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Unequal treatment for equal opportunities: Taking a stand for parents in science

Equality of opportunities is the law in democracies. To achieve equality, unequal treatment can be necessary. This might be the case for parents in science during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Scientists who are parents now have to take care of their children full-time. Women spend more time taking care of children and homeschooling than men.¹ Female scientists are probably no exception: Their partners mostly work full-time, while partners of male scientists often work part-time (with less than 30 weekly hours on average in Germany).² Plans to close day care centers until the summer, considered in several countries, will largely increase inequality between scientists with and without primary childcare obligations. While top journals and funding agencies report record numbers of submissions^{3,4}, parents report not being able to work on research papers or grant applications at all⁵. Large governmental funding agencies, such as the German Research Foundation⁶, or the Swedish Research Council⁷, plan to give extensions for grants and contracts, but this applies to everyone, independent of child care duties. Other funding bodies, such as the Royal Society, explicitly state that they will not provide additional funding for scientists who work less due to child care.⁸ Research has shown that treating everyone the same leads to greater inequality: Gender-neutral tenure clock stopping policies increase the probability of tenure for fathers by 18% and decrease it for mothers by 19%⁹. To protect diversity and promote meritocracy, we urge governments and funding bodies to publicly acknowledge that caregivers cannot work as usual. They should treat parents differently and consider, for example, counting the duration of the pandemic measures as parental leave in hiring and promotion decisions, longer contract extensions for primary caregivers, or giving parents extra budgets to hire assistants to support lab work or teaching preparation.

¹ Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., & Tertilt, M. Impact of COVID-19 on gender equality. *Discussion Paper Series - CRC TR 224*, **163** (2020). Available at: http://tertilt.vwl.uni-mannheim.de/research/COVID19_Gender_Equality_March2020.pdf

² See for example Lind, I. & Samjeske, K. *Schlussbericht zum Projekt ‚Balancierung von Wissenschaft und Elternschaft‘ (BAWIE)*. Bonn: GESIS – Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, Kompetenzzentrum Frauen in Wissenschaft und Forschung (CEWS) (2010). Available at: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-441382>

³ Katz, L., Twitter: <https://twitter.com/lkatz42/status/1246515530938408966?s=20> (2020).

⁴ Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF), Twitter: https://twitter.com/snf_ch/status/1248213068578009088?s=20 (2020).

⁵ Minello, A. The pandemic and the female academic. *Nature*, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01135-9> (2020).

⁶ German Research Foundation (DFG), Calls for Proposals – Information for Researchers: https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/announcements_proposals/index.jsp (2020).

⁷ Swedish Research Council, News: <https://www.vr.se/english/just-now/news/news-archive/2020-03-13-possible-to-extend-the-availability-period-of-projects-affected-by-covid-19.html> (2020).

⁸ The Royal Society, Grants, Schemes & Awards: https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/grants/coronavirus-covid19-grants-information/faq-award-holders/?utm_campaign=6833&utm_source=adestra&utm_medium=email (2020).

⁹ Antecol, H., Bedard, K., & Stearns, J. Equal but inequitable: who benefits from gender-neutral tenure clock stopping policies? *American Economic Review*, **108** (9), 2420 – 2441 (2018).