

# MODERN FAMILY INDEX 2017

## NEW RESEARCH: "MENTAL LOAD" FELT BY MOTHERS IS REAL AND HAVING A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT AT HOME AND AT WORK

### WHAT IS THE MENTAL LOAD?

A child's school day isn't just about the physical jobs of pick-up and drop-off. It's also about the perpetual mental awareness of schedules including early release days, carpools, doctor's appointments, play dates, special events, field trips, class parties, science fairs, who needs to bring what, and which day requires special supplies. And those are only some of the items on the family list that require a working mother's constant mental presence. The mind share versus time share equation is at the heart of the mental load — the requirement on women to be not just parents and caretakers, but also unofficial keepers of where the entire family needs to be and when, and perpetual guardians against anything falling through the cracks.



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# BREADWINNING MOMS: DOING IT ALL

Working mothers have been steadily gaining ground as nearly half of family breadwinners<sup>1</sup>. But new research shows that even as women catch up to men as family earners and actually outpace them in academic achievement, they continue to bear a disproportionate portion of household and parenting responsibilities, driving many to admit they're suffering from a continuously compounding "mental load."

Parent responses to the 2017 Modern Family Index, commissioned by **Bright Horizons**<sup>®</sup> and conducted by Kelton Global, show women are two times more likely to be managing the household and three times more likely to be managing children's schedules. More than just responsible for their half of the parenting and household duties, these working mothers are also organizing, reminding, and planning everything else. And surprisingly, the household responsibilities only increase when women are bringing home the primary paycheck:

- Breadwinning women in married households are three times more likely than breadwinning fathers to be keeper of their children's schedules and ensuring that they get to all activities and appointments (76% vs. 22%)
- They're three times more likely to volunteer at school (63% vs. 19%)
- They're nearly twice as likely to make sure all family responsibilities are handled (71% vs. 38%)

While much anecdotal evidence of "mental load" exists, the 2017 Modern Family Index offers the first data showing the effects on women are real. Most working mothers in the study — 86% — say they handle the majority of the family and household responsibilities; not just making appointments, but also driving to them and mentally calendaring who needs to be where, and when.

And the load adds up to more than a problem for women. Deep-seated gender roles are costly across the board, holding women back at work in the short term, and compromising women's growth across whole careers. For employers in the midst of a talent shortage, there's a real risk to talent pipelines as valuable female employees carry this mental load with them to work — giving employers good reason to become part of the solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Wang, Kim Parker, Paul Taylor, Breadwinner Moms, Pew Research Center, May 29, 2013

# NEW MILLENNIUM, OLD STEREOTYPES

The 21st century was supposed to usher in a new era for professional women, but data from the 2017 Modern Family Index shows the old era still stubbornly hanging on. Women and men may be working side-by-side as nearly equal parts of the workforce; but workplace cultures that continue to favor men as employees and women as mothers unintentionally keep the household responsibilities squarely in women's camp — even as they carry a full professional load. Two decades into the new era, women are not only breadwinning and managing the bulk of household tasks; they're also more likely to be doing those tasks as well.

- 72% of women feel it's their job to stay on top of kids' schedules, vs. 22% of fathers
- 63% have missed work to take care of their children when they are sick or when school is closed, vs. 29% of men
- 59% say they make sure all household responsibilities are handled, vs. 32% of men

