

18 MAY 2015

Having a Working Mother Is Good For You

U.S. Women Benefit, Study from New Harvard Business School Gender Initiative Finds

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BOSTON— Contrary to conventional wisdom, growing up with a working mother is unlikely to harm children socially and economically when they become adults, new research by a Harvard Business School professor concludes.

The “working mother effect” actually improves future prospects, especially for adult daughters of mothers who worked outside the home before their daughters were 14 years old, according to recent findings based on a comprehensive survey of 50,000 adults aged 18 to 60 in 25 nations worldwide in 2002 and 2012.

The research, which provides the basis for two forthcoming academic papers, is one of a number of projects led by faculty affiliated with Harvard Business School’s new Gender Initiative. The Gender Initiative, announced today, seeks to further research, education, and knowledge dissemination on issues related to gender and work. To find out more about the Initiative, see: [Harvard Business School Launches Gender Initiative](#).



Kathleen McGinn

Photo: Tracy Powell

The working mother study, authored by Harvard Business School professor Kathleen McGinn, HBS researcher Mayra Ruiz Castro, and Elizabeth Long Lingo of Mt. Holyoke College, found that women with working mothers performed better in the workplace, earning more and possessing more powerful positions than their peers with stay-at-home mothers.

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In the United States, adult daughters of working mothers earned 23 percent more than those whose mothers had not worked during their daughters' childhoods, earning an annual average income of \$35,474 compared to \$28,894. Over 33 percent held supervisory positions, compared to roughly 25 percent of their counterparts from more traditional households.

"There is no single policy or practice that can eliminate gender gaps at work and at home. But being raised by a working mother appears to come very close to that. Women raised by a working mother do better in the workplace, and men raised by a working mother contribute more at home," McGinn said.

Across all 25 developed countries in the survey, women whose mothers had worked earned 6 percent more than daughters from more traditional households. Twenty-one percent worked as supervisors, compared to 18 percent of women with stay-at-home mothers.

"These findings imply that denying women the opportunity to pursue fulfilling careers outside the home is counterproductive – not only for the future of their children but for society as a whole," observed Harvard Business School professor Robin Ely, the Gender Initiative's faculty director and the School's Senior Associate Dean for Culture and Community.

The researchers also found that the working mother effect does not extend to sons in the workplace, where they are as likely as sons with stay-at-home mothers to hold supervisory positions and earn comparable salaries.

Sons of working mothers did do better, however, when it came to domestic duties.

Of U.S. men surveyed, those who had working mothers spent nearly twice as many hours on family and child care as those hailing from more traditional households – a weekly average of 16 hours compared to 8 1/2 hours.

But that is still around 15 hours a week fewer than the 30-plus hours U.S. women devote to family care, whether they grew up in working-mother households or not.

The research is based on data from the International Social Survey Programme's Gender and Attitude Survey of 2002 and 2012. (For more information, see: <http://www.gesis.org/en/issp/issp-modules-profiles/family-and-changing-gender-roles/>).

"One of the main goals Harvard Business School wants to achieve with the Gender Initiative is to ground discussions about gender in rigorous research so that people can make better-informed decisions for themselves, their families, their companies, and their communities," Ely said. "So much of what people think they know about gender is simply not substantiated by empirical evidence, but instead is based on gender stereotypes. We want to develop the Initiative so that Harvard Business School becomes the 'go-to place' on gender issues, where both researchers and practitioners can come together to find ways to advance gender equity in the workplace and help both women and men lead whole, fulfilled, and sustainable lives."

“From marketing and organizational behavior to strategy, social enterprise, and entrepreneurship, for more than one hundred years Harvard Business School and its faculty have been leaders in defining the roles and functions of business, as well as effective business practice,” Harvard Business School Dean Nitin Nohria said. “With the launch of this Initiative, we want to have a similar and lasting impact on the way the world understands and acts upon gender-related matters.”

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ABOUT HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

Founded in 1908 as part of Harvard University, Harvard Business School is located on a 40-acre campus in Boston. Its faculty of more than 200 offers full-time programs leading to the MBA and doctoral degrees, as well as more than 80 open enrollment Executive Education programs and more than 60 custom programs. For more than a century, HBS faculty have drawn on their research, their experience in working with organizations worldwide, and their passion for teaching to educate leaders who have shaped the practice of business and entrepreneurship around the globe.



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