Managers to Mompreneurs

Marywood University
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Tami Davies-Coleman

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Abstract

This paper examines how women navigate motherhood as a status characteristic at work and subsequently shift into mompreneurship. Through the lenses of status characteristics theory, human capital theory, work-family enrichment theory, and self-determination theory, this paper analyzes maternal workplace experiences and the endemic limitations women face in their challenge of mitigating the tension between the "motherhood penalty" and their pursuit of professional autonomy outside the boundaries of systemic discrimination, gender bias, and institutional resistance to allowing moms the same opportunities at work that anyone else with their experience and qualifications would have.

The analysis shows that traditional workplace environments and cultures consistently devalue mothers, leading women to choose mompreneurship, where they often find career success and work-family enrichment, and it also challenges classic human capital assumptions that presume women voluntarily choose role-appropriate career paths or pre-plan career tracks in anticipation of future motherhood. Instead, the findings indicate that many mothers earn management positions through advanced education, extensive experience, and high productivity, only to face a status-based wage gap, systemic devaluation, and a maternal wall that prevents them from climbing or maintaining their positions on the corporate ladder. Facing workplace cultures that disregard their expertise, these women strategically shift to mompreneurship, where they may reclaim autonomy and achieve work-family enrichment.

Finally, this paper proposes targeted policy and legislative interventions to dismantle these systemic barriers and supports retaining highly skilled mothers who bring significant knowledge, skills, and abilities to the corporate table and whom corporations cannot afford to lose.

Keywords: motherhood penalty, status characteristics theory, human capital theory, self-determination theory, gender-bias, mompreneurship, work-family enrichment.

Introduction and Background of the Problem

Despite mothers' prevalence in the modern workforce, scholarly understanding of their subjective experiences remains limited. This problem reflects a critical structural paradox in the modern labor market of the 21st-century post-Gender Revolution era. Although women now make up about 47% of the active United States workforce (Pew Research Center, 2024), traditional corporate structures have failed to adapt to this demographic reality (England et al., 2020). This paper explores how mothers navigate motherhood as a workplace status characteristic (Abendroth, 2020; Fuller & Hirsh, 2019; Weisshaar, 2018) and the phenomenon of mothers choosing to become mompreneurs (Croom & Miller, 2018; Dhaliwal, 2022). Rather than evaluating these pathways in isolation, this study establishes an analytical dialogue between the external structural barriers of status characteristics and human capital theories, and the purposeful, restorative pathways of work-family enrichment and self-determination theories. To examine this dynamic comprehensively, this

study focuses primarily on the organizational landscape of the United States, while integrating critical cross-national data from other industrialized nations, specifically Japan, the Netherlands, and Germany, to capture how working mothers interface with varying corporate structures, cultural expectations, and institutional policy frameworks.

Understanding how organizations and society perceive the status characteristic of motherhood is critical, as it directly affects mothers' career choices and the rising trend of mompreneurship. When traditional employment structures systematically undermine a mother's professional standing, they disrupt the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness outlined by self-determination theory, ultimately leading to moms shifting to self-employment (Al-Jubari et al., 2019; Reeve & Lee, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Shir et al., 2019).

Existing literature confirms that the workplace often devalues motherhood. Specifically, within the framework of status characteristic theory, mothers are often perceived as less competent, less committed, and less suitable for leadership than their childless counterparts (Bertogg et al., 2020; Fuller et al., 2020; Markoczy et al., 2021; Melamed et al., 2019; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019). This motherhood penalty stems from a perceived conflict between the cultural mandates of intensive mothering (Christopher, 2012) and the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990; Williams et al., 2000), which demands total availability to the organization.

In sharp contrast, classic human capital theory attributes the motherhood wage gap to deliberate choices made by women either in advance of having children or after returning to work from maternity leave, arguing that women optimize use of energy resources by shifting their productivity goals toward household and mothering responsibilities (Becker, 1985; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Mincer & Polacheck, 1974). Building on how these choices shape a mother's work tasks, modern research using a work-family strain perspective shows that motherhood constraints limit a woman's time and energy for inflexible, demanding tasks (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). Consequently, the authors show that mothers often experience a distinct "job task penalty" after childbirth, shifting away from complex analytical or interactive duties toward more routine tasks, a phenomenon concentrated among women who reduce their formal paid working hours.

Research increasingly rejects the assumption that work tasks and mothering tasks inherently compete for a finite amount of individual energy; instead, they are more likely to complement each other, meeting resource needs on both ends of the scale to achieve equilibrium. Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) work-family enrichment theory provides a gender-neutral framework explaining how skills, material resources, and psychological capital gained in one sphere spill over to improve the quality of life and performance in another. Applied to mothers at work, empirical data confirm that these positive spillover effects are associated with warmer, more sensitive parenting and stronger, more supportive couple relationships (Cooklin et al., 2015).

Despite the profound benefits of meeting this equilibrium, traditional organizational designs rarely provide the structural flexibility necessary to foster work-family enrichment. As a result, more women leave traditional corporate structures to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, a phenomenon often termed mompreneurship (Dhaliwal, 2022; Pilukienė et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

This paper addresses the systemic devaluation and structural marginalization of highly qualified mothers within traditional corporate hierarchies, which manifests as a persistent status-based "motherhood penalty" (Abendroth et al., 2014; Oesch et al., 2017; Correll et al., 2007). Classical economic frameworks have historically attributed this wage and promotion gap to a mother's voluntary, deliberate domestic choice (Becker, 1985; Mincer & Polacheck, 1974), but contemporary organizational realities show that gendered expectations and rigid institutional norms actively block skilled mothers from climbing the corporate ladder (Correll et al., 2007; Glass & Fodor, 2018). This structural barrier operates as a dominant force within the United States market (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019; Pepping & Maniam, 2020) and is corroborated by evidence across multiple international regulatory contexts (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020; Dumauli & Asai, 2019; Mari & Luijkx, 2019). This structural failure pushes vital human capital out of corporate pipelines (Jee et al., 2019) and accelerates a shift toward mompreneurship (Dhaliwal, 2022; Pilukienė et al., 2025). Furthermore, corporate concealment at the firm level compounds this systemic devaluation, where a lack of institutional accountability obscures widening disparities until mandated transparency legislation forces a correction (Bennedsen et al., 2020).

Organizational literature still lacks a comprehensive synthesis of how status characteristics (Markoczy et al., 2021), the job task penalty (Schulz & Zoch, 2026), and basic psychological needs (Foulk et al., 2019) interact and incite mothers at work to pursue mompreneurship. As mompreneurship scholarship continues to emerge, a distinct research gap remains in how corporate barriers directly shape this shift from traditional employment to self-employment (Pilukienė et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2024). Furthermore, standard tracking models often overlook long-term career shifts for mothers and fail to examine how corporate barriers gatekeeping force highly skilled women out of the labor market (Potluri et al., 2026). Consequently, a significant gap remains in corporate retention strategies and legislative policy design (Dhaliwal, 2022). Therefore, this qualitative synthesis evaluates how modern workplace structures systematically disenfranchise qualified mothers and identifies the multi-theoretical mechanisms that drive moms away from corporate hierarchies toward mompreneurship.

