



The Unspoken Bias That Childless Women Face In The Workplace

The Unspoken Bias That Childless Women Face In The Workplace is led and authored by Tutum Global Founder Jobi Tyson. For the past four years, Tutum Global has conducted targeted research that focuses on the effects of female childlessness and medical breakthroughs on causes and links to infertility.

Tutum Global is a social enterprise that caters to the mental wellness of involuntary childless women by changing the way female childlessness is presented, analyzed, and discussed.

In a recent research survey, we explored the nuances of workplace dynamics on how childless women are impacted in the workplace. The research seeks to highlight the experiences of involuntary childless women, to eliminate implicit bias, and to reduce the stigmatization and psychological impacts on childless employees in the workplace.

In attempts to increase our understanding of emotional and often hidden experiences in the workplace, Tutum Global analyzed a study group of fifty intergenerational involuntarily childless women, spanning six countries.

The main purpose of the research survey was hence to do a global sociocultural exploratory investigation into experiences of involuntary childlessness at work.

We will explore what they value most in an inclusive culture (defined as “embracing all people, making all people feel valued and feel they belong in their organization”) and how inclusion may be impacted in the future.

Our key findings include:



Tutum Global's mission is to address the critical issues required to eradicate stigmas that will lead to significant changes in the way female childlessness is presented, analyzed, and discussed. This powerful research identifies specific opportunities to challenge traditional processes and foster an intentional approach to inclusion that can benefit childless employees and organizations now and for generations to come.

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Introduction

As the evolving workforce continues to shape the future of inclusion, the need for organizations to transform the framework of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging for childless employees is severely underrepresented.

Approximately one in five women will remain childless, and for ninety percent of them, it is not by choice.

Yet, from the survey results, we discovered that one of the most overlooked diversity and inclusion issues in the workplace is the equal treatment of women without children.

Many organizations are diligently attempting to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion into their culture through training but tend to exclude childless employees as part of this framework since there often remains a disconnect between the expectations of childless employees and equity in organizations.

Given the significant amount of attention and efforts underway, why are organizations still disregarding their childless employees from the framework of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging?

To answer this, we will first explore the psychological impacts on being childless in the workplace. Second, we will discuss work-life balance and workplace equity for childless women. Finally, we will determine what organizations can do to improve the everyday experiences of their childless employees and create a culture of inclusion and belonging now and in the future.

This study contributes to understanding this growing population group by highlighting that while female childlessness is increasingly normalizing, it is still not completely acknowledged in diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.



The psychological impacts on childless women in the workplace

Cultivating and showcasing an unbiased culture is an essential component that can result in increased morale, productivity, and mental wellness.

Every year, many organizations allocate time, resources, and budgets towards efforts to foster an inclusive culture — and interest is still increasing. In a recent study, Tutum Global found that a vast majority of respondents rated workplace inclusion and equity as an important issue for mental wellness. Ninety-eight percent have experienced psychological impacts in the workplace ranging from feeling distressed, unworthy, and isolated to undervalued. What accounts for this finding? One reason may lie in the nuanced experiences that involuntary childless female employees face during a typical workday. For example, exclusion was a common theme among respondents. According to a recent survey by ResuMeLab¹, nearly two-thirds of employees — of which 80% were parents —believed that people with children are treated better in the workplace.

Given that today's companies and employees indicate that they view inclusion as a critical component of organizational culture, could inclusion or lack thereof specifically impact mental health?

Based on the results of our recent survey of fifty involuntarily childless female employees from a range of organizations and industries across the globe, the results of our survey suggest the answer is a resounding yes. When asked whether they experienced inclusiveness in the workplace, seventy percent of the respondents reported no.

These findings may help explain some of the psychological effects on childless women in the 'mother-centric' focus of today's society and workforce. An inclusive culture may be able to help mitigate some of these trends. The majority of respondents stated that everyone — their co-workers, themselves, their direct manager, and senior leadership — all have a role to play in the unspoken bias that childless women face in the workplace.

Recent research has explored managing bias of childless female employees can spur a significant change in the relationship between diversity practices and engagement. Patriarchy plays an important role in how childless employees are perceived by leadership, society, and culture. Fostering equity often starts with the tone at the top.



Work-life balance and workplace equity



Work-life balance represents a vital part of individuals' wellbeing and is a critical procedural priority at companies. Yet a substantial gap exists in the understanding of employees' ability to use work-life provisions, particularly employees without children.

