

## Perceiving and Responding to Maternal Workplace Discrimination

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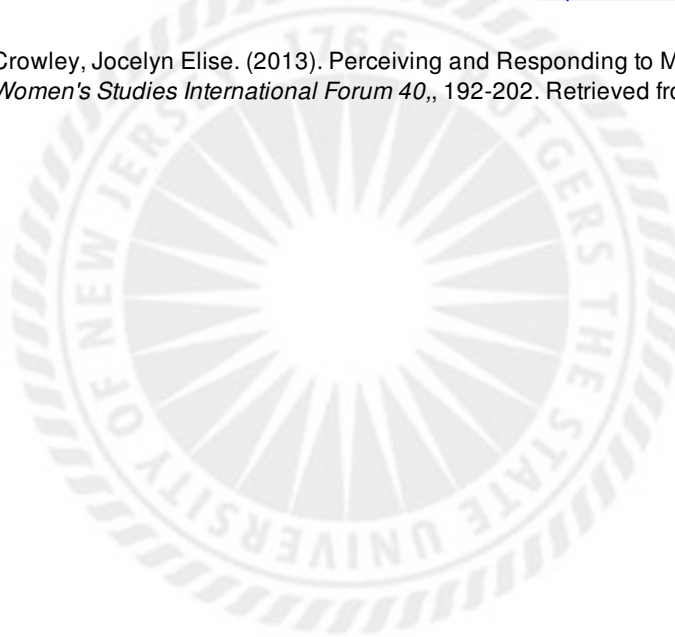
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## **Perceiving and Responding to Maternal Workplace Discrimination in the United States**

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**SYNOPSIS:**

Despite recent gains, mothers in the United States still face a set of challenges in achieving full equality in the labor market, including subjective discrimination, or perceived unfair treatment from their employers. Using original data from 54 qualitative interviews of predominantly middle class, heterosexual women involved in national mothers' groups, this analysis first finds that whether currently working for pay or not, mothers perceive and label a variety of past employment experiences as discriminatory. This is primarily because in their status as mothers, they are seen as not meeting the ideal worker standard of performance nor as capable as non-mothers by their employers. Mothers report events under the categories of moment of hire, on-the-job, and evaluations/promotions related bias, with on-the-job incidents most common. Second, this analysis builds on previous work that has focused on mothers' extreme reactions such as opting out of work completely and filing lawsuits by mapping out three, intermediate responses to this subjective discrimination: ambivalence, endurance, or confrontation. Endurance was the most frequently deployed response strategy overall and for each of the three categories of discrimination. None of these three strategies, unfortunately, functions to promote broad-based organizational reform that would integrate mothers more equitably into the workplace.

## **Introduction**

Over the past several decades, mothers have entered the American workforce at a rapid rate. In 1975, only 47.4 percent of all mothers with a child under the age of eighteen participated in the paid labor force. By 2011, this number had risen to 71.3 percent (BLS, 2012). Mothers of young children under the age of six also joined the ranks of the labor force in greater numbers than ever before, rising from 39 percent to 64.2 percent over the same time period (BLS, 2012). Yet, despite these gains, mothers still face significant barriers to achieving fundamental equality with non-mothers in the workplace across basic measures such as pay and upward career mobility opportunities (Baker, 2010; Blair-Loy, 2003).

Mothers' struggles are at least partly due to their not conforming to the highly gendered ideal worker imagery that is dominant in American society (Williams, 2000; Williams & Cohen Cooper, 2004). According to this vision of the employment world, certain categories of workers should be available to their employers twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week (Cha, 2010). But in women's status as mothers, employers judge them as not being able to meet these standards. Acknowledging the frustration of these mothers, researchers have focused on how these women cope in their use of two extreme strategies. They either opt-out of the workplace entirely if they are financially able (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004), or file discrimination lawsuits against their employers (Williams & Bornstein, 2006).

Understudied as of yet are not these extreme reactions but the range of intermediate responses that mothers execute on ground with their employers every day. That is, how do mothers navigate interactions with their employers when they perceive discrimination without leaving the workforce completely or filing lawsuits? This analysis proceeds as follows. After more fully defining the boundaries of the ideal worker standard and the status characteristic of

motherhood, I analyze the processes by which employers judge mothers based upon these expectations and how mothers may report perceived or subjective discrimination in reaction to this negative treatment. Here, I particularly address the stages of their careers in which mostly middle class and more advantaged mothers are most likely to report subjective discrimination. This article then further expands upon prior scholarship by developing a typology as to how mothers respond to these events and cope with their treatment in the short-run, when they are immediately confronted with unfair treatment and/or remain on the job. Although mothers' perspectives are only one piece of this employment-related puzzle, their own insights into the complexity of subjective discrimination and their responses can undoubtedly help identify possible solutions to these inequities (Naff, 1995).

### **The gendered ideal worker standard and the status characteristic of motherhood**

The ideal worker standard creates two sets of inescapable pressures on mothers in the United States. First, in the caregiving arena, the ideal worker norm creates an environment where parenting responsibilities do not exist; all that is important is that the job get done by someone who is never distracted by competing family demands (Cha, 2010; Jacobs & Gerson, 2005). Second, in the employment arena, the "perfect" ideal worker is an intrinsically able-bodied individual who can come from a variety of class backgrounds. Although sexual orientation is not specified, the ideal worker concept can exclude or marginalize non-whites due to employer discrimination (Williams, 2000). In many ways, then, the ideal worker standard is a particular type of disembodied masculine subject, unencumbered by family-related duties.

