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Motherhood Gap and Employer Discrimination. A Qualitative Investigation in the German Context

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Background: Motherhood penalty has often been considered the base for the wage gap and the glass ceiling phenomena. It represents a delicate topic in gender equality since its effects tend to persist over medium to long time periods and its validity holds in most countries. The study has been designed to investigate the specific contribution of employer discrimination to the overall motherhood penalty in socioeconomic contexts characterized by the archetype of the "male breadwinner model", which has been further exacerbated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic.
Methods: The employer discrimination phenomenon has often been treated as a black box, since longitudinal data and panel regression modelling were unsuitable to assess the magnitude of the effect of this variable on the overall motherhood penalty. For this study, we addressed this gap by focusing on employer discrimination in the specific context of Germany. The work is based on data generated from a survey conducted among 2,130 working mothers and it is presented as a qualitative content analysis.
Results: Our qualitative angle on the employer discrimination phenomenon confirmed previous quantitative investigations. Firstly, the employer attitude toward working mothers conformed to the "second shift" hypothesis, with highly skilled mothers in managerial roles in particular experiencing the largest motherhood gap in our sample. Secondly, we found confirmation for the theory of human capital, with working mothers seeing their career progression come to a halt or temporary slowdown, and pending salary increases not implemented as originally planned. Finally, we found employer discrimination taking various forms, the most frequent being a mismatch between skills level of the working mothers and the suggested new role post parental leave.
Conclusion: Our study confirms the previous academic investigations on the topic discussing the antecedents of the motherhood gap, namely the "second shift" hypothesis and the work-effort hypothesis. Ultimately, employers seem to trigger, voluntarily or not, certain career choices for working mothers (e.g., "mother-friendly" arrangements) which cause the motherhood gap to increase, and thus further reinforce the traditional male breadwinner model.

Keywords: *Gender studies, Motherhood penalty, Employer discrimination, Glass ceiling, Content analysis*

1 Introduction

In recent years, considerable efforts have been made to investigate the negative wage effect of motherhood, the so-called motherhood penalty (Adda et al., 2017). This phenomenon, which could be summarised as a lower hourly pay for working women, is partly explained by mothers' work interruptions and subsequent re-entry into the workforce. Parental leave represents a delicate topic in gender equality, having been found to be more detrimental than any other form of work interruption (Baum, 2002). In addition, the wage gap triggered by motherhood also tends to

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persist over medium to long timeframes (Abendroth et al., 2014; Lundberg & Rose, 2000).

Academic studies have confirmed that motherhood penalty is an almost universal phenomenon. In their meta-analysis, Cukrowska-Torzewska and Matysiak (2020) analysed 208 wage effects of having one child and 245 wage effects of the total number of children and found that, while each child of mothers with multiple children is associated with an average wage drop of 3.6 percent, having only one child will lead to a wage decline of around 3.8 percent.

Of course, differences in sampling and model specification originate from country-specific peculiarities regarding the motherhood penalty, namely:

- In the UK, a wage penalty equal to 9 percent for the first child and 16 percent for the second child has been reported (Waldfogel, 1997). A recent study in the same geographical context compared mothers to childless women, estimating that the medium- and long-term earnings penalty for working mothers was 46 percent (Vagni & Breen, 2021);
- In Sweden, wage costs amount to 2 percent per year of child-related work interruption (Albrecht et al., 1999) while in Denmark, the investigations on residual wage penalty seem to be inconclusive (Gupta & Smith, 2002). In this regard, a recent comprehensive study on employment and earnings trajectories in Europe confirmed that the geographical context matters, with smaller wage gaps reported in countries with higher female labour force, such as the Scandinavian region (Muller et al., 2020);

In the specific context of Germany, Ondrich et al. (2003) estimated that each month of parental leave reduces post-break wage growth by 1.5 percent. A subsequent study by Ziefle (2004) confirmed a persistent wage loss of 5 percent per year of work interruption. Finally, Harkness and Waldfogel (2003) estimated a significant wage loss of 10 percent and more after a second birth. Parental leave regulations can, however, mitigate the negative effects related to work interruptions (Baum, 2002; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Ziefle, 2004).

Germany, in particular West-Germany, represents a very interesting scenario for motherhood wage gap analysis because of the dominance of the "male breadwinner model", with the man usually taking on the paid work and the woman shouldering the bulk of unpaid work at home, including childcare (Adema et al., 2017; Barnes, 2015; Ziegler, Graml, Khachatryan, & Uli, 2022). On this basis, the motherhood gap constitutes a strong antecedent for the broader gender gap and glass ceiling phenomena (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). In addition, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the caregiving responsibilities of working parents, in general, and mothers, more specifically, and, therefore, the gender gap has widened even further (Clark et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021). In this regard, a recent literature review by Ziegler et al. (2022) found that the Covid-19 pandemic did not produce strong and consistent macrodynamic changes on gender gap, thus contradicting both the backlash and the gender convergence hypotheses. Other major findings include: i) There seems to have been a general increase in equal childcare responsibilities, even though, on average, mothers still carry the heavier load; ii) Mothers in dual-career couples were more exposed to work-hour reductions or losing their job completely; iii) Temporary gender convergence shifts were largely motivated by female working arrangements and/or necessity; iv) A new gap in psychological distress emerged for working mothers compared to both men and childless women (Ziegler, Graml, & Uli, 2022).