"Everyone needs a work-life balance, even if their "life" doesn't align with your expectations of a life."

While organizations focus on attention to issues related to the intersection of parenthood status and work-life, there is still a segment of this intersection that is fairly ignored – the inclusion of work-life balance and female childlessness.

We address the gaps by exploring the perceived worthiness of childless employees around the globe to utilize work-life balance. From our previous research, we know that a mere 21% of involuntary childless women feel an overall sense of belonging. When implicit bias bleeds into the workforce, it means a diminished level of equity for this specific group — often without employers even realizing it. The best way to end implicit biases is for employers to recognize these biases and educate themselves.

Our survey underlines the continuing disconnect between the expectations of childless employees and bias in organizations. When we asked respondents what have they ever experienced exclusion from work-life balance due to being women who do not live within a family structure that includes children, eighty-four percent reported that their female colleagues who were parents received preferential treatment.

The top three aspects cited were "A culture where I am overlooked from days off and holidays" (92%), "Feeling guilty for requesting time off," (75%), "Covering substantial amounts of extra workload for maternity leave" (86%). These were all rooted in lived experiences. Conversely, respondents indicated they are not looking for work environments where they are disregarded from work-life balance.

When we asked, "Have you ever experienced exclusion from work-life balance for not having children?" Over 90% of respondents said yes...



While employers increasingly offer work-life balance policies such as paid leave or the right to request flexible working², these work-life balance for all employees, and policy support are primarily designed to help parents (and in limited measure, caregivers) balance work and family requirements³. These policies differ from work-life balance policies not explicitly related to care, which support the balance of paid work and private life more broadly⁴.

As a result, there is a discrepancy between the concept of work-life balance, and recognition of the need for work-life balance in practice. This discrepancy is also evident in the uptake of work-life arrangements, with parents more likely than employees without children to make use of work-life benefits^{5 & 6} even though employees with and without care responsibilities can benefit from such policies⁷.

Involuntarily childless women are looking for employers to go beyond only addressing how workplace equity looks to meaningfully addressing how workplace equity feels.

"Don't be afraid to speak up to your manager if your workload is suddenly increased due to a "working mother" not pulling her weight but somehow your time is less valuable."

What is most important in an inclusive culture? Across many generations, today's workforce is seeking a culture of:



Where they can feel comfortable being themselves, leveraging their unique strengths, and sharing their perspectives. Many look for their co-workers and leaders to do the same.



Choosing where and when their work gets done and having flexibility with other aspects of their lives.



Making an impact and understanding how their work fits into the big picture.

Stereotypical assumptions of female employees without children help to maintain mother-focused work-life balance practices. In many contexts, individuals without children are viewed as 'childless', suggesting an absence of something that is naturally expected, thereby going against patriarchal norms of womanhood⁸ and sociocultural norms of equating motherhood to womanhood.

These stereotypes matter for perceptions of employees with and without childcare responsibilities. This term reflects the push-back from childless employees who feel they are admonished and mistreated in the workplace for not having children, for example, insensitive comments from employees and/or employers. In this context, experimental insight into the perceived worthiness of employees without children to make use of organizational work-life benefits are merited to raise awareness to an under-researched aspect of inequity in the workplace, namely the varying consequences women with and without children face.

But childless employees are seeking inclusiveness and fair treatment. When asked to share comments from employees and/or employers, many revealed that their daily experiences, interactions, and behaviors at the workplace were discriminatory and insensitive.

Our survey respondents have told us that inclusion is an important factor in determining whether they will stay or leave an organization. Many do not want to just participate in a project, event, or activity yet feel excluded. Instead, they believe that employers must readjust how they approach inclusion as it pertains to childless employees to truly unleash the power of belonging.

When we asked women who were childless not by choice, "Please share insensitive comments from employees and/or employers." This is what half of them shared.