Methodology: Strategy for Examination

To investigate this problem, this paper utilizes a narrative qualitative synthesis of secondary literature focused on the United States and selective international contexts. The research process involved a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed articles. I evaluated and vetted secondary sources based on their relevance to work experiences and institutional barriers for mothers. Rather than using a rigid coding grid, I read, analyzed, and synthesized these studies to identify overarching patterns. By comparing thematic findings across different organizational and national contexts, this methodology isolates how external workplace devaluations affect a mother's professional trajectory and internal psychological well-being.

Literature Review

A critical examination of the literature shows how mothers in the United States and across multiple countries navigate the status characteristic of motherhood at work and how this may relate to

mothers' later turn to mompreneurship. Dossinger et al. (2019) define status characteristics as individual qualities that are "differentially valued by others in interpersonal interactions," and that can be diffuse, valued across contexts, or valued only under certain circumstances (p. 111). Within this framework, status characteristics theory explains how individual characteristics cue others about what to expect in both task-specific and generalized status perceptions, from gender-based expectations to expectations about professional experience and performance (Markoczy et al., 2021). Status characteristics theory provides a lens for understanding how perceptions of motherhood status at work affect mothers' experiences as employees (Berger et al., 1977).

To fully understand the career choices mothers must make, however, these external workplace biases must be balanced against economic and resource constraints mothers also face. Accordingly, this review integrates human capital theory (Becker, 1985; Mincer & Polacheck, 1974) to examine mothers' decisions regarding professional on-the-job training investments, alongside modern task allocations and structural productivity barriers they face at work (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). Furthermore, work-family enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) offers a critical third lens for evaluating the positive dynamic in which resources and skills acquired in one domain enhance satisfaction and performance in the other (Cooklin et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018).

When traditional corporate environments create systemic roadblocks to work-family enrichment, mothers may shift their professional goals toward mompreneurship. Kuschel (2019) defines a mompreneur as a mother who starts a business venture to "gain higher levels of flexibility and autonomy than they experienced in the corporate world" (p. 1). Self-determination theory explains that basic psychological well-being is met by satisfying needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (De Araujo, 2021; Grabowski et al., 2021). This theory highlights the psychological driving forces that motivate mothers to become mompreneurs (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Status Characteristics and Workplace Devaluation

Studies show that women who are mothers are perceived in a specific way at work, because of their status as mothers (Doren, 2019; Jee et al., 2019; Mari & Luijkx, 2019; Oren, 2020; Pepping & Maniam, 2020) and systemically, this begins in the community social structure (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Windsong, 2019). A 2019 study using a systemic model of community found that gender segregation emerged in neighborhood activities (Windsong, 2019). Windsong further identified themes related to motherhood, showing women participating in activities as an extension of family, navigating as mothers, and describing "neighborhood gender expectations tied to motherhood" (p. 305). Windsong (2019) argued that gender research emphasizes parenting and childcare, with mothers engaging in the "mental labor" of childcare, including worrying about their abilities as good mothers, noting that these mothering duties are labeled as a "third shift" (p. 306). Oren (2020) extends this community-level view, describing motherhood as a "core social institution" whose primary objective is successfully raising children into society (p. 20). Traditionally, mothers were expected to fulfill mothering duties and align with their gender by raising and nurturing children and remaining loyal to their gender through the selfless work of mothering (Oren, 2020). Taken together, the third shift Windsong describes and the selfless ideal Oren identifies reflect the community's portrayal of women's work. Because community members are also employers and coworkers, these portrayals

follow women into paid work, where mothers are expected to follow a mommy track rather than a career track of paid work (Jee et al., 2019; Oren, 2020).

While historical scholarship established women's status outside of work, contemporary research shows that women are perceived fundamentally differently at work as they transition into motherhood. A social inequality described by Cabello-Hutt (2020) in a sequence analysis covering over 30 years of employment histories showed that, regardless of education level, women who became mothers face unique systemic workplace disadvantages. Specifically, becoming a mother triggers a continuous struggle to balance work and caregiving demands and multiple forced lapses in employment (p. 1). Kelley et al. (2020) reported that women described their struggle with family-work conflict as balancing mothering and work while remaining successful in one or both (p. 1). These pre-existing perceptions and deep-seated cultural expectations translate directly into career penalties for mothers within traditional employment structures.

Perceptions of women being less reliable because they may someday become mothers seem to be the primary source of these discriminatory practices, as employers worry women will disregard their careers to focus entirely on mothering. Guided by statistical risk aversion, employers evaluate job candidates by predicting which applicants are most likely to sustain consistent, profit-producing work. However, status characteristic frameworks show that these evaluations remain deeply gendered, and mothers are stereotypically expected to be less committed and work fewer hours. Yet experimental evidence from a Dutch survey by Mari and Luijkx (2019) reveals an important nuance: while these negative assumptions about commitment persist, they have limited effects on hiring intentions and initial salary offers in sex-typical professions. Once a mother is hired, however, broader structural pay disparities develop; firm-level segregation plays a significant role in perpetuating the gender wage gap, with firm-specific variance accounting for as much as 35% of the disparity (Masso et al., 2021).

Research indicates that firm-level segregation (i.e., when women are disproportionately employed at lower-paying companies) affects the gender wage gap more than differences in broad occupational categorization (Masso et al., 2021). In these corporate environments, institutional rewards disproportionately favor employees available to work extended, unpredictable hours (Goldin, 2014). Consequently, this structural demand leaves working mothers with fewer opportunities to advance, secure promotion pathways, or receive equitable wage increases (Goldin, 2014; Masso et al., 2021). Dumauli and Asai (2019) reported in a longitudinal study on the motherhood wage penalty in Japan that mothers frequently shift toward “mother-friendly” jobs, which contributes to lower pay and part-time hours (p. 376). Research suggests that women who prefer these so-called mother-friendly positions may not be the cause of the motherhood wage penalty. Dumauli and Asai (2019) further explained in their study that an organizational culture of lifetime employment, including on-the-job training, retirement plans, and wages based on seniority, provides job guarantees for employees who are expected to adapt to flexible work schedules convenient for the organization, most characteristic of the male employees of large corporations and government entities (p. 376). While a flexible schedule may seem attractive to some mothers struggling to balance mothering with paid work, research suggests it can increase negative perceptions of a mother’s commitment to paid work and her ability to meet standards set within her workplace's social structure, depending on her position. In their longitudinal study of the motherhood pay penalty, Fuller and Hirsh (2019) reported that flexible schedules for mothers

bring negative bias and stigma, increasing the penalty for highly educated mothers by substituting at-home work for physical face time on site (p. 3).

