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Gender Gap in Reported Childcare Preferences among Parents*

Filip Pertold[†] Sofiana Sinani[‡] Michal Šoltés[§]

November, 2023

Abstract

The child penalty explains the majority of gender employment and wage gaps; however, less is known about the factors driving the child penalty itself. In this paper, we study the gender gap in childcare preferences as a potential factor that contributes to the child penalty. We surveyed Czech parents and elicited the minimal compensation they would require to stay home to care for a child. Mothers require less compensation for childcare than fathers. The estimated gender gap in childcare preferences is CZK 2,500 monthly, 7.6% of the median female wage, and cannot be explained by differences in labor market opportunities or prosocial motives to care for a family member. We further document widespread misperception of fathers' preferences, as respondents incorrectly expect fathers to require less to care for a child than to care for an elderly parent.

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1 Introduction

The gender wage and employment gaps following the birth of a first child, usually referred to as the child penalty, have been extensively documented worldwide (Ejrnæs and Kunze, 2013; Angelov et al., 2016; Wilner, 2016; Blau and Kahn, 2017; Adda et al., 2017; Chung et al., 2017; Goldin and Mitchell, 2017; Lundborg et al., 2017; Kleven et al., 2019a,b, 2022). To explain the gap, scholars have proposed several potential mechanisms, most of which relate to mothers' comparative advantage in home production, established gender norms and cultural expectations (Antecol, 2000; Fernandez, 2007; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Grewenig et al., 2020), underestimation of the child penalty by mothers (Kuziemko et al., 2018), and gender differences in childcare preferences (for a more detailed discussion of possible mechanisms of the child penalty see, for example, Andresen and Nix, 2022).

This paper focuses on the gender gap in childcare preferences and presents a novel measure of the gender gap in parents' childcare preferences using survey questions. To measure childcare preferences, we elicit respondents' minimal required compensation to stay home to care for a child and what they would require to stay home to care for an elderly parent. The latter question allows us to isolate childcare preferences from other factors that influence minimal required compensation, such as labor market opportunities, household wealth, productivity in home production, and prosocial preferences. Our measure rests on the assumption that people are willing to accept lower compensation for work or activity they find more pleasant and need to be compensated more for what they may perceive as less pleasant work. Therefore, respondents who find providing childcare enjoyable (have positive childcare preferences) require less compensation to stay home to care for a child.

We implemented our survey with Czech parents of young children. We asked respondents to state the minimal monthly compensation they would require in two hypothetical scenarios: i) to stay home to care for a 3-year-old child and ii) to stay home to care for their elderly parent who requires daily assistance. In both scenarios, the time horizon is limited to 6 months.

We first define compensating differential as the difference in compensation required to care for an elderly parent versus to care for a child. Mothers, on average, asked for CZK 2,090 (EUR 85) per month less to stay home to care for a child than to stay home to care for an orderly parent. The mothers' compensating differential is statistically and economically significant, corresponding to 6.5% of the median female wage.² In contrast, fathers, on average, do not differentiate between staying home to care for a child and an

¹Kleven et al. (2021); Andresen and Nix (2022); Rosenbaum (2021) show that biological differences are not primary drivers of the child penalty.

²Median female wage in 2021 Q1 when the data collection was conducted was CZK 32,100.

elderly parent. The compensation fathers would require in both scenarios is statistically indistinguishable.

To estimate the gender gap in childcare preferences, we run a series of regressions with the compensation required to stay home as the outcome variable, controlling for the compensation needed to care for a parent. The variable of interest is a dummy variable, which equals 1 for fathers. Our estimates of the gender gap in childcare preference range around CZK 2,500 (EUR 100) per month, suggesting that fathers would need to be compensated more to care for their children than mothers. The effect is unlikely to be explained by gender differences in labor market opportunities or prosocial motives to care for a family member. The effect accounts for 7.6% of the median female wage and remains stable across various specifications.

We extended the survey by eliciting respondents' beliefs about the required compensation of others. All respondents were asked what compensation they think mothers and fathers needed to stay home to care for a child, or for an elderly parent All respondents - mothers and fathers - hold relatively accurate beliefs about mothers' compensating differential, correctly expecting an amount between CZK 2,000 and CZK 3,000 more to care for an elderly parent. In contrast, respondents overestimate fathers' compensating differential, with mothers misperceiving fathers' preferences by a more considerable margin. While fathers' compensating differential is around CZK 500 and statistically indistinguishable from zero, mothers expect CZK 2,300.

