

Mothers' Day: All Mothers Are Working Mothers

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This article is the seventeenth in a year-long series about economics and holidays.

The second Sunday in May is celebrated in the United States as Mothers' Day, a day to honor our own mothers and mothers and motherhood in general. It has had that slot on the calendar since it was first proclaimed in 1914. In the United Kingdom, it is known as Mothering Sunday.

The majority of 21st century American women, mothers or not, are in the labor force. Those who are also mothers hold down two jobs—their regular paying occupation, and the nonpaying but demanding and rewarding job of mothering. The labor force participation rate for mothers is actually higher than for women in general, because older women are less likely to be working and much older women are generally retired even if they had been working at an earlier stage of life. In 2008, 71% of mothers of children under age 18 were in the labor force. Even mothers of very young children (under age 3) had a 60% labor force participation rate. These figures represent a dramatic social change in the last 50 years. In 1975, the labor force participation rate for mothers of children under age 17 was only 47%. The prime age (25-54) labor force participation rate for women rose a dramatic 40 percentage points from 1960 to the present. More education for women, smaller families and a higher divorce rate all contributed to this trend. Women's labor force participation rates are now comparable to those for men.

But while women work, they generally earn less than men. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 2008 women who worked full-time had median weekly earnings of \$638, about 80% of what men earned. That was a substantial improvement over 1979, when the ratio was only 62%.¹ The earnings gap was larger for women 35 and older (75%) and smaller for workers ages 25-34 (89%). Women's occupational choices are somewhat different than men's, although in recent decades more women have chosen traditionally male occupations such as medicine, law, science and engineering. But even within occupations there are earnings differences favoring male workers.

Economists have been scratching their heads over this earnings gap for most of the last fifty years. Some of the difference was due to the distribution across occupations, and the movement of women into traditionally male occupations has narrowed the gap. Some of the difference was due to interruptions in work history, but maternity leaves have become shorter and women are having fewer children than in earlier decades, so that source of earnings differentials has declined.

¹ "Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2008," U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2009, Report 1017.

Most statistical studies are able to explain part of the wage gap in terms of occupational choice, interrupted work history, and other factors, but even as the wage gap has narrowed, these studies all leave an unexplained residual in earnings of men over women. Psychological studies show a preference for males over females by employers and customers in many situations. If such preferences are widespread, they would make an equally qualified woman less likely to be hired than her male competitor. Or, if she is hired, she may be paid less because she is perceived as less productive despite any evidence to the contrary.

Discrimination still exists in the labor market. In part, it's because our cultural perceptions lag reality. The image of Mom at home with the kids and Dad away at work all day is still a large part of our cultural memory, particularly among those more senior employees who get to make hiring decisions. The image of males as competitive and women as cooperative, a stereotype with some degree of grounding in reality, also creates a bias against women in some occupations where competition is valued more highly than cooperation. Historically, women have gravitated toward occupations and academic disciplines in which cooperation or nurturing was highly valued, like teaching, nursing, and social work. Were these lower paying occupations because they were largely occupied by women, or were women segregated into these occupations because they paid less and were therefore less attractive to men?

So to all the challenges of 21st century mothering, moms need to add the awareness of cultural pressures that push girls and boys in different directions and perpetuate stereotypes that limit the ability of our daughters to compete on a level playing field and succeed on their own terms. No one ever said that mothering, or parenting, was an easy job. That's why it gets a day of its own when we pause to reflect on the value of the unpaid work done by mothers as well as the question of fairness or equity in pay for work outside the home.

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