

Cambridge Judge Business School

Discussion Paper for the
Wo+Men's Leadership Centre

NAVIGATING THE PROSPECTIVE MOTHERHOOD CAREER PENALTY: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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**Wo+Men's
Leadership
Centre**



**UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**
Judge Business School

Wo+Men's Leadership Centre

The Wo+Men's Leadership Centre (WLC) is a centre committed to help women realise and embrace their potential in order to become successful leaders. Part of Cambridge Judge Business School, the WLC achieves meaningful impact globally, across a wide range of organisations: from large companies to small start-ups; within for-profit to non-profit sectors, from corporations to government agencies.

By generating support for gender diversity in senior leadership positions, we will foster the next generation of women leaders and expand the pool of women with the requisite leadership skills.

How will we achieve our mission?

Impactful research – The WLC undertakes cutting-edge research to discover the challenges within the work environment and use it to generate practical solutions into the issues. Such research will enable us to make a meaningful difference in gender equality and women's empowerment globally.

Innovative programmes – research findings are used to create the basis of our women's leadership programmes, aimed at inspiring prospective female leaders and employers.

Multi-faceted approach – throughout the year, in addition to our research, we offer a wide variety of panel events, workshops and our flagship annual conference to foster thought leadership, dialogue and action. We do so to engage as many people as possible to increase the support base for gender diversity in the work environment.

Inclusivity policy – The WLC is open to everyone, no matter their gender, age or position. We invite everyone to be a part of our community to help spread our message of diversity and create networks to promote open dialogue and offer successful solutions. This inclusive bottom-up platform is an important cornerstone of the WLC.

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Professor Sucheta Nadkarni sadly passed away in October 2019 before this paper could be published.

Sucheta arrived at Cambridge Judge Business School in 2014 to take up the position of Sinyi Professor of Chinese Management. Sucheta was also Head of the Strategy & International Business subject group and a Professorial Fellow of Newnham College.

Sucheta achieved much in her sadly shortened life. She was a force of nature, with enormous energy and drive and a great love for her work, publishing consistently and regularly in the top journals in her field. Sucheta served as the Associate Editor of the *Academy of Management Journal* (2016-2019) and as the Associate Editor of the *Journal of Management* (2011-2016) in addition to serving on several editorial boards. Sucheta was active in projects with companies such as Boeing, Booz Allen Hamilton, Newton Asset Management and BNY Mellon in the areas of strategic change and leadership.

Sucheta's main research interests were in strategic leadership and competitive dynamics, as well as gender diversity. In addition, with great enthusiasm, Sucheta embraced the Women's Leadership Initiative, initially as faculty lead, becoming the Director of the Wo+Men's Leadership Centre in 2017. She established the consistently oversubscribed Executive Education Rising Women Leaders programme that focused on supporting women to aspire and achieve in their professional lives, with the goal of fostering the next generation of women leaders. In addition, Sucheta was Gender Equality Champion at the University of Cambridge (2016-2019). She was very generous in including PhD students and other colleagues in her research and mentoring her students.

Sucheta won many awards for her work and undertook pioneering work on gender diversity, including the representation of women on corporate boards and in senior executive positions.

**Dr Monique Boddington**

Research Associate at the Entrepreneurship Centre, Cambridge Judge Business School and Interim Deputy Director, MSt in Entrepreneurship, Cambridge Judge Business School

Dr Monique Boddington's research includes the study of entrepreneurial teams, entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurship and gender, and the use of sociological approaches to broaden our understanding of entrepreneurial activity. Monique leads the EVER project, which is a longitudinal qualitative study of the teams within of the teams within Accelerate Cambridge. This project aims to understand the strategic decision-making of early ventures and how teams pivot over time. She is also currently working on a project exploring the impact of gender on entrepreneurship in the gaming industry. Previously, she worked on multiple EU-funded projects looking at the impact of entrepreneurial education and remains passionate about understanding how research can improve the delivery and impact of entrepreneurship education to educate the next generation of entrepreneurs.

Her original background is in archaeology having completed a BA and MA in Archaeology at the University of Nottingham and taken part in excavations across Europe. Monique has a PhD from the University of Cambridge and her thesis focused on applying philosophy to archaeology to look at the nature of knowledge creation of the past.

