

## Role of Maternity Leave: Working Mothers and Psychological Wellbeing

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological well-being is an essential part of understanding various aspects of women's lives, including work and family. The study empirically investigates the impact of maternity leaves on various dimensions of psychological well-being. The sample consists of 76 working mothers with 7-8 hours of work and children aged 0-2 years were studied using Carol Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale in Delhi NCR. The t statistics were employed for the analysis. The findings suggest that there was a significant difference on 2 out of 7 dimensions namely Autonomy and the Personal Growth among those who could or couldn't avail maternity leaves, exploring the importance of environmental factors, family and care giver support, self-concept and level of education other than the availability of maternity leaves. The study belongs to the organisational discipline of psychology. This research opens the avenue for exploring the impact of workplace dynamics in collectivistic cultures like India and can help to understand that a change from being a woman to a mother can be emotionally distressing.

**Keywords:** *Psychological Well-Being, Working Mothers, Maternity Leave*

Motherhood denotes the art of nurturing and loving someone from the deepest corner of the heart without expecting anything in return. Women over the millennia have been displaying their effective skills and abilities in wide arenas within the society and due to the multiple roles played by the women they tend to have shouldered more responsibilities, are pressured by time which in turn increases their risk to acute and in some cases chronic health issues. The stress in these roles increases when there is an unequal distribution of the household responsibilities or the being a sole member in child rearing enhancing the issues faced by women due to lack of self-care.

In a woman's life motherhood is considered to be vigorous, life changing, and a permanent shift. A change from being a woman to a mother can be emotionally distressing. The physiological changes are not the only reason for anxiety and stress; worry and curiosity linked with children also contribute to it. After the birth of a child, mothers tend to lose their self-confidence as they compare themselves with others and feel like they are not good mothers, or they are incapable of taking care of their child. From the fear of being judged by

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other mothers or society, they tend to lose their social confidence and avoid attending any functions or programs. (Fontein-Kuipers et al., 2021)

The feeling of inadequacy has contributed to low self-esteem, self-efficacy and development of negative thoughts related to maternal identity. All these disturbing thoughts can affect mothers emotional state and psychological well-being which sometimes lead to postnatal depression or traumatic birth experiences. The postpartum mental health problems can include chronic, mental health effects which can lead to maladaptive maternal behaviour. Motherhood is regarded as a precious, joyful, blissful and gratifying feeling but for some mothers parenting or nurturing a child can involve feelings of guilt or stress. Due to the reduced psychological well-being, a mother can experience negative, paradoxical or ambivalent feelings towards motherhood. The poor emotional state or reduced psychological well-being of a mother can be caused due to changes in relationships, social context or experiencing a loss of financial freedom.

The types of support that are significant for the new mothers range from parental support, emotional support, affirmative support and material support to social and professional support. Social support along with the professional support have positive impacts on the mothers as they tend to be high on self-esteem, making them feel prepared with a sense of coherence. Having good social support can help in strengthening the relationship of the new parents and the mothers' bond with their children.

Workplaces also are entitled to support the new mothers by providing tangible or measurable aids, for example providing childcare centres or creche, leaves from the office or sometimes flexible hours with the recent facility of work from home so that the mothers can be healthier and more productive.

According to Diener (2000) the support provided to the new mothers can prove to be beneficial as new mothers develop higher well-being, feeling happier and healthier, live longer, increase productivity, self-control and develop good communication and organisational skills along with an interest in the social activities and relations.

There are different types of leaves that are provided for the new mothers in different sectors of work; these include parental leave, maternity leave and adoption leave. Maternity leave (paid or unpaid) is said to cover various periods starting from the before, during and after the birth of the child. The paid maternity leave benefits the mothers with the sense of financial security and strengthens their relationships along with their mental wellbeing. Mandal (2018) studied the effects of the paid maternity leave on the mental health of mothers. The study establishes that those who returned early to their work had an elevated negative psychological effect than others.

Maternity leave as a crucial aspect acts as an aid to the new mothers. It refers to a period where a mother takes a back step from work and takes an off to take care of themselves and their children. This period may usually involve the period from prenatal to the postpartum care of both the child and the mother. The leaves may be granted at different time periods i.e. the period of expectant mothers or mothers who have lately given birth. These may be of two types: paid or unpaid. The paid leaves are referred to as the leaves for which the mothers are paid, while the unpaid refer to the leaves for which they do not get paid. Psychological well-being refers to the healthy functioning and living of an individual in terms of their mental health which may include their emotional, social and cognitive wellbeing. The attainment of