Our results show a substantial gender gap in childcare preferences in Czechia, a country with a strong gender norm in childcare provision. In 98% of cases, it is a mother who takes parental leave, which often lasts for up to three years (Grossmann et al., 2023). Family policies further strengthen the gender gap in childcare. The prevailing gender norms and family policies are likely relevant to our results in at least two aspects. First, policies such as parental leave and parental allowance have norm-setting power, as monthly installments of parental allowance and the maximum length of parental leave signal how much society values childcare and what the expected duration of care for a child is. Second, given the different levels of childcare experienced by mothers and fathers, especially those of young children, the reported required compensation may reflect other mother-father differences, such as fathers' lack of experience with childcare.

Our results contribute to the discussion on mechanisms driving the child penalty by documenting the gender gap in childcare preferences among parents. We also add to the recent literature on the effects of family policies (such as earmarked parental leave) that aim to reduce gender inequalities in childcare and employment. Documented weaker childcare preferences of fathers are consistent with rather limited long-term effects of such policies (Ekberg et al., 2013; Müller et al., 2018) and with families forgoing financial

benefits to keep fathers at work (Jørgensen and Søgaard, 2021). Furthermore, the gender gap in childcare is an important input for welfare analysis of policies promoting fathers' parental leave (Jørgensen and Søgaard, 2021).

Finally, widespread misperception of fathers' childcare preferences may lead to a demand for suboptimal family policies. We thus add to the growing literature studying the impact of beliefs and (mis)perception of facts on public demand for policies. For example, Settele (2022) shows how beliefs about the size of the gender wage gap shape the demand for policies aimed at mitigating it, Alesina et al. (2018) show how beliefs about intergenerational mobility affect support for redistribution policies, and Haaland and Roth (2023) show the effect of beliefs about racial discrimination on support for pro-Black policies.

2 Roadmap

To measure childcare preferences, we propose a survey that elicits a respondent's minimal compensation required to stay home to care for a child. The amount is influenced by other factors, such as general preferences to stay home, labor market opportunities, comparative advantage in home production, and pro-social motives to provide care to a family member. Therefore, to isolate childcare preferences from other relevant factors, we propose a control hypothetical situation in which respondents need to stay home to care for an elderly parent. This allows us to control for the contaminating factors that may influence both decisions. To interpret the measurement, we argue that lower required compensation to stay home to care for a child controlling for the compensation needed to care for an elderly parent implies stronger childcare preferences. The argument rests on the assumption that the compensation required for more pleasant activities is lower than for unpleasant ones.

To measure parents' childcare preferences in a survey, we asked respondents to indicate the minimum monthly compensation required in two hypothetical scenarios: i) to stay home to care for their 3-year-old child and ii) to stay home to provide care to their elderly parent who requires daily assistance. In both scenarios, the period in question is limited to 6 months.³ We implemented the survey online through a Czech private company, Behavio, that maintains a panel of regular respondents. Data were collected in two waves in December 2021 and May 2022. We sampled only parents with at least one child younger than 8 in December 2021. The median respondent has two children, and the median age of children is 49 months. Our primary sample comprises 688 respondents who finished both waves and passed attention checks.⁴

³The English version of the survey questions is presented in the appendix.

⁴When possible, we replicated the main exercises with all respondents in the appendix. The results

Apart from standard demographic characteristics including age, gender, income, number and age of children, and attitude towards child care,⁵ we further collected respondents' perceptions of the child penalty using a hypothetical comparison of the hourly wage for a male colleague, a female colleague, and a female colleague after she returned from parental leave. In the second wave, we elicited respondent's perceptions about the compensation other parents in the sample would require for both scenarios. The English translation of the key questions in the survey is in the appendix.

Fathers in our sample tend to be older, have more children, and earn a higher income. Many of the mothers were surveyed during parental leave and did not report income. See the descriptive statistics in Table 1 in the appendix.

3 Results

We first show that our measure is correlated with individual beliefs about childcare. The compensation required to care for a child is negatively correlated with beliefs that children suffer when their mothers work. Respondents who believe that children suffer when mothers work require less compensation to stay home to care for their children. The effect is more substantial for younger children. The results are presented in Table 2 in the appendix.

