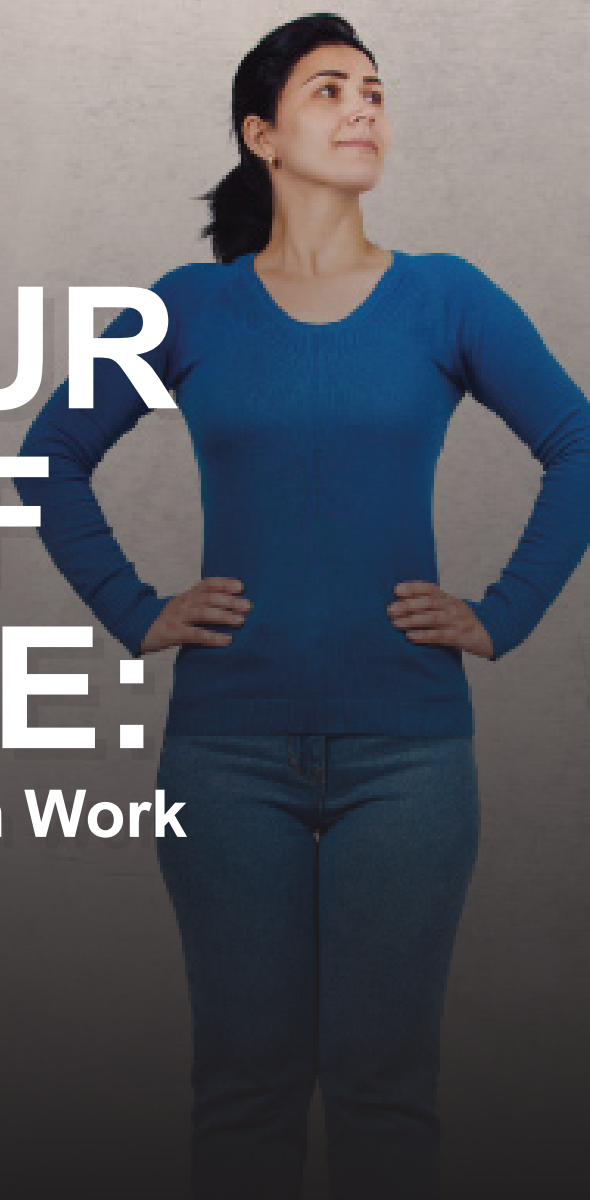




HAILING OUR HEROES OF CHILD CARE:

The Women Who Help Women Work



In March 2019, 2,000 moms working for Amazon claimed that the short supply of child care stopped talented women from progressing in their careers. The Momazonians, as they called themselves, were “tired of seeing colleagues quit because they couldn’t find child care.” They mounted a campaign demanding a backup child care option for when their primary child care arrangement fell through.¹ Their demands fell on deaf ears until the retail behemoth faced a singular tsunami of orders from customers cooped up at home. “We’ve heard from our employees that access to affordable family care, for both children and adults, is particularly challenging during the COVID crisis,” said Beth Galetti, Amazon’s senior VP for HR, so “we are committed to support them in this unprecedented time.”²

Her words signaled a change in tone for a company whose workers have carped at it for being tight with benefits and pay. This June, the company announced plans to subsidize 10 days of child care for all its U.S. workers. Employees are now able to access child care at a center for \$25 a day or in-home care for a child at \$5 an hour, Amazon said in a blog on its site. “Our daily lives have changed in unexpected ways as a result of COVID-19,” the blog explained. “With the closure of

schools and summer camps, and the loss of some child care and adult care options, we know it’s challenging to balance home and work.”³

THE TIPPING POINT OF A LONG-TERM CRISIS

It’s especially hard because early childhood care and education doesn’t get meaningful public investment. As a result, child care providers function like small businesses that rely on revenue from fees and robust program enrollment. When the virus forced centers and family child care providers to close, the early childhood sector suffered a crushing blow. Providers operate on slim margins with few cash reserves, and the losses they’re enduring have pushed many to the brink of collapse. Across the country, our educators have been laid off en masse without health care benefits or wages.⁴ More than 90 percent of the country’s 1.2 million child care workers are women, and the loss of the services they provide has brought our country’s child care crisis to a tipping point.⁵ Women in every field are now feeling the effects.