Mothers face discriminatory outcomes because of perceptions employers and coworkers hold about mothers' duties, responsibilities, and expectations, particularly as they relate to wages. Pepping and Maniam (2020) reported that the motherhood wage gap ranges from 5% to 10% and remains steady, even though women have come a long way since the gender revolution, with women making up 47% of the US workforce in 2019 (pp. 119-120). Status characteristics theory provides the critical framework for explaining these persistent penalties, defining status characteristics as social positions fundamentally linked to institutionalized inequalities (Melamed et al., 2019). They further reported that status characteristics lead people to expect higher-status group members to be more influential, receive more positive evaluations, participate more often, and be disproportionately rewarded for their efforts (p. 1014).

Crucially, existing literature frequently overlooks maternal agency, failing to address the specific strategies women employ to convince employers to trust their level of professional commitment despite their status as mothers. Cabello-Hutt (2020) reported a lack of research on maternal employment trajectories because studies typically focus on a single cohort, which limits our understanding of how status characteristics at work affect mothers' employment over time (p. 3). Mothers are not just passive in this dynamic, however. In fact, current tracking data show that highly skilled professional mothers purposefully use their own complex strategies to actively avoid negative career consequences, as well as avoid persistent bias, whether that requires downplaying motherhood in high-status offices, scaling back their job tasks, or shifting their positions to part-time roles (Dossinger et al., 2026).

This ongoing structural friction remains tightly tethered to gendered expectations of caregiving. Hirsh et al. (2020) reported that caregiver-status discrimination is particularly damaging for women because caregiving responsibilities are tied to a presumed caregiver status created by gender norms and expectations of women (p. 760). Further, Hirsh et al. (2020) noted that women are presumed primary caregivers, while men are seen as babysitters, which widens workplace inequality when women fight for parental rights, accommodation, and flexibility at work (p. 763). Women deemed less credible are less likely to win arguments that support their roles as qualified, competent employees.

Status Characteristics and The Motherhood Penalty

Prior literature outlines how working mothers are traditionally perceived as less committed than childless women (Pepping & Maniam, 2020; Mari & Luijkx, 2019). These biased perceptions directly drive labor market discrimination against mothers in the workplace. Cross-national meta-analytic and longitudinal data indicate that the severity of this motherhood penalty varies heterogeneously by a mother's age at childbirth, number of children, and duration of career interruptions (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Jee et al., 2019). To explain these variations, traditional labor-economic frameworks focus on supply-side factors, arguing that a mother's career choices, such as consciously selecting lower-paying, family-friendly roles or reducing workplace effort, account for a portion of the wage gap (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). Although research shows mothers are perceived as having fewer skills,

competence, and commitment to their paid work, men experience the opposite effect when they become fathers. In the United States, Dias et al. (2020) utilized Current Population Survey data to demonstrate a distinct fatherhood premium in job retention during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting that partnered fathers faced a significantly lower likelihood of being laid off following the outbreak compared to working mothers, childless men, and childless women (p. 2). Similarly, within legal systems, Fuller et al. (2020) examined Canadian family responsibility discrimination cases and found that the legal interpretation of claims was deeply gendered, reporting that the Human Rights Tribunals were significantly more likely to question the credibility, competence, and legitimacy of female complainants based on their status as caregivers (p. 761).

Kelley et al. (2020) defined the motherhood penalty as "a loss of human capital when women become mothers and subsequently take time off work, divide their attention between their jobs and home, and make other potentially detrimental career decisions based on their children" (p. 1). Similarly, the motherhood wage gap, or motherhood wage penalty, is defined as a phenomenon that describes the "fact that mothers earn less than childless women with similar characteristics" (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). Kelley et al. (2020) reported that much of the gender wage gap in previous research can be attributed to the motherhood penalty (p. 1). The motherhood penalty compromises a woman's ability to secure an equitable wage, achieve long-term salary growth, and advance her career. Crucially, this penalty begins before hire. In a laboratory experiment, Correll et al. (2007) found that evaluators rated mothers significantly lower in competence and commitment than equally qualified childless women and recommended lower starting salaries. A companion field audit confirmed the pattern in the actual labor market: employers called back mothers significantly less often than equally qualified childless women. However, cross-national research shows regional policies and societal norms shape these pre-hiring penalties; for instance, Mari and Luijkx (2019) observed that while European employers similarly hold gendered expectations of lower workplace commitment, these stereotypes have limited effects on actual hiring decisions and salary offers. Once within an organization, this initial gatekeeping disadvantage compounds into long-term systemic inequities, resulting in persistent wage penalties that a woman's individual investments in higher education cannot fully erase (Jee et al., 2019; Pepping & Maniam, 2020).

While Masso et al. (2021) reported that firm-level sorting explains up to 35% of the generalized gender wage gap, the specific wage penalty triggered by motherhood operates completely independently of company profitability or productivity premiums. Motherhood triggers an immediate 4% to 9% drop in relative earnings that is not driven by substandard performance or sorting mechanisms. Instead, it reflects a distinct institutional barrier that systemically devalues a woman's professional contributions as soon as she becomes a parent. In a comparative analysis of 26 countries, Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz (2020) found that having children leads to a pay loss for mothers and a pay gain for fathers, which they attributed to country-specific family policies and cultural norms related to gendered divisions of childcare (p. 1).

Human Capital Framework and Imposed Corporate Roadblocks

While status characteristics theory highlights external barriers driven by employer biases, classic human capital theory approaches the motherhood penalty through the lens of worker productivity

and effort allocation. Classic economic models posit that women earn lower wages and advance more slowly in their careers because they shift their primary productivity goals toward household and child-rearing responsibilities (Becker, 1985; Polachek, 1981). From this perspective, women deliberately choose job tracks that offer flexibility, require fewer complex caregiver roles, and carry fewer penalties for intermittent leaves of absence (Mincer & Polacheck, 1974). They further proposed that women historically invested less in firm-specific on-the-job training because they anticipated future motherhood and viewed lower pay as a trade-off for lower job demands.

However, scholarship strongly challenges the assumption that this shift in productivity is simply a voluntary, deliberate choice. From a work-family strain perspective, corporate task structures will inevitably conflict with the logistical demands of caregiving. Schulz and Zoch (2026) explored this dynamic through what they call the "job task penalty," arguing that mothers often experience a systematic reduction in the complexity of their daily tasks after childbirth. Rather than mothers actively pulling back effort or losing their skills, corporate structures strip away complex analytic, interactive, and leadership-oriented job tasks (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). Consequently, Schulz and Zoch (2026) show that when mothers request reduced hours to balance caregiving, organizations respond by reorganizing their workloads toward more routine, predictable tasks. While this compromise might keep mothers on the payroll, it also limits upward mobility and ultimately leads to career stagnation in their current roles.

Work-Family Spillover and Enrichment Pathways

Rather than assuming that work and family are inherently destructive domains competing for a finite amount of maternal energy, the literature highlights how resources can transfer positively between roles. Building on this perspective, Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) work-family enrichment theory examines how skills, experiences, and psychological capital gained in one sphere spill over to improve quality of life and performance in another. Work-family enrichment occurs through two paths: an instrumental path, in which skills, perspectives, and flexibility acquired in one role directly improve performance in the other, and an affective path, in which resources boost a positive effect that then spills over into the second role. Casteleijn-Osorno & Hytti (2025) reported that skills associated with caregiver roles that enrich mompreneurs are often "overlooked, marginalized, and misunderstood" (p. 653).

