



Invisible Labor: An Examination of the Perceptions of Moms in the Workplace

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Introduction

Employment concerns faced by American workers over the last three years have been widespread, and moms are not excluded from these impacts. A survey of 1000 lower-income and 500 mid/high-income moms shed light on how mothers have been impacted, what these women see as barriers, and what they need from their employers as they strive to reenter the workforce as vital and productive employees. The Mothers Overcome More™ (or the M.O.M.™ report) survey, conducted by University of Phoenix (UOPX, 2023) offers insight into the attitudes of working moms as it relates to why they remain in a job and what they desire from an employer while drawing attention to the myriad of responsibilities women juggle daily. This so-called “invisible labor” exemplifies the adage “a woman’s work is never done.” The survey findings raise some interesting discussion points worthy of further investigation. When employers possess a keen understanding of the barriers unique to the working mother, the on-the-job skills learned as moms, and how those skills can transfer to the workplace, women are more likely to receive the types of support needed for them to increase their level of self-sufficiency, mental health, and sense of satisfaction with life (Parker & Wang, 2013).

Invisible Labor

The concept of moms as caregivers and the impact mothers have on their children and families is not a new topic. In their 2015 study, Luthar and Ciciolla focused on the other side of caregiving by endeavoring to identify the best way to support moms so that they too may function well, suggesting this as a potential link between the mental and emotional labor required to manage a household and a woman’s sense of personal well-being (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). While the role of men continues to shift as it relates to contributing to the care of children and the home, women still manage the bulk of household responsibilities (Parker & Wang, 2013).

This is the case for stay-at-home moms, those working from home, and mothers working in a traditional setting such as an office or area business. Studies conducted by Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2004) report that the unequal burden of family management can take a toll on women emotionally, physically, and psychologically resulting in depression, increased stress, and reduced life satisfaction.

The invisible labor women encounter often includes daily expectations to resolve childcare conflicts, provide discipline, guidance, and transport of children to and from activities, while striving to maintain employment. Mental and emotional labor associated with the burden of managing a home can be invisible in nature since rather than occurring in isolation, this care work is part of regular multi-tasking routines moms carry out daily (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). Regarding the issue of invisible labor, Lareau and Weininger (2008) suggest that cultural norms insulate men from certain family responsibilities. The societal pressure on men to provide invisible labor is less (Ahn et al., 2017). Bearing an unequal proportion of responsibility for the care and well-being of family management can be particularly difficult for working mothers if they do not receive adequate support. Recognizing and appreciating the real value of invisible labor among mothers can positively impact a mom's sense of well-being (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). Unfortunately, there is much work to be done with quantifying the value of invisible labor. Although 89% of lower-income moms in the survey see skills (organizing, decision-making, delegating) learned as mothers as applicable to the workplace, 49% perceive those skills as not being valued by employers in the workplace, and see themselves as easily replaceable (UOPX, 2023).

Barriers

Taking on the role of a working mother presents challenges that can negatively impact a mom's career. This is the case regardless of income, but lower-income moms are hit the hardest as they often face financial and childcare concerns at a higher rate than their wealthier counterparts (UOPX, 2023). Similarly, many working mothers feel they are held back in their careers (59%) due to the external pressures that come with continuing education, applying for a new job, and limited exposure to role models. In fact, working moms often perceive the idea of having a “career” as a luxury they cannot afford. Thirty percent of women in the M.O.M.TM report conveyed feeling stuck in their jobs due to insufficient experience and lack of professional connections. Of the lower-income moms surveyed, nearly half (49%) suffered from burnout and stress over their jobs at a higher rate than the workforce average. Despite these challenges, working moms are less likely to quit their current job if they do not have another lined up due to fear of unemployment (UOPX, 2024). The perception of feeling stuck is especially concerning when viewing the high levels of dissatisfaction lower-income moms express due to a lack of advancement opportunities and childcare resources. Coupled with limited mentoring programs and networking support, finding the necessary resilience to remain in the workforce can be challenging (UOPX, 2023).

Resilience Theory

When families encounter disruptive situations, such as adjusting to a global pandemic that impacts home and work simultaneously, the best chance for finding the resilience to overcome challenges is through the combined efforts of a well-functioning family. The concept of family resilience hinges on the capacity of the family to overcome life challenges as a functional system. When impacted by highly stressful events, family members must adapt their

relationships as a unit (Walsh, 2021). The ability to withstand and recover from disruptive life challenges, the concept of resilience goes beyond simple coping strategies. True resilience calls for implementing resources that enable recovery and growth within families facing serious life challenges (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). When family resilience is seen from the perspective of an overwhelmed, working mom, the presence of wraparound support systems is critical if mothers are to attain self-sufficiency. Significant discussion points identified in the M.O.M.TM report included the importance of mentoring programs, paired with networking support events in the workplace, to help working moms take advantage of training and development opportunities that aid in career advancement (UOPX, 2023).

Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR) assesses how resilience is constructed through communication (Buzzanell, 2018). Turner et al. (2022) found five components working mothers faced during the pandemic that impacted their lives including financial disruptions, role-related issues, on-the-job issues, and temporal and space-related concerns. Mothers in the study responded to life disruptions by developing resilience processes that helped rebuild a sense of normalcy through routines and rituals. Shifting the social support is sometimes required of working mothers. Whereas they may have previously relied on neighbors, family, and friends for childcare support, in times of crisis, moms may shift to seeking support from their workplace (Dorrance Hall & Sharp 2021; Lee et al., 2020).

Support Services

Developing self-sufficiency and a work-life balance can positively impact a working mom's mental health and her mindset. Compared to the average worker, lower-income mothers bear a disproportionate load of the responsibilities required to maintain financial stability in the home. Over the last three years, University of Phoenix published its Career Optimism Index[®]

survey which has identified a range of challenges American workers grapple with related to career progression. Year three findings demonstrated that working mothers are struggling financially, feeling overwhelmed, and forced to take on additional employment to make ends meet. While 29% of average Americans responding to the Career Optimism Index (UOPX, 2024) stated they were open to leaving their jobs even if they do not have another lined up, working moms are less likely to do so. Motherhood presents challenges compounded by external financial barriers that can discourage moms from applying for higher-paying jobs, making attaining self-sufficiency less likely. Working women report that being a mom negatively impacts their career trajectory (59%), and they see myriads of family and caregiving responsibilities which are often invisible to, or unappreciated by, employers as the leading culprit (UOPX, 2023; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). Bearing a disproportionate share of the burden calls for lower-income moms to receive higher levels of support in the form of wrap-around services to ensure a path to self-sufficiency.

Wraparound Services

As employers seek to identify and address obstacles facing working moms, it helps to go to the source to see what it is that these women feel they need to feel motivated to apply for better-paying jobs or return to school for training and development, while also maintaining a work-life balance. Although there is a desire for further education, 77% of moms say the skills they utilize as a mother such as multitasking, problem-solving, time management, budgeting, and organization are more applicable to the workplace than the skills they have gained through education (UOPX, 2023). As previously stated, moms incorporate these skills into the daily family routine which, unfortunately, often renders them invisible and not viewed as valuable in the workplace (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019).

There is growing interest in the experiences and unique challenges working mothers encounter, however, more study is needed on meeting the needs of lower-income moms who wish to start a new career or advance in their current job. Findings from the M.O.M.™ Report offer the opportunity for employers to provide much-needed support. More than half of working moms (58%) are open to going back to school within the next five years but lack the money and time to do so. In the event funding was available, 29% of moms expressed a need for guidance with finding appropriate education programs and training. As it stands, 74% of working mothers stated that their level of job satisfaction would increase if their company provided opportunities for further education (UOPX, 2023). Survey participants further noted that resources such as on-site childcare, paid parental leave, and flexible scheduling would be a great benefit to them in finding a balance between work and their responsibilities as a mother. Interestingly, 86% of the moms view these types of resources being equally important as their wage or salary (UOPX, 2023).

While COVID had a life-changing impact on millions across the globe, one positive outcome of the pandemic is that it allowed women to discover a new model for balancing work and life. The pivot to hybrid or remote work encouraged women to prioritize their personal lives without sacrificing career ambitions. Women view a better work-life balance as a key benefit of hybrid or remote work and credit this work model with reducing stress and burnout. Findings in the McKinsey Report (2023) show that 78% of women employees place significant importance on when and where they work with 38% of mothers with small children stating that they would leave their employment, or at minimum, be forced to reduce their hours if there was no flexibility. The option of a flexible schedule far outranked childcare, caregiver benefits, and parental leave (McKinsey & Company, 2023). These findings highlight the value mothers place

on maintaining self-sufficiency and the power to make decisions at work which directly impact their lives at home as they continue to perform a disproportionate amount of household responsibilities.

Conclusion

A range of community and societal barriers await moms in the workplace. Although men have shifted their view of gender roles as it relates to family care, women of all income levels continue to bear a disproportionate portion of the day-to-day responsibilities associated with childcare, decision-making, and discipline. Moms who work must master the skill of multitasking to meet the demands of the job, while simultaneously serving as the lead manager at home. This highly skilled and endless invisible labor is absorbed into a mom's routine and therefore is not fully recognized by family members or by workplace leaders. There is a need for invisible labor among mothers to receive greater recognition within society as a means of acknowledging the invisible burdens that are associated with household management. Allowing for more appreciation of invisible labor can benefit mothers as well as the entire family unit (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). Working mothers express interest in furthering their education to qualify for better-paying jobs but require wraparound services and a strong support system at work to make this a reality. Implementation of flexible scheduling (hybrid or remote) is a starting point in the mind of working moms. With increased flexibility to control when and where they work, mothers see the opportunity to achieve a better balance between work and home. The reduced burnout and stress will benefit home and work, resulting in an increased sense of self-sufficiency and satisfaction for mothers.

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