

# Maternal Employment in the United States: The Intersecting Effects of Child Age, Number of Children, and Marital Status on Women's Labor Market Outcomes

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the differences on women aged 25–45 in maternal employment in the US by child age, number of children, and marital status. The analysis utilized the data from the Women's Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to emphasize maternal employment in different situations. The findings indicate that while mothers typically show greater relative employment rates than childless women, maternal employment is most constrained when the youngest child is under three, which shows an early-childhood penalty from this situation. As children get older, rates gradually rise, but families with several children face additional time and financial issues. Results are further differentiated by marital status: married mothers have more stability in the labor market, but single mothers with young children face income and employment penalty because of their lack of resources and inferior social support networks. These findings show that maternal labor force participation is shaped by intersecting demographic and structural factors rather than uniform patterns. Policy implications include expanding childcare subsidies, redesigning welfare and tax systems to smooth benefit phase-outs, promoting inclusive parental leave with paternal involvement, and enhancing flexible work arrangements. Also, it is essential to provide targeted workforce development and income-graded support for single mother. Overall, such integrated strategies can reduce maternal employment losses, reduce gender inequality, and support broader economic and intergenerational equity.

**Keywords:** Maternal employment; Child age; Marital status; Gender Inequality; Childcare policy.

## 1. Introduction

The participation of women in the labor force has been a topic of academic and policy concern in the United States for a long time. Despite a significant increase in women's overall labor market participation since the mid-20th century, there are enduring gaps especially in their prime working and childbearing years. Women in age 25 to 45 will struggle with employment and family responsibilities as their career decision are influenced by both personal preferences and broader social factors. Mothers' labor market outcomes are shaped by child-related characteristics such as the age and number of children, as well as marital status. According to recent data, it shows that mothers with young children have lower employment rates, and high childcare costs further restrict maternal employment, especially for low-income families [1]. Although maternal employment gets more attention, there is little known about the combined effects of marital status and child-related factors on women's income and labor force involvement. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the age and number of children, along with marital status, influence employment and income among women aged 25–45, to provide insights for both policymakers and labor economists.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Women's Bureau, both official U.S. government agencies that provide nationally representative and authoritative collected labor market statistics, show that maternal employment rates vary considerably with the number of children in the household and the stage of the children's life course. For instance, mothers with younger children show lower participation rates compared to those with older children, and this suggests that parental responsibilities may interact with maternal labor market decisions in complex ways. Therefore, the

relationship between fertility and female labor supply is neither uniform nor static but rather relate on multiple dimensions of family structure.

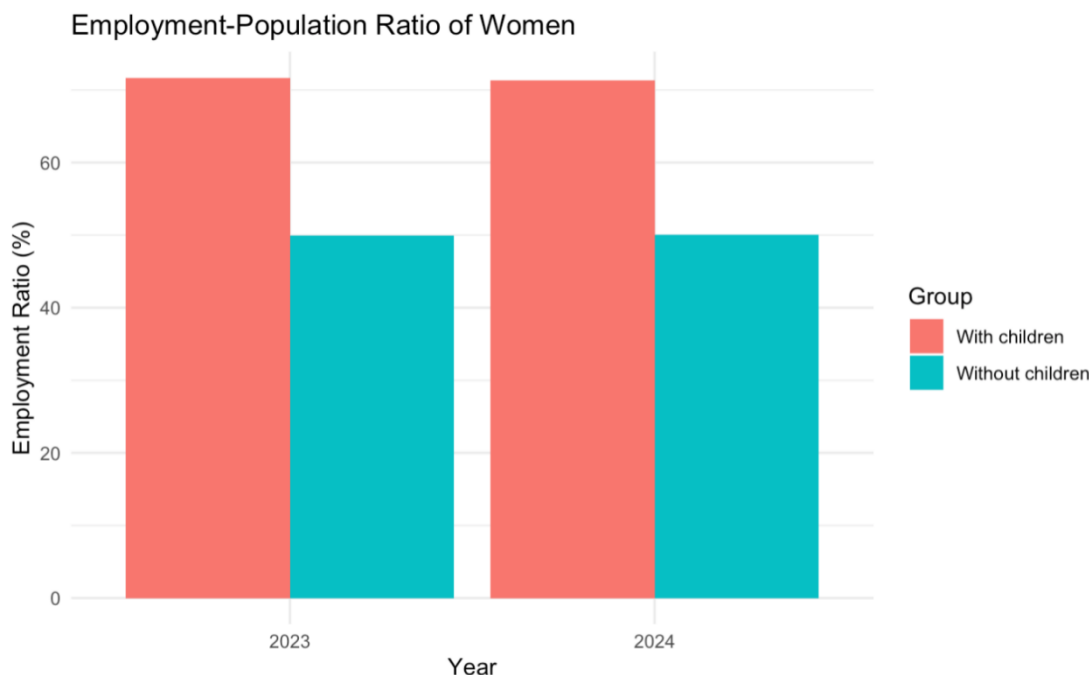
Furthermore, it is vital to comprehend how women participate in the workforce in the current economic. In the United States, demographic shifts, declining fertility rates, and current debates about labor shortages have received renewed attention on the role of women in sustaining labor force growth. Research indicates that decreasing fertility affects human capital and labor supply, which shapes long-term economic sustainability in addition to being a demographic concern [2]. At the same time, mothers' economic contributions extend beyond household earnings to broader dimensions of productivity, consumption, and social welfare. The availability of reasonably priced childcare has been found to be crucial in maintaining women's earnings and employment continuity, but the wage consequences of parenthood vary significantly based on gender, family size, and working schedules [3, 4]. Overall, these results highlight how important parental responsibilities are to understanding gendered employment outcomes and how analyzing their effects offers vital insight into the social and economic issues that modern countries face.