3.1 Gender Gap in Childcare Preferences

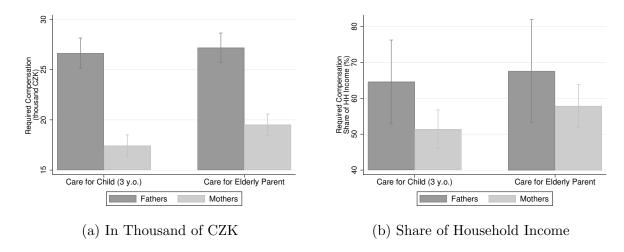
On average, mothers mothers say that they would require at least CZK 17,428 (EUR 720) per month to stay home to care for their child. Interestingly, the required compensation corresponds to 175% of the average monthly installments of parental allowance in the Czech Republic (Grossmann et al., 2023). To care for a parent, mothers asked for CZK 19,519 (EUR 810) monthly. The difference of CZK 2,091 is statistically significant (p-value = 0.000) and corresponds to 6.5% of the median female wage in the 2021 Q4 when the data were collected.

In absolute values, fathers require higher compensation than mothers in both scenarios but they do not distinguish between the two scenarios. To stay home to care for their child, fathers require at least CZK 26,643 (EUR 1,090), while caring for a parent requires CZK 27,175 (EUR 1,115). The difference of just CZK 532 (EUR 20) is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.193). Figure 1a displays the average required compensations for

remained unchanged.

⁵Whether and to what extent respondents agree with a battery of statements about notions such as that children suffer if a mother works or whether spending time with father, grandparents, and in childcare institutions are stimulating for children. For the complete list of statements, see the appendix.

Figure 1: Required Compensation to Care for a Family Member



Notes: The figure shows average fathers' and mothers' minimum required monthly compensation to stay home to care for their child and their elderly parent. The left panel shows the required compensation in thousands of Czech Koruna. The right panel represents the same amounts as a share of net household income.

both mothers and fathers in both scenarios in absolute values, and figure 1b shows the same amount as a share of net household income.⁶

To estimate the gender gap in childcare preferences, we run a series of regressions with the required compensation to stay home to care for a child as the outcome variable. In the regressions, we gradually add control variables. The parameter of our interest is a dummy variable that equals 1 for fathers and captures how much more (in CZK) fathers require in compensation than mothers to stay home to care for their child. We interpret this coefficient as the gender gap in childcare preferences.

Figure 2 plots the coefficients of the gender gap in childcare preferences across different specifications and shows that mothers have stronger childcare preferences than fathers. The first column shows an unconditional difference in required compensation for staying home to care for a child, amounting to CZK 9,215 (EUR 370). After accounting for the required amount to stay home to care for a parent and other control variables, the difference falls to CZK 2,500 (EUR 100), amounting to 7.6% of the median female average wage.

In the final specification, we control for various individual and household characteristics including income, educational attainment, the number of children in a household, respondents' age, availability of institutional child care, and perception of the child penalty. Furthermore, we control for *Childcare index*, a principal component of often-used mea-

 $^{^6}$ We do not report required compensation per individual income because many mothers were on parental leave and did not report income.

sures to capture respondents' beliefs regarding whether children suffer when mothers work and whether time spent with fathers, grandparents, and in institutional care is stimulating for children. The gender gap in childcare preferences thus comes from different variations than from gender differences in beliefs about what is stimulating for children and whether mothers of young children should work or not. Table 3 in the appendix shows the full results.

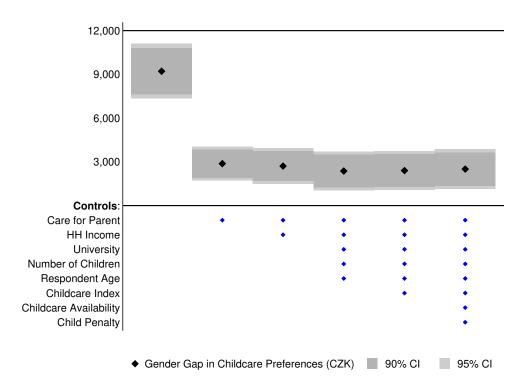


Figure 2: Gender Gap in Childcare Preferences

Notes: This figure represents the estimated coefficients of the gender gap in childcare preferences, i.e., how much more fathers require to stay home to care for a child than mothers. The upper panel shows how much fathers require more to stay home with their child in various specifications. The lower panel describes control variables in the specifications. Variables *Home w/ Parent* represents the required compensation to stay home to care for an elderly parent. *Childcare Index* is a principal component of respondents' beliefs about whether children suffer when mothers work, and whether time spent with fathers, grandparents, and in institutional care is stimulating for children. *Childcare Availability* captures the availability of institutional childcare in the neighborhood. *Child Penalty* corresponds to the perceived child penalty we elicited in the survey.

