

Balancing Profession and Family: A Survey of Female Library Professionals with Children

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Abstract

More women are delaying having children until they complete their university education. Due to this, there are more women with young children working and more women of childbearing age in the workforce than at any other time. In this study, we investigate whether female library professionals delay career opportunities based on family planning or managing childcare. By investigating questions related to female library professionals' pursuit of career opportunities based on the age of their children, the study shows the connection between perceived barriers and competing obligations that women contend with during the most professionally productive years of their lives.

Introduction

Due to a lack of current literature and an absence of contemporary scholarship on library professionals with children, this study investigates whether women library professionals delay career opportunities based on the age of their children. By investigating questions related to women library professionals' pursuit of career opportunities based on the age of their children, this study aims to show the connection between perceived barriers and competing obligations that women contend with during the most professionally productive years of their lives. We have not investigated the parenting experiences of men or those identifying as non-binary; these are areas for further research.

Background

More American mothers are in the workforce than at any other time in history and many working mothers have school aged children.¹ In 2019, 57.4% of women were employed in the

¹ Leah Ruppner, Caitlyn Collins, Liana Christin Landivar, and William J. Scarborough, "How Do Gender Norms and Childcare Costs Affect Maternal Employment Across US States?", *Gender & Society* 35, no. 6 (2021): 910-939, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211046988>; Kei Nomaguchi and Marshal Neal Fetto, "Childrearing Stages and Work-Family Conflict: The Role of Job Demands and Resources," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 81, no. 2 (2018): 289-307; Liana Christin Landivar, *Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out?*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017): 119.

U.S. labor force compared to 69.2% of men.² In librarianship, recent scholarship acknowledges that despite female librarians representing 80% of the workforce, only 50% of library leadership is female.³ Multiple studies address the experiences of women who have children in higher education and general industry.⁴ Previous scholarship has questioned whether professional women are disadvantaged by “competing family obligations” and if men are thereby advantaged.⁵ This research is likely to be beneficial to women if it continues; scholars have asserted that research focusing on women professionals can help with the creation of family friendly policies and develop a culture that promotes healthy work life balance that supports women so they are more likely to advance into and persist in higher-level positions.⁶

While some of the scholarship presents rich data analysis of work-family conflict⁷ and whether female academic librarians pay a price for having children,⁸ more research could be conducted on professional women in higher education. Little research that investigates the barriers encountered by female library professionals and how these barriers impact career progression has been published, and much of it only recently.⁹ Some of the publications are more

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, “Women in the labor force: a databook,” accessed August 19, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/womens-databook/2020/home.htm>.

³ Jessica Olin and Michelle Millet, “Gendered Expectations for Leadership in Libraries,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, (2015, November 4), <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/libleadgender/>.

⁴ Sunny Lee, “Disrupting the Discourse of Motherhood and Leadership: The Experiences of Women with Children in Senior-Level Higher Education Administration,” PhD diss., (Claremont Graduate University, 2015); Nomaguchi and Fetto, “Childrearing Stages and Work–Family Conflict: The Role of Job Demands and Resources;” Ruppner, Collins, Landivar, and Scarborough, “How Do Gender Norms and Childcare Costs Affect Maternal Employment Across US States?”.

⁵ Jackie Guendouzi, “The Guilt Thing”: Balancing Domestic and Professional Roles,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 4 (2006): 901-909; Christine L. Williams, “The Glass Escalator, Revisited: Gender Inequality in Neoliberal Times, SWS Feminist Lecturer,” *Gender & Society* 27, no. 5 (2013): 609-629.

⁶ Lee, “Disrupting the Discourse of Motherhood and Leadership”; Stephanie J. Graves, Jian Anna Xiong, and Ji-Hye Park, “Parenthood, Professorship, and Librarianship: Are they Mutually Exclusive?,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (2008): 202-210.

⁷ Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden, “Do Babies Matter? The Effect of Family Formation on the Lifelong Careers of Academic Men and Women,” *Academe* 88, no. 6 (2002): 21-27; Divna M. Haslam, Pamela Patrick, and James N. Kirby, “Giving Voice to Working Mothers: A Consumer Informed Study to Program Design for Working Mothers,” *Journal of Child Family Studies* 24, no. 8 (2015): 2463-2473.

⁸ Mickey Zemon and Alice Harrison Bahr, “Career And/Or Children: Do Female Academic Librarians Pay A Price For Motherhood?,” *College & Research Libraries* 66, no. 5 (2005): 395-405, <http://doi.org/10.5860/crl.66.5.394>; Graves et al, “Parenthood, Professorship, and Librarianship.”

⁹ Betty Jo Irvine, “Differences By Sex: Academic Library Administrators,” *Library Trends* 34, no. 2 (1985): 235-257; Kathleen DeLong, “Career Advancement and Writing about Women Librarians: A Literature Review,” *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice* 8, no. 1 (2013): 59-75, <https://doi.org/10.18438/B8CS4M>; Lorelei B. Rutledge, “Leveling Up: Women Academic Librarians’ Career Progression in Management Positions,” *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 7 (2020): 1143-1167.

focused on managing mothers; one of Gallin-Parisi's studies details strategies for supporting librarians who are mothers in the workplace from the perspective of a library administrator.¹⁰ None of the research studies reviewed investigate whether female library professionals delay career opportunities based on parenting responsibilities or are less likely to persist in higher-level positions based on the age of their children.

Rutledge's study on career progression for women academic librarians proposes that "managing work responsibilities while caring for family and children," is the top barrier for many working mothers and prevents women from pursuing or maintaining management level positions.¹¹ In their article "Career and/or Children: Do female academic librarians pay a price for motherhood," Zemon and Bahr conclude that women holding directorships at ARL libraries were able to advance in their careers without paying a price for motherhood.¹² However, the authors acknowledge that their study did not reveal what conditions were responsible for supporting women with advancement to high-level executive positions in libraries. Zemon and Bahr reported that out of 347 respondents, 219 women directors were parents. Of the 219 ARL directors, only 56 reported taking maternity leave. Most institutions surveyed in Connell's article on academic librarians' leave policies (68.6%) offered leave to librarians to care for a new child, but the research did not address whether or not librarians took advantage of the leave options or to what degree.¹³ Bedoya et al. provide practical tips for managing parenthood and working in technology in a library.¹⁴ Lastly, Gallin-Parisi's 2015 study addresses the joys of motherhood and librarianship, rather than the challenges.¹⁵

Challenges for advancement and work-life balance for women with children exist in other fields according to Nomaguchi and Fetto.¹⁶ The authors assert that the roles that women and men play in childrearing differ with twenty-first century mothers still shouldering most childcare responsibilities. Flexible schedules can potentially help librarians succeed, according to Landivar, who adds more generally that flexibility in schedules helps working mothers retain higher-level

¹⁰ Alexandra Gallin-Parisi, "It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint, and Other Lessons for Supporting Librarianship and Motherhood," *Library Leadership & Management* 31, no. 4 (2017): 1-14.

¹¹ Rutledge, "Leveling Up."

¹² Zemon, "Career and/or children."

