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### **Mum's the Word: Are mothers choosing to give up their careers or being booted out of the labor force?**

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*Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism*

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**Mum's the Word: Are mothers choosing to give up their careers or being booted out of the labor force?**

Updated: 2 days ago

By Harini Chakrapani

May 20, 2021

Jennifer Anderson, a mom from Merrillville, Ind., reached breaking point when she had to juggle her 10-year-old son's virtual learning and her job as an administrative assistant at the Ascension Lutheran Christian School. So, last June, she quit her job: a scenario unthinkable to her before the pandemic.

Farida Mercedes, a mother of four from Fair Lawn, N.J., never wanted to be a stay-at-home parent. Yet, last August, this was the role she fell into after resigning from her job as the assistant vice president of human resources at L'Oréal cosmetics while dealing with maternal guilt and overwhelming work stress.

For Meg Brannon, an education specialist from Arlington, Va., giving up her career at the onset of the pandemic to care for her children was a no-brainer. Her husband makes more than twice her annual \$90,000 salary.

Since the pandemic began, Shelly Wigginton, a single mom from Akron, Ohio, has been thinking about quitting her job. As the assistant manager at a Burger King, she works 60 hours a week, yet is paid less than the proposed \$15 minimum wage and cannot afford daycare.

While women overall are making strides in the labor force a year into the pandemic with their unemployment levels even [lower](#) than men's, working mothers are struggling.

The share of mothers with jobs has declined at nearly double the rates for fathers. Mothers' participation in the labor force has also plummeted. Over 2.3 million women [left the labor force](#) -- meaning that they were no longer working or looking for work -- from February to December 2020. Men had 1.8 million dropouts for the same period.

"There's a narrative that basically expects women to quit; they are always flight risks," said Pamela Stone, a professor of sociology at Hunter College in New York and author of "[Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home](#)," and its sequel "[Opting Back In: What Really Happens When Mothers Go Back to Work](#)." "This is a part of the larger motherhood penalty."

For many mothers quitting their careers hasn't been a choice but a forced exit brought on by a lack of flexible hours and affordable child care; a widening gender wage gap; and traditional gender roles that push mothers to give up their professional dreams and stay home to take care of their kids and households.

"What we're seeing now isn't new; there were already cracks in the system," said Elise Gould, a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington think tank. "There are already racial and gender disparities in employment, in wages, in occupations."

As the economy gains momentum with the injection of stimulus cash and Covid-19 vaccinations, mothers are returning to work and slowly catching up to the number of working fathers. But the hurdles mothers face remain daunting. What happens next may depend on whether the historic expansion in child care help proposed by President Biden becomes law and whether corporations are willing to be more flexible toward their female employees.

“As everybody understands these were not voluntary exits,” said Stone. “I’m hoping that as companies bring workers back in a fair and non-discriminatory way they won't fall into the old assumption: she's not committed, she'll only quit anyway.”

### ***1. Women outnumbered men in the workforce just before the pandemic.***

In December, 2019, women [held more jobs](#) than men for the first time in more than a decade.

Then the pandemic upended women’s hard-won victory when the [female-dominated](#), contact-intensive leisure and hospitality industries shuttered to curb the spread of the coronavirus, shedding jobs. From February to December last year, women lost 5.4 million jobs -- a million more than men, according to a [report](#) by the National Women’s Law Center. Even as schools resumed in September, with some offering hybrid learning modes, women left the labor force [at four times the rate for men](#).

By December, however, women had made gains as their unemployment rate dropped from its peak of [16.1% in April](#), nearly one and a half times the rate for men, to [6.7%, the same rate as men](#).

“Women were hit harder by the pandemic than men but the unemployment was driven by the rise in furloughs,” wrote Tim Lee, a professor of economics at Queen Mary University of London, based on his [analysis](#) of the U.S. Labor Department’s data. Furloughs are temporary reductions in force with either reduced or no pay; employers give the furloughed employees a return date to work.