3.2 Perceptions of the Compensation Required by Others

We next explore the differences in respondent's perceptions of the different compensation required by other mothers and fathers for each scenario. We then compare the average perceived differences in compensation with the actual differences reported by mothers and fathers in the survey.

Figure 3a shows that both mothers and fathers overestimate the compensating differential of fathers. While the average father's compensating differential is CZK 532, respondents expect significantly more. Specifically, fathers expected CZK 1,788 (p-value = 0.019), and mothers expected CZK 2,376 (p-value = 0.003). Figure 3b replicates the calculation for mothers, and shows that respondents generally hold more accurate beliefs about mothers' compensating differential. In particular, fathers estimated the mothers' compensating differential to be CZK 2,200, which is statistically indistinguishable from the actual CZK 2,091 (p-value = 0.777). Mothers expect the compensating differential of other mothers at CZK 3,133, which is marginally statistically different from the reported compensating differential (p-value 0.061). In short, respondents hold fairly accurate beliefs about mothers but systematically overestimate the compensating differential of fathers.

Fathers' Perception
Mothers' Perception
Mothers' Perception
Fathers' Compensating Differential (CZK 532)

(a) Fathers' Compensating Differential

Figure 3: Perceptions of Compensating Differential

Notes: This figure shows actual and reported compensating differential by parents and the perception of other respondents. The left panel shows that the fathers' compensating differential is CZK 532, while others perceive it as larger, especially mothers. The right panel shows that mothers' compensating differential is CZK 2,091, and others perceive it accurately.

4 Concluding Remarks

We show that Czech mothers in our study generally have mothers have stronger childcare preferences than fathers. The gender gap in childcare preferences reaches CZK 2,500, 7.6% of the median female wage. The difference is unlikely to be explained by different labor market opportunities, home production, or prosocial motives to care for a family

member. The gender gap in childcare preferences can contribute to the child penalty and has and has clear implications for family policies aimed to reduce gender inequality in childcare, such as earmarked parental leave policies.

Furthermore, our results indicate widespread misperception of the gender differences in childcare preferences. If that was a general pattern, the divergence between perceived and actual fathers' preferences may lead to a demand for suboptimal policies.

The gender gap in childcare preferences may reflect existing family policies and strong gender norms. Our findings describe the situation in Czechia, which has strong gender norms related to childcare and generous family policies, including extended job protection up to the child's third birthday, and both maternal and paternal family allowances. To ensure generalizability of the gender gap in childcare preferences, further research in settings with varying family policies and gender norms is necessary.

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5 Appendix

5.1 Survey and Data

Staying home to care for their child Imagine that either you or your partner have already exhausted the parental allowance, and now you are considering staying at home with your child for another six months. How much money would **you** need to receive monthly in order to do that? Please provide the <u>lowest amount</u> for which you would be willing to stay at home to care for your child, on a scale from CZK 0 to CZK 70,000 (ca EUR 3,000).

Staying home to care for their parent Imagine that you are considering taking care of your parent at home for six months, as they require care. How much money would you need to receive monthly in order to do that? Please provide the <u>lowest amount</u> for which you would be willing to stay at home to care for your parent, on a scale from CZK 0 to CZK 70,000 (ca EUR 3,000).

Perception staying home with child - mothers (fathers) What amount would you estimate that mothers (fathers) on average state that they would need to receive monthly in order to stay at home to care for their child under the age of 4 for six months? Please provide your estimate.

Perception staying home with parent - mothers (fathers) What amount would you estimate that mothers (fathers) on average state that they would need to receive monthly in order to stay at home to care for their elderly parent who require care? Please provide your estimate.

Childcare index - a battery of questions On a 4-level scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, rate the degree to which you dis/agree with the following statements:

- A working mother can create the same warm relationship and sense of security for her child as a mother who is not employed.
- Preschool children (3-6 years old) suffer if their mother is employed.
- Preschool children (1-3 years) suffer if their mother is employed.
- Fathers are able to take care of their preschool children (3-6 years) as well as mothers.
- Time spent with the father is stimulating for the child.
- Time spent with grandparents is stimulating for the child.
- Time spent in kindergarten (playgroup) is stimulating for the child.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Fathers	Mothers	t-test (p-value)					
Age (years)	40.8	34.8	0.000					
Educational Attainment (%)								
Elementary school	1.72	3.42						
Highschool w/o GE	13.24	14.21						
Highschool w/ GE	45.10	41.58						
University	39.95	40.79						
Number of Children	1.92	1.73	0.000					
Income (CZK)								
All	37,019	13,914	0.000					
Income > 0	38,746	$25,\!433$	0.000					
N	359	329						

