The "F" words

Teaching Princeton students about feminism and family

By Sara Curran

Sara Curran is assistant professor of sociology and director of undergraduate studies in sociology at Princeton.

As I write this, spring break is coming to an end. Daylight lengthens, snow and cold linger, and I am ambivalent about what lies ahead for the rest of the semester. I gather my stamina to balance teaching, research, administration, and family. Then I prepare myself to guide students in my course on the sociology of gender (SOC 225) through what is always the most difficult three weeks. We are about to read and talk about work, careers, and work-family balance; the topics are discouraging, and there is little in the policy and social science literature that can give my 28 students – of whom all but two are female – satisfactory direction about how to navigate future opportunities and hurdles.

As much as I want it for myself, I want my students to imagine a future where they can have fulfilling family and work lives, without having to acquiesce to cultural discourses, social structures, and economic imperatives that pit career and family in two-way combat. My use of militaristic language is not unadvised. Feminists were portrayed by themselves and others as waging war and going into battle during the 1970s and 1980s. The militant portrayals have left the word "feminist" tainted in the current cultural milieu on campus. However, the two-way combat remains – perhaps the term can be abandoned, but the dilemmas cannot.

This year, a confluence of events makes me anticipate the impending three weeks more anxiously than usual. On campus we are still feeling the ripple effects from the *New York Times Magazine* article written by Lisa Belkin '82 about some of Princeton University's alumnae – high-achieving career women who "opted out" of the workplace to intensively raise their children. Belkin's article on the "opt-out" revolution was widely debated on various listservs, including campus listservs, and generated an avalanche of e-mails that shut down the magazine's e-mailbox several times.

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Then, three weeks ago, one of my former students shared with me a book: *Women Reflect About Princeton* (1989), edited by Kirsten Bibbins '87, Anne Chiang '87, and Heather Stephenson '90. This collection of writings by alumnae includes two poignant chapters about whether and how women's Princeton education prepared them for life after college. In story after story, women, younger and older, recount their eager anticipation of career opportunities and open doors, only to find that workplaces are not very accommodating when it comes to family responsibilities, and may even be discriminatory. Most of these women had Princeton experiences that were both challenging and extremely satisfying; they either experienced little gender discrimination here or overcame it with skill. So they were all the more disappointed and discouraged when they stepped out of the cocoon of collegiate life and into the "real" world. Their experiences resonated with my own. And I had to ask myself: How well am I preparing the young women in my own class – future Princeton alumnae?

In one of my precepts right before spring break, a lively exchange developed among the students about motherhood, the value of children, and whether it is "irresponsible" for women graduates of Princeton to "opt out." It was a climactic ending to the first half of the semester.

The passions revealed by these discussions and events reflect deep, ethical dilemmas pitting individualism versus care and responsibility for others. One way to parse this ethical dilemma is to acknowledge explicitly how cultural constructions of work and motherhood (and child well-being) create very different sets of needs and obligations that weigh most heavily upon the shoulders of many women and a few men. (Let us remember, first, that some women have

no choice but to work and care for children at the same time. For these women the dilemmas are no less pressing; they just have less wiggle room than the women who can "opt out.")

Cultural expectations about motherhood are alive and well in American discourse. They reveal themselves when school administrators call mothers first when children are ill, when media portrayals in advertising, film, and television consistently portray women as primary caregivers, when research about how fathers can be caregivers is rarely considered or conducted, when child-care institutions are vilified in the press, when kindergartens are only half-day, and when child-centered community activities are not offered on evenings or weekends. American women frequently are rewarded symbolically and emotionally for staying home. They are vilified if they do not, especially when their children come into harm's way, or their children cause harm. The culture of motherhood alongside limited institutional support makes it easier to "opt out" and very difficult to be a working parent when you cannot or do not "opt out."

The other cultural trope, competing with that of motherhood, is the expectation that successful professional workers make an all-or-nothing contribution, have tireless commitment, and emotionally participate in the daily lives of colleagues in order to be a team player. Professional performance evaluations are based on productivity and the degree to which an individual demonstrates commitment to the cultural ideals of success in a particular profession. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild convincingly demonstrates this in her book, *The Time Bind* (1997). This all-or-nothing commitment to work leaves little room for the demanding responsibilities of family care.

Thus, when women entered the workforce in droves between 1970 and 2000, spurred on by economic necessity and feminism, they entered a vortex of competing pressures. Today the pressures remain. The vast majority of their male colleagues and competitors do not have a working spouse, while a vast majority of professional women do. The structures of opportunities within the workplace continue to presume a male-breadwinner model of family life. Workdays are expected to be expandable if need be, regardless of the cost to family.

So, where does this leave the feminists? What can I offer my students when presenting them with these two competing cultural frameworks? Where can they look for ideas and leadership? To answer the first question: Feminists' work has fallen far short of its promise, and feminists must reach out to this generation of young women and men of all classes, races, and ethnicity, and look beyond our borders for solutions (there are many). To the second: Assume that motherhood can morph into parenthood. And that the issue is not just about child care. As our population ages, the issue needs to encompass a wide spectrum of family care. A recent study by Phyllis Moen of Cornell University shows that a vast majority of men would gladly trade money for more time with their families. And perhaps there ought to be some monetary benefits to doing so. (Writers Ann Crittendon and Joan Williams both provide concrete ideas and justification for valuing child-rearing work.)

And, finally, the third question: My students cannot be complacent. There is work to be done, building coalitions with older men and women to demand and imagine solutions that bring expectations about workers into balance with the valuation of family care.

It is 9 P.M. on Sunday, and the end of spring break. My children are soundly asleep, after the usual last kiss, hug, glass of water, and trip to the bathroom. My husband and I have traded turns caring for each of these concerns. As I reflect upon the week, I start to run through my usual litany: Did I do enough . . . work on my research, reading to my children, playing with them, just hanging out, reading into the pile on my desk? Could I have organized my week better to do more and better mothering and work? I know I am not alone in this internal accounting; I have shared the conversation with all too many of my women friends and colleagues. Nevertheless, spring is around the corner, and perhaps a cathartic moment is at hand. I turn on my laptop to prepare this essay for PAW. P