¹³ Ruth Sara Connell, "Maternity and Paternity Policies Available to Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 74, no. 3 (2013): 262-271.

¹⁴ Jaclyn Bedoya, Margaret Heller, Christina Salazar, and May Yan, "How to Hack It as a Working Parent," *Code4lib Journal* 28 (2015), <https://journal.code4lib.org/articles/10409>.

¹⁵ Alexandra Gallin-Parisi, "The Joy of Combining Librarianship and Motherhood," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41 (2015): 839-846.

¹⁶ Nomaguchi, "Childrearing Stages and Work-Family Conflict."

positions.¹⁷ In their 2019 study “Childrearing Stages and Work Family Conflict,” authors Nomaguchi and Fetro suggest that policies established by employers that give parents the choice of when leave is taken to afford parents the opportunity to support life events such as childbirth or adoption may be more effective than only allowing parents to take leave immediately following a new addition to a family.¹⁸

The role of choice is also important to consider when conducting research about mothers’ ability to succeed in academic libraries, or within any workforce. Not every woman is given the same opportunities for advancement.¹⁹ The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines multiple scenarios for discrimination that could apply to working mothers, including sex-based discrimination, equal pay and compensation discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, and sexual harassment.²⁰ Many authors that have undertaken research on the topic of working parents point to policies and laws in the United States that perpetuate problems for women.²¹ Such systemic barriers prevent all industries from developing and sustaining real solutions to help working parents.

In her book “Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out?” Liana Landivar discusses the implications for working mothers in various occupations across fields/industries and sheds light on the importance of legal and cultural shifts that have taken place since the 1970s. Landivar puts forward that policies such as the Family and Medical Leave Act have allowed working mothers to pursue a “wider range of occupations” and have increased their job attachment following childbirth.” What most of the research cited here has in common is that almost all of the authors consider the enormous impact that American policy (government as well as company) and/or culture has on the lives of working mothers.²²

Methods

The authors undertook this exploratory research to address two core questions about women library professionals, including (1) do they delay career opportunities because of their

¹⁷ Landivar, *Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out?*: 119.

¹⁸ Nomaguchi and Fetro, “Childrearing Stages and Work-Family Conflict.”

¹⁹ Ruppanner, “How Do Gender Norms and Childcare Costs Affect Maternal Employment Across US States;” Kelly Musick, Pilar Gonalons-Pons, and Christine Schwartz, “Change and Variation in Couples’ Earnings Equality Following Parenthood,” *University of Pennsylvania Population Center Working Paper (PSC/PARC)*, 2021-68 (2021), https://repository.upenn.edu/psc_publications/68.

²⁰ U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.eeoc.gov>.

²¹ Nomaguchi, “Childrearing Stages and Work-Family Conflict;” Musick, “Change and Variation in Couples’ Earnings Equality Following Parenthood.”

²² Landivar, *Mothers at Work*, 8.

parental responsibilities, and (2) do they perceive that dynamics at work change when their coworkers become aware of their parenthood. As part of this second question, this study investigates how willing working mothers would be to share their vulnerabilities related to the challenges of working while having children.

The survey instrument utilized to answer these research questions included 13 questions, some with follow-up prompts. Five questions required yes or no responses, with two of these questions asking for clarification based on response. Five questions were multiple choice and two of these had “other” options. The remaining three questions were open response questions, including an “additional comments” section where participants could enter free text clarifications, responses to the survey, the research project, etc. The survey was administered in Qualtrics after an IRB approved review for exempt research.

The authors targeted people who identify as women, work in U.S. libraries, and have children. All library professionals were encouraged to participate, including those in librarian and non-librarian positions. Participants were primarily recruited via email from listservs that address topics of librarianship, library and information science in libraries. Initial listservs selected included a number of American Library Association listservs, particularly those in the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) and in Core. In an effort to receive a wide range of responses, the authors shared the survey with peers who posted it to state listservs for librarianship and also shared via social networks. Some of the respondents contacted the authors to offer to repost on social networks. The first call for participants was sent out March 11, 2021 and a second reminder call on April 14, 2021.

Once results were received, we coded qualitative responses from free-form text according to recurring topics and themes. Quantitative responses were analyzed in Excel to produce figures and percentages. Based on reported ages of children and number of children, additional groupings were added including average age of children and additional identifiers (parent of twins, special needs child, etc.).

Results

Per American Library Association statistics, 366,642 workers were employed in libraries in the United States.²³ Of these, 79.9% identify as female.²⁴ If all of these library workers had

²³American Library Association, 2018, “Number Employed in Libraries: ALA Library Fact Sheet 2,” accessed April 28, 2022, <http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet02>.

²⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021, “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>.

children, a sample size of 384 would be needed to achieve statistical significance with a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 5%. We received 433 responses to our survey during the time period of March 11th to May 6th, 2021. Of those 433 responses, 395 met the criteria for inclusion in this study.

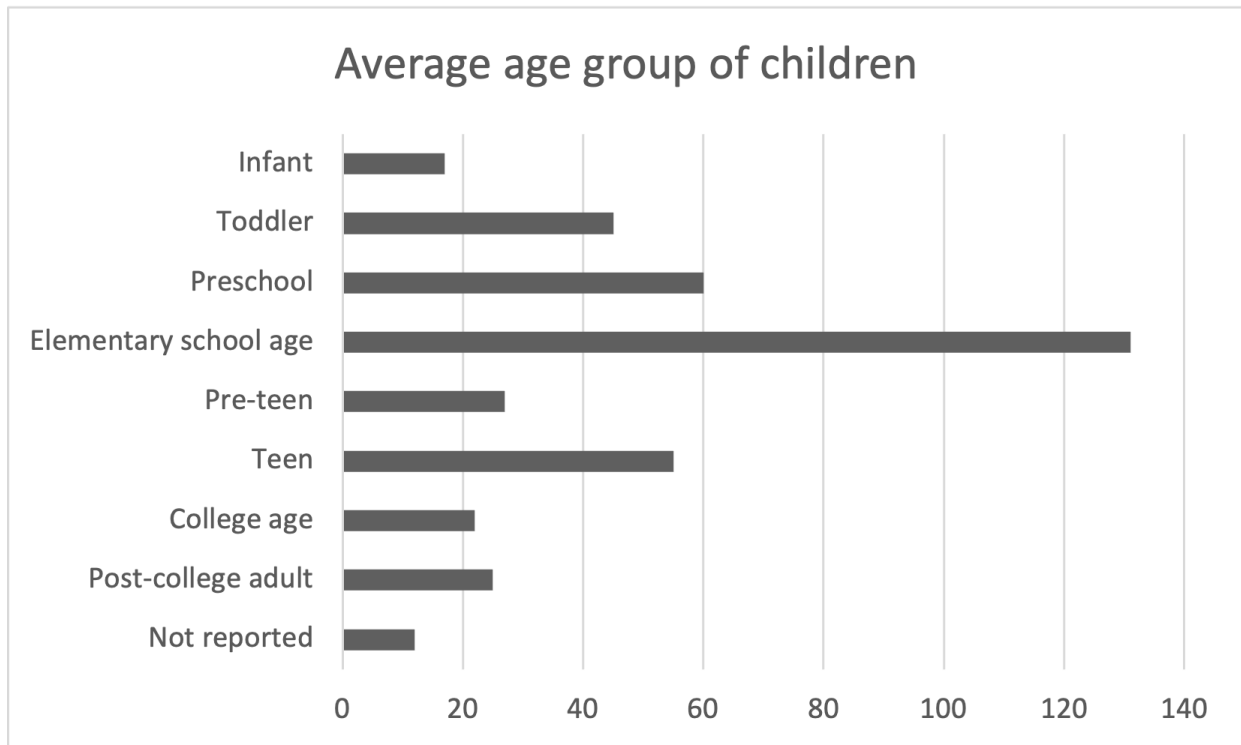
A majority of respondents worked in academic or public libraries (62% and 30% respectively). The remaining worked in special libraries (3%), school libraries (2%), or indicated they worked in another type of library. These libraries included medical libraries and state libraries as well as some freelance positions. Since ALA Connect, ACRL and Core groups were used to elicit responses, it is not surprising that the majority of responses are from academic and public libraries.

