

The motherhood penalty: How childcare and paternity leave can reduce the gender pay gap ^[1]

Some studies have shown the 'motherhood penalty' makes up 80% of the gender pay gap.

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Excerpted from article

- Studies have shown the 'motherhood penalty' makes up 80% of the gender pay gap.
- Joeli Brearley, founder of the Pregnant Then Screwed campaign, is the author of *The Motherhood Penalty: How to stop motherhood being the kiss of death for your career*.
- Here she explains how COVID-19 impacted mothers, and how paternity leave and childcare could help to reduce the motherhood penalty.

When Joeli Brearley was four months' pregnant, she was brushing her teeth one morning and missed a call from her company.

Two days before, she'd told her employer she was pregnant. The unexpected voicemail Brearley later picked up was from her female CEO saying her services were no longer required.

A routine doctor's appointment then found Brearley was having a high-risk pregnancy - which forced her to abandon any attempt to challenge the discrimination by taking her employer to a tribunal.

"The doctor said, 'Whatever you do, don't get stressed because it's stress that will trigger early labour and if you go into labour now the baby will die'.

"Within the space of two weeks, I found myself going from really happy to suddenly no job prospects, no income, completely reliant on my partner to pay my rent and bills."

The experience "ate away" at her for 18 months until she channelled her anger into the now global campaign, Pregnant Then Screwed to help other women, and a book, *The Motherhood Penalty: How to stop motherhood being the kiss of death for your career*.

In this edited interview, Brearley explains what needs to change to enable mothers to have fulfilling careers - and what companies can do to support them and reduce the gender gap.

What is 'the motherhood penalty' and how is it connected to the gender pay gap?

It's a term coined by sociologists describing the systematic disadvantage that women encounter in the workplace when they become mothers, in terms of pay, perceived competence and benefits compared to other workers. For me, it is the gender pay gap - some studies have shown the motherhood penalty makes up 80% of the gender pay gap. And it really is about all of these barriers that women headbutt when they try to have children and a career. There really isn't a huge gender pay gap for women in their 20s and below, and you start to see the gender pay gap widening from the age of about 30 to 33. It really takes a jump and increases from there. Just because we dared to have a baby.

This situation isn't unique to the UK, and you've since extended the campaign globally. What experiences are other women having?

No country is immune. Even the countries that we see as the Nirvana - Sweden, Norway, Denmark - still have instances of pregnancy and maternity discrimination. We have spent centuries in the Western world in particular seeing women as mothers. If you have children, your primary role is to be a mother. There are these deeply entrenched biases towards women - from the point they get pregnant, they're seen as distracted and uncommitted to their jobs.

Discrimination can be as extreme as my scenario where you get sacked. But it can also be demotions, bullying and harassment, it can be about flexible working arrangements, just being cast aside and ignored. In countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway, we do see women that experience bullying and harassment, or their career stalls, they immediately hit that glass ceiling. In other countries, it's more severe. In America, women don't automatically get maternity leave: one in four women in America return to work 10 days after giving birth. Many women feel they have to leave their jobs, so they're forced out in a way. In all of these countries, the stories are devastating, and they strip women of their confidence, of their economic empowerment and that should be something that we're all very worried about.

How does maternity and pregnancy discrimination impact women's mental health?

Mental health is a really big issue - and we now know that stress is really bad for a growing baby. Premature birth is very common in women that experience stress and, of course, being pushed out of your job or experiencing bullying and harassment can really take its toll on the mental health of women and therefore the successful development of a baby. Anecdotally, we see lots of women that experienced pregnancy discrimination ending up with postnatal depression. I certainly did, as well as lots of the women that I speak to. During the pandemic, we've seen a huge uptick in the number of pregnant women and mothers requesting mental health support. In fact, it's increased by 40% between 2019 and 2021.

Women end up taking on more housework and childcare, the 'domestic load'. What needs to change?

Women do almost three times the care work of men, they do 60% more of the unpaid labour and that's obviously devastating for their careers. Many of us are working full-time, more than three-quarters of mothers work. So you have a situation where we're going to work, doing all of this paid work, and then coming back and doing unpaid work as well. Many women request to work flexibly, and part-time. And that means you get lower pay, it means you're half as likely to be promoted than if you're working full-time. So it all interlinks - all of the domestic labour we're doing is a big part of the motherhood penalty.

In countries like Sweden, where they have better paternity leave and dads are taking more time out in those early days to care for their children, we see that women do less of the unpaid labour. So there are ways we can fix this, it's a system problem. In the UK, for nearly all families, it's women that take maternity leave, while dads will have a maximum of two weeks off. Women end up being the main carer, then they go back to work and they're still the ones doing the majority of the housework, the pick-ups and knowing how to get the baby back to sleep. But all of this unpaid work has massive benefits for the economy. Without it, men wouldn't be able to go to work, we wouldn't have industries.

We saw in Iceland, when 90% of women went on strike over this in the 1970s, it showed men there is value in this work, they cannot do their jobs without it. That was the big shift for Iceland in terms of gender equality. I'm not saying we all need to go on strike, I'm saying unpaid work has economic value and should be respected and valued by the government. The only way I think we will ensure dads spend more time with their kids is by ring-fencing and properly paying paternity leave.

So, it's just societal structures that don't allow dads to participate more?

