible. Women with children are the ones who stay home with the sick child. Although I see men taking much more responsibility in this area, it's still not totally equal."

Shapiro remembers when she was going to medical school how pregnant students would be told to take a leave of absence until the baby was born.

"Having children was once considered a medical disability," she said.

Some scientists have chosen their careers over children, putting them on a faster track to the top.

Adrienne C. Scheck, senior staff scientist and director of solid tumor and infested disease infection at Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph's, spends most of her time in the lab because she doesn't have a family tugging at her lab coat to get home and make dinner.

"I've been married to the lab most of my life," Scheck said. "I've been working hard at putting some balance in my life."

She sees her colleagues struggling with balancing the needs of their families with the demands of the lab.

"When push comes to shove, the person who ends up being put out is the woman," she said. "Not always, but most of the time."

Susana Martinez-Conde, who works in the Laboratory of Visual Neuroscience at BNI, said the administrative positions typically go to the men because there aren't enough women mentors in science to help guide young scientists' careers.

"The role of mentorship, especially from senior females who have gone through similar career paths, would be very helpful," she said.

Sometimes women step away from their careers to start a family, which puts them behind, said Marcia Levitus, assistant professor and researcher at The Biodesign Institute at Arizona State University.

With a Ph.D. in physical chemistry, Levitus said more women entering the sciences, which would help show men that having women around is normal.

"Hopefully, in a few decades, things will get better and better," she said. "There's still a struggle to break through that barrier."

The good news, however, is that over the past several decades, the number of women earning degrees in science and engineering fields has exploded, according to data from the National Science Foundation.



Tim Koors/Special to The Business Journal

Women researchers are prevalent at Barrow Neurological Institute. Pictured left to right, clockwise from front: Susana Martinez-Conde, Joan Shapiro, Leslie Baxter, Lucy Treiman, Adrienne Scheck and Denise Campagnolo. [View Larger](#)

From 1966 to 2004, the number of doctorate degrees in science and engineering awarded to women surged from 924 to 9,819.

Maybe, Levitus said, women just aren't applying for top positions because they know how difficult it would be to balance their family life with the stressful demands of running a lab.

"Very often, I'm the only woman in any meetings or discussions," she said. "That's tough."

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