

The pull of the past: how mothers influence their daughters' career choices and policies shift this relationship

Francesca Barigozzia
Helmuth Cremer
Kerstin Roeder

Video Abstract

Keywords: gender wage gap, labor force, economics, occupation, jobs, full time, part time, women's career choices, workforce, social norms, gender patterns, child care, laissez-faire, parental leave, childcare subsidy, woman quota, female quota, University of Bologna, Toulouse School of Economics, University of Augsburg

Posted Date: November 21st, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-113086/v1>

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Abstract

Are our moms responsible for the lingering wage gap between men and women? A European research team claims that by trading in high-powered careers to provide childcare, mothers have created a social norm that's been hard for today's generation to shake. Although today's workforce features more women than ever before, women still earn 15% less than men. Among the many factors creating this wage gap, the researchers focused on women's life choices. Using a rigorous theoretical model, they linked these choices to whether mothers had high or low future earning ability. ** ** The model argues that the previous generation's decisions determine the career paths pursued today. If most mothers in the prior generation took lower-level jobs to allow time for childcare, then their daughters aren't likely to opt for a high-powered career because of this social norm. Likewise, if most fathers in the prior generation pursued high-powered careers, then their sons may feel stigmatized when choosing a lower-level job and therefore avoid it, ultimately leaving the choice about childcare to the woman. Using the model, the researchers examined two career options: jobs with high earning potential but no time to provide childcare and jobs flexible enough to allow time for care. They predicted that only women with high future earning potential will pursue high-powered careers. But despite their potential to provide for their family, they will still feel guilt for not taking care of their children due to the social norm. The team then looked at three policies for shifting this social norm and closing the wage gap: quotas for the number of women in high-powered jobs, childcare subsidies, and parental leave. Quotas for women and childcare subsidies were the most effective because both options increase the number of women pursuing high-powered careers. However, parental leave perpetuated social norms because going on leave comes at the cost of fewer job promotions, and women are usually the ones taking leave.~~ ~~ These findings highlight the complex interplay of factors determining a woman's willingness to pursue a career and underscore why addressing the wage gap is so difficult. Companies and governments must pay attention not only to current factors in designing policies but also how past social norms affect present generations.