While this framework applies broadly across workforces, it is especially useful for examining working mothers' lives. When women draw on accumulated resources from one role to reinforce another, they experience enrichment associated with warmer, more sensitive parenting, and more supportive couple relationships (Cooklin et al., 2015). Ultimately, a mother's satisfaction across these domains is highly individualized and cannot be defined categorically through a single lens, revealing a multifaceted reality that traditional corporate environments often fail to acknowledge or accommodate (Zhang et al., 2018).

Enrichment, however, depends on access to the resources that generate it, chiefly autonomy, schedule control, and meaningful work. The structural barriers reviewed above restrict precisely these resources. Flexible arrangements carry stigma that deepens the pay penalty (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019), and reduced hours often shift mothers toward routine, less complex tasks (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). When traditional workplaces close off these enrichment pathways, mothers may seek work

arrangements that restore them, a dynamic that helps explain the turn toward mompreneurship examined next.

Self-Determination and the Transition to Mompreneurship

Many women choose to avoid the motherhood penalty by becoming mompreneurs. Rather than transitioning into entrepreneurship solely to reduce work-family conflict through flexible hours, emerging research suggests that reduced earning opportunities and stagnation in wage employment are the primary catalysts. Yang et al. (2024) use population-level data to show that mothers often launch new ventures as a strategic response to wage penalties caused by traditional employer discrimination. By shifting to mompreneurship, high-skilled women can better align their work with their actual capabilities, capturing the professional rewards and salary growth that corporate hierarchies deny them (Dhaliwal, 2022; Yang et al., 2024). Mompreneurship offers mothers a framework to align professional goals with caregiver roles, providing unrestricted professional ownership and direct control over their time, when traditional employment blocks enrichment pathways (Acker, 1990; Dhaliwal, 2022; Pilukienė et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2000). Aarseth (2020) describes mompreneurs as a romanticized figure resulting from an "opting-out revolution" for a culture of women returning to an early phase of competitive capitalism to fulfill their feminine need to be an "angel of the house…able to combine homemaking with a small but meaningful enterprise from the kitchen table" (p. 230).

Research has not fully captured the transition to mompreneurship or the development of mothers' choice to pursue self-employment as a career trajectory, particularly the nuanced motivations behind such choices in markets with gender inequalities (Hudson Breen & Leung, 2020; Pilukienė et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2014). To understand their motivation to become mompreneurs, it is necessary to examine their workplace experiences through the lens of motherhood's status characteristics. Grounded in self-determination theory, organizational literature demonstrates that daily motivational strivings trigger positive work behaviors that satisfy basic psychological needs, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of next-day motivation (Foulk et al., 2019). Crucially, however, Foulk et al. (2019) observed that organizational power significantly moderates how these daily strivings translate into psychological need satisfaction, with much stronger effects for individuals with high-power status. Consequently, because traditional corporate environments structurally relegate mothers to lower-power statuses, they are systemically blocked from this psychological fulfillment loop, driving them to exit the hierarchy entirely, pursue mompreneurship, and claim the institutional autonomy required to sustain daily psychological well-being.

While mothers at work actively try to build positive relationships, stereotypes about their competence, commitment, and reliability construct steep obstacles to forming or maintaining positive working relationships (Pepping & Maniam, 2020). Because mothers face stricter performance and punctuality standards than childless women, they have fewer opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities to employers and coworkers (Correll et al., 2007). These negative outcomes, tied to the devalued status of motherhood, suggest that women are stripped of workplace power; this, in turn, undermines their ability to meet basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence in traditional corporate environments, ultimately breaking the daily motivational cycle and prompting a transition to self-employment.

Summary

Many women enter paid work and choose careers outside of mothering, which can lead to challenges. Most notably, women face the challenge of the motherhood penalty, a devaluation of highly useful skills needed for the success of the organization because of their status as mothers (Abendroth et al., 2014; Kahn et al., 2014; Oesch et al., 2017; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Weeden et al., 2016). Historically, society has devalued motherhood at work, and having children can significantly disrupt or stall a woman's career trajectory (Hennessy, 2018).

Motherhood status can lead to a perceived lower position within the workplace hierarchy. Cultural assumptions regarding motherhood frequently distort professional evaluations. As the experimental and audit evidence reviewed above shows, these distortions begin before hire (Correll et al., 2007). Rather than being isolated to initial hiring decisions, these biased perceptions often translate into long-term career friction. Cross-national and longitudinal data confirm that this ongoing devaluation contributes to depressed wage trajectories, slower promotional velocity, and persistent underrepresentation of mothers in senior leadership positions (Abendroth et al., 2014; Glass & Fodor, 2018; Oesch et al., 2017; Yu & Kuo, 2017). This analysis will advance the field by exploring how these workplace status characteristics dynamically manifest in mothers' career trajectories.

Conversely, Jee et al. (2019) argued that appropriate work-family policies could significantly mitigate the motherhood penalty (p. 436). Negative perceptions of a mother's inability to meet the standards set by her workplace social structure can cost her more than pay. Targeted structural interventions could reverse these negative perceptions and reduce the consequences of this type of workplace bias against mothers.

Analysis: Emerging Themes

The literature reviewed above points to four interrelated themes that explain how the status characteristic of motherhood functions in the workplace and why many mothers ultimately turn to mompreneurship as an alternative career choice: (a) motherhood as a devalued status that travels on a continuum from the community into the workplace, (b) the tension between choice and constraint in mothers' career trajectories, (c) the obstruction of work-family enrichment, and (d) unmet psychological needs and the strategic shift to mompreneurship. The paper examines each theme from three perspectives: the individual mother, the employing organization, and the broader societal and institutional context. The analysis interprets each theme through status characteristics theory, human capital theory, work-family enrichment theory, and self-determination theory.

Interpreted together, the themes form a sequence rather than a list. Devalued status constrains mothers' options, constrained options close off enrichment, and blocked enrichment leaves core psychological needs unmet, creating the conditions under which mompreneurship becomes a strategic choice.

Theme 1: Motherhood as a Devalued Status That Travels

The Individual Perspective

From the mother's vantage point, she cannot leave motherhood at the office door. Hirsh et al. (2020) describe caregiving as a presumed status assigned by gender norms rather than chosen, which means a mother carries expectations about her commitment into every interaction regardless of her actual performance. Status characteristics theory explains why this matters: when a characteristic is differentially valued, it cues others' expectations of competence and performance (Dossinger et al., 2019; Markoczy et al., 2021). For the individual, this creates a persistent burden of proof: she must continually counter assumptions she did not create.