Most of our respondents had one (42%) or two (45%) children whereas 8% of respondents had three children and 3% had four. One respondent had six children. Nine did not report the number of children they had. Eight indicated they were expecting. The average age of the respondents' children were coded into the following eight categories:

Infant	1 year of age or less
Toddler	2 years of age
Preschool	3 to 4 years of age
Elementary school age	5 to 10 years of age
Pre-teen	11 to 12 years of age
Teenager	13 to 17 years of age
College age	18 to 23 years of age
Post-college adult	Over 23 years of age

Table 1: Age coding for children

The majority of respondents (54%) indicated that the average age of their children was K-12 school age, whether elementary, middle, or high school. Another 31% had children that were not yet K-12 school age. Twelve percent (12%) had college-age children or children who were post-college age. Twelve respondents (3%) did not indicate how old their children were.



Graph 1: Average age group of children

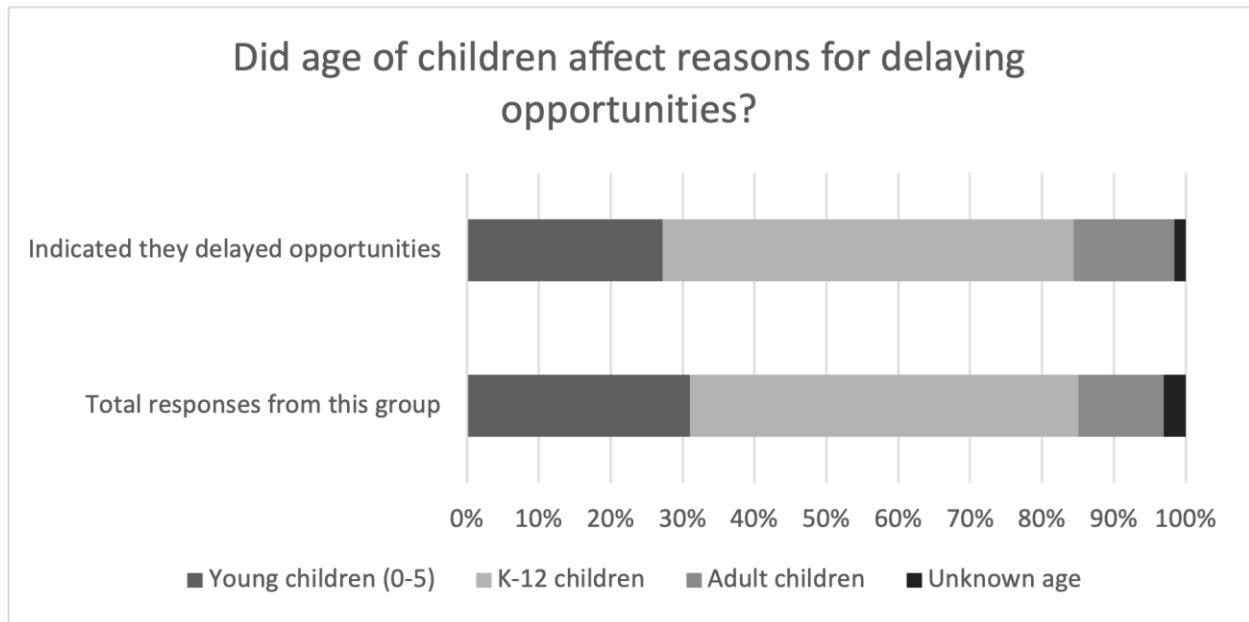
Additional coding was added to indicate special status categories. These included respondents who indicated they had twins (11), had three or more children (44), had more than 2 children under age 5 (39), had a special needs child (8), were a single parent (10), or indicated all children were adults (47). Some of these categories were coded using age data. Parents with twins and those with children under 2 years of age were coded according to questions regarding childrens' ages. Those with three or more children were coded as such for all with 3-6 children. Special needs and single parent data was coded by reading free-form data entries in comments and other areas, therefore it is not comprehensive and some who are in fact in these categories might not be coded as such.

Demographic questions asked included the age and race of the respondent. Most (69%) were between 30-45 years of age and 27% were over the age of 45. Only 2% were between 18-30 years of age. Two chose "Prefer not to answer" and three others did not answer the question. In the race question, respondents could indicate multiple races. Of our survey respondents, 89% indicated that they identified at least partially as white, 4% identified as Hispanic, Latino, Latina, or Latinx, 3% identified as Asian or Asian American, 2% indicated they were Black or African American and another 2% indicated American Indian or Alaska Native. One respondent selected

Middle Eastern or North African and one respondent selected “Other” and indicated Jewish ancestry. Of all the respondents that participated in the survey only 4% did not report their race.