Extant literature has found that the main drivers responsible for the motherhood gap are the loss of job experience, the decrease in productivity at work, accepting mother-friendly jobs, and being discriminated against by employers. While the first three antecedents, as we discuss at length in the theoretical framework section, have been extensively investigated, employer discrimination has always been treated as a black box. Indeed, motherhood penalty studies normally adopted longitudinal data and panel regression modelling to assess the magnitude of the penalty. Employer and institutional discrimination present two main methodological issues. Firstly, the evidence of employer bias to date is indirect at best (Correll et al., 2007), providing only a partial view of employer biases in hiring, promotions, and other work practices. Secondly, we lack compelling evidence on how different job contexts shape employers' perceptions of mothers' fitness for a particular job (Glass & Fodor, 2018).

The goal of this paper, positioned within the research field on female labour supply, untangle the black box represented by the employer discrimination phenomenon – and its related implications – within the more general framework of motherhood penalty in the specific context of Germany. By doing so, the authors hope to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the impact of motherhood penalty on working mothers' professional avenues.

The research, based on data generated from a survey conducted among 2,130 working mothers, is presented as a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015). In this regard, the material collected has been organised and analysed according to a set of codes, adopting both deductive and inductive approaches and resulting in the creation of a category grid with several main and sub-categories (Hahn, 2008).

This paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, we present the theoretical framework of motherhood penalty, focusing on the most relevant and recent sub-streams of the topic (i.e. human capital theory, work-effort theory, compensating differential theory and employer discrimina-

tion); in Section 3, we outline the methodology; in Section 4, we present the results obtained through our content analysis; and, finally, in Section 5, we promote a discussion on this subject by comparing our results with essential findings from previous works.

2 Theoretical background

Over the years, scholars have intensely investigated the antecedents of the motherhood penalty phenomenon. The most recent meta-analysis on the topic (Arena Jr et al., 2023; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Kelley et al., 2020) confirmed that working mothers may earn less than other women with similar skill sets and employed in similar job roles, because having children would imply, at least from a theoretical standpoint, the following outcomes:

i) Losing job experience, which stems from the human capital theory and is a direct consequence of taking time off work (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Napari, 2010);

ii) Being less productive at work, which depends upon dividing their focus between their job and child rearing (Anderson et al., 2003);

iii) Accepting mother-friendly jobs, which would entail making potentially detrimental career decisions based on their role as mothers (Felfe, 2012);

iv) Being discriminated against by employers (Budig & England, 2001; Correll et al., 2007; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Kelley et al., 2020).

The motherhood penalty therefore constitutes a well-investigated phenomenon in developed countries; recently it has also been tested and verified in developing countries, demonstrating that it represents a topic of interest on a global scale (Gao & Tian, 2022; Kim & Hahn, 2022; Querejeta & Bucheli, 2023).

In the following four sub-paragraphs, we will discuss each of the aforementioned implications to gain a better understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the motherhood gap. In this regard, we decided to present all determinants discussed in literature for two reasons: Firstly, as anticipated in the introduction, the phenomenon of employer discrimination has always been considered as residual compared to the other antecedents. Therefore, the specific literature to date about the impact of employer discrimination on motherhood penalty is, to the best of our knowledge, still limited. Secondly, the analysis of our sample suggests that the effects of employer discrimination tend to overlap with the effects of other determinants. Therefore, presenting the entirety of the theoretical framework would be advantageous when "connecting the dots" with earlier investigations on the topic.

2.1 Human capital

As anticipated above, the human capital descriptor can be immediately traced back to the theory of human capital (Becker, 1985), which implies that the motherhood wage gap could be explained by the accumulated work experience divide between mothers and non-mothers caused by child-related employment breaks or reduced working hours.

Most of the academic research agrees on the human capital theory as the major driver behind the motherhood wage gap penalty, although some studies show that human capital only explains part of the wage gap (Budig & England, 2001) and differs across countries, with the UK and the US well explained, but not Germany (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009). In any case, the research on pre- and post-birth periods has clearly identified a wage penalty around the time of a birth and only for women.

The intuitive explanation behind this phenomenon is that employment interruptions (or periods of part-time work) trigger skills-depreciation dynamics (i.e., slowing the acquisition of job experience), which have a negative impact on both short- and long-term occupational gains for working mothers (Abendroth et al., 2014). In addition, work interruptions may lead to post-birth lower occupational status, especially if women accept part-time jobs (Dex et al., 2008).

Some studies analysed the impact of the length of maternal leave on the magnitude of the gap; in this regard, Felmlee (1995) concluded that women who maintained continuous employment, even changing their pre-birth employers, were less exposed to the motherhood gap, and ultimately saw an increase in wages compared with women who were out of the labour force between jobs.

Finally, there is still an open debate in literature regarding the relationship between skills level and motherhood penalty, conventionally expressed as a percentage wage gap between working mothers and childless women. Work-effort theory implies that highly skilled women suffer a higher wage penalty than less qualified working mothers (Anderson et al., 2003; England et al., 2016; Wilde et al., 2010). On average, more educated women tend to have jobs in which effort is relatively important and where employers promote visibility rather than performance in the context of performance appraisal. On the other hand, research has also found support for the opposite argument, i.e., that wage gaps are, in fact, not lower, but even greater among women working in low-skilled job roles (Budig & Hodges, 2010).

2.2 Reduced productivity

A further driver behind motherhood penalty is reduced productivity, which possesses the same determinants that

have a negative effect on working mothers as human capital does. In this instance, however, the loss of job experience depends upon the child-bearing activity, which leads to exhaustion or distraction at work, and consequently makes working mothers less productive. This loss of productivity would therefore raise the amount of overtime and, ultimately, result in loss of job experience. Moreover, the loss of productivity could also be a by-product of the so-called "second shift" that working mothers are normally subject to in the traditional male breadwinner model. This hypothesis originates from the assumption that non-mothers do not have to spend their time off work dealing with family-related duties and therefore have more energy for their paid work (Budig & England, 2001). The second shift phenomenon may also be one of the possible explanations behind the decision of working mothers to be relegated to less demanding occupations. Worrying about children while at work (e.g., calling them at home, planning their time and activities, etc.) can also impact productivity (Parrott, 2014).