The Organizational Perspective

Within organizations, these expectations shape job placement evaluation from the first point of contact. Correll et al. (2007) found that evaluators rated mothers lower in competence and commitment, recommended lower starting salaries, and called mothers back less often. Status characteristics theory predicts this pattern: members of lower-status groups receive less favorable evaluations and fewer rewards for equivalent effort (Melamed et al., 2019). Yet research findings are not uniform. Mari and Luijkx (2019) found that although Dutch employers held similar stereotypes, those beliefs had limited effects on hiring decisions. Organizational and national context can then moderate how strongly a status characteristic converts into discrimination.

The Societal Perspective

The devalued status does not originate in the workplace. Windsong (2019) and Oren (2020) locate its roots in community norms that define good mothering as selfless, all-consuming work. Because community members are also employees and coworkers, these norms enter already-formed organizations. Legal institutions can reinforce them rather than correct them: Hirsh et al. (2020) found that tribunals were more likely to question female caregivers' credibility and competence. From a societal perspective, the motherhood penalty is not simply a series of individual biased decisions, but a status hierarchy reproduced across community, workplace, and legal settings.

Furthermore, formal legal frameworks frequently reinforce these oppressive norms rather than correcting them. Fuller et al. (2020) examined family responsibility discrimination cases and found that Human Rights Tribunals were significantly more likely to aggressively question the credibility, competence, and legitimacy of female complainants based strictly on their status as caregivers. From a broad societal perspective, the motherhood penalty is not merely a collection of isolated, biased management decisions; instead, it represents a cohesive status hierarchy continuously reproduced across community, corporate, and legal settings.

Theme 2: Choice or Constraint

The Individual Perspective

Classic human capital theory frames mothers' career outcomes as the product of deliberate individual choices. This economic model posits that women anticipate motherhood, invest less in firm-specific on-the-job training, and choose flexible, less demanding occupational roles to optimize their allocation of domestic energy (Becker, 1985; Mincer & Polacheck, 1974).

However, contemporary empirical literature strongly challenges this supply-side narrative; Cabello-Hutt (2020) used sequence analysis of over 30 years of employment histories to show that mothers face severely disrupted employment trajectories and forced career lapses regardless of education level. This finding shows that intensive investments in higher education and professional development do not protect women from career marginalization. Similarly, Dumauli and Asai (2019) concluded that a mother's move into family-friendly positions does not, by itself, explain the accompanying wage penalty. Because highly educated, highly productive mothers face the same occupational disruptions, individual choice alone cannot account for these systemic career deficits.

The Organizational Perspective

The organizational perspective shows how rigid corporate job design shapes these apparent choices. Goldin (2014) shows that firms disproportionately reward employees who are available for long, unpredictable hours, a structure that penalizes caregivers regardless of skill. Schulz and Zoch (2026) document a job-task penalty in which reduced hours make complex, analytical, and leadership-oriented work difficult to sustain, pushing mothers toward routine tasks. Fuller and Hirsh (2019) add that the flexibility mothers seek carries stigma that deepens the pay penalty. These findings suggest that what human capital theory interprets as a preference for less demanding work is better understood as an adaptation to organizational structures that make demanding work incompatible with caregiving. Masso et al. (2021) show that firms' structural roles in the gender wage gap account for up to 35% of the generalized variance, trapping women in lower-paying organizational brackets. Rather than mothers willingly retreating into routine roles, corporate structures actively redirect their workloads, forcing skill depreciation that restricts upward mobility and fuels career stagnation. Human capital theory and status characteristics theory therefore offer competing explanations, and the evidence reviewed here weighs toward constraint.

The Societal Perspective

At the societal level, cross-national variation further weakens a purely individual explanation. Across 26 countries, Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz (2020) found persistent, systemic pay losses for mothers alongside simultaneous pay gains for married fathers. Crucially, they attributed the severity of this divergence to country-specific family policies and deeply entrenched cultural norms about the gendered division of childcare.

If the maternal wage deficit depended solely on individual work effort or universal maternal preferences, the penalty would remain consistent across global markets. Because the penalty varies

dynamically with the surrounding institutional policy environment, it cannot be reduced to mothers' universal biological preferences. This cross-national variation signals that the motherhood penalty responds strongly to institutional design, a critical reality this paper's legislative and structural recommendations directly leverage (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020; Mari & Luijkx, 2019).

Theme 3: Blocked Enrichment

The Individual Perspective

Work-family enrichment theory holds that resources gained in one role can improve performance and well-being in another through both instrumental and affective paths (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). For mothers, enrichment is associated with warmer, more sensitive parenting and more supportive couple relationships (Cooklin et al., 2015). Furthermore, caregiving may also develop skills such as coordination, prioritization, and interpersonal sensitivity that could transfer to paid work. From the individual perspective, mothers bring substantial potential for workplace enrichment.

The Organizational Perspective

Whether the organization realizes that potential depends on its leadership and structure. Enrichment requires resources such as autonomy, schedule control, and meaningful work, and the structural barriers identified under the previous theme restrict exactly these.

Casteleijn-Osorno and Hytti (2025) note that caregiving-related skills are often overlooked and marginalized. Through the lens of status characteristic theory, this marginalization is predictable: skills associated with a devalued status are themselves devalued. Traditional organizations therefore block the instrumental path by failing to recognize transferable skills and the affective path by withholding autonomy that generates positive spillover.

The Societal Perspective

At the societal level, the persistent ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990; Williams et al., 2000) frames work and family as competing rather than complementary domains. This framing sustains a conflict model in the broader culture even as research increasingly supports an enrichment model. Zhang et al. (2018) emphasize that mothers' satisfaction across roles is highly individualized, a reality that traditional corporate structures and cultural norms rarely accommodate. By maintaining a societal baseline that treats family and work as inherently destructive forces, traditional corporate environments close off enrichment pathways and structurally manufacture the psychological strain that triggers the shift to mompreneurship.

Theme 4: Unmet Needs and the Strategic Turn to Mompreneurship

The Individual Perspective

Self-determination theory identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Each theme threatens at least one of these needs. Devalued status undermines relatedness, as stereotypes obstruct positive working relationships (Pepping & Maniam, 2020). Stricter performance standards (Correll et al., 2007) and task downgrading (Schulz & Zoch, 2026) disregard competence. Stigmatized flexibility and limited control over schedules undermine autonomy. Through this lens, Kushel's (2019) definition of the mompreneur, a mother seeking greater flexibility and autonomy than corporate work allowed, frames a woman's effort to restore unmet needs.

The Organizational Perspective

Traditional corporate structures severely disrupt the daily operational mechanics of motivation. Foulk et al. (2019) show that daily motivational pursuits drive psychological need satisfaction and next-day motivation, but that the effect is strongest for employees with organizational power. Crucially, their findings show that organizational power strongly moderates this fulfillment loop, yielding significantly stronger need-satisfaction effects for individuals with high-power status. Mothers, whose status strips them of power, are therefore least equipped to sustain this motivational cycle. For organizations, the resulting loss is substantial. Yang et al. (2024) and Dhaliwal (2022) suggest that high-skilled mothers leave in part because entrepreneurship lets them capture rewards corporate hierarchies withhold. As a result, organizations lose experienced employees in whom they have already invested, directly fueling the talent drain from traditional corporations to independent market ventures.