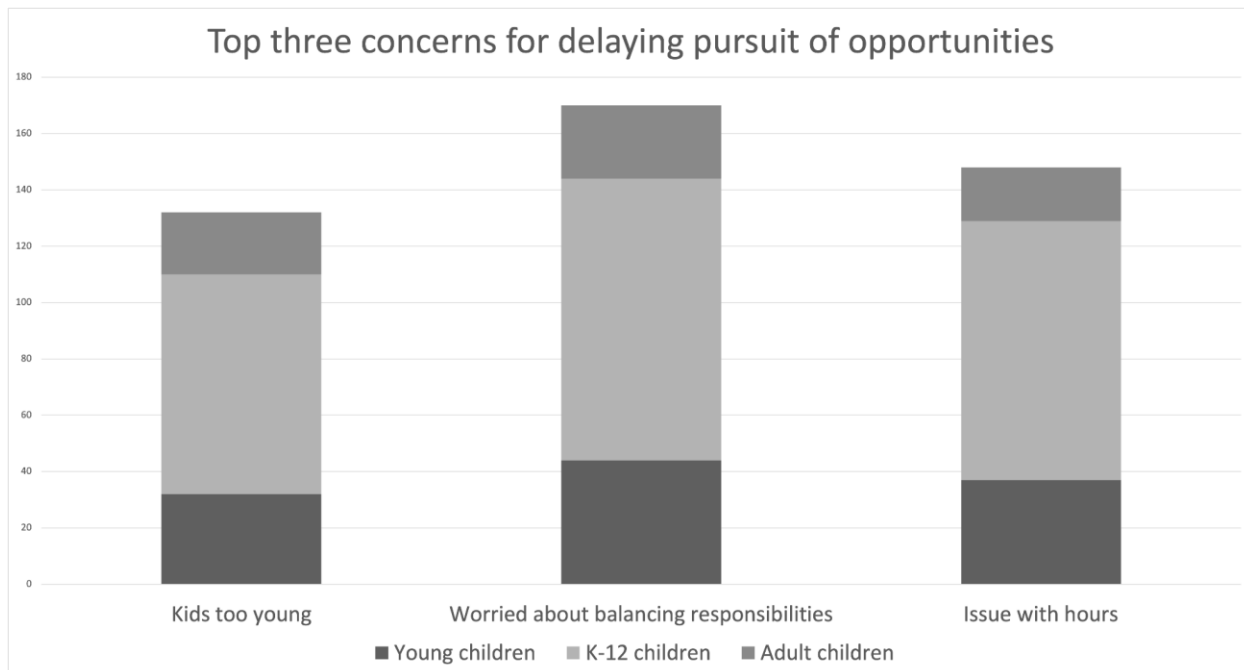
Three-hundred and ninety-one (391) of the participants responded to the question on whether or not they had delayed career opportunities due to status as a parent. Among the answers to this question, 66% of the respondents indicated that they had delayed opportunities. Most (66%) indicated that they had concern about balancing children and increased responsibility and/or had concern about longer hours that would affect childcare responsibilities (58%). More than half (52%) felt that their children had been or were too young. Roughly a third (31%) selected that they had a lack of support in their personal life or were not able to relocate (29%). Another 12% indicated that in their experience the culture of the new potential employer or job was not supportive enough of mothers. Few (7%) felt that they would be judged by family, friends, or colleagues, or perceived as too ambitious. Twelve percent (12%) also indicated other reasons such as their partner’s career, continuity of schooling or concern about reliable or affordable childcare/daycare in the new location, pregnancy and inability to travel, children with special needs, and single parent status. Three indicated other reasons that mentioned scholarship and research productivity. One of these indicated the exhaustion that prevented them from submitting an article manuscript. Another mentioned a tenure postponement that “means my opportunity to receive a salary increase (and subsequent capitalized percent increases toward retirement) was delayed a year.”

One of the core questions of the authors’ research was whether or not the age of children affected the reasons for delaying career opportunities. As parents with young children, the authors expected to see the challenges and delays represented more for parents managing childcare responsibilities for infants, toddlers, and preschool aged children, however, the data indicated different trends. Of those with very young children (under 5 years of age), 58% indicated they had delayed opportunities compared to 69% of those with K-12 age children and 76% of those with grown children. It is possible that those with grown children, and also K-12 age children, may have had more opportunity and time to reflect on delays they might have encountered in their career growth due to family responsibilities.



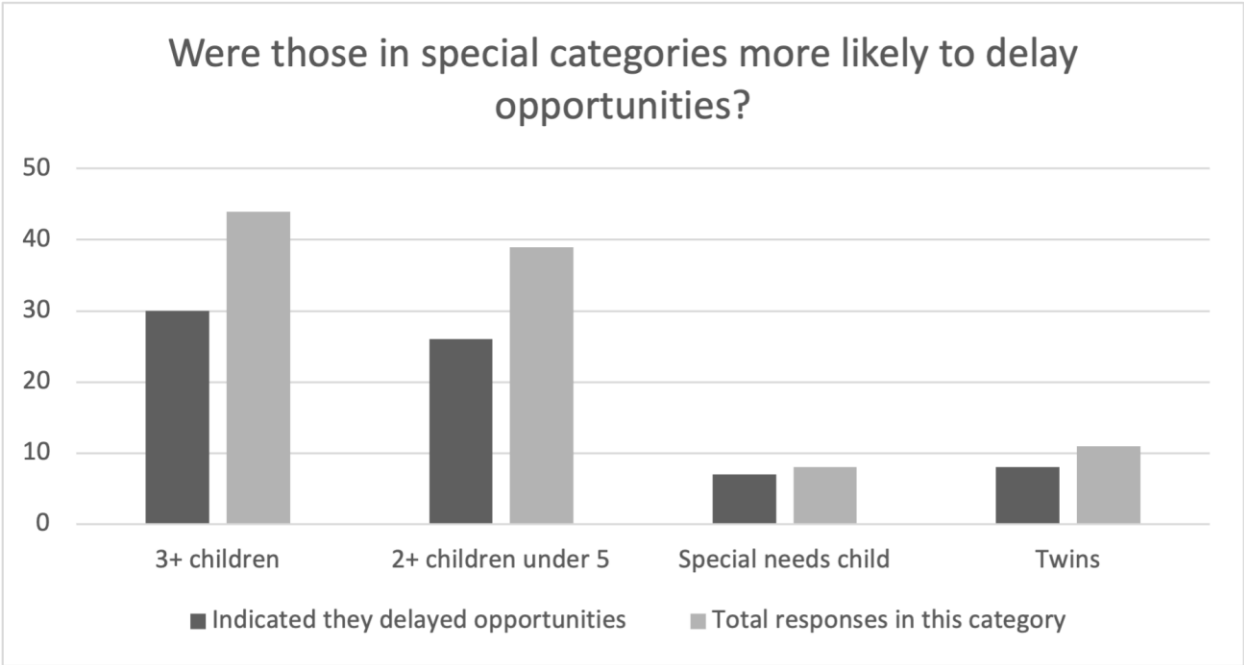
Graph 2: Age of Children’s Effect on Delaying Opportunities

This trend continued when comparing the top three concerns for delaying opportunities across age groups of respondents’ children. The older their children were, the more likely respondents were to indicate they delayed either because of the young age of their children or the ability to balance new work duties with family responsibilities. Hours were the biggest concern for those with children in K-12 schools (63% compared to 53% of concern from parents of grown or young children). Those with K-12 school age children were also more likely to delay opportunities within the K-12 age group at 73%, possibly due to challenges managing or organizing before and after school care for shortened school days compared to standard business hours.



Graph 3: Top 3 Concerns Related to Children that Led to Delayed Opportunities

We also examined whether or not those in what we coded as special categories were more likely to delay opportunities. Those with three or more children or more than two children under the age of five were only slightly more likely to delay career opportunities than all of the responses on average (68% and 67% respectively compared to 66% on average). Those with twins were much more likely to delay opportunities (73% compared to 66% on average) and nearly all respondents with special needs children were likely to delay opportunities (88% or seven out of eight respondents). This last category is unlikely to be generalizable, as the mentions of special needs children were pulled out of free-form text answers. Some respondents may not have indicated that they had a special needs child. Additionally, there were simply not enough responses to draw clear conclusions about this category.