Despite being such an important determinant for motherhood penalty, in literature the measure of productivity has always been treated as a black box, with residual effects of motherhood penalty not explained by other variables (Kelley et al., 2020).

If we subscribe to the effort hypothesis notion, then better educated women with important job roles and small children should report the highest motherhood penalty gap. In this regard, Anderson et al. (2002) found that the wage gap is highest for mothers with small children, but not for highly skilled mothers. The same conclusion was reached by Azmat and Ferrer (2017), who showed that "billable hours" (i.e., a measure of productivity commonly accepted in U.S. law firms because of its direct effect on revenue) explain a substantial share of the motherhood gap, since childbearing directly and negatively impacted billable hours for working mothers.

2.3 "Mother-friendly" jobs

The concept of "mother-friendly" jobs revolves around the theory of compensating differentials. This broad definition comprises all those work-related arrangements which are aimed at reducing the workload of women. More specifically, reduced time or part-time jobs, flexible arrangements in terms of working time windows, reduced travelling and a low-stress work environment may all be classified as mother-friendly occupations. In those instances, higher wages and positions are traded in for employment that is more suitable to family and parenting duties. Dex et al. (2008) found that motherhood often implies a shift for working mothers away from high-status jobs to less demanding occupations. Multiple investigations carried out in Norway, the UK, the US, and Germany have concluded that the motherhood wage gap is often due to different occupations rather than intra-differences in pay between mothers and non-mothers (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Petersen et al., 2010). As anticipated above, childbirth may reinforce the traditional male breadwinner model, with working mothers often opting for reduced work hours (Drobnič et al., 1999), more secure and predictable jobs (Desai & Waite, 1991) and, more generally, family-friendly work arrangements (J. Glass, 2004; Österbacka & Räsänen, 2022). Recent trends, however, have confirmed that these supply-side dynamics have been challenged by the quick re-entry of working mothers in the labour market. In addition, it has recently been shown that parenthood exerts a positive effect on transformational leadership behaviour, thus fostering the leadership attitude after the period of parental leave (Stellner, 2022).

The contribution of the "mother-friendly" jobs descriptor to the motherhood gap seems inconclusive. Some studies have maintained that only a marginal portion of the gap is explained by work adjustments (Budig & England, 2001; Felfe, 2012; Waldfogel, 1997). Others, however, have shown that pre-school children are an obstacle to career progression, as they reduce the mobility of working mothers (Looze, 2017). Ultimately, mothers tend to choose family-friendly employment, often within the public sector, in order to find the best work-life balance (Simonsen & Skipper, 2006).

2.4 Employer discrimination

Anderson et al. (2003) found that, collectively, the antecedents discussed in the previous sections (i.e., human capital, occupational, and household resource variables) only account for 24 percent of the total wage penalty for women with one child and 44 percent for women with two or more children. In the same vein, Budig and England (2001), after checking for occupational variables, concluded that the residual wage gap originates from a combination of decrease in productivity (Correll et al., 2007; England, 2010) and employer discrimination against mothers.

Employer discrimination can manifest in peculiar outcomes such as assigning mothers to fewer rewarding jobs or hindering their chances to be hired or promoted (Aranda & Glick, 2014). These employer attitudes may constitute the base for the so-called "glass ceiling" phenomenon, where women, in general, and working mothers, more specifically, are prevented from reaching management positions and wage equality (Gough & Noonan, 2013). In addition, these demand-side discriminations cause motherhood costs which never vanish completely, even in the long-run (Abendroth et al., 2014).

As one would expect, testing for employer discrimination has always been a very delicate and sensitive topic in research. In this regard, the experiment performed by Correll et al. (2007) seems to confirm that mothers are perceived as less competent than childless women. Evidence

of employer bias has been studied in the U.S. context, where some women have been forced to pull back or drop out of paid work, while some mothers have been able to sustain careers (Damaske, 2011).

Ultimately, scholars concur that employer bias contributes to the motherhood gap, with most quantitative investigations focusing on measurable occupational variables and most qualitative studies focusing on mothers' perceptions about employer bias.

3 Methodology

The authors conducted the survey for the 2nd Frankfurt Career Study on Career Perspectives of Working Mothers, following a similar survey conducted in 2010. The working mothers were approached via major women's associations, unions, and social network interest groups in Germany. Both the associations and the interest groups were asked to distribute the link to our survey to their members.

The relevant data on working mothers were collected using an online survey created with the survey tool Survey Monkey and carried out between 13 January 2017 and 11 May 2017. A total of 2,130 women took part in the survey. 1,879 of them were currently employed. The adjusted sample includes 2,000 mothers who were either employed at the time of the survey or had been employed at some point in the past.

Compared to the national average, the sample includes working mothers who were younger, better educated, had more children and worked predominantly for larger companies. The composition of the sample of working mothers is consistent with the geographical distribution between West and East Germany. The authors are nevertheless aware that the results cannot be readily compared with the underlying population, as the sample of the online survey was self-selecting. Nevertheless, we believe that the results are particularly meaningful for the segment of highly qualified mothers working for larger companies.

The results presented in the following sections were not influenced by the data collection period, since sociodemographic changes would require longer timeframes to manifest. In addition, the qualitative approach adopted in this work has been found to be particularly time-consuming; however, as discussed previously, it was the most fitting methodological approach to effectively investigate the phenomenon under analysis.

