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Being on call for teenagers is the missing piece in the gender pay gap debate

The “child penalty” phenomenon describes how women’s working hours and income change after they have a baby. This knowledge has helped drive government support for parents of pre-school children. However, a mother’s work continues beyond their children’s early years. Almudena Sevilla shows that even once the hands-on childcare years have passed, mothers spend twice as much time as fathers “on call”, providing supervision and support to their teenagers.

The persistent reduction in women’s paid work and earnings after having a child, **known as the child penalty**, remains one of the most stubborn and impactful barriers to achieving true gender equality. This penalty is not merely a short-term effect but stretches across nearly two decades of a child’s upbringing. In most developed countries, mothers continue to work significantly fewer hours than fathers after childbirth, with women’s employment rates and average hours both dropping noticeably and not recovering even as children grow more independent.

The result is a lasting wage gap and diminished career prospects for half the population. Every time a highly skilled woman steps out of the workforce or works below her potential because of these caregiving demands, society loses out: valuable talent is left on the sidelines, and this misallocation comes at a high cost to overall productivity and economic growth.

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Why does this gap persist so stubbornly? The answer lies in the kinds of care mothers provide. While direct, hands-on childcare such as feeding, bathing and helping with homework drops sharply

as children move past early childhood, mothers are still called upon, day after day, to provide supervision, emotional support and simply to “be available” at unpredictable moments.

This on-call care remains high, with mothers spending about twice as much time as fathers in these roles throughout their children’s lives, from infancy right up to the teenage years. Even as kids gain independence, the need for a parent—usually the mother—to be present does not fade, and this ongoing responsibility is what continues to push down mothers’ paid work hours long after the need for direct care has diminished.

My colleagues and I researched the issue and found that the motherhood penalty in paid work hours is almost fully explained by these two kinds of parental care: primary (direct) and on-call (supervision and availability). In the early years of a child’s life, most of the penalty stems from the intensive hands-on caregiving roles, but as children grow older, the burden shifts rapidly to on-call care.

By the children’s adolescence, more than half of the work penalty is explained by mothers’ continued need to be present and available, not by direct caregiving. Across childhood and into the teen years, mothers consistently spend far more time than fathers in both forms of care, and the paid work gap between men and women reflects this difference.

Solutions

Addressing this long-term penalty requires new solutions, and policy options fall into two broad categories. First, the government can play an active role by directly providing care infrastructure, such as universal after-school programs, youth clubs, and extended day services. When care is publicly available, mothers are less likely to be constrained by the need for on-call supervision, freeing them to participate more fully in the workforce. Countries with robust public provisioning of supervised care, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, have smaller gender gaps in maternal employment and a more level playing field for parents throughout childhood.

Second, care can be left for families to provide themselves. Here, the challenge is even greater: household norms typically assign the burden of supervision and emotional support to mothers, even when formal workplace flexibility is increased. Policies that make work more flexible, such as remote or hybrid working, may help mothers reconcile family and professional life, but on their own they risk reinforcing rather than breaking old patterns unless intentionally designed to encourage a more equal sharing of care. If both parents use flexible work policies but only mothers take the opportunity to care for children, existing gender gaps will persist.

To make family-provided care truly equitable, policies must directly target gender norms and expectations. Possible approaches include non-transferable parental leave for fathers, financial incentives for equal uptake of leave and caregiving, public campaigns to shift attitudes and

expectations and company-level rules requiring evidence of equal use of flexible options by both male and female parents. For example, workplaces could report not only how many employees take flexible options, but also how many men, not just women, use that flexibility specifically for childcare.

Ultimately, both government and family strategies should be carefully designed so that support for mothers does not come at the expense of the deeper goal: ensuring that fathers are equally involved in all forms of care, so that gender gaps in work and care responsibilities finally begin to close.

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- This blog post is based on *A New Model of Parental Time Investments: A Paradigm Shift for Addressing Gender Inequality in the Labor Market*, Discussion Paper CEPDP2126. LSE's Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), by Pilar Cuevas-Ruiz, Jose Ignacio Gimenez-Nadal, Sveva Manfredi and Almudena Sevilla.
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