This study focuses on women in the U.S. aged 25 to 45 and examines how their employment outcomes differ depending on the number of children, the age of children, and marital status. These factors will be investigated to determine whether marriage increases or decreases the so-called "motherhood penalty" and the degree to which maternal labor force participation is influenced by family features.

## **2. Analysis**

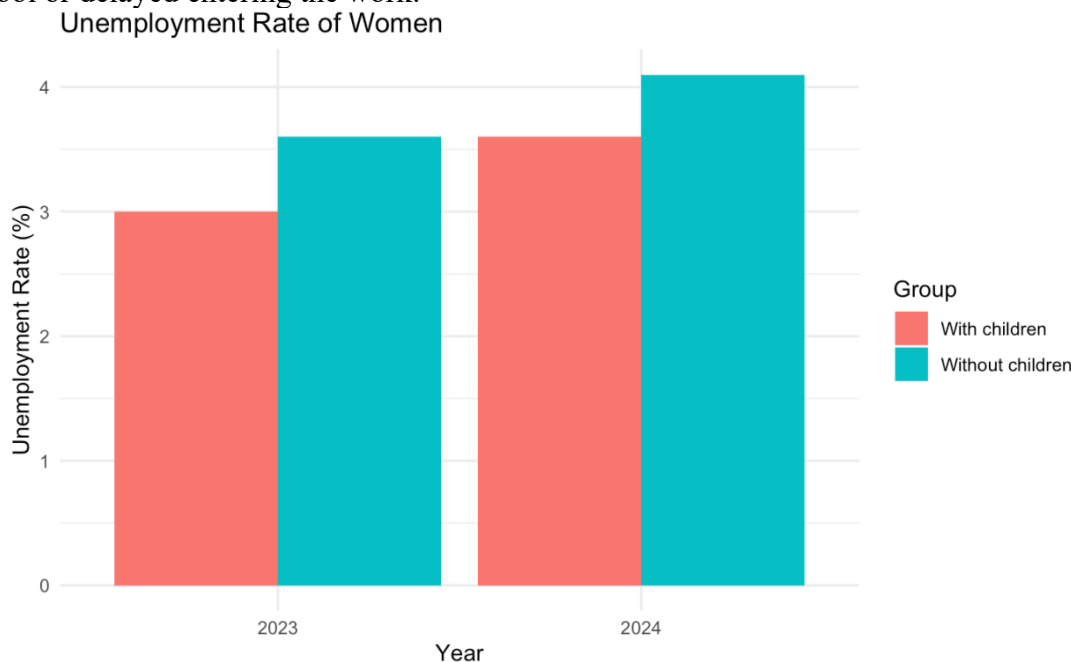
### **2.1. Maternal Employment versus Childless Women**

