

SCIENTIFIC WORKFORCE

NSF Touts Family-Friendly Policies as Boon to Women

Young women are forever asking Meg Urry, an astrophysicist at Yale University, if it's possible "to have a successful scientific career and a family." A tenured professor with both, Urry tells them "yes." Perhaps more telling, however, is that the issue doesn't seem to interest half of her students. "I've never been asked that question by a man," she says.

This week, the National Science Foundation (NSF) rolled out a set of family-friendly policies that it hopes will reduce the number of young women who jettison scientific careers because of responsibilities outside the lab. "Too many women give up because of conflicts between their desire to start a family and their desire to ramp up their careers," says John Holdren, the president's science adviser and head of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. It was a rare moment in the spotlight for the low-profile basic research agency: First Lady Michelle Obama announced the policies at a White House ceremony touting the importance of women to the nation's economic recovery and, in particular, the need to improve the proportion of women in the so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) workforce.

The new policies will allow both male and female grant recipients to defer an award for up to 1 year or receive a no-cost extension of an existing grant. NSF also hopes to increase its use of "virtual reviews" of grant proposals so that scientists don't need to travel as often to the agency's Arlington, Virginia, headquarters.

The only change with any price tag attached is a new program of supplemental awards to investigators going on family leave, allowing them to hire a technician to keep their labs moving ahead.

NSF Director Subra Suresh says "small pockets of NSF" are now offering some of these options, but the new policies will "elevate those practices" across the agency. If the 10-year initiative succeeds, he says, the percentage of academic tenure-track positions in STEM fields held by women, now 28%, should approach the proportion of Ph.D.s earned by women in STEM fields, now about 40%. Suresh says that goal is "a national target. ... NSF cannot do it alone."

Scientists who work on gender-equity

issues generally applaud what NSF is trying to do. Lisa Wolf-Wendel of the University of Kansas, Lawrence, especially likes the fact that a major federal research agency is weighing in on practices that are shaped largely by the cultures on individual campuses. "It gives everybody the opportunity to do the right thing," says Wolf-Wendel, who has found that flexible policies, like stopping the tenure clock to accommodate a woman's child-bearing years, can carry a stigma that makes them less attractive to those who could most benefit. "And it's nice to see the message coming from the government."

But the country "is still a long way from where we need to be," say Urry and others, who believe there are several other issues

new-mom postdocs who couldn't work nights and weekends in the lab. In 2004, she persuaded NIAID Director Anthony Fauci to launch the Primary Caregiver Technical Assistance Program. The 1-year grants "made a big difference" in helping women establish their academic careers, says Glimcher about a pilot program that continues to this day—but which has never spread to any other NIH institute.

Even more important, she says, is providing help to women struggling to balance a growing family with an expanding career. "The second R01 grant [NIH's primary vehicle for supporting individual investigators] is even harder to get than the first," Glimcher says. She'd like to see universities

provide an equivalent amount of support so that a rising scientific star can devote her energies to building up her lab without having to burn the midnight oil on another grant application. "There's no substitute for a mother's time," says Glimcher, who confesses that she returned to her lab "1 day after coming home after the birth of each of my three children, all by caesarian section."

Alice Agogino, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, who has been very active in promoting gender equity, likes the idea of funding a technician to help a young scientist on parental leave but says monitoring such a program could be a problem. "As most STEM faculty are male," she says, "I expect they will be most likely to take advantage of this." However, she says she's

known men who were supposedly on parental leave who actually became more productive researchers "because someone else is at home and taking care of the baby."

In brief comments headlining the East Room event, Michelle Obama said she hoped that other organizations, including private industry, would see NSF as an example of how to promote a more flexible workplace. And while she urged her audience to encourage more girls to enter science and engineering, she said her own limitations led her to take a different career path. "I'm a lawyer who was bad at these subjects," she confessed. "All you lawyers know it's true. We can't add and subtract, so we argue."

—JEFFREY MERVIS



Lending a hand. First Lady Michelle Obama applauds the work of young women in science at a White House event.

society needs to address. For example, Urry notes that many young scientists may not be able to take advantage of no-cost extensions and delayed grants. What's really needed, she says, is a family-leave policy that also provides an income: "It lets you stop the clock, but you're also stopping the paycheck. It's a nice benefit for those who are not economically challenged."

Laurie Glimcher, a Harvard immunologist who has just been named dean of Cornell University's medical school, knows that time can be just as valuable as money to a scientist with a young child. For years, she had used grant money from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) to pay for technicians to help her