The survey used several partially closed-ended questions to allow for detailed analysis of as broad a range of expressions of disadvantage among working mothers as possible.

In this paper, qualitative analyses of the open-ended response option "Other" are presented in addition to quantitative analyses of the pre-written response categories. In the case of the additional open categories, the survey participants were able to enter their own response option, which differed from the pre-formulated categories.

We performed our qualitative content analysis using the summarizing procedure according to Mayring (2015). This methodology implied, firstly, the determination of category definitions for inductive categories based on our research questions; then we proceeded with a step-by-step formulation of inductive categories from the material, continuously testing and revising the categories we established. Ultimately, several (inductive) categories emerged during this coding process. Open answers to the analysis items were paraphrased, systematically shortened, and reduced to essential content. For each research question or theme presented in the following Section 4, "Results", we have included the category grids we adopted with the different levels of abstraction and sub-categories identified.

4 Results

4.1 Characteristics of the surveyed sample

The following table exemplifies the characteristics of the surveyed sample.

Age groups: Most participants (43 percent) were between 31 and 40 years old. 37 percent were 41-50 years old, and 14 percent were aged 51-60. The average age of our sample is 42 years old. Much younger and older age groups were represented only in a very small proportion, which is probably due to the topicality of the issue of having children or not for these groups.

Number of children and their age distribution: Eighty-six percent of the women surveyed were in a marriage or partnership. On average, the mothers surveyed had 1.8 children. Eleven percent of the children were between 0 and 2 years old, while 18 percent were 3-5 years old. Twenty-six percent were in the age group 6-10 at the time of the survey, and 27 percent were aged 11-18. Nineteen percent of the children were over the age of 19.

Level of education: The mothers surveyed had above-average qualifications. Eight percent of the respondents had a doctorate and 62 percent had completed (specialised) university studies.

Geographical distribution: 81 percent of the working mothers came from West Germany and 19 percent from East Germany including Berlin, which is a representative sample of the population in terms of East-West geography.

Employment situation: At the time of the survey, 94 percent of the women covered by the study were currently employed. The other six percent were housewives, retirees, students, or job seekers. The average workweek for mothers at the time of the survey was 31 hours. This data is consistent with the Gender Equality Index 2019, which states that, on average, women in Germany worked 30 hours per week that year (EIGE, 2019). Forty-one percent

of the mothers surveyed were employed as clerks and 16 percent as consultants in a company. Seventeen percent held a leadership position such as team leader, general manager, department or division manager.

Employer size: Sixty-five percent of the study participants were employed in a large company and 35 percent in a small or medium-sized company.

Before we begin our analyses of possible consequences of pregnancy and motherhood for the further professional career of future mothers, we feel it would be instructive to understand the perceived general attitude of managers towards pregnant employees and working mothers.

Table 1: Characteristics of the surveyed sample

Sociodemographic characteristics	
Age groups	
21-30 years old	6%
31-40 years old	43%
41-50 years old	37%
51-60 years old	14%
Over 60 years old	1%
Number of children (mean)	1,8
Partnership / marriage	86%
Highest level of education	
Secondary school leaving certificate	1%
Realschulabschluss[1]	5%
A-levels	3%
Completed training	22%
Completed studies	62%
Doctorate	8%
Geographical distribution	
West Germany	81%
East Germany	14%
Berlin	5%
Employment situation	
Employed	94%
Unemployed/Job seeker	6%
Average workweek (n. hours)	31
Employer size	
Large companies	65%
Small-Medium companies	35%

4.2 Perceived attitudes of managers towards working (expectant) mothers

In the following table, we present the coding strategy we followed, according to the protocol set out by Mayring (2015), regarding managers' attitudes towards working (expectant) mothers.

A large majority of study participants reported neutral to positive manager attitudes toward pregnant employees. Just under half of the study participants confirmed that pregnancy and children were normal for the respective manager and that the associated absence of the employee was bridged in the best possible way. Another 20 percent stated that their company recognised the socio-political importance of family and enabled employees to achieve a

[1] School-leaving certificate usually awarded after ten years of schooling and comparable with the British GCSE.

Table 2: Coding strategy – Managers' attitudes toward working (expectant) mothers

Category	Sub-categories
C1: Working mothers are not as present as other employees	C1a: Working mothers are not as present or reliable as other employees C1b: Working mothers are sick more often than other employees
C2: Working mothers perform as well as other employeeS	C2a: Working mothers show equal or more commitment compared to other employees C2b: Output at work depends on personal attitude rather than the mother status C2c: The superior has prior positive experience with working mothers
C3: Working mothers perform worse than other employees	C3a: Working mothers show a lower degree of flexibility C3b: Working mothers are often not available for duty travels, short-notice and evening meetings C3c: Working mothers often misuse home office arrangements C3d: Working mothers don't take on voluntary additional tasks or overtime
C4: Working mothers are not career-oriented	C4a: Working mothers require part-time positions C4b: Working mothers' time schedules are more difficult to manage C4c: Working mothers have more responsibilities toward family and children
C5: Mothers should not work (male bread-winner model)	C5a: Mothers should not work (male bread-winner model)

good work-life balance. However, a different picture could be discerned among nearly 30 percent of the female study participants: They confirmed the statement that, for the manager, pregnancy was an unwelcome complication of the work organisation.

The content analysis we performed on this specific subset of closed-ended questions revealed further interesting aspects. In summary, managers seem to view working mothers as i) frequently absent from the workplace, ii) not particularly well organised, and iii) someone who has to take more time off due to illness. The associated absence of the employees was accepted grudgingly, or it was even attempted to do without such female employees.

