



## Women (and mothers) in the workforce: Worldwide factors



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### SYNOPSIS

The number of women in the workforce is increasing, although its rate continues to remain low in terms of the population they represent. Some factors such as friendly family policies, eliminating restrictions at work, and non-discrimination laws have been suggested as promoting women's economic advances. This is empirical research and analyzes the relevant factors to those in the workforce in three job positions. These findings indicate that child care provisions have had a positive influence on women's workforce participation in all job positions. This situation protects jobs, eliminates restrictions and improves non-discrimination.

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### Introduction

Women's work-related issues are an important topic in governments around the world. The authors have noted that a need exists to develop appropriate public policies to drive changes in the division of labor and participation in care needs. This is due to the fact that "working norms and workplaces, where more and more women now work, are still designed for a previous social era that preferenced men's lives, and are thus critical sites of gender production and reproduction" (Baird, Williamson, & Heron, 2012:328). Therefore, it is still an unresolved issue, and women still face many challenges in the workplace, especially when they are pregnant (Lobodzinska, 2000). In this situation, women are seen as less productive, as they must take a leave to give birth and then require recovery time (Barnard & Rapp, 2009).

Eagly and Carli (2007:56) indicated that raising children while maintaining a career is "hard work." In fact, competing demands among work and family responsibilities are increasing due to demographic and workplace changes, as well as the increased number of women in the labor force and in the aging population (Abendroth & Dulk, 2011; Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Thus, expanding the number of women who have children and maintain jobs depends on equal opportunities, in that women have to be at work both before and after childbirth. Discrimination in pre- or

post-maternity conditions and the lack of flexible work conditions create significant barriers to workforce participation for women, because they are still primarily responsible for house care (Baird et al., 2012).

Women represent half of the active population (The World Bank, 2011) to the extent that companies cannot undermine this human capital (Alonso-Almeida, 2011). There is pressure on governments and companies to implement policies toward facilitating employee efforts to fulfill both work and family responsibilities (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). Indeed, sources of support such as funded child care, leave provisions, and flexible working conditions have a positive effect on women in the labor force (Abendroth & Dulk, 2011; García-Moran & Kuehn, 2012). Nevertheless, previous research has shown that motherhood leads to a form of discrimination, because it can create a penalty for women in terms of hiring, promotion, work experience, and wages (Glauber, 2012). In other words, maternity policies might lessen the number of companies that employ women (Abendroth & Dulk, 2011). In this sense, companies might be reluctant to contract women in order to avoid maternity leave and other related benefits. In addition, internal organizational factors could contribute to discrimination and become an impediment in achieving gender equality (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). Thus, when women feel discriminated against in the workplace, they could decide not to have children to seek advancement or to leave the labor market (Abendroth & Dulk, 2011).

Nevertheless, protecting work laws for women and mothers could allow them to continue to stay active at work and combine their professional and home responsibilities (Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann, 2012). Another factor in gender discrimination has been work restrictions; some jobs are considered inappropriate for women (and even more so for mothers) especially in terms of how these restrictions increase gender inequality (Gornick & Hegewisch, 2010). The link between protective family policies for women, elimination of restrictions, and non-discrimination laws in the labor force worldwide remains poorly tested, although some authors suggest a strong interdependence among some of these factors and female workforce participation (García-Moran & Kuehn, 2012).

This study is an attempt to identify the most effective factors in encouraging women to participate in the labor force and the relevant policies that have been adopted worldwide. Thus, this work contributes to previous research in two ways. First, it shows the main drivers that encourage women and mothers to participate in the labor force. Second, it analyzes women's labor force participation depending on their job position. Three positions have been studied, namely, global work, non-agricultural work, and top management. Global work is the ratio of female labor force participation over male value based on the International Labour Organisation (Hausmann et al., 2012). Non-agricultural positions refer to the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector according to aforementioned authors. Finally, top management positions refer to the number of female firms that have a female in the top executive positions (World Bank, 2012).

This research provides relevant empirical evidence regarding the importance of breaking some of the barriers that continue today and preclude women from economic advancement. Furthermore, this article could provide insight into the role that governments should play toward maintaining competitiveness and increasing global wealth, while simultaneously advancing gender equality.

To achieve these goals, this article is divided into five sections. The theory framework and hypotheses are presented first. Methodology and variables used are explained as well, while the next section describes the quantitative results. Finally, there is a discussion about the results, and conclusions will be presented in the final section.

## Theory background

Previous research reports that the availability of child care increases women labor force participation (del Boca, 2002; del Boca & Vuri, 2007; Haan & Wrohlich, 2011; Mörck, Sjögren, & Svaleryd, 2009). Child care provisions have a strong effect on women's employment, more so than direct economic incentives (Haan & Wrohlich, 2011).

Gornick and Hegewisch (2010) noted that child care provisions not only increase the number of women in the labor force, but also improve the human capital development of the next generation. Previous works (see Gornick & Hegewisch, 2010; Love et al., 2003) asserted that women's work provides a double benefit for children: more education and a better quality of life. Therefore, child care is strongly associated with women participating in the workplace: women maintaining employment and holding better jobs, although the inverse is also accurate.

In fact, child care availability, including the school system in earlier years, has been shown to be more important than other economic incentives (Haan & Wrohlich, 2011; Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2008). Haan and Wrohlich (2011) found that public child care facilities for children younger than three years old pushed women's employment forward. Therefore, an available school system in the early years contributes to starting or maintaining female work (Abendroth & Dulk, 2011; Earles, 2011). Nevertheless, direct economic subsidies could discourage women from returning to work and could create future problems when they decide to return to work. Our first hypothesis is:

**H1.** Child care provisions provide a positive effect on women in the labor force.

Another driver that encourages women in the labor force is a leave provision, which is being extended in all countries worldwide (Abendroth & Dulk, 2011; García-Moran & Kuehn, 2012). Its impact for women in the workforce has a strong correlation with other factors, such as child care provisions (Gornick & Hegewisch, 2010). Economic theory suggests that leave provisions increase the number of women in the labor force, both before becoming pregnant and after giving birth. In line with this reasoning, Earles (2011) suggested that parental leaves encourage women to stay in the labor force, as well as allow for an equal distribution of domestic responsibilities. This policy could help gender roles at home. This author asserts that, contrary to antiquated thinking, women with more children do not participate in the labor market, even though current research suggests that women might have more children if they were supported with an extensive leave provision system. Earles (2011:189) noted that in Sweden, "Parental leave has been successful in ensuring women's labor force attachment before and after having a child." In the same vein, Haan and Wrohlich (2011) in Germany stated that maternity provisions are positive in terms of encouraging new births; this in turn assures future generations as well. Thus, a wide leave provision system could promote women's competitiveness, such that men and women more fairly shared the inconvenience and expenses of leaves (Borovoy & Ghodsee, 2012).

Moreover, given that women would feel comfortable that their children were protected, parental leave provisions reinforce women's economic independence, while dividing child care more evenly between both parents. Therefore, this provision could better contribute to gender equality when both parents desire professional careers (Earles, 2011). Hence, we propose our second hypothesis:

**H2.** A generous leave policy has a positive effect on women in the labor force.

Protection measures in the workplace, such as preventing the dismissal of pregnant women or helping them maintain the same job after the leave ends, seem to facilitate women remaining in paid work (Wall, Pappámikaail, Leitão, & Marinho, 2009). A woman would not feel forced to choose between motherhood and work outside of the home, as she should be able to do both. A generous leave policy provides a feeling of security after childbirth, because a woman can anticipate returning to the same job.

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