

WHOI Workplace Climate Committee: Women in Science CommuniTea

March 26, 2021

The WHOI Workplace Climate Committee held a CommuniTea on March 26th, 2021 with 54 members of the WHOI community in attendance. The CommuniTea focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on women at WHOI, with a key focus on the impacts on mothers. Prior to the CommuniTea, participants were encouraged to watch a movie about Maryam Mirzakhani and to read *Rebuild the Academy* by R. Fulweiler et al., 2021¹. The CommuniTea was structured to have a 15 minute introduction including a sharing of discussion points. This was followed by 30 minute breakout groups, with 15 minutes for groups to report back. There was overwhelming gratitude that everyone kept their jobs during COVID. However, there was a significant sense of stress and anxiety felt by all, especially for the mothers.

Discussion Points:

- What kinds of issues have women at WHOI been experiencing during the COVID-19 epidemic?
- How can we better support women right now (as individuals, mentors, supervisors, and an Institution)?
- What should WHOI do (or keep doing!) to support women working at home, returning to campus, and returning to field work?
- The challenges mothers are facing now will impact their careers for many years to come. In what ways can WHOI prevent the loss of women with children from the institution?

Here we present compiled and anonymous key points from the breakout rooms:

Issues women at WHOI have experienced during COVID

- Breakdown of boundaries between work and home life leading to anxiety and stress. This has been especially acute for families who have been confronting uncertainty about school and daycare services. The impact includes lack of after school programs to extend the work day and not being able to rely on school buses and car-pooling.
- Increase in workload with a decreased capacity to do that work, due to lack of time, space, separation from family, access to campus resources, etc.
- Concern over time lost in long-term careers, especially those on short grants or who have lost field work opportunities. COVID has been a “Career staller” and while no reprimands are expected, no advancement is expected either, as groups reward those who have been able to work throughout COVID over those who have been hampered by dependent care, illness, etc.
- WHOI’s flexibility with part, ¾ time, and emergency time is greatly appreciated. However, there are impacts on productivity and concerns about how this will disproportionately affect those who have job security vs. those who need it for job promotion and tenure?

¹ Fulweiler RW, Davies SW, Biddle JF, Burgin AJ, Cooperdock EH, Hanley TC, Kenkel CD, Marcarelli AM, Matassa CM, Mayo TL, Santiago-Vázquez LZ. *Rebuild the Academy: Supporting academic mothers during COVID-19 and beyond.* PLoS biology. 2021 Mar 9;19(3):e3001100.

- Much stress about low productivity and commitments that are not being met. Many are missing deadlines, falling behind, feeling like not being as good a mentor as usual because there is not enough time in the day, and concern of longer-term consequences (e.g., missed proposal deadlines).
- Many are managing others who also have stresses due to childcare/aging parent responsibilities.
- Stress about using funding to pay for field or lab work that was not done as proposed.
- Added costs for enhanced internet at home.

Childcare Issues *These issues are especially exasperated for women, who are most likely to bear the brunt of child care and elder care.*

- Uncertainty of available care, including in-person schools that have intermittently closed and lack of summer daycare options.
- Responsibility of caring for the mental health of themselves and their children.
- Responsibility of suddenly becoming full time teachers on top of their day jobs, and concern for the long-time social and learning impacts of COVID on dependents without reliable school and day care options
- Difficulty conducting field work, which can now include significant quarantine time (additional weeks) away from home in addition to the field work time away from dependents. Makes field-going science seem very difficult.
- Stresses of supervising other WHOI employees who are facing their own family problems.
- Concern for the impact of funding looking forward and on promotions/merit increases, especially when compared to those who may have been impacted less.
- Quarantine requirements for children impact ability to work.

Ways we can better support women at WHOI

- Be mindful of those under emotional/mental stress.
- More supervisor training and mentoring opportunities are needed.
- Continued flexibility of working from home and flexibility in transition back to on-campus work.
- Extending virtual conferences and lectures can help caregivers attend events.
- There are parallels and differences between maternity leave and COVID, particularly related to the stigma and career goal compromises of those on leave. Bringing these issues to attention is valuable. Several attendees expressed a seminar from HR about the new PFML State Act.
- On-site daycare and summer camp.
- Disproportional service of women on committees/community service. It would help if excess service load was paid at a rate to truly compensate for time spent that is above and beyond what male/non-minority peers are doing.
- Need for recognition of limits on women's time (particularly if they have childcare/aging parent/family responsibilities) to participate in activities.