

The Handmaid's Tale: Fertility and Higher Education

Adrienne Otto Frame

Margaret Atwood's book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a chilling description of a futuristic society in which women have very circumscribed roles for their existence. Fertility and a woman's ability to give birth are important central themes in *Handmaid*. As a result of a catastrophic event resembling a nuclear holocaust, many women are rendered infertile and a new rigidly organized society, the Republic of Gilead, emerges in an effort to encourage the perpetuation of human life. In Gilead, it is the responsibility of a fertile group of women called Handmaids, to mate with men, called Commanders, and bear children for their infertile, but upper class, Wives.

It is impossible to read this book and not be deeply affected by the story as told by one of the Handmaids known to the reader as Offred. While the Handmaids of Gilead are little more than "baby making machines", those Handmaids who are successful in producing a child are revered in the society. Those who are unable to produce a child risk being sent to work camps where women, called Unwomen, are required to complete undesirable and dangerous tasks including the clean up of toxic waste left behind as a result of the catastrophic event. While some characteristics of the Republic of Gilead are not as clearly evident in American society, other aspects

certainly are, particularly the blessing and curse that women face as a result of fertility issues. For women pursuing faculty and/or administrative positions in higher education and student affairs, the issue of fertility can be a particularly precarious one.

The Struggle

The struggle between a woman's desire to pursue her career interests and her competing desire for motherhood is not a new one in society, nor is it one unique to the field of higher education. There are characteristics of higher education, however, that further complicate the issue of childbirth for women faculty members and administrators. According to Wilson (1999), "It's become an unwritten rule in academe that female professors who can manage it give birth between May and August...a late spring or summer delivery is the least disruptive to the academic calendar and guarantees [women faculty and administrators] the most time at home with their infants" (p. A14). Life, and fertility cycles in particular, do not always easily converge with the traditional, and somewhat unforgiving, academic calendar. As a result, the calendar itself presents a formidable obstacle for would-be moms in higher education and can cause some women to choose to try to get pregnant only at certain times of the year. According to Wilson (1999), "some academic women give up trying to conceive if they aren't successful in timing the infant's arrival, and wait until the next year to try again" (p. A14).

Additionally, the field of higher education and student affairs tends to require untenured faculty and administrators to spend long hours "paying their dues" in academia in order to position themselves to move forward in the ranks of the institution and in their chosen profession. According to Williams (2000), "while almost as many women as men train for academic careers, women are much less likely to receive

tenure and much more likely to drop out of academe, or to work at colleges that focus on teaching rather than at research universities” (p. B10). It can be particularly difficult for female academics, and especially those without tenure, to split their time between the responsibilities of child rearing and the responsibilities associated with their research, teaching, and administrative positions. Williams (2000) indicated that the field of higher education can indeed be more difficult for female faculty and staff members stating “that we make it easier for men to succeed in academe by the way that we define the ideal [higher education] employee: someone who works for several decades straight, taking no time off to bear or rear children; and someone who is able to relocate – because, as the saying has it, ‘to move up, you’ve got to move’” (p. B10).

When I first started working full time in student affairs, I expected to have to “pay my dues” as an entry-level professional and I was eager to do it. As a live-in professional for seven years at two separate institutions, I made myself available to students at all hours of the day and night and was energized by the opportunities afforded me through my work, to connect with students and observe and facilitate their growth and development. I loved the direct student contact and the money I was able to save living in. But even with the change from a rural institution to a much more urban campus, the job was my life and my life was the job.

According to Williams (2002), my experience with long hours at work was not unusual, as “ambitious academics generally work not only full time but overtime – often 10 to 14-hour days...40 hours per week is often part time in academe” (p. B10). As reported by Williams (2002) “only 8 percent of all mothers age 25 to 44 work that kind of schedule [10 – 14-hour days]” (p. B10). However, as my years of experience grew, I

began to ask myself what else I wanted in my life other than work? Did I want a husband? Did I want a family? And, how did I intend to have time for work and family when a career in student affairs, and particularly in student housing, often means very late nights, calls at all hours, dealing with unplanned student emergencies, and a list of meetings and responsibilities that never seem to end and all seem of equal importance?

Looking for Balance

In an attempt to answer these questions, I set out to find women mentors with successful careers in student affairs to learn more about their struggles with similar questions and the methods they had devised to cope with and resolve such struggles for themselves. My quest however, revealed some rather disturbing realities. Many of the women that I knew in student affairs were single and childless. I found it difficult to ask those who were single whether they were single by choice or by happenstance. I learned that those who were married had often met their partners later in life. Some believed that because they were married, certain colleagues chose not to call them for additional assignments, or to assist with after hours emergencies, opting instead to call upon single colleagues, so as not to disturb the married colleague and her spouse at home. In every case, those who were married said they wished that their colleagues would call upon them at any time and give them the opportunity to be of help or turn down the opportunity themselves.