That's exactly it. Research shows 80% of dads said they'd do anything to spend more time with their children. In Quebec, Canada, they ring-fenced properly paid paternity leave a number of years ago, and the uptake from men compared to the rest of Canada went through the roof. And this has so many benefits for society. There was one study by a university that showed that if dads spend more time with kids in those early days, couples are 40% more likely to stay together. But also kids do better in the education system and mothers have higher rates of wellbeing. And there was a study in Sweden that found that for every month of paternity leave taken by dads and mothers, wages rise by 7%. It has an enormous impact on the motherhood penalty.

What impact did COVID-19 have on mothers?

The number of calls we were getting quadrupled almost overnight. Pregnant women were terrified for their safety and they didn't know what their legal rights were. A lot of our calls were from pregnant women saying, 'I work in a supermarket, I'm interacting with people all the time, and I don't feel safe'. For mothers, there were huge amounts of redundancies in the first wave of the pandemic, because employees were scared, they felt they needed to reduce their expenditure so that they could survive. We were seeing mass redundancies of women on maternity leave and pregnant women. We know that when a business is facing cuts, the first people out are pregnant women and mothers. You were 47% more likely to be made redundant if you were a mother, according to data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies.

What we've seen since then, is a big skills gap in the UK, many of those mothers who lost their jobs have found new jobs. But what that data doesn't show us is whether they have had to take a pay cut. And the key issue was that as the schools and childcare facilities closed you had all of this extra unpaid work that mothers were doing. PricewaterhouseCoopers said it added 31 hours of unpaid work onto women's working week. And for every hour of uninterrupted paid work done by mothers, fathers were doing three hours of uninterrupted paid work. So mothers were hoovering up all of this extra unpaid work. Many were saying, 'I need to be furloughed', which of course reduced their income, or they got made redundant.

It really impacted their mental health, because many were trying to do everything and at the same time, that pandemic was affecting everybody's mental health. We're still seeing the impact of that now - mothers haven't really fully recovered and many employers have not got their heads around this. They haven't necessarily put programmes in place or considered the fact that many women are traumatized from what they experienced behind their closed doors over the past few years.

How crucial is affordable childcare to reducing the motherhood penalty?

We have all of these brilliant, skilled women, and we're not enabling them to use those skills effectively enough to contribute to the economy because of the way the system works. The biggest barrier for women is childcare. In the UK, we have the most expensive childcare as a proportion of a mother's earnings in the OECD. Our research with 27,000 parents found that two-thirds pay the same or more for their childcare as they do on rent or their mortgage. And that results in one in four families saying they're either skipping meals or foregoing heating and fuel in order to pay for childcare. But it's also really inaccessible because the government isn't funding it properly. So nurseries are closing their doors. One in five parents told us that their local childcare provider has closed in the past 12 months. And 41% of parents said there is at least a six-month waiting list at the local childcare provider.

Parents cannot work without childcare, it's social infrastructure. We know that investing in childcare is an investment in the economy. PricewaterhouseCooper found that for every dollar you invest in childcare, you get at least \$2 back into the wider economy. Other countries seem to be getting the memo on this. America has just done its Families Plan, which is looking at creating a really affordable childcare system, Canada has just committed to invest in their childcare system. Governments don't do things to be nice, they've done it because they've crunched the numbers and it makes sense for the economy.

We have 870,000 stay-at-home mothers in the UK who want to work but can't purely because of the cost of childcare. It's so good for the economy, it contributes billions and billions of pounds, if we can give women the tools that they need to be able to work. And we know that pretty much all mothers want to work, they just in many cases, can't afford to.

What is Sweden getting right with childcare?

Sweden bases their childcare system on what is good for the child. They think every child deserves to have access to really good-quality childcare, so they've built the system around that. And that means they have to make it affordable for every family, because otherwise every child can't access it. Childcare workers are really highly valued in Sweden, and paid way more than the average wage. In the UK, one in 10 childcare workers live in poverty. It's a really hard job and the whole system is breaking, because you've got a disenfranchised workforce. Sweden and other countries invest in it properly and they reap the benefits long-term because it reduces the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest children if they have quality care and education from the outset. We know that this plays out in the education system throughout the rest of their lives.

What can companies do to tackle the motherhood penalty and gender pay gap?

Childcare is an open goal that employers don't seem to be filling at the moment. We've got this massive skills gap, you've got all these brilliant women that desperately want to work. If you find a solution to the childcare issues they're facing, you will see your recruitment go through the roof. Patagonia in the US created on-site childcare for their employees, and increased retention rates of parents. They say it pays for itself. But also what's quite magical is you create a community within your employees, because their children are playing together. It's a really good bonding experience for employees.

Second thing you should do is advertize your jobs as flexible and be very specific about what you mean by flexibility. Say, 'You can work three days a week, do a job share' and you will see an increase in the number of women applying for your job go through the roof. Zurich Insurance did this.

Third thing you should do: pay maternity leave properly and encourage dads to take paternity leave. Dads often state they are put off from taking paternity leave by their employees, so encourage them to take time out to care for their children. Set up women's groups, allow women within your organization to discuss what's working and what's not, because lobbying as a group is so much more powerful - and there are women in organizations that will be too scared to speak up. Give them a direct line of communication to the top and also the resources they need.

Presenteeism is a massive issue, particularly in UK workplaces. We work the longest hours in Europe and many employees say they have to sit at their desk for really long hours to look like they're working in order to be promoted. I would suggest implementing what the PepsiCo CEO Robbert Rietbroek did, which was the leave loudly approach. He encouraged his senior executives to leave on time and make a big song and dance about it, so it trickles down to other employees. Presenteeism is really bad for productivity and really bad for mental health, so you've got to nip it in the bud and that's a really good way of doing it.

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