ASSESSING EMPLOYMENT STABILITY IN WOMEN AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS ON REDDIT POSTS

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INTRODUCTION

Welcoming a new child commonly requires working mothers to face challenging decisions related to balancing career obligations and caregiving responsibilities for their newborn child. During their career, working women who have gone into maternity leave may notice some transformations to their job once their leave comes to an end. Issues like gender bias in companies may cause women to have apprehensions about going on maternity leave. Additionally, organizational changes in the workplace may also raise concerns among new mothers on whether they will be able to retain their job after returning from maternity leave. The challenges of managing a job and raising a child simultaneously could possibly lead to women considering a change in career altogether. Through this study, I would like to discuss some of the potential factors that can help assess the stability in the employment of new mothers following a period of maternity leave.

BACKGROUND

There is a lot of existing research work about a woman's career after maternity focus on central ideas like employment conditions, employee relations and instrumental issues such as breast feeding and childcare. The issues relating to career transformations, ability to resume a career and career management questions among new mothers have received less attention. (Nowak, Naudé & Thomas, 2012)

According to research, a woman's supervisor and peers' support can have a major impact on her maternity leave experience and decision to return to work (Liu & Buzzanell, 2007; Houston and Marks, 2003; Lyness et al., 1999). Planning done during pregnancy about continuation of career after maternity leave can influence a women's will and decision to return to work. (Houston and Marks, 2003). Women who had guaranteed jobs (either same or similar to one before maternity leave) after childbirth planned to work later into their pregnancies and return more quickly after childbirth than women without guaranteed jobs (Lyness, Thompson, Francesco & Judiesch, 1999). Hence, a supportive work environment can have a positive effect on a woman's decision to return to work sooner than planned or even return at all.

An interesting research work on positive reintegration into the workforce post a maternity leave period revealed that one of the critical factors in determining how women experienced the transition back into work after maternity leave was dependent on the perspective that management had on maternity leave (Freeney, van der Werff & Collings, 2018). The paper goes on to highlight three important issues that negatively impacted a woman's transition back into work: career derailment, unconscious biases amongst colleagues and a deterioration of professional relationships.

When on one hand we have the issue of a woman's smooth transition into work post maternity leave, on the other is the task to negotiate their roles, work conditions, or timing of their leaves with their bosses. While negotiating a leave, childbearing women have been found to feel guilty because their coworkers must take on their work in addition to these coworkers' own workloads and in some situations many women ended up handling projects and other work while on maternity leaves (Liu & Buzzanell, 2007). Workplace pregnancy and maternity leave can indeed pose a lot of challenges to both the female employee and the employer to ensure a smooth

transition into the maternity leave and into the workplace post the completion of leave.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The objective of this study is to answer the following research questions:

i. What kind of career challenges have women faced before and after having gone into maternity leave?

ii. What are the potential factors that can help assess the stability in the employment of new mothers following a period of maternity leave?

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions outlined above, Reddit posts were collected by searching using the following case – insensitive search terms:

i. Maternity leave return to job
ii. Maternity leave career
iii. Maternity leave support
iv. Maternity leave benefits
v. Maternity leave guilt
vi. Maternity leave quitting
vii. Maternity leave attitude
viii. Maternity leave fears

The posts that were collected contained at least 30 words and 60 posts were gathered for the purpose of this study from the time period 2021 – Present. In order to understand the nature and content of the posts about maternity leave the following themes were introduced in the dataset:

i. *Type of post:* Checks whether the user just wrote about her maternity leave experiences or did she also additionally ask a question about dealing with certain challenges associated with maternity leave.

ii. *Considered switching jobs:* Does the post mention anything about the user considering switching jobs post maternity leave? This can help assess commitment to the organization.

iii. *Professional relationship challenges:* Did the user feel that she was not valued or supported at work due to her pregnancy?

iv. *Familial Pressure:* Are the family members of the pregnant user supportive of her career decisions prior to or post maternity leave?

v. *Fired by employer:* Did the user get fired from her job because of her pregnancy?

vi. *Absence of proper maternity leave policies:* Does the company where the user works for have proper policies in place for maternity leave?

vii. *Unpaid leave:* Did the user receive any form of compensation or benefits from the company after having gone on maternity leave?

ANALYSIS

Successful transition back into work post a period of maternity leave is important for a woman to sustain her career but it is not necessary or the only determining factor. Upon performing a close analysis of the data, it has been indicated that 81% of the users are in favor of continuing their professional career at the same company where they worked prior to taking a maternity leave.

Professional relationship issues prior to or after taking maternity leave were found to be the crucial theme in the data. Nearly 48% of the users indicated that they had experienced some type of workplace constraint or difficulty, such as unsupportive coworkers and managers, hostile work environment, harassment because they were pregnant, and feeling let down by their manager. About 3% of users reported that their families were unsupportive of their career choices following maternity leave, and that they were asked to abandon their jobs to focus solely on becoming a full-time mother.

Several users expressed concern that their prospects for progress had dwindled and that their colleagues had surpassed them. This was partly related to a period in which the women were away from the workforce. Approximately 15% of users stated that while on maternity leave, they were laid off from their normal work either because of organizational changes or in some cases the company could no longer afford to pay the woman on maternity leave.

An important observation that can be made from the data is that among the 36 users who stated that they received paid maternity leave or employer provided child-care services and had proper maternity leave policies in place, there were 23

users who indicated that they did not consider switching jobs. We can hypothesize that women working for organizations which offer maternity leave benefits offered may possibly be more committed to continuing their employment post maternity leave but there is not enough data to support this claim.

Dataset themes	No	Yes
Considered Switching Jobs	81.67%	18.33%
Professional Relationship Challenges	51.6%	48.4%
Familial Pressure	96.6%	3.4%
Fired by the employer	85%	15%
Absence of proper maternity leave policies	60%	40%
Unpaid leave	76.66%	23.34%

Among all the Reddit posts that were reviewed, an interesting theme is the type of post. While 45% of the posts about women who wrote about their experiences related to taking maternity leave, the remainder 55% of the posts were of women who were trying to seek answers to their queries on maternity leave and to deal with difficult situations caused due to the absence of proper maternity leave places at the workplace.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify some important challenges that women face prior to or after taking maternity leave. Professional relationship challenges such as such as unsupportive coworkers and managers, hostile work environment, harassment because they were pregnant, and feeling let down by their manager were found to be of most significance. Besides these challenges there are also issues such as familial pressures, getting laid off from regular job that have shown to affect a pregnant woman's employment.

Although there was no conclusive evidence for the fact that women working for organizations that offered maternity leave benefits would be more committed to continue their employment post maternity leave, there was a significant proportion of women who relied on these amenities before going on maternity leave. The small dataset size cannot be generalized to the entire population which is a major limitation of the study.

Another limitation of my study is that demographics and racial background of the women have not been considered and we do not know to what extent the sample is representative of all pregnant women. Duration of the maternity leave which is a factor related to leave benefits has not been considered in this problem.

REFERENCES

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