

The toll of parenting on the American woman's workweek^[1]

Though they pick up more hours than ever, mothers' proportion in the workforce has stalled, finds a new report from the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Author: Holder, Sarah

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EXCERPTS

More women than ever are serving as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, though still far fewer women than men reach this level. American women are being paid more in general, but still less than men. And according to new research, they're also working more hours—again, however, fewer than men—and they are starting to outnumber men in part-time work. These disparities are even more pronounced when the women are mothers and the men are fathers, and they're persistent, according to a report released by the Institute for Women's Policy Research last week.

"The role of the father still is to 'bring in the bacon,' and make money," said Ariane Hegewisch, one of the authors of IWPR's report. "The role of the mother is to work for pay but to [also] have the main care responsibilities." It sounds like a sexist trope, but after analyzing the U.S. Current Population Survey through 2017 for workers ages 25 to 64, IWPR found that for the average worker, it's true: Fathers work more hours than other men, and mothers work fewer hours than other women.

That's not to discount the fact that women across the board have started working a whole lot more than they used to. In the last 40 years, women have picked up five more weeks of full-time work a year, while men are only working one more full-time week than before. For parents, the difference is greater over the same period: Mothers have worked 300 more paid hours a year since 1977, while fathers' annual paid hours fell by 8 hours. Black mothers work the most paid hours of all mothers—on average, "104 hours more than Hispanic mothers, 89 hours more than White mothers, and 52 hours more than Asian mothers," according to the report—as did white fathers, out of all fathers.

Marital status matters, too. Labor patterns for single mothers have gotten closer than ever to those of married mothers, but the average single mother still spends 3 percent more time working in a paid job each year. However, this isn't true for black mothers, who on average work more when married than single. (Notably, the researchers didn't have a way to take non-married but partnered women into account.)

The more things change for mothers, however, the more they stay the same. In 2000, more mothers than ever were participating in the labor market, and their effort bolstered the economy significantly. But after the early 2000s, that growth stagnated. And the "traditional" gender breakdown within the home persist: Women still do the majority of the home care and childcare work as compared to men.

In other countries, it's common to see mothers working longer hours than fathers, Hegewisch says, especially when paid and unpaid work hours are combined. In the U.S., "families just cannot do more," she said, without similar access to affordable childcare, paid family leave, or longer school days. If a family is raising a child in the U.S., "there is a limit of how much time they can put into the labor market," Hegewisch said. That means even as mothers work more, fathers can't afford to work less.

When both parents are working full-time and coming up against these limits, Hegewisch says it's women who typically suffer professionally: "Because of globalization coupled with the internet and the fact you can work anywhere, anytime, the pressure to work long hours"—or to be present in the office for long hours—"has really increased in professional jobs. ... It's very hard to have two people doing those jobs." The one who gets to do them is typically the man.

That's also part of the reason why American women—especially those in their "prime working years" from 25 to 64—are so over-represented in part-time work, which is often more precarious, lower-paid, and includes fewer benefits than full-time work. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than three-quarters of men and women working part-time do so voluntarily, but IWPR argues that "their reasons for working part-time work may nevertheless reflect economic constraints," as a third of women who reported working fewer hours cited child-care issues and personal obligations as reasons for doing so. Of the workers that did report working part-time involuntarily, women make up half; the rate of involuntary part-time work for black and Hispanic women is more than double the rate for white women.

Some of the fixes for these dynamics seem self-evident: More paid family leave, stronger protections for part-time workers, a deemphasis on overwork, fairer scheduling practices, and limits on overtime.

But the nature of work is changing, Hegewisch says. Though the technological advancements introduced by AI threaten to make some kinds of jobs obsolete, especially those that disproportionately employ women, technology could also narrow these gender inequities, if harnessed correctly. “[We could use] the productivity that’s generated through new technology in a way to give people more time off,” she said. “And that for women makes it less penalizing to work, and it allows men to do more care.”

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