**Stacey Kurtz Campkin**

Head of Aldeburgh Young Musicians at Snape Maltings

Stacey passionately believes that creativity and the arts can change lives and create an innovative and empathetic future. During her bachelor's degree in music performance from Northwestern University in Chicago, she played with the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra in South Africa and was introduced to community music projects, inspiring her to pursue a career in this field. Stacey did her master's degree in music performance at the Royal Academy of Music and started working at the Royal Opera House after graduating.

After four years of working at the Royal Opera House on community outreach programmes, her interest in education drew her to Wigmore Hall to manage their Schools and Early Years programme. Stacey graduated with her MBA from Cambridge Judge Business School at the University of Cambridge in May 2019.

**Rasmus Pichler**

PhD candidate in Strategic Management at Cambridge Judge Business School

Rasmus's main research interests include corporate wrongdoing – corporate actions that violate social norms and harm stakeholders – and the role of businesses in society. In particular, Rasmus is interested in how the characteristics of top managers and corporate governance structures affect decision making about corporate wrongdoing. His PhD research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and by a Cambridge Trust Vice Chancellor's Award. Rasmus holds an MPhil degree in Strategy, Marketing & Operations from the University of Cambridge.

Prior to embarking on his PhD research, Rasmus worked in the corporate social responsibility department of a global automotive supplier and as a management consultant for clients in the technology, mobility and financial service sectors.

Whereas the motherhood penalty has been well documented as a major workplace issue for women with children, this Discussion Paper explores the largely unaddressed phenomenon of the prospective motherhood penalty – harm to the careers of women who are seen as potential mothers. This is a vitally important issue in an era when an increasing number of women have chosen not to have children, or to do so at a later age.

Based on a survey of 115 male and female middle and senior executives, the results point to a prospective motherhood penalty in the form of negative stereotypes against women viewed as mothers regardless of their motherhood status. Women without children were perceived more negatively than men without children in areas ranging from commitment to competence, with little statistical difference between women with children and without children. Similarly, women without children reported significantly higher negative career outcomes (fewer pay raises and promotions, and less challenging projects) than men without children.

The Discussion Paper suggests five strategies to combat this prospective motherhood penalty: authenticity, finding a passionate niche, lifelong learning, sponsorship by a mentor, and a circle of support.

Academic research and insight from practitioners increasingly recognise a major factor contributing to the gender pay gap and barriers for women to rise to senior management positions: the motherhood penalty.

The motherhood penalty reflects a stereotypical bias where women are penalised in the workplace for being mothers. Mothers are often perceived under this stereotype as being less competent, less hardworking and lacking commitment in the workplace. As a result, pregnant women or women with children miss out on challenging assignments, promotion, jobs and pay raises, all of which are essential for career growth and development.

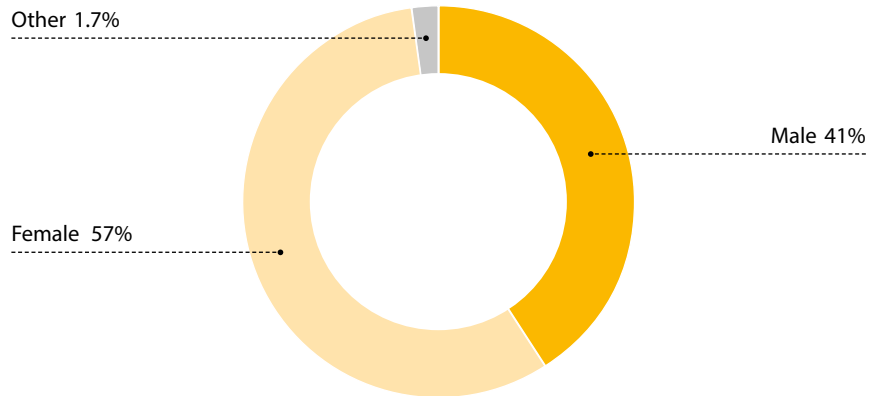
Relatedly, the choice to be child free is on the rise in many parts of the world. With reduced stigma of childlessness and increased focus and pressures of career, many women and couples choose not to have children or have children later in life after they are well settled in their career trajectories. The U.S. birth rate has consistently been in decline, reaching a new low of 59 births per 1,000 women (NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, 2019). Similarly, nearly one in five women in England and Wales born in 1971 have no children at all – compared to one in 10 of their mother’s generation (U.K. Office of National Statistics: ONS, 2019). At the same time, the fertility rate among women in their 40s has more than trebled since 1981 in the U.K., reaching its highest in nearly 70 years (ONS, 2017). These trends raise an important question: Are women who do not have children free of the motherhood penalty?

