

## THE CONVERSATION

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# African mothers in science need more support. Providing it is actually easy

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Mothers need support to manage the demands of a scientific career with their family responsibilities.

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There are a number of discussions to be had about women scientists in Africa: why there are so few, for instance; or how more can be drawn into science, technology, engineering and maths careers. And, crucially, how can existing women researchers be retained once they've embarked on scientific careers – particularly when they have become mothers?

Women may often leave the workforce entirely once their child is born. The cost of childcare may outweigh the financial benefit of working, or women simply want to spend most of their time with their child. Inflexible jobs that don't accommodate the realities of parenting are another issue. Some women will stop working temporarily, but the return to work is not always smooth.

Women may find that they miss out on potentially life-changing career opportunities because of their maternal obligations. That in turn deepens the gender gap.

In the case of science in Africa, the World Health Organisation and UNESCO have done a great deal of work to close this gap. But not much attention has been given to how mothers who want to attend

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workshops, conferences and similar networking opportunities are supported. This simple intervention can boost the presence of women in science.

The Africa Science Leadership Programme set about finding out how the demands and realities of motherhood are affecting women scientists on the continent. We conducted a survey of 118 African women researchers from a range of institutions to find out about their career goals and barriers to success.

Many talked about how hard it was to balance family life and career. A number said their obligations as mothers kept them from attending workshops or similarly useful meetings.

The survey responses, along with the experiences of a new mother who'd been selected as a programme fellow, have offered new insights into how organisations and institutions can create supportive spaces for women researchers.

## **A mother's experience**

Dr Dalia Saad is a Sudanese researcher who focuses on environmental chemistry. She was selected as a fellow for 2017, the third year of the Africa Science Leadership Programme. But she had just given birth.

The programme aims to grow mid-career African academics. Part of the fellowship involves a week-long meeting, a valuable opportunity for networking and career development.

Dr Saad said she wanted to take up the fellowship, but would need to travel to South Africa with her mother and would require a baby cot and extra space in her room. This turned out to be easy to arrange, and meant that an excellent scientist did not have to miss out. Reflecting on the experience, she said:

*I was able to bring my baby along with someone to take care of her, so I had peace of mind to effectively participate in the programme while checking on my baby during breaks. This was a special experience for me and I wish that such arrangements were always made to accommodate women researchers' needs to support their career progression.*

Dr Saad suggests that institutions and organisations should consider in-house creches, flexible working hours and more flexible funding time frames to support new mothers who want to continue pursuing their scientific careers. This is borne out by women's experiences elsewhere in the world.

There are some organisations in the US, London and Canada which offer such support, among them the Society for Molecular Biology and Evolution, the London Mathematical Society and the American Academy of Religion. The Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa fully supports women who are pregnant or breast feeding to ensure they can take advantage of opportunities within that programme.

This shows that the challenges for new mothers attending workshops are starting to be recognised on the continent. But spreading this support more widely could potentially help to close the gender gap.

Our interaction with Dr Saad and feedback from the survey have presented an opportunity for the Africa Science Leadership Programme to restructure its support systems. We're committed to allocating resources towards supporting women who would like to attend our workshops with a newborn and a caregiver. This support will be explicitly announced in all future calls, and on our online and social media pages, so that women know it's available.

We believe this is an approach that other organisations, institutions and fellowship programmes should consider adopting to encourage more women scientists to stay the course despite the demands of motherhood.

## **A worthwhile investment**

The cost implications involved with these suggestions may worry some, since different organisations work with different budget constraints. In our experience, we were able to arrange a cot and a double room for Dr Saad at no extra cost. This suggests it is worth negotiating requirements like room space, baby facilities or even a local, trusted caretaker – some hotels or venues may offer childcare facilities at little or no extra cost.

But, we'd argue that any cost is a small investment with a potentially high output: institutions and organisations will be able to offer truly inclusive programmes for young mothers and an opportunity for more women to remain in science in Africa.



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