Additionally, when I looked around at the women I knew in student affairs, I noticed a large age discrepancy among them. I knew women who were my age and either single, or just recently married without children, and I knew older women who had either never been married or who were married with grown children. I had a hard time

identifying any women in student affairs to serve as role models for career-focused mothers of young children.

I finally addressed this with one female Vice President of Student Affairs who regularly described her career development as one of a series of choices and sacrifices. She always said that she did not know what the consequences of her career choices were but that she was concerned that one of the things that she may have sacrificed along the way was her ability to have children. She was one of those who found her spouse later in life and who also desperately wanted to have a child of her own. Her aggressive pursuit of her career, she feared, may have erased her opportunity to be a mother. This Vice President's experience and concerns are not unique according to a recent *Time* magazine article, as "...many women [have] embraced a "male model" of single-minded career focus, and the result is "an epidemic of childlessness" among professional women" (Gibbs, 2002).

Messages

Like other women my age, I listened to the messages that were sent to me throughout my years of formative, undergraduate, and graduate education, "Concentrate on your education...delay marriage and childbirth until you have established your career." Underlying all of these messages was another unspoken one, "When you are happily married and ready to get pregnant, just stop taking the pill." What I have recently learned is that it is not only a career in student affairs that may be counter-indicated for family life. It may also be that despite medical advances female fertility cannot be taken for granted. According to Gibbs' (2002) article, many women my age are surprised to learn that there may be real consequences to our choice to wait

to achieve pregnancy until later in life, “even the best fertility experts have found that the hands of the clock will not be moved. Baby specialists can do a lot to help a 29-year-old whose tubes are blocked or a 32-year-old whose husband has a low sperm count. But for all the headlines about 45-year-old actresses giving birth the fact is that ‘there’s no promising therapy for age related infertility’”.

Finally, the messages sent by those in the upper echelons of higher education faculty and administration, and the formal recognition structures in place at many institutions, seem to discourage any activity, including family responsibilities, which divert a woman’s attention from her professional pursuits on campus. Currently there are no awards given at annual recognition ceremonies for the person with the most balanced life. Instead phrases such as “above and beyond the call of duty” are heralded as the gold standard for performance and reward in academe. Even as women declare their candidacy for positions of increased authority in higher education, their family circumstances may inadvertently taint their otherwise successful application. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article Paula M. Krebs (2001), described her reaction to female candidates who chose to divulge details of their off campus lives: “When these candidates raised their family issues in our discussions about their jobs, I found myself seeing them as unprofessional” (p. B24). The message seems clear that anything, including child rearing, that causes a woman in higher education to “[work] less than full time virtually guarantees that a woman will not get tenure [or promotion] at a major research university, no matter how talented she is” (Williams, 2000, p. B10).

A Solution?

In some ways, perhaps, the society described in *A Handmaid's Tale* would be beneficial to women in higher education and student affairs. If we all had a Handmaid to get pregnant for us, and Marthas to help with the housework, cook, and care for the children, then perhaps we would have the chance to move forward in our professions and maintain some degree of family life and fulfillment, without detriment to our career goals. However, the other aspects of life in the Republic of Gilead are far less desirable.

As a higher education professional, I understand that the choice to bear a child may significantly, and negatively, impact my ability to pursue my chosen career path with my current level of rigor and dedication. To some degree, my choice to pursue the doctorate has arisen from my hope to take time out one day to raise children, and later return to academia. It is my hope that when the time comes the doctorate will allow me to make the transition back into student affairs and higher education more smoothly. Given that I have been unsuccessful thus far in identifying young mothers in student affairs to be role models of what it is actually like to have a family and be a successful and respected administrator, I look forward to a time when I might be the role model for a young female professional in higher education—the kind of role model that I personally could not find.

References

- Atwood, M. (1986). *The handmaid's tale*. New York: Anchor Books/Random House.
- Gibbs, N. (2002, April 15). Making time for a baby. *Time*, pp. 48-54.
- Krebs, P.M. (2001, November 2). Why "family first" is not a win for academic feminists. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B24.
- Wilson, R. (1999, June 25). Timing is everything: Academe's annual baby boom. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A14.
- Williams, J. (2000, December 15). What stymies women's academic careers? It's personal. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B10.