In addition to the general attitude of managers towards pregnant employees, several other factors naturally also play a role in the question of whether and how the expectant mother's further professional career in the company should proceed. The possibility of finding a replacement for the employee after the birth of the child, and keeping her job open for her, often depends on resources, which not every company can afford.

Reiterating what has been stated above, the most frequent statements were on the topic of presence in the company and flexibility (see, in particular, categories "C1: Working mothers are not as present as other employees" and "C3: Working mothers perform worse than other employees" and their sub-categories).

"Due to childcare, mothers are not flexible or only partially deployable; the promotion chances of childless women are therefore much higher" (CaseNo. 5240856843).

A common stereotype is that working mothers are often absent, while their time schedules are perceived as more difficult to manage than those of their male colleagues due to unpredictable and frequent sick leaves (in this regard, refer to categories C1 and C3, but also "C4: Working mothers are not career-oriented").

"They never schedule me for 100 percent of my working hours, because I might be absent more often due to the children. Yet they plan 100 percent of my (male) colleague's hours even though he, too, has a school-aged child. But according to my supervisor, the women (mothers) are mainly responsible for childcare, e.g., in case of illness, meaning that the men's full hours can be considered during worktime planning." (CaseNo. 5244878628).

Furthermore, many managers believe that family is or should be the first priority for working mothers and maintain that working mothers are, on average, not career-oriented.

"Working mothers are often seen as "Muttis", who are not primarily career-oriented, but instead 'doing a bit of work'" (CaseNo. 5188160380).

The social and parental role of the mother, and consequently the confirmation of the male breadwinner model (please refer to category "C5: Mothers should not work (male bread-winner model"), seems prevalent among our sample.

"Working mothers are normally seen as bad mothers who don't really care about their children" (CaseNo. 5216652037).

In the same vein, managers seem to equate being a

working mother with being an employee with low career aspirations and for whom work is mostly a sideline activity.

"Mothers automatically decided against career advancement when they decided to have children. Mothers should be glad they even have a job, the most important thing is that the content is right; money doesn't matter so much. It has always been the case that women do not earn as much as their male colleagues." (CaseNo. 5310292253).

"My manager thinks women belong in the kitchen – and if they do work, then only in clerical positions or part-time" (CaseNo. 5188034696).

However, part-time work often seems to be one of the main problems for working mothers (i.e., "C4a: Working mothers require part-time positions").

"The role as mother tends to go unnoticed at work, working part-time is the much bigger issue" (CaseNo. 5289286645).

"Unfortunately, working part-time is currently seen as something negative in my department, because you are not available every day" (CaseNo. 5201185067).

Part-time employees are not looked upon favourably because they are deemed to cause more organisational work and are supposedly never around when you need them (e.g., C4b: Working mothers' time schedules are more difficult to manage). Some managers also hold the view that part-time work is not compatible with a management position, meaning part-time employees are not promoted (e.g., C3b: Working mothers are often not available for duty travels, short-notice and evening meetings).

"Mothers who worked part-time had to make a disproportionate effort [...] to be noticed" (CaseNo. 5295961443).

"Behind closed doors, HR departments and decision-makers always have a worse opinion of mothers" (CaseNo. 5223312597).

There were also statements about the positive image of mothers among managers, as identified in category "C2: Working mothers perform as well as other employees". Some respondents reported good time management skills and a higher degree of loyalty.

"Though working mothers were not around as much, their output was good, they worked efficiently and were well organised. Their life experience benefits them" (CaseNo. 5189995468).

"Yes, mothers have to leave at some point, they can't just stay late, travel, etc. But they also don't change jobs at the drop of a hat; instead, they and their expertise stay with the company" (CaseNo. 5175791181).

4.3 Managers' reactions during pregnancy in relation to upcoming career steps

In the following table, we present the coding strategy we followed, according to the protocol set out by Mayring (2015), regarding managers' reactions during pregnancy in relation to upcoming career steps.

What happens to upcoming career moves when a company is informed about a pregnancy? Only one-fifth of the mothers who participated in the survey were able to execute impending career moves. Forty-five percent of the study participants had upcoming career developments put on hold for the time being and another 27 percent had their career prospects cancelled altogether.

One of the most-reported impacts of pregnancy on career advancements was that, in many cases, the career steps for the working mothers were put on hold (i.e., "C2:

Table 3: Coding strategy – Managers' reactions during pregnancy in relation to upcoming career steps

Category	Sub-categories
C1: Pending career steps were implemented	C1: Pending career steps were implemented
C2: Pending career steps were put on hold	C2: Pending career steps were put on hold
C3: Pending career steps were cancelled	C3: Pending career steps were cancelled
C4: Job re-entry was hindered	C4a: Re-employment was not possible after parental leave C4b: Part-time was not possible after parental leave C4c: Abandonment/reduction of responsibility
C5: Predetermined career steps	C5a: Civil servant C5b: Collective bargaining agreements (i.e. union negotiations)
C6: Employment contract was terminated	C6a: Settlement agreement C6b: Position was filled with the temporary replacement employee C6c: Fixed term contracts was not extended

Pending career steps were put on hold").

"I have been in the talent pool three times. During my first pregnancy, [my employer] took me out of the talent pool. After my first child, I managed to get back into the talent pool. Then I became pregnant with my second child and was again taken out of the talent pool. Even now, I am still in the talent pool, but unfortunately, in the last five years there has been no salary increase, no advancement, ...". (CaseNo. 5189757179)

Some study participants also reported some more nuanced negative experiences with regard to further career steps, in the form of responsibilities being reduced or in the assignment of inferior tasks, resulting in career regression (e.g., in particular, "C4c: Abandonment/reduction of responsibility").

