

This Mother's Day, Moms Need Child Care, Paid Leave and Protections While Pregnant

By Amanda Novello

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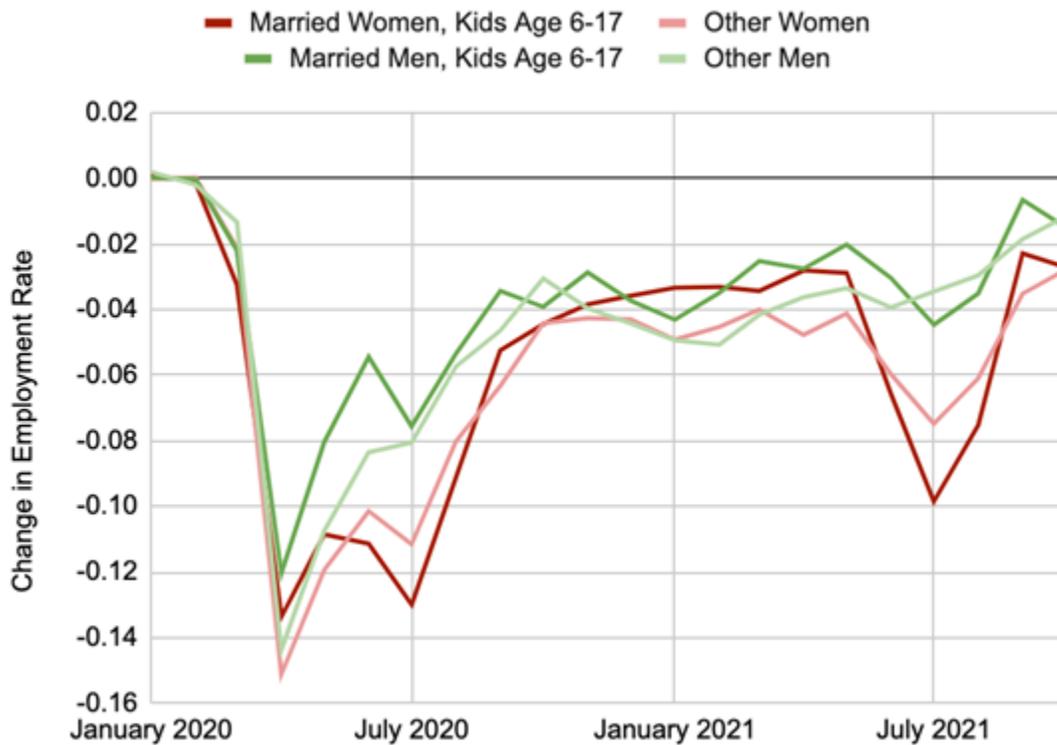
Introduction

When the pandemic hit and schools and child care centers closed, nursing and adult care facilities became unsafe, and people began falling ill, each family was left to figure things out on its own. For the most part, the increased burden of care fell on women, while women also bore the brunt of job losses in employment in sectors where they are most concentrated. This perfect storm — increased care responsibilities, paired with a labor market shedding jobs and dramatically reducing safety for frontline workers, a majority of whom are women — brewed up calamity for women at work. There are still one million fewer women working than before the pandemic.¹ Over the last year alone, the number of women not working due to family responsibilities increased by 67 percent—and is now nearly three times the number of men not working for this same reason.²

Mothers Have Fallen Farther Behind Without Support

Although all women are more likely to have home and care responsibilities than men, mothers have been particularly impacted by the pandemic economy. The ongoing lack of family support policies like paid family and medical leave and universal child care contribute to the inability of mothers to stay in their jobs. The “motherhood penalty,” a term reflecting the losses in earnings and employment to women due to childbirth, follows women throughout their career and into retirement. It is worse for women of color,³ and has only grown since the pandemic began.

Figure 1: Employment Rates Relative to Jan/Feb 2020, by Gender and Parenthood⁴



Source: Replicated data from Panel A, Figure 1. Hansen, B., Sabia, J., & Schaller, J. (2022, January).

