

Women more likely than men to worry about how career paths align with future parenthood

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Women are more likely than men to think and worry about future parenthood, a Stanford scholar says.

Brooke Conroy Bass, a Stanford sociology doctoral student, wrote in a

new *Gender & Society* article that women also were more apt to downscale their career goals when thinking about their upcoming [parenthood](#) roles.

On the other hand, men were less worried or concerned about the duties of forthcoming parenthood. According to Bass' research, these "gendered anticipations of parenthood" begin relatively early in women's career paths, thus creating labor market inequalities for them such as the gender gap in pay.

"There's an expansive body of research that examines how women and men's career trajectories shift at the onset of new parenthood. What we know is that men tend to ramp up their investment in paid labor (their jobs) while women tend to cut back," Bass said in an interview.

While most couples maintain a sense of egalitarianism before having children, many shift to more traditional roles upon the birth of the first child, she noted.

Women and the future

Bass conducted in-depth interviews with 30 heterosexual couples between the ages of 25 and 34 in the San Francisco Bay Area. None of the couples had children (yet).

What Bass said she did differently from prior studies was to "rewind the clock a bit" and survey people in anticipation of parenthood, before the actual birth of a child. The findings show a clear difference between how men and women approach parenthood.

"Women in my study were much more likely to think about, worry about, and make changes to their career plans just by imagining the additional responsibilities and care work that comes with parenthood,

while men did not," she said.

Regardless of their age, marital status and background, women more often were deeply concerned about how best to combine work with family obligations into the future. Women tended to downshift educational or professional opportunities as a result.

"This occurred when they worried that their preferences and family responsibilities might shift upon the birth of a child, something that men were not affected by," Bass said.

An example from those interviewed is Tamar (age 30, married), who had recently begun a public sector job that she enjoyed. When asked about the direction of her career in the next five to 10 years, she cited uncertainty: "I don't know when we're gonna have kids. We're thinking about it. So I'm not sure how that would work in with the career path and all that."

Replying to the same question, Cindy (age 32, married) said, "Well, we do wanna have kids soon," before describing her new and possibly different employment paths due to the idea of motherhood complicating her career.

'Um, I don't know'

On the other hand, looming parenthood was less influential in the minds of men, Bass found.

Donald (age 27, married), a sales manager, said, "Oh, that's a good question. Um ... I don't know." Nathan, (age 30, married), a computer programmer, offered a similar response: "It's an interesting question ... I don't know if we've put a ton of thought into exactly how that process would work or not."

Bass said that her research helps explain more deeply how gendered career aspirations emerge and shift throughout life. Many of those aspirations are based on cultural assumptions about the conventional roles of mother and father, wife and husband. Simply, the anticipation of motherhood and family responsibilities often influences women's preferences and behavior long before entering parenthood, she noted.

Societal flexibility

Society and companies can create a more fair and equal position for women in the marketplace by adopting a flexible approach to handling parenthood in the workplace, Bass said.

"Women are already taking on a burden of worrying and making choices in anticipation of the conflict that they believe will occur in the future," a point that is particularly revealing about today's workplace realities, she noted.

Bass said that if career and family were made more compatible, through policies like flexible work arrangements and paid parental leave for both men and women, then perhaps women would not worry as much about juggling career and children.

She acknowledges that her research portrays women as "the planners" or "the worriers" in heterosexual marriages. This reality has a ripple effect. By extension, the cultural expectations at play probably go beyond married women and men.

"It's easy to imagine a whole range of things that this might affect. For instance, this might tap into other aspects of care work too, such as worrying about caring for aging parents or caring for an ill family member or pet," she said.

And single people may be affected by this dynamic, she said. "For instance, in a mixed-sex group of friends, [women](#) may be expected to think about, worry about, and plan for group outings and events such as dinners or gatherings."

More information: "Preparing for Parenthood?: Gender, Aspirations, and the Reproduction of Labor Market Inequality." *Gender & Society* June 2015 29: 362-385, first published on August 19, 2014 [DOI: 10.1177/0891243214546936](#)

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