Employers hold this view of the ideal worker while at the same time operating with beliefs or expectations regarding certain categories of employees. Expectation states theory maintains that when groups of different people come together to work on a shared task, they will

search for cues as to whether to value, hold in esteem, and/or consider the viewpoints of other groups (Berger et al., 1977). They do so on the basis of status characteristics such as race, gender, and even motherhood (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Perhaps the most important implication of this theory is that individuals expect more competent task completion by those with positive status characteristics than those with negative status characteristics, regardless of actual performance. Motherhood, unfortunately, is a negative status characteristic as it relates to the workplace (Correll et al., 2007). In the United States today, intensive mothering philosophy mandates that all mothers put forth maximum effort into nurturing their children at the expense of their own employment interests (Hays, 1996). While feminists have critiqued this "essential motherhood" imagery (DiQuinzio, 1999; Young, 2005), it remains a powerful idea that can circumscribe women's full participation in the labor force (Faludi, 1991; Ginsburg & Tsing, 1990). Because of their primary caregiving responsibilities, then, mothers are simply assumed to perform less adequately in the workplace than other groups of workers and thus fall far short of the ideal worker norm.

### **Maternal discrimination in the workplace**

There are two central avenues of research that explore maternal discrimination in the workplace: scholarship from the employers' perspective and scholarship from the mothers' point of view. Research that investigates employers' actual behavior suggests that maternal discrimination in the workplace is real, and that it takes place across the career trajectory.<sup>1</sup> First, with respect to hiring decisions, employers may wonder about mothers' ability to get to work on time, take care of their children and adequately complete their job tasks, and their likelihood of getting pregnant (Correll et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2004). Second, employers may discriminate against pregnant women and mothers during their daily, on-the-job experiences, for example, by

questioning their need to take time off to care for their children (Benard & Correll, 2010; Cuddy et al., 2004; Etaugh & Folger, 1998; Halpert et al., 1993). Third, employers may discriminate against mothers in the areas of evaluation and promotion by speculating, for instance, about their true job commitment (Cuddy et al., 2004; Halpert et al., 1993). In addition, and again across mothers' career trajectories, some of this employer discrimination can be further broken down into more specific subcategories. For example, role incongruity stereotyping emerges when mothers are asked to choose parenthood or employment and not both; benevolent prescriptive stereotyping occurs when employers make “helpful” accommodations for mothers without directly asking them about their needs; attribution bias relates to assumptions regarding mothers' use of time on the job related to caregiving; leniency bias gives more room for non-mothers to make mistakes; and negative competency assumptions emerge when women are believed to become incompetent once they give birth (Williams & Bornstein, 2006).

Similarly, the majority of the literature on this topic from mothers' perspectives reflects this unfair treatment that results from employers' beliefs in the ideal worker norm and its incompatibility with the motherhood status characteristic. Numerous studies of middle class and professional women have repeatedly demonstrated that while women are attempting to make headway in their careers, they find it challenging to manage their families' needs (Blair-Loy, 2003; Stone, 2007). Facing inflexible work environments where their bosses make no allowances for their family circumstances, mothers struggle to keep up with their male peers. For those who want to move ahead, they must frequently take concrete and time-consuming steps, such as actively seeking out male mentors to guide them through the labyrinth of the promotion process (Roth, 2006).

Working class and poorer mothers face challenges as well, but in different forms (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Hays, 2003; Webber & Williams, 2008). Day care is extremely expensive, with employed women living below the poverty line paying 40% of their monthly family income toward care, and women living between the poverty line and 199% of the poverty line paying 17% of their monthly income on these services in 2010.<sup>2</sup> As an alternative, and in their attempts to conform to societal stereotypes of what a good mother should be, these women might elect to work shifts when their children do not rely on them, such as during the evenings. In this way, they can attend all of their children's events and functions while still earning a living. However, their physical health due to insufficient sleep and inadequate self-care might suffer as they struggle to satisfy all of the demands placed upon them (Garey, 1999). This can produce lower than average job performance, resulting in unfavorable employer evaluations. These mothers also might work diligently to obtain a job, but might end up employed in a sector of the economy that offers little in the way of benefits and time off. If they or their children become ill, and they consequently need time off to attend to these issues, they can be terminated from their jobs. They also might have difficulty paying for health care, with 39% of women living below the poverty line uninsured in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, turning to the government for income maintenance, food benefits, and medical assistance might be their only choice.

These studies all document mothers' struggles with balancing family and employment; however, it is also important to understand how mothers think about their career histories in their totality and what "counts" most prominently in their minds as subjective discrimination. When asked directly about the multiple stages of their work lives, are they equally as likely to cite examples of perceived discrimination across the areas of hiring, on-the-job, and



evaluations/promotions opportunities, or does one area stand out more than the others with respect to maltreatment?

A significant and related issue is how mothers cope with perceived discrimination over the short-run, meaning the immediate context of unfair treatment or while they are still on the job. Setting aside the extreme reactions of opting out of paid work or filing discrimination lawsuits, dealing with subjective discrimination takes effort, and not every person will respond in the same way to these types of events (Whitley & Kite, 2010). On one hand, there are many factors that favor a carefully measured approach. More specifically, there are psychological and potential financial costs to bringing up an issue related to perceived discrimination. Mothers may feel alienated and isolated from their colleagues who disapprove of such actions. In addition, mothers might be unsure as to whether the discrimination actually has taken place. In these situations, mothers may partially justify employer behavior in the context of their overall endorsement of reasonable business practices within a free market system that they can individually accept or reject. On the other hand, the perceived discrimination may be so egregious that mothers feel that they have no choice but to take an active approach. They can do so in a variety of ways to make their injustices heard with the perpetrators directly by speaking up or supporting their allies in doing so. In these cases, however, they risk their employers' potentially hostile rebuttals.