Whereas prior research has demonstrated how the motherhood penalty inhibits career growth of women (Anderson et al 2003; King & Botsford 2009), less has been spoken about whether this penalty holds for women even if they are neither pregnant nor have children. Research has shown that the prospective motherhood penalty may be greater because employing companies fear increased costs relating to maternity cover and benefits (Becker et al 2019). The “risk of pregnancy” in the eyes of firms is therefore likely to lead to a specific set of penalties inhibiting the careers of women who are seen as mothers-to-be. With the growing trend toward women choosing to become child free or to have children much later in their life, this issue has become increasingly important in today’s workplace.

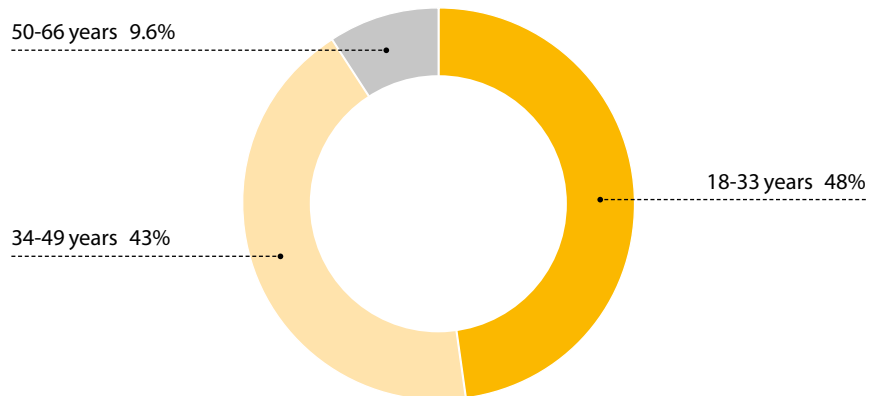
To explore these questions, we conducted a survey-based study of 115 male and female middle and senior executives with different family situations (no children, pregnant, children). The results of this survey uncover a “prospective motherhood penalty” – stereotypical bias against women who are not pregnant and have no children based on the presumption that they may one day become a parent. Our results show that this penalty is likely to have important career ramifications for women in middle-level positions, as well as those with high potential to reach executive positions, thus offering a new explanation for the persistence of gender pay gaps (Bastani et al 2017) and glass ceilings across organisations. Importantly, we provide five strategies that can help women effectively navigate the prospective motherhood penalty.

Figure 1: Description of the sample

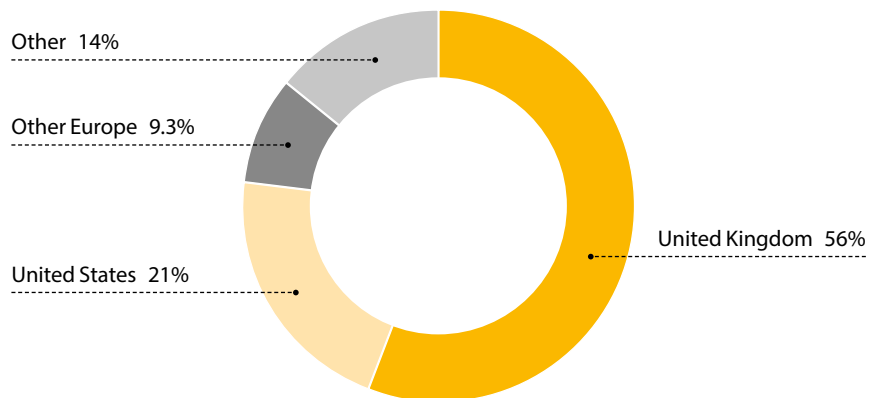
Gender



Age



Nationality



Research has suggested that the nature of the prospective motherhood penalty is very different from the actual motherhood penalty. Firms view women of child bearing age to be at a “risk of pregnancy”, requiring replacement workers for the duration of maternity leave. Therefore, women without children are less likely to receive interview call backs for part-time jobs (Becker et al 2019). However, we know little about the breadth and potency of the prospective motherhood penalty, so we therefore pose two questions: Do women without children face the prospective motherhood penalty at work? How can women respond to such a penalty?

Research on the motherhood penalty has identified two broad sets of penalties: a) stereotypical biases against working mothers about their abilities and motivation at work (Correll 2013) and b) adverse career outcomes resulting from these biases. We explore whether these very same stereotypical biases also apply to women without children presumed to become mothers in the future, regardless of whether they choose in the near future to have or to not have children.