By multiple measures, the gap between mothers’ and fathers’ labor market security has widened. Figure 1 shows that the gap between mothers and fathers of school-aged children has widened. And new data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that these rates have widened among parents of younger children as well — employment and workforce participation rates declined for women with children under age six in 2021, while those rates for fathers have edged up.⁵ More than three times as many mothers of young children had to stop working in the midst of pandemic child care disruptions than fathers.⁶ One study showed that fathers have rebounded twice as quickly as mothers, with only 41 percent — fewer than half — of mothers finding new work, compared with 78 percent of fathers.⁷

In terms of labor force participation, mothers with children under age 5 participate in the workforce at rates nearly 30 percentage points below that of fathers with children in that age range; seven percentage points below the participation rates of mothers with children age 18 or younger; and nearly 10 percentage points below that of all women aged 25-54. These gaps — in a mother’s ability to stay in the workforce, relative to her peers — were already stark in the beginning of 2020, but have only grown throughout

the pandemic (See Table 1).

Table 1: Difference in Labor Force Participation Rates - Mothers with Children under age 5 compared with other groups.

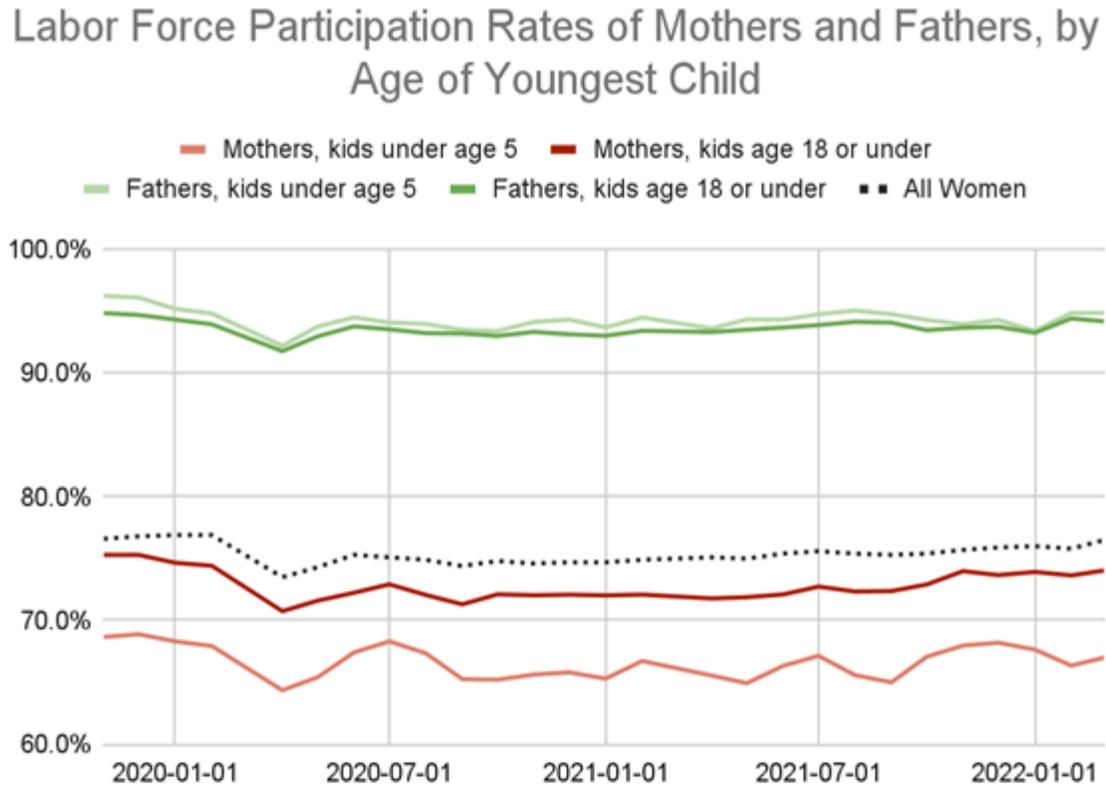
Difference in labor force participation rates of mothers with children under age 5 and:	February 2020	March 2022
Fathers with children under age 5	26.9	27.8
Mothers with children age 18 or under	6.5	7.0
All prime-age Women	9.0	9.5

Source: Author's analysis of the Current Population Survey. Note: All data are limited to prime-age adults ages 25-54.