## **Methods**

This qualitative study is part of a larger project that randomly surveyed membership in mothers' organizations across the United States. I identified only five national mothers' organizations in the United States today that met the two criteria for selection into the study: 1) they maintain centralized lists of all of their members; and 2) their core organizing principle is

attracting and helping members primarily based on whether they currently work for pay (full and part-time), are transitioning between the home and paid work, or are staying at home with their children full-time (each group, however, contains mothers with all of these backgrounds). Each of these five groups participated in this study and produced lists that included survey-eligible members, or those mothers with valid email addresses. They include MomsRising (an online, highly policy-oriented group focusing on employment issues composed of mostly mothers who work for pay, including 168,786 survey-eligible members); Mocha Moms (an in-person group designed for stay-at-home mothers of color with 2,853 survey-eligible members); The National Association of Mothers' Centers (NAMC) (an in-person group that attracts both stay-at-home and mothers working for pay with 885 survey-eligible members); Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) (an in-person group that stresses Christian values among mostly stay-at-home mothers with 84,584 survey-eligible members); and Mothers & More (an in-person group that serves mothers transitioning in and out of paid work with 5,534 survey-eligible members).

After securing each group's membership list, I conducted a census of the smaller groups-- Mocha Moms, NAMC, and Mothers & More--and took a random sample of 5,000 members from the larger groups, MOPS and MomsRising. Each selected member was invited to participate in a web-based survey on issues related to participation in her mothers' group, attitudes toward workplace flexibility, and challenges of motherhood in general from April-June 2009.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the survey, each member was asked if she would participate in a one-hour interview on similar topics. A total of 1,141 respondents agreed, from which I randomly selected 25 respondents from each group to interview. The 125 total, in-depth interviews, conducted with the assistance of a graduate student in 2009 (who completed 75), had twenty-seven questions, were digitally recorded, and then later professionally transcribed.

For the analysis here, each interview respondent was queried in the following way so that she was exposed to the three possible areas of hiring, on-the-job, and evaluations/promotions subjective discrimination: "Discrimination in the workplace for being a mother can mean many things. Here are some examples. During a job interview, you are asked about the number of children you have, your pregnancy intention, or questions about who would take care of the kids while you were at work. Or maybe you were paid less than another worker without children, denied a promotion, or received a negative job evaluation because of your parenting responsibilities. Thinking about these examples, do you think that you were ever discriminated against in the workplace for being a mother or potentially becoming a mother?"<sup>5</sup> By providing interview respondents with examples of subjective discrimination, I remained aware that I could be priming them for the themes that emerged in each bias category of hiring, on-the-job conditions, and evaluations/promotions processes. As will be demonstrated in the results, however, only a minimal amount of overlap occurred between the question examples given and the themes ultimately offered by the respondents. Those who answered "no" to the discrimination question, 56.8 percent (71) of the 125 respondents, did not elaborate and therefore their answers could not be analyzed.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, a total of 43.2 percent (54) of the 125 respondents answered affirmatively to this question and offered examples; their interpretations constitute the results discussed in this analysis.

I used the software program Atlas.ti to code themes in each of the three categories of hiring, on-the-job, and evaluations/promotions subjective discrimination. With the literature framework in mind, I first used open coding procedures to most accurately describe how the respondents reflected on the various types of subjective discrimination that they had experienced. Repeated readings of the transcripts also allowed codes to develop more organically. This is a

modified type of grounded theory analysis, where aggregate categories, created based on axial coding as themes, are connected to the primary research question (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to count as a theme within each category of hiring, on-the-job, and evaluations/promotions subjective discrimination, it had to comprise at least 20 percent of the responses in that category. I then re-read each of the quotes reflecting these themes in order to isolate the reaction mechanism involved and categorized them accordingly.

## **Results**

As Table 1 reports, in this study, 43.2 percent or 54 of the 125 interviewed mothers reported subjective discrimination. Of these 54 mothers, 31.5 percent came from MomsRising, 22.2 percent from Mocha Moms, 18.5 percent from Mothers & More and the NAMC, and 9.3 percent from MOPS. The mean age of the mothers in this sample was 38-years-old and they had, on average, two children each. Of all the mothers who reported some type of subjective discrimination, 72.2 percent were white, 24.1 percent were Black, and 3.7 percent had some other racial background. They were also very well-educated, with 9.3 percent having attended some college, 3.7 percent having earned an associate's degree, 38.9 percent possessing a bachelor's degree, 1.9 percent reporting some graduate school, and a full 46.3 percent completing graduate school or earning some type of professional degree. In terms of their relationship status, 87 percent were married, 1.9 percent were living with a partner, 3.7 percent were divorced, 1.9 percent were separated from their spouses, and 5.6 percent were never married. After graduating from college or after having taken their last college course, these mothers held an average of 4.9 paid jobs. About 70.4 percent worked for pay at the time of the interview, with the remainder staying at home with their children.

Table 1 also presents comparative descriptive data on the 56.8 percent (71 interviewed

mothers) from the sampled 125 who did not report discrimination (as well as statistics drawn from the larger random sample survey of mothers from all five groups).<sup>7</sup> Overall, focusing only on those 125 mothers who were interviewed, those who did and did not perceive discrimination shared many similar characteristics. However, there were some differences that are notable. The largest set of mothers perceiving discrimination was affiliated with MomsRising, with the smallest set coming from MOPS. The opposite was true for mothers not perceiving discrimination, with the largest set of members coming from MOPS and the smallest set from MomsRising. In addition, another significant difference between the two groups was that mothers perceiving discrimination at any point in their paid work histories were currently working for pay at a level approximately 18 percentage points higher than mothers not perceiving discrimination. This suggests that perhaps additional exposure to a specific group's strong versus weak policy messages on promoting more mother-friendly workplaces (MomsRising versus MOPS) as well as current exposure to the workplace might be generating these divergent experiences with perceived discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

