

Women and the Economics of Childcare*

Ellen Baxt

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Think about the terms *overrepresented*, *underrepresented*, *in proportion*, and *incentive*. What do they mean? Try using them in sentences.
2. Consider reading this article in conjunction with the article by Adriana Herrera López on pp. 17-18, along with a math lesson on proportion, written by Eric Appleton.

Women Do More than their Fair Share of Low-Wage Work

This section of *The Change Agent* is called “Caring for Our Children.” Here is a question for you: Who do you think wrote the stories? Men or women or both? The answer: five out of five sto-



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages, [Flickr](#).

Low-wage Jobs by Gender, 2013	
The 10 largest low-wage occupations	% women
Childcare workers	95%
Home health aides	89%
Housecleaners	88%
Personal care aides	84%
Cashiers	72%
Waiters	70%
Food preparers and servers	65%
Bartenders	58%
Food preparers	56%
Hand packers and packagers	49%
Source: BLS, Occupational Employment Statistics, 2013; Current Population Survey, 2013.	

What do you notice about the data in this chart? Make several true sentences about it. Source: [nwlc.org](#).

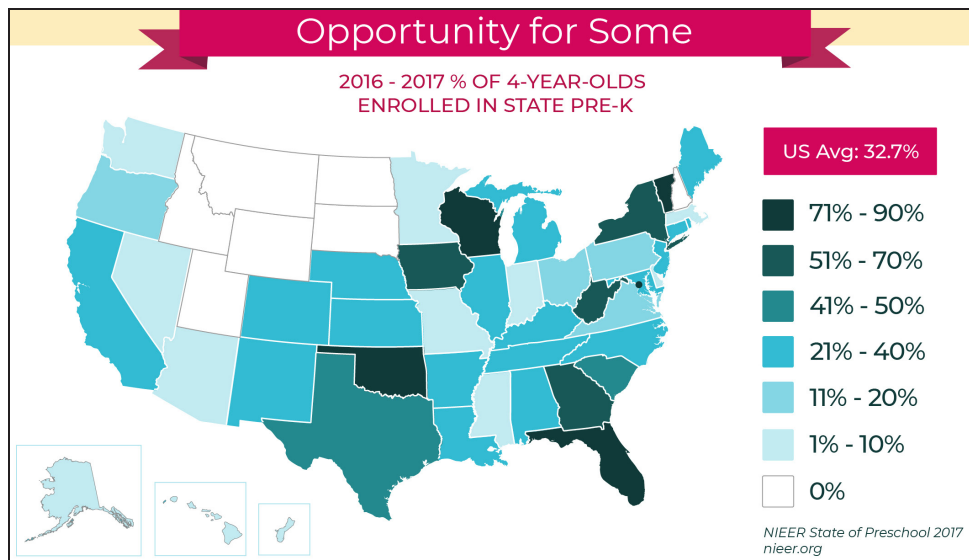
ries are by women. That is 100%! Why are women so *overrepresented* in this group? Maybe it is because they spend more time than men caring for children in the home.

Why do women do more of the childcare work in the home? One reason is that, on average, women earn less than men. In fact, they make 82 cents for every dollar that a man makes. They are *overrepresented* in jobs that make less money. (See the chart on the left.)

Men, on the other hand, are *overrepresented* in jobs that pay more. Did you know that only 11% of people in all construction jobs are women?

So, if you are in a family with a mother and father, there is a good chance the father earns more than the mother. If one person has to leave their job to take care of the children, whom would you pick?

* Two versions of this article are available: [beginner intermediate](#) (pp. 37-38) and [advanced intermediate](#) (pp. 39-42).



This map shows which states offer state-funded preschool and what percentage of children receive the benefit. <https://nieer.org/>

In many families in the United States with a mother and father, where both parents work, the father often earns more than the mother. This creates an *incentive* for men to work and women to stay home to take care of children and relatives.

Support for Families

Of 41 wealthy countries, only one does not ensure paid time off for parents. (See the chart on p. 41.) The one hold-out is the U.S., where there is no federal law giving parents paid time off when they have a new baby or need to take care of a child. However, people have fought hard for new policies, and some states are starting to pass laws that give parents paid leave. (See the chart

Did You Know?

69% of U.S. families are two parent households. This means that 31%, or almost one third of U.S. families are one parent households, or households with shared custody. Many U.S. families include parents who are single or are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

on p. 42.) These benefits are important because they help keep families out of poverty, they give families more support, they keep women in the workforce, and they allow parents to bond with their babies, a necessary component of healthy infant development.