The economy is recovering, but the gender gaps in employment remain and are more pronounced among parents, while considering the rates at which they are participating in the workforce.

Among women 25 to 54, mothers had the highest drop in participation -- nearly three times the rate for fathers by the end of last year --- from the pre-pandemic period in February, according to the Federal Bank of San Francisco’s [report](#).

Women without children left the labor force at the same rate as fathers, slightly less than men without children.

“Survey evidence points to a large shift toward mothers’ being the sole provider of child care since May,” wrote Nicolas Petrosky-Nadeau, an economist who was a co-author of the report.

## ***2. The pandemic signaled that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers.***

Jennifer Anderson, the mom from Merrillville, Ind., reached her breaking point last summer when she had to juggle her 10-year-old son’s virtual learning with her part-time role as an administrative assistant for the Ascension Lutheran Christian School.

“Having to choose between supporting the students at my school and supporting my son was very frustrating,” said Anderson. “It was lots of those days where I felt like I was taking out my frustration on him.”

Her husband couldn’t leave his job since he had a steadier income with health insurance. As a custodian, he couldn’t work from home. Last June, to help her son with his learning, Anderson quit her job.

Before the pandemic, “everything was fine,” she said. “There was not a wrench thrown into the system. Covid was a wrench.” “Here comes this big thing that made us stop and reflect.”

In addition to supporting her son, she had to spend more time on domestic chores.

“There’s never really any off time,” said Anderson. “And if I do have off time, it’s just like literally going into the room and closing the door, but not really being able to have an outlet.”

She is no exception.

The pandemic exacerbated the already pronounced disparity in gender roles at home. American women spend [roughly 4.5 hours a day](#) on unpaid domestic work including cooking, cleaning and caring for children, 1.5 hours more than men. During the

pandemic, among working couples, mothers were twice as likely as fathers to spend more than five additional hours a day on household responsibilities according to a [report](#) by the management consultant McKinsey & Company.

“Women have actually left the workforce as well because trying to manage paid and unpaid work with kids at home became kind of impossible for them,” said Aliya Hamid Rao, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, who studies families and gender disparities in households.

### ***3. Long hours at work pushed moms out of jobs.***

In the aftermath of the coronavirus outbreak, Farida Mercedes, the mom of four from Fair Lawn, N.J., quit her job at L’Oréal.

“I didn't have a choice if I wanted to preserve my own mental health, and not potentially have a nervous breakdown, because that's how intense it became,” said Mercedes, who recalled pushing through 12-hour work weeks and marathon office calls that lasted up to three hours as she carried out layoffs for L’Oréal.

As her husband held onto his job as a correction officer at New York City’s Rikers Island jail, she readily accepted her decision to give up her 17-year career in human resources and \$200,000 annual income.

“It was a non-issue,” said Mercedes, 44, who is of Latino-Pakistani descent. “In the Latina culture and many other cultures, the woman is the provider in so many other ways outside of just working. We take care of the house; we take care of the food, we take care of the children.” “If you ask my husband who's my kid’s teacher, he wouldn't be able to tell you. So why would he be the person to leave his job? So the conversation was really can we afford for me to leave?”

Stone said “There's been an enormous speed-up in terms of the number of hours that are expected and the extent to which workers are expected to be completely on call.”

According to the [Census Bureau’s report](#), among working mothers living with another working-age adult -- whether a spouse or a family member who contributes to the family’s earnings -- Latinas had the highest share of those not working or

looking for a job, at 38.6% in January, a 2.6 % increase over the same month last year.

“Hispanic women are also more likely than white or Black women to be in a traditional family structure where they're married to a man and their husband is more likely to earn more than them,” said Diane Lim, an adjunct professor of economics and public policy at George Washington University.

