

## Exploring Workplace Wellbeing and Working Experiences of Women after Maternity Leave: A Narrative Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

Women from various cultures face many obstacles when they return to work following maternity leave, which affects their work-life balance, career advancement, and workplace well-being. Women often face the emotional turmoil of leaving their newborns at the care of others while they reintegrate into their workplace. This narrative literature review identifies important elements that affect women's reintegration into work life. The study emphasizes the necessity of inclusive workplace policies, more applicable parental leave frameworks, and changes in workplace culture. The study also explores the role of coworkers and supervisors that can act as support systems for new mothers. This review looks not only into the job related wellbeing and working experience but also focus on women's mental and physical health with context to the postpartum period and its subsequent influence in the workplace. By analyzing various studies, this paper identifies key factors such as flexible work arrangements, employer support, childcare accessibility, and workplace culture that shape post-maternity employment outcomes. Common barriers include lack of childcare support, and limited career advancement opportunities. Long-term career outcomes and the influence of intersectional factors on postpartum work experiences need to be further investigated. A Shorter duration of maternity leave along with the work pressure and organization culture that doesn't support breastfeeding seems to be hindering factors. The study highlights the need for more understanding of the psychological aspects and other understudied aspects in exploring women's experience of returning to work after maternity leave.

**Keywords:** *Maternity Leave, Workplace Wellbeing, Work-Life Balance, Working Mothers, Post-Maternity Transition, Maternal Employment*

The post-partum period is often referred to as the fourth trimester (Choi et al., 2022). This is a very crucial period of their life as they undergo several physiological and mental changes. For new mothers, it is a time for taking several preparations in several aspects such as caring of the new born, recovery of their own health and for several others preparations need to be taken for returning to work life. Flexible work environment are commonly proposed to aid in this transition; however, they may have unintended

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consequences. Some studies suggest that such arrangements can lead to lower mental health scores in the postpartum period, possibly due to blurred boundaries between work and personal life (Hosokawa et al., 2021).

The World Health Organization [WHO] recommends exclusive breastfeeding up to 6 months of age, with continued breastfeeding, along with appropriate complementary foods, for 2 years of age or beyond (WHO and UNICEF, 2003). In recent decades, the importance of women's employment in the world has been increasingly recognized and valued, thanks in part to a growing number of studies showing that women's work has positive consequences for countries development and growth not only in employment but also in economic, financial and social spheres (Hendricks, 2019; Zenger and Folkman, 2016; International Monetary Fund, 2013).

Balancing work life and family life together during the postpartum period presents unique challenges that require careful navigation (Chatterji & Markowitz, 2018). Returning to work life after the maternity leave can be having so many requisites. Women who are working are expected to meet the work and family life demands. Managing the baby and also taking care of one's own health along with one's work in and out of the home can be troublesome. Factors such as work place policies, access to maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and family support play a crucial role in easing this transition.

### ***Work place well-being of women***

The general mental, physical and emotional well-being of workers in their work setting is referred to as workplace well-being. The particular difficulties experienced by women in different sectors are further exacerbated by gender differences in occupational segregation, wage discrepancies and leadership representation (International Labor Organization, 2018). Women's frequently balance many obligations, striking a balance between the demands of their careers and their family and giving commitments. Stress, burnout and decreased productivity can result from this combined burden (Brough et al., 2022). Furthermore, cultures at work that don't have gender sensitive rules may not adequately promote the welfare of women. Maternity leave access, flexible scheduling, and extensive health support programs are essential for improving general well-being. (Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2020). Occupational segregation is a major element affecting women's work experiences; women are frequently absent in leadership positions and overrepresented in lower paying industries.

### ***Child Care and Work Life***

Returning to work after maternity leave involves navigating emotional, physical and logical challenges. Mothers often experience heightened stress due to the need for reliable childcare, workplace, support and flexibility (Chung & van der Horst, 2020). Furthermore, access to affordable and high-quality childcare is crucial for fostering maternal workforce participation and overall family wellbeing. The transition phase to parenthood is a very crucial life event that will bring happiness and certain difficulties too. Mothers face a dual responsibility of managing child care and also taking care of their professional needs. The balance between these two demanding roles can significantly impact the maternal wellbeing, family dynamics and workplace productivity (Torres et al., 2024). Child care responsibilities often disproportionately fall on mothers, contributing to gender disparities in career progression and financial independence (Kossek et al., 2021)

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Father's involvement in child care has also emerged as a critical factor in achieving work life balance. Shared parenting responsibilities can alleviate the caregiving burden on mothers and promote greater gender equality in work place (UNICEF, 2021).

