

Creating a Gender-Balanced Future: Reimagining Maternity at Work

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Abstract

The study explores the interconnected relationship between gender justice and maternity benefits, aiming to illuminate how maternity policies impacts women's equality in both the workplace and society at large. With a focus on both regional and national contexts, this research examines the historical progression, current state and prospective reforms of maternity benefit policies.

Through a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, legal frameworks, and case studies, this study evaluates how maternity benefits contribute to or hinder progress in gender justice. The findings demonstrate the dual purpose of maternity benefits as both a care mechanism for mothers and a strategic tool for advancing gender parity. It delves into the economic, social, and psychological factors of these benefits, assessing their impact on women's career progression, financial stability, and overall well-being.

Furthermore, this study investigates into the complex interplay between maternity benefits, workplace culture, and gender-based discrimination. It examines whether these policies can perpetuate traditional gender roles or act as a catalyst for breaking down barriers to women's professional advancement and leadership in various industries. By analyzing successful strategies and new policy approaches, it identifies opportunities for reform that can foster greater gender equity.

The study highlights the importance of maternity benefits as an important tool in the pursuit of gender justice. It calls for an intricate approach to policy design and implementation, recognizing the dynamic nature of women's roles in contemporary society. Ultimately, it advocates for comprehensive maternity benefits that not only safeguard working women but also propel society closer to a fairer and more balanced.

Keywords- Gender Justice, Maternity Benefits, Women's Equality, Workplace Equality, Gender Discrimination.

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I. Introduction

Workplace Gender Parity, often defined as the equitable treatment and representation of individuals regardless of their gender, has earned significant attention as a fundamental societal challenge, specifically in relation to labor and employment. This includes equitable treatment of both men and women in every respect of employment, from hiring to advancement opportunities, to ensure that all individuals are treated with dignity and fairness, regardless of their sex or gender identity (Chaves, n.d.). Maternity Benefit function as a protective measure to rectify historical career penalties associated with childbirth, ensuring that women in the workforce are not disadvantaged by their productive

role. These strategies comprise policies and practices that support women during pregnancy and early motherhood, thus reducing career setbacks and ensuring their full workforce participation (Kumari. 2024). As such, these initiatives not only ensure the well-being of female employees but also serve as a crucial driver for cultivating a diverse, inclusive and high performing workplace. This paper aims to outline strategies for maternity benefits that promote gender equality in the workplace. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of maternity benefits, focusing on their legal and regulatory framework, significance in promoting gender equality, and the practical challenges and opportunities they present for both employers and employees. By analyzing real-

world examples, established best practices, and the measurable impact of various initiatives, this paper analyzes the role of modern workplace gender equality, contributing to a growing body of knowledge and policy discourse on this critical subject.

II. Understanding Maternity Benefits

Understanding maternity leave policies is crucial for grasping the foundational aspect of maternity benefits in the workplace. Maternity leave is an authorized, often paid, period of absence from work granted to expectant and new mothers to recover from childbirth and bond with their newborns (Nandini, n.d.) The length of maternity leave is not uniform, varying widely between nations and organizations due to a mix of legal, cultural, and economic factors. The legal framework acts as the vital pillar in upholding the rights and well-being of pregnant employees. These regulations are codified in labour statutes, employment contracts, and international conventions. For instance, the International Labour Organization's Maternity Protection Convention (C183) enumerates key rules for maternity protection, emphasizing the need for paid leave, job security, and non-discrimination against pregnant workers (International Labour Organisation, 2000). Individual nations have instituted diverse legal frameworks for maternity protection, leading to significant inconsistencies in coverage and provisions (Sharma, 2018). Adhering with these legal standards is paramount for gender equality by protecting working mothers' employment rights during pregnancy and motherhood. Understanding the full spectrum of maternity benefits is essential to appreciating the extensive support system available to working mothers. Maternity benefits encompass a broad range of financial, health, and workplace accommodations, not just paid time away from work. Standard maternity entitlements consist of paid maternity leave, prenatal and postnatal healthcare coverage, job security during maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and access to childcare services (Acharya, n.d.). These benefits intended to deal with the physical, emotional, and practical needs of expectant and new mothers, guiding them in achieving work-family harmony while continuing to advance professionally.

