

Mothers are the 'Shock Absorbers' of our society ^[1]

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Source: New York Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Oct 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Dharushana Muthulingam was on maternity leave with her second child when the pandemic began. In April, she returned to her full-time job as an infectious disease physician and public health researcher at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. Muthulingam, 38, was working remotely with a team reviewing Covid results, figuring out if people needed retests, and guiding the hospital about how to take virus precautions.

She was working six to seven days a week, she said, including night-time calls, sometimes with her kids awake beside her. Muthulingam and her husband, a research scientist, had moved far from family in California and Idaho to work in St. Louis, and her father had a heart attack this year. Her husband's job is less flexible than hers is for the first time in their relationship, and after he had taken on the extra domestic load for many years when her job was more intense, something had to give.

So Muthulingam made the difficult and painful decision to step back from her research position and go part-time as a physician — despite the fact that doing so may set back her academic career. And because she's a public health researcher, that's not just a personal loss, it's an obvious loss to society.

"My decision keeps me up at night," she said. She knows that she can come back to this important work later, but right now her well-being and humanity are stretched too thin. "I have a lot of optimal circumstances," she said, "A successful career trajectory, an A-plus feminist husband who tries to step up and do 50-percent plus, and I have a workplace that's supportive. But at the end of the day that's not enough."

Many married mothers are finding themselves in the same untenable position Muthulingam did: making decisions that are sensible for their families in the near-term, but are also emotionally devastating and have long-lasting consequences. Women already accounted for the majority of jobs lost during the early days of pandemic. And every month since June, "there's been a pronounced slowing of job growth and labor participation for married women," according to Michael Madowitz, an economist at the Center for American Progress.

Overall, four times more women than men dropped out of the labor force in September, so the situation for single women isn't looking so hot, either. "Three women dropped out for every woman who got a job," Madowitz said.

Though we can't be sure that what's going on is entirely because of parental status, both economists I spoke to thought the dire situation for women was related to remote learning and the lack of child care availability.

"The drop in female labor-force participation was quite dismal and not surprising with the return back to school not happening," said Betsey Stevenson, a professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan, as most of the biggest school districts are fully remote, and even many hybrid models provide a paucity of in-person learning. There is past evidence that during times of employment uncertainty, heterosexual couples fall back into traditional gender roles, according to Jessica Calarco, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University.

Because of the outrageous expense of child care in the United States, even before the pandemic, "women with young kids in many cases pay to work," said Stevenson, which is to say, they're paying more for care and other work-related expenses than they're making in salary. But this is usually a decision that makes sense for the long haul, because there is ample evidence that mothers are financially penalized for taking time out of the work force, and child care costs go down when children enter school.

Without school, the calculation implodes. If you can even get child care, the high expenses continue, and during this pandemic, there is more housework to be done and more child-related tasks to complete. (For example, I spent at least 15 minutes last week trying to log into Seesaw — a string of words that would not have even made sense to me before March 2020.) Because men tend to outearn women, it is economically the more rational decision for some proportion of mothers to leave their jobs.

But that does not mean they're happy about it, or that it's good for marriages or long-term financial security. "Sacrificing market skills to help your family comes at a really big cost," said Stevenson. "And potentially causes tensions in marriages, and when you put those two together, a generation of women may be pretty badly scarred by Covid."

Calarco has been conducting a survey of over 100 Indiana mothers as part of the Pandemic Parenting Study since April, and she found that

almost 40 percent of her respondents are reporting increases in pandemic-related frustrations with their partners, and child care is a major source of strife. Rather than ask their spouses to step up their domestic contributions, “mothers blame themselves for these conflicts and feel responsible for reducing them, including by leaving the work force, beginning use of antidepressants, or ignoring their own concerns about Covid-19,” Calarco and her co-authors noted in a pre-print of a new paper using data from their study.

As Muthulingam put it, women are the “shock absorbers of our system, and the poorer and more precarious you are, the more shock you’re expected to absorb.” She recognizes how lucky she is to even be able to cut down on work — something single mothers, like Jamie Brody, 38, of Boynton Beach, Fla., cannot do.

Brody has a 3-year-old daughter, and she lost her job as an account executive for an insurance company in May, which she described as “quite traumatic.” When she was unemployed and without consistent child care, she would spend all day teaching and playing with her kid. Then after she put her daughter to bed, Brody estimated that she spent three to five hours each night scouring job sites looking for work.

She finally found a job selling data visualization software, which she started two weeks ago, and Brody’s daughter is back in preschool, which makes her feel anxious. “I feel like I’m choosing between health and financial security,” she said. That’s a choice that no parent should have to make.

Region: United States ^[3]

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