Way before the pandemic struck, the shortage of safe, affordable care and education stopped many women from holding jobs. Over the past 20 years, the rising cost of this vital service has led to a 13 percent drop in the number of mothers who work.⁶ Traditionally, we have celebrated moms who sacrifice for those they love and put their children’s needs above their own. But this vision is at war with today’s demanding workplace. “An ideal worker in the U.S. economy means being fully dedicated and committed with your undivided attention—

that you can come in at a moment's notice, that you don't have anything that distracts," said Caitlyn Collins, a sociology professor at Washington University. "This doesn't work if you have kids."⁷ And it's clear from the data that U.S. women have long felt daunting stress as they strive to meet competing demands:

- In 1975, more than half of mothers stayed home with their children. Today both parents work in 70 percent of families with children.
- Dads are taking on more parenting duties than ever, but moms still carry a heavier load in more than half of households, even when both parents work full time.
- Nearly half of grandparents live more than five hours from their grandkids.
- In 2016, moms spent around 25 hours a week on paid work, up from nine hours in 1965. At the same time, they spent 14 hours a week on child care, up from 10 hours a week in 1965.
- Social media is pervasive, and mothers who compare themselves to others online feel more depressed and less positive about their co-parenting relationships.⁸

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families to Capitol Hill. For the past few years, they've strolled to Congress and issued a thunderous call: make policies that give young children a strong start in life, including paid maternity leave and quality, affordable child care and education.

In meetings with their senators and reps, they have shared their stories and urged lawmakers to act on behalf of our youngest children and their parents.⁹

"When I was working," a Missouri mom recalled at the event, and "felt like I had no other choice, it

was daunting and depressing. At the same time, I know parents who stay home to raise kids who talk about the sacrifices of giving up a career, but also feel their hands are tied. Options for spending more time with newborns and better choices for quality, affordable child care are so important in helping families thrive."¹⁰

But it's beyond the means of many parents, a North Carolina mother pointed out. And she had a broad perspective since she was both a preschool professional and a parent. "As director of an early childhood program," she said, "I can speak first hand to the struggle associated with providing high-quality early care and education programs while balancing what parents can reasonably afford to pay. As a mother of two, I can speak to the fact that if I did not receive discounted tuition at my center, I would not be able to afford child care costs and would be forced to stay home with my children. As a result, our family would not have affordable access to health care and our children would not benefit from the social and educational benefits they receive in a group setting."¹¹

LAWMAKERS HEAR THE THUNDER

Putting perceptions aside, the reality is that mothers need more resources and support. And some of them have spoken out at Strolling Thunder, an annual rally that brings a storm of babies, toddlers and

Sadly, moms have to make wrenching choices because of the skyrocketing costs of early childhood care and education. The average cost of full-time, center-based care is just under \$1,000 a month and can run upward of \$20,000 per year in some states.¹² That's more than many families spend on food, rent and higher education. Public programs meant to help families find and afford high-quality early care and education are often disconnected from one another, so families find themselves navigating between complex bureaucratic systems to find a spot in an early childhood care and education setting.¹³

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF UNMET DEMAND

The challenge of finding reliable, quality child care falls mainly on women, and the burden is heaviest for women of color. Hispanic mothers are more than twice as likely as white or black mothers to have trouble finding child care because Hispanic families are also more likely to live in child care deserts, neighborhoods with more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots. African-American mothers are more likely to have trouble finding affordable child care because the average annual cost of center-based care amounts to 42 percent of the median income in African-American households. And the lack of access to care prevents women of color from taking steps to improve their family's economic health.¹⁴

In most cases, moms would look for more demanding work or ask for more hours at work if they had better access to child care. And getting it would make an even greater impact on women of color. More than half of African-American mothers and 48 percent of

Hispanic mothers would look for better paying jobs if child care was within their limited means. The combined effects of gender and race discrimination mean that women of color receive extremely low wages, so they face an especially tough choice that translates into needed dollars and cents.¹⁵

A PENALTY THAT PERSISTS

But whatever the color of their skin or the country where they live, women bear most of the weight of providing care, and they pay a price in the workplace. It's a persistent fact across the globe that women earn less than men. This is true in the United States, where women earn 79 percent of what men do. It is true in Japan, where women earn 73 percent of what men do. And it's true in Denmark, which has a 20 percent wage gap between the genders. Explanations for the difference range from the perception that women can't perform as well as men, the kind of education they receive or the types of fields they pursue.¹⁶

But these long-term drivers of the gender wage gap are declining. Women now outnumber men at U.S. colleges and universities. They're entering professions like medicine and law that used to be male strongholds while more men are going into fields, such as nursing and dental hygiene, that were long dominated by women. The one thing that isn't changing is the impact of having children, according to Henrik Kleven, a professor of economics and public policy at Princeton. The "child penalty," as he points out, is stubborn and it shows no sign of disappearing.¹⁷ For many moms, the choice between working or staying home to take care of the children comes down to a simple

equation: Can I make more than I spend on child care? And sometimes the math just doesn't add up.