III. Gender Disparities in the Workplace

Studies indicates significant gender gaps across professional environments. According to a 2024 World Bank report, Singh (n.d.) women earn on average only 77% of what men earn, indicating a persistent global gender wage gap. Furthermore, a study by McKinsey & Company (2020), Krivkovich et al. (2024) shows that women remain significantly outnumbered in top management, holding only 28% of managerial positions globally. Multiple underlying causes contribute to these disparities. Societal

expectations and cultural norms often dictate gender roles, that cause unfairness in hiring and promotion practices (Emeka, 2024). Additionally, the absence of supportive work-family policies disproportionately affects women, as they are still largely responsible for family caregiving. This is compounded by the "glass ceiling" effect, a term coined by researchers at the University of Wisconsin (1986), Noronha and Aithal (2019) referring to the invisible barriers preventing women from advancing in their careers. These disparities significantly hinder on women's professional advancement. A study by the American Psychological Association (2018) Prakash et al. (2024) found that workplace inequality acts as catalyst for reduced employee motivation and increase turnover rates among women. A report from the National Institute on Retirement Security (2020), indicates that gender wage gap directly reduces women's retirement savings and pension benefits, leading to greater economic insecurity in their later years (Whitford, 2024)

IV. Maternity Benefit Strategies

Implementing strong maternity support strategies are essential for supporting working mothers, contributing to both workforce stability and ensuring the wellbeing of the family. These strategies encompass a range of employee benefits, including paid maternity leave, flexible arrangements for work, childcare support, equal opportunity leave, and awareness programs.

A. Paid Maternity Leave Policies

1. Length of Leave: The length of maternity leave varies across countries and organization but is important for the health and wellbeing of both mother and child. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), a minimum of 14 weeks is recommended (ILO, 2020) and Recommendation No.191 encourages to increase the period to at least 18 weeks (Khan, 2020). With countries like Estonia providing up to 85 weeks of paid leave, highlight a gap in global parental support (Ro, 2019).

2. Income Replacement: The extent of income replacement during maternity leave strongly impacts a family's financial stability. The OECD data shows countries, like Germany, offering full salary replacement, whereas others provide minimal support, directly influencing the decision to return to work post-childbirth (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011).

3. Eligibility Criteria: Eligibility for maternity benefits often determined on employment history and structural set up of the job. The United States is an outlier as no federal law ensures paid maternity leave but some states have implemented their own paid family leave programs (Nandi et al., 2018).

B. Flexible Work Arrangements: Flexible work arrangements, enable mothers to balance work and family responsibilities. According to Harvard

Business Review study (2018) flexible work options significantly boost staff retention and happiness.

C. Childcare Support: Providing childcare support, through onsite creches or financial subsidies, is essential for retaining working mothers. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) has established a clear link between quality childcare services, sustained child development and parental work productivity (Schmitz, 2019).

D. Equal Parental Leave: Equal access to parental leave, helps split childcare responsibilities evenly between parents. Countries like Sweden has effectively enhanced work-life integration by implementing generous, family-friendly policies (Sweden.se, 2024).

E. Employee Awareness and Support Programs: Promoting maternity benefit awareness and support to encourage full utilization and reduces workplace stigma. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) indicates that such programs enhance overall employee morale and employee loyalty (SHRM, 2022).

Robust maternity benefit strategies, encompassing paid leave, flexible arrangements, childcare support, equal parental leave, and awareness programs, are critical for supporting working mothers and promoting a balanced workplace culture. These strategies not only benefit the employees but also contribute to the overall productivity and sustainability of organizations.

A comparative analysis of the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 and its amendment in 2017 in India highlights significant advancements in the rights and benefits for working women.

Maternity Benefit Act, 1961

- **Duration of Leave:** According to the 1961 Act, 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, which included 6 weeks before and 6 weeks after delivery were provided.
- **Eligibility:** The Act applied to women employed in factories, mines, plantations, and shops with 10 or more employees. Women were required to have worked for their employer for at least 80 days in the 12 months preceding the date of expected delivery.
- **Payment:** The employer was responsible for paying maternity benefits, which was generally the average daily wage for the period of a worker's actual absence.
- **Other Benefits:** There were limited additional benefits, primarily focusing on the leave duration and pay (Maternity Benefit Act, 1961).

Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017

- **Duration of Leave:** The amendment extended the paid maternity leave period from 12 to 26 weeks, with the leave period before delivery increased to 8

weeks. However, in the case of women with two or more children, the duration remains 12 weeks.

