

Combining Family and Work – Just Do It

Katharina Landfester¹

Ackermannweg 10, 55128 Mainz



Prof. Dr. Katharina Landfester is a director at the Max Planck Institute for Polymer Research in Mainz. Together with her husband Dr. Volker Mailänder, she has two children. In a very personal essay, Prof. Landfester describes her experience as a woman and mother in the scientific world and how they managed to balance their scientific careers and family life showing us why instead of hesitating, sometimes it is best to just do it.

Again and again, there are a lot of complaints in Germany, that there are too few female academics either with or without children. In higher positions in research and business, women (with or without children) are only found very sparsely. Well, in my opinion, there are simply too few role models towards which we can orient positively as a woman, and the “society” is still not very encouraging. This means that women have to swim at an early stage already as a girl and later as a woman against the current, stand by their decisions and must have the courage to follow unusual pathways. It is clear that there is not THE solution, there can only be examples and everybody has to find their way. Therefore, I would like to share my way.

I have chosen Latin and German as my major disciplines in high school. The choice for me was difficult because I simultaneously was also very much interested in science, but my favorite combination of chemistry and Latin was not possible. So I opted for the pure humanities combination, also in view of a possible study of Latin and history. At that time, many people said to me that it is a good idea to become a high school teacher, which would allow for an ideal combination of work and family. I thought that was plausible, until one day before the last written exam in school, the “Abitur”. On this day, I thought: “No way, you cannot do something, just because everyone says that this is a great job for women.” Therefore, on that day I decided that I would study chemistry – perhaps it was a bit defiant (“and now I can prove to you that I can act differently as a woman ...”), but I knew it was the right decision for me. I decided to go to the Technical University of Darmstadt, because I thought that the more technical it is the better it would be. At that time this meant being really among men, the university in Darmstadt probably belonged to the few, where dance classes for women were free because there was a lack of women! During my studies I never had a disadvantage because I was a woman. However, I was shocked by some comments from men. For example, on the very first day of the study, one professor said: “Look around, the women are only here to get married.” Therefore, I simply had to learn how to ignore these and other comments from professors, assistants, students, relatives, friends and neighbors. I also

had to learn not to be scared. And I had to learn “to selectively listen” in order not to doubt whether women really can obtain a science degree and then can also make their career path. I always received very special support from my parents, who have supported me at any time and have always encouraged me, even if it was difficult.

For my master thesis I went to Strasbourg, where I stayed for nine months and wrote my thesis entitled “Synthesis of Core-Shell Latexes”. It was a wonderful experience, especially because the French women were much more open for working women. Here I first saw that it was possible for a woman to be successful, even while having a family.

Then I changed to Mainz to perform my doctoral thesis at the Max Planck Institute for Polymer Research in the department of Prof. Spiess. It was entitled “Synthesis and Characterization of Core-Shell Latexes with Electron Microscopy and Solid-State NMR”. I vehemently rejected any well-intentioned support of colleagues with comments like “Oh, I will help you, because you’re a woman”.

After graduation I decided to go to the United States as a postdoc. I spend 15 months at the Lehigh University (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, United States, not Israel!), and it was clear to me that I wanted to start with my habilitation and go into academic research. In the US I was really fascinated to meet some women as important role models. For me, the most impressive woman was Diane Wittry, the conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra; she deeply impressed me and I thought that I simply have to challenge myself. In Bethlehem I also first came into contact with a future research topic: “miniemulsions”.

Back in Germany I went to the Max Planck Institute of Colloids and Interfaces in Potsdam in order to pursue my habilitation. Markus Antonietti was my mentor and he challenged me a lot. He has inspired me again and again, to become better and better; I truly owe him a lot. If I had not had Antonietti as a mentor, I would probably never have been where I am today. As a group leader, I initially had three female Ph.D. students (yes, all of them women!). We really were a very good female team! In 2000, I met my husband Volker, a physician at the university clinics on Benjamin Franklin campus in Berlin.

¹email: landfest@mpip-mainz.mpg.de

After my habilitation in the summer of 2002, I applied for a professor position and was, in fact, already in early 2003 appointed as a full professor of Organic Chemistry (Macromolecular Chemistry and Organic Materials) at the University of Ulm. I first went to Stuttgart to the Ministry responsible for my University, where I negotiated my salary. After one hour, I had the heart to ask if they could help me find a job for my husband. My counterpart responded completely unexpected for me and said, “This is the first time I am asked this question. I think that is great!” I was amazed that in Germany nobody dared to ask this question. Encouraged by this statement I also brought up the subject in the negotiations with the President of the University. I even said that I would only sign the contract if my husband could find a job. Luckily, my husband got a position at the University Hospital of Ulm (even without any further help), so that I could sign my contract very soon.

The beginning was not as difficult as I had imagined at first. For the first year I was the only woman in the chemistry department, then another female professor joined so that the percentage of women had doubled. As a chemist I had quite a large group within a short time. The group consisted of 25 graduate students, 4 postdoctoral students, 5 master students, 5 technicians, and 2 secretaries.