The impact of children on women's employment has been widely studied in labor economics. One key question is whether having children significantly affects women's labor force participation and employment outcomes. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2023 - 2024), in 2023, women with children under 18 numbered 34,090, with an employment-population ratio of 71.7 percent and a labor force participation rate of 74.0 percent. In the same year, women without children totaled 102,376, with an employment-population ratio of 49.9 percent and a participation rate of 51.8 percent. In 2024, these patterns were largely unchanged: mothers numbered 34,018, with a 71.3 percent employment-population ratio and 74.0 percent participation rate, whereas childless women numbered 103,615, with an employment-population ratio of 50.0 percent and participation rate of 52.1 percent [5]. Based on these BLS data, Figure 1 and Figure 2 present the labor force participation and employment-population ratios for women with and without children, which highlights the relative differences discussed above.



**Fig. 1** Employment-population ratio of women

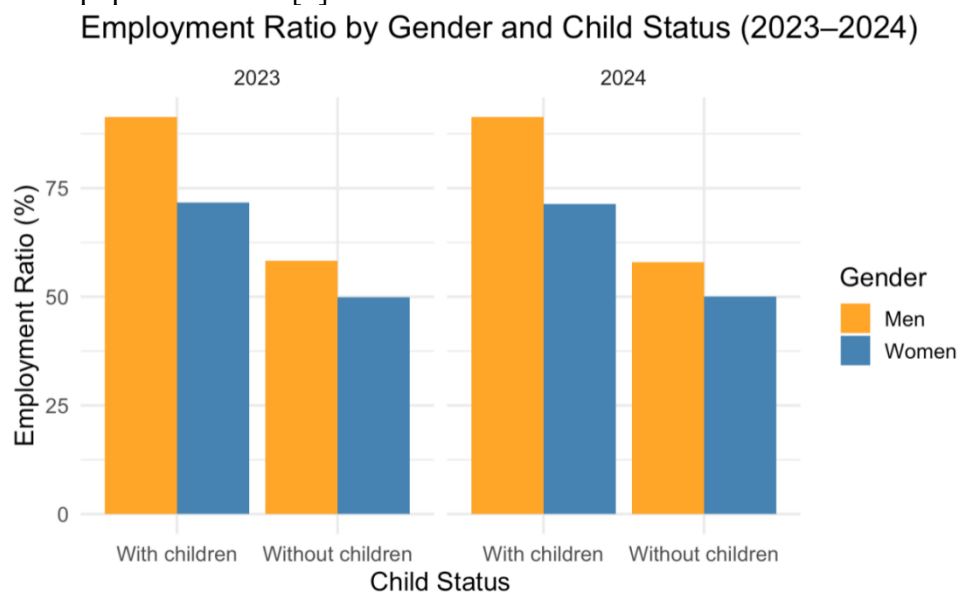
From the Fig. 1, it is evident that women with children have a higher percentage of being employed compared with their childless counterparts. However, in absolute numbers, the total employment of childless women is higher than that of mothers. As shown in Fig. 2, the number of employed women with children under 18 years is 24,457; however, the number of employed women without children under 18 years old is 51,080. This illustrates the difference between relative rates and absolute counts by reflecting the larger group of childless women, which includes younger women who might still be in school or delayed entering the work.



**Fig. 2** Unemployment rate of women

Male employment rates generally exceed those of women across all groups. Male employment rates, by contrast, remain generally higher and relatively unaffected by parenthood. In 2023, men with children numbered 28,470, with 93.4 percent participation and 91.3 percent employment-

population ratio, while childless men totaled 102,007 with 61.1 percent participation and 58.3 percent employment-population ratio [5].

