

# Chapter 10

## Being Child-Free by Circumstance in the Academy One Dean's Journey

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter will illustrate the challenges of being a female lead in the academy and child-free by circumstances. The current research on child-free women outside and within the academy will be highlighted most especially with a focus on the era of COVID and post-COVID. Particular attention will be given to negative perceptions and stereotypes of child-free women and the lived experiences of the Dean writing this chapter will be braided in. There are unwritten expectations that are placed upon women to fulfill the role of motherhood and if not, in academia in particular, women are considered to have no life outside of their work and undue burden is placed upon them in the workplace. The last section focuses on several ways that Human Resources and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices can increase sense of belonging and fairness for child-free higher educators and leads.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-2790-6.ch010

## INTRODUCTION

Current higher education scholarship encompasses a wealth of research articles on the challenges that female faculty experience when they have a child and the influence this has on their ability to sustain a full-time faculty position, go up in rank and promotion, and even more so in promoting into administrative positions (Burke, 2022; Huang et al., 2020; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Mason et al. 2005; Oleschuk, 2020; Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014; Schochet, 2019). Evidence shows that heterosexual men can promote much faster and into leadership positions, as many of the childcare duties fall upon the woman in the relationship (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Mason, 2013). In this case, I am referring to solely heterosexual or bisexual relationships between men and women focused on possibilities for biological birth. While women have most definitely broken this ceiling and so many have successful careers and families with children, oftentimes, this happens later in life and may limit how high they go.

However, what about the alternative? What about women who, while they want to have it all, including a thriving academic career, healthy relationships with their partners, and being mothers, yet have found this work-life balance is not balanced at all or what one senior manager described as a “creeping nonchoice” (Hewlett, 2002). These women have witnessed the abrupt impact of a nightmare of infertility and/or childlessness upon them, and have refrained from speaking out, enduring both physical and metaphorical discomfort, while concealing their experiences (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003) due to the societal stigma. This chapter will address the systematic gender bias and lack of ability of work-life balance for women in academia which can lead to infertility and child-free status. After all, higher education has the largest percentage of child-free women (some studies cite upwards of 50%) than most industries.

### My Experience

I am one of these women. This chapter is also based on my experiences as a Dean in academia and being child-free by circumstances or rather more by situational barriers. I would like to first define what “childless by circumstances” (Day, 2019) means, the challenges I have experienced based in research in trying to “have it all,” and finally the lack of human resources

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