

# Constructive Bharat: Postpartum Returnee and Board of vicissitudes: An Outline of the Corporate Settings

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## Abstract

A significant proportion of women experience health and emotional challenges upon re-entering the workforce after maternity leave. Physical complications from pregnancy and the duration of maternity leave notably influence their health during this transition. Employers have a vested interest in addressing these unique needs, as unaddressed postpartum health issues can lead to absenteeism, decreased productivity, and increased turnover. Implementing supportive measures—such as flexible work arrangements, comprehensive health benefits, and dedicated support programs—can be cost-effective in the long run. Such initiatives not only enhance employee well-being but also help attract and retain the diverse talents and skills that women contribute to the workforce, fostering increased profitability, productivity, and innovation. The present paper highlights the challenges, inclusive approach by the companies in India to promote optimistic support system and environment for female employees returning to work postpartum and the present bittersweet scenario of the same in corporate settings in India.

**Keywords:** Women experience, emotional challenges, maternity leave, transition, flexible, comprehensive, fostering, productivity, innovation.

## 1. Introduction

The postpartum period (immediately after delivery to 42 days later) is critical for mothers, involving significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes. A female is subjected to enormous stress and strain due to the evolving lifestyle, changes in her current day routine which in turn influences her mental conditions and physical as well. Psychological health issues during this time include:

1. **Postpartum blues:** It is a common, minor adjustment disorder that resolves within weeks with family support and lifestyle changes.
2. **Postpartum psychosis:** A rare but serious condition (prevalence: 0.89–2.6 per 1,000 births) that begins within four weeks postpartum and requires hospitalization.
3. **Postpartum depression (PPD):** It Affects 10–15% of mothers globally and 22% in India. It often goes undiagnosed and untreated, with significant consequences for both mother and infant. PPD may emerge immediately postpartum or follow antenatal depression, necessitating timely treatment.

Postpartum period is a critical period in women's life during which she undergoes wide range of emotional changes. Many studies highlight critical challenges faced by working mothers in India's corporate sector, reflecting deep-rooted issues in workplace equity and inclusion. Few of them include:

**1. Maternity Penalty:**

- A staggering 75% of working mothers experienced a career setback of 1-2 years upon returning from maternity leave.
- This delay in career progression underscores systemic biases and a lack of support for mothers re-entering the workforce.

**2. Impact on Pay:**

- Nearly 40% of respondents reported that taking maternity leave negatively affected their compensation. This suggests persistent inequities in how women are rewarded for their contributions.

**3. Unwanted Role Changes:**

- Many women returned to altered roles or assignments they did not prefer, indicating a disregard for their career aspirations and expertise.

These findings display the stand organizations need to take and to implement robust policies supporting working mothers, such as flexible work arrangements, re-skilling programs, mentorship opportunities, and unbiased pay reviews. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable corporate environment.

In India, the integration of postpartum employees into corporate settings is governed by the **Maternity Benefit Act, 1961**, which has undergone significant amendments to enhance support for working mothers. The Act mandates that organizations employing at least 10 individuals provide 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for the first two children, and 12 weeks for subsequent births. To be eligible, a woman must have worked for her employer for at least 80 days in the 12 months preceding the expected delivery date. Despite these legal provisions, challenges persist in the corporate landscape. Reports indicate that women often undertake extensive measures to ensure their safety during commutes and within workplaces, reflecting broader societal issues that impact their professional lives. Additionally, instances of overwork and inadequate protections for white-collar employees have been highlighted, underscoring the need for comprehensive workplace policies that address the well-being of all employees, including postpartum mothers. To foster a more inclusive environment, it is imperative for organizations to not only comply with statutory requirements but also to implement supportive measures such as flexible working arrangements, on-site childcare facilities, and robust safety protocols. These initiatives can significantly aid postpartum employees in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities, contributing to a more equitable and productive workforce.

**2. Theoretical background**

In examining the experiences of postpartum employees within corporate settings in India, several theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights:

**1. Gender Role Theory**

This theory explores how societal norms, and cultural expectations define and reinforce behaviors considered appropriate for different genders. In the Indian corporate context, traditional gender roles often dictate that women shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities, which can influence their professional trajectories and workplace experiences. Research indicates that these societal expectations can lead to challenges for new mothers balancing work and family duties. The theory stems from sociological

frameworks, particularly functionalism, which viewed gender roles as essential for the smooth functioning of society. Talcott Parsons (1950s) emphasized that traditional gender roles (men as breadwinners, women as caregivers) were critical for family stability and societal balance

## 2. Post-Modern Feminist Theory

It is a philosophical movement that emerged in the mid-20th century, questioning universal truths, objectivity, and binary oppositions (e.g., male/female, reason/emotion). Thinkers like Jacques Derrida (deconstruction) and Michel Foucault (power dynamics) deeply influenced postmodern feminist thought. Post-modern feminist theory advocates for egalitarian and non-exploitative practices across various domains, including the workplace and domestic settings. It challenges traditional power structures and seeks to deconstruct established norms that perpetuate gender inequalities. In the context of corporate India, this perspective emphasizes the need for organizational policies that support gender equity, such as flexible work arrangements and parental leave, to aid new mothers in their professional roles.