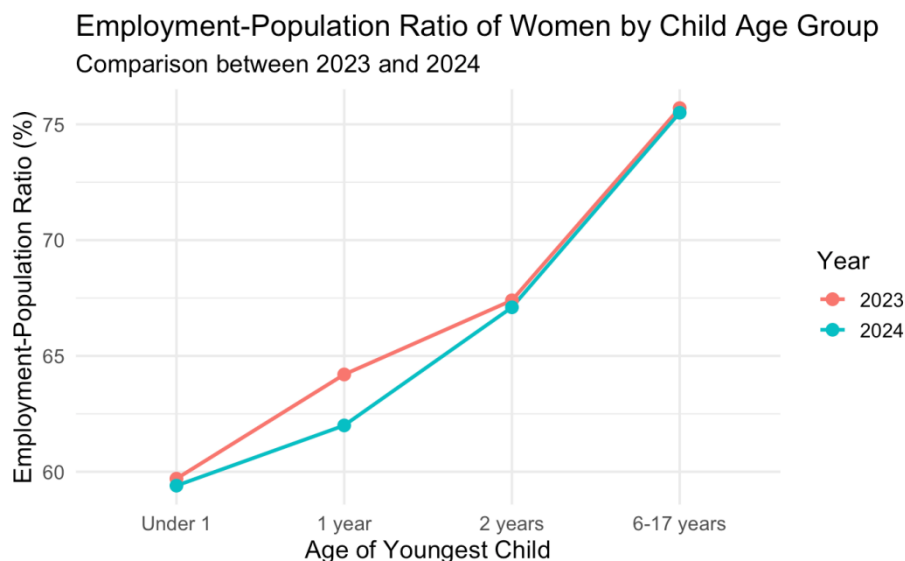


**Fig. 3** Employment ratio by Gender and Child Status(2023-2024)

From Fig. 3, it shows that the employment rate of men is higher than women in both with and without children’s situations. Moreover, wage patterns reinforce this disparity, where women are generally paid less than males, even before they have children, and this gap usually grows when they get married and have children [6]. Overall, these patterns illustrate continuous gendered differences in labor market outcomes, with men benefiting from relatively stable employment and earnings while women face both the motherhood penalty and structural wage gaps.

## 2.2. Effects of Child Age on Maternal Employment

Another central question in the analysis of maternal labor force participation is whether the number of children or the age of the youngest child exerts a stronger influence on mothers’ employment outcomes. Evidence from the 2023 and 2024 data indicates that child age imposes a more immediate and restrictive effect on women’s labor market activity than child quantity. Specifically, when the youngest child is under one year old, mothers exhibit the lowest employment-to-population ratios—59.7% in 2023 and 59.4% in 2024. This figure represents the most constrained stage of maternal employment, as new mothers face recovery from childbirth, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to affordable childcare. Once children reach age one, maternal employment begins to recover, rising to approximately 64%. By the time the youngest child is two, the rate increases further to around 67% [7]. The sharpest contrast appears when the youngest child is between six and seventeen years: here, the maternal employment-to-population ratio surpasses 75% across both years, marking a clear rebound from the early-childhood penalty. Unemployment rates follow the opposite trajectory, higher among mothers with infants and lower ones once children are older. These patterns are illustrated in Fig. 4, which is generated based on BLS data on maternal employment by the age of the youngest child.



**Fig. 4** Employment-Population Ratio of Women by child age Group

The trajectory of maternal employment across child age groups highlights different stages of labor market connection. The steep rise from roughly 60% among mothers with infants to 67% by the time the youngest child reaches age two suggests that the earliest stage of motherhood acts as a transitional shock, with employment gradually stabilizing thereafter. The slower but continued increase through the preschool years, and the clear jump above 75% once the youngest child enters school age (6–17), indicates that maternal employment patterns are closely linked to children’s development. The contrast between the sharp recovery in the first two years and the declining after school entry implies that decisive adjustments in mothers’ labor supply occur during the infant and toddler phases, rather than being distributed evenly throughout childhood. Moreover, the consistent pattern across 2023 and 2024 suggests that these dynamics are structural rather than cyclical, reflecting persistent constraints tied to child age rather than temporary fluctuations in labor demand.

### 2.3. Marital Status and Maternal Employment

Marital status emerges as a critical factor shaping maternal labor market outcomes, often intersecting with both child age and number of children to raise the motherhood penalty. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2023–2024) indicate that married mothers exhibit slightly higher employment rates compared to their unmarried counterparts, though both groups face constraints relative to men.