Thirty-eight percent of millennials, for example, say their primary source of child care is one parent who stays home or works part time.¹⁸ Yet deciding to reduce your hours, even on a temporary basis, has long-term consequences for earnings and careers. The steep price of child care and education indirectly costs U.S. parents \$35 billion a year.¹⁹ And the pandemic has made that figure mount as unemployment spikes and many child care settings close their doors. Some moms now have no choice but to stay home as they lose a vital service on which they have relied.

THE PANDEMIC PUTS NEW PRESSURES ON MOMS

In recent years, about a third of U.S. children under five attended a day care or preschool. Now the coronavirus has upended this arrangement in many cases. Sixty percent of parents have had no outside help caring for their children during the pandemic, and we could lose up to 4.5 million child care slots if educators can't weather the shutdown.²⁰ While some centers continue to serve essential workers, many have already shuttered their doors. For example, Bright Horizons, one of the country's largest providers, closed more than half of its centers in mid-March. KinderCare, which once operated over 1,300 centers across the nation, now lists only about 400 that are still open. As a result, many of the 1.5 million people employed in the child care sector have seen their jobs disappear, and those losses have led to tremendous heartbreak. One Philadelphia provider

described laying off her hundred workers as "the worst day of my life."²¹

Business reverses like these are also leading to some rough days for moms who can work remotely. The closing of child care centers pushed care work back into the home as paid work moved there, too. Conferences on Zoom have shown some women scrambling to meet deadlines and children's needs, prepare meals while being productive on the job. And moms tried to make light of their double-duty routines when a joke circulated on Twitter: Tell us something that your kid did, but substitute "my co-worker" for their job. In response, one mom wrote, "#My co-worker just pooped on the floor ... don't worry though! My other co-worker ate it."²²

But jokes aside, young children make it difficult for moms to focus. "You've got to be able to check in on them and still be able to do your job. It's a lot," one mother sighed. "It's so nice to see my kids all day long. It's lovely, but also frustrating," another mom said. "It makes it very difficult for women. We're supposed to be working at home and taking care of children. You really can't do two jobs at once," another moaned. And the mother of a four-month-old had been particularly distraught since her son had discovered he could scream. "It's been tough, especially in the last three weeks," she groaned. "The baby is just figuring out that his voice can get louder. He screams and squeals just because he can."²³

She, like many moms, is bearing most of the weight of child care during the pandemic. Although men have nearly tripled the amount of time they spend on child care since 1965, imbalances persist in the invisible work of parenting. Women often shoulder the planning, organizing and remembering of essential household tasks. "We've been socialized for 200 years for women to take

this load on without even talking about it,” said Stephanie Coontz, a historian of family studies. The pandemic “is really going to bring this to the fore more starkly than in the past because now there is so much more planning that has to be done.” And the mental load that comes with that work has mounted steeply in recent months.²⁴

Women also face an added burden because the pandemic is making greater inroads on their jobs than on those of men. Women have accounted for 55 percent of job losses during the pandemic though they previously

made up less than half of the workforce. And many have suffered a one-two punch of no job and no child care.²⁵ This will make it more difficult to return to work and may lead many moms to stay home for good because they can’t find a job that will cover the cost of care. “If child care becomes extremely difficult to find, we’re really going to see the impact on moms’ employment,” said Katie Hamm, VP of early childhood policy at Center for American Progress. “I worry that we’ll see a big decline in mothers’ labor force participation, and that will impact the economy as a whole.”²⁶



THE COLOR OF CARE

Working mothers tend to be employed in fields on which we all depend, and they do tasks that can't be performed at home. They are most likely to work in elementary and secondary education, within hospital settings and food service.