- **Eligibility:** The Act retained the same eligibility criteria concerning the type of establishment and the minimum employment period.
- **Work from Home:** The amendment introduced the option of work from home after the maternity leave period, subject to the nature of work and employer agreement.
- **Crèche Facility:** A notable addition was the mandatory crèche facility for every establishment employing 50 or more employees. Women were to be permitted four visits to the crèche per day, including the interval for rest allowed to them.
- **Awareness:** The amendment mandated employers to educate women about their rights under the Act, which was not specified in the 1961 Act.

Significance of Changes

- **Increased Leave Duration:** The extension of maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks was a significant step towards ensuring the health and well-being of the mother and child.
- **Work from Home Option:** This addition acknowledged the evolving nature of work and the need for flexibility for new mothers.
- **Crèche Facility:** The mandatory provision of a crèche facility was a progressive step towards supporting working mothers and ensuring the well-being of their children.
- **Awareness:** The emphasis on making women aware of their rights under the Act was crucial for its effective implementation.

Thus, the 2017 amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act significantly enhanced the benefits and rights of working women in India, reflecting a progressive step towards gender equality and support for working mothers (Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017).

V. Case Studies and Best Practices

A. ICICI: ICICI offers 26 weeks of maternity leave for the first two children, extendable without pay. They provide 36 Child Care Leaves for single parents and 180-day leave for fertility treatments. An adoption leave of 36 days is available for mothers and single fathers. The IWork@Home program allows a year of work from home, with travel and stay support for a child and caregiver (Mayura, 2026).

B. Accenture: Accenture provides 26 paid weeks of maternity leave and options to work locally for a year after birth. They offer 16 weeks paid maternity leave for birth parents and 8 weeks for other parents. Accenture supports fertility, adoption, surrogacy, and provides 120 hours of subsidized backup care service (Mayura, 2026).

C. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS): TCS offers 26 weeks of maternity leave, extendable by 30 days in case of complications. TCS also provides 3 months

paid adoption leave regardless of gender (Mayura, 2026).

D. Deloitte: Deloitte provides 26 weeks of paid maternity leave as per the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961. They also offer flexible work arrangements, like work from home or a 5-year freelancing break (Mayura, 2026).

E. Infosys: Infosys offers 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, extendable by 12 weeks without pay. They provide 6 weeks of miscarriage leave and various support services like the iMother app, Mom's net, and flexible work options (Mayura, 2026).

F. Cognizant Technology Solutions corp (CTS): CTS provides at least 182 days of paid maternity leave for the first two children, extendable by 30 days or six months without pay. They offer leaves for miscarriage, tubectomy, commissioning, and child adoption (Mayura, 2026).

G. IBM: IBM provides 26 weeks of maternity leave with full pay, along with leave for miscarriage, medical termination, tubectomy, and illness related to pregnancy. They also offer 12 weeks of paid leave for adoption/surrogacy (Mayura, 2026).

H. SAP: SAP's policy includes 22 weeks of paid parental leave for primary carers and 12 weeks for secondary carers. They offer flexibility on the timing of leave and additional support for special cases like stillbirth or miscarriage (Mayura, 2026).

I. Wipro: Wipro offers up to 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, extendable by 12 weeks of unpaid leave. They provide support services like flexible work arrangements, counseling, guidance on childcare, and a "keeping in touch" program (Mayura, 2026).

J. Ernst & Young: Ernst & Young offers 26 weeks of maternity leave for up to two children, with conditions for additional children. They also provide leave for commissioning parents and support programs for mothers facing various challenges (Mayura, 2026).

Case Laws

1. *National Campaign Committee for Central Legislation on Construction Labour (NCC-CL) v. Union of India* (2018)

This case addressed issues related to maternity benefits for construction labor, highlighting the need for adequate legislative provisions in this sector.

2. *Mangalore Ganesh Beedi Works v. Union of India* (1974)

A significant case that dealt with the applicability of maternity benefits in the context of labor laws and workers' rights.

3. *Pooja Jignesh Doshi v. The State of Maharashtra and Ors* (2019)

The court explored the entitlement of maternity leave for a surrogate mother, emphasizing the equality and

dignity of motherhood in all forms, including surrogacy.

4. *Anshu Rani v. State Of Uttar Pradesh and Ors* (2018)

This 2018 case revolved around the partial granting of maternity leave, underlining the importance of maternity leave as essential social insurance for maternal and child health.