In 2023, the labor force participation rate for married mothers with children under 18 was 66.4%, with an employment-to-population ratio of 64.9%. By contrast, unmarried mothers recorded a lower participation rate of 66.1% and an employment-to-population ratio of just 60.7%. These disparities persist in 2024, married mothers’ employment ratio remained at 63.6%, whereas unmarried mothers’ employment ratio stood at 60.8%. Unemployment rates also diverged sharply, while married mothers reported rates around 2%–2.4%, unmarried mothers experienced unemployment of 8%–10% [7]. The intersection of marital status and child age further magnifies these gaps. Unmarried mothers with very young children (particularly under age three) face the steepest employment penalties, with participation rates falling below 60% and unemployment exceeding 8%. In contrast, married mothers, though still constrained in the early-childhood years, exhibit higher stability in employment outcomes.

These findings suggest that marital status is not merely a background attribute but operates as a channel through which individuals gain access to economic and social resources. Marriage often provides dual incomes, childcare support, and greater job stability, which buffer against the labor market costs of motherhood. However, unmarried moms have additional challenges, such as fewer resources for the home, less social support, and more vulnerability to job changes. Thus, marital status

not only reinforces but also increases the motherhood penalty, particularly for those raising very young children outside of marriage.

### 3. Solutions

The above analysis indicates the continuous challenges that mothers face in the labor market, particularly in those of multiple children's families. Although their employment rates are relatively higher than those of women with no child, they often face "motherhood penalty." Families with multiple children face complex economic and time pressures that may limit mothers' labor force participation. Research shows that high childcare costs may reduce mothers' employment, especially in households with multiple children [1]. In order to shorten these burdens, targeted intervention can help. Research indicates that child-number-linked childcare subsidies and tax incentives are particularly effective for low- and middle-income families, which help mothers maintain attachment to the labor market [8]. Besides financial aid, the flexibility of the labor market is also important. Higher maternal employment rates and lower turnover is associated with flexible parental leave arrangements, remote work options and flexible work schedules. Recent evidence from Ziegler and Bamieh indicates that while more flexible parental leave systems can shorten benefit durations and encourage earlier return to work, they also primarily generate redistributive effects that make high-income families more benefit [9]. This emphasizes the potential that poorly designed flexibility measures may unintentionally extend inequality, which highlights the importance of combining flexibility with childcare subsidies and targeted tax incentives to ensure mothers across income groups remain in the labor market. Public investment in early childhood education further supports maternal employment by reducing childcare constraints and promoting equitable access to quality care [10]. However, unconditional cash transfers alone are insufficient to sustain labor force participation, as they fail to adequately address time constraints and childcare service accessibility [11]. By combining targeted subsidies, tax incentives, flexible employment arrangements, and early childhood education opportunities, policymakers can help mothers, particularly those in large families, balance work and family responsibilities. This reduces employment losses caused by having several children and promotes long-term economic stability.

Maternal employment faces the greatest constraints when their children are under three years old, which makes this stage critical for intervention. OECD data shows significant cross-country variations. For instance, in the Czech Republic, the employment rate for mothers of children aged 0-2 was only 21% in 2021, while it rose to 75% for mothers of children aged 3-5 and reached 92% for mothers of children aged 6-14 [12]. By contrast, countries like Luxembourg and the Netherlands exhibit much narrower gaps, which highlight the positive impact of accessible childcare and family support systems. In the United States, childcare shortages remain a major barrier. For example, in 2023, over 2.2 million parents of children under six reported quitting, declining, or changing jobs due to children's difficulties, while women negatively impacted [13]. These patterns indicate the necessity of subsidized childcare for children aged 0-3, both to maintain mothers' labor force participation and to prevent the deepening of gender income gaps. Beyond employment outcomes, early childhood care is a demonstrated social investment that improves children's cognitive development and prevents future inequality [10]. Paid parental leave serves as another critical tool for supporting mothers' employment, particularly when fathers also take leave. State-level experiences in the United States demonstrate this potential: in California, the proportion of men taking paid parental leave rose from 17%- 40%; in Rhode Island, 42% of leave applications in 2020 were submitted by fathers [14]. According to national reports, when fathers take leave, childcare tasks are more equally shared, and moms return to work quickly. However, awareness of these programs remains uneven, particularly among low-income workers, immigrants, and men, limiting coverage and exacerbating inequalities. At the same time, caution is important, as evidence from Austria suggests that more flexible or generous parental leave schemes have limited impact on gender equality. While the overall supply of female labor remains relatively stable, high-income households gain greatly; it becomes challenging

to reverse long-term career disruptions for mothers when extended parental leave becomes the norm[9]. This suggests that extending parental leave without combining it with affordable childcare services and explicit incentives for fathers may unintentionally deepen disparities. Effective reforms must combine childcare subsidies for children aged 0 to 3 with inclusive, well-designed parental leave policies that actively encourage fathers' participation in childcare. Such comprehensive measures are crucial for reducing employment losses among mothers during early childhood due to childcare responsibilities, while also promoting lasting gender equality in the labor market.