### *Theoretical Framework*

For women, returning to work after maternity leave is crucial time that frequently affects their well-being. Greenhaus & Beutell's work life balance theory mainly focuses on the equilibrium between the professional life and personal responsibilities. Keeping this balance is essential for the wellbeing of returning mothers. In line with this theory, balance can be facilitated by the organization through flexible management (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

The significance of instrumental, information, and emotional support is emphasized by House's Social support theory (1981). Supportive managers, coworkers, and family members greatly enhance the psychological health of women who return to the work (House, 1981). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), employee well-being is influenced by workplace demands like work load and resources like flexibility and financial support. The experience of returning after maternity leave can be enhanced by fewer responsibilities and more resources.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This narrative literature review delves into relevant information to investigate the work place well-being and women's employment experiences following maternity leave. To assure a thorough and impartial review of the variety of available literature, a methodical and structured approach was used. This approach makes it easier to uncover major themes, trends and gaps in the literature. 14 studies were used for the background information of the study. An Overall of 20 papers were reviewed out of which two were secondary data. Several electronic databases, including Scopus, PubMed and Google Scholar were thoroughly searched. Relevant publications were identified as well by looking through the reference lists of important studies to guarantee thorough coverage. The following related search terms were used to identify the relevant data under the mentioned term (1) work place well-being and maternity leave (2) women returning to work and working mothers (3) work experiences and maternal stress (4) employee support system and career. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were marked for the study. Peer review articles that were published within the past 12 years were included in the study. Studies exploring the work place well-being and experiences of women after maternity leave. Research unrelated to workplace experiences and working mothers were excluded from the review that was conducted. This study wasn't bound by direct ethical approval because it used a literature review to analyze secondary data. To uphold ethical standards, however, the results of the original research were faithfully presented, and all sources were properly cited.

**Table 1: Papers/reports reviewed in this study**

<b>Author And Year</b>	<b>Study Design</b>	<b>Country</b>
(Allen et al., 2024)	Qualitative study	Australia
(Sriram, 2017)	Qualitative study	India
(Barrerio- Lucas et. al., 2013)	Qualitative study	South Africa
(Rapisarda et al., 2024)	Online Intervention study	Italy
(Srikruti et al., 2024)	Qualitative study	India
(Khajeh et al., 2024)	Cross sectional study	Iran
(Lucia-Casademunt et al., 2018)	Cross sectional survey study	27 EU states
(Gregory, 2020)	Qualitative study	Australia

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<b>Author And Year</b>	<b>Study Design</b>	<b>Country</b>
(Kokubo et al., 2023)	Controlled experimental study	Japan
(Buzzanell et al., 2024)	Qualitative study	United states
(Addati et al., 2014)	Report	N/A
(Steurer, 2017)	Systematic review	N/A
(Aitken et al., 2015)	Systematic review	N/A
(Jou et al., 2018)	Survey and data analysis	USA
(Andres et al., 2016)	Systematic Narrative review	USA
(Butikofer et al., 2018)	Epidemiological analysis	Norway
(Van Neil et al., 2020)	Review study	USA
(Walsh et al., 2019)	Cross sectional survey	53 Countries
(Human resource management international digest, 2021)	Report	N/A
(Costantini et al., 2022)	Qualitative study	Italy

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Challenges and Emotional Impact***

For working mothers, going back to work after maternity leave poses serious emotional issues. These difficulties frequently result from juggling obligations to one's family and job, cultural norms, and one's own feelings of fear and guilt. It can be emotionally draining to return to work, and many women feel guilty and anxious about leaving their children behind (Allen et al., 2024). Coworkers and managers emotional support can lessen negative emotions, improving performance and job satisfaction (Costantini et al., 2022; Sriram, 2017). Workplace culture and attitudes frequently increase the emotional impact and can either facilitate or impede a seamless transfer. Decreased engagement and possible professional failures might result from negative attitudes and lack of support (Barreiro-Lucas et al., 2013). Mothers frequently worry about going back to work because they can receive unfavorable reviews at work and find it difficult to manage their homes and professional lives. Rigid views about motherhood and social expectations increase this concern (Srikruthi & Vijayan, 2024; Rapisarda et al., 2024)

### ***Work Life Balance and Support Systems***

For mothers who are going back to work, work life balance is essential. Policies that facilitate the transition and increase job satisfaction include breastfeeding breaks and flexible work schedule (Sriram, 2017; Khajeh et al., 2024). Social support from friends, family and coworker is also crucial for women to successfully balance their responsibilities (Costantini et al., 2022). Work life balance and supportive company policies are essential for working mother's well-being. Improved mother infant connection is one of the many physical and mental health advantages linked to longer maternity leave for both mother and child (Sriram, 2017; Lucia-Casademunt et al., 2018). When balancing job and parental responsibilities, women frequently have limited options and are compelled to make judgments, which can contribute to gender disparity in workplace. Common tactics like hiring daycare providers and outsourcing housework emphasize how difficult it is to strike a balance between work and personal obligations (Gregory, 2020). Biases against women returning from maternity leave still exist, despite advancement in workplace diversity. Organizations must put in place support programs that address these prejudices and advance gender equality since they can influence how people perceive dedication and aptitude (Human resource management international digest, 2021). For mothers going back to work, programs that increase self-efficacy in work life balance can help with the preadaptation

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process. Although they might not have a major effect on employment views, such treatments have been demonstrated to enhance in role performance (Kokubo et al., 2023). Improved communication is required on employment rules that go beyond parental leave prescribed by the government.