"I had a project management position before my pregnancy. I was told to give up this position even while I was still pregnant" (CaseNo. 5197210224).

"After giving birth and taking one year of parental leave, I was forcibly transferred to a position that has little to do with my actual training and skills. That was a step backward" (CaseNo. 5313303450).

"After the birth and my maternity leave, I was assigned other (inferior) work, covering for absences (illness, vacation). I was told that, ''after all, nobody else would be able to do all these different tasks..." – this continued until I took on another job in a different division of the company." (CaseNo. 5305819037)

For some mothers, the demotion was so significant that it resulted in job loss or hindered job re-entry (i.e., categories "C6: Employment contract was terminated" and "C4: Job re-entry was hindered", respectively).

"The option of further employment at this office location was excluded" (CaseNo. 5197277491)

"Re-employment after parental leave was even obstructed" (CaseNo. 5189104519)

Finally, for certain specific contract types, such as fixed-term contracts, the consequences of pregnancy for professional careers can often be quite drastic, with most contracts not extended or terminated (i.e., category "C6: Employment contract was terminated").

4.4 Managers' reactions during pregnancy with regard to upcoming salary increases

In the following table, we present the coding strategy we followed, according to the protocol set out by Mayring (2015), regarding managers' reactions during pregnancy with regard to upcoming salary increases.

For about half of the mothers to whom this question applied, upcoming salary increases were implemented as planned. For 8 percent, they were implemented at a reduced level, and for about one-third, they were cancelled completely.

For certain groups of working mothers, clustered under category "C4: Predetermined salary increase", such as civil servants (sub-category C4a) or employees subject to collective bargaining agreements (sub-category C4b), salary increases were obviously not an issue.

"Salary steps are predetermined and linked to specific points in time" (CaseNo. 5294396209) (civil servant)

"Salary [...] is paid according to the collective bargaining agreement; the direct supervisor had no influence on this" (CaseNo. 5348840843) (collective bargaining agreement)

In government agencies, a salary increase is normally associated with a promotion, yet pregnancy-related time off was found to result in a lack of proactive promotion.

"Often, however, one is overlooked when the time comes for promotions, or the assessment is more neutral than positive because one has not been there for a long time" (CaseNo. 5307586531).

The perception of managers that working mothers are less present or reliable than other employees negatively impacts the performance appraisal and consequently the salary increase perspectives of working mothers (e.g.,

Table 4: Coding strategy – Managers' reactions during pregnancy with regard to upcoming salary increases

Category	Sub-categories
C1: Pending salary increase was implemented as planned	C1: Pending salary increase was implemented as planned
C2: Pending salary increase was put on hold or implemented at a reduced rate	C2a: Pending salary increase was put on hold C2b: Pending salary increase was implemented at a reduced rate
C3: Pending salary increase was cancelled	C3a: Pending salary increase was cancelled (i.e. parental leave caused the motherhood gap)
C4: Predetermined salary increase	C4a: Civil servant C4b: Collective bargaining agreements (i.e. union negotiations)

"C2b: Pending salary was implemented at a reduced rate" and "Pending salary increase was cancelled (i.e., parental leave caused the motherhood gap").

"Next appraisal will be difficult due to lack of time. Without a good appraisal, no promotion, no raise :-(" (CaseNo. 5240855970).

"Last salary increase had already been approved. Then, for two years no raise due to one-year absence." (CaseNo. 5333627080).

Another recurrent theme among our respondents which directly impacted decisions on salary increases were the type/responsibility of tasks performed. As discussed, job re-entry after maternal leave is often associated with reduced responsibilities for working mothers.

"Tasks that would have led to my upgrading [...] were cancelled" (CaseNo. 5197277491)

Another aspect that was frequently presented in our sample was the reduction of working hours, normally associated with the request for more flexible work arrangements, such as part-time.

"By reducing my working hours, any claims I had become void" (CaseNo. 5352976379).

"They wanted to put me in a lower pay grade when I returned from parental leave because, from the manager's point of view, it was not possible to keep me on as a part-time employee with the same pay grade." (CaseNo. 5311410565)

"During my time with my children, I am sure that I often did not receive a salary increase even though I was entitled to it, just as a part-time employee. In the situation following the birth of my last child, I did receive a salary increase again after a while, but only because of my extraordinary commitment during that time." (CaseNo. 5295970377).

Finally, the topic of visibility, perceived by our respondents as face time at work, is often one of the most important antecedents for salary increases.

"At our company, so-called 'performance-related changes' are not performance-related at all, but in fact visibility-related: half the hours, half the visibility." (CaseNo. 5296032132).

4.5 Managers' reactions during pregnancy in relation to position

In the following table, we present the coding strategy we followed, according to the protocol set out by Mayring (2015), regarding managers' reactions during pregnancy in relation to the woman's actual position.

Table 5: Coding strategy – Managers' reactions during pregnancy in relation to position

Category	Definition	Coding rules
C1: The position was kept vacant and remained temporarily unoccupied	The position should: - be vacant - temporarily unoccupied - still exist	All three aspects of the definition must hold true, otherwise - C2, if not vacant and temporarily filled - C3, if filled permanently by another employee - C4, if eliminated
C2: The workplace was temporary filled by another employee	The position should: - be filled temporarily - still exist	Both aspects of the definition must hold true, otherwise - C1, if vacant and temporarily unoccupied - C3, if filled permanently by another employee - C4, if eliminated
C3: The position was permanently filled by another employee	The position should: - be filled permanently - still exist	Both aspects of the definition must hold true, otherwise - C1, if vacant and temporarily unoccupied - C3, if filled permanently by another employee - C4, if eliminated
C4: The position was eliminated	The position ceased to exist	The single aspect of the definition must hold true, otherwise - C1, if vacant and temporarily unoccupied - C3, if filled permanently by another employee - C4, if eliminated

Following the birth of their child, working mothers in Germany are entitled to take up to three years leave from work[2] . In our sample, 64 percent of the working mothers took between 3 and 12 months parental leave.