Turning back to the inquiry about differential treatment described above, the 43.2 percent of mothers who reported subjective discrimination did so in all three areas of employment, including the moment of hire (35.2 percent of these mothers), on-the-job interactions (50 percent of these mothers), and job evaluations/promotions (25.9 percent of these mothers). In each of the categories of moment of hire, on-the-job, and evaluations/promotions, I identified themes of subjective discrimination whereby women believed that the ideal worker norm directly clashed with their status characteristic of motherhood; notably, mothers most commonly perceived discrimination during their on-the-job experiences. In addition, across all three categories, mothers responded to their discriminatory treatment in the short-run in one of three ways. In the

most passive way, they were *ambivalent* toward their subjective experience with discrimination (22.2 percent of all responses); that is, they were not positive that it had happened in that they assumed some personal responsibility for their current situation via their own individual choices and actions. Most commonly, other mothers exhibited *endurance* through their treatment (52.4 percent of all responses). They made an conscious decision to tolerate their experiences for a variety of reasons, thereby demonstrating agency, but at the same time noted the unfairness of their circumstances. Finally, at the most active end of the spectrum and also demonstrating agency, some mothers used *confrontation*, either by themselves or with the help of others, to challenge their perceived discriminatory circumstances, often addressing the perpetrators directly (25.4 percent of all responses). Table 2 disaggregates these numbers further to demonstrate that endurance was also the most common response across *each* of the three points of discrimination as well.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

### ***Moment of Hire***

Within the category of hiring opportunities, mothers described three central themes of subjective discrimination: employer questioning in the areas of pregnancy intention, current pregnancy status, and child care responsibilities.

Mothers first reported that prospective employers often directly asked them about their plans to have children if hired. Tracy, a 43-year-old MomsRising member, was recently separated from her husband and therefore had primary responsibility for raising her 3-month-old son. At one earlier point in her paid work history, she had interviewed for a particular job in the area of domestic violence victim advocacy. Since she had previously worked at a rape crisis center at a local police department, it seemed like the perfect job for her, until the topic of her having

children came up.

In the interview, a male (evaluator) asked me, "Are you planning on having children right away? (I need to know) because that would affect your job." Fortunately, there were two other women in the room who said, "You can't ask her that; that is illegal." It was really interesting. I was like, wow; in this day and age, somebody would actually ask something like that? I thought that depending on what my answer was, he clearly would not have...hired me.

Here, in response, Tracy relied on the other female interviewers in the room to confront the interviewer. Once they did, he terminated this line of inquiry. While it was positive that the other female interviewers were able to redirect the interview process, Tracy also benefitted from her relatively advantaged socioeconomic status as she was engaged at the time and did not desperately need this job. While Tracy had a direct experience with being questioned as to her pregnancy intention, other mothers described a more general employer attitude against hiring potential mothers because they might leave after a pregnancy. Deborah, 33-years-old and a member of Mocha Moms, had two children, a 5-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter. Her husband was a freelance marketing manager while she worked in the field of fundraising and development. She described her husband as holding egalitarian views with respect to taking care of their children; however, Deborah also knew that she definitely wanted to take significant time off from paid work after any births. Here, Deborah described how one job interviewer directly asked her about her potential behavior after having a baby.

I have had a question about whether I would leave and not come back (after giving birth)... And I was very open, like, "Yes, that's very likely."...I mean, I think, because of the small staff (of the organization), it was a legitimate question. Do I think it was a fair question? No. But I think that it came out of concern for the organization, knowing that if I were not to return, that my position once again would need to be replaced, just because it is an essential function for its survival as a non-profit organization...I didn't like the question, but you know, I had every intention of not coming back, and I mean, I was honest. I don't feel like everyone should answer that, (though); no one should have to answer that question if (she doesn't) want to.

Here, just like in Tracy's case, a potential employer asked about Deborah's future behavior regarding a pregnancy. However, Deborah was much more ambivalent in her interpretation as to whether or not this was actual discrimination. More specifically, she wavered as to whether the interviewer's question regarding her plans to return to work after a maternity leave constituted improper treatment as she balanced the human resource needs of the small organization against her desire for family privacy. Deborah ultimately argued that answering this type of question was a matter of personal choice and that no woman should be forced to divulge her post-pregnancy plans.

In addition to facing inquiries about their pregnancy intentions, other mothers felt as if they had to conceal their pregnancy status in order to be hired. Jada, 31-years-old and a Mothers & More member, had a 2-month-old son. Her husband worked as a research analyst for a defense contractor and, before starting their family, they mutually expected that she would do most of the caregiving for their children. She was in the minority in the sample in that she described her experiences with a non-middle class job; nonetheless, she still reported subjective discrimination. More specifically, she recalled that not long before giving birth, she needed to obtain a job at her local grocery store and in order to do so, felt as if she had to hide her pregnancy.

I did not tell (any potential employers) during my interview (about my pregnancy) because I luckily have a lot of padding so I hid it pretty well...I did not tell them until right after I had passed my thirty-day (trial) period because I did have the perception that I was afraid I wouldn't get the job (if I were up front with them)...One manager told me to my face, "Oh yeah, we love babies here," but I was told by other people...at work that she was really pissed off that I did not tell her (that I was pregnant) because she wouldn't have hired me.

Jada clearly exhibited endurance in response to this treatment; she needed the job and decided to withstand her soon-to-be manager's attitudes. However, after she had her son, Jada did not



return to her grocery job. Instead, she began taking customer service calls for a company that would route these inquiries to her home. This was a job that she deliberately selected in order to avoid going through any type of visible pregnancy inspection should she become pregnant again.

Lastly, other mothers reported being quizzed about their child care responsibilities while applying for jobs. Karen was a 28-year-old member of Mocha Moms and had 5-year-old twin daughters; she never married her children's father and he was not involved in the twins' lives. After completing her service to the country in the Navy, Karen had her babies and took some time off from the paid labor force. However, as a single mother, she eventually needed to secure a job in order to be financially stable. She interviewed for an administrative position, and looking back on the experience, felt as if some of the questions that her prospective employers asked of her were unfair.

There was a job interview where I was asked, basically, who would take care of my children, and would my parenting interfere with my work responsibilities?... Well, (at the time) I said, "No, it would not be a problem," and it wasn't until afterwards that I felt like that was an inappropriate question to be asked in an interview...(Notably,) the way that (the interviewer) asked me, she was comfortable; so I'm sure that she had asked that question before.