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wellbeing in its essence is seen to be directly related to the attainment of happiness. Cooklin et al. (2008) studied entitlements and conditions of employees and the well-being of mothers and reported adversities at the workplace are directly related to the poor psychological well-being of mothers because of lack of leaves or displacement from their jobs and loss of their positions at work. The subject matter of this study could be of importance to various fields of psychology like social, organisational, health psychology and gender psychology. There may be many kinds of well-being which may include physical wellbeing, psychological well-being, financial well-being, social wellbeing etc. The well-being of an individual is an important topic in today's time. Psychological well-being of an individual refers to the state of mental and emotional health. Through the years it is noticed that there has been very less focus on the well-being of women in general and to a large extent the well-being of the new mothers is researched and studied upon even less. Women during prenatal period and after their child birth tend to face a challenging transition which affects their lives in countless ways. If the women or mothers are working then this transition becomes much more difficult and at this time greater support and guidance is needed. In countries like India this topic has not been explored and thus there seems to be a need for more research to understand the changes that are needed in various workplaces and organisations and the perspective of the society. This study highlights the mental state of the working mothers with infants and the kind of support that these mothers need. The aim of the study is to explore the relationship between maternity leave and the psychological well-being of new working mothers using the Carol Ryff scale of psychological well-being.

### ***Objectives***

Based on the aim of understanding the role of maternity leave on the psychological well-being of new mothers the objectives include-

1. To examine the level of autonomy among mothers with and without maternity leave.
2. To assess the degree of environmental mastery among mothers with and without maternity leave.
3. To measure the extent of personal growth experienced by mothers with and without maternity leave.
4. To evaluate the quality of positive relations among mothers with maternity leave versus those without.
5. To investigate the sense of purpose in life among mothers with and without maternity leave.
6. To assess the level of self-acceptance among mothers with maternity leave compared to those without.

### ***Hypothesis***

1. Ho: There is no significant difference between the degree of autonomy among mothers with and without maternity leave
2. Ho: There is no significant difference between the degree of environmental mastery among mothers with or without maternity leave
3. Ho: There is no significant difference between the degree of personal growth among mothers with or without maternity leave.
4. Ho: There is no significant difference between the degree of positive relations among mothers with or without maternity leave
5. Ho: There is no significant difference between the degree of sense of purpose in life among mothers with or without maternity leave
6. Ho: There is no significant difference between the degree of self-acceptance among mothers with or without maternity leave.

### **METHOD**

#### *Design*

The study aims to assess the effect of maternity leave on the mental well-being of new mothers in the workplace. This study's nature will be designed as quantitative, exploratory, comparative and cross sectional. The variables studied in this research will include the nature of leave as independent variable and mental wellbeing as dependent variable. Exploratory research on a small scale will be conducted to understand whether the instructions and items of the scale are clear to participants.

#### *Sampling*

The sample was selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The sample size is 76 (38 mothers with maternity leave and 38 without maternity leave), with 7-8 working hours and children aged between 0-2 years. The criteria for maternity leave was 6 or more months. The mother should have only one child.

#### *Tools and measures*

To assess the difference between the well-being of working mothers who were entitled maternity leave of 6 months vs those who weren't, Carol Ryff scale of psychological well-being was used to analyse.

#### *Psychological well-being scale*

Carol Ryff's psychological well-being scale (1989), a Likert scale consisting of 18 questions was put to work to assess 6 broad dimensions of well-being namely self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, life purpose and personal growth to assess overall well-being. The scale focuses on a holistic perspective of functioning. The reliability of the test was maintained by test-retest reliability and internal consistency reliability. It was reported that the coefficients of Cronbach's range from 0.73 to 0.86.

#### *Procedure*

To study the impact of maternity leave on the psychological well-being of new mothers, seventy-six participants were chosen cautiously with the line of the objective. According to the APA guidelines, a Google form was created, consisting of 3 sections - the informed consent, demographic details, and the items of Carol Ryff's Psychological Well-being scale. The participants were informed about their rights comprising the informed consent and the confidentiality of the data. The instructions for filling out the form were given, with the request to fill it with utmost honesty. The results were then analysed employing the independent t-test. Software like SPSS was used for statistical analysis.

