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The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Working Mothers in Same-Sex Relationships in the  
United States

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## **Abstract**

Since early 2020, the United States has been battling the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic that has forced businesses to close, schools to move to remote learning and triggered nationwide shelter-in-place mandates. While the crisis continues to unfold, much attention has been given to the extraordinary burden that the pandemic has placed on families with children who have been mandated to stay home during school and day care closures. Particularly, women have left the work force in record numbers as they have taken on a majority load of care work and have been forced to make difficult decisions to balance their responsibilities.

Through interviews with mothers from both heterosexual and same-sex partnerships, this study highlights the unique challenges that mothers have faced throughout the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic in the United States both at home and in the workplace. Touching on issues surrounding child care, workplace accommodations and mental health, these interviews paint a diverse picture of the struggles plaguing mothers in the current climate. Insights collected from these interviews as well as quantitative national survey data and government economic reports highlight the incredible toll that the pandemic has taken on working mothers in both same-sex and heterosexual partnerships in order to draw a comparison between these two groups.

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### Chapter 1: Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on the lives of people all over the world. The United States has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, which forced the closure of public spaces including restaurants, businesses, and schools. Such closures, in addition to the proliferation of the disease in general, have upended the US economy and forced men and women to reassess every aspect of their lives. While research continues to unfold, much attention has been given to the significant number of mothers that have left the workforce over the course of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> In large part, significant job loss can be attributed to the lack of social protections in the United States such as access to affordable universal child care and Family Medical Leave as well as a loss of access for those who were fortunate enough to have these services pre-pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, existing gender stereotypes and expectations have meant that a majority of the burden of child care and elder care has fallen onto women, forcing many to choose between their home responsibilities and their careers.<sup>3</sup> These challenges have been even more pronounced for groups that were already marginalized in the United States including Black and Brown communities, families with low-incomes and, of interest for this study, LGBTQ individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The massive exodus of women from the workforce threatens to set back years of progress that has been made toward women's equity. Prior to the pandemic, as of December 2019, women held a majority of nonfarm jobs in the United States, a remarkable milestone for women's

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Power, "The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Increased the Care Burden of Women and Families," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 16, no. 1 (2020): pp. 67-73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1776561>.

<sup>2</sup> Seth K. Kornfeld, "A Need Not Being Met: Providing Paid Family and Medical Leave for All Americans," *Family Court Review* 56, no. 1 (2018): 165-79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12329>.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Phillips II et al., "Addressing the Disproportionate Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Gender Minority Populations in the United States: Actions Toward Equity," *LGBT Health* 7, no. 6 (September 1, 2020): 279-82, <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0187>.

<sup>4</sup> Phillips, "Addressing the Disproportionate Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Minority Populations in the United States: Actions Toward Equity

equality and significant achievement for women's advancement in the US economy.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the pandemic presents an formidable and daunting setback for this upward trend. Unlike recessions of the past, pandemic-related job losses heavily affected service industries rather than goods-based industries, leading to a significant loss of jobs in female-dominated fields.<sup>6</sup> The Center for American Progress reports that “women have lost a net of 5.4 million jobs during the pandemic-induced recession compared with 4.4 million lost by men.”<sup>7</sup> Without substantial and swift government action to help curb the effects of the pandemic both from a public health standpoint and from an economic standpoint, women in the workforce face irreparable damage to their careers and global gender equality. In many ways, the pandemic hasn't necessarily created *new* dynamics and challenges, but rather exacerbated and elevated existing structural inequalities and challenges for already marginalized groups. For the purposes of my research, I will be focusing on the effects of the pandemic on working mothers, particularly to gain an understanding of how the pandemic has affected women in same-sex partnerships compared to those in heterosexual relationships.

## **Literature Review**

While the full effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the United States are still largely unknown and unfolding, many of the themes that this research touches upon are rooted in decades of existing research and scholarly work. To better frame my own research, the following literature review will outline existing research as it pertains to work structures for mothers, the effect of the pandemic on the LGBTQ community, paid leave programs in the United States and

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<sup>5</sup> Betsey Stevenson, “Women, Work, and Families: Recovering from the Pandemic-Induced Recession,” September 2021, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/20210929\\_Hamilton\\_stevenson\\_womenWorkFamilies.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/20210929_Hamilton_stevenson_womenWorkFamilies.pdf), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Stevenson, “Women, Work, and Families: Recovering from the Pandemic-Induced Recession,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Boesch and Shilpa Phadke, “When Women Lose All the Jobs,” n.d., 11.

gendered divisions of care. These themes of study provide a framework for understanding the landscape of the field as it stands and contextualize my findings within the greater body of work in this area of study.

### ***Pandemic Work Structures for Mothers***

The challenges presented by the pandemic have exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly for women in the workplace. Studies have indicated that gendered dynamics of the pandemic have the potential to undo years of progress made toward women's parity in the workplace as thousands of women have lost their jobs or been forced to leave the workforce entirely to assume care responsibilities.<sup>8</sup> There is conflicting research as to whether remote work is beneficial for gender equity or acts to worsen existing inequalities for mothers. Since women are overrepresented in lower-status white collar jobs, such as administrative work, women were found to be more likely to telecommute than their male counterparts throughout the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Some studies suggest that remote work is beneficial for mothers in that it allows them to find a better balance between their work responsibilities by allowing them to complete some child care and household tasks during the work day.<sup>10</sup> Other studies indicate that telecommuting actually adds an additional burden of unpaid labor to already overstretched mothers who feel the social pressure to take on housework and care responsibilities while working from home.<sup>11</sup>

The ability to be productive professionally while working from home and caring for children has been a major concern for both employers and working parents. While studies have

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<sup>8</sup> Jamille Bigio et al., "Covid-19 Could Undo Decades of Women's Progress," *Foreign Affairs*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-01-05/covid-19-could-undo-decades-womens-progress>.

<sup>9</sup> "One-Quarter of the Employed Teleworked in August 2020 Because of COVID-19 Pandemic : The Economics Daily: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics," accessed September 24, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/one-quarter-of-the-employed-teleworked-in-august-2020-because-of-covid-19-pandemic.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Jill E. Yavorsky, Yue Qian, and Amanda C. Sargent, "The Gendered Pandemic: The Implications of COVID-19 for Work and Family," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 6 (2021): e12881, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12881>.

<sup>11</sup> MC Noonan and JL Glass, "The Hard Truth about Telecommuting," *Monthly Labor Review*, no. 135 (n.d.): 38–45.

shown that both mothers and fathers have felt the pressure of child care while working from home, 53% of mothers surveyed stated that they were not able to give 100% to their work while working from home with children, while just 43% of fathers felt the same.<sup>12</sup> The chart below illustrates the divide between how men and women experienced working from home while parenting in the pandemic:

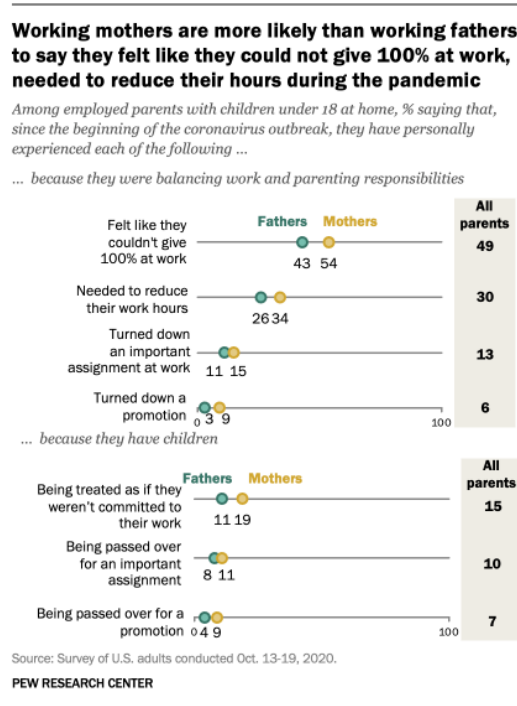


Figure 1. Experience of Working Mothers and Fathers during the Pandemic<sup>13</sup>

Although both men and women found child care to be difficult during the pandemic, mothers felt a heavier need to turn down assignments, cut back hours and forgo promotions in addition to feeling seen as uncommitted to work and being passed over for additional assignments and

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Igielnik, “A Rising Share of Working Parents in the U.S. Say It’s Been Difficult to Handle Child Care during the Pandemic,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed September 24, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/26/a-rising-share-of-working-parents-in-the-u-s-say-its-been-difficult-to-handle-child-care-during-the-pandemic/>.

<sup>13</sup> Igielnik, “A Rising Share of Working Parents in the U.S. Say It’s Been Difficult to Handle Child Care during the Pandemic,”

promotions.<sup>14</sup> These findings are consistent with pre-pandemic research that shows women take a heavier penalty for motherhood at work than fathers do in terms of pay, treatment and access to promotions.<sup>15</sup><sup>16</sup> While some research shows that these “motherhood penalties” may subside somewhat as women move further along into their careers in their 40’s and 50’s, women in their 20’s and 30’s bear a significant brunt of lost wages and promotions that have potentially career-long implications.<sup>17</sup> These findings are also dependent on industry and the number of children that a mother has.<sup>18</sup>

A comparative study out of the UK presents a more hopeful finding, suggesting that decisions around work dynamics within families throughout the pandemic may be driven more heavily by human capital than by gender roles.<sup>19</sup> The study compared couples in the United States and the United Kingdom and the transformations of work patterns among couples throughout the pandemic. The study found that the biggest shift in work patterns, both within the US and the UK was toward “sole-worker families in which the better educated partner, irrespective of gender, participated in paid work.” This suggests that decisions may not have been made based on existing gender stereotypes, providing a glimmer of hope that pandemic-related work patterns could prompt advances in gender equality as decisions are made based on

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<sup>14</sup> Igielnik, “A Rising Share of Working Parents in the US Say It’s Been Difficult to Handle Child Care During the Pandemic.”