These are the jobs that affect the prospects of America's future workforce, protect the health and well-being of communities and help other workers be productive by taking on

essential work that would otherwise have to be done at home: preparing food, caring for ill or injured people and educating children. Yet the median wages these women earn don't come close to covering the cost of child care at a licensed center.²⁷

Consider, for example, that the food service sector—where Hispanic moms are extremely common—only pays about \$15,000 a year. This means that the cost of child care, which averages a whopping \$1,000 a month, would consume over two-thirds of their wages.²⁸ Like many women of color, they tend to hold the jobs that are least likely to be unionized and provide benefits, offer the lowest pay and least predictable hours. They also face roadblocks that reflect broader social trends. Less than one in five African-American workers and roughly one in six Hispanic workers are able to work from home.²⁹ That makes social distancing hard, especially for women working with young children, who need to be diapered, dressed and hugged.

While women of color represent only 20 percent of the U.S. population, they make up about 40 percent of the country's 1.5 million

“It’s so nice to see my kids all day long. It’s lovely, but also frustrating,” another mom said.

child care workers. And the pandemic has exaggerated the hardships they suffer. In 2018, the average pay for those employed in child care centers amounted to \$11.17 per hour, barely a living wage. Nearly 15 percent of child care workers live below the poverty line, more than double the rate of other industries, and 85 percent don't have health

insurance. Right now, the women who spend their days teaching and caring for other people's children often can't pay for care to ensure the development and well-being of their own.³⁰

Yet these child care workers play a vital role as we strive for victory over the virus. Child care is not optional for essential workers, so we need to invest more in the educators who elect to care for children of first responders, health care workers, grocery store clerks and other essential personnel. These child care providers are putting their families' health and their own at risk by supporting us through this pandemic. As politicians and pundits rightfully praise essential workers, they should also hail the country's committed child care workers.³¹

A RINGING CALL FOR RESPONSIBLE CLOSURES

Our educators are genuine heroes whose contributions are too often forgotten—but not by the Council for Professional Recognition, the international nonprofit that oversees the Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential. In March, the Council called for responsible closures and funding of early childhood centers severely disrupted by the virus. “We advocate for financial assistance

for early childhood educators and child care workers who are losing their income due to program closures,” the Council pleaded in a ringing statement. “K-12 teachers are rightfully still receiving their paychecks during school closures, and we call on governments and employers to do all they can to support early childhood education in a similar way. This should apply to all early educators, whether they are in center-based, family child care or home visiting settings.”³²

The Council pointed out that early childhood educators are in a high-touch field that puts them at high risk for infection. Over the past few months, this has led many but not all states to mandate closings of early childhood centers and programs. In other cases, economic pressures have simply led centers to fold and release their workforce. Reopening these facilities won’t be easy. While many out-of-work child care workers would jump at the chance to resume their jobs, they often won’t be in a position to return. Forty-three states closed public schools for the rest of this school year and may not resume in-person classes in the fall—which means that early educators who work while their children go to school may not be able to come back.³³

ON-TIME PACKAGES OR A PUBLIC GOOD?

Still others may not want to come back. In some cases, it could be because laid-off child care workers prefer the safer course of collecting unemployment and other benefits, rather than risk their health at their former jobs. In other cases, these early educators may be employed elsewhere. Amazon has 100,000 job openings with a minimum starting pay of \$17 per hour.³⁴ Many child care

workers have pursued their field because they find it fulfilling, but in this moment they may prefer the security and compensation offered at a place like Amazon. Since the start of the pandemic, the retail giant has hired 170,000 workers and expects 125,000 of them to stay on for good.³⁵

Many of them are women, and the company’s recent investment in child care may be the sign of a silver lining in the current health care crisis. There’s a chance that employers like Amazon are going to be more flexible, offer work more from home than they used to and perhaps be more aware that mothers need child care. The reality of working while parenting is now much more apparent. Yet employers can’t solve the nation’s child care crisis alone, and a few days of backup child care won’t meet the needs of moms who must arrange and pay for full-time care all year long.

The stresses they face aren’t new, but the pandemic has put a spotlight on the problem. The lack of public investment in child care means that moms struggle to find the high-quality options they need each day. Working women of color confront especially high roadblocks to accessing child care, and their economic security suffers as a result. It is long past time to implement policies that recognize early care and education as a public good and make it affordable for all. We also need to support the largely female workforce that provides it. If we don’t, there could be forced unemployment as the economy reopens. American homes may get their Amazon packages on time, but American women may not get the childhood services they need to resume their jobs. The issues raised at Strolling Thunder have now converged with COVID-19 to heighten the child care crisis. Together, they’ve produced a perfect storm for working moms.

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