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Sustainable inclusion in the workplace: The role of HR and leadership in empowering women post maternity leave

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Abstract
Purpose: This study explores the role of Human Resource (HR) practices and inclusive leadership in empowering women returning to the workforce post-maternity leave.
Design/methodology/approach: Anchored in Social Role Theory and Gender Role Congruity Theory, this mixed-methods study analyses responses from 40 women in the teaching and corporate sectors in Karnataka using descriptive statistics.
Findings: Results highlight significant gaps in policy implementation, inadequate HR support, and inconsistent leadership involvement. Childcare challenges, inflexible work arrangements, and lack of reintegration programs emerged as key barriers.
Practical implications: Effective reintegration requires empathetic leadership, flexible work policies, sector-specific interventions, and enhanced HR support structures.
Originality/value: This study contributes to the discourse on gender inclusion by offering a context-specific examination of post-maternity workplace reintegration in India.

Keywords: HR Policies, maternity leave, inclusive leadership, work-life balance, sustainable inclusion

1. Introduction

Striving for gender fairness and fostering inclusivity within an organization has gained more relevance in recent years. Women experience many hurdles through their career journeys, but returning from a maternity leave poses distinct personal, professional, and sociocultural challenges. Regardless of the policies in place that encourage taking maternity leave, numerous women face struggles while attempting to rejoin work owing to discrimination, inadequate support structures, and few clear paths to advancement. The practices within Human Resource (HR) departments and how leaders conduct themselves significantly determine whether women are included post-maternity leave subsidized by organizational culture. Economic inclusion is more than mere compliance with organizational policy; an ecosystem where mothers are welcomed and is empowered to make a meaningful contribution to organizational goals. Economically sustainable pathways to employment include the provision of flexible working schedules, support in redefining their professional roles, and mentoring that ensures respect and empathy. This research analyses in detail the role that strategic HR measures and inclusion-driven leadership are employed to foster the sustainable recovery of women into work roles after maternity leave. It addresses the systemic and societal set factors that aid success after maternity sabbaticals and outlines suggested actions for organizations to achieve sustainable gender-inclusive development.

Gender equity and inclusion have emerged as strategic priorities for organizations. While maternity leave policies have advanced, women face significant barriers upon re-entry to the workforce. These barriers manifest in role reassignments, limited flexibility, career stagnation, and psychological stress. Post-maternity inclusion requires robust HR policies and committed leadership to foster long-term, sustainable career paths for women. Workplace gender equity has become a strategic priority for organizations worldwide. Despite legal advancements such as India's Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017, many women face substantial barriers to rejoining the workforce after maternity leave.

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These challenges are exacerbated by inconsistent HR support, limited flexibility, and cultural biases. This research investigates the role of HR practices and leadership in promoting sustainable inclusion post-maternity. By focusing on women in Karnataka's teaching and corporate sectors, it seeks to provide empirical evidence on policy effectiveness and organizational practices.

2. Review of Literature
2.1 Role of HR Policies and Leadership
Sil and Lenka (2024) [13] emphasize mentorship, flexible work schedules, and promotion transparency as critical to reintegration. Inclusive leadership also enhances corporate innovation and supports returning mothers (Research in International Business and Finance, 2024) [10].

Furthermore, gender-diverse leadership teams are more likely to support corporate and green innovation, according to a study published in Research in International Business and Finance (2024) [10]. According to this research, inclusive leadership helps returning mothers and advances the performance of the company as a whole.

2.2 Barriers to Inclusion Post-Maternity Leave
Arena *et al*. (2023) [2] and Rezai *et al*. (2023) [11] identify attitudinal barriers and training exclusions as persistent challenges. These are often rooted in organizational biases against working mothers.

A scoping assessment by Rezai *et al*. (2023) [11] found that organizational-level attitudinal barriers, like prejudice and preconceptions, are major obstacles to workplace inclusion. According to the report, supporting HR procedures and inclusive leadership are essential for removing these obstacles.