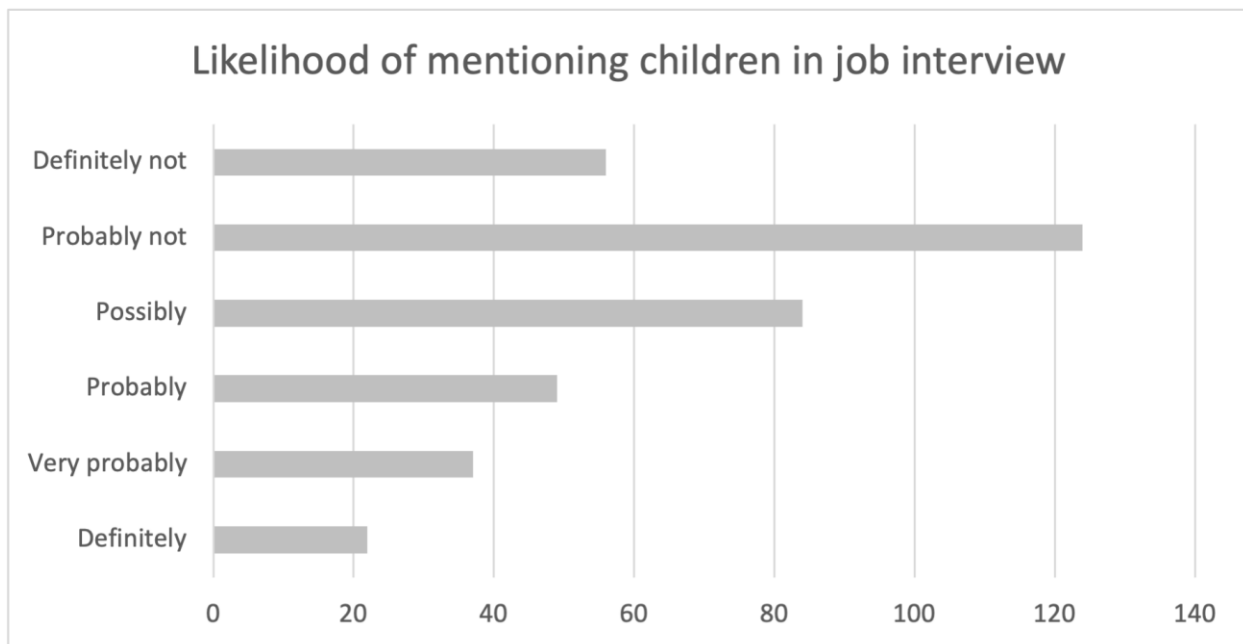
Graph 4: Special Categories and Delayed Opportunities

Of the respondents that answered the question related to delaying career opportunities due to childcare responsibilities, 34% of the respondents answered that they had never delayed a career opportunity because of childcare responsibilities. The top three reasons for not delaying included that they felt they could work the necessary hours for the new opportunity, whether at a new job, a new employer, or with increased responsibility in the current position (41%), and that they felt well-supported as a mother by the employer and at home (both 40%). Some had not found opportunities that were appealing to them (16%), others felt that they were either comfortable relocating or that their children were old enough when the opportunity presented itself (both 13%), 12% stated that they had not been interested in new career opportunities. Twenty-five (19%) respondents wrote in other responses for why they had not delayed opportunities. Many also indicated that their partners’ careers had taken precedence, thus they did not apply for new opportunities, however in some cases the opposite was stated - that the partner, the main caregiver or stay-at-home parent was supportive of the respondent’s job taking priority. Some had successes even during pregnancy with one getting promoted shortly before going on maternity leave. Others indicated that they delayed having children to allow for their career to be established. One respondent states, “Honestly the only answer is: Because I wasn’t willing to delay. Whether I felt supported or not, my career was my priority. I actually delayed motherhood until my late 30s specifically so that I could advance my career first before having children.”

Three-hundred and eighty-one (381) respondents answered a question about who at their place of work were aware that they had children. Most shared this information with their supervisors and with their peers (97%). Those who shared with people they supervised was less (72%), however, this question was not appropriately qualified. Perhaps the remaining 28% did not supervise anyone and could therefore not indicate whether or not it was meaningful that they did not share with that group.

Most of our respondents (83% in total) mentioned their children at work at least weekly, if not a few times a week or daily. Only 7% mentioned their children monthly and 9% very occasionally. Two respondents (1%) never mentioned their children at work.

Respondents were not as open about their parental status in job interviews. 48% indicated they would probably or definitely not mention their children in a job interview. An additional 23% would only possibly mention them. A total of 29% would probably (13%), very probably (10%), or definitely (6%) mention their children. Many respondents mentioned the laws or guidelines forbidding search committees or hiring managers from asking about marital or parental status.



Graph 5: Likelihood of Mentioning Children in Job Interview

Those who were more likely to mention their children in job interviews had myriad reasons. Some felt it would be an asset due to the role of the job, such as a children's librarian. Others felt that representing their "authentic self", their need for work-life balance, or need for flexibility were important topics to broach with a potential employer. One states "the most important thing I have done in my entire life is raise my children" while another mentions "the central role parenthood has in my life." One respondent who chooses to test the environment where they are interviewing says, "I am more than my work and more than my motherhood." Many respondents indicated that they would not take a job where the environment was perceived as unwelcoming to parents.

Respondents who were unlikely to mention their children in a job interview and chose "Definitely not", "Probably not," and "possibly" mentioned several themes. Many felt that having children, especially young ones, might be seen as disadvantageous by search committees and hiring managers, and that they might be viewed as less able to do the job or less committed. Many felt that the institution would look poorly upon time off needed for caregiving responsibilities and might also have bias towards mothers as women are often seen as the main caregivers, regardless of actual situations. One stated that "I want to be judged on my capabilities, not my family" and another felt that the job interview is the "time to discuss merits as a professional." One respondent talks about the majority of childless library workers and not wanting a search committee to judge their abilities should parenthood be viewed negatively. A few respondents shared details about needing to pump during interviews; some pumped in secret in bathrooms and others asked for accommodations, but were particular about sharing with the fewest people necessary. One respondent, who probably would not mention children in a job interview, talked about the irony of not wanting to share for fear of being perceived as less dedicated, but also wanting to find out if the culture was family-friendly.

A number of respondents described particular situations where they did feel passed over because of pregnancy. One states:

I am not going to put myself in a position where people will label me unfit because of my duties as a mother. It has happened to me in the past (I interviewed while very visibly pregnant) and was told later, in confidence, that this was the reason I was passed over.

Another described a particularly intrusive interview experience while pregnant:

As for academic libraries, I interviewed at an academic library and I [was] 6 months pregnant so I was visibly pregnant. They kept asking me if I had children and I said no. They kept telling me how this job was demanding and would require me to work evenings and weekends and not good for people with other priorities. At the dinner, they kept offering [me] alcohol to which I refused (I don't drink but I was also pregnant). I was not

offered that job but I would not have taken it because I feel like they would have not been supportive of me as a mother.