Karen, too, exhibited endurance during what she actually viewed as discriminatory treatment at her interview; however, she reasoned that financial need demanded such a reaction.

Interestingly, Karen never got called back for another interview at this company. She ultimately decided to relocate to Atlanta, where her godmother ran a non-profit organization and also had an opening for an administrative assistant. Since she would be working for a relative, Karen did not feel as if she had to justify who would take care of her children if need be during office hours. In addition, in this new job, she could also work from home, which maximized her flexibility in terms of responding to her children's needs.

### ***On-the-Job Issues***

In addition to the moment of hire, mothers also described subjective discrimination that took place while they were on the job; this was also the most common form of perceived discrimination experienced in the study. Two themes related to subjective discrimination emerged here: the particular structure of work imposed by employers and the nature of tasks that employers gave to them as mothers.

The rigid and demanding structure of work was a theme that influenced mothers in the daily management aspects of their jobs. For some mothers, the most important component of their work structure that was impossible to fulfill related to the hours that they were expected to be on the job. Donna, 31-years-old, was a mother of three and a member of Mocha Moms. Her husband, an educator, held traditional views that the mother should do the majority of caregiving, a perspective that Donna did not dispute. At the time of her interview, she was employed as a parent representative in her local school district on a part-time basis. However, prior to this job, she tried working in commercial real estate. In that job, her employers constantly challenged her regarding her hours and whether or not she could truly perform adequately at work while taking care of her family's needs.

I (heard) little, snide comments and remarks...I was the only person in the department with children...Everyone worked long hours...Some people would come in at like 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. and not leave until like, 8 p.m. at night. Then, I would leave every day at 4:30 p.m. on the dot because I had children, and there were times they'd say, "Oh, you're packing up already?" and I'm like, "Oh, yeah. I've been here since 7:30 a.m. I think it's time for me to leave at 4:30."

Donna used confrontation as a response to "talk back" to her detractors, and ultimately quit when these pressures became too intense. Experiencing pushback in a similar way, Sara, 34-years-old and a Mothers & More member, had what she described as an egalitarian view of caregiving for

children that she shared with her husband, a music critic. However, as she thought more concretely about becoming pregnant in the future, she reported that her "maternal instinct" kicked in and she decided that she wanted to assume the majority of caregiving tasks. Yet, she knew this would be difficult given the demands of what she experienced working in the field of journalism.

Journalism is predominantly a male dominated field and you were praised for working, working, working, and working. At the time, we had a plane crash in western Pennsylvania and then we had this mine rescue where...(the male reporters) would sleep in the car and work 36 hours straight. (They) were patted on the back but I could not work those hours and have children.

Sara at first decided to respond with endurance to these trials in the short-run since she loved her job. She was even told by her bosses that she had to answer a very important question for herself: "(I was told that I needed to decide) whether (I was going to be) a journalist or a parent." Sara ultimately determined that she wanted to have children with her husband. She had a son and a daughter, and took some time off from paid employment to attend to their needs. However, since her husband was also in an unstable occupational field, she knew that ultimately, she had to get back to paid work. Employing her strong networking skills, she was able to locate a woman-owned company where she could do technical writing on energy issues on a flexible, 32 hours per week schedule.

Another area of concern for mothers regarding the rigid and demanding structure of work pertained to accommodations for breastfeeding. Angel, 40-years-old and a mother of two daughters, was a member of MomsRising. Her husband worked in a power plant, and they both believed in traditional gender roles with respect to caregiving for children. Throughout her life, Angel worked in a variety of jobs, including being a hairdresser, day care provider, and office worker. While employed in her office position, she felt as if she were discriminated against

because the practice of breastfeeding was not valued.

There was an administrator--a female administrator--and she made very derogatory remarks about having a child. I was pregnant at the time. She was not very supportive of having to pump in the private staff restroom. She was definitely not supportive of my breastfeeding...In my experience, the men usually leave (the practice of breastfeeding) alone but the women will come right out and be nasty.

Angel needed this job badly and therefore decided to respond with endurance to this administrator's verbal treatment. However, perhaps due to this experience, Angel became more committed to the issue of breastfeeding and began studying to become a certified lactation counselor.

Finally with respect to a rigid work structure, mothers also condemned employers who prohibited time off to care for an ill child. Gloria, a 36-year-old mother of two boys, ages eight and three, was a member of MOPS and worked in a variety of jobs. When her first son was about 1-year-old, Gloria decided to return to the labor market and work as a fundraiser at a humane organization. She quickly learned that most of her co-workers, including her boss, did not want her to take any time off to care for her sick child.

The culture of the organization was very sort of (anti-leave for any reason)...(There were) really weird policies around not being able to take time off because of a child who had just a very minor illness kind of thing. (I was happy because) that did not affect me a whole lot. It could have. If my kid had been sicklier, I probably would have lost my job.

At the time, Gloria's response, like that of many others, was one of mindful endurance. Her husband was going to school to become a pastor, and she noted that her own employment gave the family the health insurance that it needed during this transitional period. Also at this point in time, the couple shared child care responsibilities, but Gloria knew that eventually she wanted to be the more involved parent if at all possible. Ultimately, she decided that she had to stay with the organization until her husband finished his education, secured employment, and the family as

a unit could relocate. Once this occurred, she would no longer be the sole breadwinner and could search for a job that was more compatible with her needs.

Mothers also reported on-the-job subjective discrimination in the form of the nature of the tasks that they were given. For some women, this came in the form of assumptions about the types of work they would like to be responsible for now that they were mothers. Stephanie, 34-years-old and a NAMC member, had two young sons, ages four and thirteen months. Her husband worked as a sports website producer, and philosophically, they decided even prior to having a family that they would share many of their children's caregiving responsibilities. For years, Stephanie worked in the biomedical and pharmaceutical fields. As part of the job she had before she was pregnant with her first son, she would travel to various work sites to handle quality assurance issues, such as making certain that contracts were being upheld and protocols followed. After she had her first son, however, she decided that she wanted to take more responsibility for her child's care than her husband. At the same time, she also noticed that some fundamental elements of her work were being changed right in front of her eyes.