2.3 Intersectionality and Broader Implications
Science Direct (2023) [12] and initiatives like the UK's Family Friendly Workplaces highlight the need for intersectional approaches and sector-specific interventions (Baker & Kelan, 2019) [3].

2.4 Global Perspectives and Initiatives
Aiming to integrate family-friendly policies into businesses, the UK-based program "Family Friendly Workplaces" acknowledges the social and economic advantages of assisting working mothers. Businesses have benefited greatly from flexible working rules, which have been demonstrated to increase staff retention and productivity.

According to Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, and Shockley (2013) [1], telecommuting choices, flexible work schedules, and phased return plans are essential for a seamless transition.

The reintegration to work following the maternity leave is one of the most important milestones in a women's career path because this usually dictates the level of commitment towards the organization, career advancement, and other factors that matter deeply in the future. It is well understood that any lack of support at this level would result in low engagement, dissatisfaction, and even high attrition (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011) [9]. The "motherhood penalty" (Correll *et al*., 2007) [5] leads to reduced leadership opportunities. Kabeer (2005) [8] frames empowerment as the ability to access and utilize resources effectively, underscoring the need for enabling organizational structures. These prejudices highlight the value of inclusive HR procedures and leadership

development programs that aggressively combat preconceptions and create fair performance evaluations.

While there has been an increase in policies allowing maternity leave, the concern lies within the women's re-entry facing culture and structural aspects of the society (Hewlett & Luce, 2005) [7].

Objectives of the study
- To examine psychological, institutional, and cultural obstacles faced by women returning to work post-maternity.
- To analyse maternity leave policy implementation and accessibility.
- To evaluate employee perceptions of empowerment and HR/leadership support.

- **Statement of the problem**
Although there are policies in place, they are frequently not implemented in a way that empowers returning mothers and fosters an inclusive environment. In addition to having an impact on employee retention and morale, the discrepancy between policy and practice also jeopardizes organizational goals for gender equity. In order to ensure that women's return to the workforce is encouraged, valued, and incorporated into long-term career development plans, this study tackles the urgent need to investigate how HR procedures and leadership conduct can play a transformative role in promoting sustainable inclusion for women after maternity leave. Despite progressive maternity leave policies, implementation gaps persist. Many organizations lack structured reintegration programs and supportive leadership, leading to disengagement and attrition among returning mothers. This study addresses the need to bridge policy and practice through inclusive HR leadership.

- **Scope of the study**
This study's focus is on investigating how HR procedures and leadership can promote long-term inclusion for women who return to the workforce following maternity leave. Targeting female employees from the corporate and teaching sectors who have returned to work after maternity leave, the study will be carried out in the Tumkur and Bangalore regions of Karnataka. Structured questionnaires will be used to gather primary data in order to comprehend their reintegration experiences, difficulties, and the degree of leadership and organizational support they received. To further enhance the analysis and add contextual depth, secondary data from already published works, policy documents, organizational reports, and pertinent databases will be used.

6. Research Methodology
6.1 Research Design
A descriptive, mixed-methods approach was used with purposive sampling. Forty women from teaching and corporate sectors who had returned to work post-maternity were surveyed.

6.2 Data Collection Methods
Structured questionnaires captured both qualitative and quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, including pie charts and frequency analysis, were used for interpretation.
Secondary Data: Obtained from reputable online databases, government and non-governmental publications, HR policy

documents, organizational reports, and scholarly journals.

6.3 Sampling Method
A purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants who meet the criteria, women employees in the teaching and corporate sectors who have availed maternity leave and returned to work.

6.4 Data Analysis
Pie charts and bar graphs were utilized to present the frequency distribution and percentage responses to closed-ended questions, offering clear visual insights into trends such as HR support levels, leadership encouragement, and post-maternity challenges.

