



Guide to Ending the Motherhood Penalty

UPROOT UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TO PREVENT DISCRIMINATION

Unconscious biases and practices that negatively affect mothers may have legal implications. Employers must ensure that the rules, policies, and practices they create are made in good faith and do not create an adverse effect on an individual or group—including mothers—based on a protected characteristic, such as family status. Canadian legislation, such as Ontario's Human Rights Code, protects women against being fired, demoted, or laid off because they are or may become pregnant. Pregnant women also have the right to not be passed over for employment and career opportunities or benefits, including training or promotions.

While legislation aims to protect mothers against discrimination, it unfortunately still happens. According to a 2021 report from Moms at Work, one third of mothers said they have been discriminated against or mistreated for being mothers. To prevent this, employers should train employees to check their own unconscious biases, particularly in recruitment and performance management. Our [Unconscious Bias Training](#) teaches employees at all levels what unconscious bias is; why it's important to address; and how they can overcome their own biases to create a fairer, more diverse, and more inclusive workplace.

Companies should identify where unconscious bias may be affecting recruitment. In a study where participants were asked to evaluate fictitious

applications, applicant mothers were six times less likely than childless women and over three times less likely than childless men to be recommended for hire. To reduce how much unconscious bias informs recruiters' decisions, employers can develop more objective hiring practices, like anonymous recruitment. Evaluators should only assess applicants on bona fide occupational requirements. By implementing an [Anonymous Recruitment Policy](#), companies remove identifiable characteristics, including gender and age, from applications. This way, applicants are less likely to be unfairly assessed or rejected because of competencies or traits unrelated to the job.

Employers should also revise performance management to support the career mobility of working moms. A 2018 study found that mothers were significantly less likely to be promoted compared to childless women. Mothers are generally perceived as less ambitious at work, but a 2019 report from McKinsey and Lean In revealed that more mothers agreed with ambition-related statements (for example, "I want to be promoted") than women overall. Employers must ensure performance management processes fairly evaluate all employees based on objective, consistent, and measurable criteria. Mothers' career mobility can also be restricted when they are denied opportunities to learn new skills. Employers should never hold back opportunities to grow because they presume mothers won't have the time, energy, or interest to take on challenges.

INCREASE ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Where a rule, policy, or practice creates an adverse effect on a mother because she is a mother, employers must implement accommodations that would remove the negative effects the original policy, practice, or rule imposed on her. Additionally, employers should recognize the unique challenges low-income mothers and those in equity-deserving groups face. Employers can support all mothers where it matters most and improve the work environment and culture to increase belonging.

Like anyone else, mothers should be able to fulfil caregiving obligations in a safe, clean, and healthy environment. Only 10 percent of mothers surveyed in the 2021 Moms at Work report received information about their rights and accommodations for breastfeeding and pumping. Employers should adopt a [Breastfeeding and Chestfeeding Policy](#) to communicate these expectations. Workplaces can also have a dedicated room where mothers can safely and privately recharge, take personal emergency calls, and breastfeed or pump.

Employers can also support mothers' wellbeing through employer-sponsored employee assistance programs (EAPs). More women than men are affected by tiredness, worry, anxiety, overwhelm, and disrupted sleep caused by unpaid caregiving duties. Of the mental health concerns women experienced, depression and postnatal depression were the second-most commonly reported. EAPs give mothers free access to counselling and other supports to help them navigate their specific situations.

Becoming a parent also comes with new financial burdens. A [Maternity and Parental Leave Top-Up Policy](#) lets parents recoup lost earnings while they are away from work for extended periods to care for a new child.

LIFT DOUBLE SHIFT BURDENS

"Double shift" refers to the burdens and obligations mothers often take on in addition to their regular job. Even when they haven't formally decided to be, mothers are often considered the default parent who is contacted for caregiving needs. According to recent data from Statistics Canada, mothers (52%) provide more care to children and care-dependent adults than fathers (42%). Flexible work arrangements and childcare support can alleviate the double shift stress mothers typically face.

Because traditional work and school schedules aren't aligned, parents benefit from flexible work arrangements so they can be where they need to be.

A [Flexible Hours of Work Policy](#) lays out guidelines for employees to restructure their work schedules in order to balance organizational and personal needs.

Childcare is often a barrier for mothers who want to return to work. Expensive daycare fees are linked to higher gender employment gaps in large cities like Vancouver and Toronto. While Canada's federal government and Quebec offer support to reduce fees and broaden accessibility to childcare, the remaining fees and long waitlists continue to hold women back from returning to the workforce. To offset this, employers can provide additional resources to help mothers access childcare services and return to work. At companies recognized as the Best Workplaces in Canada by Great Place to Work, three percent offer onsite childcare services and 27 percent offer subsidized emergency backup care. Other options include dependant care assistance, reimbursement systems, and tutoring programs.

IMPROVE PAY EQUITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Pay inequity affects all women, but the motherhood penalty can further restrict working moms' access to fair pay and widen the gender pay gap. Currently, Canada has the eighth-worst gender pay gap among OECD countries. For every dollar a man earns, a Canadian woman earns about 89 cents.

In Canada, mothers typically take the majority of the available family leave, so they are absent from the workforce longer. But this is only one of the factors contributing to gender pay inequity. Work culture, perceived competence, and other factors rooted in bias also prevent mothers from receiving adequate compensation increases. Since the pandemic, employees have been switching to higher-paying roles. Two thirds of women report not being paid enough in their current role, which can lead to turnover if uncorrected. To retain effective workers, companies need to pay them fairly. Employers can use the [Pay Equity Evaluation Guide](#) to conduct routine internal pay equity analyses and correct inconsistencies within their organization.

Additionally, companies can adopt pay transparency to disclose internal pay structures. Since women are less likely than men to ask for a raise, many rely on their company to openly share compensation information.

OUTLINE EXPECTATIONS AND RIGHTS IN POLICIES

The largest single point where women leave corporate organizations is during their maternity leave and the

years surrounding it. Of the mothers surveyed in the Moms at Work report, 40 percent considered quitting their jobs during the return-to-work process. To avoid losing valuable employees, employers should offer structured maternity leaves and return-to-work programs.

Employees often lack communication, support, and belonging when transitioning to or returning from maternity leave. Almost all (95%) mothers in the survey did not receive any formal support during their maternity leave transition, and 58 percent said their employers were unprepared for their return to work. Over two-thirds (69%) of women in the same survey were not provided with options for communications during their leave. Employers can improve retention by delivering clear communications and expectations for mothers before, during, and after their maternity leave. Assign a manager or HR to help expectant parents navigate the leave process and assist them while on leave. Use the [Maternity, Paternity, or Parental Leave Confirmation Letter](#) to outline important details for the parent on leave, including timelines and entitlements, so they can plan ahead.

Surveyed mothers said they want to be kept in the loop while on maternity leave, including being informed of company announcements, organizational changes, awards, opportunities for promotions, and internal job postings. Sharing these details can support mothers

in maintaining a sense of connection and belonging to the organization. This connectedness can help ease the transition back to work.

FINAL THOUGHT

Key takeaways to remember.

Employers can create systemic and social changes to remove barriers working moms face and help put an end to the motherhood penalty. This Mother's Day, remember to formally recognize the contributions the mothers in your workforce make at work and in society, and give them equal opportunity to create meaningful change.

Improving equity and inclusion requires systemic changes in areas like compensation and recruitment. From [customizable policy templates](#) to on-demand [expert advice](#), HRdownloads' resources help employers create fairer workplaces practices that bolster organizational success and help everyone thrive.



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