The Societal Perspective

Societally, mompreneurship is framed in competing ways. One perspective treats it as empowerment, a strategic response to discrimination. Aarseth (2020) offers a more critical interpretation, describing the mompreneur as a romanticized figure who revives traditional domestic ideals under an entrepreneurial label. Both evaluations carry weight: mompreneurship may restore autonomy for individual mothers while leaving intact the workplace structures that pushed them out. In effect, it offers an individual solution to a collective problem, so individual exit cannot substitute for organizational and policy reform. Because research has not fully captured this transition (Hudson Breen & Leung, 2020; Pilukienė et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2024), claims about mompreneurs' outcomes should also be held tentatively.

Synthesis

Across the four themes, the theories operate in sequence. Status characteristics theory explains the origin of the penalty: motherhood is a devalued status formed in community norms and carried into organizations. Human capital theory, viewed through task allocation, shows that the resulting career shift reflects constraint more than choice. Work-family enrichment theory identifies what those constraints cost, namely the positive spillover mothers could otherwise bring to their work. Self-determination theory explains the behavioral result: when corporate hierarchies fracture a mother's core needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness go unmet, mothers seek them elsewhere, and entrepreneurship becomes a strategic path.

Integrating the three analytical perspectives shows that this sequence is not confined to individual decisions. This multi-dimensional sequence is systematically produced and reinforced at both the organizational and societal levels, and this multilevel dynamic makes the motherhood penalty highly responsive to the organizational accountability mechanisms and legislative policy interventions examined in the final section of this paper.

Ethical Implications

The multi-level sequence tracing a mother's journey from community devaluation to corporate exit and mompreneurship raises critical ethical concerns for modern organizations and legislative frameworks. Treating motherhood as a devalued status characteristic violates core principles of justice, equity, and corporate social responsibility. When corporate structures systematically funnel high-skilled women out of traditional employment, it reflects a deep systemic failure rather than an equitable evaluation process, highlighting issues of structural exploitation and unequal distribution of career risks, leaving women to take on financial, professional, and personal stakes of navigating the labor market, while the corporation absorbs zero liability (Dhaliwal, 2022; Schulz & Zoch, 2026; Yang et al., 2024).

The Devaluation of Core Human Capital and Existential Fairness

The first ethical challenge stems from the systematic disregard for a woman's hard-earned skills and experience based purely on her status as a mother. Traditional corporate environments claim to operate as meritocracies, rewarding employees based on advanced education, extensive experience, and high productivity. However, as status characteristics theory explains, the maternal wall alters how a mother's competence is perceived, overriding the company's objective baseline qualifications (Dossinger et al., 2019; Markoczy et al., 2021).

Holding mothers to stricter performance and punctuality standards while withholding complex analytical, interactive, and leadership-oriented tasks is fundamentally unjust (Correll et al., 2007; Schulz & Zoch, 2026). Organizations break the unwritten psychological contract of workplace equity when they evaluate candidates through statistical risk aversion rather than individual merit. This systemic gatekeeping devalues valuable human capital, creating an environment where identical qualifications lead to drastically different career tracks depending on parental status. Ethically, forcing individuals to constantly provide a higher burden of proof to counter conditioned biases undermines the basic fairness expected in a professional corporate culture.

Corporate Construction of Choice and the Reality of Constraint

A significant ethical issue lies in how traditional corporate labor structures mask systemic exclusion under the guise of individual choice. Classic human capital frameworks claim that a mother's shift toward routine, mother-friendly jobs is a voluntary, pre-planned strategy to balance caregiver responsibilities (Becker, 1985; Mincer & Polachek, 1974). However, a closer look reveals that this shift is an enforced adaptation to rigid corporate task designs rather than a free personal preference.

Organizations create a coercive environment by disproportionately rewarding employees who can work long, unpredictable hours while penalizing those who utilize flexible arrangements (Goldin, 2014; Masso et al., 2021). Forcing high-skilled women to trade task complexity for essential schedule control is a form of structural exploitation (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). It strips women of professional power and limits their long-term salary growth, trapping them in lower-paying positions (Fuller et al., 2020; Masso et al., 2021). When framed as a deliberate choice, this institutional containment shifts moral responsibility from the corporation to the individual. This dynamic creates an ethical double standard, as organizations benefit from a mother's baseline productivity while using her parental status to justify career stagnation and wage depression.

The Forced Privatization of Socially Essential Resources

When traditional workplaces eliminate pathways to work-family enrichment, they compromise a mother's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Foulk et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This dynamic raises a broader social-ethical problem: the forced privatization of resources that naturally build cross-domain well-being. Work-family enrichment is a valuable social resource that directly predicts warmer, more sensitive parenting and stronger family relationships (Cooklin et al., 2015).

When organizations block this enrichment by withholding autonomy or marginalizing transferable caregiving skills, they create intense work-family strain (Casteleijn-Osorno & Hytti, 2025; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Pushing high-skilled mothers out of corporate hierarchies forces them to assume the entire operational, financial, and psychological risk of launching a business just to secure basic professional autonomy (Yang et al., 2024). While mompreneurship offers a strategic path to personal autonomy, relying on self-employment as the primary escape route lets corporate systems avoid necessary structural changes (Aarseth, 2020). This dynamic leaves collective organizational failure unresolved, supporting an inequitable marketplace baseline in which professional well-being is restricted to mothers with the financial capital to absorb the risks of independent entrepreneurship.

Institutional Complicity and the Failure of Caregiver Equity

The final ethical implication involves legal and institutional systems that reinforce these workplace inequities rather than correcting them. Human rights tribunals and corporate compliance structures often question the credibility, competence, and legitimacy of female complainants because of their caregiver status (Fuller et al., 2020). By presuming women are primary caregivers and viewing men as temporary babysitters, institutions reinforce gendered power imbalances (Fuller et al., 2020).

This systemic bias makes it incredibly difficult for mothers to successfully advocate for parental accommodation or equitable advancement pathways. Allowing these discriminatory biases to persist unchecked makes organizations complicit in perpetuating an unequal labor market. This dynamic creates a critical failure of corporate accountability, systematically draining talent pools by pushing out highly qualified professionals whose expertise and strategic leadership organizations cannot afford to lose (Dhaliwal, 2022; Yang et al., 2024).

Actionable Policy and Legislative Recommendations

To dismantle the multi-level sequence that penalizes motherhood within traditional corporate structures and systematically forces highly qualified mothers into mompreneurship, structural and legislative interventions are needed. Relying on self-employment as an individual solution to a collective structural failure leaves the broader institutional archetype unchanged (Aarseth, 2020). Therefore, mitigating the motherhood penalty requires a dual-pronged framework: targeted organizational policy reforms to eliminate internal career stagnation, and robust legislative mandates to redefine caregiver equity at the societal level. These recommendations directly address the power imbalances, systemic exclusion, and unilateral transfer of professional liability identified throughout this analysis.

