



Valuing Women's Caregiving During and After the Coronavirus Crisis

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June 4, 2020

Working families are experiencing new challenges during the coronavirus crisis, as they must manage both work and an increase in caregiving responsibilities. Notably, mothers are responsible for the majority of this caregiving duty. While many working women, especially those in jobs with low wages or nontraditional hours, have long struggled to manage work and caregiving, the pandemic has created additional child care stresses for everyone, including higher-income families. With many schools, child care programs, and summer camps closed for the foreseeable future, women with young children have had no choice but to take on additional child care responsibilities that are often shared unequally with their partners.

Federal policymakers must take significant action to invest in the child care industry and support women's work and caregiving now and in the future. If they do not, the United States risks losing much of the progress women have made toward gender equality in the home and workplace. Current caregiving challenges are experienced differently along race, ethnicity, and gender lines as well as by employment status—women continuing to go to their essential jobs, women who are unemployed, and women working from home. But all women are now paying the consequence of the United States' earlier systemic failures to value and support women's work and caregiving. These failures have left the country with inadequate child care funding, low wages for child care workers, and workplace policies from a bygone era when fathers were assumed to be their families' sole breadwinner. Women's increased caregiving responsibilities during the coronavirus crisis, compounded by the lack of policies that support caregiving and the potential permanent closure of many child care programs, may result in long-term negative impacts on women's earnings and employment. This will ultimately worsen the gender wage gaps for women—and mothers in particular—and undermine the economic stability of families.

The United States lacks structural policies to support women's work and caregiving

The United States has never adequately valued and supported women's paid work and unpaid caregiving, though both are essential contributions to the nation's economy and families' well-being. Women perform the majority of unpaid care work, and these

contributions at home help ensure the functioning of a strong economy.¹ Despite the critical importance of this uncompensated care, it is not valued or supported by society. Rather, women's unpaid labor often diminishes their economic opportunities and time spent on paid work. Although women spend significant hours on unpaid care work, their participation in the labor force has grown since the 1950s, reaching 57.4 percent in 2019.² Women of color—and Black women in particular—have higher labor force participation rates due, in part, to expectations that they perform work outside the home.³ These expectations are rooted in a history of slavery, domestic service, and farm labor.

Women's participation in the economy adds an estimated \$7.6 trillion to the nation's gross domestic product each year and contributes significantly to their families' financial security.⁴ In 2018, 64 percent of U.S. mothers were a primary or co-breadwinner, earning a substantial portion of their family's income.⁵ Black mothers and Hispanic mothers are especially likely to be the primary or co-breadwinner in their families, at 84.3 percent and 60.9 percent respectively.⁶

Despite their critical economic contributions, working mothers and parents of young children are in an unsustainable position: They need access to work-family supports and child care in order to participate in the labor force, but these are often unaffordable and inaccessible.⁷ Before Congress passed relief packages in response to the coronavirus, the United States was one of the only countries in the world that didn't guarantee workers access to any form of paid leave. The lack of a national paid sick leave policy and national paid family and medical leave program forced many workers to choose between keeping their paycheck and recovering from an illness or caring for a loved one. In 2019, workers' access to these leave benefits through their employer or state or local law was limited, with low-wage workers and workers of color—especially Hispanic workers—less likely to have access.⁸

Child care has also never received sufficient support. In addition to performing a majority of the unpaid caregiving within their families, women are the ones who most often perform paid care work in the United States.⁹ A disproportionate number of these child care workers are Black or Latina.¹⁰ Despite the fact that child care is essential to the health of the economy and to children's well-being, the work is often dismissed as unworthy of adequate wages and public support. The fact that women of color, particularly Black women and Latinas, perform this work makes clear that the devaluing of care is often connected to attitudes about those doing the work, including the stubborn persistence of misogyny and racism. Child care has never received enough funding to provide most families with access to affordable, quality child care, nor has it provided even livable wages to child care providers.¹¹ Most child care programs barely bring in enough revenue to cover their operating costs and cannot operate for more than a few weeks without that revenue.¹² Furthermore, families often rely on a constellation of family and friends, especially grandparents, to help with child care.

