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Lois M. Collins

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SALT LAKE CITY – Among married moms, the wealthy and the poor are more likely to join the ranks of stay-at-home moms than are middle-class moms.

But the reasons behind the decision to work for pay outside the home rather than stay home with kids varies greatly between the have-lots and have-nots.

That's according to researchers at the Institute for Family Studies, who describe the married, stay-at-home mom population as a U-shape, with a high proportion of moms deciding to stay home at each end of the income and education spectrum.

"Mothers married to a husband who makes less money are themselves often less-educated, and they don't make that much money when they work," said Wendy Wang, director of research at the institute and co-author of the report, "[The Real Housewives of America: Dad's Income and Mom's Work](#)." Education and income go hand-in-hand, with those who are better educated able to bring in more income. For less-educated women, child care may be hard to find and expensive relative to what they can earn, so for many it makes more sense to stay home with the kids.

On the other side of the income scale, wealthy couples have more choice, Wang said. High-income couples can afford to choose whether both parents work or one stays home with the kids. They can decide whether the family will benefit most from mom working or

staying home to be with the children.

Heather Tuttle

It is in the middle class where married mothers are most likely to go to work: They typically earn enough to make the cost of child care feasible, and may choose work to get further ahead financially.

The report finds that 46 percent of the mothers whose husbands earned at least \$250,000 a year don't work for pay. And just over a third of mothers married to men earning less than \$25,000 a year are not in the workforce.

Mothers married to men earning between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year are the least likely to stay home, with three-fourths in the labor force. The mean household income for husbands in the analysis was \$60,000.

"I think many Americans think, based on the popularity of shows like 'The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,' that stay-at-home mothers are the preserve of the rich. But this report shows that SAHMs (stay-at-home mothers) are more common among both the well-off and the poor," said W. Bradford Wilcox, a senior fellow at the institute and visiting scholar with the American Enterprise Institute.

A child's impact

Wang and her co-author, institute research fellow Robert VerBruggen, analyzed data from the 2017 American Community Survey to look specifically at working patterns for married couples who are parents. They limited their analysis to women whose husbands work full time, year-round.

Among married couples, the report notes that in about half of families with children, both parents work, though not necessarily full time.

"For some low-income women, it's not really a choice because they can't afford to have other people taking care of their kids."

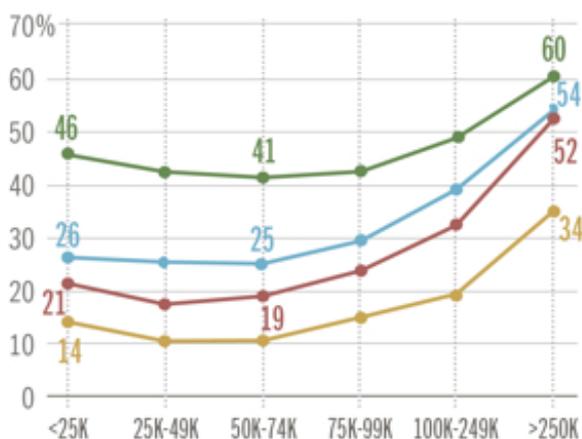
Wendy Wang, director of research at the institute and co-author of the report, "The Real Housewives of America: Dad's Income and Mom's Work."

"Circumstances change when you have a child," said Wang. "Then couples make the decision on what works for their families. Different families use different strategies to cope with their responsibilities."

Dad's income and mom's work, by mother's education

Percent of mothers out of the labor force

High school or less Some college
Bachelor's degree Advanced degree



NOTE: Based on mothers with children under age 18 at home, married to husbands who are full-time, year-round workers with positive income.
SOURCE: IFS analysis of American Community Survey 2017. IPUMS

Deseret News

A Gallup poll in 2015 showed how women's desire for paid work outside the home change with the birth of a child.

According to the poll, "More than half of women, 56 percent, who have a child younger than 18 would ideally like to stay home and care for their house and family, while 58 percent of those without young children would rather work outside the home. Having young children makes little difference in men's preferences, with close to three-quarters preferring to work regardless of their parenting status."

But it's not solely a matter of choice, nor is choice available for all couples.

"For some low-income women, it's not really a choice because they can't afford to have other people taking care of their kids. It makes more economic sense for them to stay at home – and I am sure that some want to," Wang said.

" Children only stay home with you a certain number of years. "

Wendy Wang, director of research at the institute

The 2018 Global Family & Gender Survey from the Institute for Family Studies and Wheatley Institution reached a similar conclusion. It added part-time work to the mix of options and found that 37 percent of mothers with minor children (regardless of marital status) prefer part-time work and 21 percent don't want to work outside the home. Among those without minor children, 28 percent wanted part-time work and 10 percent prefer not to work.

In reality, though, 45 percent of married mothers work full time and 26 percent work part time. Married mothers with young children are the group least likely to work full time, the new IFS report finds.

"Children's age is a really interesting factor in the whole picture," Wang said, "Children only stay home with you a certain number of years."

The report says mothers of children younger than 3 are the least likely to be working for pay. When the kids go to school, about half of married mothers go to work, at least part of the time.

Supporting choices

The report also suggests that couples who marry today tend to have similar educations and thus earning power, which is called "assortative mating." Put simply, people tend to marry peers.

"In the old days, a doctor would marry a nurse. Now a doctor will marry another doctor," Wang told the Deseret News.

Furthermore, "people who are better-educated are also more likely to marry in general than people who are uneducated," she said.

Mother's education is a proxy for her earning capacity, the researchers note, adding that despite the U-shaped curve, mothers who have an advanced degree are the most likely to be in the labor force. Wang interprets that to mean that when couples decide whether a

mother will work, "opportunity costs play a role," too. Very highly skilled and educated women may choose to stay in the work force because they have high earning and advancement opportunities that benefit their families.

"There are probably not a lot of women who get an advanced degree thinking, 'I am going to be a stay-at-home mom after I get it,'" Wang said.

The choices mothers make about work today often involve economics and don't necessarily reflect what they would choose if they could decide solely based on preference, Wang said.

"On the one hand, we definitely have women who would love to work but don't have the opportunity; they can't afford to," she said. "On the other hand, a majority of married mothers do not prefer a full-time job. They have a strong desire for spending more time with their children. It's just different families divide up responsibility in different ways and we want to support them all."

It's clear, she added, that families need some support for their choices. Middle-class families, for instance, are struggling to balance work and family.

According to the report, "her education, his income and their child's age all loom large in shaping who does what in contemporary American married families."

The report emphasizes — somewhat humorously — that its authors aren't taking a position on whether women should work or stay at home.

"We're not showing up at the 'mommy wars' to support a certain side," the two wrote.

"VerBruggen is the son of a stay-at-home mom and the husband of a working one, so he's not allowed to say anything judgmental about either arrangement, while Wang is a working mom who is sometimes envious of her stay-at-home friends."