

Study finds pregnant women feel pushed out of their jobs

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Many working women feel like they are being pushed out of their jobs when they become pregnant while new fathers often get a boost in their

careers, according to research from Florida State University.

Samantha Paustian-Underdahl, assistant professor of management at FSU's College of Business, studied two long-standing theories on why [mothers](#) are more likely to leave the workforce than fathers.

One suggests pregnant women feel "pushed out" of the [workplace](#). The second indicates moms decide for themselves during pregnancy to "opt out" because of changing personal and career values.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, confirmed inherent biases against [expectant mothers](#) that make them feel unwelcome in the workplace. This is the first study to show that women who feel pushed out of the workplace choose to opt out.

"We found that pregnant women experienced decreased career [encouragement](#) in the workplace only after they disclosed they were pregnant," Paustian-Underdahl said. "Once they told managers and co-workers, we saw a decline in career encouragement for women but an increase in career encouragement for men."

That kind of contrasting treatment between men and women in the workplace has been documented in past studies.

Known as the "motherhood penalty" and "fatherhood premium," researchers have attributed both to old cultural stereotypes that favor fathers as breadwinners and women as caregivers.

Labor statistics back up that financial contrast. When couples have children, women's salaries tend to go down while men's go up, yet little research has been able to pinpoint the causes of those wage differences.

Paustian-Underdahl's study is one of the first to compare pushed out and

opting out explanations.

Her findings indicate that as expectant moms receive reduced career encouragement at work, they experience lower motivation to stay with the organization or in the workforce. Fathers see the opposite effect. They get increased career encouragement from colleagues and managers and become more committed to their work.

Paustian-Underdahl also examined the opting-out perspective, which suggests working women with children become less motivated about their jobs so they decide to leave [careers](#) to focus on caregiving. Her research did not find examples of pregnant women becoming less enthusiastic about working.

"Contrary to expectations, career motivation increased for both men and women over the pregnancy," Paustian-Underdahl said. "We expected career motivation to decrease for mothers throughout pregnancy, but we found the opposite to be true."

The study found one exception to that opting-out perspective. If expectant mothers felt pushed out by an organization, then their career motivation dropped and they chose to leave their jobs.

"This is the first study to show that being pushed out can actually drive women to adopt an opting-out attitude," she said.

The research offers new ideas on how to treat pregnant women; primarily, workplaces should not reduce their career-related encouragement toward expectant mothers. In addition, managers should provide both fathers and mothers with social and career support to help them attain their work and family goals.

Paustian-Underdahl hopes her research prompts all workers to stop

making assumptions about men and [women](#) with children.

"If employers want to retain top talent, they should have honest conversations with employees about their career goals and plans, and then managers need to provide support to help employees achieve those goals," she said. "Organizations need to give their workers the encouragement they're looking for because, in this study, [pregnant women](#) really wanted [career](#) support, and they did not get it."

More information: Samantha C. Paustian-Underdahl et al. Pushed out or opting out? Integrating perspectives on gender differences in withdrawal attitudes during pregnancy., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000394](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000394)

Provided by Florida State University

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