### **RESULTS**

*Table 1 - Description of the sample (Total N= 76)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	
<b>Age of mother</b>	20 - 25	7
	26 - 30	26
	31 - 35	35
	36 - 40	6
	41 - 46	2
	Total	76
<b>Type of Leave</b>	With leave	38
	Without leave	38

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<b>Type of support System</b>	Yes	Family	55
		Society	1
		Caregiver	11
		Other	0
	No		10

**Table 2 - Descriptive Statistics of sample (Total 76)**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>		<b>Standard Deviation</b>		<b>Standard Error</b>	
	With leave	Without leave	With leave	Without leave	With leave	Without leave
<b>Autonomy</b>	11.5789	9.7895	4.15661	3.50411	0.67429	0.56844
<b>Environmental mastery</b>	12.5789	11.7105	2.87233	3.20395	0.46596	0.51975
<b>Personal growth</b>	14.3158	13.1053	3.06775	3.21978	0.49765	0.52232
<b>Positive relations</b>	12.9211	12.9474	3.00793	2.86590	0.48795	0.46491
<b>Purpose in life</b>	14.1842	13.2105	2.85558	2.90533	0.46324	0.47131
<b>Self - acceptance</b>	11.5000	10.9474	3.07343	2.37040	0.49858	0.38453

**Table 3 - Independent Sample t – test (Total N = 76)**

	<b>t statistics</b>	<b>p value</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	2.029	0.046
<b>Environmental mastery</b>	1.244	0.217
<b>Personal growth</b>	1.678	0.098
<b>Positive relations</b>	-0.039	0.969
<b>Purpose in life</b>	1.473	0.145
<b>Self-acceptance</b>	0.878	0.383

Note \*  $t^{crit} = 1.665$   $p < 0.05$ ,  $df = 74$

## **DISCUSSION**

The individual's choice and volition based on their level of knowledge, self-perception, self-determined, perceived independence and ability to curb their actions and thoughts of all social pressures by regulating their behaviour and evaluating themselves by standards they set are described in the Autonomy dimension. Mothers with low autonomy scores are caught in the cycle of expectations and appraisals by others and end up relying on their judgments to make crucial decisions in their lives. The results portray that there was a significant impact of autonomy on mothers who did and did not get maternity leave. Lothian (2008) found that the choices of mothers in decision making depends on various aspects like the degree of knowledge that is possessed by new mothers about their bodies, her covert wisdom, their confidence about their bodies and their own feelings and degree of trust on people around them. Those mothers high on autonomy might have had knowledge about themselves and their children and thus do not conform to the social pressures while there might be many who could not develop the trust and confidence and hence might be low on autonomy. With the rising technology there might be an overload of information about child rearing practices present in the environment which might have led new working mothers to lose their confidence and difficulties to develop trust.

The second dimension is environmental mastery, refers to the capacity to manage the environment effectively, perceiving the environment as being under one's control and

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successfully using opportunities for one's own needs. People low on this dimension miss opportunities and worthy experiences and lack control in the outside environment. Self-efficacy, adaptability and extent of autonomy are various factors that define environmental mastery. Therefore, Environmental Mastery stems from self-perception, high self-efficacy, enhanced sense of independence and high adaptability. These also include extraneous factors like the support of family members or others (maid, colleagues), facilities provided at the workplace and economic stability. The *t* value 1.244 shows no significant difference in their environmental mastery when tested for well-being for the groups (with and without leaves). The collectivistic culture with large extended families that provide extended support blur out the difference in the scores of the impact of maternity leave. The joint and extended family cultures provide emotional and monetary support and share their responsibilities to lessen the burden of new mothers. Thompson and Ensminger (1989) concluded that mothers burdened with responsibilities due to lack of physical and emotional support from family members and society have low scores on psychological well-being. Mothers with greater access to knowledge and parental education classes, enhanced support of their friends, neighbours and religious activities had an enhanced perception of self and mastery over the environment. Fahami et al. (2018) found in the research that those mothers who have low body issues after and during pregnancy have better mental health. Support from caregivers like domestic helpers and elders is prevalent in Indian society, magnifying the perceived environmental mastery. With changing societal norms, social expectations are also reforming, lessening the burden on new mothers. An increasing number of companies now provide benefits to new working mothers with facilities like creches, flexible working hours, child care, support programs, transport facilities and nursing rooms. Encouragement of organisational citizenship behaviour within the organisations helps the new mothers as the colleagues extend their support to the mothers by providing different kinds of support like emotional affirmative instrumental, material and informative support.

The third dimension refers to personal growth which refers to the continuous process of self-improvement, learning and development. It involves new experiences, challenges and opportunities for individual development or expansion. Individuals who are high in personal growth are open-minded, curious for learning, and adaptable. Personal growth in newly mothers includes building resilience to face new challenges, learning new skills, gaining insights about oneself and one's capabilities. Personal growth involves recognising and harnessing internal strengths to face the challenges with courage and determination. The obtained result shows that mothers with maternity leave have better mental well-being than mothers without maternity leave because maternity leave tends to provide mothers with dedicated time and space to focus on their own personal growth and development. According to Waldfogel, et al. (1999) maternity leave allows mothers to engage in activities such as skill-building, education, and self-care that contribute to their personal growth and well-being. Mothers tend to engage in regular exercises, practising mindfulness or meditation, they also seek therapy or counselling. Engaging in activities during maternity leave that promote personal growth contributes to overall well-being and satisfaction in life. Maternity leave provides mothers with time, support, and resources needed to invest in their own development.