Stereotypical biases: These biases refer to subjective perceptions of people about the ability, skills and motivations of women in performing their work. The biases include adverse evaluation of competence, commitment, focus, work effort, and motivation or drive. The biases can create a negative climate for women at the workplace.

Career outcomes: The adverse stereotypical biases have important ramifications for career outcomes such as support from superiors, pay raises, viability of work projects, challenging projects, promotion recommendations, number of job offers, salary, and performance evaluations.

Sample

We used a snowball sampling method to conduct the survey. We started with Executive MBA students enrolled in a major university who then referred us to other acquaintances. 115 middle (E.g., managers, senior project managers) and senior executives (E.g., senior vice president and chief executive) completed the survey. Our sample consisted of 46 (43 per cent) males and 66 (57 per cent) females. The participants ranged in age from 28 to 66. Most participants had a Master's (57 per cent) or a Bachelor's (30 per cent) degree. The majority of individuals resided in the UK and US (55 per cent), though only 36 per cent were born in the UK and US. There were no significant differences in the results between countries. Finally, 60 per cent of respondents did not have children and 40 per cent had or were expecting children. Both males and females in our sample had successfully risen up the career ladders. Therefore, we believe that their insights would be especially helpful in understanding the strategies to deal with prospective motherhood penalties.

Survey design

The survey was divided into two parts. The first part captured the prospective and actual motherhood penalties experienced by participants. In this part, we asked respondents to answer regarding their own perceptions of their superiors, peers and subordinates opinion of their competencies, skills and commitment at work explicitly in relation to having children. For women who were pregnant or mothers, we asked them about these stereotypes and career outcomes in relation to others' perceptions about them as mothers. For women with no children, we asked them to rate the stereotypes and career outcomes in relation to others' perceptions about them as 'prospective mothers' at some time in the future. Each question was rated on a 1 to 5 point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The second part of the survey focussed on strategies used by the participants to deal with the prospective motherhood penalty.

Analysis

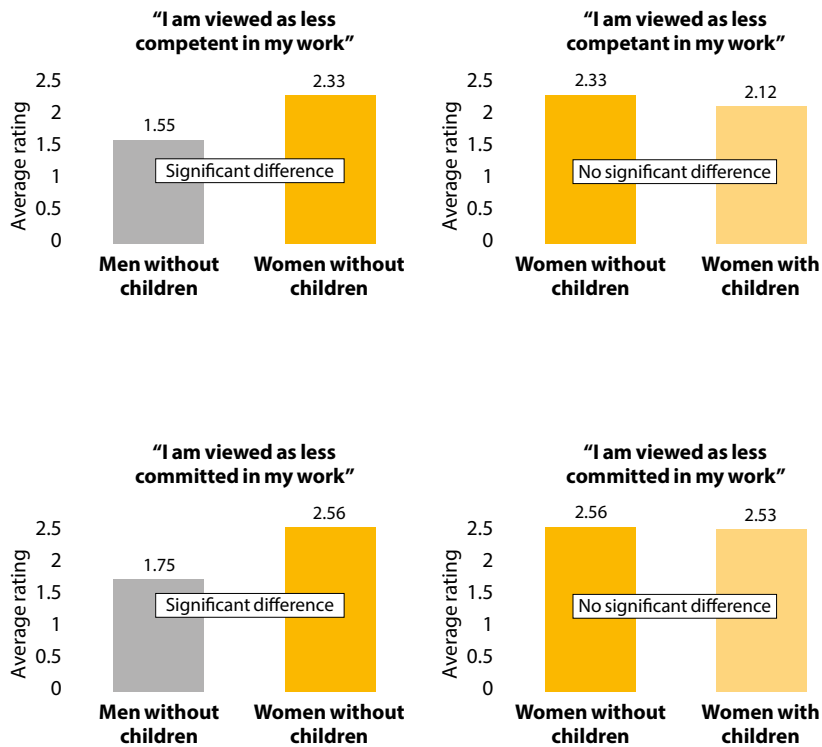
We examined the prospective motherhood penalty by comparing the degree of stereotypes and adverse career outcomes for: a) Women without children to Men without children, and b) Women without children to Women with children. We used the t-test, which is a type of inferential statistic used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two groups – in our case, the comparisons of groups in a) and b). We evaluated the strength of difference based on statistical significance levels: *Significant difference = $p < 0.05$, and No significant difference = $p > 0.05$. We present the results in three parts.