<sup>15</sup> “Stephen Benard and Shelley J. Correll, “Normative Discrimination and the Motherhood Penalty,” *Gender & Society* 24, no. 5 (2010): pp. 616-646, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243210383142>.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Patricia Wirth, “The Career Cost of Children: A Life Course Perspective of the Gender Gap in Occupational Status” (Ph.D., United States -- North Carolina, North Carolina State University), accessed September 24, 2021, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/2433217102/abstract/4C11135387584054PQ/1>.

<sup>17</sup> Joan R. Kahn, Javier García-Manglano, and Suzanne M. Bianchi, “The Motherhood Penalty at Midlife: Long-Term Effects of Children on Women’s Careers,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, no. 1 (2014): pp. 56-72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12086>

<sup>18</sup> Kahn, Garcia-Manglano and Bianchi, “The Motherhood Penalty at Midlife.”

<sup>19</sup> Yue Qian and Yang Hu, “Couples’ Changing Work Patterns in the United Kingdom and the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 28 (March 31, 2021): 535–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12661>.



education, where women tend to attain higher levels of achievement than their male counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Effect of the Covid 19 Pandemic on the LGBTQ Community***

Despite strides that have been made toward equality in recent years, the LGBTQ community continues to face adversity and challenges within the United States that have made them more susceptible to the effects of the pandemic. A report by leading LGBTQ rights organization, *The Human Rights Campaign*, found that LGBTQ people are more likely to work in industry sectors that are more susceptible to impact from pandemic closures and restrictions, including food service, hospital work, education, and retail.<sup>21</sup> LGBTQ community members working in these fields comprise 40% of the population, as opposed to just 22% of the non-LGBTQ population in these industries.<sup>22</sup> As such, upwards of 5 Million LGBTQ Americans are at-risk of, or have already experienced, pandemic-related job losses or cutbacks in employment.<sup>23</sup> Often, loss of employment comes in tandem with loss of employer-sponsored health insurance or the implementation of higher premium insurance COBRA benefits, further threatening LGBTQ access to adequate healthcare of significant importance during the pandemic.

These statistics are particularly alarming in conjunction with the fact that LGBTQ people already faced economic disparities prior to the onset of the pandemic with nearly one in five LGBTQ adults living in poverty and one in ten unemployed.<sup>24</sup> LGBTQ individuals have

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<sup>20</sup> Qian and Hu, ““Couples’ Changing Work Patterns in the United Kingdom and the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

<sup>21</sup> Charlie Whittington, “The Lives and Livelihoods of Many in the LGBTQ Community Are At Risk Amidst Covid-19 Crisis” (The Human Rights Campaign, March 2020), [https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/COVID19-IssueBrief-032020-FINAL.pdf?\\_ga=2.118026251.387739910.1631724118-844006.1631724118](https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/COVID19-IssueBrief-032020-FINAL.pdf?_ga=2.118026251.387739910.1631724118-844006.1631724118).

<sup>22</sup> Whittington, “The Lives and Livelihoods of Many in the LGBTQ Community Are At Risk Amidst Covid-19 Crisis.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

historically been victims of discriminatory hiring and firing practices based on sexual orientation and a reported 11-28% of LGBTQ employees reported lost promotions due to sexual orientation, leading to poorer work performance outcomes widely.<sup>25</sup> As a result, LGBTQ individuals were already at increased risk of lacking access to proper healthcare and the financial means to pay for care.<sup>26</sup> A 2020 Survey of LGBTQ Americans found that 29% of respondents had postponed needed medical care due to costs and 16% of respondents had postponed preventative medical screenings to avoid discrimination, with slightly higher rates of 30% and 19%, respectively, for respondents of color.<sup>27</sup> Compounded with limited access to healthcare and financial constraints, LGBTQ individuals, especially youths, have considerably higher rates of mental health issues than the general population. As such, rates of suicide and diagnoses of depression and anxiety were already high in this population pre-pandemic and have been heightened because of increased trauma, stress, loss, and isolation.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note the significance of community support for LGTBQ individuals and families. Often, LGBTQ people rely on external community groups for advice, emotional support, and other assistance that non-LGTBQ individuals might seek out from family members. This community support is often in lieu of familial support in situations where LGBTQ

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<sup>25</sup> Sejal Singh and Laura E. Durso, “Widespread Discrimination Continues to Shape LGBT People’s Lives in Both Subtle and Significant Ways,” Center for American Progress, May 2, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/news/2017/05/02/429529/widespread-discrimination-continues-shape-lgbt-peoples-lives-subtle-significant-ways/>.

<sup>26</sup> Whittington, “The Lives and Livelihoods of Many in the LGBTQ Community Are At Risk Amidst Covid-19 Crisis.”

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Medina et al., “Improving the Lives and Rights of LGBTQ People in America,” Center for American Progress, accessed September 16, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/reports/2021/01/12/494500/improving-lives-rights-lgbtq-people-america/>.

<sup>28</sup> John P. Salerno Fish Jackson Devadas, M. Pease, Bryanna Nketia, Jessica N., “Sexual and Gender Minority Stress Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for LGBTQ Young Persons’ Mental Health and Well-Being - John P. Salerno, Jackson Devadas, M Pease, Bryanna Nketia, Jessica N. Fish, 2020,” *Public Health Reports*, October 7, 2020, [https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0033354920954511?utm\\_source=summon&utm\\_medium=discovery-provider](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0033354920954511?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider).

individuals might not be accepted by their families or no longer have contact with family members at all because of their coming out. Sadly, these circumstances are not uncommon in the LGBTQ community with 67% of LGBTQ youth reporting that their families made negative comments about LGBTQ people.<sup>29</sup> During Covid 19 lockdowns, many of these individuals were forced to isolate with unsupportive family members and missed out on school-based programs that provide supports and monitor mental health warning signs for young people struggling with their sexual identities.<sup>30</sup> As such, quarantine lockdowns and social distancing mandates place an additional burden on LGBTQ individuals who rely on these community supports for their physical and mental well-being.

### ***United States Paid Leave and Child Care Assistance Programs***

To understand the reasons why so many individuals have been forced to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely, it is important to first understand existing family paid and unpaid leave policies in the United States. Under the Biden Administration, the topic of paid leave for care givers and child tax credits has been intensely discussed with several pieces of legislation potentially coming up for a vote in the coming months or years. Several of Biden's plans incorporate child care into existing infrastructure bills, arguing that child care is a form of social infrastructure that holds up our society.<sup>31</sup> While many are hopeful that these supports would bring much-needed relief for families struggling because of the pandemic, as well as those who had been struggling prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, it remains to be seen whether these

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<sup>29</sup> Whittington, "The Lives and Livelihoods of Many in the LGBTQ Community Are At Risk Amidst Covid-19 Crisis."

<sup>30</sup> John P. Salerno et al., "Sexual and Gender Minority Stress amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Implications for LGBTQ Young Persons' Mental Health and Well-Being," *Public Health Reports* 135, no. 6 (July 2020): pp. 721-727, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354920954511>.

<sup>31</sup> "FACT SHEET: The American Jobs Plan," The White House, March 31, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/>.

bills will make their way into law or if temporary relief programs have the potential to become more permanent fixtures. A 2021 study conducted by the *National Partnership for Women and Families* surveyed both men and women and found that workers with access to paid leave reported being 14% more likely to report little or no financial stress, 10% more likely to say they were living comfortably and 22% more likely to say they would recommend their job to a friend who didn't have access to leave.<sup>32</sup>

Looking at programs as they stand today and as they operated throughout the onset of the pandemic, a significant study of the limitations of federal paid family leave, FMLA, was assessed in a Human Rights Watch report entitled “Failing its Families: Lack of Paid Leave and Work-Family Supports in the US”. The report outlines meager paid leave options available to families who need to take time off for childbirth, family care responsibilities or personal illness. The United States is one of just four countries that doesn't offer legal definitive maternity leave.<sup>33</sup> Understandably, these policies have come very much into the forefront in recent months as families have scrambled to make ends meet while maintaining increased home responsibilities. Currently, only ten states have enacted comprehensive paid leave policies with workers of color and low-wage workers being far less likely to have access to these programs.<sup>34</sup> The report found that only a small percentage of the workforce is even eligible for leave, whether it be state-sponsored or federal, given that it only applies to employees who work over a certain

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<sup>32</sup> Thea Garon, Jess McKay, and Jessica Mason, “Unpaid and Unprotected: How the Lack of Paid Leave for Medical and Caregiving Purposes Impacts Financial Health” (Financial Health Network, September 2021), [https://fhn-finhealthnetwork-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2021/11/PulsePaidLeave\\_UnpaidUnprotected.pdf](https://fhn-finhealthnetwork-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2021/11/PulsePaidLeave_UnpaidUnprotected.pdf).  
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<sup>33</sup> Janet Walsh, “Failing Its Families: Lack of Paid Leave and Work-Family Supports in the US Human Rights Watch Short Reports, United States” (Human Rights Watch, 2011), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/23/us-lack-paid-leave-harms-workers-children#2>

<sup>34</sup> “ Thea Garon, Jess McKay, and Jessica Mason, “Unpaid and Unprotected: How the Lack of Paid Leave for Medical and Caregiving Purposes Impacts Financial Health” (Financial Health Network, September 2021), [https://fhn-finhealthnetwork-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2021/11/PulsePaidLeave\\_UnpaidUnprotected.pdf](https://fhn-finhealthnetwork-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2021/11/PulsePaidLeave_UnpaidUnprotected.pdf).  
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number of hours and work for a considerably large organization, depending on the specifics of the locality. It is important to note that the study also found that “same-sex partners of biological mothers were almost all denied even unpaid FMLA leave”.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that same-sex partnership may further complicate access to assistance programs for working mothers in that same-sex parents are not always afforded the same legal protections as a biological parent would. Interviewees suggested that even a few weeks of paid leave for themselves would have significantly relieved the burden and allowed them to perform better at their jobs.<sup>36</sup>

In an analytical article about FMLA programs in the US, Selmi questions whether current FMLA programs are better than nothing, or if perhaps the scant policies currently in place are impeding progress toward more robust leave protections. Noting that nearly no additional protections had passed since the original passage of the Family Medical Leave Act in 1993, Selmi contends that the bare minimum legislation might actually have done more harm than good in “symbolizing” progress without actually helping families in need.<sup>37</sup> While the existing legislation provides coverage for a small percentage of Americans, its mere existence is often used as a scapegoat reasoning for not pursuing additional legislation. Selmi contends that the sheer number of people left out of current legislation indicates a need for a system overhaul and the lack of progress in recent years suggests that existing legislation might be standing in the way of public pressure for reform.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Garon, McKay and Mason, “Unpaid and Unprotected.” 4.

