

The wage penalty for becoming a mother is the same now as it was in 1977 ^[1]

Author: Covert, Bryce

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EXCERPTS

The motherhood penalty, or the gap in wages between women with children and those without, was about the same in 2007 as it was in 1977, even though the gender wage gap narrowed in that time, according to new research from Ipshita Pal and Jane Waldfogel for Columbia University.

They found that while the gap nearly disappeared by 1997, that doesn't hold true when "demographic and human capital characteristics" are taken into account, most importantly whether women who face high wage penalties just opt to leave their jobs. When those are factored in, women with children have earned about 5 to 6 percent less than childless women pretty consistently, with the same gap in 1977 as in 2007.

The gap is smaller when part-time work is taken into account, but it still remains constant over the years. Controlling for what job or industry women choose also helps explain some of the gap, but again it still stays stable.

The researchers note that they can't uncover whether discrimination helps cause the gap, nor can they look at work experience, job tenure, or how hard women work. But they do posit that one cause of the gap may be the fact that "policies to help mothers reconcile work and family have been surprisingly rigid in the U.S. over the past few decades." They point to research showing that the motherhood penalty is smaller in countries with better policies, as well as the fact that paid family leave has been shown to boost women's wages enough to offset the motherhood penalty, but the Family and Medical Leave Act, which only guarantees unpaid maternity leave, doesn't have that effect. "[T]he lack of strong work-family policies could explain to a large extent why the motherhood penalty has remained relatively stable in the U.S. over time," they write.

Indeed, over the past 20 years, the U.S. failed to implement guaranteed paid family leave, while virtually every other country in the world has paid maternity leave. Other countries also significantly ramped up how much they spent on child care, from .35 percent of GDP to .47 percent on average, while the U.S. went from .03 percent to just .11. While the country nearly had universal child care in the 1970s, the bill was vetoed by President Nixon and the issue hasn't gotten much legislative traction since.

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