Organizational Policy Reforms

Reconstructing Job Design and Objective Task Allocation

Organizations must structurally eliminate the "job task penalty" by removing discretionary, manager-driven clerical oversight of mothers' career trajectories. Empirical data show that workplaces systematically remove complex analytical, interactive, and leadership-oriented duties from mothers, reorganizing their workloads toward routine labor under the guise of accommodation (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). To counter this structural exploitation, human resource standards of operating procedures must implement blind, audited task-allocation rubrics. These rubrics evaluate project assignments, client distributions, and leadership roles using objective data metrics completely independent of an employee's parental status. This intervention ensures that high-skilled mothers retain access to complex, high-profile professional tasks that drive mobility upward and protect long-term salary growth (see Correll et al., 2007; Schulz & Zoch, 2026).

Institutionalizing Results-Only Work Environments (ROWE)

Traditional corporate cultures disproportionately reward employees who can work long, unpredictable hours, while artificially penalizing caregivers who need control over their schedules (Goldin, 2014; Masso et al., 2021). To eliminate this barrier, organizations should transition to a Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE), a structural framework that evaluates employees exclusively on measurable outputs rather than physical presence or time logged (Kelly et al., 2011). In a ROWE framework, physical 'face time' on site is completely rejected as a standard for commitment or performance. Employees are evaluated exclusively by measurable outputs and predefined deliverables. By normalizing schedule independence and location flexibility by default, corporations eliminate the stigma around flexibility and the career devaluation highly educated mothers face when using telecommuting options (Fuller et al., 2020). Crucially, this structural autonomy satisfies the basic psychological needs for competence and control outlined by self-determination theory, unlocking the daily motivational cycle required to sustain professional well-being within the firm (Foulk et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Establishing Corporate Returnship Initiatives

Longitudinal trajectories show that forced employment lapses and temporary maternity leave compound systemic career-mobility stagnation, slowing long-term promotional velocity (Abendroth et al., 2014; Cabello-Hutt, 2020). Corporations must actively counter this human capital depreciation by introducing formal 'returnship' programs, a framework pioneered to mitigate career-gap penalties through structured, temporary-to-permanent organizational onboarding (Goldman Sachs, n.d.; see also Fontenot, 2012). Rather than treating returning mothers as a statistical liability or relegating them to entry-tier paths, returnships provide structured, fully compensated mid-to-senior-level transition tracks (iRelaunch, n.d.). These programs include dedicated peer mentorship, immediate integration into high-impact cross-functional teams, and accelerated upskilling pathways to update firm-specific technical competencies. This framework protects the corporate talent pool, reverses the systematic talent drain, and validates a mother's professional credibility and expertise.

Legislative and Regulatory Interventions

Expanding Title VII to Protect Caregiver Status

Because current statutory protections fail to shield mothers from implicit caregiving bias, human rights tribunals and compliance structures often question the credibility, competence, and legitimacy of female complainants because of their caregiver status (Hirsh et al., 2020). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 2007, 2022) has noted that while caregiver status alone is not an explicitly protected category under federal law, adverse treatment can violate Title VII if rooted in gender-based stereotyping. Congress must expand Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to explicitly list 'caregiver status' as an independent protected class. This legislative amendment would provide mothers with an ironclad legal framework to contest subtle discriminatory practices, such as subjective task downgrading and disparate performance standards, that current gender-discrimination laws fail to capture. Elevating caregiver status to a protected category would require organizations to formalize objective accommodations, shifting moral and legal liability from the mother to the employer.

Implementing Non-Transferable Paid Parental Leave Quotas

Cross-national data confirm that country-specific family policies and cultural norms about the division of childcare heavily shape the severity of the motherhood pay penalty (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020). To counter the systemic pay losses mothers face and the concurrent pay gains fathers enjoy, federal legislation must implement a mandatory, fully compensated parental leave system with non-transferable individual quotas, often called 'daddy quotas' (Patnaik, 2019). When parental leave is legally structured as a 'use-it-or-lose-it' individual right, it incentivizes fathers to absorb an equitable share of initial caregiving responsibilities (Duvander et al., 2019; Patnaik, 2019). This statutory intervention normalizes career interruptions for both genders, erodes the corporate stereotype that caregiving is exclusively a maternal liability, and erases the gendered assumptions employers use to justify statistical risk aversion (see Duvander et al., 2019; Esping-Andersen, 2015).

Mandating Algorithmic and Structural Pay Transparency

Firm-level sorting and corporate concealment play a definitive role in perpetuating the gender wage gap, with firm-specific variances accounting for up to 35% of the total earnings disparity (Masso et al., 2021). To eliminate the hidden, status-based wage gap that persists regardless of an individual's productivity or educational investments (Jee et al., 2019; Pepping & Maniam, 2020), federal regulators must mandate full pay transparency. Legislative frameworks must require corporations to publicly publish audited salary-band data across all organizational tiers, alongside the specific algorithmic metrics used to calculate performance bonuses and raises. Empirical evaluations demonstrate that transparent compensation reporting significantly compresses the gender wage gap by reducing managerial discretion and increasing corporate accountability (Bennedsen et al., 2020; Kim, 2015). Enforcing transparent compensation reporting dismantles the institutional veil that protects arbitrary wage depression, forcing corporations to offer equitable advancement pathways and equal pay for identical human capital.

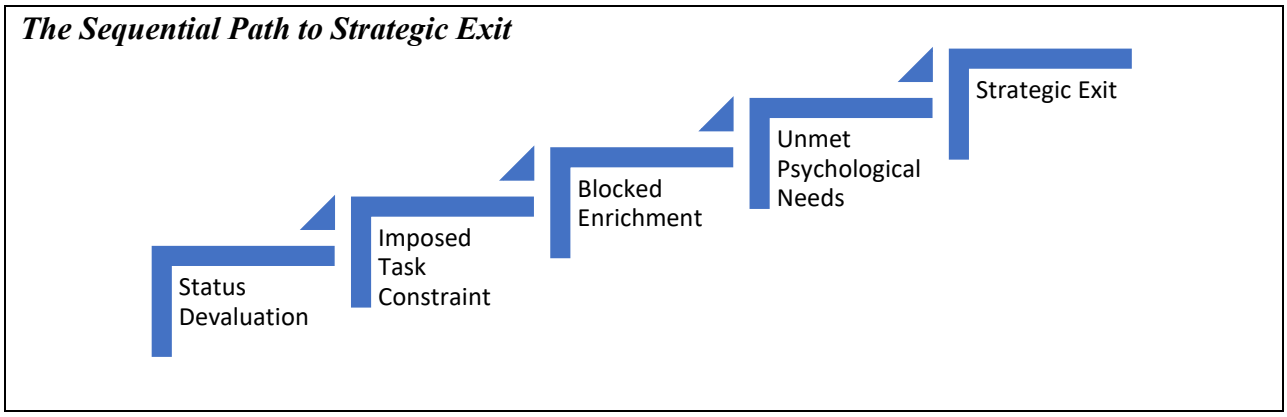
Summary

Despite high labor market participation rates, traditional corporate environments have failed to adapt to the reality of working mothers, who now comprise approximately 47% of the active United States workforce (Pew Research Center, 2024). This analysis examines the critical structural paradox in which the devalued status of motherhood operates as an institutional barrier in traditional employment, disrupting internal psychological needs and ultimately driving a strategic career transition to self-employment, or mompreneurship (Abendroth, 2020; Croom & Miller, 2018; Dhaliwal, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Grounded primarily in the corporate landscape of the United States, this study integrates cross-national data from Japan, the Netherlands, and Germany to examine how mothers interface with varying institutional regulatory frameworks, organizational cultures, and cultural expectations (Dumauli & Asai, 2019; Fuller & Hirsh, 2019; Mari & Luijkx, 2019; Weisshaar, 2018).