<sup>36</sup> Garon, McKay and Mason, “Unpaid and Unprotected.” 3.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Selmi, "Is Something Better Than Nothing - Critical Reflections on Ten Years of the FMLA," Washington University Journal of Law & Policy 15 (2004): 65-92

<sup>38</sup> Selmi, “Is Something Better Than Nothing.”

## *Gendered Divisions of Care*

In order to better understand the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on women, it is crucial to first understand the historical underpinnings of gender roles in the United States, with regard to child care and housework. Traditionally in the United States, women have taken on a majority of child care and, until recent years, have had lower levels of participation in paid work outside of the home.<sup>39</sup> There are many studies that have looked into the division of care work amongst heterosexual couples and the findings have consistently shown that women tend to take on a majority of at home care work, particularly taking care of children, but also tasks such as cooking, cleaning and shopping for the home.<sup>40</sup> Craig and Mullen studied the division of child care between mothers and fathers across several countries, taking into account cultural values, income, class and social context.<sup>41</sup> The study found that while there are some variances depending on the work arrangements and education levels, child care responsibilities are still unequally divided such that women take on a majority of the burden.<sup>42</sup> Gender variances are less pronounced in households where both spouses are employed full time, but still exist. This suggests that although women have made strides in workplace involvement, there is still inequality to overcome at home as well.

More recently, a study by Sutphin investigates how parental gender roles are complicated by same-sex couples with two female parents. Sutphin uses “social exchange theory” which posits that status differences will affect the percentage of tasks in which the individual

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<sup>39</sup> “Mothers and Families,” United States Department of Labor, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/mothers-and-families>.

<sup>40</sup> Lyn Craig and Killian Mullan, “How Mothers and Fathers Share Child care: A Cross-National Time-Use Comparison,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 6 (2011): 834–61.

<sup>41</sup> Lyn Craig and Killian Mullan, “How Mothers and Fathers Share Child care”

<sup>42</sup> Lyn Craig and Killian Mullan, “How Mothers and Fathers Share Child care,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 6 (2011): pp. 834-861, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411427673>, 835.

participates-- “in heterosexual couples, gender can be used as a status characteristic to determine power, but in same-sex couples, other characteristics must come into play.”<sup>43</sup> Typically, the status difference in same-sex couples is defined by time spent in the paid employment.<sup>44</sup> That is to say that if there are two working women in a parental partnership, the partner with higher “status”, in this case the parent who spends the most time occupied with paid employment will have less expectations in child care. Thus, the parent who spends less time in paid employment will undertake a greater burden of child care to exchange for their “status.”<sup>45</sup> Taking this social exchange into account, the study suggests that same-sex couples divide care work by status markers other than gender, given that this quality is shared.

Kurdek’s study looks again at the allocation of household labor by partners in gay and lesbian couples. Looking specifically at couples where both partners are employed full-time, the study found that compared to gay partnerships, lesbian couples were generally more satisfied with the division of labor and reported that household tasks were evenly split.<sup>46</sup> While this study focuses more on the division of household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, rather than child care, it is still useful to understand how power dynamics may work differently in same-sex vs heterosexual couples. The perceived equity in sharing household tasks, according to the study, has also been linked to significantly better long term marriage longevity and happiness outcomes.<sup>47</sup> While there is minimal research looking into the different parenting structures, little is known about how the overlap of same-sex parenting and traditional gender roles plays into the

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<sup>43</sup> Suzanne Sutphin, “The Division of Child Care Tasks in Same-Sex Couples,” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 9, no. 5 (2013): pp. 474-491, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428x.2013.826043>, 475.

<sup>44</sup> Sutphin, “The Division of Child Care Tasks in Same-Sex Couples,” 476.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 478

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence A. Kurdek, “The Allocation of Household Labor by Partners in Gay and Lesbian Couples,” *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 1 (2007): pp. 132-148, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x06292019>.

<sup>47</sup> Kurdek, “The Allocation of Household Labor by Partners in Gay and Lesbian Couples,” 133

dynamics of the pandemic. More research would need to be conducted to understand if a more equitable division of child care tasks has led to a lessened burden on one individual parent and, if so, how that dynamic has affected a woman's decision whether to leave the work force.



## Chapter 2: Methodology

### *Research Methodology and Participants*

The majority of data for this study was acquired through semi-structured interviews with working mothers in both heterosexual and same-sex partnerships. These interviews were conducted for the most part on a one-on-one basis, except for one same-sex couple that preferred to be interviewed together. Due to the ongoing pandemic, for the safety of myself and the participants, all interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded onto my hard drive, then transcribed using an online transcription service. Once the transcripts were complete, I then re-read those transcripts and audited to correct any mistakes and misinterpretations as well as to note appropriate inflection, laughter, and emotion for my own analysis. All interviews were stored on a password-protected computer and responses were not shared with anyone other than me so participants could maintain as much anonymity and security as possible.

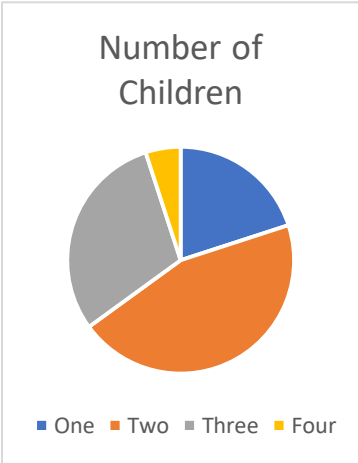
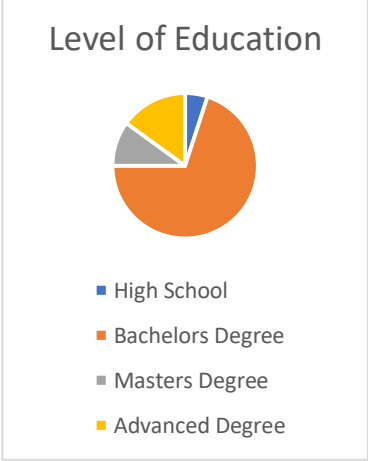
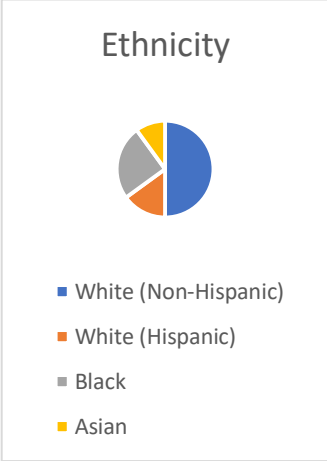
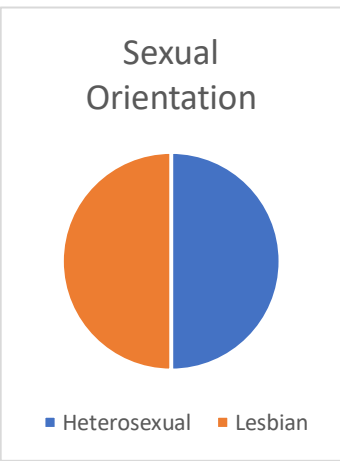
All the mothers I interviewed were parents from the onset of the pandemic in early 2020 through the time of the interview, which ranged from May 2021-September 2021. Though they held these few characteristics in common, the participants live in a variety of states, work in different industries, and come from different ethnic backgrounds. The makeup of the group comprised of twenty total women: ten mothers in heterosexual relationships and ten mothers in same-sex relationships. Following IRB guidelines and to maintain confidentiality for participants, all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms that will be used throughout the discussion section of this paper and are outlined in the chart below:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Type of Partnership</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Job</b>	<b>Number/Ages of Children</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>
Janet	Same-sex	Hispanic	Police Officer	1(6 mo)	Austin, Texas	Bachelors Degree