5. *Rasitha C.H. v. State of Kerala & Anr* (2019)

The Kerala High Court ruled that denying maternity benefits based on contractual employment status is against a woman's dignity, reinforcing the right to maternity benefits for all women employees.

VI. Challenges and Barriers

Cultural and Societal Norms: One of the primary challenges in implementing maternity benefit strategies is the pervasive influence of cultural and societal norms. In many cultures, traditional gender roles continue to dictate women's primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work. This entrenched perspective often leads to biases in the workplace, where women are viewed as less committed to their careers or as liabilities due to potential pregnancy and maternity leaves. Such biases can result in discriminatory hiring practices, unequal pay, and limited opportunities for advancement, effectively penalizing women for their potential or actual maternity roles (Dristi IAS, 2018). The cultural stigma attached to taking maternity leave can also discourage women from fully utilizing these benefits. Overcoming these deeply rooted norms requires a concerted effort at various levels, including education, awareness campaigns, and stringent enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Implementing comprehensive maternity benefit strategies can have significant financial implications for employers. Providing paid maternity leave, for instance, requires companies to cover the costs of the employee's absence while often needing to hire temporary replacements to maintain productivity. Smaller businesses, in particular, may find it challenging to bear these costs, which can lead to resistance in fully embracing such policies. Furthermore, establishing facilities like on-site childcare or developing flexible work arrangements entails additional investments in infrastructure and technology. While these investments can lead to long-term benefits such as improved employee retention and productivity, the initial costs and logistical challenges can be substantial hurdles for many organizations. Resistance to change is a significant barrier in the implementation of effective maternity benefit strategies. This resistance can manifest at various levels, from management to employees. Managers may fear that extended maternity leaves or flexible work arrangements might disrupt business processes or affect team dynamics.

There is often a concern about setting precedents that could lead to demands for similar benefits from other employee groups. At the employee level, there can be resistance due to a lack of understanding of the benefits these policies provide or concerns about perceived unfairness. Additionally, in workplaces where traditional views on gender roles are prevalent, there can be a lack of support for women taking maternity leave, which can further hinder the effectiveness of these policies. Addressing this resistance requires a change in organizational culture, led by top management, to foster an environment of inclusivity and support for maternity benefits.

Thus, while maternity benefit strategies are crucial for supporting working mothers and promoting gender equality in the workplace, their implementation faces several challenges. These include deeply ingrained cultural and societal norms, financial implications for employers, and resistance to change at various levels. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving policy changes, cultural shifts, financial planning, and education to ensure that maternity benefits are effectively implemented and valued within the workforce (Shivam, 2021).

VII. Measuring the Impact

Evaluating the effectiveness of maternity benefit strategies necessitates the use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These KPIs provide measurable values that organizations can use to gauge the success and impact of their maternity benefit policies (Krivkovich et al., 2024; Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011).

Essential KPIs include:

1. **Return-to-Work Rate:** This KPI measures the percentage of women returning to their jobs post-maternity leave. A higher rate indicates effective maternity policies that support women's reintegration into the workforce (Nandi et al., 2018).
2. **Retention Rate Post-Maternity Leave:** This metric evaluates how many women remain with the company for a specified period (e.g., one year) after returning from maternity leave. It reflects how supportive and conducive the work environment is for new mothers (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011).
3. **Employee Satisfaction Score:** Surveys and feedback mechanisms can gauge the satisfaction level of employees with the maternity benefits. High satisfaction scores can correlate with better morale and commitment (Krivkovich et al., 2024).
4. **Career Advancement Post-Maternity Leave:** Tracking the career progression of women post-maternity leave can indicate whether there are any biases or barriers impacting their professional growth (Prakash et al., 2024).
5. **Utilization Rate of Maternity Benefits:** This KPI assesses how many eligible employees utilize the

offered maternity benefits, indicating the awareness and perceived value of these policies among the workforce (Krivkovich et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of maternity benefit strategies can be evaluated by analyzing various factors:

1. **Employee Feedback and Surveys:** Direct feedback from employees who have utilized maternity benefits provides invaluable insights into the effectiveness and areas for improvement of these policies (Noronha & Aithal, 2019).
2. **Comparative Analysis with Industry Benchmarks:** Comparing an organization's KPIs with industry benchmarks helps in understanding where it stands relative to its peers in terms of supporting working mothers (Krivkovich et al., 2024).
3. **Long-term Impact on Workforce Demographics:** Analyzing changes in workforce demographics over time, especially the proportion and roles of women, can reveal the long-term effectiveness of maternity benefit strategies (Nandi et al., 2018).
4. **Impact on Overall Organizational Performance:** Assessing whether the implementation of maternity benefits has affected the overall productivity, profitability, and employee morale of the organization (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011).
5. **Compliance and Legal Framework Adherence:** Ensuring that the maternity benefit policies comply with legal requirements and best practices is crucial for their effectiveness and sustainability (International Labour Organization, 2000).