"Once I said to a colleague that I'm tired and they said imagine if you had children."	"You need children."	"You don't understand, you don't have children"	"This job is better for someone with children"	"You don't need to have that day off, you don't have kids."
"It's easy to try to talk about gratitude and staying positive when your commitments are minimal."	"I don't have experience in parenting and mother crafting working as a midwife"	"You don't know love until you have a child."	"You need to work more as X is stressed due to their children so you need to do more to help them."	"When are you due?"
"When my cat was very ill I had to take two days off to look after him. When I told my boss she said "It would have been cheaper to get a pet sitter!"	"Only mums need flexible working arrangements."	"You can't have school holidays off."	"Your going to have kids one day so you can't do this job."	"Why don't you have kids need children?"
"You don't need to take during summer break."	"You can cover X's duty since you don't have to rush home, right."	"Why don't you just adopt?"	"You're so lucky you don't have kids."	"So and so really needs this promotion and raise since she's a mother."
"You wasted your life not having children."	"As a therapist, I have been asked how I can help parents if I do not have kids."	"You can stay late, you don't have a family to get home to."	"Why are doing xxx when you don't have children?"	"After expressing my worries when going through IVF, I was told I'll be alright since I had disposable income."

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents said that they have been mistreated or discriminated against in the workplace as a childless employee. The majority of respondents stated that they do not want inclusion to be solely a practical initiative or afterthought. Rather, inclusion should be a central aspect of their experience and felt throughout everyday treatment, traits, and behaviors.

Recommendations: managing bias of childless employees

From our survey, the responses indicated that an inclusive work environment is both about how it **looks** and how it **feels**. Involuntarily childless women in today's workforce are seeking organizations where inclusion is rooted in their daily experiences. Additionally, they do not view the framework of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging as the only way to foster an inclusive culture. They want to see their leaders and peers demonstrate inclusion in their behaviors. So how can organizations be more responsive to the needs of childless female employees and manage bias in impactful and meaningful ways?

Recommendations for organizations:

For inclusion to advance in an organization, it is essential that performance and attendance must not be influenced by family status.

Involuntarily childless women are often looking for organizations to go beyond positioning inclusion such as implementing a childless policy within the workplace, and ongoing education and training sessions for coworkers.

Many in today's workforce have indicated that they are prioritizing the experiential aspects of an inclusive culture, yet involuntarily childless women urge employers to be aware that bias exists to address the inequality.

Rules should be the same for all employees regardless of their child/childless state.

Equal fair treatment. People should be able to work required hours and holidays, as their employment contracts do not have unspoken situations where parents are prioritized.

Being a female ally is supporting all women, not just mothers. Don't assume all women are mothers. Understand what all women employees need not just what mothers need.

All staff have equal rights to work life balance and leave requests. How people use their time outside of work is their business alone.

Don't mix professional and private life. If you expect less from parents, because they are parents and more childless people, you are not treating everyone equally.

Inclusive language in the policies might help such as such as staff who need time to care for family and friends.

Avoiding making assumptions is helpful, as is recognizing that not all people want or can have children.

Respect the boundaries of all employees, regardless of parental status. Many childless people are caring for elderly parents in need of support or are struggling with mental health issues that require time and effort to address.

Considering that regardless of whether an employee has children, we all deserve the same flexibility in the workplace regarding hours worked, time off, and leaves.

It doesn't have to be a battle between parents and the childless. The burden is really on employers to respect all their employees and implement policies that benefit us all. Paid family and medical leave is a huge, important benefit for society at large.

Awareness raising, for it to be a standard part of the gender policies and networks in the workplace along with an understanding of what intersectionality means.

Benefits shouldn't solely focus on infertility and parental leave. Women have health needs beyond breeding such as menopause treatments, dental work, and time off for women who have unsuccessful IVF treatments.

These recommendations are a starting point for organizations to explore and reevaluate how managing biases against female childless employees have been traditionally approached. As the workforce continues to evolve, now is the time for organizations to embrace change by embedding inclusion throughout the daily experiences of childless women. Fostering an inclusive culture will become both about how inclusion looks as well as how inclusion makes childless employees feel.

Recommendations: fostering workplace belonging and equity

As the voices of childless women regarding societal stigmas are growing louder, this survey explored ways they can influence the culture at work and make meaningful change.

From our survey, the respondents suggested how companies can improve in diversity, inclusion, and equity of childless female employees.

Follow the discrimination laws and don't make decisions based on parental status.

Allow childless workers to transfer the benefits for dependents and costs from childcare to elder care.

Offer the same kind of leave to childless/childfree people who are pet owners.

Ask staff anonymously: How can we support those of you who are childfree?

Offer childless employees the option to work from home on "bring your kids to work" days.

Provide family leave for women and men who have lost a child, without the stigma of mental or physical health issues.

Offer health insurance with infertility treatments included.

Be more consistent across the board and appreciate that those without children also have responsibilities outside of the workplace.

Offer fertility coverage, surgery coverage, and coverage for other therapies for childless women.