Nancy	Same-sex	Black	Financial Coach	1(2 years)	Brooklyn, New York	Bachelors Degree
Colleen	Same-sex	White	Health Care Administrator (currently full-time mother)	3 (6, 8, 9)	Southern California	Bachelors Degree
Connie	Same-sex	White	Nurse Practitioner	2 (Newborn)	Kansas	Masters Degree
Catherine	Same-sex	Black	Office Manager	4 (2, 5, 7, 9)	New Jersey	Bachelors Degree
Christina	Same-sex	White	Sales	2 (7)	Atlanta, Georgia	Bachelors Degree
Valerie	Same-sex	Asian	Office Administrator (Currently full-time mother)	3 (6mo, 2, 5)	California	High School
Lindsey	Same-sex	White	Realtor	2 (6, 9)	Columbus, Ohio	Bachelors Degree
Julia	Same-sex	Black	Firefighter	1 (Newborn)	Seattle, Washington	Bachelors Degree
Sarah	Same-sex	Hispanic	Politician	3 (Triplets-6mo)	California	Bachelors Degree (plus Executive Certificate)
Claire	Heterosexual	White	Elections Attorney	2 (2, 4)	Washington DC	Juris Docorate
Maria	Heterosexual	White	IT Project Manager	2 (4, 6)	Austin, Texas	Bachelors Degree
Erica	Heterosexual	White	Human Resources Manager	3 (2, 5, 8)	Boston, Massachusetts	Bachelors Degree
Melanie	Heterosexual	Hispanic	Consultant	3 (5, 9, 12)	Buffalo, New York	Masters Degree
Laura	Heterosexual	White	College Professor	2 (6 mo, 3)	Providence, Rhode Island	PHD
Amanda	Heterosexual	Black	Physician	3 (6, 8)	Atlanta, Georgia	MD

Jordan	Heterosexual	White	Accountant	1(10)	Iowa	Bachelors Degree
Susan	Heterosexual	Black	Financial Planner	2 (7, 12)	Florida	Bachelors Degree
Martha	Heterosexual	Asian	Nurse	2 (5, 7)	Michigan	Bachelors Degree
Jackie	Heterosexual	White	Director of Artist Engagement	2 (4, 7)	New York City	Bachelors Degree

The following charts provide further insight into the makeup of the participants with regard to sexual orientation, racial diversity, number of children and level of education:



## ***Recruitment***

In selecting my sample, I utilized purposive sampling techniques, rather than probability sampling to locate a specific group of people with certain shared characteristics, but a range of experiences.<sup>48</sup> I aimed to find a manageable sample size that would provide a diversity of experiences to understand the in-depth lived experiences of my participants rather than generalizing to a larger population.<sup>49</sup> Participants for this study were recruited through several methods such as social media groups and hashtags, resource groups and existing relationships with community-based associations. Through social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, I was able to locate resource groups such as “working mom groups” for both heterosexual and lesbian mothers through hashtags such as #workingmom, and #lgbtqfamily. From those groups, I was able to identify potential candidates who might be interested in participating in this project who I then reached out to via email with my recruitment letter.

These groups were particularly helpful in that they provided access to self-identifying working mothers and members of the LGBTQ community who I already knew met the criteria of participants I was looking for. Furthermore, social media allowed me to reach people outside of my immediate geographic circles who I likely would not have reached through my own social circles and connections. Beyond social media, I reached out to LGBTQ community groups and “mom groups” around the country via email and website submission forms to post my recruitment flyer to virtual bulletin boards for members. I was also able to use the snowball method of recruiting to reach additional participants through existing connections I have within my community.

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Bryman and Alan Bryman, “Sampling in Qualitative Research,” in *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 408-411, 408.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 408.

## *Interview Strategies*

For my semi-structured interviews, I tried to remain consistent with a set of uniform questions to ask each participant, beginning with some basic demographic information, questions about their family structure and careers, and moving into more detailed questions about their experiences being a working mother during the pandemic. Although there are some disadvantages to not having been able to conduct interviews face-to-face in person, the use of video conferencing opened the range of possibilities for me to reach mothers from around the country by sharply reducing cost, travel, and time barriers. Still, there are drawbacks to video conferencing in that some people are not comfortable with or don't know how to use this type of technology. Also, given that interviews were conducted remotely, it was far more common for participants to drop out or reschedule with little to no notice, as is consistent with existing research on conducting interviews via video conferencing.<sup>50</sup>

In deciding to conduct interviews rather than utilizing a survey method, I thought about the principles of feminist research methods and wanted to gain a deeper understanding into the lived experiences of the women I spoke to, understanding that the voices of women are historically marginalized and unheard—attempting to uncover “hidden knowledge” and bring a nuanced understanding to each of the responses.<sup>51</sup> Although surveys are considerably less time-consuming and would have perhaps allowed for a larger sample size, it was important that I was able to hear intonation, grasp the emotion and ask individual questions based on where each person was coming from as the is unique value in those qualities that cannot be captured on through a digital survey.

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<sup>50</sup> Hannah Deakin and Kelly Wakefield, “Skype Interviewing: Reflections of Two Phd Researchers,” *Qualitative Research* 14, no. 5 (2013): pp. 603-616, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113488126>, 613.

<sup>51</sup> Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “The Practice of Feminist in-Depth Interviewing,” *Feminist Research Practice*, 2007, pp. 110-148, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984270.n5>, 7.

My interview guide was informed by feminist interviewing strategies of semi-structured interviewing, paying attention to the role that I played as an interviewer. I positioned myself as both an “insider” and an “outsider”, being careful to acknowledge my own positionality to the questions and to the subject matter while also understanding that the experiences of the interviewee are not my own.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the interviews, I attempted to engage the participants deeply, prompting for clarity when necessary to be certain I was capturing not just what I heard, but what the interviewee *meant*.<sup>53</sup> Some questions were not relevant to all participants, for example questions about schooling were not relevant for those with children not yet of school age and questions about remote work were not relevant for those who work in essential frontline industries. Naturally, the questions evolved throughout the course of the interview process and depending on the experiences that each person shared, and I was careful to remain flexible in my questioning to allow each individual story to be told.<sup>54</sup> I tried to leave questions relatively open-ended so that participants would have the space to share their experiences and provide any relevant information they saw fit while still guiding the conversation toward key points of discussion of interest for my research questions.

### ***Limitations***

It is important to note that there are several limitations in analyzing the group of participants I was able to recruit. Within this group, there are a range of different careers represented as well as a variety of ethnic backgrounds and geographic locations, but there is a

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<sup>52</sup> Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “The Practice of Feminist in-Depth Interviewing,” 4.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Galletta, William E. Cross, and Anne Galletta, “Conducting the Interview: The Role of Reciprocity and Reflexivity,” in *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), pp. 75-119, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Alan Bryman and Alan Bryman, “Interviewing in Qualitative Research,” in *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 469-499, 469.

significant bias toward middle-class, white-collar positions. There are several participants I interviewed who are frontline workers in the fields of medicine, law enforcement and fire safety and were public facing throughout the pandemic. However, I didn't have access to any low-wage workers such as public transit workers, care takers or grocery store workers who were very much at the forefront of the pandemic and experienced extreme hardships given the nature of their work. As such, my data provides an understanding of a more middle- and upper-class motherhood experience during the pandemic with the acknowledgment that many of these challenges were more pronounced or different for people who work hourly, shift-based public facing positions. This may have been informed by my recruitment methods which relied on either on access to technology or on a proximity to my own circles, narrowing the reach of possible participants.

Furthermore, the set of women that I interviewed happened to mostly have children under the age of 10. While this was not intentional, it is important to note since there may have been different responses for mothers with older children who don't need as much guidance in home schooling and don't require constant supervision outside of school to be taken care of. Additionally, there may be challenges with older children, such as how to negotiate quarantine and moderate socialization to maintain safety, which are not represented heavily in this sample. All the women that I interviewed are also cisgender, identify as female and use she/her pronouns. My research does not speak to the experiences of trans-women or non-binary mothers as they were not represented in my pool of participants. Their absence from this study is not to diminish those experiences or to suggest that those motherhood experiences are less worthwhile to study. This study also only considers the dynamics of motherhood in partnered couples, acknowledging

that single mothers are likely to have a different set of concerns and challenges not addressed through this research.

With regard to political leanings, I did not specifically ask my participants for their political affiliation, but it is likely that my sample is heavily representative of Democratic and Independent viewpoints. As of 2019 voter surveys, just 15% of self-identified LGBTQ individuals reported that they are Republicans while 50% reported being Democratic, 22% Independent and 13% “Other.”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, with the premise of the project focusing on understanding same-sex motherhood, it is assumed that heterosexual participants were also tolerant of same-sex marriage and parenting given their willingness to participate. Statistically, Democratic individuals tend to be more likely in favor of LGBTQ rights with 75% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning voters supporting same-sex marriage compared to 44% of Republicans and Republican-leaning voters in favor.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, throughout the course of my recruitment, I was met with some potential participants who were not interested in participating given the inclusion of same-sex families, further skewing my participant set toward those who favored LGBTQ rights. These political demographics are of importance for this project because the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States has become incredibly politicized with skepticism of the disease, compliance with vaccine and health mandates and public health policies highly divided along partisan lines. In addition, political party affiliation is also correlated with belief in certain public policies, with liberal voters tending to favor more government investment in social

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<sup>55</sup> Christy Mallory, “THE 2020 LGBT VOTE Preferences and Characteristics of LGBT Voters” (UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, October 2019), <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020-LGBT-Vote-Oct-2019.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> “Changing Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, December 31, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>.



services and public welfare programs. These liberal biases are important to keep in mind when drawing conclusions from this data.

Recognizing my own biases, it is worthwhile to note my own positionality within the framework of my research. I am a cisgender biracial female in a same-sex relationship living in a suburb of New York City. Being a part of the LGBTQ community, as well as identifying a woman, has allowed me to empathize with many of the challenges that the women I've spoken to face as it relates to these identities. While I was conscious not to interject my own feelings and opinions into my interviews, it is inevitable that my own biases may have been evident in my questioning and responses to interviewees. I made a concerted effort to be objective and not to ask leading questions based on my own assumptions and lived experiences, but my close proximity to these issues is worth taking into consideration in the analysis of my findings. As a lesbian woman, I can speak to the relationship that I have with my partner which is highly equitable and has open channels of communication. I had to be careful not to assume that all relationships followed the same patterns as my own. Furthermore, my own experiences as a working woman have been fraught with microaggressions of working in a male-dominated corporate space but I understand that this is not a universal experience and was careful to keep an open mind. Finally, having read significant previously literature on these topics, I had to challenge myself not to succumb to confirmation bias in assuming that my data would fall in line with the findings of existing studies.