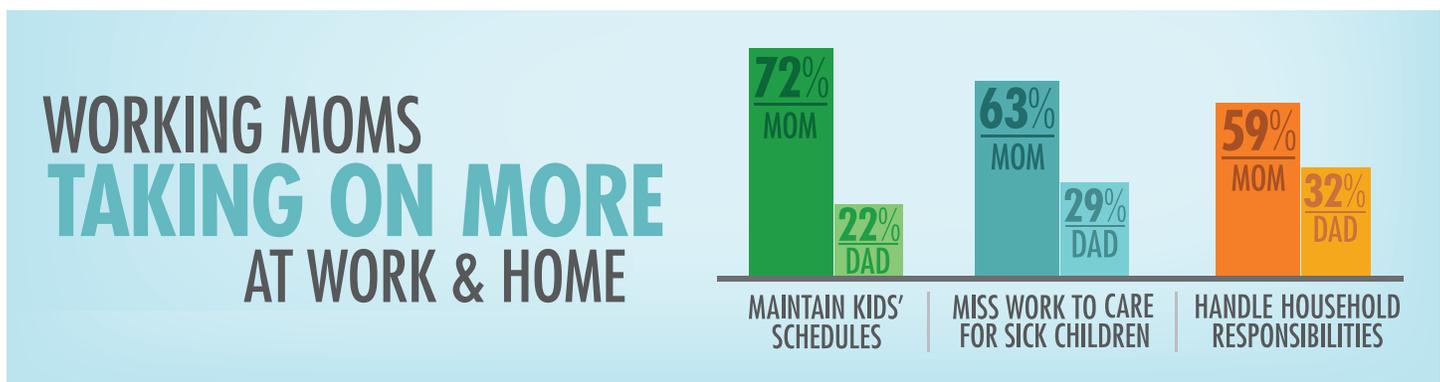
## WHAT WOMEN WANT

The conversation comes at a time when it's clear that working mothers need and want to progress professionally. Of women in this year's survey:

- 72% see work as a way to provide for their family
- 50% feel they're setting an example for their children

## NOT *HAVING* IT ALL...*HAVING TO DO* IT ALL

At the same time, these career-minded women remain overburdened by family responsibilities. And the burden only grows with the paycheck. A record 40% of families have female breadwinners<sup>2</sup>, and even those primary earners are roughly twice as likely as men to handle all household responsibilities. In fact, for working mothers, more work at the office means more responsibility at home, too, with female primary earners taking on even more household jobs than mothers overall.



<sup>2</sup> Wendy Wang, Kim Parker, Paul Taylor, Breadwinner Moms, Pew Research Center, May 29, 2013

Primary breadwinning women are:

- 34% more likely than other working mothers to manage the family finances (71% vs. 53%)
- 63% more likely than other working mothers to maintain the yard (31% vs. 19%)
- 30% more likely than other working mothers to organize family vacations and family gatherings (73% vs. 56%)
- 38% more likely than other working mothers to take care of home maintenance (33% vs. 24%)

## DIFFERENT RULES FOR MEN

But the same rules don't apply to men, with male Modern Family Index breadwinners more than three times less likely to stay on top of the family's schedules. Perhaps that's because fathers continue to be penalized at work for taking care of issues at home, leaving mothers with both the personal and professional heavy lifting.

Compared to female breadwinners, male breadwinners are:

- Nearly half as likely to care for children when they're sick or off from school (23% vs. 49%)
- Less than three times as likely to register their children for afterschool activities (22% vs. 76%)
- More than half as likely to perform household tasks (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping)

## WEIGHED DOWN BY THE LOAD

The result? In this second decade of the new century, the number of women who find maintaining a work/life balance stressful rose from 44% in the 2015 Modern Family Index to 50% today. And the data show the weight of household responsibilities is taking a clear toll, with nearly three in five women saying they're thinking about such tasks even while they're at work.

- 69% of working moms say the household responsibilities create a mental load
- 52% are burning out from the weight of their household responsibilities



# WHAT ABOUT FATHERS?

It's not just a problem for mothers. Women may bear the brunt of the load, but over and over, data from the Modern Family Index shows modern dads want to help, but are similarly hamstrung by equal and opposite professional expectations; namely workplace cultures that subtly sustain gender stereotypes by supporting women as caregivers and men as employees. Women taking time away from work for family commitments, for example, often raise fewer eyebrows than men, making women the family's obvious default choice for the bulk of family obligations.

