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Empathy, not sympathy

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Unlike a vast majority of women, I never really faced any strong gender bias. Consequently my story is not one of heroic struggle. But still its a story that needs to be heard, as it underscores how the positive presence of certain people, such as parents and spouses, in one's personal life can aid professional fulfilment.

I had the great good fortune of having enlightened parents. I had a childhood where being a girl child was not an issue at all. My parents insisted on very little, and believed that I should (and could) figure out what was best for myself. With freedom came responsibility, and at a fairly young age I learned that I was fully accountable for my choices.

I remember going with my father for counselling to IIT Kharagpur when I was about seventeen. The counsellors told my father that perhaps I should opt for Kharagpur, as it was closest to my hometown and they could drop by and "check on me" as often as they thought fit. My father firmly told them that I had set my heart on IIT Kanpur and so he would encourage me to stick to my choice, unless there was an academic reason to rethink my decision. I remember the feeling of pride at having my decision respected, even when weighed against the advice of the counsellors, and also an overwhelming sense of gratitude for having the parents I did.

When I went to IIT I was initially completely overwhelmed by the gender imbalance. I remember I had mistakenly first been allotted a room in a boys' hotel, because I had forgotten to specify 'Kumari' in front of my name! I still recall standing in the quadrangle with my luggage, besieged by catcalls, praying that some miracle would render me invisible! I was the only girl among the forty students in my section. It was a lonely and tense time, but those difficult initial years lent me a certain toughness, which came in handy later. I learnt to depend on my own resources completely, and though I made many mistakes, I also learnt to bail myself out of potentially damaging situations. And most importantly, I had learnt to acquire "internal blinkers" to help me get on with my life just the way I wanted to live it, regardless of pressures from outside to conform to certain patterns.

In TIFR I met Kapil, my husband of two decades, and in meeting him I was plain lucky. He understood me well enough (perhaps better than I understood myself!) to know that I would be deeply unhappy if my professional life was unfulfilled. I am grateful to him – for never letting me give up. To him it was important that we both had equal opportunities for professional growth, even if "equal" implied less than the best that was on offer for him.

Often a turning point of women's personal and professional life is motherhood. Since timing is the single-most important factor in balancing motherhood with a career, we tried to time the expansion of our family as best as we could. I suppose, ideally, one should have a faculty position before starting a family. I didn't quite manage that (though I was close). I remember going for a job talk when I was carrying my daughter. I wore an umbrella-cut kameez to disguise my growing girth! I was afraid that my impending motherhood would render me quite unemployable. I did get that position however, and I like to believe that my employers had realized that I was pregnant (in spite of my tent-like attire, or perhaps because of it!), but still thought I was worth hiring.

I enjoy motherhood in a way I had not even imagined possible. I treasure our daughter, and I am grateful for her in my

life. But motherhood, especially in the first four years, did make demands on my time in a manner nothing else had done till then. I took a complete break for eight months and even when I went back to work, so much of my mental and physical energy was centered around my daughter that there was some inevitable slackening of my academic drive. For the first time in my life, my time was not entirely my own. There were occasions of conflict between career demands and needs of my daughter. At this stage, the key to sustaining some reasonable level of academic activity, was efficiency, discipline and time-management. I remember I valued time in a way I never had before! Arguably I was not as productive as I should (could?) have been in this period. But I reckoned, viewed in the perspective of a working life spanning four decades, this dip of professional energy for a few years was not that significant.

There is one last observation I have: while I cruised along professionally in my early thirties, I did feel a transition in the attitude of my peers when I was approaching forty. There was a subtle (and not so subtle) shift from treating me as an younger colleague they enjoyed hanging out with, to a serious competitor in the work place. I often heard my productivity dismissed as “she just writes many papers”, and my several single author papers seen as evidence of some kind of “inability to collaborate”! In all honesty I am not entirely sure it has to do with being a woman, but perhaps this is how a “glass ceiling” manifests itself in academia. In a sense, the idea of a woman as competent, organized and hard-working is easily acceptable, but brilliance and ingenuity is not natural to her image. So it is most crucial to hold that centre of self-belief steady. And it is important not to care too much about what other people think.

I am acutely aware how much could have gone irrevocably wrong at every stage of my professional life. And so I feel incredibly lucky to have the wonderful parents I did, and later on a truly supportive husband. They provided me with that little bit extra strength one needs to stay afloat in severely gender-imbalanced work environments.

Lastly, for all those men reading this, perhaps fathers, brothers, husbands or teachers of women scientists, I would just like

you to remember that what women want in their professional life is exactly what men want. Women need empathy not sympathy, and a true acceptance of the fact that there are probably fewer differences between women in science and men in science, than between men in science and men not in science.