### ***Analysis Methodology***

To analyze the interviews, I uploaded my transcripts to NVivo software and categorized the interviews into groups based on several distinguishing factors such as type of partnership, number of children, type of employment and location of residence. From there, I identified

several key themes relating to topics such as remote work, division of child care, emotional and child care support, and feelings about policies to narrow down specific comparisons based on the demographic groups using coding techniques.<sup>57</sup> In terms of analysis, I took an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from my data as I went through it.<sup>58</sup> After my first pass of coding, I came up with 80 different codes and that I continued to comb through to identify overlapping themes and patterns to narrow my focus down to just a few main areas of focus while understanding how the data from different groups interacts. Through this coding system, I was able to easily categorize important quotes falling under each theme as well as by specific demographic information provided in the transcripts. I was able to identify common attributes among certain groups relating to key themes throughout my research to draw conclusions about the ways that each group has been affected by the pandemic. As I went through to code each interview several times, I was careful to change the order in which I read the interviews with each new pass so that I would start new interviews with a fresher mind each time, ensuring that all of the interviews were equally taken into consideration.

In addition to the analysis of my semi-structured interviews, I also used secondary supplemental sources such as federal jobs reports and statistics relating to how the pandemic has shaped the workforce and the United States as a whole. I used these statistics and research to get a broader picture through concrete quantitative numbers such as the number of women that have left the workforce, the number of jobs lost throughout the pandemic, and percentages of people that have moved to remote work. Furthermore, I consider published survey data that assesses

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<sup>57</sup> Anne Galletta and William E. Cross, "Ongoing and Iterative Data Analysis," in *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), pp. 119-147.

<sup>58</sup> David R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data," *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (2006): pp. 237-246, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>.

feelings toward certain policies and about the pandemic for a larger sample size of people than my study includes. Since the pandemic is still very present in the United States at the time of this research, much of this data is continuing to evolve, but reflects feelings representative of the specific period in which I am composing this research.

### **Chapter Three: Findings and Analysis**

From the semi-structured interview data, several key themes emerged that highlight some of the shared experiences and concerns of both heterosexual and same-sex couples. These include concerns surrounding accessibility and affordability of child care, workplace flexibility and accommodations, division of household labor, mental health, community and family support and the future of work for women beyond the pandemic. Although these themes were commonly spoken about by all the mothers I spoke to, there were a wide range of experiences depending on factors including type of partnership, age of children, type of work and location around the country. Many of these experiences echo the data found in my secondary data sources to paint a broader picture of the struggles that many women faced throughout the country.

#### ***Child Care***

By far the most heavily articulated concern among all interviews I conducted was around child care, primarily in terms of accessibility and affordability. Of my interviewees, 85% reported losing their primary source of child-care as a result of the pandemic whether it be through school closures, limited daycare capacities or loss of a nanny or family member caretaker. While child care struggles were certainly exacerbated by pandemic-related closures, five heterosexual mothers and four same-sex mothers detailed their struggles with child care that began long before the pandemic arose, suggesting that this has been a long-standing concern for many mothers. Additionally, both mothers I spoke to who had left their jobs during the pandemic did so because of child care. One mother chose to stay home because it was too difficult to juggle both remote work and caring for her young children and another chose to stay home simply because the cost of sending her four children to daycare outweighed the amount of additional pay she was bringing home as a second source of income noting, “One whole

paycheck was going to child care and the other one, and it just didn't make sense in our heads, like we weren't seeing an income increase because of that.”<sup>59</sup> Even those mothers that continued to work throughout the pandemic spoke about the extraordinarily high price of child care such that almost an entire salary would be spent on child care per year. They spoke about how they often weighed whether it even made sense for both parents to keep working but pointed to self-worth and the importance of their career independence as a reason for continuing to work. This sentiment was true of both lesbian and heterosexual participants. They pointed out that while Biden’s new Child Tax Credit does help somewhat, the cost of child care significantly outweighs that additional funding and that more needs to be done to help offset these costs.

Beyond the cost of child care, another major concern was accessibility of child care as well as backups for when child care falls through. Of the women I spoke to who had kids under schooling age, a vast majority relied on daycare programs for child care during the day. As a result of the pandemic, many daycares closed temporarily and when they reopened they were operating at limited capacities to ensure social distancing protocols and to accommodate for staffing shortages. Consequently, many of the women I spoke to were stuck on long waitlists to get into programs that were often still only part-time days or only a few days a week. This data is consistent with national survey data that found in June 2020, preschool enrollment had dropped from 61% to nearly 8% of all 3-5 year old children in the US.<sup>60</sup> It is expected that these scenarios will continue to unfold as new outbreaks and variant are introduced and school closures become a possibility once again.

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Valerie (pseudonym) on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021

<sup>60</sup> Steven Barnett, Kwanghee Jung, and Milagros Nores, “Young Children’s Home Learning and Preschool Participation Experiences During the Pandemic,” August 2020, [https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NIEER\\_Tech\\_Rpt\\_July2020\\_Young\\_Childrens\\_Home\\_Learning\\_and\\_Preschool\\_Participation\\_Experiences\\_During\\_the\\_Pandemic-AUG2020.pdf](https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NIEER_Tech_Rpt_July2020_Young_Childrens_Home_Learning_and_Preschool_Participation_Experiences_During_the_Pandemic-AUG2020.pdf), 5.

These unpredictable child care situations presented a huge problem for mothers whose work schedules were returning to normal, but who were without a source of affordable child care. Especially with young children not yet eligible for vaccines and therefore highly susceptible to disease, five mothers recounted the struggles they had with exposure in daycare settings noting that even if their child did not test positive, but was in close contact with a positive case, a lengthy quarantine of up to 20 days would trigger. While these policies are in place to help prevent outbreaks for both the children and care takers, it places an immense burden on families who do not have an alternate source of child care in the event of a quarantine. Furthermore, most day care centers require parents to pay for their services even if they are not able to come in due to exposure or positive test, leading to an additional financial burden for families.

In order to accommodate these unpredictable changes, four heterosexual mothers and three same-sex mothers I interviewed had to cut back on their working hours or change their schedules so they could take turns parenting or be able to pick up their kids from daycare in the middle of the day or accommodate staying home during periods of quarantine. Furthermore, even when daycare centers did open back up, uncertainty about the safety of these centers created a dilemma for parents who needed the child care, but who were unsure about exposing their unvaccinated children to other students and caretakers amidst rising Covid rates throughout Winter and Fall 2020:

When we were ready to put them into daycare, the daycare said they couldn't take all three kids that they could only they would only be able to accept two because they were on certain restrictions of the class sizes that they could have. And so they would only have space for two. So then it's like we didn't want to separate them, of course. So we started reaching out to other daycare centers and we just kept hitting roadblock after roadblock.<sup>61</sup> (Colleen)

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Colleen (pseudonym) on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Another concern that three mothers shared, which is not specifically related to the pandemic, was that the current timing of school hours across the country is not conducive to families who have two working parents, especially when additional before or after school programs are not available or affordable. For parents who work traditional 9-5pm schedules, schools that let out at 3pm create a major problem unless they have a parent who is working from home, a nanny or a family member or friend who can watch their kids after school. This has become a greater issue as many after school programs were cut back or reduced during the pandemic, despite many offices reopening full time.

### ***Workplace Accommodations***

Of the women I interviewed who were given the option to work from home 70% said that they would prefer to work remotely a majority of the time even after the pandemic restrictions are lifted and offices reopen. Generally, the women I spoke to found work from home beneficial in that it eliminated hours of commute time and allowed them to complete some household chores throughout the workday when they had down time rather than having to complete them early in the morning before work or late at night after work. This finding was consistent among both the heterosexual and lesbian samples of women:

I like that during my lunch break, I can go in and throw in a load of laundry, or I can empty the dishwasher or I can run the vacuum, do some of those quick housekeeping things. And because I'm able to do that, then I feel like I've actually found better kind of overall balance throughout the week where I'm not spending my weekend cleaning the house because I've done it throughout the days. So I'm actually finding that my weekends are more enjoyable and I'm able to separate from work better on the weekends, and I'm able to actually do some real self-care things because I'm not doing housework on the two days that I have that I'm home.<sup>62</sup> (Colleen)

Conversely, five women, three heterosexual and two lesbian, reported that work from home elongated their workday and blurred the lines between work life and home life in a way

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Jordan (pseudonym) on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

that made them feel like they never could get away from work. It is important to note that three of these women also said that they did say they also saw the benefits of being able to complete other housework during the day, despite the drawbacks of blurred lines between work and personal life. Five women described feeling like managers expected them to be on the clock day and night because they were always able to be at their laptops and always home whereas their previous workday would end when they left the office and there was a clear divide between work hours and rest hours. Others also commented on the loss of the mental transitional hours and separation that remote work eliminates:

Being a working mom, like I'm really missing the physical separation between the end of my day workday and the start of my night with my kids because I'm on calls and then all of a sudden, like my calls end at five. I have to relieve a nanny. I have to cook dinner, and then I'm like, thrown into the chaos. There's no secret, like half hour drive home listening to Hamilton. You know, there's no transition. And that's, I think, what's really hard personally for me and I've heard it's hard for other parents too.<sup>63</sup> (Erica)

Six women, half heterosexual and half lesbian, spoke about their inability to compartmentalize work and home responsibilities when they had children in the house. They spoke about not being able to give their full attention to their work even if they had additional help in the home if they heard their child crying in another room or wondered what they were doing in their absence. Those with younger children spoke about being interrupted frequently while in meetings and having to take constant breaks to tend to the needs of their children. While 70% of respondents said that their co-workers and bosses were mostly understanding of appearances from children, or if they had to take a break during the day, 60% of the women interviewed still reported feeling distracted by having children in the home.