6.5 Justification of Sample Size: A sample size of 40 respondents was considered appropriate for the exploratory nature of this study. The following factors justify the choice:
- **Focused Population:** The study targets a specific demographic women who returned to work post-maternity which naturally limits the available sample pool.
- **Exploratory Design:** The research aims to identify themes and perceptions rather than draw generalizable conclusions, making a smaller sample suitable.
- **Sectoral Representation:** The sample includes voices from both corporate and teaching sectors.
- **Resource Constraints:** The study was conducted within time, logistical, and access limitations.
- **Foundation for Future Research:** The findings offer preliminary insights that can inform larger, future studies.

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017 provides the legal framework.
- **Extension of Maternity Leave:** Maternity leave increased from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for women with fewer than two children. For women with two or more children, the leave remains 12 weeks (6 weeks pre-delivery, 6 weeks post-delivery).
- **Inclusion of Commissioning and Adoptive Mothers:** Commissioning mothers and adoptive mothers of children below 3 months are entitled to 12 weeks of maternity leave from the date the child is handed over.
- **Work from Home Option:** Women may work from home after maternity leave if the nature of work allows, upon mutual agreement with the employer.
- **Crèche Facility:** Every establishment with 50 or more employees must provide a crèche facility within a prescribed distance. Women employees are allowed four visits per day to the crèche, including rest intervals.
- **Employer's Duty to Inform:** Employers must inform women, at the time of appointment (in writing and electronically), about the maternity benefits available under the Act.
- **Effective Dates:** Most provisions came into force on 1st April 2017, while the work-from-home provision came into force on 1st July 2017.

Implementation in the Corporate Sector
- **Extended Leave:** A few employers provide leave in excess of the legally required 26 weeks.

- **Paternity Leave:** To encourage shared parenting, paternity leave regulations were introduced.
- **Flexible work arrangements:** Choices such as remote work after maternity leave, flexible scheduling, or part-time employment.
- **Return-to-Work Programs:** Efforts to assist women in returning to the workforce, such as training and mentoring.

6.6 Data Interpretation
A Structured questionnaire was shared to working Women of different age categories who are married and have children with a work experience of several years and had availed maternity leave from the organization both corporate and teaching sector.

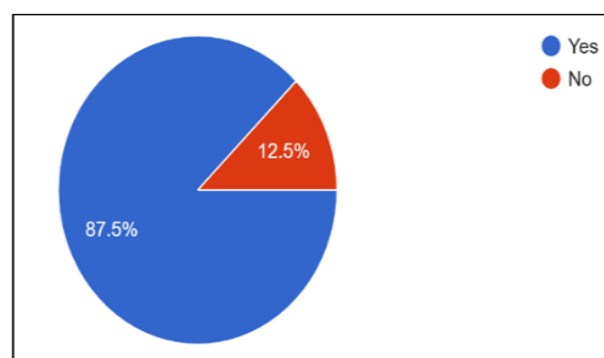**Was your Job role retained after your return?**

Fig 1: Retention of Job Role Post-Maternity Leave

According to the poll, 87.5% of women returned from maternity leave with their jobs, demonstrating broad adherence to the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017's legislative requirements. Nonetheless, 12.5% of those surveyed said that after returning, their employment duties changed. Addressing Objective 1 of the study, which focuses on the challenges women face during maternity leave, requires an understanding of this conclusion. Additionally, this outcome is related to Objective 2, which looks at how employees perceive inclusion. (Source: Author's own work)

Rate your experience during the maternity leave process
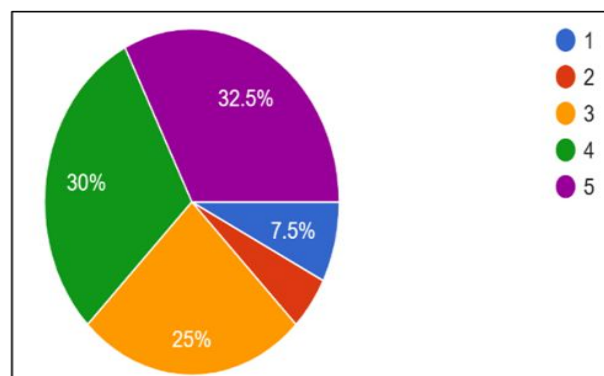