The fourth dimension refers to positive relations that reflect the quality of an individual's relationships with others, including their family, friends, and colleagues. It involves qualities such as empathy, compassion, trust, and the ability to establish and maintain meaningful connections with others. People with strong positive relations with others experience emotional support, intimacy, and a sense of belonging, which contribute to their overall well-

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being. New mothers with positive relations involve seeking and providing support, communicating effectively with loved ones, and establishing a nurturing and secure attachment with their child. The result specifies that there is no difference between positive relations of mothers with or without maternity leave and thus, the quality of relationships with society, family is more important than the presence of maternity leave, as relationships with others may be the primary determinant of positive relations among mothers. A Study by Proulx et al. (2007) and Umberson et al. (2010) showed that the quality of relationships, including factors such as intimacy, trust, and communication, is more important than structural factors such as employment status in predicting relationship satisfaction and well-being. Mothers without maternity leave may compensate for the absence of maternity leave by prioritising their relationships and investing time and energy in building positive connections with others.

Purpose in life being the next dimension includes a sense of meaning, direction, and significance in one's existence. It involves setting and pursuing meaningful goals, feeling a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. For many new mothers, finding a purpose in life becomes difficult with their role as a parent. Purpose in life involves identifying goals and aspirations for oneself and for one's family, as well as finding meaning and fulfilment in the daily tasks of caregiving. Whether it's nurturing a loving and supportive family, raising a happy and healthy child, or pursuing personal passions alongside parenthood, having a sense of purpose can sustain new mothers through the challenges of early motherhood. The *t* value 1.473 shows that there is no significant difference between the mothers with maternity leave and mothers without maternity leave. Research by Diener et al. (2010) found that individuals who prioritise intrinsic goals, such as personal growth, relationships, and community involvement, report higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being. If mothers of both groups with or without leave have strong social support networks then they can facilitate a sense of purpose and belonging.

The Sixth dimension assessed in the psychological scale was self - acceptance which involves having a positive attitude towards oneself, including self- respect, self - esteem, and self-worth. Individuals who are high in self- acceptance tend to acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses without having any harsh criticism for themselves. They usually have a realistic and compassionate view which helps them to have inner peace and contentment. Self-acceptance in newly mothers involves accepting both the joys and challenges of motherhood and having compassion to cope with the inevitable ups and downs. The result shows no difference between the mothers with maternity leave and mothers without maternity leave. Maternity leave may contribute to self-acceptance but its impact may be relatively modest compared to other factors.

From the above discussed results it can be concluded that the factors of psychological well-being among mothers were impacted and benefit from all types of support as it decreases the level of stress, feelings of anxiety and depression and enables them to view child rearing as manageable, satisfactory, meaningful and joyful which is important for the development of a child (Bäckström, 2018) Other factors like education, support, self-concept are more important rather than the availability of the leaves.

This study accomplishes to provide a valuable insight to our understanding of the psychological wellbeing of new working mothers with respect to the leaves provided to them in the Indian context. Due to lack of research in collectivist cultures, this research opens new

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arenas for research on the wellbeing of the new working mothers with infants in the Indian context.

This research also provides some limitations including - Lack of considerations of the workplace factors like the position at which the women are working and the concerns in relation to them along with the dynamics of the workplace including how the mothers are treated or the organization's culture along the amount of leave might also have influenced the research. Narrowing it to the Delhi NCR region only and the size of the sample could also pose challenges to the result of the study by reducing its power of in-depth analysis and increasing the potential barriers to the innovation.

On the ground of the potential limitations, some of the suggestions for further research might include-

The exploration of the variables supplementing the environment of new mothers like workplace culture, job satisfaction and the kind of their support systems along with their personality characteristics could also be done. Usage of advanced statistical tools like using correlation, regression could be useful for better analytical power along with providing insights into the factors that are causal and the mediating. Cross sectional study across various industries or geographical locations with unique workplace dynamics is useful for expanding the learnings. Longitudinal studies and research design could allow for deeper exploration of the long-term effects and the implications. Qualitative research techniques like interviews, focus group studies can offer rich narratives and deeper understanding on the topic. Similar studies should be conducted for larger samples with expanded geographical regions.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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