Those with older children who switched into remote schooling during the pandemic dealt with trying to juggle their new roles as educators with their responsibilities at work. Several

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Erica (pseudonym) on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021



women I spoke to detailed the difficulties they had trying to balance their own work with maintaining a schedule for their children that required a lot of hands-on interaction. Not surprisingly, these mothers spoke about how ill-prepared their children's schools were for moving into remote schooling and how much of the burden of teaching fell into their hands. They spoke about how they felt mounting pressure as the pandemic continued to press on into numerous months to maintain their children's education so they would not fall behind in their learning and have long-term effects:

And I don't have the patience to teach. I think it was a lot of frustration and a lot of like tears on both parties, ourselves and the kids because they're like, we don't want to. And coming up with new routines like at this time today we're going to do this and all that kind of really just didn't work out as planned. And I think it sucks, too, because there's a whole generation now probably be known as some kind of pandemic era of children instead of generation. It'll be like generation COVID where they lost a year essentially of teaching, especially as my son was in kindergarten, and that's when they're learning and have expectations to start reading, developing, you know? Not being in school was really difficult because teaching a child something from the get-go where there was not even a foundation or basis to work off of-- it's not like we're going into division from multiplication. We're going into reading from nothing. So it's such an important time of their life. And I think that that was really hard, especially as parents to try and teach them they not want to hear from us<sup>64</sup> (Lindsey)

This was particularly true of those mothers who had elementary and early middle school aged children who could not self-direct themselves through a school day and needed to be fed and taken care of throughout the workday. Of the heterosexual mothers I spoke to, 60% reported that they facilitated their children's remote schooling entirely, with little to no help from their partners. This divide was considerably more equitable for the lesbian mothers I spoke to who almost entirely described having an even split of teaching in their households, despite having two working parents. These findings are consistent with national data in which 80% of mothers

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Lindsey (pseudonym) on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

reported being the primary facilitators of their children's remote schooling.<sup>65</sup> This data does not, however, represent the division of at-home schooling among same-sex couples.

### ***Division of Household Labor***

The area where I found the greatest divide between mothers in heterosexual vs same-sex partnerships was regarding division of household labor. When asked about how they and their partners divided up work, both care work and other household tasks, I found that the women in same-sex relationships described a more equitable division of labor than those in heterosexual relationships with 80% of lesbian women saying they and their partner split these tasks evenly. Among the women in heterosexual relationships, there was a common theme of the “mental load” that they felt they carry in the division of labor within the home. Despite reporting that their partners were willing to take on household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, etc when they were directed to do so, four heterosexual women spoke about the burden of having to delegate these responsibilities and constantly be aware of their “to-do list” in a way that their partners were not, in addition to having the same or more professional work responsibilities:

And my husband, when I tell you that I'm married to like the nicest, most hands-on dad in the world, I mean, he is, but it's still being a working mom there is this that mental load that you have to struggle with and that you have to think about constantly. Like ok, the soccer, if we have soccer on Sunday, I need to make sure those socks are ready, so I have to put them in the washer and dryer and all that. It's something I don't think my husband deals with or really thinks about.<sup>66</sup> (Erica)

Conversely, the lesbian mothers I spoke to all spoke about an equitable division of child care and household tasks. They spoke about how difficult it is as a same-sex couple to have

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<sup>65</sup> Claire Miller, “Nearly Half of Men Say They Do Most of the Home Schooling. 3 Percent of Women Agree.,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/upshot/pandemic-chores-homeschooling-gender.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Erica (pseudonym) on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021

children and how planned you must be from the start. All the same-sex couples I interviewed relied on either IVF (In-Vitro Fertilization) or IUI (Intrauterine Insemination) to have children aside from one mother who had a child from a previous heterosexual relationship. These processes can be incredibly costly and time-consuming, so they require a great deal of planning and monetary investment, but also allow for some flexibility in timing if the treatments work as planned. As a result, the lesbian couples expressed having had a well-developed long-term career and parenting plan going into the decision to have children. While this may have also been true of the heterosexual couples I spoke to, these plans were not discussed in my interviews while they were brought up by the lesbian mothers. Several lesbian mothers said that because they had to make such a sure choice to have their kids, there was always an open and honest conversation coming into the decision about how labor would be divided and the potential toll it might take on their individual career paths. Looking to existing literature, there is little research that questions if the conversations and pre-planning that same-sex family building requires leads to a more egalitarian division of parenting. However, these findings are consistent with a study that shows lesbian mothers tend to meet their prenatal expectations of postpartum division of parenting, while heterosexual couples tend to assume there will be a more even split of parenting than there ends up being after birth.<sup>67</sup> In these instances, both heterosexual mothers and fathers assumed there would be equal participation from both parents, when in reality heterosexual parents reported that after birth mothers ended up doing far more parenting and fathers far less parenting than originally assumed.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Esra Ascigil et al., “Division of Baby Care in Heterosexual and Lesbian Parents: Expectations versus Reality,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 83, no. 2 (2020): pp. 584-594, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12729>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 591

Another theme that arose was the potential positive effect that the pandemic has had on building some awareness about the amount of household labor that women had been taking on. Several heterosexual women I spoke to shared that their husbands had become more aware of their household contributions since the pandemic forced them to work from home, to take on a additional share of the responsibilities and to witness the amount of household tasks that need to be done which used to go unseen. Similarly, when asked about the potential silver-linings of the pandemic, 40% of mothers both lesbian and heterosexual spoke about how the pandemic strengthened their relationships with their partners in that they became aware of their resilience and ability to take on any challenge that life may throw their way. This data echoes early-pandemic research that suggests remote work might have a positive effect on breaking down gender norms in child care as more fathers are working from home and therefore contributing more to household tasks and parenting.<sup>69</sup> Still, one of the heterosexual mothers I spoke to was careful to note that it is yet to be seen how these dynamics will continue to play out as the world resumes some normalcy. While she was cautiously optimistic, she also feared that if or when workplaces return to in-person structures, many of the positive changes the pandemic brought about might also return to pre-pandemic routines that place a heavy burden on women.

### ***Effect on Mental Health***

Another one of the most common themes that arose from my interviews was the issue of mental health and stress, particularly surrounding feelings of guilt in trying to juggle motherhood and employment while also maintaining a healthy sense of self. What is particularly interesting about this theme is that none of my interview questions specifically asked about “mom guilt” or the challenges that mothers face internally in how they perceive their success in the workplace

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<sup>69</sup> Titan Alon et al., “The Impact of Covid-19 on Gender Equality,” 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w26947>.

and at home, but almost every mother I spoke to detailed feelings of guilt either in not being a “good enough” mother or being a “good enough” employee. Particularly throughout the pandemic, 65% felt that the blurred lines between work life and home life led to an impossible balance that eliminated their ability to focus on their own needs and self-care. Speaking about trying to strike a balance between work, taking care of kids and caring for herself, one mother said:

Think of a day that is twenty-four hours, right? And you could carve it up into a pie with all the pieces, with what you said before. Those three things, because you added and ‘also for yourself’, that became an impossibility, there's just not enough hours you have to steal from one to get to the other. So to me, where are the places that you can borrow from that will make a difference? You can't take away your kids. You can't say your kids are like, alright for the next two hours, like, we don't exist, you do you and we will do us. So that's not a possibility. The first thing that's easiest to go is your own, your own needs. So that goes away.<sup>70</sup> (Janet)

Another mother who left her job during the pandemic spoke about the challenges she faced while she was working full-time:

I struggled so much when I was working with that when I was working, because it was like I was I was neither like a good mom nor a good employee, because when I was at work, I was always thinking about my kids. When I was at home with my kid, I was thinking about work and checking emails and doing all that, that I just wasn't conducive at either.<sup>71</sup> (Valerie)

To combat these feelings of inadequacy, some of the mothers spoke about how they have overcompensated at work to “prove” their worth as an employee, something that many said they did not believe men are expected to do or put pressure on themselves to do. They spoke about coming in early, staying late and constantly feeling like they had to point out the hours that they were working to prove they were keeping up with their childless or male counterparts. When I asked about where this pressure comes from, several women wondered if these were pressures they exerted on themselves and noted that there often wasn't necessarily outward sexism at the

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Jackie (pseudonym) on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Valerie (pseudonym) on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021

workplace, but rather a general societal pressure to prove that mothers are adequate employees. They echoed that although their workplaces tended to be outwardly supportive of working mothers, there were often microaggressions and off-handed remarks that led them to feel like they were not taken as seriously as their male counterparts or that it was believed work was not always their first priority.

These findings are not necessarily specifically a result of the Covid-19 pandemic as pre-pandemic studies have found that mothers experience significantly higher rates of “work-family” or “work interfering with family” guilt than fathers.<sup>72</sup> The study suggests that while both mothers and fathers experience conflict about the demands of work and family, women experience higher levels of personal distress if they opt to place work needs over family needs.<sup>73</sup> The researchers posit that this distress is in response to different gendered expectations of mothers and fathers that assume mothers will place the needs of their families over their work, causing additional stress and guilt when acting against their societally reinforced “role”.<sup>74</sup> Beyond guilt, research has confirmed the detrimental role that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on everyone, especially mothers with 26.9% of mothers with young children experiencing depression and 41.9% experiencing anxiety symptoms.<sup>75</sup> These rates are up significantly from pre-pandemic estimates of 17% for depression and 15% for anxiety.<sup>76</sup>

These mental health challenges were not limited to those who were juggling professional work and child care responsibilities. Of the mothers I spoke to that ended up leaving their careers

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<sup>72</sup> Jessica L. Borelli et al., “Gender Differences in Work-Family Guilt in Parents of Young Children,” *Sex Roles* 76, no. 5-6 (2016): pp. 356-368, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0579-0>.