The lack of critical child care and work-family supports in the United States was one of the many ways in which the country was unprepared for the coronavirus public health emergency and the upheaval it has caused for families' work and caregiving responsibilities. Fixing this problem is essential to effectively supporting workers, their families, and the economy; failure to act could set back women's progress in the workplace—and the economic growth that it has fostered—in unprecedented ways.

Women's caregiving responsibilities have increased during the coronavirus pandemic

The pandemic has caused dramatic shifts in the lives, work, and child care arrangements of families, as stay-at-home orders have closed many workplaces, schools, and child care providers. Normal care arrangements for children, family members with disabilities, and elderly family members are closed or unavailable. This includes family-based arrangements: For example, grandparents who are at high risk of complications related to COVID-19 may be unable to care for their grandchildren. These changes are especially challenging for women who have both caregiving responsibilities and essential jobs with little to no workplace flexibility. A majority of the workers in many of these jobs are women¹³—and disproportionately women of color.¹⁴

To provide care for loved ones around the clock, families have been required to shift their normal schedules. Again, this responsibility falls most heavily on women. A survey conducted for *The New York Times* in April 2020 found that, among parents with children under 12 years old, women consistently reported spending more time on home schooling and child care than men.¹⁵ This matches previous CAP research, which found that mothers of young children spent more time doing unpaid household labor and child care than fathers even under nonpandemic conditions.¹⁶ Single mothers who live without a partner face even greater challenges during the coronavirus crisis, as many are unable to rely on extended family or their community to help with caregiving.¹⁷

Women's challenges in managing increased caregiving responsibilities vary depending on their access to paid leave and workplace flexibility. While Congress has attempted to help families with caregiving by temporarily providing workers up to two weeks of emergency paid sick leave and an additional 10 weeks of emergency paid child care leave through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), the law's loopholes and exemptions exclude an estimated 68 million to 106 million private sector workers from receiving these paid leave protections.¹⁸ Among these millions of people are essential workers such as health care providers, emergency responders, and more than 2 million grocery store workers employed at large chains with 500 or more employees.¹⁹ Women working in essential jobs face additional barriers to managing caregiving due to a lack of workplace flexibility, forcing them to figure out child care solutions in order to keep their job and report to work. And while some women may be able to work from home during the pandemic, they nonetheless struggle to

manage work with home schooling and caring for their children, especially if their employer denies them flexible work hours. About 1 in 3 workers have been able to transition to working from home during the pandemic,²⁰ but workers who are low income, are Black or Latinx, have low levels of formal education, or are in service occupations each have a lower likelihood of being able to work from home.²¹ Even the mothers who are some of the nearly 12 million unemployed women as of April 2019 may have limited child care options if they are able to return to work in the future.²²

Unfortunately, these challenges may not be short term, as the coronavirus pandemic stretches on without a clear end in sight and causes permanent damage to the child care industry. Many child care providers may never reopen, further reducing the amount of child care available in the future.²³ Even before the pandemic, half of Americans lived in a child care desert with an undersupply of licensed child care.²⁴ With half of programs now closed²⁵ and one-third of people in the child care sector now unemployed,²⁶ child care deserts will likely get even worse. Simply reopening child care centers without safety equipment, sanitation materials, and access to coronavirus testing and tracing is not a solution, as it puts child care workers, primarily Black women and Latinas, at elevated risk. And even if child care providers or schools begin to reopen, parents may remain wary of sending their children back if face masks and physical distancing are required, as these precautions are a challenge for young children in particular. Sending children back to child care also includes a risk of continued infection, which can be especially dangerous for children with risk factors such as asthma.

