

Childcare Access and Women in the Workforce

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Childcare is essential to healthy functioning family dynamics, in whatever form it may take. Some families rely more heavily than others on daycare centers or relatives to watch their children while they go to work and provide for their families. In fact, in the United States, families spend an average of 8% and 19.3% of median family income per child in paid care (Grundy 2024). With the high price of childcare in the United States, some families find themselves better off to have one parent providing income and the other staying at home to take care of the homestead. Historically, the term breadwinner can be described when one partner shoulders the primary responsibility for paid labor, which in heterosexual couples often tends to be men, while the other partner takes primary responsibility for unpaid domestic labor, tends to be women in a heterosexual couple (Coyle et al. 2023). With this being the case, there are many opportunities for women's involvement in the workforce that are not being utilized due to the outrageous prices of childcare in the United States. There are cases in which the blatant divide between female and male norms have been present, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Women that can afford childcare are at a much higher advantage to those that cannot in improving their own lives and maintaining financial freedom. In fact, lower-income mothers are more likely to be depressed than higher-income mothers (28% versus 17%, respectively) (Smith and Mazure 2021). This correlation is not coincidental, as mothers that have the freedom to afford support have the freedom to take charge of their lives in a way that others cannot, improving their mental health and overall wellbeing. In Germany, there is evidence that subsidized childcare has proven to be effective, where maternal employment rates were recorded as being higher after subsidized childcare became available for families. Expanding access to free childcare increases women's participation in the workforce by reducing the economic and social barriers that disproportionately limit mother's employment.

Historical Roles and Structural Constraints on Women's Employment

The relationship between women and the workforce has shifted numerous times throughout history. Before and during World War II, most women's primary role was tending to their home and their children. This dynamic can be summed up as, "most women controlled and managed the private (home) space, while men easily navigated the public space" (Santana 2016). However, World War II was a turning point in traditional norms of families, as women were needed for the wartime effort. The shift in women's employment was intense, as Nancy Gabin writes, "in 1939, there were an estimated 3,130 female production workers in the transportation equipment and automobile industries; in November 1943 there were 777,400 women in these industries, an increase of nearly 25,000 per cent" (Gabin 1979). Women partaking in industries that they had never before was something that sparked a sense of independence and freedom that was unheard of at the time. After the war ended, women desired to keep their roles in the industry, but were met with barriers that encouraged them to retreat back to the private space of the household and raise children. Women who sought to keep their jobs were met with discrimination that took the form of layoffs of women workers, inequitable hiring practices, discriminatory pay scales, transfers by management, hostility and harassment from other employees (Gabin 1979). These practices continued, despite women filing grievances to unions and sticking up for themselves in the workplace.

The barriers women faced to keep employment continued further than the employer, but also took the form of governmental policy. In Sharon Hays' *Flat Broke with Children*, she shares that, "According to Congress, the family edicts of welfare reform are specifically designed to 1. Reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, 2. Promote marriage as a route off welfare, and 3. Allow children to be "cared for at home" (Hays 2004, p.64). With these policy goals in mind, there was

no consideration or even thought of women entering the workforce or having financial independence. In fact, women were encouraged to do the opposite, they were encouraged to marry and spend the duration of their lives in the private space raising their children and taking care of the homestead.

In the Post-War period, there has been a significant shift in women's employment participation, from 37 percent in 1960 to a peak of 61 percent in 1997 (Albanesi 2025). There has been more of a priority of women's education in the post-war era. Currently in the United States, 47% of women ages 25-34 have a bachelor's degree, compared to 37% of men (Hurst 2024). The shift in the priorities of women from focused on the homestead to focusing on career goals is not consistent with the stereotypical treatment of women. According to the most recent data, women make 95 cents for every dollar a man makes on average (Fry and Aragão 2025). Societally women are treated as having less experience and less education than men and are still looked to as the parent that is responsible for childcare, even though the data on bachelors degree holders shows that this is absolutely not the case. The urgency of women to make their presence known in the workforce grows momentum every day, therefore the need for childcare is something that is being reevaluated as well in current society.

Although there have been significant increases in the labor force participation from women in recent years, the amount of women in the workforce versus men is still fewer. In fact, women are three times more likely to work part time than men (OECD 2018). Due to the barriers in childcare, women are less likely to maintain full time employment than men. In 2017, it was recorded that "the typical gross childcare fee paid by the parents for two children (aged 2 and 3) enrolled in full-time ECEC settings is around 27% of the average wage" (OECD 2018). Paying over one fourth of the family's yearly income in childcare is excessive and it does not promote

dual parental income in households. When childcare is low-cost and state-subsidized, there is a visible increase in maternal employment.

OECD Countries and Childcare Policies

To see some of the successes of universal childcare, it is important to look at the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries, including thirty-eight countries that collaborate on economic and social policies. Some countries put more of an emphasis on childcare than others, however on average, “OECD countries spend 0.39% of their GDP on publicly provided childcare services, with the countries ranging from no spending to spending up to 2% from 1990 to 2010” (Adrangi and Jeszenszki 2024). In Hungary, the investment in universal childcare is not strong, therefore the government earns back about 31 percent of what they invest into the programs (Hufkens et al. 2019). Belgium’s government earns back about 165 percent of what they invest in universal childcare programs (Hufkens et al. 2019). With this data, it can be concluded that the more a country invests in childcare, the more they may earn back through women employment and taxes and potentially less families needing welfare and social support.