<sup>73</sup> Borelli, “Gender Differences in Work-Family Guilt in Parents of Young Children,” 358.

<sup>74</sup> Borelli, , “Gender Differences in Work-Family Guilt in Parents of Young Children,” 364.

<sup>75</sup> Nicole Racine et al., “When the Bough Breaks: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Mental Health Symptoms in Mothers of Young Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21959>, 11.

<sup>76</sup>Racine, “When the Bough Breaks,” 11.

during the pandemic to become full-time stay at home moms, two articulated the effect that that decision had on their mental health and self-worth. These women expressed feeling like society doesn't value stay-at-home mothers and that they felt pressure to present an image of having it all together or else society would label them as a failure. They articulated that for stay-at-home moms it is stigmatized to ever be overwhelmed or ask for help because it is assumed that they are already not contributing monetarily, so they should be able to take on the full load of parenting and housework alone.

You have to kind of sort of like have it together and be like the perfect mom, because that's all you have. That's all you are. So there is this pressure to to do all the cool things and fun things with your kids. But it's a struggle to keep them entertained and fed. And there is literally no break. Like you can't even shower. I wake up early on purpose every day so that I can have my alone time because then I won't ever get it.<sup>77</sup> (Valerie)

### ***Community and Family Support***

The women I spoke to expressed a range of different experiences in regards to community and family support during the pandemic. Largely, the amount of family support received was dependent on the proximity of nearby family as well as the potential health risks of seeing family. For instance, anyone with very elderly parents or parents with pre-existing conditions was very hesitant to have their family members over during the pandemic and lost out on that source of child care and support. 60% of the mothers of mentioned participating in “mom groups” and maintaining their social lives via virtual events on video services such as Zoom. It is important to note that the mention of “mom groups” was more common amongst heterosexual mothers than same-sex couples with just two lesbian mothers mentioning they took part in such groups. This is perhaps because most “mom groups” are tailored to heterosexual families which might feel exclusionary for mothers in same-sex relationships.

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Valerie (pseudonym) on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Seven of the same-sex partnered mothers I spoke to mentioned the importance of having other lesbian friends that could support them, particularly in getting parenting advice from other same-sex families. The importance of support from friends or, “chosen family” amongst queer individuals has been well-documented, particularly in regard to relationship and mental health outcomes for those who may have strained relationships with their biological families.<sup>78</sup> However, little research has been done on the role of “chosen family” in same-sex parenting specifically. Three lesbian mothers described feeling like no matter how much heterosexual couples or their own family tried to relate, there were some things that only other same-sex parents could fully understand. One of the lesbian mothers I spoke to acknowledged these differences and noted that being a queer mother also played into her decision take a step back from full-time work:

You know, we had the difference with us in our community. And what I tell my wife all the time when we talk about her conversations is we're in a different situation. You have a job, you have to want that time. Yet, you know, it's not like a heterosexual. It's like I had a relationship where you can just conceive and try and try and try every single day. It's an emotional toll. So it's like, why go through that? Just to separate our family and let someone else raise them.<sup>79</sup> (Janet)

I also had several mothers who gave birth to at least one of their children at the very start of the pandemic. These mothers spoke about the challenges they faced learning how to be a new parent without being able to see friends or family and dealing with the uncertainty and fear of the pandemic. During the early lockdowns, new parents were not allowed to bring both partners or any additional kids or family to doctor’s appointments or hospital visits, leaving these new moms

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<sup>78</sup> Kurdek, Lawrence A. “Differences between Partners from Heterosexual, Gay, and Lesbian Cohabiting Couples.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 2 (2006): 509–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00268.x>.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Janet (pseudonym) on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021



to endure the uncertainty alone oftentimes. Particularly, four of the mothers I spoke to came from more conservative-leaning states or families and mentioned the trouble they had with family members who were not following covid safety protocols and did not understand their desire to keep their kids away from outside family members in order to keep them safe. Covid protocols and the severity of closures and lockdowns varied heavily depending on the state, with some states taking the virus more seriously and others allowing for individuals to make their own decisions on how to handle their health and safety. This divide made it difficult for some of these new moms to grapple with how to manage family and friends who wanted to help with their concerns around exposing their newborns and themselves to the virus.

### ***Future of Work for Women***

When asked about how they planned to move forward both personally and professionally once the pandemic subsides, several women voiced concerns about the potential setbacks that the pandemic could have for working mothers. Foremost, those who work primarily in male-dominated spaces voiced concerns that remote work might ultimately become a barrier to women's advancement if a majority of women decide to continue working from home while their male co-workers return to the office. Two mothers, both heterosexual, expressed that although they would love to keep working from home and feel it would be the best for their productivity and mental health, they feared falling behind if other people chose to return. One of the women I spoke to said that she is encouraging her husband to maintain remote work at least several days a week not just to help her with some household responsibilities, but because he works in a male-dominated IT space and fears that other women on his team might not speak up for their preferences and would not want other women to be punished for desiring the

flexibility.<sup>80</sup> Others voiced similar concerns that if they did not return to working in person, that their bosses would assume they weren't working as hard and that they would lose out on networking and community building experiences that their single or male counterparts were gaining at the office while they work from home. Ultimately, there was still a great deal of uncertainty about what the future looks like for working moms and how the pandemic will affect work and parenting.

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with Jordan (pseudonym) on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## *Chapter 4: Discussion*

The data collected paints a diverse portrait of the working mothers who have been affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic. As the pandemic continues to rage on nearly two years after it first began, there is still a great deal of uncertainty around how quickly the United States will truly return to “normalcy” and if office and school re-openings will persist despite emerging new variants and continued unknowns about the future. Looking at this data as it relates to existing literature, it becomes clear that the most prevalent concern for both heterosexual and same-sex families is that of child care. Additional studies conducted by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research indicate that high income families spend about 11% of their household income on care and low-income families spend a striking 33% of their income on care annually.<sup>81</sup> Cost of child care was mentioned by all of the mothers interviewed as their primary reason for choosing to cut back on work or leave the workforce entirely, for those that fell into this category. This phenomenon was not unique to the mothers participating in this survey as the Center for American progress reports “one out of four women who reported becoming unemployed during the pandemic said it was because of lack of child care—twice the rate of men.”<sup>82</sup> When asked what the government, either local or federal, could do to help mothers, participant interview responses were overwhelmingly for monetary child care assistance, noting that almost an entire salary or more could be dedicated solely to child care. It is important to once again note that it is likely this sample was heavily democratically leaning, which may have also influenced the

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<sup>81</sup> “Build Back Better Plan Will Accelerate Gender Equality, Reduce Poverty for Women and Families, and Strengthen the U.S. Care Infrastructure” (Institute for Women's Policy Research, November 5, 2021), <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-publications/build-back-better-plan-will-accelerate-gender-equality-reduce-poverty-for-women-and-families-and-strengthen-the-u-s-care-infrastructure/>.

<sup>82</sup> Julie Kashen, Sara Jane Glynn, and Amanda Novello, “How Covid-19 Sent Women's Workforce Progress Backward,” Center for American Progress, November 9, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/covid-19-sent-womens-workforce-progress-backward/>.

policy preferences and beliefs of my participants. Still, according to a Center for American Progress survey conducted prior to the 2020 election amidst the pandemic, 78% of democrats, 55% of independents and 40% of republicans favored a “strong role for government in helping families get reliable, affordable child care so people can work,” amounting to 6 in 10 of all voters.<sup>83</sup>

Beyond cost barriers, access to sufficient child care is another primary concern for working mothers, particularly since the pandemic has led to decreased capacities and uncertainty surrounding child care closures. Currently, more than half of the Americans live in so-called “Child Care Deserts” which lack an adequate supply of reliable and certified child care. This number threatens to increase as some child care centers have not yet or will not ever reopen after the pandemic subsides, leading to an even more dire situation predominantly in communities with people of color.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, access to back-up child care would be incredibly helpful for mothers who cannot afford to take off work when their children need to stay home from school sick, due to Covid-19 exposure, or if schools close again due to an uptick of disease. Biden’s *Build Back Better* Plan aims to remedy some of these concerns by providing child care funding to individual families within a certain income bracket and attempting to address child care deserts by investing in furthering child care infrastructure in communities where it is most needed, but it is unclear if this legislation will be signed into law.

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<sup>83</sup> John Halpin, Nisha Jain, and Karl Agne, “What Do Voters Want on Child Care Ahead of the 2020 Elections?,” Center for American Progress, November 7, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/voters-want-child-care-ahead-2020-elections/>.

<sup>84</sup> “Five Reasons Stabilizing Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Critically Important for Families and the Economy,” National Women’s Law Center (Center for Law and Social Policy, April 2020), <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FiveReasonsStabilizingChildcareCOVID1.pdf>.