The results of our study show that in one-fifth of the cases, the job was kept open and remained temporarily vacant. In 43 percent of the cases, the job was kept open and there was a temporary replacement solution. The picture is more negative for one-third of the study participants, whose job was either permanently filled by another employee (28 percent) or even cut completely (4 percent).

In addition, it is common for mothers to be offered other jobs within the company after parental leave. Some of our study participants reported that their wishes were taken into account when choosing a department or job.

"My position was filled, but after 2 years of maternity leave I was able to return to the department of my choice (I no longer wanted my old position)" (CaseNo. 5257906970)

Others reported that new jobs with equivalent tasks were offered.

"My place was filled by another employee, but I was given an adequate job with similar tasks after 10 months. There was enough work for both positions. We got along well" (CaseNo. 5308099050).

Some mothers saw these changes as an opportunity to acquire additional professional qualifications ("...I was assigned to a different department. This was positive for me, as it allowed me to become acquainted with new and welcome activities" (CaseNo. 5197434984)) or to have a somewhat stress-free job ("Transferred (voluntarily) during parental leave to a less stressful job after parental leave" (CaseNo. 5324656423).

However, there were also quite a few reports that tasks given after parental leave either did not match the qualifications or were undemanding and uninteresting.

"They kept my position open for me, but not my actual job. I was then assigned another job (with the same pay), but it had nothing to do with what I was good at or wanted to do" (CaseNo. 5309305727).

"A position was held open for me, but not the one I had before pregnancy. The tasks were made up of all the ones the others didn't want to do. At least that was my impression" (CaseNo. 5197260127).

Frequently, the mother's former job was permanently filled by another employee, while another, part-time position was created for her.

"Pressed by my boss, I arranged for full-time care for the baby at an extremely early stage. Nevertheless, my position was permanently filled by another employee. The explanation: even with full-time care, there was no guarantee that I would actually be available full-time (key words: the child falling ill, days when the day-care centre was closed, nursery teachers going on strike, the need to work overtime at short notice...). They told me the position absolutely needed to be filled full-time and working overtime had to be possible at all times." (CaseNo. 5315961944)

In some cases, jobs were reorganised, and mothers were given only a fraction of their former duties.

However, it was not uncommon for the mothers to hand in their resignations themselves. This was often done so they could take care of the children, but also because of negative reactions in the company. In some cases, professional reorientation was the reason for leaving the old job.

5 Discussion and implications

This work has been aimed at investigating one of the most overlooked determinants of the motherhood gap, employer discrimination. Indeed, in existing literature, most of the work done to explain this phenomenon has been of a quantitative nature. Therefore, the key determinants behind the perception of employer bias have been largely understated.

Our analysis profoundly resonates with the relevant literature presented in the theoretical framework. More specifically, the quotes generated through our content analysis originated from a large sample of observations accurately coded.

In general terms, respondents perceived their employer as biased against working mothers (i.e., Section 4.2, "Managers' attitudes toward working (expectant) mothers").

Being a mother seems to project the idea of less flexibility and mobility, and even when full availability is offered, they are often not scheduled for the whole working day (see, in particular, Section 4.2, categories "C1: Working mothers are not as present as other employees" and "C3: Working mothers perform worse than other employees", and their sub-categories). This phenomenon can be explained by the "second shift" hypothesis: The employer, anticipating the high burden of family/maternal duties, would automatically assume a loss in productivity (Parrott, 2014) and therefore relegate working mothers to less demanding tasks (Budig & England, 2001)Click here to enter text..

Employers seem to subscribe to the notion that working mothers are implicitly not completely job-oriented as, otherwise, they may be deemed bad mothers (Section 4.2, "C4: Working mothers are not career-oriented"). In other words, the role of the mother often seems to be derived from the male breadwinner model (Section 4.2, category "C5: Mothers should not work (male bread-winner model").

[2] In addition to parental leave, in Germany there is also financial support for parents who want to care for their child together after the birth. There are basically three types of benefits: 1. basic parental allowance, 2. parental allowance plus, 3. partnership bonus (BMFSFJ (2020).

Reduced work hours seem to be the most widespread solution for working mothers, although part-time arrangements normally require more organisational efforts and investments from the employer and are generally not perceived as compatible with managerial positions. In this regard, our inductive coding strategy shows that the sub-categories "C4a: Working mothers require part-time positions" and "C4b: Working mothers' time schedules are more difficult to manage" are inherently intertwined with the category "C4: Working mothers are not career-oriented" and therefore trigger a negative attitude or perception in the manager. The effort hypothesis notion offers a compelling explanation for the results obtained. Highly skilled mothers with managerial roles, especially when they have small children, did indeed experience the largest motherhood gap in our sample, confirming previous investigations on the reduced productivity topic (Anderson et al., 2003; Azmat & Ferrer, 2017). In addition, our working mothers often found themselves in a position where they had to accept such part-time arrangements, which eventually widen the motherhood gap, causing negative career loops (Dex et al., 2008)Click here to enter text.. This was particularly evident in Section 4.3, where we analysed the reactions of managers during pregnancy in relation to upcoming career steps. We found that job re-entry was somehow hindered due to reduced responsibilities (C4c) or flexible work arrangements (C4b).