## COMMITTED TO FAMILY

These same men are willing parenting partners, telling the 2015 Modern Family Index they desire family time; and that lack of it topped career worries as the reasons they burn out.

- 46% of working fathers said they ran out of steam due to lack of family time
- 27% burned out due to a difficult client or project

## BEST INTENTIONS THWARTED

Yet history has taught them to put career first, with dads telling the 2016 Modern Family Index that their professional stock tumbled at the mere suggestion of work/father conflicts.

- One in four working fathers believed that even the announcement of fatherhood caused employers to think less of them
- More than 25% felt at risk of being fired once they told their employer they were going to be a parent
- A third of new dads felt becoming a father limited opportunities for advancement

## EAGER TO PITCH IN

What's clear from 2017 responses is that today's working fathers are hungry for a sea change, weary of missing out on family events, and even more likely than working mothers to crave evolution.

- In 2017, working fathers are 9% more likely than working mothers to wish their employer offered more family flexibility
- They are 32% more likely than mothers to say they would give up a 10% raise for more family time



# SUPPORTING WOMEN: PRESERVING TALENT PIPELINES IN THE MODERN ERA

The fourth in a series, the 2017 Modern Family Index paints a clear picture not just of overburdened women; but of modern families bumping up against outdated workplace cultures that have failed to keep up with women's professional strides. And it presents more than just impacts for parents.

Year after year, Modern Family Index data has shown working mothers and fathers who want to be partners in parenting; who have expressed desires to break out of male breadwinner and other stereotypes — 90% of employed parents believe primary breadwinners can be a mother or father — yet who are held in place by organizational and societal structures that continue to support traditional roles. *“Men who seek work flexibility may be penalized more severely than women, because they're viewed as more feminine, deviating from their traditional role of fully committed breadwinners,”* wrote author and psychologist Darcy Lockman<sup>3</sup> recently in the Washington Post. The effect is men directed away from such programs, and so the preservation of mom-on-mental-overload arrangement — and the continuation of the status quo.

The stereotypes not only diminish women's contributions in the short run, but also stunt growth over whole careers. Indeed, in 2017, despite massive gains for women in earning college degrees, men continue to occupy roughly 80 percent of corner offices<sup>4</sup>, while women's workforce participation continued to slide<sup>5</sup>.

And the timing couldn't be worse. A widening skills gap and feverish competition for talent have made every employee critical. Worse is who is at risk — working mothers who, according to the CDC, are delaying childbirth until their 30s<sup>6</sup>, when they're in established leadership roles and so costly to lose. And it's not just women employers need to worry about; mothers and fathers in our 2016 Modern Family Index said that they would opt for a job that allows them to care for children, even if it meant a smaller paycheck.

Upending the order will require changing expectations. To allow women's and men's careers to flourish, employers will need to offer family-friendly benefits that appeal to both genders. Perhaps more importantly, they will need to ensure employees have equitable, gender-blind access to support. The goal is to change workplace cultures that quietly favor men as employees and women as mothers, and so to create environments and cultures in which mothers and fathers feel they can equally share the load.

## ABOUT THE BRIGHT HORIZONS MODERN FAMILY INDEX

The Modern Family Index is an internet-based survey conducted by Kelton Global from October 11 to October 20, 2017. The sample consisted of 2,082 employed Americans over the age of 18 with at least one child under the age of 18. The survey was conducted online and has a margin of error of +/- 2.2%. \*Note: Please refer to the survey as the Bright Horizons Modern Family Index.

<sup>3</sup> Darcy Lockman, “Where do kids learn to undervalue women? From their parents,” Washington Post, November 10, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Women in the Workplace 2017, McKinsey & Company, Lean In, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Bryce Covert, “The Best Era for Working Women Was 20 Years Ago,” New York Times, September 2, 2017

<sup>6</sup> Nora Caplan-Bricker, “For the First Time Ever, Thirty-Something Women Are Having More Babies Than Their Twenty-Something Counterparts,” Slate, May 17, 2017