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There is potential for massive gains not only for mothers, but also for businesses and the economy. Higher rates of women's labor force participation as we see in countries that have invested in family-support policies are associated with higher productivity and more economic growth.⁸ To imagine what it could be like for mothers if they had the support they needed, we estimate lost potential by comparing the rates of labor force participation of mothers with young children to those of women overall. If all mothers with children under age 5 were able to participate in the labor force at rates comparable to all women,⁹ there would have been **1.39 million more mothers in the workforce in 2020**, and **1.44 million more mothers in the workforce in 2021**.¹⁰ Growing the labor force by 1.44 million workers would in turn have grown the economy by more than **\$170 billion dollars** in 2021.¹¹

Figure 2: Labor force participation rates of mothers and fathers, by age of youngest child, compared with all women



Source: Author’s analysis of the Current Population Survey. Note: All data are limited to prime-age adults ages 25-54.

How Policy Can Expand Mothers’ Opportunities and Reduce Inequity

Policies like expanded affordable child care, paid family leave, and accommodations for pregnant people at work could allow millions of mothers to remain in or reenter the labor force, while balancing home and work lives.

Child Care

A lack of child care can make it difficult or impossible for mothers to maintain employment. Even before the pandemic, nearly two out of three parents reported having a difficult time finding and affording child care.¹² In one recent survey, one in four unemployed women said they were out of work due to a lack of childcare, and those who reported reducing work hours due to unmet child care needs were more

likely to be Black than other racial demographics.¹³ A large portion of mothers who would otherwise want to be employed report that child care is a major reason why they have not looked for work.¹⁴ Lack of child care poses steeper barriers for Black and Latina mothers than for white mothers due to a combination of prohibitive costs and low wages, and because Black and Latinx families are more likely than white families to live in child care deserts.^{15 16}

The numbers: If the 25 percent of mothers who say they cannot work due to child care were instead able to look for work, that could bring nearly **2.5 million mothers** into the labor force so they no longer need to choose between caregiving and a paycheck.

Child care responsibilities land disproportionately on mothers *with* jobs, too. For women who have kept their jobs but also have seen increased child care responsibilities, there are record levels of reported burnout, and reported burnout is rising faster for women than for men. In one survey, 40 percent of mothers report feeling consistently exhausted compared with 32 percent of fathers.¹⁷ Burnout can lead to myriad poor outcomes that both affect women individually and collectively hurt the economy.

Paid Leave

Paid leave would increase workforce attachment and reduce gender pay gaps for mothers.¹⁸ Only 23 percent of private sector workers¹⁹ — and just 12 percent of lower income workers,²⁰ disproportionately women of color²¹ — have paid family leave. Without it, welcoming a child into one's family likely means being out of work for several months, missing paychecks, and having to seek employment after a big gap in work history. All of these considerations, intertwined with the impacts of discrimination²² and sexism, translate to economic penalties for mothers. If a new mother instead had paid family leave and could keep their job, they would not have to face the negative bias in hiring²³ and lowered wages that new mothers are too often offered.^{24 25}

The numbers: One recent report estimated that implementing paid family leave increases maternal labor force participation by six percentage points in the year after birth —which would bring the current participation rate of 66 percent (for mothers with very young children) up to 72 percent. That means paid family leave could add **890,000 mothers to the labor force**, alleviating the financial penalty of motherhood for their families, each year.

Giving birth is not the only care responsibility mothers face. Mothers may need time to care for their own health, not only to recover from childbirth, but also if they experience

a serious illness or injury, or need to manage a chronic illness or other disability. The millions of women who provide care for both children and other aging or disabled family members need paid leave to ensure they do not have to choose between having a paycheck and fulfilling those needs. Paid leave provides that balance. Research shows that when paid leave is implemented, up to 14 percent of adult caregivers would be able to keep their jobs or enter the labor force.²⁶ A national paid leave policy would translate to six million more caregivers in the labor force.²⁷

Pregnant Worker Protections

Every worker deserves to be able to protect their health and wellbeing at work, including pregnant workers. Unfortunately, federal law does not reflect that, and many pregnant workers face health and safety risks, lack of basic accommodations and discrimination that can put their job and livelihood at risk, as well as the health of their baby. This is especially the case for the one in five pregnant workers who work in low-paying jobs and who are disproportionately Black and Latina workers.²⁸ These same workers are those who are more likely exposed to work conditions in which they have to do physically demanding work—e.g. home and health care, retail and food service—that may pose challenges and even health risks during pregnancy.