Results part 1: Stereotypes and career outcomes of the prospective motherhood penalty

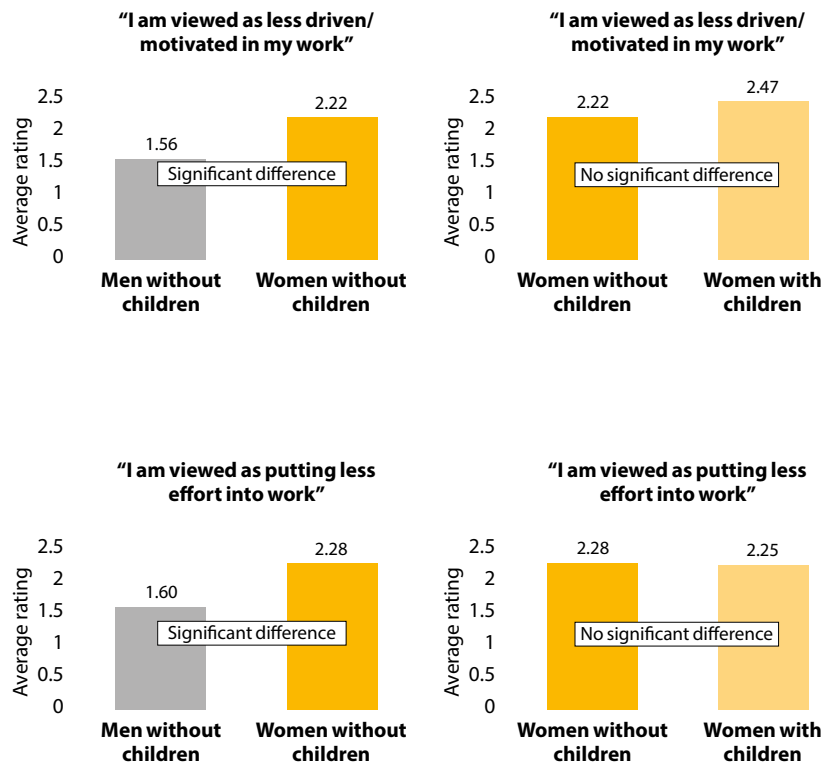
Stereotypes of prospective motherhood penalty

Our results in Figure 2 indicate that women without children reported being perceived significantly more negatively than men without children in relation to the prospect of being mothers across a range of stereotypes*. As shown in Figure 1, women without children perceived that they were viewed as less competent, less committed, and putting less effort into their work than males without children. The women respondents explicitly attributed these stereotypes to being seen as prospective mothers in the near future. Surprisingly, Figure 2 shows that there are no statistically significant differences in these stereotypes between women with children (or pregnant) and women without children (and not pregnant). Taken together, these results point to the existence of the prospective motherhood penalty in the form of stereotypes against women seen as mothers, regardless of their actual motherhood status.

Figure 2: Comparison of stereotypes in relation to in relation to others' perceptions about: "prospective fathers" and "prospective mothers" (left side graphs), and "prospective mothers" (both graphs) and "mothers" (right side graphs)



*Excluding the oldest age group (50-66) resulted in no statistically significant difference.