I certainly felt like my employers made assumptions about my desires as an employee based on the fact that either I was pregnant or had a young child...When I returned to work after having my first son, my duties had shifted greatly in a way that required that I travel much less than I had before I had him. And my direct boss had made the assumption that I wouldn't want to be on the road as much, and that I wouldn't want to be traveling as much, which was a correct assumption, but it was never...discussed with me before I returned to work.

Stephanie was ambivalent in her response to experiencing subjective discrimination. She was not upset about having to travel less than she had before, which she wanted, but she also observed that she had never been asked about her preferences, which made her feel less than engaged with the direction of her career.

### *Evaluations/promotions*

Mothers also experienced subjective discrimination when they were being evaluated or considered for promotions in their jobs. Two themes of subjective discrimination emerged here: employers both setting an impossible standard for advancement, and ignoring mothers altogether when their achievements and prospects were considered.

Mothers interviewed in this study argued that their employers unfairly set an unattainable goal for them to uphold when they were being evaluated or considered for promotion. For most mothers, they experienced this sense of being dwarfed by the expectations of their jobs when it came to the hours that they were expected to contribute to their organizations. Joyce, 38-years-old and a NAMC member, had one 2-year-old daughter. Her husband worked in the field of information technology, and since he earned significantly more money in the household, they both determined before they had any children that she would do more of the caregiving. For years, Joyce worked in the area of engineering and enjoyed her job. When she had her baby, she took eight weeks off from work, returned full-time, and then moved to part-time work because she felt it was too difficult to manage her work/family life under the full-time schedule. Yet, there was a price to pay for this reduction in time devoted to paid work. Part-time employment was not correlated with promotion, and mothers were disproportionately affected. Joyce's conscious response was to endure her treatment as she wanted to continue her part-time employment in order to receive her paycheck.

I mean...I know the people who are getting promoted are the ones who are there an excessive number of hours...I mean I have run into a couple of people who had kids that were working a lot like that...(but) I would say they tend not to be mothers... Well, I mean it's engineering, so it's mostly men (working there) anyway.

Similarly, Carol, 38-years-old and a Mocha Moms member, was a highly educated mother of three young children. She was married to a man who worked in the field of business

development for a sports team, and she stressed before they started a family that they shared an egalitarian philosophy with respect to childrearing responsibilities. In her earlier career, she worked in various manager jobs related to accrediting university and Olympic athletics. Later, she joined a foundation that engaged in diplomatic efforts to secure peace as well as promote new public health initiatives across the globe. After she took one particular maternity leave, a new position emerged at the foundation that would have constituted a promotion for her. However, she noted that these rarely available top positions effectively shut out mothers from applying.

Well, where I was working, at the level I was going to, I would have to do international travel...so that limited my advancement and my position...You know, the (organization) can't take a mother. Most mothers aren't going to travel internationally all the time.

Carol responded with endurance to her current situation but actively noted that this restriction on promotions was very difficult for mothers to circumvent. If promotions and advancement typically involved international travel, then promotions and advancement were, according to Carol, a non-mother game.

The second theme in this category that the mothers reported was that they were completely ignored during evaluation and promotion opportunities. Connie was a 33-year-old mother of a 3-year-old boy, member of MomsRising, and married to a business consultant. She described herself as highly career-oriented, with a husband who supported her employment goals and took a strong interest in childrearing himself. She worked in a variety of sales positions until she took a job at a well-known photography company, where she expected to be very happy. After she had her son, however, she made a jolting discovery. A male colleague and she were both promoted to management positions at the same point in time. While he had been at the

company longer, she had the much stronger resume as well as a college degree. Yet, he was earning more money than she was in the same new position.

I took it pretty personally, whether I should have or not. It was not anything against my colleague; he worked very hard. I certainly did not bring it to his attention. I did go to our director, at the time, and explained...I said, "I need you to fix this. Just pay us equally right down the middle." His (response) was, "You know, I would be concerned if (he were making a much) higher percentage (than you)." I thought about contacting attorneys. I thought, what do I do? This is just a clear-cut...issue of discrimination.

Connie was direct and confrontational when she brought this issue to her director, and was extremely disappointed when he did nothing about it. She ultimately decided not to hire an attorney, but when she left the company, she told human resources about the incident during her exit interview. She reported saying, "If nothing else, in this company you need to educate your managers on how to handle these situations better because this is a lawsuit waiting to happen."

In a similar way, other mothers like Isabella also reported simply being ignored for promotions. Isabella was a teacher and a member of her local NAMC. Her husband, a regional manager of a restaurant chain, had traditional ideas that mothers should be the primary caregivers of their children, and Isabella shared many of his views. At the time of her interview, she had a 3-year-old son at home and thought a long time about becoming the school's principal when the current principal retired in the future. However, the current principal refused to even think about her as a possibility for the job.

And among the teachers in my building, I'm the only one who is certified to take over (the position of principal)...But I know that (the current principal) is pursuing another teacher to start her degree...so that she can take over. Because, well, first of all, there is a little bit of favoritism there...But also because I have a young child...I can't say that that's why, but for years and years she has always said that she wanted me to take over. And then when I had my child, I said, "I don't want to work summers anymore."...I know I changed the circumstances. I said that I didn't want to work that (summer), but it was because my child was an infant...Well, now my child is almost four...Well, if she is planning on retiring in four years, my child will be eight...I do have an interest in that job. I'm not saying that I'll definitely (take it)...But I just think it's interesting that she



is not pursuing me anymore, like it's kind of not even in the realm of possibility.