Legislation like the federal Pregnant Workers Fairness Act should require workplaces to provide reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers, such as sitting instead of standing or being able to carry a water bottle. Research on state-level pregnancy accommodation laws shows that states with similar protections enable pregnant workers to keep their jobs, increase work hours, and earn higher wages.²⁹

Supporting Moms is Good for Business

Workers are quitting their jobs at record numbers each month,³⁰ including moms. In a recent survey, one in three mothers reported they are considering leaving their jobs or the workforce entirely, and cite child care as a primary reason.³¹ While many big corporations are turning record profits by increasing prices and driving inflation,³² others are struggling to fill jobs and offer competitive benefits needed to attract and retain workers as job openings rise. The cost of turnover for companies, between searching for new employees, onboarding and training, is notoriously high, with estimates ranging from 33 percent to 200 percent of a worker's salary.³³ A pro-mom agenda could mitigate the cost of turnover by ensuring all businesses can meet the needs of their workers, and those same policies could help level the playing field for small businesses that are less able to provide them. Given that women represent a majority of frontline workers,³⁴ including in occupations and industries experiencing staffing shortages, implementing policies that help women and mothers manage work

and home life would solve many intersecting issues at once, all while growing the economy by billions of dollars each year.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, seasonally adjusted employment levels, women age 16+, series LNS12000002. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS12000002>

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022). A-38. *Persons not in the labor force by desire and availability for work, age, and sex*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea38.pdf>.

³ Kashen, J. & Milli, J. (2021, October). *The Build Back Better Plan Would Reduce the Motherhood Penalty*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from The Century Foundation website: <https://tcf.org/content/report/build-back-better-plan-reduce-motherhood-penalty/>

⁴ Panel A, Figure 1. Hansen, B., Sabia, J., & Schaller, J. (2022, January). *Schools, Job Flexibility, And Married Women's Labor Supply: Evidence From The Covid-19 Pandemic*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper. Retrieved 10 May 2022, from: https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w29660/w29660.pdf

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022). *Employment Characteristics of Families News Release*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.htm>

⁶ 26 percent of mothers compared with 8 percent of fathers. See Tucker, J. & Vogtman, J. (2022). *Resilient But Not Recovered: After Two Years Of The Covid-19 Crisis, Women Are Still Struggling*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from National Women's Law Center website: <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/FINAL-NWLC-Resilient-But-Not-Recovered-3.29.22.pdf>

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Novello, A. (2021). *The Cost of Inaction: How a Lack of Family Care Policies Burdens the U.S. Economy and Families*. National Partnership for Women & Families publication. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from National Partnership for Women & Families website: <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/other/cost-of-inaction-lack-of-family-care-burdens-families.pdf>

⁹ 76.5% compared with 67% for mothers with kids under age 5, in March 2022. All data reflect rates for prime-age individuals, from author's analysis of the Current Population Survey.

¹⁰ Author's calculations based on annual labor force participation levels and rates of mothers with kids under age 5 from BLS CPS, compared with annual labor force participation of prime-age women from BLS CPS. See Table 5 for mothers labor force participation rates, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.htm>, and series LNS11300062 for prime-age rates.

¹¹ Author's calculations using CBO's Budget and Economic Outlook estimates for GDP and labor productivity.

¹² Pew Research Center (2015, December). *Parenting in America: Child care and education: quality, availability and parental involvement*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from Pew Research website: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/4-child-care-and-education-quality-availability-and-parental-involvement/>

¹³ Modestino, A. S., et al. (2021, April). *Childcare is a Business Issue*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from Harvard Business Review website: <https://hbr.org/2021/04/childcare-is-a-business-issue>

¹⁴ Kent, A. & Evans, S. (2022, February). *Child Care Remains Central to an Equitable Recovery*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis website: <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2022/feb/child-care-remains-central-equitable-recovery>

¹⁵ Malik, R. et al. (2020, June). *The Coronavirus Will Make Child Care Deserts Worse and Exacerbate Inequality*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from Center for American Progress website: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/coronavirus-will-make-child-care-deserts-worse-exacerbate-inequality/>