Many respondents worried about bias in a job interview if their motherhood was discovered. One states that “in my previous job, an administrator discouraged me from applying for more responsible positions by saying that I had ‘the right job size for how old my kids are.’” Another describes a situation where they were “told there was no way I could do my job and have a kid under 2.” A last example from one respondent detailed a negative comment during an interview that led them to no longer offer this information in similar settings:

In my last job interview, I very casually mentioned I have a child through telling a story about a past job I held. At the very end of a very good interview, a male interviewee said “Well, we really think your experience and drive is a perfect fit, but I’m not sure how you would balance this job with being a single mother.” I was flabbergasted, insulted, and angry. I was offered the position, and I was very close to turning it down because of that interaction.

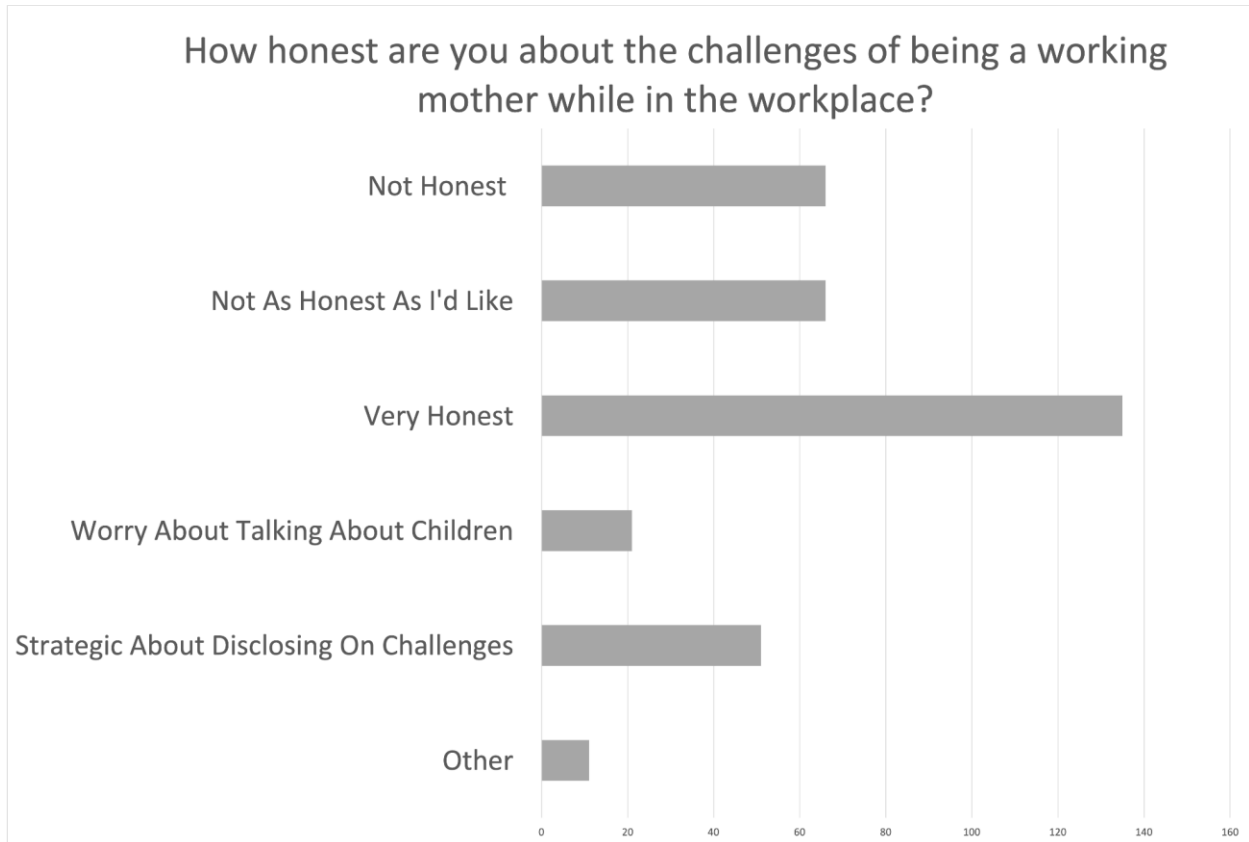
Qualitative Analysis

As this is an exploratory study, an inductive, ground-up, coding approach was used to code and analyze qualitative responses. For the unique questions that allowed respondents to provide open text responses, the initial round of coding data used verbatim coding to code group responses for further analysis. Verbatim coding uses respondent’s own words to devise codes for qualitative responses. After the first-round pass of coding, the codes were used to generate categories and subcodes, then thematic analysis coding was used to further analyze data and discover patterns across data collected.

Since this research hopes to shed light on the difficulties women have as working parents, we have intentionally highlighted all the work women undertake in obscuring their challenges as working parents due to fear of being perceived as less than capable. There is so much that is not discussed and still thought to be taboo about expressing difficulty and/or challenges that come with being a working mother. Because women have done the work of caregiving while working full-time there is no evidence of how ubiquitous these challenges are for working parents.

When asked how honest respondents are about the challenges of being a working mother 132 respondents answered ‘Not Honest’ or ‘Not as honest as I’d like’, while 135 responded ‘Very Honest’. Some 51 respondents revealed they used some form of strategy

when disclosing challenges that they experience as a working mother, (i.e., only disclosing challenges to other parents or women, never mentioning challenges to supervisors); and 21 respondents answered that they worry about talking about children too much or did not want to be perceived as a complainer.



Graph 6: Honesty Scale about Challenges of Working Mothers

Respondents who offered responses to how honest they were about the challenges of being a working mother while in the workplace answered very honest, which ranged from “honest” to “very honest” to “VERY!”, with some reporting that they “don’t talk about it much” or “not very”; some respondents provided elaborate details on why they felt they could be honest including statements such as: “everyone in the department is a parent”, “flexible time off and scheduling”, and “the library director has made it clear that staff should take care of family first.”

Women who responded either ‘Not honest’ or ‘Not as honest as I’d like to be’ provided comments such as “Fairly honest, but very uncomfortable sharing those challenges with supervisors”, “Only somewhat, I am afraid of undermining my own success”, and one respondent divulged that they “hesitated” to accept “the full support accommodations” their