The pandemic presents a unique problem in which even when child care was available, many parents didn't feel comfortable exposing their children to the virus in a public daycare setting or allowing another outside person into their home with so much uncertainty around how the virus affects children and the lack of vaccines for young children. As such, it is hard to imagine a solution that would solve the issue of access child care should there be additional closures or future pandemics other than providing additional workplace flexibilities that allow parents to juggle child care and work. Alternatively, stipends that allow for a family member or trusted friend to take on care roles on a paid basis are a potential remedy for those families that have someone who might be able to step into that role. Legislation that provides paid leave, even for single days, for individuals that need to care for family members or loved ones would be another potential solution for short term emergency care needs that could also provide a sense of security for working mothers constantly worried that they might be left without care. While I did not hear this concern specifically from the lesbian mothers I spoke with for this project, concerns have been raised by the LGBTQ community to ensure that paid leave includes care for not just biological family, but for loved ones in the community that rely on one another for support. Calls have been made for Paid Leave programs to include caring for "chosen families" that are of particular importance to the LGBTQ Community.<sup>85</sup>

Looking to the wide-reaching potential of child care and paid leave programs, a newly published *Times Up* report modeled the potential effects of Biden's American Families Plan and Building an Economy for Families Act, both of which would provide national paid leave programs. The study found that the plan would directly stimulate the economy by adding \$19.1

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<sup>85</sup> Lindsay Mahowald and Diana Boesch, "Making the Case for Chosen Family in Paid Family and Medical Leave Policies," Center for American Progress, November 7, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/making-case-chosen-family-paid-family-medical-leave-policies/>.

billion in national income from wage replacement, would specifically benefit women, low-income workers, and people of color, and could help create over 160,00 new jobs.<sup>86</sup> Beyond the economic and political benefits, investing in child care infrastructure sends an important message to mothers and caregivers that their work is valued.

Looking to workplace structures, it became clear that although some mothers struggled with work from home while they had young children in the house, a majority of the women who had the option to work remotely would prefer to continue their remote work in the future or at least have an optional hybrid model of work. As we continue to make strides to move out of the pandemic, it is imperative that workplaces take into consideration the lessons that the pandemic taught us in regard to flexible work structures, including offering work from home options, paid time off and flexible scheduling options. A recent study on the future of work conducted by McKinsey and Company suggests that roughly 25% of jobs can be done remotely three to five days per week without loss of productivity.<sup>87</sup> While this number may not seem significant, this is nearly five times the amount of remote work that was conducted prior to the onset of Covid-19.<sup>88</sup> Of course, those most affected by the pandemic have been low-income and essential workers who never had the option to work from home and often had to work considerably *more* hours in unsafe working conditions throughout even the height of the pandemic. For those workers, additional protections that allow for guaranteed notice of work shift hours, paid leave and reliable child care might help alleviate this burden somewhat. Unfortunately, as it stands currently, plans to include National Paid Leave into Covid-19 federal recovery legislation has

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<sup>86</sup> Lenore M Palladino, Anwesha Majumder, and Jessica Forden, “Paid Leave Pays Dividends,” 2021, 30.

<sup>87</sup> Susan Lund et al., “The Future of Work after COVID-19,” McKinsey & Company (McKinsey & Company, September 9, 2021), <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19>.

<sup>88</sup> Lund, “The Future of Work after COVID-19.”

been stalled, suggesting that a significant overhaul of the paid leave program may be years away still despite its desperate urgent need.

A less tangible, but equally important concern is that surrounding the stigma of motherhood for women at work and those at home. While some of my participants were unsure about the root causes of the guilt and pressure they felt, almost every mother who participated in this study spoke about societal pressures around being a mother, especially being a working mother. It may be that the most important step toward destigmatizing motherhood will come through the work of media and social movements rather than through legislation. As several of the mothers articulated, there was not always an overt discrimination against women or mothers in the workplace, but almost everyone felt the pressure to overcompensate in the workplace or expressed feelings of guilt in trying to balance motherhood and professional work. While deeply rooted societal stigmas are difficult to combat in a short period of time, there may be a benefit to media campaigns and increased representation showing working mothers in popular culture. It is important that this representation accurately depicts the challenges that working mothers face while not portraying them as frazzled or incompetent, as many mothers in television and media have in the past.

Within larger organizations, it is also important that an effort be made to elevate women, particularly working mothers, to positions of leadership since several women spoke about how their male bosses didn't understand their home responsibilities or assumed they were not as focused on work as their male counterparts. Those who had female bosses, particularly with children as well, explained that they felt better supported and understood in the workplace. As outlined in the literature review, it is well-documented that women face what is called a "motherhood penalty" at work. That is, the inherent, or overt, penalization of women in the

workplace on the assumption that they will take time off or leave the workplace entirely in order to take on childbearing responsibilities. Additional research would need to be done to see if this “motherhood penalty” is consistent among both heterosexual and same-sex couples and if the pandemic has had any effect on increasing or lessening these penalties.

Regarding the division of household labor, the same-sex couples I spoke with indicated having a much more equitable division of labor than the heterosexual mothers. This is concerning in that it indicates little progress has been made in combatting gender roles in the home sphere. Despite women making strides in increased workplace participation, the data from my study indicates that many women still struggle to achieve parity within the home. Even those heterosexual mothers that expressed having support from their husbands, reported having to harbor the mental burden of keeping track of household needs and having to delegate tasks. This data is consistent with decades of data that shows, within heterosexual couples, the burden of household labor is skewed heavily toward women.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the physical distribution of labor, the lesbian couples I spoke with also spoke highly of the emotional support and empathy they felt from their partners. This plays into existing gender roles and suggests that some of the heterosexual couples did not feel the same level of empathy or emotional support in their relationship.

Looking specifically at challenges that were expressed only by the lesbian mothers I spoke with, concerns were raised surrounding familial support and the importance of a tightly-knit community. Within the LGBTQ community, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel misunderstood by their families. Even those who have families that respect and support gay

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<sup>89</sup> Amanda Barroso and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, “The Pandemic Has Highlighted Many Challenges for Mothers, but They Aren’t Necessarily New,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, March 22, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/17/the-pandemic-has-highlighted-many-challenges-for-mothers-but-they-arent-necessarily-new/>.



rights, many LGBTQ individuals express feelings of isolation, increased levels of anxiety and a need for specifically LGBTQ community support. The lesbian women I spoke with indicated the importance of LGBTQ support, particularly in gaining advice about same-sex motherhood and how to raise children in a non-traditional family. It is important that we continue to amplify the voices of LGBTQ mothers and normalize LGBTQ families so that they can start to feel more included in the “mom groups” that most women referenced being a part of. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the importance of “chosen family” and normalize the idea that not all family is biological. Again, the work of “normalizing” different family structures can be done largely through diverse media representation as well as through some simple legislative adjustments that would be more inclusive of same-sex families. For example, simplifying second parent adoptions, providing additional funding and assistance for IVF and IUI and simply changing medical and school forms to include options for same-sex parents would be progressive steps toward normalization.

Looking to the future beyond the pandemic, there were concerns raised about the profound effect that the pandemic threatens to have on progress toward gender equality, both at home and at work. In 2020, the gender wage gap for all male and female workers was found to have increased from 26.5 to 27.4 percent, with the greatest brunt being taken by low-income female workers.<sup>90</sup> Based on current trends, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research projects that it will take another 39 years until women’s earnings reach the same level as men’s.<sup>91</sup> These statistics emphasize the need to incorporate gender justice into recovery plans and legislation in an attempt to combat the potential severe setbacks the pandemic has caused.

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<sup>90</sup> “Lost Jobs, Stalled Progress: The Impact of the ‘She-Cession’ on Equal Pay” (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, September 2021), [https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Gender-Wage-Gap-in-2020-Fact-Sheet\\_FINAL.pdf](https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Gender-Wage-Gap-in-2020-Fact-Sheet_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> “Lost Jobs, Stalled Progress: The Impact of the ‘She-Cession’ on Equal Pay,” 2.

## *Chapter 5: Conclusion*

This study contributes to existing literature that explores the wide-ranging effects that the Covid-19 Pandemic has had on working mothers in the United States with special attention given to understanding the effects on same-sex mothers who have traditionally been left out of the conversation. The data suggests that while there were unique experiences felt by each mother individually, there are several key themes and takeaways that were consistent among most mothers I spoke to. Same-sex families faced some additional personal hardships in their isolation from community, particularly of concern given the immense mental health problems that the pandemic has exacerbated, especially for working mothers. Meanwhile, heterosexual mothers were faced with greater challenges surrounding division of household labor than their same-sex counterparts.

It is important to note again that this study is limited in that all the participants were in mid- to high-income jobs and none of the participants worked in low-wage or hourly shift positions. Presumably, mothers in these work situations would have additional challenges and concerns that are not addressed in this study. Furthermore, this study represents a scenario in which the pandemic was trending in a positive direction with the introduction of vaccines and potential medical remedies for severe illness. At the time of these interviews, additional child care supports, and infrastructure had not yet been passed into law. Additional research would need to be conducted to determine whether attitudes or concerns changed as a result of these factors after the time of the interview. For instance, Biden's Child Tax Credits which aim to alleviate some of the burden of child care expenses had not yet been introduced at the time of some of the interviews and may have helped some of the families participating in this study.

Data from this study heavily emphasizes the dire need for child care supports in the United States both in the form of daycare and caretaker assistance, but also in terms of financial assistance to help defray the extraordinary costs of child care as well as a National Paid Leave program for parents who need to take time off from work to care for their children or other dependents. Additional attention needs to be given to the societal stigmas surrounding working mothers as well as mental health resources. It is important that legislation and programs that are introduced take into consideration the unique needs and experiences of LGBTQ families which are often not considered.

Further research is needed to better understand how the effects of the pandemic will be felt over a long-term period of time. Ultimately, despite the many setbacks and hardships that the pandemic created for working mothers, it also presents an opportunity for a significant overhaul of work structures and child care accessibility in the United States as the dire need for change has become apparent. Through the analysis of studies such as this one, we have the chance to rebuild after the pandemic in a way that promotes more equity and opportunity than existed prior to the pandemic.

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