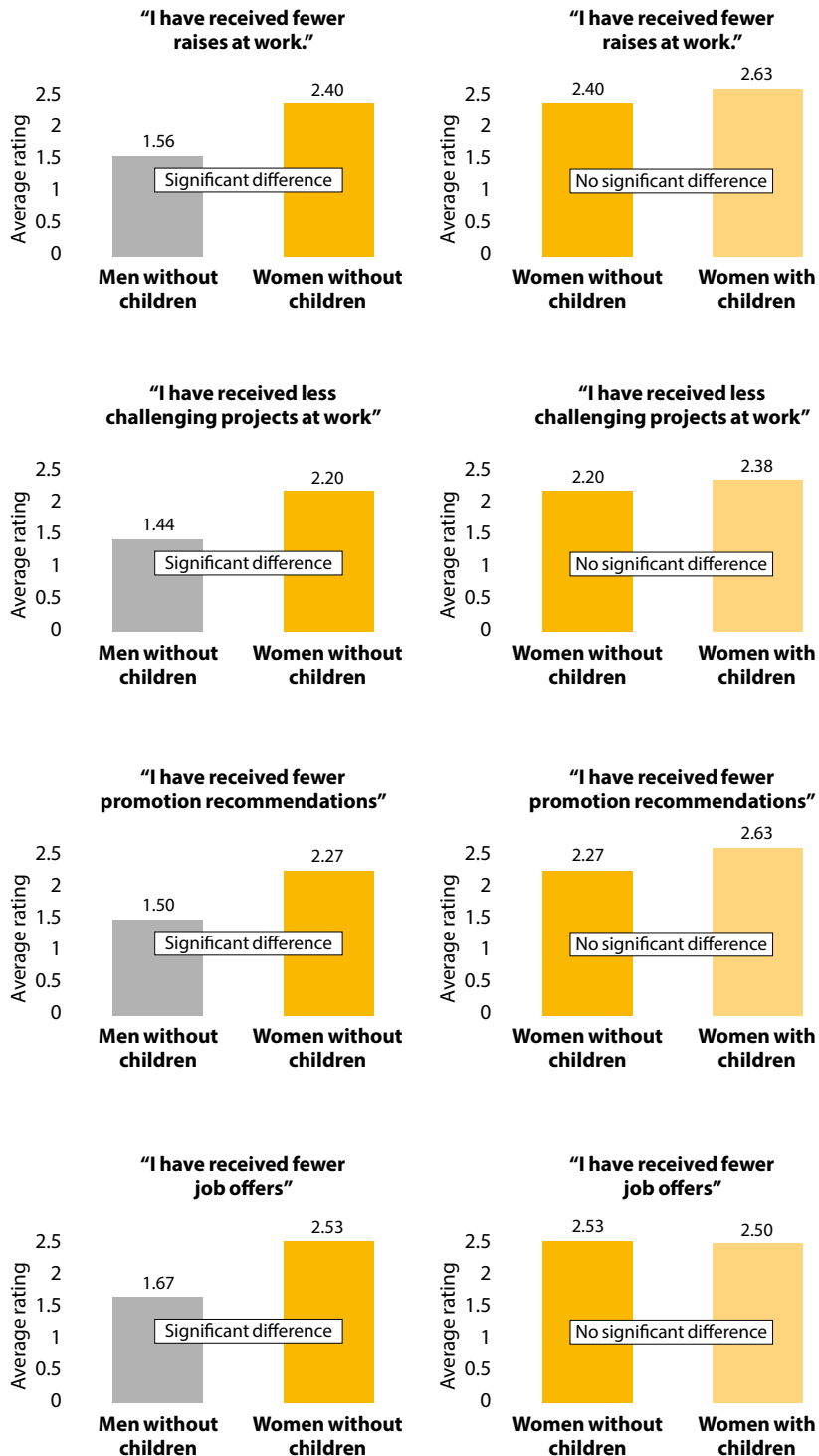


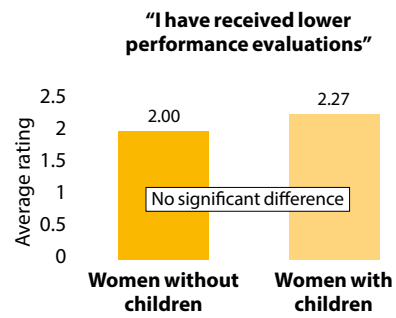
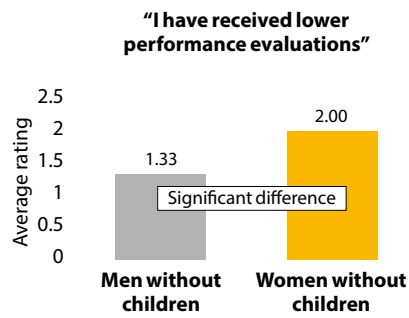
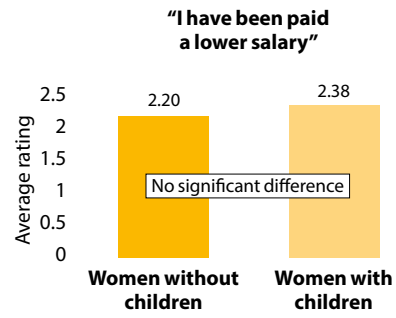
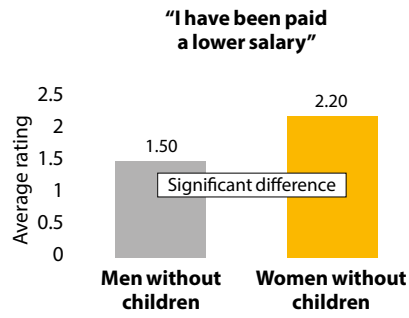
Career outcomes of prospective motherhood penalty

We found a similar trend with regards to career outcomes in Figure 3. Women without children reported a significantly greater degree of negative career outcomes than men without children. Women without children reported that they had been paid a lower salary, been given less challenging projects, and had received fewer pay raises, promotion recommendations, job offers and performance evaluations – all in relation to the presumption of their becoming mothers in the future.