For Black mothers living with another working-age adult, however, the situation was worse: a 4.8% climb in non-participation in the labor force from January 2020. Among mothers living without any additional income support, either single mothers or mothers living with retired family members, Black mothers were most likely to have left the workforce at a rate 7.5% higher than last January, compared to a 5% increase observed for white mothers.

Historically, [Black women](#) have had higher participation in the labor force than [white women](#).

“Black women are actually [more likely to be single](#), to be not partnered with a man,” said Lim. “So they've usually been more solely responsible for household income.”

#### ***4. The pandemic could worsen the gender wage gap.***

When Meg Brannon and her husband, Steve, were dating, they shared their dreams with each other: she wanted to be a career mom and he a stay-at-home dad.

But after two high-risk pregnancies that required medical tests every couple of days, and the births of a premature baby and a second child with special needs, the 36-year-old mom from Arlington, Va., faced constant interruptions in her career as an education specialist. While she was losing on projects, promotions and work trips because of caregiving, her spouse was rising through the ranks in cybersecurity.

When the pandemic struck and her daughters' daycare shut down and switched to Zoom classes, she quit her job with a private company based in Washington (name withheld on request). She didn't have the option of working from home. Daycare was not feasible: \$55,000 a year for online learning for her daughters, 5 and 3. But

there was a more significant reason: her husband made more than twice what she did.

“I'm so laughably far behind that it's not even a question of if he can be a stay-at-home dad,” she said. “He can't be a stay-at-home dad; he makes what we live on.”

The cost of women's not working ranges from a decrease in lifetime earnings, losing out on promotions or leadership positions to an increase in non-participation rates in the labor force. But the most significant consequence would be an increase in the gender wage gap -- a reversal of the gains women have worked long and hard to make.

“That might be okay, and there are some people -- that's their choice,” said Tara Sinclair, a professor of economics at George Washington University. “But if that wasn't what they were planning and they had a different career trajectory in mind, I think that this is an error that is a costly and unexpected shock.”

### ***5. Moms are getting jobs back, but they are still behind dads.***

Mothers are also catching up to the number of working fathers based on the [Census Bureau's report](#).

In January, 19.6 million fathers were working compared to 18.5 million mothers-- a difference of 1.1 million, nearly the same difference observed pre-pandemic in January 2020.

“There is a tendency for mothers to get back working probably a little bit more quickly than women,” said Misty L. Heggeness, an economist at the Census Bureau and a co-author of the March report. “If you're a mom, you tend to be older; you may tend to have more stability. And that stability might kind of help you retain work during a pandemic.”

Mothers could be returning to the workforce to meet their families' economic needs.

“They're trying to make decisions between keeping their household safe and free of the virus but also need to put food on the table for their children,” said Heggeness.

The employment gaps between mothers and fathers could be narrowing, the Census Bureau data suggests, but it's important to note that mothers' gains were calculated with March 2020 as the starting point.

The reality is different going back a few months earlier. Mothers' employment levels were higher than fathers' in January 2020, before the pandemic struck.

The Census Bureau report also includes only parents who had jobs and were working when they were surveyed. It doesn't account for those who were on leave or furloughed or those who had lost jobs: all of whom are factored in the labor force participation rate.

"You might call it a more restrictive measure; it's just those who are actively working," said Ryan Nunn, assistant vice president at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis referring to the Census Bureau's analysis. He also co-authored a [report](#) on the declining labor force participation rates for mothers because of disruptions in child care.

### ***6. Child care is still out of reach for many.***

Since the pandemic began, Shelly Wigginton, the single mom from Akron, Ohio, has been thinking about quitting her job. At Burger King, she puts in 50-60 hours a week, works past midnights, sometimes past mid-day, with no weekends off because the outlet where she works at is understaffed.

Her schedule also changes every week, leaving her constantly anxious about how she'll be able to pick up the kids, 7 and 11, from their school bus stop.

Daycare with an after-school program could help but she can't afford it. At \$200 a week per child, daycare accounts for more than half her paycheck. A babysitter isn't an option, either.