Single mothers deal with several structural challenges, including high poverty rates, insecure work, and severe maternity penalty, particularly when raising small children. Therefore, a comprehensive and targeted strategy is essential to handle these challenges effectively. First, it is important to provide affordable and high-quality childcare for children aged 0-3. Also, adjusting the childcare services or free childcare through income, when closely aligned with actual access channels and availability, can reduce employee turnover and promote sustained employment participation, and it more effective in maintaining employment than unconditional cash transfers[11, 15]. Second, welfare and tax support systems should be redesigned to eliminate the situation where low-income workers immediately lose eligibility for childcare subsidies, housing assistance, or food stamps once their income exceeds a specific threshold. Despite small wage gains, this abrupt withdrawal of benefits can put families in an even deeper financial crisis, possibly discouraging single moms from working longer hours or pursuing higher-paying jobs. Redesigning these systems with gradual phase-outs, income-graded subsidies, and refundable tax credits would smooth transitions into higher earnings, reduce income volatility, and ensure that employment growth is always rewarded [8]. Third, workforce development programs for single mothers are critical. Short-term training programs can equip single mothers with digital skills, problem-solving abilities, and interpersonal competencies. When combined with subsidized childcare services and employment placement support, these initiatives enable them to pursue careers less replaceable to automation and job displacement [12]. This integrated program empowers single mothers by integrating accessible childcare, welfare smoothing, and skills training to maintain employment, increase upward mobility, and eliminate long-term inequities.

Overall, the difficulties moms have in working are complex and result from the interaction of social support networks, family structure, and the ages of the children. Mothers in families with multiple children often face dual pressures of time and finances, requiring targeted subsidies, tax incentives, and flexible work arrangements to alleviate these burdens. During the critical stage when children are aged 0–3, accessible and affordable childcare services, coupled with parental leave policies that encourage fathers' involvement, become essential conditions for sustaining mothers' employment. For single mothers, beyond childcare and subsidies, smoother transitions out of welfare systems and skill training are crucial to enhance their long-term employability. These three elements reinforce each other, demonstrating that no single measure can address complex challenges. Through a systematic combination of childcare services, welfare and tax systems, flexible labor markets, and family-friendly policies will effectively reduce the maternal penalty. Looking ahead, policy design must also account for automation and remote work trends by connecting skill development with emerging job demands. In addition, expanding public education investment will ensure sustained maternal labor force participation and intergenerational equity for children, thereby fostering a more inclusive and sustainable labor market.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Women's Bureau, this study shows how mothers' employment varies by number and age of children, as well as marital status. The analysis shows that while women with children often have higher relative employment rates than childless women, their employment is most constrained when children are under three years of age, which reflects an early-childhood penalty. Employment gradually rises as children grow older, and mothers with multiple face additional time and financial pressures. Marital status further influences

outcomes, for unmarried mothers, particularly of very young children will experience penalties, which highlights the combined effects of limited household resources and reduced social support. These patterns indicate that the motherhood penalty is multidimensional and shaped not only by family characteristics but also by structural labor market conditions. Single interventions, such as financial transfers or flexible leave, are insufficient to ensure maternal labor force participation. Therefore, effective policy requires a combination of targeted childcare subsidies, inclusive parental leave that encourages fathers' involvement, flexible work arrangements, and welfare and tax systems that reduce sudden benefit losses. For single mothers, workforce development programs and income-graded support are particularly critical. These integrated strategies can help mothers balance work and family responsibilities, reduce employment losses, and promote long-term gender equality. By dealing with the intersecting challenges of child age, family structure, and social support, such policies contribute not only to sustained maternal employment but also to broader economic stability and intergenerational equity.

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