Again, we found no statistically significant difference between women with children and women without children on these career outcomes.

Figure 3: Comparison of career outcomes in relation to others' perceptions about: "prospective fathers" and "prospective mothers" (left side graph), and "prospective mothers" (both graphs) and "mothers" (right side graphs)

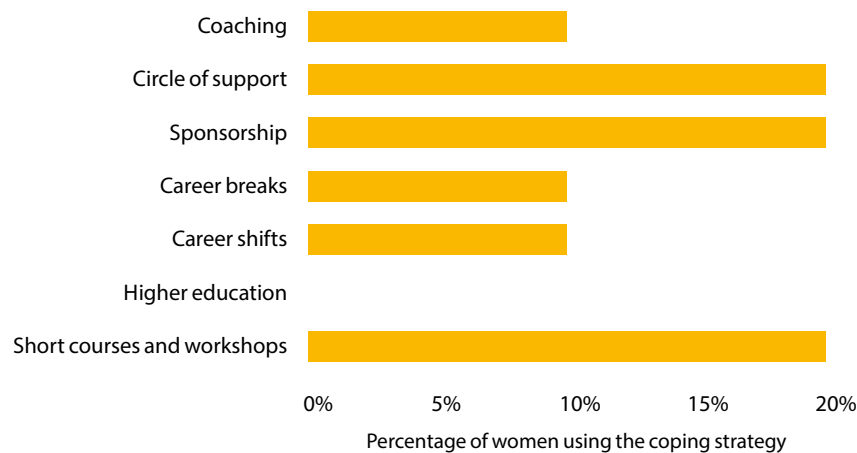




Part 2: Five effective strategies for navigating the prospective motherhood penalty

In the second part of the survey, we asked the participants to share the strategies that they found effective in overcoming the parental penalty. Figure 4 shows the most frequently used strategies by women without children to navigate the prospective motherhood penalty. Our qualitative conversations with women in our sample yielded five effective strategies to cope with the prospective motherhood penalty.

Figure 4: Coping strategies used by women to deal with prospective motherhood penalty



Strategy 1: Authenticity

***“Always be a first-rate version of yourself than a second-rate version of someone else.”* Judy Garland**

The women in our sample stressed that it is critical for women to not fall into the trap of feeling pressured into changing themselves by these negative workplace stereotypical biases. Trying to change who you are as a person does little to change people’s perceptions, but can have far reaching negative personal and career consequences such as greater stress, lower career satisfaction and breakdown of trust others have in you. Trust is a powerful factor in the workplace: most effective leaders are authentic, which inspires loyalty and engagement.

Senior women leaders in our sample emphasised that it is important to focus on being the best version of yourself, regardless of stereotype pressures. Focus on areas where you are particularly strong and passionate about. To become a first-rate version of yourself, it is important to know yourself first. Getting an understanding of your psychological and strength profiles can be a great first step. Being honest and reflective are key to understanding your strengths and how you can leverage them in your work (Opie & Freeman 2017). An environment that inhibits people from being authentic can be harmful and

promote an imposter syndrome among employees. It may be worthwhile thinking about changing companies or areas of work to find a good fit with who you are.

A female senior vice president from a financial company said:

"If I can't be authentic at work and I don't feel recognised, valued and appreciated for what I bring to the table, I don't want to do what it takes to rise and succeed in that organisation. I have experienced this and the best way for me was to leave the organization."

An operations director at a technology company said:

"I faced a lot of politics and negative competitive behaviours at work in my previous company. I had to pretend to be something I was not. I just realised it was not sustainable. Not worth it at all. I just left the company. It was the best decision I made."

Strategy 2: Find your Niche

***"I think that in order to be successful, women have to figure out what they're passionate about first. No matter what you aspire to, you've got to love what you do in order to be successful at it."* Michelle Obama**

In being authentic to yourself, it is important to play to your own strengths and focus on areas that you feel passionate about. Research has shown that one proven technique for overcoming stereotypical biases is through experiencing and expressing passion and devotion to work (Aranda & Glick 2014). Pursuing careers that you feel personally passionate about and devoted to will enhance your satisfaction and drive to persist even in the face of challenges. For example, women entrepreneurs are often driven by personal motivations and a passion for a particular opportunity, which is often key to the ability to persevere when times get tough. Pursuing a niche increases women's visibility as they stand out from the crowd, and can help in future-proofing your career.