"A babysitter," costs "what I make an hour," said Wigginton, 36, who makes \$12 an hour.

A social welfare worker informed Wigginton that, as a single mother, if she quit her job she would have enough money to pay her bills and access to child care benefits and food stamps. She currently doesn't qualify for these benefits, since her monthly income exceeds the cutoff by \$85.

"If I do end up quitting, it's not going to be because I want to," she said. "It's going to be out of necessity to care for my children."

In 2016, the annual average cost of child care in the U.S. was [\\$16,200](#), higher than the [in-state tuition](#) at a public university.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, child care is affordable if it costs no more than 7% of a family's income. Even in Mississippi, the state where it is [least expensive](#), child care accounts for 11.7% of the median family income.

### ***7. Whether moms will win or lose depends on the government.***

The Biden administration offers hope to the American middle class in the form of a \$1.8 trillion economic support package, the American Families Plan. Its ambitious proposals include extending free public education through the prekindergarten years and two years of tuition-free community college.

"I wonder whether we'd think, as we did in the 20th century, that 12 years is enough in the 21st century. I doubt it," President Biden said in his April 28 address to a joint session of Congress when he pitched his proposals. "Twelve years is no longer enough today to compete with the rest of the world in the 21st century."

The plan also includes providing affordable child care that would cost no more than 7% of low- and middle-income families' income, making the child tax credit permanent and implementing 12 weeks of paid medical leave.

"No one should have to choose between a job and a paycheck or taking care of themselves or their loved ones, or their parent or spouse or child," Biden said.

If these proposals become law, they could help fix the broken child care system in America.

“Women, who performed the majority of the unpaid care responsibilities at home, would have the support to return to the labor market when the jobs return,” said Shengwei Sun, senior research associate at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, who also co-authored the [report on the policies](#) that would help women in the workforce.

### ***8. Companies should offer mothers flexibility.***

Going back to work can be daunting for mothers particularly when they are asked to explain career breaks in their resume caused by caregiving responsibilities.

Path Forward, a New York-based nonprofit, offers a solution. Its returnship program -- a paid internship -- offers caregivers an opportunity to return to the workforce after a hiatus. It also gives them a shot to convert their internships into permanent roles with some of the tech industry’s biggest names, including Apple and Facebook and the e-commerce giants Amazon and Walmart.

“I don't think the media does a great enough job making it clear how little choice some women feel they have when it comes to leaving the workforce,” said Tami Forman, chief executive of Path Forward. “Because of the way our school system is set up and the lack of support we give to working families, I think those choices become very constrained for a lot of women.”

Mothers say they need more flexibility at work.

“That means everything from offering part-time roles, where they only are working 20 hours a week, or having to work two or three days a week or bringing them back into a job-share relationship,” said Mary Beth Ferrante, founder of WRK/360, a training and development consultancy that teams up with companies to improve working conditions for parents. Job-sharing is an arrangement in which an employer hires two part-time workers to do a job, instead of one full-time employee.

For service jobs in the restaurant and retail industries where remote work isn't an option, the approach to retaining mothers is different.

“I think one of the hardest things is that your schedule changes every week,” Ferrante said. “So then you're having to get care, change your care situation every week.” “And that's really challenging for working parents, especially when you're managing online school and other things.”

A more stable routine can help mothers plan how to care for their children and eliminate anxiety. But employers also need to be flexible when a mother isn't able to fill a full shift because of sudden changes in the child care situation and needs to have her work covered by another employee.

For service-workers, “the biggest thing is to have the ability to own their schedule a little bit more,” said Ferrante.

But change starts at home. Men need to do more.

“Mothers are expected to work a full 40-hour week, come home, clean the house, still cook dinner and make sure the kids have everything they need,” said Wigginton. “Whereas fathers can sit on their butts as soon as they get home. Maybe they should be at home with the kid. We don't live in 1950 anymore.”

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