The Pandemic and a Childcare Crisis

During the pandemic, many schools and day-care centers closed. Some workplaces closed, but

others stayed open. Essential workers, those who worked in grocery stores or hospitals, for example, kept going to work every day. Without a safe place for their children, many parents, especially mothers, quit their jobs to stay home with their children. Many parents worked from home, while at the same time taking care of their children. I did, and it did not work well at all!

The U.S. did not have a backup plan to help families continue working while making sure their children were cared for. Many of us already knew we have a childcare crisis in this country, but the pandemic made it clear to everyone. Soon politicians, like mayors and city councilmembers, started creating plans to get mothers back to work. I couldn't believe that in 2021, the U.S. did not have a plan to help provide childcare so that mothers who wanted to could work.

Well, better late than never! Politicians are considering local and federal proposals. For example, in New York City, where I live, the mayor has a new initiative to expand childcare by raising the income threshold so that more families qualify. This could mean 15,000 more children would have access to affordable daycare. On a national level, President Biden wants universal free preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. If your children are

younger than that (and you earn up to 1.5 times the state average), he proposes that you not have to pay more than 7% of your income on childcare.

Biden's policy would also increase the pay of childcare providers to at least \$15 per hour. That's a step in the right direction! We leave the work of caring for children to women; we should compensate them for this essential service!

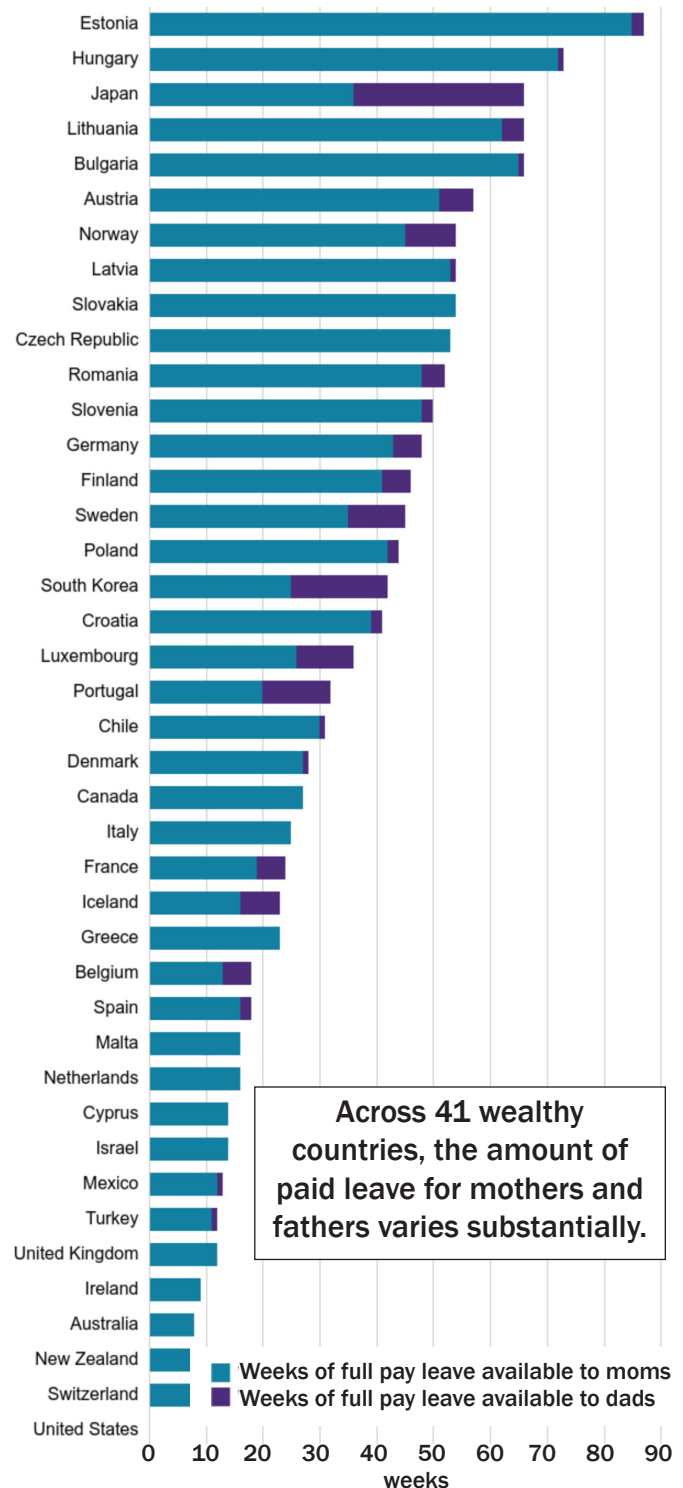
Sources: <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/401-21/recovery-all-us-city-expand-child-care-working-families>; <https://www.nytimes.com/article/biden-rescue-family-plan.html>