Many mothers are not aware of the extra help that their organizations provide, which could help them when they return to work. (Sriram, 2017). A successful return to work following maternity leave depends on supportive policies and practices, but continued efforts are required to remove prejudice and enhance information about available support networks. Working mothers can attain a sustainable work life balance with the support of these strategies. Although women in passive job types do not believe that work place policies are adaptable or open to constructive dialogue, active job types use hybrid techniques to negotiate maternity leave regulations (Buzzanell, 2024). The studies also reveal that there must be more research to be done on structural opportunities and constraints to negotiate work family policies and practices. There must be more discussions and workshops to be held to educate details about the advantages and benefits of training in beneficial interaction for employee's health and well-being,

### ***Current Trends in Maternity Leave Practices***

Policies regarding maternity leave differ greatly between nations. Significant international variances were highlighted by the fact that 64.44% of the female surgeons from 53 countries surveyed had access to paid paternal leave (Walsh et.al. 2019). Although most nations offer some kind of maternity protection, there are differences in how these laws are implemented and whether international norms like the ILO maternity protection convention are followed (Addati et al., 2014). Better maternal and new born health outcomes, such as lower rates of hospitalization and enhanced mental and stress management, are linked to paid maternity leave (Aitken et al., 2015). Younger mothers, black and Hispanic mothers and mothers with less education are less likely to use paid maternity leave in the United States. Additionally, utilization rates are lower in other occupations (Hawkins, 2020). A legally binding regulation that provides for atleast 14 weeks of maternity leave with variable income replacement coverage and a minimum of two weeks of paid parental leave are both required in the European Union. (European Parliament, 2022). There are notable differences and variances in maternity leave policies around the world. Despite the fact that paid maternity leave is associated with better health outcomes, access and implementation are still uneven. Globally, mother and child health outcomes could be improved by addressing these discrepancies and strengthening policy enforcement.

### ***Health and Wellbeing***

Maternity leave, which offers time for recuperation and bonding, is essential to the health of both mothers and children. Research provides evidences that Paid maternity leave has a significant impact on habits that promote health and physical well-being. The implementation of paid maternity leave in Norway encouraged healthy habits like exercising and quitting smoking while also improving a number of health outcomes such as blood pressure, BMI and pain (Butikofer et al., 2021). Furthermore, mothers who took paid leave were more likely to exercise and manage their stress and they were also less likely to be readmitted to the hospital (Jou et al., 2018). Children also benefit from maternity leave in terms of their health. Reduced newborn mortality, fewer readmissions and better compliance with pediatric checkups and vaccinations are all linked to paid leave (Van Niel et al., 2020). Therefore, maximizing health outcomes require a balanced approach to leave duration.

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Hence in order to support mothers and their children's health and wellbeing leave is essential. The availability and the length of paid leave have a big impact on physical and mental health results, which emphasizes the need for international standards and supportive policies.

### **Major Findings**

Review conducted using 20 studies on the work place experience and work life balance of women's after maternity leave shows that returning to work is a complicated process that requires many adaptations and obstacles to be sorted out. There are several areas identified where additional research and development could be made, so that it helps to improve the professional experience and personal life balance of working mothers of new born. According to the studies reviewed, there must be more studies that focuses on enhancing work place support, flexible scheduling, policy communication and tackling the emotional difficulties and biases experienced by women returning to work following maternity leave. According to the studies reviewed, there are still underlying prejudices and misconceptions regarding women's dedication after maternity leave. More research could examine how these prejudices can have an impact on women's professional advancement and how organizations can lessen them. Another issue that requires investigation is the interactions between childcare arrangements and how they affect the process of returning to work. Policy changes should be made by understanding of how various childcare options affect mother's professional and family balance. To properly customize support systems, more research must be conducted on specific industries especially medical professionals and other demanding occupations. Future research can help develop more effective measures that improve the well-being and job satisfaction of working mothers returning back after delivery and maternity leave.

### **CONCLUSION**

The experiences and well-being of women returning to work following maternity leave were examined in this narrative literature review. Maternity leave's detrimental effects on career advancement and general job satisfaction can be lessening with the help of organized re-entry programmes and effective employer employee communication. There should be more studies that examine mother's long term professional outcomes and assess the efficacy of different organizational treatments. More information and understanding can be obtained by looking at how corporate culture and peer support affect the experience of returning to work. Organizations should adopt a holistic approach in supporting the welfare and returning of mothers of newborn after maternity leave. Organizations should make changes as the employee welfare is closely related do cooperate productivity. This narrative literature emphasizes the significance of tackling the problems faced by women in work place after maternity leave. This also shows that organization continues to lack all-encompassing plans for providing women with appropriate support. This disparity suggests that in order to promote a more inclusive workplace, additional research and evidence based initiatives are needed.

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