Fig 2: Employee experience during maternity leave process

Most respondents offered positive ratings when asked to rate their experience with the maternity leave process on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (outstanding). In particular, 30%

thought their experience was good (4), and 32.5% thought it was great (5). 62.5% of people had a good experience overall. However, 15% of respondents (7.5% rated 1 and 7.5% rated 2) had a terrible or extremely poor experience, while 25% provided a neutral rating (3). Regarding Objective 3 of the study, which examines the maternity leave laws that apply to Indian women, this distribution offers a complex perspective. (Source: Author's own work)

Did your organization provide flexible work arrangements after maternity leave?
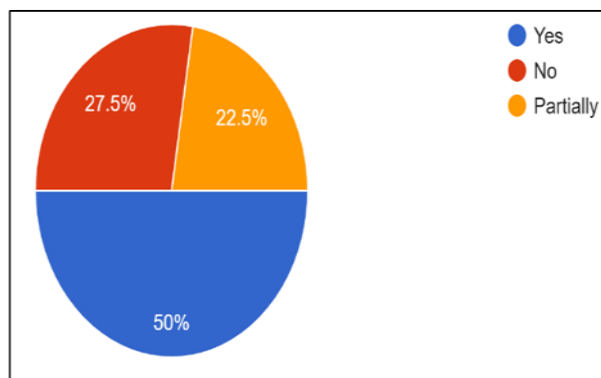

Fig 3: Availability of flexible work arrangements post-maternity leave

After maternity leave, half of the respondents (50%) stated their company had flexible work schedules; the other 27.5% disagreed, and 22.5% only had partial freedom. Given that a typical barrier to women's reintegration into the workforce is a lack of flexibility, this finding is important for Objective 1. It also pertains to Objective 2, emphasising that although some organisations advocate for post-maternity inclusion, a significant number still do not, which may have an impact on women's work-life balance and sense of empowerment. Partial or non-existent flexibility suggests that more uniform and inclusive policies are required. (Source: Author's own work)

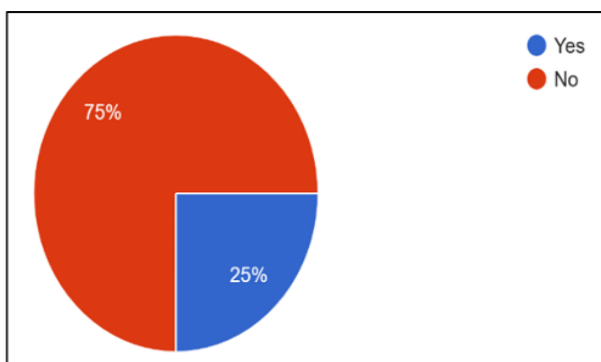**Were you given access to any orientation or re-integration program?**

Fig 4: Access to orientation or reintegration programs

After returning from maternity leave, only 25% of respondents said they had access to an orientation or reintegration programme; a noteworthy 75% said they had no such help. This draws attention to a significant weakness in organisational procedures, which is closely related to the study's Objectives 1 and 2. For returning mothers, the

absence of organised reintegration initiatives might present difficulties that affect their self-esteem, adaptability, and sense of belonging. It highlights how HR and leadership must put helpful transition programmes into place to help women re-enter the workforce more easily and stay there for the long run. (Source: Author's own work)

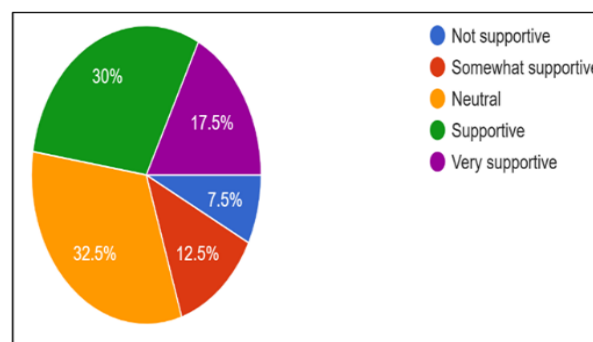**How Supportive was HR department during your transition back to work**