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AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, what is one *incentive* in families for women to do more childcare work?
2. Look at the chart on the right. In most wealthy countries, who gets paid time off to take care of children? What *incentive* does this create?
3. Who was your primary caregiver when you were a baby? Did they take time away from work to take care of you? Did they receive pay while they took care of you? How did that impact your family's finances and wellness?
4. If you are a parent, write or tell the story of whether you took paid or unpaid leave when your baby was born. How did family leave policies impact your family's finances and wellness?
5. Parental and family leave policies are being discussed by local and national politicians. What recommendations do you have for parental and family leave policies? How could you persuade lawmakers to pass your bill? (Study the chart on p. 42 to learn more about different states' parental leave policies.)
6. What do you think about the idea of universal, state-funded preschool? What are the pros and cons of a national policy? Do some research on the internet to learn more about it.
7. Write a letter to your state legislator. Use the guide on p. 43.

Time off for caregiving



Of these wealthy nations, the U.S. is the only one that does not give paid time off of work for parents to care for newborn babies and young children.

Paid Parental Leave

The U.S. government does not guarantee paid leave for parents, but some states do. Often, certain conditions have to be met in order to be eligible. When I had a baby in 2014, even though my state offered paid parental leave, I was denied it because my employer said I didn't meet all the conditions. Like many mothers, I quit my job in order to take care of my baby.

Is your state in the chart below? What do you think of your state's parental leave policy? What is missing from the policy that could help families?

Unpaid Parental Leave

Some states offer parental leave *protections*, meaning that a parent can take unpaid leave and still return to their job. Some states say how long the leave can be. Others leave it up to the employer. In some states, it applies only to pregnant workers. Who does this leave out? What message does this send to families? Over half the states (26) do not provide any parental benefits or job protection for parents. If your state is not in the chart below, find it at <https://www.policygenius.com/blog/parental-leave-by-state/> to learn more.

State	Weeks of Paid Leave	Max. earning potential	Eligibility
California	6	\$1252	Must have earned \$300 in wages in California to receive paid leave.
Colorado	12	\$1100, beginning in 2024	Must have worked at least 180 days and earned \$2,500 in wages.
Connecticut	12	60 X minimum wage. At \$15/hr this would amount to \$900	Must have worked for the same employer for at least 12 weeks.
Hawaii	26	\$1088.08	Must have worked at least 14 weeks in Hawaii.
Massachusetts	12, beginning in 2021	50-80% of weekly income with \$850/wk maximum	Must work for employer with at least eight workers.
Michigan	Workers can accrue 1 hour for every 35 hours worked. Hours can roll over from year to year.		Employers with 50 or more workers Federal employees are not eligible
New Jersey	12 weeks, as of 2020	85% of salary, up to \$650/week	New parents who have worked 20 weeks or earned \$8,600.
New York	12 weeks, as of 2021	\$746.41/wk, which is 55% of average state wages	Must have worked 26 consecutive weeks for at least 20 hours a week, or 175 consecutive days for less than 20 hours a week.
Rhode Island	4 weeks, paid 13 consecutive weeks, unpaid	60% of earnings, up to \$852 weekly	Employer must have at least 50 employees. A worker must have earned at least \$12,600 in the base period.
Washington (State)	12 weeks paid, 20 weeks unpaid	Workers with average weekly wages 50% or less than the statewide average weekly wage receive 90% of their weekly wage. All others receive 25% of the average state weekly wage + 50% of their average weekly wage (max of \$1,000 per week)	Workers must have worked for the same employer for one year for at least 1,250 hours to qualify for unpaid leave. Workers at companies with 50 or more employees who have worked more than 820 hours during the qualifying period are able to receive paid leave. Federal employees are not covered.
Washington, DC	8 weeks paid	\$1000/week	At least 50% of employee's work must have occurred in the District, under a covered employer.

Find your state in the charts below. What do you think of your state's parental leave policy?
<https://www.policygenius.com/blog/parental-leave-by-state/>