Isabella was ambivalent in her response to this subjective discrimination. She admitted that her prior statements regarding her work intentions during the summers may have confused her boss. However, in other work contexts, Isabella also reported that this principal was very harsh in her treatment of mothers overall. She expected them to take no time off to take care of their own children's needs, even if they were sick. This resulted in morale becoming very low in the school, and Isabella actually considered leaving her district for other opportunities that would advance her career in the near future. Promotion opportunities within her current work setting were simply not viable.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

As demonstrated here, mothers as a unique category of employees do perceive and label certain experiences as workplace discrimination. These experiences emerge across the career trajectory of hiring, on-the-job conditions, and opportunities for evaluation and promotion because employers simultaneously believe in the ideal worker norm and the negative status characteristic of motherhood. Interestingly, although mothers described unfair events at each point along the career trajectory, on-the-job experiences represented the most commonly reported category of perceived discrimination.

What is notable here is that these mothers did not immediately drop out of the labor market, sue their employers, or deploy some other extreme reaction when faced with such treatment. Instead, they employed a set of intermediate responses that helped them negotiate their day-to-day relationships with their employers. Ultimately, they utilized three short-run coping strategies: ambivalence, endurance, and confrontation. Many mothers were ambivalent across the three points of discrimination; they were unsure as to whether or not something unfair

was happening to them. This lack of certitude undoubtedly transferred power to their potential or current employers in legitimizing discrimination. Endurance was the most common coping strategy overall and by point of discrimination. In these cases, mothers felt that something unfair was happening to them, but competing demands, such as the need for a reliable source of income, prompted them to express their agency by consciously refraining from action at that particular moment. Lastly, confrontation was also an important coping strategy used by mothers and their allies to even out the playing field with their employers. However, these were often one-time interactions that were quickly resolved between an employer and an employee. In sum, regardless of the coping strategy chosen, since they were all based on individualized, privately-made decisions or relatively modest challenges to authority, none of these strategies generated formal, organizational overhauls with respect to promoting equality at work.

Although this study focused on employees' short-term responses to perceived discrimination, it is critical to acknowledge that there are also long-term effects of unfair treatment that are extremely serious for mothers as a group. Most notably, scholars have documented a strong motherhood wage penalty, with estimates ranging from 4 percent-15 percent per child (Budig & England, 2001; Budig & Hodges, 2010). Of course, reduced earnings lead to an increased likelihood that mothers will suffer from a lower quality of life, confront actual poverty, and/or live out their older years under significant financial strain (Gough, 2001). Mothers who attempt to address the pressures that they face by working part-time face a whole host of other problems, such as not being taken seriously in either the working or family world (Epstein et al., 1999). Part-time parity, which would give part-time workers the same wages and benefits as full-time workers, is still far from a reality across most of the United States today (Segal, 2002). Other types of flexibility can also cause mothers financial harm. Glass (2004),

for instance, studied the use of four types of flexibility options on mothers' wages with longitudinal data from 1991-1999; these included reduced work hours (fewer than 30 hours per week), flextime, telecommuting 5 hours per week or more, and child care assistance (including on-site centers, money/vouchers to pay for off-site care, and/or flexible spending accounts to pay for child care elsewhere). Use of all of these options decreased earnings.

As demonstrated by this analysis, mothers have a range of intermediate responses—between the extremes of dropping out of paid work completely and filing lawsuits—that they employ when faced with subjective discrimination. Given that this is such a serious problem, however, perhaps mothers should give greater consideration to options for legal redress. Family responsibilities discrimination, or FRD, is an expanding area of employment law that argues that discrimination occurs when an employer treats an employee differently based on stereotypes of how she/he will or should behave, regardless of actual performance (Williams & Bornstein, 2006). FRD cases can be successfully prosecuted under existing law, such as Title VII and the Family and Medical Leave Act. With the introduction of more FRD cases into the judicial system each year, simply the threat of litigation might induce increasing numbers of employers to review their human resources policies to protect themselves against potential future lawsuits. This could benefit both mothers and also interestingly fathers, who may experience equal or more mistreatment than female employees as they attempt to combine paid work with caregiving duties (Berdahl & Moon, 2013).

While this analysis focused on those mothers who had experienced some form of subjective discrimination in their workplaces, the majority of the interview respondents did not perceive any discrimination. How can we account for these disparate outcomes? As discussed above, these latter mothers were more likely to come from the least policy-oriented group in the

sample, MOPS, and were less likely to be currently employed. These factors might serve as protective shields against perceived discrimination over their paid work careers. Beyond these differences, it might also be that some of these women do not identify with the important "group construct", in this case--mothers--at this point in their lives, thereby reducing their likelihood of perceiving discrimination on this basis (Marino et al., 2007). Finally, as in the case of gender discrimination, some mothers might not wish to label an experience as subjective discrimination unless they have already overcome it due to misplaced feelings of personal responsibility with respect to their current circumstances (Sigel, 1996).

This study, while informative, is not without its limitations. Overall, the sample consists of women in particular forms of organizations--mothers' groups--who might be more primed to think about perceptions of workplace discrimination than mothers not included in these groups. The sample analyzed here is also highly advantaged in terms of class, as indicated by their average levels of educational attainment. As expected, then, the majority of these mothers were seeking or were holding professional jobs. This is critical because while this analysis studied perceptions of discrimination from primarily a middle class point of view, mothers in working class jobs might experience different forms of bias than the types reported here (Webber & Williams, 2008). For example, they might report even less control in taking time off to care for their children when they are holding an hourly rather than a salaried job. In addition, in terms of group homogeneity, the sample was also composed only of heterosexual women, most of whom were married. Moreover, while the inclusion of Mocha Moms brought racial diversity to the study and the important voices of Black mothers to the conversation about employment discrimination, the final sample was composed mostly of whites. As intersectionality theory proposes (Risman, 2004), lesbian, single, and Black workers might experience other forms of

discrimination that intersect with their parenthood status in determining their individual employment outcomes. The nuances of these multiple layers of oppression clearly need more exploration.

