

Obstacles that Expecting Women Face When They Return to Workplace

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One of the most influential judgements given by Supreme Court this year was the extension of paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks which now places India easily in the league of all the wealthy western countries. This decision apart from proving beneficial to the mother and child, it will also benefit the businesses economically as chances of women returning to their jobs are very high saving them from the cost incurred and the time wasted in hiring temporary replacements and holding the recruitment exercise all over again. This even impacts the productivity per employee as the new worker requires time to learn the new job skills. But this has another aspect too which the women have been facing from time to time. Where on one hand, we are celebrating India's progressive nature in this regard, on the other hand we come across at least one in 7 women who have been facing or have faced post maternity leave discrimination at work place.

Around 50,000 women join back their workplace each year and their joining is definitely not a pleasant experience as far as their study report results are shown. A recent survey report shows that around 7% women are pressurized to quit their jobs after returning from their maternity leave while one in 20 women have been made to join at a very low package whereas this statistic is poorer in India being one in every 12. Another survey "Listening to Mothers" taken in 2013 by Childbirth Connection in the US analyzed the experiences of pregnant women at their respective organizations and followed by another survey of the same group – women ages 18 to 45 who gave birth to single babies in U.S. The findings of the study were as interesting:

- **First, holding a job for most of the pregnant women is the new normal**, 61% of survey respondents reported working for someone else or being self-employed during pregnancy.
- **Second, women just need minor adjustments and a little support on the job during their pregnancy.** 71% of survey respondents reported that they needed more frequent breaks at work when they became pregnant.
- **Third and the most important one being that new moms report discrimination and lost pay, hours, promotions and responsibilities upon returning to work.** It was found that more than one in every four surveyed women reported experiencing bias from their employers due to perceptions of "low productivity, lost focus and commitment towards their job".
- **Breastfeeding remains a significant challenge for new moms with jobs.** A majority of women (58 percent) who were employed at the time of the follow-up survey reported that breastfeeding along with their paid was a major challenge. However, they believed that if the employer provides them crèche and day-care facility, this challenge could be easily overcome.

The discrimination does not end here. The truth is that the women are suffering silently. In 1978 Congress passed the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of pregnancy and requires employers to treat pregnant women the same as they treat others with similar working abilities.

In spite of this, women returning from maternity leave are treated as redundant and are replaced by other people or are either demoted from their current position resulting in low pay and lower position. Pregnancy discrimination can even place women in the untenable position of being forced to choose between becoming (or remaining) pregnant (which now comes to be seen as a complicated and troublesome event as against a normal biological phase of life) or continuing to care for themselves and their families. The biggest issue with the employers in these days is that they view such women as less committed to their jobs because they are mothers now. In turn, the companies also know that only around 3% of the women would go for legal help in cases of maternity discrimination on job front and would therefore maximum cases like this are settled with the employee for less pay or lower position as the women are not aware of their rights. As per the law, companies employing more than 15 employees are liable to treat all short term medical conditions and pregnancy equally.

Also they are not allowed to either fire any women on maternity leave and in some countries, the employers are also liable to hold the employee's position for as long as she is on leave. Despite the fact that there are laws to protect the women's working rights, results display that pregnant women and women who return from maternity leave are still being discriminated with unfavourable decisions by the court. These results make the women even more less persuasive to take up their issues legally in court. Studies show that as less as only 4% of such incidents are reported to a government body. It is high time that our society realizes that we need to protect the jobs of pregnant women and women returning from maternity leave as they also have a valid role. We need stronger and stringent laws for the women of our society. For example, Europe government has prohibited the firing of pregnant employees and women returning from maternity leave till one year after they have returned to their work.

As a result of an HR survey, it has been seen that women show amazing productivity if offered with a little bit of flexibility in terms of their work life balance. For example, most of the IT firms these days offer working from home as an option because it saves the cost incurred by the companies from electricity, conveyance charges, etc. and it is beneficial for employees who are mothers too. This trend is increasingly being followed by several multinationals in India too. But numbers are still very small to reach the desired state. Companies can easily accommodate such workers by coming out of their prejudices and offering them a little support and empathy and the retention ratio is definitely going to inflate.

References:

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