In September 2006, our daughter Karolina was born. Of course this has changed our life (and especially my working life) significantly. Given my large group, I felt it was not possible for me to work temporarily part-time. A few weeks I worked from home and only did what was absolutely necessary. I answered emails, made phone calls and wrote reports. As Karolina was 10 days old, I received the first visitor, a Japanese professor, in the university, with whom I had a scientific conversation for one hour. After four weeks I was back regularly to work together with Karolina. From the beginning, I took her with me everywhere: to meetings, conferences, etc. At a launch event for new students, I gave the talk with Karolina together. The students were amazed. However, there was no problem at all. In my office, I installed a bed in which Karolina could sleep. In between, we went out for walks. At the first meeting with the President of the University, Karolina started screaming just after the meeting had started, she was obviously hungry. It was an important meeting, and I had to decide whether I leave now or breastfeed in public. After a moment of thinking, I chose the latter, which I did ever since, allowing me to take care of my child and my work.

Since I already had many industrial collaborations at this time, it was also necessary for me to go to the industrial representatives. When Karolina was 4 months old, I took her, for example, to London, where I was expected at the airport by a chauffeur. However, the driver obviously had not been instructed very well; he rather expected a gentleman in suit than a woman with a baby. He was very surprised when I asked him if it could be that he was waiting for me. Since name (Landfester) and origin (Ulm) were correct, there could not be any doubt. He was totally confused and just said, “I lost my mind”. The jaguar, which we drove, had certainly never seen a child seat (which I of course had

brought with me) in its car life.

Karolina and I were always a great team. For three hours of lectures (per week) of the winter semester at first my husband was able to take time off, for another two hours per week I hired a nanny. If everything failed, Karolina just came with me to the lecture. In the beginning, I took her in the stroller, then she was in a sling. If I was lucky, she slept immediately when I started the lecture, if not, she talked a bit and then fell asleep. But it did not bother anyone at any time. We went to conferences such as in Lisbon. Since I did not organize any support for Karolina, I took her in a sling on stage to give the lecture. When I began to talk, almost everybody took a picture. It was obviously very unusual!

When I was approached by the German Science Foundation if I could examine a Collaborative Research Centre, I said, yes, if they supported me with childcare, which they did.

In September 2007, at the age of one year, Karolina went into the nursery. In the beginning only in the morning, and later from 9 am to maximum 5 pm, before and after it was Karolina time. When I travelled and Karolina was no longer breastfed, my husband took care of Karolina. The weekend was (and still is) sacred family time!

In December 2007, I got a call from the Max Planck Institute for Polymer Research in Mainz for a director’s position. Again, I had to negotiate for my family, even though my husband found a job by himself. He has, however – and I have to give him credit for that – given up his permanent position in Ulm in order to follow me to Mainz. In September 2008, we started in Mainz. My group was bigger, the research broader.

In October 2009, our second daughter Isabella was born. Also as the director of a Max Planck Institute it is possible to harmoniously combine children and career. Just nine days after the birth of Isabella, I started to slowly return to work. As her older sister, Isabella went with me to all business appointments. With the second child, everything was more “normal”. In the German Science Foundation I had only to mention briefly that I needed child care for the Collaborative Research Centre evaluation. Already at an early age, Isabella was in many German cities, but also in Granada, Florida and Brazil. All trips were without any problems. Isabella started to go to the nursery, when she was nine months old. And when I went away with her (because she was still breastfed), I said at the daycare center: “Isabella goes again on a business trip”.

Today our children are 5 and 8 years old; in my office they have their own desk with many important items and sometimes they explain their dolls the world of “nanocapsules and nanoparticles”. When I go on business trips, the children stay in Mainz and go to school and kindergarten; my husband then takes care of the children. Only sometimes I take both children with me on trips; journeys by train are always an experience for both and they are looking forward very much to being able to test the toys in other daycare centers and Karolina is very proud to be responsible for her little sister. In this way, I always try to combine children and work. There is time for work and there is time for the kids when we play, laugh, make music, read books, and tin-

ker. During weekdays, from 5 to 8 pm is holy children time. I never work during the weekends. If the kids are asleep in the evening, my husband and I usually start to work again in a very comfortable atmosphere. And what happens when the kids are sick? They cannot go to daycare, of course. If they are not too sick, they come with me to the institute, otherwise I or, especially when I am on a business trip that I cannot easily cancel, my husband remain at home. Karolina and Isabella are very happy girls.

My credo is: The children must be fully integrated into our everyday life and not be separated. So we have found a way to combine career and family. And I am very thankful that my husband is a very responsible father. Certainly: it can

be exhausting, but the children are worth it.

I am aware that this is only one example. It always depends so much on the individual circumstances, so that there are only individual solutions which can be demonstrated. I can encourage any woman for a pathway to higher positions: First, it is more possible than one thinks, and secondly one has to look for unusual ways. Many times I have heard: “Oh, great that you do it like this, I did not think of these possibilities.” However, one must, in fact, also dare to go unusual ways. It is important to make very specific proposals, solutions can be found in many cases, but sometime the road is not an easy one.