Case Study: Germany’s Childcare Expansion and Policy Impact

Germany is a unique case to follow when looking at maternal employment. The complicated history of the country divides Germany into two regions, the West and the East. In Eastern Germany, the maternal employment rate surpasses that of Western Germany, and this can be explained by the access to subsidized childcare (Zoch and Hondralis 2017). The differences in childcare support come from the differences in governmental functions in the divide between regions. After reunification of the country, the same patterns persisted. “In 2014, 52 per cent of

under 3-year-olds in East Germany attended a childcare institution, compared to 27 per cent in West Germany, where a childcare availability of more than 20 per cent became accessible only after 2009” (Zoch and Hondralis 2017). The gap between regions is clearly prevalent and policy is one of the main divisions creating this gap.

Results from the Zoch and Hondralis 2017 study, comparing maternal return to work rates for women in West Germany prove just how substantial subsidized childcare can be for families. With the expansion of low-cost, state-subsidized childcare access for children under the age of three, there is a decreased employment interruption for working mothers (Zoch and Hondralis 2017). Additionally, their findings suggest that “ increased availability of low-cost, state-subsidized childcare plays a significant role in supporting mothers’ returns to substantial employment (again only statistically significant for West German mothers), whereas the effect of childcare availability on returns to marginal employment remains unaltered” (Zoch and Hondralis 2017). These results are conclusive and show that subsidized childcare has a significant impact on maternal employment. East Germany has had strong subsidized childcare policies in place before reunification of the countries, therefore the shift in West Germany is important.

Case Study: Covid-19 and the Collapse of Childcare Access

The Covid-19 pandemic was an interesting and unique time culturally, as society worked to figure out how to preserve public health and everyday lives of individuals. Most non-essential workers stayed home instead of commuting to their workplace, and children remained at home from school. The gender expectations and norms were tested during the Covid-19 pandemic, as families sought to figure out how to run their household, pay their bills, and educate and/or take

care of their children while the world outside seemingly came to a halting stop. The concept of the traditional breadwinner, caregiver division of labor became apparent during the pandemic. The concept of the traditional breadwinner became apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. In heterosexual couples, the male was noted to take more responsibility for the income for the family where the female was seen to take more of a caregiver role for the children and the homestead. This division of labor puts perspective on the aspect of childcare in the lives of current family traditions. Who does the burden fall on when childcare and in-person schooling is no longer an option?

In the study “Families in Quarantine” (Coyle et al. 2023) examined the familial roles played during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Here, it was found that mothers experienced significant increases in work-family conflict, particularly with home responsibilities interfering with work. Mothers also took on the majority of the burden of at-home education for their children, which was noted to have connection to the increased work-family conflict (Coyle et al. 2023). The Covid-19 Pandemic is a unique time to look at, as the world came to a halt, forcing families to stay home for their health and wellness. In this scenario, it is interesting to study the roles that mothers fell into, as all members of the family were home, versus a classic stay-at-home mother scenario wherein the mother knows the duties expected of her as her husband is the breadwinner of the family. Continuing with the results from the study, it is also important to note that daughters took on a more significant role in chores and sibling care than sons, a gap that widened throughout the pandemic (Coyle et al. 2023). Gender stereotyping that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic is harmful to the progress that women have made in the workplace. Teaching young girls that it is their responsibility over their brothers to take care of younger siblings or help their mother is reinstating harmful ideology. Instead, imagine young girls looking towards

their mothers as role models of strong leadership, working hard for career goals, and making the workplace a priority. These concepts are more in line with healthy ideology that will continue the progression of women in the workplace.

Conclusion

It is important to look at the success stories seen around the world in the improvement of mother's lives when subsidized childcare becomes available to families. In Germany, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that subsidized childcare policies make a significant difference in the lives of medium skilled mothers, meaning that the middle class of society is positively impacted the most in terms of part-time employment and overall participation in the workforce (Müller and Wrohlich 2020). The role women play in society has been debated, argued and changed over time. During the Covid-19 pandemic gender stereotypes became apparent in families, where husbands weren't the ones to take responsibility for the education and needs of their children. In times of dire economic stress, mothers are the ones that take the brunt of the impact. To be a woman is to break barriers in a society that did not plan or light the way for you to exist on your own. Women have fought for generations for their right to participate in the workforce, as well as proven time and time again that they will not give up in being seen as individuals, apart from husbands, fathers, and male relatives. Individuality flourishes when a person can take control of their own lives, in the way of passion, financial freedom, or being a strong role model to new generations. It is urgent now more than ever to expand access to free childcare, as it is proven to increase women's participation in the workforce by reducing the economic and social barriers that disproportionately affect women.

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