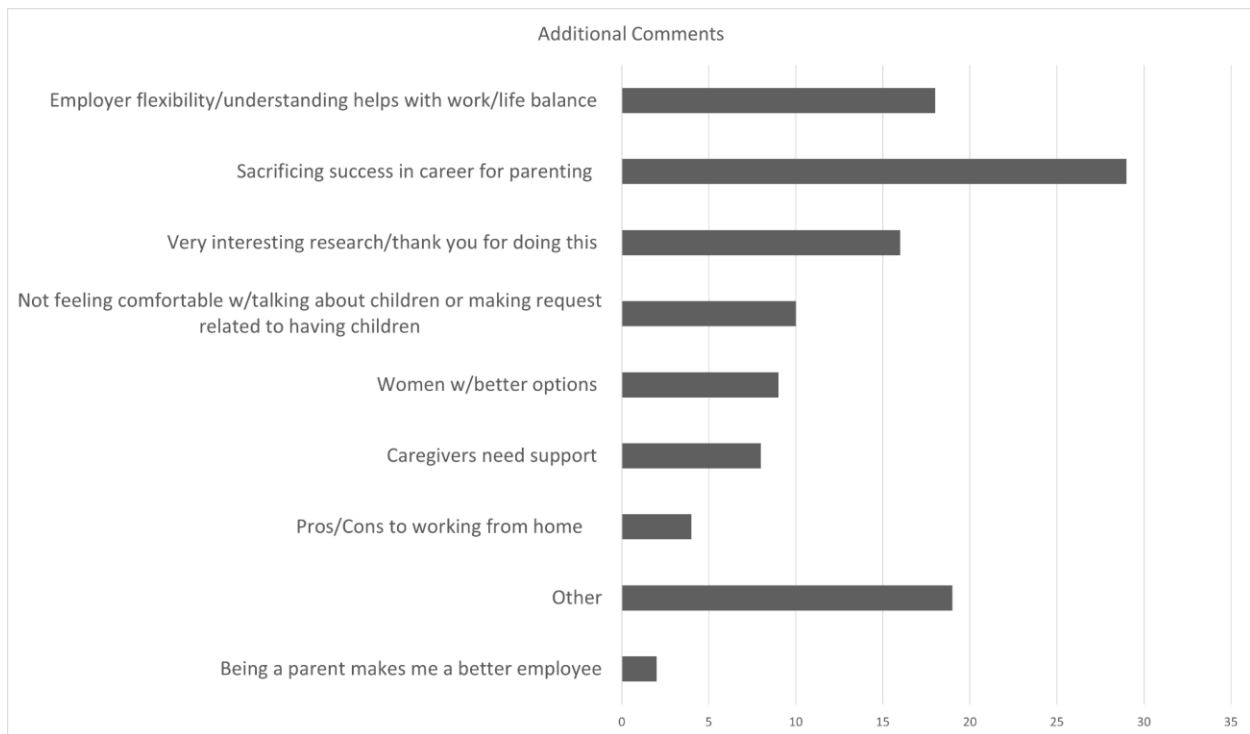
employer made available during a global crisis because they didn't want people at work to know how much they were struggling. Clearly, many working mothers in libraries believe that they cannot be honest about the challenges they face in the workplace.

From the responses gathered it is clear that some of the women surveyed feel that they work in a supportive environment where they can discuss the challenges of being a working mother and expect to receive reasonable accommodations for their schedules or meeting their parental obligations. Still, there were many women surveyed who did not feel they should even mention their children or their parental obligations too often or it could affect their current employment and/or future employment opportunities.

Common Themes Emerging from Extra Comments

Out of 395 eligible responses, there were 115 comments entered into the open text 'Additional Comments' field. The same ground-up, coding method was used to code responses for Question 13. A good number of responses provided additional comments and anecdotes specific to their experience or simply offered "none, thank you" in this field. Other responses spoke directly to the need for employer flexibility/understanding or presented cases where women felt the need to sacrifice their career and/or neglect their parental obligations.

A major theme that was revealed from responses coded under category 6 'Caregivers need support' was the disproportionate burden women are expected to handle as caregivers in addition to full-time workloads. Respondents were very clear in their declarations that caregivers need support. Two respondents stress that working mothers require support since caregiving responsibilities, for children as well as aging parents, often fall to women. One respondent included that working mothers do not have "wives" at home to care for their children. Another respondent acknowledged that caregiving can be challenging for any working parent, but also noted that a majority of libraries are staffed mostly by women, offering low salaries and inflexible schedules. It is this combination of untenable circumstances that libraries must address.



Graph 7: Overarching themes from coded open comment question

Even women who reported being honest at work about the challenges that come with being a working parent seemed to be reluctant in requesting support due to how it may be perceived as well as burdening others with work that may get transferred. Some respondents even reported doing additional work so they would not be perceived as incapable or observed doing less because they are parents. In a very poignant response one participant wrote that they do not continue to divulge the challenges of being a working mother because it seems that no one cares. They added that particularly among librarians “...children are viewed as an inconvenience and that it was ‘my choice’ to have a child.” The respondent believes that their colleagues do not feel a need to provide professional support because the challenges that come with childrearing is a self-created problem.

Some participants in the study acknowledged the difficulties of parenthood while holding management level positions or aspiring to management level positions. They debunked the concept that parents have to choose one or the other in the interest of work-life balance; many reported that setting boundaries and modeling positive work-life balance was not only beneficial to them, but also stands to benefit their peers and subordinates.

Discussion

The United States is the only industrialized country that provides little to no support for working parents or employers to provide programs that support working parents.²⁵ In the general workplace outside of and including libraries, the lack of societal structures and support can leave working mothers to be perceived as burdens to employers. Women who take parental leave may perceive their employers and colleagues are left with the sense that they are responsible for filling the void left when a mother takes parental leave. This can potentially cultivate animosity and perpetuate the sense that it is the women's choice to leave her duties for someone else to complete. Without more discussion on the challenges working mothers face (as well as all caregivers) and until more awareness and societal responsibility is developed, working mothers will continue to bear this burden for society. More open discussions on the role society and employers play in supporting working mothers is needed so that solutions can be proposed and shifts in cultures in addition to legislation can happen once again.

At the very least, women should feel they can talk about issues and/or challenges related to parenting in their work environments, without shame or guilt. Colleagues will never feel any obligation to develop a better understanding of what is required to balance the demands of work and home if working mothers continue to feel the topic of raising children is taboo. Also, leaders of organizations will have little understanding of their role in making change or shifting work culture if working mothers do not feel comfortable sharing the challenges of being a working parent. One respondent makes it clear that having a "boss with kids" makes a big difference:

I think that juggling parenting and professional responsibilities is a mixed bag. I find co-workers who are parents tend to "get it," though not all of them are sympathetic. It really depends on the culture and personality of the individual co-worker. Some co-workers who are not parents are less understanding of the challenges, though others are OK. It helps to have a boss with kids - or short for that one who is really into their dog or cat (a living being they actively care for!).

Initially, the authors intended to map the age of women's children to their responses, especially responses on whether or not these women delayed career opportunities. This was not

²⁵ Barbara Gault, Heidi Hartmann, Ariane Hegewisch, Jessica Milli, and Lindsey Reichlin, "Paid Parental Leave in the United States: What the data tells us about access, usage, and economic and health benefits," *Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR)*, 2014, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34540.3>; Landivar, *Mothers at Work*, 184.

a clear cut conclusion from the data once the authors started delving into the specifics of answers based on age groupings. Trends appeared to indicate that women who had older children were more likely to indicate that the ages of their children and childcare responsibilities were a factor in delaying opportunities. The reason for this trend could be multifold. Women of older children may have had less liberal policies in their workplace earlier in their career. This is in line with the research conducted by Landivar and Ruppner et al.²⁶ It could also indicate that some of the respondents had time to reflect on the challenges from past experiences and were more likely to notice trends across their careers after becoming mothers. Challenges for working mothers may ebb and flow; certain developmental milestones, ages, schooling and childcare circumstances may have impacted the reasons that so many of these women delayed opportunity.