A female senior product manager at a pharmaceutical company said:

"It is very important to find your passion in your work. If you are working in a job that you don't care about, these biases will increase and your odds of quitting are high. But if you really love what you do, these things do not bother you much. I really enjoy my job and I keep focused on what I do. This drives me every day."

Focusing on your areas of interests outside the workplace can also be a practical way to finding and honing your niche. Thinking about questions like how you like spending your free time and what you look forward to doing can

help you find your passions and interest. Exploring activities outside of your work can help you build your own network, allowing you to be a knowledge broker between networks.

Strategy 3: Lifelong Learning

Continual learning is key to career success, especially in the face of stereotypical barriers. It increases confidence, facilitates strength building and increases your marketability. Selecting well-regarded programmes and institutions also gives women greater formal credibility and access to valuable networks. You should focus on expanding your knowledge and skills in specialised and emerging areas, which increases your value in an organisation and helps to break down stereotypes.

There is a wide range of programmes available to individuals including executive education courses, workshops and coaching. Short courses offer a way of balancing learning and employment. You may wish to select those forms of education that most contribute to developing and finding your own niche. Most importantly, you should be passionate about these areas.

A female VP of a Fintech company stated:

"There are very few women in Fintech. So people are not used to having senior females around and make all sorts of presumptions. But I have always tried to stay up to date with new trends and cutting-edge technology, and I initially surprised people when I offered new and futuristic ideas. But now people respect me. Staying up to date is very important. It really helps you get credibility and stay ahead of the curve."

Strategy 4: Sponsorship

Seeking a sponsor, particularly early on in a career, helps women achieve promotions, overcome workplace biases and grow comfortable as self-advocates. A sponsor can increase visibility in the workplace and give access to new networks. A sponsor can better guide you in finding and developing your own niche, and may assist in opening opportunities.

You should be careful in selecting a sponsor, and make sure that you choose a person who is right for you. Research them so you have a good understanding of who they are as a person. Proactively adopt sponsors. If you find people in your organisation who can help in your career, try to find ways to work directly with them on specific projects. Working with a would-be sponsor will allow you to vet the person while proving your own capabilities. These proactive steps will increase your chances of being accepted for sponsorship. Identify clear career goals and share these with a sponsor to make the most out of your connection.

A female fund manager from an Investment management company explained:

"I have been very lucky to have a great sponsor early on in my career. He pushed to get me in front of people and got me some really visible opportunities. I met him at one of the receptions, but then followed up. I offered to help him with some of his work and worked really hard. It is important to prove yourself through your performance. There is no other way."

Strategy 5: Circle of Support

Study participants stressed that it is critical to start building four circles of support: partner, family, friends and colleagues. The most important circle was partner support. Having an open dialogue to discuss the sharing of responsibilities and the length and sequencing of parental breaks are critical to long-term career plans. A "circle of support" offers psycho-social support: women can discuss their challenges, mistakes and problems with members of their circle of support in a psychologically safe environment without the fear of being judged. This circle of support gives women a safety net to seek advice, particularly when dealing with stereotypical biases in the workplace.

A network of individuals can offer an effective strategy of support and this support can come from different people within your own personal network. The survey showed that partners were seen as the most effective, followed by family, friends and finally colleagues. These different circles of support can be leveraged by women trying to navigate the prospective motherhood penalty.

A female senior project manager at a technology company said:

"My friends and partner are my pillars of support. I can say anything. Don't have to worry about what people will think. It helps me bounce back from stress. I would not have survived without their support and help."

Although the motherhood penalty has been well documented, there has been little recognition of: a) the prospective motherhood penalty and b) effective strategies to navigate the prospective motherhood penalty. This study highlights that women without children face the same penalties that women with children face, based on the presumption of becoming a mother one day, and they lose out on challenging assignments, promotions and pay raises.

Our respondents suggested five strategies to deal with the prospective motherhood penalty. Women successful in their careers highlighted that proactively taking steps well ahead of motherhood, expanding their repertoire of skills, carefully considering alternative career paths, and following your passions were all critical to effectively navigating motherhood penalties. We hope the insights yielded by this study help women get ahead in their careers in the face of challenges, and will alert organisations about taking the necessary steps to reduce the prospective motherhood penalty.



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