



The Motherhood Penalty

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By [Gemma Alexander](https://stories.avvo.com/author/galexander) (<https://stories.avvo.com/author/galexander>)

Juggling a career and family is a fact of life for [73% of women with children](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/24/stay-at-home-moms-and-dads-account-for-about-one-in-five-u-s-parents/) (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/24/stay-at-home-moms-and-dads-account-for-about-one-in-five-u-s-parents/>). Working mothers make up the majority of female employees ([roughly half](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t01.htm) (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t01.htm>) of all U.S. workers). Women are still penalized in the workplace for having children. This “motherhood penalty” is not just a matter of perception, nor is it isolated incidents of discrimination. The bias against mothers in the workplace is systemic and it has a significant impact on the bottom line for working women.

Perceptions of Motherhood

The [Chicago Tribune](https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/success/tca-working-moms-still-face-biases-20190204-story.html) (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/success/tca-working-moms-still-face-biases-20190204-story.html>) reported that the majority of working parent survey respondents agree with the perceptions that:

- Fathers are more dedicated to their careers than mothers
- Fathers are better able to manage their responsibilities without being stretched
- Men manage working parent responsibilities better than women

Despite changing societal standards, working mothers are still responsible for the [majority of childcare](https://time.com/5589770/parenting-working-women-domestic-balance/) (<https://time.com/5589770/parenting-working-women-domestic-balance/>), which can result in more time off work for family responsibilities than fathers do. They have more measurable added [stress](https://www.workingmother.com/working-moms-two-are-officially-40-more-stressed-than-working-women-without-kids) (<https://www.workingmother.com/working-moms-two-are-officially-40-more-stressed-than-working-women-without-kids>) because of this added responsibility.

Respondents also said being a mother makes them better listeners, calmer in crises, more diplomatic, and better team players than other employees. Nearly half of women in the U.S. take less than two months of [maternity leave](https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2019/05/09/working-moms-motherhood-stress-parenting-good-mom-childcare-daycare-costs-maternity-leave-gender-gap/3586366002/) (<https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2019/05/09/working-moms-motherhood-stress-parenting-good-mom-childcare-daycare-costs-maternity-leave-gender-gap/3586366002/>), and nearly one in four say they return to work within two weeks of giving birth. Mothers tend to be more efficient and better multitaskers than other employees, too. More [women in](#)

leadership (<https://thinkprogress.org/companies-discover-more-women-means-more-money-88f6d4feebd7/>) positions correlate with a company's higher financial performance, and studies have even found that women with children are more engaged (<https://research.wsu.edu/2015/09/14/equity-for-women-in-the-workplace/>) with their work than men.

Real Consequences

Feeling judged could certainly contribute to working moms' stress, but the perceptions of them as overstretched and distracted also have very real consequences to their incomes and careers. Research shows that being a mother reduces the chance of a job offer by 37% (https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/511799?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents). When mothers are hired, they are paid 4% less (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/reversing-motherhood-penalty-amy-bohutinsky/>) with each child, while men's earnings increase as their families grow. Mothers are also more likely to stall in their careers, while childless women are 8.2 times more likely to be recommended for a promotion (<http://gap.hks.harvard.edu/getting-job-there-motherhood-penalty>).

Showing the Money

Overall, women are paid 80 cents (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/allthemoms/2019/06/10/wage-gap-widens-between-working-moms-and-dads-nwlc-moms-equal-pay-day/1344822001/>) for every dollar that men make. The motherhood penalty is amplified for most women of color. For every dollar paid to white fathers in 2017:

- Latina working moms: 46 cents
- Native American working moms: 48 cents
- Black working moms: 54 cents

On average, Latina women would have to work an additional 35.5 years to earn as much as a white, nonHispanic man earns in a 40-year career. The women with the largest pay gap are also those who are most likely (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2019/05/10/469739/breadwinning-mothers-continue-u-s-norm/>) to be single mothers or primary breadwinners for their families.

The loss of income is compounded by the increased cost of childcare (<https://www.care.com/c/stories/2423/how-much-does-child-care-cost/>). More than 40% of families spend more than 15% of household income on care, and 70% of families reported paying more than 10% of their income on childcare. In many cities, the cost of childcare is approaching the cost of housing (<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/childcare-housing-costs-parents>). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/09/30/2016-22986/child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf-program>) defines "affordable care" as no more than 7% of family income.

Correcting the Course

Several organizations are working towards closing the wage gap among men, single working women, and working mothers. Working mothers have added protections as well.

Women can file complaints (<https://www.eeoc.gov/employees/charge.cfm>) with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for discrimination, and they have the right to sue their (https://www.avvo.com/?utm_medium=sem&utm_source=google&utm_content=brand&network=g&device=c&matchtype=e&creative=190585681428&adposition=t1&k_clickid=7b7e0c1d-3225-47ea-9688-58edb51396a7&utm_campaign=brand&campaignid=737527139&adgroupid=38701760815&c3api=3040190585681428.avvo&gclid=Cj0KCQjw753rBRCVARIsANe3o47fy64vJAbuNz4I59Rcp0OP04B2FDpCIVjo0B6rrGz2Ulfm8Y02pAaAgx1EALw_wcB) employers.


The National Women's Law Center (<https://nwlc.org/issue/equal-pay-and-the-wage-gap/>) fights for gender justice, including closing the wage gap, through policy changes and in the courts. Moms Rising

(<https://www.momsrising.org/about>) is a popular movement working to end the wage gap and advocating for family-friendly public policy. Washington Senator Patty Murray (D) introduced the [Child Care For Working Families Act](#) (https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Child%20Care%20for%20Working%20Families%20Act_913_final.pdf), which would create a federal policy to provide high-quality affordable childcare to all parents.

Managers need to work harder to apply the same performance standards and offer equal opportunities to working mothers, fathers, and employees without children. Unconscious [bias training](#) (<http://gap.hks.harvard.edu/gender-bias-habit-breaking-intervention-led-increased-hiring-female-faculty-stemm-departments>) can not only improve your work, but it can also help you prevent [discrimination lawsuits](#) (<https://www.avvo.com/topics/discrimination-in-the-workplace>).

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Gemma Alexander is a Seattle-based freelance writer specializing in technical topics for general readers. She holds a degree in Horticulture and has worked in a genetics lab and at a landfill. See other things she has written [here](#). (<https://gemmadeealexander.wordpress.com/>)

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