Many of the free-form responses also mentioned that their experiences largely depended on the flexibility of the structures around them. This might be their workplace, the system in which it operates, or their interactions with their individual supervisor. Those who were in unsupportive environments were much more likely to feel the challenges of pursuing internal advancement opportunities, if not external ones as well.

One unexpected discovery that the authors were surprised by was that far more women of K-12 school age children delayed pursuing career opportunities more than women with younger, preschool or daycare age children (69% of mothers with children over age of 5 indicated they had delayed opportunities opposed to 58% of mothers with children under age 5). Speculatively, we could estimate that this is due to a lack of childcare as public school in most places across the U. S. ends at 3pm, while preschool often extends through 6pm. Or, that these mothers had more time as a mother to experience delays and challenges than their peers with younger children might have had.

Both of the authors are mothers of young children. Frequently discussions are had about bias faced in the profession and workplace and the exhaustion of being career-driven while raising small children. It was these very experiences that drove the authors to pursue this research. It was validating to see that others may hesitate to pursue opportunities or may simply be overwhelmed by trying to balance work and life.

²⁶ Landivar, *Mothers at Work*, 13; Ruppner, "How do Gender Norms and Childcare Costs Affect Maternal Employment Across US States?"

Further Research

There are many areas of further research this study reveals that could and should be investigated. One respondent suggested the inclusion of men with children as a comparator to determine if sex continues to have an impact on career progression and work-life balance. Those identifying as non-binary were also not addressed in our study, rather those who had a chosen gender of female. Another respondent felt that the questions did not take into consideration the challenges for single parents explicitly. This is another factor that certainly would affect parents' choices to pursue new career opportunities and one that requires additional focus. Single parents were identified in a special category based on free-form self-reported text. There was not an explicit question about this.

Another potential research question that came out of the findings from this study is why respondents with school age children delayed pursuing career advancement at higher rates than working mothers of younger, infant aged children? Understanding the reasons that working mothers delay pursuing career opportunities at different ages in their children's lives could help potential mothers better prepare for the career and future they hoped for when pursuing education, advanced training, and/or guidance from mentors.

The COVID19 pandemic disrupted parents across the United States starting in March 2020. Many mentioned COVID and the pandemic as having a significant effect on their work-life balance and childcare responsibilities. Of the 395 responses, 56 mentioned the pandemic in their free-form responses (14%). Although the authors began this research before 2020, conducting this research during a pandemic certainly had an impact on the responses received whether that was joy to have more time with their children, relief or frustration depending on the flexibility and accommodations offered by their employers, or overall stress of having a job while navigating a pandemic. The field would benefit from more research on the effects of the pandemic on working mothers, both in and outside of libraries.

Conclusion

In summary, the responses from working mothers in libraries gathered in this survey provide an exploratory understanding of the challenges posed by full-time employment, raising children, and in some instances deciding when to pursue career opportunities. The competing interests women reported rarely lend encouragement or the confidence to strive toward the goals they are interested in achieving. If adequate support and flexibility are needed, which was repeated by respondents as well as the literature time and time again, for women to undertake new, higher-level opportunities, how do women get the reassurance needed to succeed?

Our survey results reveal that the majority of respondents do not feel comfortable revealing the fact that they are parents to their potential future colleagues when interviewing for a job (48% responded probably or definitely not mention, 23% responded possibly mention). This leaves most working mothers in the terrible predicament of walking into unknown work environments, without any indication of whether or not they will receive the kind of support they need. To compound an already untenable situation, many American workers feel burdened when women take parental leave because there aren't structures in place to hire temporary workers or job sharing programs to fill in for parents or caretakers (who most often are women) that use available resources like leave. This only applies to fortunate workers that have parental leave at their disposal.

Having structures in place which allow American women (as well as men and those identifying as non-binary) to take much needed additional parental leave to care for newborn infants, newly adopted children, ill children or other vulnerable/in need family would require further action by the federal government. Without societal structures like this in place to guarantee reasonable or adequate time off for working mothers, such individuals are left dependent on the culture and structure of the American workplace. This is the primary reason why so many respondents in this survey reported that they were very hesitant to request support due to the perception of others in their workplace.

To reiterate, the authors believe that more open discussion on the role society and employers play in supporting working mothers is needed to shift what Americans believe is culturally normal and beneficial to society as a whole. Refusing to discuss such topics will ensure that Americans continue to pretend that this is a problem for individual women to solve for themselves and prevents American culture and society from evolving in helpful ways to develop real solutions to the issues working mothers face.

Appendix 1: Survey

1. Do you have children? Yes/No*
2. Do you identify as female? Yes/No*
3. Are you located in the United States or a United States territory? Yes/No*
4. Do you work in a library? Yes/No*
 - a. What kind of library?
 - i. Academic library
 - ii. Public library
 - iii. School library

- iv. Special library
 - v. Other _____
5. How many children do you have and how old are they?
6. What is your age?
- a. 18-30 years
 - b. 30-45 years
 - c. 45+
 - d. Prefer not to answer
7. Which category describes you? *Select all boxes that apply. Note, you may select more than one group.*
- a. Asian Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian or Asian American
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Hispanic, Latino, Latina, or Latinx
 - e. Middle Eastern or North African
 - f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - g. White
 - h. Another option not listed here (please specify): _____
 - i. Prefer not to answer
8. Have you ever delayed a career opportunity because of childcare responsibilities?
- Yes/No
- a. You selected Yes. What were your reasons to delay? *Select all boxes that apply.*
 - i. My children were too young
 - ii. Concern about balancing children and increased responsibility at work
 - iii. Concern about longer hours that would affect childcare responsibilities
 - iv. Lack of support in my personal life
 - v. Career opportunity was at a place (whether current or future) where I did not feel mothers were accepted/supported
 - vi. The opportunity required relocation and I wasn't able to move
 - vii. I felt that I would be judged by family, friends, or colleagues, or be perceived as too ambitious
 - viii. Other _____
 - b. You stated that you never delayed a career opportunity because of childcare responsibilities. Why? *Select all boxes that apply.*

- i. I haven't been interested in new career opportunities.
- ii. I haven't found new career opportunities that were appealing to me
- iii. My children were old enough when the opportunity presented itself
- iv. I felt that I could work the necessary hours for the new opportunity
- v. I felt well-supported as a mother at home
- vi. I felt well-supported as a mother at the workplace where the job or opportunity was
- vii. I was comfortable relocating.
- viii. Other _____

9. Who of your colleagues at work are aware that you have children? *Select all boxes that apply.*

- a. Supervisor(s)
- b. People who you supervise
- c. Peers in similar positions
- d. No one
 - i. (when "No one" is selected) Why are your colleagues unaware that you have children?

10. How frequently do you mention your children in conversations at work?

- a. Daily
- b. A few times a week
- c. Weekly
- d. Monthly
- e. Very occasionally
- f. Never

11. How honest are you about the challenges of being a working mother while in the workplace?

12. How likely are you to talk about your children in a job interview?

- a. Definitely
- b. Very probably
- c. Probably
- d. Possibly
- e. Probably not
- f. Definitely not

- i. Please elaborate on your selection for how likely you are to talk about your children in a job interview. Why did you select the option you selected?

13. Additional comments:

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