From the employer standpoint, we did, however, find some perceived positive attributes related to being a mother, such as a higher level of "life experience" and a higher degree of loyalty compared to other employees. While the former feature should encourage a generally positive attitude toward managing the complexity of a company, the latter characteristic ensures that working mothers, despite being less flexible in terms of job mobility and working hours, normally have little desire to frequently change jobs or employers in order to climb the corporate ladder.

As discussed in the Section 4.3, "Reaction of the manager during pregnancy in relation to upcoming career steps", unfortunately only a marginal number of working mothers included in our sample had their upcoming career steps realised. The vast majority saw their career progression come to a halt or temporary slowdown after communicating the pregnancy. Employer discrimination can, indeed, occur in multiple configurations, such as being temporarily suspended from a promotion cycle (especially after the second pregnancy), being assigned a less important role or being re-assigned to a different department/role with a downgrade of duties (e.g., "C4c: Abandonment/reduction of responsibility"). Some of the working mothers simply decided to opt out of career advancements due to feeling demotivated by their employer's behaviour. Similar effects were previously verified by Aranda and Glick (2014). We also found that in many instances the employment contract was indeed terminated (i.e., "C6: Employment contract was terminated") through a settlement agreement (C6a), replacement (C6b) or the very common case of a fixed-term contract not being extended (C6c). These common career paths find their partial justification in the context of the theory of human capital, where employment interruption causes skill-depreciation effects, and consequently impacts occupational gains, even in the long term as the women's children grow up (Abendroth et al., 2014). The combination of the aforementioned effects constitutes the basis for the so-called glass ceiling phenomenon (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009), largely responsible for wage inequality between genders (Gough & Noonan, 2013). In this regard, keeping the parental leave modest in length would lead to a reduced motherhood gap (Felmlee, 1995)Click here to enter text..

Pending salary increases (Section 4.4) followed a similar path, with approximately 50 percent being implemented as originally planned and the rest suspended, reduced or cancelled. However, we were able to report a lower degree of employer discrimination compared to planned promotions, since salary increases are normally predetermined in the case of civil servants or in the case of collective bargaining agreements (i.e., category "C4: Predetermined salary increase"). Furthermore, we observed a general difficulty in time allocation for performance appraisals by the employer, which, in the instances analysed, eventually led to delayed promotion paths. This problem seems to be accentuated for high-skilled professionals who often see their promotion paths delayed or cancelled because they lack the continuity needed for such high-responsibility roles; in these specific instances, employer discrimination normally translates into lower importance of tasks assigned or a biased assessment mechanism. According to the extant literature about work-effort theory (Anderson et al., 2003; England et al., 2016; Wilde et al., 2010), highly skilled working mothers, in particular, suffer a higher wage penalty compared to other groups of employees. These findings are opposed to those of Budig and Hodges (2010), who stated that low-skilled employees would suffer the most from motherhood penalty. In any case, our analysis shows that performance-related promotions are motivated by visibility rather than performance itself (i.e., "C2a: Pending salary increase was put on hold" and "C2b: Pending salary increase was implemented at a reduced rate"). This implies that part-time employees are put at a relevant disadvantage compared to full-time colleagues, i.e., men or childless women.

Finally, in Section 4.5, we investigated the reaction of managers during pregnancy in relation to the position held by the woman. In theory, the German labour law makes it possible for working mothers to take up to three years of parental leave. In practice, however, presence and visibility in the workplace always plays a crucial role. Indeed, some respondents felt threatened and preferred to keep working even during parental leave. On average, re-entry

was perceived as quite traumatic in our sample. Employer discrimination took various forms, the most frequent being a mismatch between skills level of the working mothers and the suggested new role post parental leave. This resonates with previous academic works on the topic, where work interruptions were found to lead to lower occupational status post birth (Dex et al., 2008). Other forms of discrimination may include unanticipated organisational changes in the team or division/department level and, in the most extreme situations, job cuts. In our sample, in one out of three instances, the job opening caused by parental leave was permanently filled by a colleague (”C3: The position was permanently filled by another employee”), or the job was cut completely (”C4: The position was eliminated”). In addition, resignation was often an option chosen by working mothers; opting out in this situation may look like a unilateral, voluntary decision, but it is indirectly triggered by the discrimination behaviours. A minority of respondents, however, reported positive outcomes for post-pregnancy re-entering as they took their parental leave as an opportunity to re-think their careers and agreed to being reassigned to other departments/divisions of their choice, working in new roles with equivalent tasks or opting for a more stress-free job in the same company/division. These “mother-friendly” arrangements seem to be in line with the theory of compensating differentials, where working mothers decide to trade career steps for a better work-life balance. However, if these career choices are implicitly triggered by the employer, the motherhood gap increases (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Petersen et al., 2010), further reinforcing the traditional male breadwinner model.

6 Limitations and future research

The authors acknowledge that the present work presents several limitations, mainly connected to the sample investigated. Firstly, a potential source of bias is represented by the fact our respondents were educated above-average. This could imply that our interviewees are more likely than average to strive for higher responsibilities and increasingly important job roles, not always fulfilled by their managers. Secondly, while our sample reflects the overall German population in terms of geographical characteristics, our work is limited to one country only. Finally, our respondents predominantly worked in larger companies.

Future research could address the aforementioned limitations by i) investigating a more normally distributed sample in terms of education level, and/or ii) extending the analysis to other countries or suggesting a comparison between two relevant and diverse countries, and/or iii) also factoring into the analysis small and medium-sized enterprises operating in different industries/sectors. Another interesting research avenue would be the comparison between working mothers and childless women in the same working context with the same theoretical and methodological lenses we adopted in our study.

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