Don't force or expect childless female employees to plan or attend office baby showers if they are uncomfortable.

Make sure that policies are employee-friendly, not family-friendly.

Recognize that people without kids are also part of diversity in the workplace.

Conclusion

Despite extensive research on equity, inclusion, still relatively little is known about the inclusivity of women without children. With this study, we attempted to further a broader understanding of the bias by investigating perceptions of worthiness and equal treatment of childless female employees.

We further studied the consequences and psychological impact that childless women face in the workplace, contributing to our understanding of the lived experience of being a childless woman in contemporary society. Importantly, lived experiences of childless women revealed in this research of feeling undervalued, distressed, unworthy, and isolated, demonstrate that misconceptions and negative stereotypes about childlessness continue to pervade.

Childlessness is a growing phenomenon around the world. Despite this, being a childless woman continues to be a minority and marginalized social position. Importantly, this research has raised questions regarding the extent to which childlessness is significant to childless women in and of itself, or whether the personal significance of childlessness is somewhat attributable to living as a childless woman in a society characterized by pronatalist ideology. Living in a pronatalist society renders childless women unnatural; however, this notion has been challenged by the counter-discourse presented by women in this study, affirming the naturalness of their childlessness.

Reframing childlessness as a natural and familiar way of being may offer a new and alternative discourse for childless women. The strengths and limitations of this study are also important to consider.

A major strength of this research is that it was largely guided by the respondents, privileging the voices and experiences of the women, and providing a strength of the research, by allowing validation and exploration of the findings, with the women themselves. Additionally, respondents in this research were not asked to explain why they were involuntary childless. This presents another strength, as it offered the women a space and platform to express their voices and experiences, without having to explain or justify their childless status. Despite these strengths, a limitation of the research is the small sample size, consisting of fifty women. However, this was not considered to be problematic; small sample sizes are common in phenomenological inquiry.

The results revealed a significant difference in the ranking of precedence based on parental status. Respondents attributed greater priority to female employees with children than childless women. They expect inclusive cultures where they can be themselves, have flexibility, and engage in purposeful work. To be viewed as an employer of choice, companies should take intentional action to transform the framework of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and childlessness is a vital part of this agenda.

Meet the author



Jobi Tyson, MBA

Founder

Tutum Global

Jobi Tyson is a wellness practitioner certified in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and a sociocultural researcher focused on the impact of women's reproductive health, female childlessness, and infertility trauma. She is a leading voice on female childlessness derived from her personal experience of unexplained infertility, in which she ultimately researched the root causes of her infertility being endometriosis and adenomyosis in which she utilized CBT to find coping strategies.

Jobi has led and executed strategic oversight and direction with top research institutions, organizations, and corporations on social stigmatization, marginalized segments, women's health, and medical definitions. In addition to research, she is an award-winning marketer and brand strategist with over 20 years of experience, author, elder advocate, content creator, and master storyteller known for her dedication to bringing heart and levity to difficult and uncomfortable conversations and taboo subjects.

Additional information

About Tutum Global

Tutum Global is a wellness and research social enterprise founded by Jobi Tyson to help involuntarily childless women improve their well-being as part of an effort to break stigmas of female childlessness and womanhood.

Tutum Global brings a commitment to change the way female childlessness is presented, analyzed, and discussed. To learn more about Tutum Global and to find out ways your organization can get involved, please visit www.TutumGlobal.com.

Data & Survey Methodology

Phenomenological research can be understood as the exploration of lived experience. Essentially, the notion of 'lived experience' refers to our everyday world and experiences; our daily interactions and experiences that we encounter naturally and pre-reflectively; concerned with exploring lived experiences, to create meaning and achieving understanding.

The survey gathered online responses March 25 –April 10, 2022, from fifty involuntarily childless women spanning six countries – United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, and New Zealand. The online questionnaire measured demographic subgroups upfront to ensure a significant sample size for statistical validity.

Definitions

- Involuntarily childless: Refer to those women who have never had, and currently do not have, any biologically or socially related children (such as stepchildren or adopted children) either not by choice or circumstantial, and thus have never assumed the role or identity of a mother.
- Inclusive: Embracing all people; making all people feel valued and they belong in their organization.
- Work-life balance: How individuals combine paid work and commitments outside of work.

Contact Us

To discuss any of the ideas presented here or workplace trainings, please send an email to: info@tutumglobal.com

Endnotes

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