A final limitation of this study is the lack of data on these mothers' workplace organizations. For decades, scholars have focused on individual-level characteristics that prompt workers to make claims under anti-discrimination laws (Bumiller, 1988; Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994). However, the organizational environment may be as critical in either encouraging or discouraging workers to perceive their particular experiences as discriminatory. For example, in the case of sex discrimination, Hirsh and Kornrich (2008) found that more extensive supervision structures in workplaces increase discriminatory complaints, while larger organizations with more formalized personnel and evaluation procedures decrease discrimination complaints. In addition, higher proportions of non-managerial women in the workplace as well as larger proportions of women in managerial positions at these worksites both decrease reports of discrimination. More informally, some organizational cultures might be fully supportive of meeting their employees' family needs, while others might promote a strict, business-only environment. Understanding how all of these organizational contexts shape perceptions of discrimination is therefore a critical research task for all future studies.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Mothers**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Mothers Reporting Discrimination (Interviews)</b>	<b>Mothers Not Reporting Discrimination (Interviews)</b>	<b>All Mothers : Random Sample Survey</b>
<b>Group</b>			
MomsRising	31.5%	11.3%	13.9%
Mocha Moms	22.2%	18.3%	18.6%
Mothers & More	18.5%	21.1%	39.1%
NAMC	18.5%	21.1%	5.5%
MOPS	9.3%	28.2%	22.9%
<b>Average Age</b>	38.0	36.9	37.7
<b>Average Number of Children</b>	2.0	2.1	2.0
<b>Race</b>			
White Non-Hispanic	72.2%	74.6%	76.1%
Black Non-Hispanic	24.1%	18.3%	18.2%
White Hispanic	0%	0%	2.6%
Black Hispanic	0%	1.4%	.9%
Asian	0%	2.8%	2.1%
Native American	0%	0%	.2%
Other	3.7%	2.8%	0%
<b>Education</b>			
Less than High School	0%	0%	0%
High School Diploma (also GED)	0%	0%	.1%
Some College	9.3%	0%	7.3%
Associate's Degree/Specialized Training	3.7%	2.8%	5.9%
Bachelor's Degree	38.9%	43.7%	34.6%
Some Graduate Training	1.9%	4.2%	9.3%
Graduate/Professional Degree	46.3%	49.3%	41.8%
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Married	87%	93%	93.5%
Civil Union	0%	0%	.4%
Living with Partner	1.9%	1.4%	1.5%
Divorced	3.7%	4.2%	2.0%
Separated	1.9%	1.4%	.8%
Widowed	0%	0%	.5%
Never Married	5.6%	0%	1.3%
<b>Number of Paid Jobs After First Degree Earned*</b>	4.9	4.3	N/A
<b>Paid Work Status</b>			
Currently Working for Pay	70.4%	52.1%	51.1%
Currently Staying at Home	29.6%	47.9%	48.9%
<b>Point of Discrimination-Percentage of</b>			

<b>Mothers**</b>	35.2%	N/A	N/A
Moment of Hire	50.0%	N/A	N/A
On-the-job	25.9%	N/A	N/A
Evaluations/promotions			
<b>Responses to Discrimination***</b>			
Ambivalence	22.2%	N/A	N/A
Endurance	52.4%	N/A	N/A
Confrontation	25.4%	N/A	N/A
<b>Sample Size</b>	43.2% (54/125)	56.8% (71/125)	3,327

NOTES: \* For those mothers who did not complete college, I counted paid jobs after they finished their last college-level class. \*\*Mothers could report more than one category of discrimination. \*\*\*Six mothers reported discrimination in two categories; three mothers reported more than one theme in the on-the-job category. Therefore, the total number of responses from the 54 women was 63; response percentages are calculated using the total of 63 responses.

**Table 2: Responses to Discrimination By Stage of Employment**

<b>POINTS OF DISCRIMINATION</b>				
<b>RESPONSE</b>	<b>Moment of Hire</b>	<b>On-the-job</b>	<b>Evaluation/ Promotion</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Ambivalence</b>	5	6	3	14
<b>Endurance</b>	8	16	9	33
<b>Confrontation</b>	6	8	2	16
<b>Total</b>	19	30	14	63

NOTES: Six mothers reported discrimination in two points of discrimination categories; three mothers reported more than one theme in the on-the-job category. Therefore, the total number of responses from the 54 women was 63.



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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Certain laws and regulations protect mothers, but statistics compiled on them only represent formal complaints, which can be expected to severely underrepresent the prevalence of the discrimination problem. With this caveat in mind, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports that complaints under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 increased over the ten-year period from fiscal year 2001 at 4,287 to 5,797 in fiscal year 2011 (<http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/pregnancy.cfm>). Broader forms of caregiver discrimination beyond pregnancy are also difficult to track, since many state courts and agencies do not report them or matters are settled confidentially. However, the Center for WorkLife Law found a 400% increase in lawsuits filed in the decade ending in 2008 than in the previous decade (Calvert, 2010, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> These data are from the Survey of Income and Program Participation in Table 6 at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/childcare/data/sipp/2010/tables.html>.

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<sup>3</sup> Data are from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation at <http://www.kff.org/womenshealth/upload/6000-10.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The overall response rate was 19.3 percent (3,327 members), a rate not uncommon for web-based surveys (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The use of the term "ever" means throughout their entire paid job history. Earlier in the interviews, these mothers were asked to describe all of their paid jobs after graduating college (or after they took their last college course), so they each had all of these experiences to consider when answering this question.

<sup>6</sup> These same mothers who reported "no discrimination" also did not offer examples of maltreatment and then voluntarily choose to label them as non-discrimination.

<sup>7</sup> Mothers were asked about perceived discrimination in employment in the random sample survey; however, the question was worded differently such that no comparable data with the interviews exist.

<sup>8</sup> Please contact the author for a complete list of paid jobs held for each respondent after college graduation or after her last college course taken.