Fig 5: HR support during transition back to work

Thirty percent of respondents said that HR was supportive during their return to work, and seventeen percent said that HR was very supportive. Nonetheless, 20% (combined) said HR was either not supportive or only moderately supportive, while 32.5% were neutral. These conflicting answers show that HR procedures vary from company to company. While some women felt empowered, others encountered apathy or inadequate assistance, which may have affected their post-maternity reintegration and involvement in the workplace. (Source: Author's own work)

Are there any specific HR policies for supporting women, post maternity in your organization?
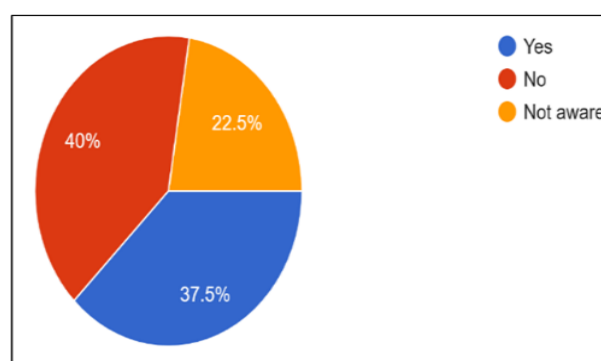

Fig 6: Existence of specific HR policies for post-maternity support

37.5% of respondents who were asked if their company had any special HR policies in place to assist mothers after giving birth admitted that they did. However, 22.5% were not aware of any such policies, while a slightly higher 40% indicated that there were none. This disparity in implementation and awareness points to a lack of uniform support systems throughout organisations. The information shows a crucial realisation that is in line with Goal 2, highlighting the necessity of transparent communication and uniform regulatory frameworks to provide postpartum assistance for women in the workplace. (Source: Author's own work).

Were you encouraged and motivated to continue your career by leadership
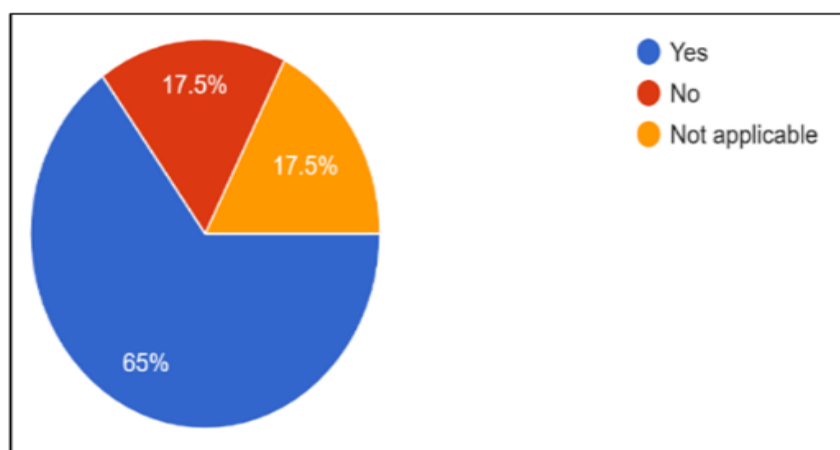

Fig 7: Leadership encouragement to continue career post-maternity

According to the poll, a sizable majority of participants 65% felt that leadership inspired and motivated them to pursue jobs beyond maternity leave. But 17.5% of respondents said they didn't receive any such support, and another 17.5% said the question didn't apply to their circumstances. According to these data, although many employees view leadership to be beneficial, a sizable percentage of workers either lack encouragement or do not believe that leadership is involved in career support. This demonstrates a chance for organisations to increase leadership involvement in order to guarantee inclusive and long-term career advancement for returning mothers. (Source: Author's own work)