Women's increased caregiving could have long-term effects on their earnings and employment

Women are already feeling the effects of their increased caregiving responsibilities on their ability to work. As time spent on caregiving increases, some women may be forced to reduce their work hours more than men or shift to multiple part-time jobs, although women who are the primary breadwinner in their family—disproportionately women of color—may not have this option. Research from 2019 found that mothers spend fewer hours on paid work than fathers due to caregiving and household labor responsibilities and are more likely to work part time due to child care problems.²⁷ Among workers who were caregivers for adults in 2019, 15 percent reduced their work hours as a result of caregiving.²⁸ This reduction in work hours may be driven by expectations about women as primary caregivers and prior inequality in household labor, but many families may rationalize it as an economic decision if women earn less than their spouse. However, this economic reasoning is still informed by gender inequality, as mothers may have lower earnings due to caregiver discrimination, concentration in low-wage occupations, and a gender wage gap. On average, mothers are paid only \$0.70 for every dollar paid to fathers.²⁹

When women reduce their work hours to manage additional child care responsibilities, their household's earnings will decline, jeopardizing their family's immediate financial security and likely exacerbating the financial stress families are experiencing due to the coronavirus. This is especially true for families in which mothers are the primary or co-breadwinner.

Women may also experience long-term effects on their career earning potential and their ability to participate in the labor force, especially if the supply of child care is diminished in the future. Previous CAP research found that when child care was difficult to find, mothers—and especially single mothers—were significantly less likely to be employed, although fathers experienced no impact.³⁰ As women take time out of the labor force to care for their families, they also face wage and career advancement penalties and are less likely to return to work, which contributes to a decline in their lifetime wealth accumulation. In 2016, CAP calculated the cost to women who leave the workforce for five years to care for their children, finding a 19 percent reduction in earnings over their lifetime.³¹

The cascading effects of performing the majority of additional caregiving during the pandemic will be detrimental to women's lifetime earnings, careers, and future retirement prospects. Compounded with the coronavirus's health effects for women³² and the disproportionate health and economic effects for women of color,³³ this new reality may undermine women's progress toward gender equality unless policymakers make fundamental changes to the way the United States values and supports caregiving and women's work.

Policy recommendations

Federal policymakers must act now, during the pandemic, to mitigate long-term impacts on women's earnings and employment. They must prioritize structural policy change—including the expansion of supportive work-family policies and investments in the child care industry—in order to recognize the value of women's work and unpaid caregiving and improve gender equality. The following sections highlight specific changes that policymakers should advance.

Ensure workers have a right to request workplace flexibility

With increased caregiving responsibilities, workers need greater access to workplace flexibility. However, many workers are unable to request such flexibility, or they fear discrimination or retaliation from their employer if they do. Policymakers can expand and protect workers' right to request workplace flexibility by passing a law such as the Schedules That Work Act, which would protect workers from discrimination, compel employers to seriously consider flexibility requests, and allow employers to deny requests only for valid business reasons.³⁴ The bill would also require employers to post schedules two weeks in advance, allowing workers the ability to plan for caregiving arrangements. This may prove to be particularly important now, as employers call employees back to their workplaces even as schools, child care facilities, and other places of care remain closed.

Increase child care funding and resources for child care providers

The child care industry needs a significant federal investment to avoid a massive decline in child care supply. These resources should be widely available to child care centers and family child care homes to help them pay their fixed costs and retain their employees during the pandemic. As some states allow more businesses to open and some parents are asked to return to work, child care providers must have the resources they need to protect staff and children. Women who work in the child care industry cannot be viewed as expendable as states relax stay-at-home orders. Their health and safety must be paramount. This includes providing them access to sanitation equipment and safety gear such as face masks and hand sanitizer. Many child care programs will need to enroll fewer children to comply with social-distancing measures and will thus need financial resources to stay afloat. Congress should pass the Child Care Is Essential Act to address the immediate needs of child care providers and parents.³⁵ To make much-needed structural reforms to the child care system, Congress should pass the bipartisan Child Care for Working Families Act, which would limit how much families pay for child care, provide livable wages to providers, and ensure families have a range of quality child care options available when and where they need them.³⁶