¹⁶ Text box citations: The 25 percent is an estimate of the percent of mothers who report not looking for work due to lack of child care, based on Federal Reserves' analysis of Current Population Survey data. This happens to align with the Harvard Business Review survey. See note 13 and note 14. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2022/feb/child-care-remains-central-equitable-recovery>; Notes: There were approximately 34.4 million mothers with children age 18 or younger in 2021. The labor force participation rate for this group was 71.2 percent according to new BLS data (See note 4). That means 28.8 percent, or 9.9 million mothers were not in the labor force. If 25% of those not in the labor force were able to reenter the labor force, that amounts to 2.47 million mothers.

¹⁷ McKinsey & Company (2021). *Women In the Workplace 2021*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from McKinsey website: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>

¹⁸ National Partnership for Women & Families. (2021, March). *Paid Leave Will Help Close the Gender Wage Gap*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from National Partnership for Women & Families website: <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/fair-pay/paid-leave-will-help-close-gender-wage-gap.pdf>

¹⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, September). *Employee Benefits In The United States – March 2021*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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- ²¹ National Women’s Law Center. (2020). *WHEN HARD WORK IS NOT ENOUGH: Women in Low-Paid Jobs*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Women-in-Low-Paid-Jobs-report_ES_pp01.pdf
- ²² Correll, S., Bernard, S., & Paik, I. (2007). *Getting A Job: Is there a motherhood penalty?* Retrieved 3 May 2022, from Harvard Kennedy School website: <https://gap.hks.harvard.edu/getting-job-there-motherhood-penalty>
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ American Association of University Women. *The Motherhood Penalty*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: <https://www.aauw.org/issues/equity/motherhood/>
- ²⁵ Text box citations: Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2020, January). *Paid Family Leave Increases Mothers’ Labor Market Attachment*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/esme/paid-family-leave-increases-mothers-labor-market-attachment/>; Notes: There were roughly 9.7 million mothers with kids under age 6 in 2021, and their labor force participation rate was 65.6%, according to new BLS data (See note 4). If it were six points higher, it would translate to 890,000 more mothers being in the labor force.
- ²⁶ Saad-Lessler, J. & Bahn, K. (2017, September). *The Importance of Paid Leave for Caregivers*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from Center for American Progress website: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/importance-paid-leave-caregivers>
- ²⁷ Novello, A. (2021, November). *Paid Leave Could Keep More Than 6 Million Caregivers Connected to the Labor Force by 2030*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from National Partnership for Women & Families website: <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/paid-leave/paid-leave-caregivers-connected-2030.pdf>
- ²⁸ Harwood, M. & Heydemann, S. D. (2019, August). *By the Numbers: Where Do Pregnant Women Work?* Retrieved 3 May 2022, from National Women’s Law Center website: <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Pregnant-Workers-by-the-Numbers-v3-1.pdf>
- ²⁹ Shinall, J. B. (2020, February). *Protecting Pregnancy*. Cornell Law Review, Vol. 106, 2020. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3543711
- ³⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, May). *Economic News Release, Table 4. Quits levels and rates by industry and region, seasonally adjusted*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.t04.htm>
- ³¹ See note 18.
- ³² Daniel, W. (2022, March 31). U.S. companies post their biggest profit growth in decades by jacking up prices during the pandemic. *Fortune*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from <https://fortune.com/2022/03/31/us-companies-record-profits-2021-price-hikes-inflation/>
- ³³ Hall, J. (2019). The Cost Of Turnover Can Kill Your Business And Make Things Less Fun. *Forbes*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2019/05/09/the-cost-of-turnover-can-kill-your-business-and-make-things-less-fun/?sh=6179f0d07943>; and Enrich. The Cost of Replacing an Employee and the Role of Financial Wellness [Blog post]. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from <https://www.enrich.org/blog/The-true-cost-of-employee-turnover-financial-wellness-enrich>
- ³⁴ TIME’S UP. *Women on the Front Lines at Work*. Retrieved 3 May 2022, from <https://timesupfoundation.org/work/women-on-the-front-lines/women-on-the-front-lines-at-work/>

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality, affordable health care and policies that help all people meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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