5.2 Additional Results

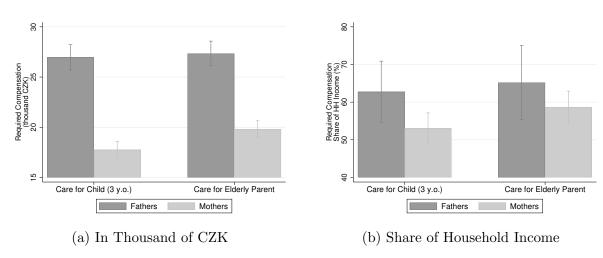
Table 2: Negative Correlation Between the Amount Required to Care for Child and Beliefs that Children Suffer

	(1)	(2)
	Care for Child	Care for Child
Male	9636.9***	9413.3***
	(968.0)	(970.4)
[= 1] Child (1-3 y.o.) suffers if mother works	-2197.9**	
	(1095.2)	
[= 1] Child (3-6 y.o.) suffers if mother works		-1186.4
		(1066.8)
Constant	18776.8***	17520.7***
	(1030.1)	(764.0)
N	675	670

Standard errors in parentheses

^{*} p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Figure 4: Required Compensation to Care for a Family Member (All Respondents)



Notes: This figure replicates Figure 1 on a sample of all respondents (N=1,098), including those who participated only in the first wave and those who failed either of the attention tests. The left panel shows mothers' and fathers' required compensation to stay home to care for their child and their parent in thousands of Czech Koruna. The right panel represents the same amount as a share of household net income.

Table 3: Gender Gap in Childcare Preferences

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Care for Child	Care for Child	Care for Child		Care for Child	Care for Child
Male	9214.9***	2878.3***	2712.2***	2370.4***	2400.0***	2504.5***
	(958.9)	(591.5)	(621.4)	(679.3)	(680.7)	(690.7)
Care for Parent		0.828***	0.823***	0.824^{***}	0.825^{***}	0.824***
		(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)
HH Income (log)			1389.9**	1297.7**	1237.2**	1224.6**
			(569.6)	(582.2)	(588.0)	(588.9)
University				238.1	200.0	185.8
				(611.8)	(614.1)	(621.2)
Number of Children				247.6	264.8	240.5
				(417.4)	(418.2)	(421.6)
Respondent Age				51.26	52.93	55.96
				(46.59)	(46.59)	(46.67)
Childcare Index					-172.4	-180.7
					(231.0)	(232.2)
Childcare Available (Strong. agree)						1651.5
						(1208.5)
Childcare Available (Rather agree)						2033.9*
						(1182.3)
Childcare Available (Rather disagree)						1361.2
						(1230.3)
Childcare Available (Strong. disagree)						2141.9*
CULLE						(1235.0)
Child Penalty						-4.64
Constant	17400 C***	1070 9**	19950 0**	1.4722 0**	1.4901 5**	(10.8)
Constant	17428.6***	1272.3**	-13358.0**	-14733.8**	-14201.5**	-15737.6**
N	(692.7)	(606.8)	(5976.1)	(6164.2)	(6207.5)	(6297.1)
	688	688	643	643	643	643

Standard errors in parentheses

^{*} p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

6 Abstrakt

Tzv. child penalty, tedy pokles zaměstnanosti matek po narození prvního dítěte, vysvětluje většinu rozdílů v zaměstnanosti a mzdách mezi muži a ženami. Výrazně méně víme o faktorech, které ovlivňují samotnou child penalty. V této práci studujeme rozdíl mezi pohlavími v preferencích ohledně péče o dítě jako potenciální faktor přispívající k tzv. child penalty. Provedli jsme průzkum mezi českými rodiči a zjistili jejich minimální požadavek na odměnu za péči o dítě doma. Matky vyžadují nižší odměnu za péči o dítě než otcové. Odhadovaný rozdíl mezi pohlavími v preferencích ohledně péče o dítě činí 2 500 Kč měsíčně, což představuje 7,6% mediánové mzdy žen. Rozdíl nelze vysvětlit rozdíly v možnostech na trhu práce nebo prosociálními motivy péče o členy rodiny. Dále dokumentujeme rozšířené zkreslení preferencí otců, protože respondenti nesprávně očekávají, že otcové budou vyžadovat menší kompenzaci při péči o dítě než při péči o staršího rodiče.

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