

The Motherhood Penalty—Alive and “Well” or on Its Way Out?

By Alise Henry

Share this:

The worries of a working mother are plentiful. Usually, such concerns run the gamut between whether our children are safe, healthy, and happy to whether a heretofore unannounced school project awaits our “assistance” when we get home. Add to this list, the little discussed “wage gap”—not between men and women—but between working mothers and women without children, commonly referred to as the “motherhood penalty.”

While the gender wage gap continues to narrow (albeit far too slowly for most women), a recent study by the Washington Center for Equitable Growth has concluded that the motherhood penalty has remained virtually unchanged over almost 30 years, and particularly so among high wage earners. While gains among women in education and experience has helped to close the wage gap for all women, the “motherhood penalty” persists with mothers of three or more children making 18 percent less than childless women, and mothers of one to two children making 13-14 percent less.

The studies’ findings support the suspicions of many-- that women in the workplace often suffer great consequences for taking leave, as opposed to their counterparts. As one in-house counsel recently explained at the Southeastern Women in Financial Securities Spring Conference, her salary has never caught up from a maternity leave taken years ago because her prorated bonus that year became the baseline from which subsequent bonuses were based. As future bonuses are based as a percentage increase from year to year, it has become impossible for her to catch up with her peers.

And it is not just salary and bonuses that are often affected; project assignments, lucrative clients, travel opportunities and promotions are often sacrificed by employees (more often women) who take leaves of absence from work due to births, adoption, or to care for a family member.

More than ever, however, employers are realizing that there are costs to a workplace that penalizes mothers and caregivers: lower productivity, lost talent, and resulting claims of discrimination. Indeed, beyond the bottom line, everyone wants a society where our children, elderly and sick are well-provided for by a loving caregiver, without women having to sidelines their careers.

So how do we satisfy the demands of work, home, and society while eliminating the motherhood gap? Though perhaps counterintuitive, a recent Bloomberg article, [“Tackling the ‘Motherhood Penalty?’ Start with Benefits,”](#) by Genevieve Douglas, suggests providing

comprehensive maternity leave in the workplace as one way to reduce the motherhood penalty.

Douglas' article quotes findings by the National Bureau of Economic Research "that fully paid maternity leave benefits don't increase maternity leave duration, and paid family leave benefits didn't have any adverse consequences on subsequent maternal labor market outcomes." In fact, the research showed that a generous maternity leave benefit leads more women to stay in the workforce compared with no leave benefit.

Many law firms are using other benefits to help women balance family and work, such as gender-neutral parental leave. While equal policies for parents in the workplace help employers avoid gender discrimination, challenges still lie in integrating different types of benefits like bonding benefits, disability leave for childbirth, and state law requirements. In addition, a challenge still lies in having employees of both sexes view gender neutral policies as a positive benefit. For example, a male associate at one major law firm with a gender-neutral leave policy was astonished to learn when he took leave for the birth of his child that he was the first male at the firm to take advantage of the policy. Hopefully, as these policies become more common place, the "motherhood penalty" will be a worry of the past.

Alise Henry is with Bresslery, Amery & Ross , Florham Park, FL.