

Women 'damned either way' on maternity leave

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Women are judged negatively if they choose to take maternity leave - and if they don't - new research suggests.

In a study of workers' attitudes, mothers who took time off to care for babies were seen as less committed and competent at work.

Meanwhile, those who continued working were viewed as less caring parents.

The results suggest women are "damned" either way, according to lead author Dr Thekla Morgenroth, of the University of Exeter.

"This is a no-win situation for women," Dr Morgenroth said.

"Our results show that perceptions of competence, whether in the work or family domain, were never boosted - but only impaired - by the [maternity](#) leave decision.

"Both decisions had [negative consequences](#), albeit in different domains.

"It is important to have policies which allow women to balance work and family life, but it's also important to understand people's use of these policies may have unintended consequences."

The study examined the attitudes of 137 [women](#) and 157 men, all employed, mostly from the US and the UK.

Three groups of participants were given information about a fictional woman.

The only difference between the information was whether the woman had chosen to take maternity leave.

In one version she had taken leave, in another she had continued working, and in a third (control group) the issue was not mentioned.

Participants were then asked to evaluate the woman as a worker and a parent - with negative family results for a woman who kept working, and negative working results for a [woman](#) who took maternity leave.

"These effects occurred regardless of the respondent's gender, age, parental status or nationality - which suggests these attitudes are universal and pervasive in our culture," said Dr Morgenroth, who worked on the research along with Professor Madeline Heilman of New York University.

The majority of participants were working full-time (70%) and had no children (71%). The average age of participants was 33.32 years.

The study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, is entitled: "Should I stay or should I go? Implications of [maternity leave](#) choice for perceptions of working mothers."

More information: Thekla Morgenroth et al, Should I stay or should I go? Implications of maternity leave choice for perceptions of working mothers, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2017.04.008](#)

Provided by University of Exeter

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