What Challenges did you face while returning to your work after maternity leave?
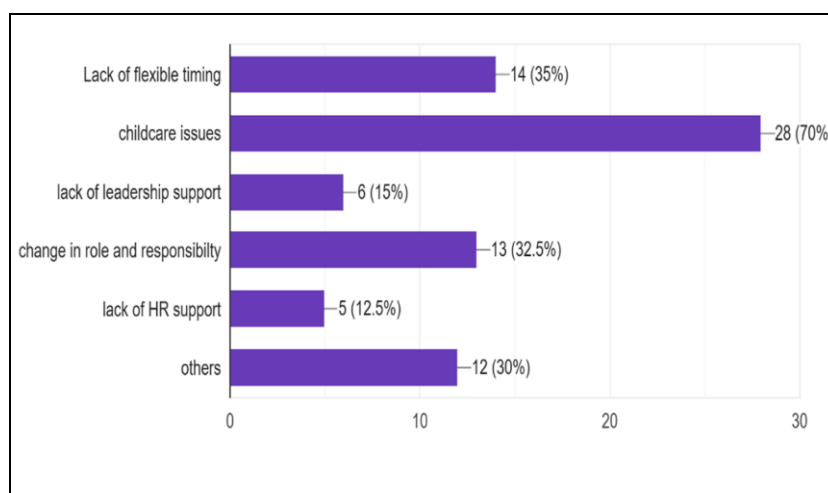

Fig 8: Challenges faced on returning to work post-maternity leave

According to the survey's findings, 70% of participants reported that childcare concerns were the most frequent obstacle they encountered when they returned to work following maternity leave. Lack of flexibility in scheduling (35%), position and duty changes (32.5%), and unidentified "other" difficulties (30%) were other noteworthy obstacles. A smaller but significant percentage of participants said they did not have leadership support (15%) or HR support (12.5%). These findings imply that even with organisational regulations in place, many mothers continue to face logistical and structural challenges that make it difficult for them to return to work. (Source: Author's own work)

7. Findings and Suggestions
7.1 Findings
- **HR Support Perception:** During their return to work, only 47.5% of respondents said the HR division was helpful or extremely helpful. A sizable percentage (32.5%) had no opinion, while almost 20% thought the support was insufficient.
- **Awareness of HR Policies:** Just 37.5% of respondents said that there were HR policies in place to assist mothers after giving birth. Sadly, there was a communication gap as 22.5% were not aware of such policies and 40% disputed their existence.
- **Leadership Encouragement:** A favourable top-down support was demonstrated by the encouraging 65% who felt inspired by leadership to pursue their jobs after motherhood.
- **Key challenges:** The main obstacles encountered were childcare concerns (70%), lack of schedule flexibility (35%), and role/responsibility changes (32.5%). HR support (12.5%) and a lack of leadership (15%) were smaller but noteworthy problems

Themes for open-ended feedback
- **Flexibility:** Particularly in the first several months following return, there have been repeated requests for decreased work hours, work-from-home choices, and flexible scheduling.
- **Childcare Support:** On-site or assisted childcare arrangements are required.

Orientation and Mental Health assistance
- **Accountability and Monitoring:** Calls for more HR participation to ensure equitable treatment and lessen prejudice.
- **Sector-Specific Needs:** Suggestions emphasized the need for tailored HR interventions in sectors like education, where teaching schedules are rigid.

7.2 Suggestions
- Introduce or Strengthen HR Policies
- Enable Flexible Work Arrangements
- Improve Childcare Support
- Conduct Reorientation Programs
- Encourage Leadership Involvement
- Tailor Support to Industry Needs
- Recognize that sectors like education may need specific accommodations (e.g., substitute teachers during extended transitions).

8. Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited by its small sample size and regional focus. Future research should expand to multiple states and incorporate longitudinal designs for tracking career trajectories post-maternity.

9. Conclusion

While leadership encouragement is a positive takeaway, significant challenges such as childcare issues, lack of flexible timings, and inadequate HR support persist. Respondents emphasized the importance of flexibility, mental health support, and organizational empathy in easing the transition. Addressing these concerns through structured policies and supportive workplace practices is essential for promoting gender equity and retaining talented women in the workforce.

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