Expand and make permanent paid sick leave and paid family and medical leave

Women with increased unpaid caregiving responsibilities during the coronavirus crisis need access to paid leave to be able to take time off work to care for their children or, in the event they or their family get sick, to recover or provide care without risking their paycheck or their job. In response to the coronavirus crisis, Congress passed the FFCRA to temporarily provide workers, until December 31, 2020, up to two weeks of emergency paid sick leave and an additional 10 weeks of emergency paid child care leave. But the law falls short of helping all workers and addressing their comprehensive caregiving needs. Congress must close the loopholes and exemptions that excluded an estimated 68 million to 106 million private sector workers, including workers at large businesses with 500 or more employees, health care workers, emergency responders, and employees taking child care leave at small businesses with fewer than 50 employees.³⁷ Policymakers should expand the 10 weeks of paid child care leave to also cover leave for a worker's own illness and caring for a sick family member. Finally, while the paid leave provided in the FFCRA is gender neutral, women are more likely to use the leave unless policymakers raise the wage replacement for caregiving leave above two-thirds of normal wages.

The temporary nature of the emergency paid leave provided in the FFCRA and the expected continuation of caregiving challenges have highlighted the need for permanent, national paid sick leave and paid family and medical leave policies to support workers, particularly women, in the future. The public strongly supports providing all workers with paid leave. In a March 2020 survey, 80 percent of voters supported providing all workers 14 days of paid sick leave and three months of paid medical leave.³⁸ Policymakers must build upon preexisting policy proposals such as the Healthy Families Act, the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act, and the Providing Americans Insured Days of Leave (PAID Leave) Act of 2020 to enact permanent paid leave solutions that meet the needs of workers both now and in the future.³⁹

Prohibit caregiver and pregnancy discrimination

Women with increased caregiving responsibilities during the coronavirus pandemic may face caregiver discrimination, also known as family responsibilities discrimination, from their employer.⁴⁰ They could, for example, be denied leave, flexible hours, or a promotion due to their caregiving responsibilities. The opportunities for caregiver discrimination may only increase in the future, as mothers struggle to find adequate and affordable child care. Women may also face pregnancy discrimination in the workplace: Their employer could deny them pregnancy accommodations, a job, or a promotion due to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions.⁴¹ Currently, there is no federal law specifically protecting caregivers from job discrimination based on their family responsibilities. And, while the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 prohibits pregnancy discrimination in the workplace, discrimination remains a widespread problem as there is no federal law guaranteeing pregnant employees' right to accommodation at work.⁴² Federal lawmakers must act to protect against employment discrimination based on pregnancy accommodations and caregiving responsibilities such as proposed in the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act and state and local caregiver discrimination laws.⁴³

Raise wages and ensure equal pay

To support women as they continue to work and contribute to their family's economic security, policymakers must raise the minimum wage and address gender wage inequality. Women make up nearly 58 percent of minimum wage workers and would benefit from an increase of the federal minimum wage to \$15 by 2024,⁴⁴ as proposed in the Raise the Wage Act.⁴⁵ This will be especially important for child care workers—disproportionately women and women of color—who had a median hourly wage of only \$11.62 in 2019.⁴⁶ And as women, particularly women of color and mothers, continue to experience significant gender wage gaps,⁴⁷ policymakers should take meaningful and comprehensive action such as passing the Paycheck Fairness Act,⁴⁸ to strengthen existing equal pay protections and combat discriminatory pay practices.

Conclusion

Public policies have provided working women little support in managing work and family responsibilities, even though women make significant contributions to their family's economic security and perform the majority of unpaid caregiving in their households. The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated the caregiving challenges women face and may result in long-term consequences for women's work and their progress toward gender equality—especially if many child care providers close permanently.

Policymakers must act now to invest in the child care industry and support women's increased caregiving responsibilities while also instituting permanent policy solutions to improve gender equality in the future. This moment also calls for a greater reimagining of the future of work and caregiving—not as a precarious balance between two

interests but as an integrated approach that is valuable to the nation's economy and families. The United States must begin to truly value women's paid work—especially paid care work from domestic workers, child care workers, and others—as well as support unpaid caregiving labor through robust, structural policy change.

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