By meticulously tracking KPIs and conducting thorough evaluations, organizations can not only assess the current effectiveness of their maternity benefit strategies but also identify areas for enhancement to better support their female workforce (Krivkovich et al., 2024).

VIII. Future Trends and Recommendations

In the sphere of workplace equality, new shifts are increasingly shaping the environment, actively promoting gender sensitive, bias-free, and respectable environments. One significant trend is the integration of gender-neutral implementation, which extends beyond traditional maternity leave to include paternity and parental leave, acknowledging the role of all genders in care giving. This shift not only promotes gender equality but also challenges the gender based occupational segregation entrenched in societal norms. Additionally, there is a rising importance on flexible work arrangements, recognizing that strict work schedules can have more frequent negative impact on women, particularly those with family responsibilities. Employers are increasingly adopting remote working, part-time roles, and flexible hours to accommodate diverse life circumstances, thereby

fostering a more inclusive and diverse workforce. Another trend is the implementation of mentor-ship and leadership programs targeted specifically at women, aiming to bridge the gender gap in leadership positions. These programs foster career growth opportunities but also to create a leadership pipeline of women who can mentor and inspire future generations. Furthermore, organizations are using regular audits and transparent pay policies as a strategic initiative to eliminate the gender pay gap and ensure fairness.

To truly foster gender equality, it is crucial to embrace a holistic approach that encompasses various aspects of the employee life cycle. Firstly, implementing impartial recruitment processes is essential; this includes using gender-inclusive language in job descriptions and employing diverse hiring panels to reduce unconscious biases. Employers should also provide ongoing training and awareness programs on gender equality, equipping employees with the knowledge and skills to create an inclusive workplace. Offering strong professional development opportunities for women, including mentor-ship programs and leadership training, is essential in ensuring equal career prospects. Additionally, employers should keep routine policy maintenance and revision their policies to ensure updating to match current norms of gender equality, including conducting pay equity audits and updating parental leave policies. Creating a supportive work environment, such as offering on-site childcare facilities or flexible work arrangements, can significantly improve work-life balance for all employees, particularly working mothers.

On the policy advocacy and government initiatives front, there is a growing recognition of the need for current laws and government regulation to promote gender equality in the workplace. Governments are increasingly enacting laws that mandate equal pay, prohibit discrimination based on gender, and require organizations to implement specific gender equality measures. These may include mandatory reporting of gender pay gaps, quotas for women in leadership roles, and penalties for non-compliance with gender equality standards. Moreover, governments are advocating for and implementing policies that support work-life balance, such as subsidized childcare, extended parental leave, and legal provisions for flexible working arrangements. This governmental support is essential for fostering fairness and ensuring both men and women to participate equally in the workforce. Additionally, public awareness campaigns and educational programs are being used to drive this policy and shift societal norms. These initiatives are crucial in addressing the underlying cultural and societal norms that contribute to gender inequality in

the workplace. Through legislative action, policy reforms, alongside educational efforts, allows governments in shaping a more equitable and inclusive future for all genders in the workforce.

IX. Conclusion

Workplace gender equality is a long-term goal that requires ongoing legal reforms, cultural change and active support. The emerging trends in gender equality strategies, such as embracing gender-neutral policies, flexible working arrangements, and focused leadership development for women, are testament to a growing recognition of the diverse needs and contributions of all genders. For employers, the path forward involves not only implementing equitable policies but also fostering an inclusive culture through unbiased recruitment, continuous training, and transparent practices.

The role of governments and advocacy groups is important in driving structured improvement. Legislative measures, educational campaigns, and support for work-life balance are critical in dismantling the structural barriers to gender equality. The collective commitment by employers, governments, and individuals are essential in building an environment where everyone, irrespective of gender, can prosper while pursuing to their fullest potential.

As we move forward, it is vital to ensure consistent progress and continuously embracing to new hurdles and possibilities in the quest for gender justice. By doing so, we can build a fairer, prosperous, and inclusive world for current and future generations.

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