Historically, classical economic frameworks have framed maternal career penalties as voluntary, domestic choices resulting from pre-planned, deliberate decisions (Becker, 1985; Mincer & Polachek, 1974). This analysis challenges those assumptions. By synthesizing broad demographic workforce metrics (Pew Research Center, 2024), laboratory and field audit experiments (Correll et al., 2007), legal case files (Fuller et al., 2020), and cross-national policy reviews over a 30-year span (Cabello-Hutt, 2020; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020), this narrative qualitative synthesis isolates the corporate structures that systematically incite high-skilled mothers to leave traditional employment to pursue mompreneurship.

The Theoretical Sequence of Maternal Devaluation

The literature shows that the motherhood penalty is not a collection of isolated, biased management decisions. Instead, this penalty represents a cohesive status hierarchy continuously reproduced across community, corporate, and legal settings. Interpreted together, the chosen frameworks form a distinct causal sequence rather than a disconnected list.



Status Characteristics Theory as the Causal Origin

Motherhood functions as a devalued status trait rooted in neighborhood and community social structures before it ever manifests in the office (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Windsong, 2019). Cultural mandates around intensive mothering impose exhausting mental labor that follows women across the corporate threshold (Christopher, 2012). Consequently, employers apply biased cognitive schemas that typecast mothers as less competent and less committed than childless women, regardless of their actual objective productivity metrics (Correll et al., 2007).

Human Capital Theory Re-Framed as Structural Constraint

Classical economic frameworks have historically attributed the maternal wage gap to autonomous, deliberate choices, arguing that women optimize finite energy resources by selecting fewer demanding roles in anticipation of family formation (Becker, 1985; Mincer & Polacheck, 1974). This synthesis challenges that narrative, showing that corporate structures enforce maternal career lapses as adaptations rather than deliberate choices (Cabello-Hutt, 2020).

The Framework of the Job Task Penalty and Blocked Enrichment

The primary operational framework driving this structural disadvantage is the "job task penalty" (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). When mothers seek standard scheduling flexibility or reduced hours to balance logistical caregiving demands, organizations respond by strategically altering their workloads. Rather than mothers pulling back effort, corporate structures systematically strip away complex analytical, interactive, and leadership-oriented responsibilities and redirect them toward routine, predictable tasks (Schulz & Zoch, 2026). This artificial downgrade of workload erodes skills and locks qualified mothers into long-term career stagnation.

Furthermore, this imposed task restraint obstructs the pathways established by work-family enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). While maternal labor builds significant knowledge, skills, and abilities, traditional corporate structures consistently devalue these cross-domain competencies (Cateleijn-Osorno & Hytti, 2025). By structurally blocking these effective pathways, organizations prevent highly skilled mothers from achieving work-family enrichment (Cooklin et al., 2015). This institutional resistance converts what should be a cross-domain social resource into a manufactured maternal wall, forcing women to navigate endemic limitations rather than fostering professional growth.

The Psychological Breaking Point and Strategic Entrepreneurial Exit

When corporate hierarchies systematically compromise these enrichment pathways, they disrupt the core psychological needs outlined by self-determination theory:

- Autonomy is shattered by the deep cultural stigma attached to flexible arrangements, which substitutes at-home monitoring for physical face time (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019).
- Competence is fundamentally disregarded through rigid task downgrading and the imposition of an exhaustive burden of proof regarding professional dedication (Correll et al., 2007).
- Relatedness is actively undermined by pervasive stereotypes that sabotage positive working relationships with managers and peers (Pepping & Maniam, 2020).

Daily motivational strivings trigger positive work behaviors that satisfy basic psychological needs, but this fulfillment loop depends heavily on organizational power (Foulk et al., 2019). Because motherhood status strips women of institutional power, they are systemically blocked from this motivational cycle. This psychological drain chokes off fulfillment within traditional corporate hierarchies, making entrepreneurship a necessary strategic path to reclaim professional well-being.

In environments that routinely disregard their expertise, highly skilled mothers use purposeful avoidance strategies (Dossigner et al., 2019). When internal adaptations are exhausted, they shift to mompreneurship, a deliberate defense against systemic wage penalties and corporate discrimination. Mompreneurship allows women to reclaim unrestricted professional ownership and direct control over their time (Dhaliwal, 2022; Yang et al., 2024).

Ethical Implications and the Demand for Accountability

This multi-level sequence raises profound social and ethical concerns regarding how traditional corporate environments reinforce the maternal wall. Traditional corporate environments profit from a mother's baseline productivity while leveraging her parental status to justify wage depression and career stagnation. By forcing skilled mothers to trade complex assignments for basic schedule control, organizations structurally exploit them, offloading the financial, professional, and personal risks of navigating the labor market onto individual women while absorbing no firm-level liability (Schulz & Zoch, 2026).

Furthermore, this dynamic creates a critical failure of corporate accountability, compounded by corporate wage concealment that obscures widening disparities from public view (Bennedsen et al., 2020). Relying on mompreneurship as the primary escape route limits corporate systems' ability to achieve systemic reform, leaving the collective organizational failure unresolved (Aarseth, 2020).

Ultimately, this analysis shows that mompreneurship is a rational adaptation to systemic exclusion rather than a voluntary lifestyle preference (Pilukienė et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2024). To stop the premature draining of highly qualified mothers from primary labor markets, contemporary legislative and organizational frameworks must shift away from passive accommodation models

and implement targeted, mandated transparency interventions that enforce strict structural accountability (Bennedsen et al., 2020).

About the Author

Tami Davies-Coleman is a doctoral candidate (PhD, ABD) in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies at Marywood University. Professionally, she is a senior lead business management consultant serving the Department of State. Her career includes service to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Office of Native American Programs (ONAP), and local municipalities managing community development programs and housing initiatives in Pennsylvania. She holds a Master of Legal Studies (M.L.S.) in Business Law and Compliance from Texas A&M University School of Law, where she earned advanced graduate certificates in Risk Management, Human Resources, and Real Estate Law, as well as a Master of Psychology (M.Psy.) in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Grand Canyon University. Her academic research utilizes Status Characteristics Theory, Capital Theory, Work-Life Enrichment Theory, and Self-Determination Theory to evaluate institutional dynamics and advocate for framing mothering as a valued, skill-based career track.

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