## 3. Social Support Theory

The concept of social support gained prominence in psychology, sociology, and public health during the 1970s and 1980s. Early studies linked social networks to improved health outcomes and reduced mortality rates. Rooted in stress and coping research, particularly the work of Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, social support was identified as a key factor in buffering stress and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms. John Cassel (1976), Cobb's Theory (1976), House's Typology (1981), Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Model (1984) contributed to the theory. The framework underscores the importance of support systems—comprising family, friends, and workplace resources—in influencing an individual's ability to cope with stressors. For postpartum employees, the availability of social support is crucial in managing the dual demands of work and motherhood. Studies have shown that adequate support can mitigate stress and enhance job satisfaction among working mothers.

## 4. Psychological Contract Theory

Argyris (1960) introduced the term “psychological contract”, Levinson et al. (1962) elaborated on the concept focusing on the employee's perception of mutual obligations in the employment relationship, Denise & Rousseau (1980-1990) defined the psychological contract as an individual's belief in mutual obligations between themselves and their employer. The theory pertains to the unwritten set of expectations between employees and employers. For postpartum employees, any perceived breach in this psychological contract—such as inadequate support during the transition back to work—can lead to dissatisfaction and decreased organizational commitment. Research highlights that unmet expectations regarding work-life balance and support can adversely affect the well-being of new mothers in the workplace.

Besides these, **Social-Exchange theory**, John Thibaut & Harold Kelley (1958,1978) which serves as a framework for understanding social relationships.

George Levinger and J. Diedrick Snoek have suggested a framework for describing the development of relationships based upon social exchange principles (Levinger & Snoek, 1972). This framework points to the degree of involvement as the crucial distinguishing characteristic of various types of relationships.

**Equity theory** proposes that when individuals find themselves in an unfair, or inequitable, relationship, they will experience distress and will be motivated to eliminate the distress by restoring equity. Equity may be restored by either of two general strategies: restoring actual equity or restoring "psychological" equity (Walster et al., 1978). Actual equity may be restored by altering the outcomes received or the inputs contributed by the participants in the relationship. For example, employees who feel they are being treated

unfairly by an employer may reduce their inputs by working less or raise their outcomes by stealing from the company

These concepts highlight how personal and external factors guide individuals' expectations and evaluations in relationships. Understanding these theoretical perspectives is essential for organizations aiming to create supportive environments for postpartum employees. By acknowledging and addressing the challenges highlighted by these frameworks, corporate entities in India can develop policies and practices that promote inclusivity and well-being for working mothers.

### 3. Objectives and Methodology of the study

In India, addressing the needs of postpartum employees within corporate settings involves establishing clear objectives and methodologies to support working mothers effectively.

#### Objectives:

1. **Ensure Compliance with Legal Standards:** Adhere to the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and its amendments, which mandate provisions such as 26 weeks of paid maternity leave and, for organizations with 50 or more employees, the availability of crèche facilities.
2. **Promote Employee Well-being:** Facilitate a supportive environment that addresses the physical and emotional needs of postpartum employees, aiding in their transition back to work.
3. **Enhance Retention and Productivity:** Implement policies that encourage employee loyalty and sustained productivity by accommodating the unique challenges faced by new mothers.

#### Methodologies:

1. **Policy Development:**
  - **Maternity Leave Policies:** Craft comprehensive policies detailing leave duration, eligibility, and benefits, ensuring alignment with legal requirements.
  - **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Introduce options such as remote work, flexible hours, or part-time roles to support work-life balance.
2. **Support Services:**
  - **Crèche Facilities:** Establish on-site childcare services or partnerships with local crèches, as mandated for larger organizations.
  - **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs):** Provide counseling and support services to address postpartum challenges.
3. **Training and Awareness:**
  - **Managerial Training:** Educate supervisors on the needs of postpartum employees to foster an empathetic and supportive workplace culture.
  - **Employee Workshops:** Conduct sessions on available benefits and resources to ensure awareness and accessibility.
4. **Feedback Mechanisms:**
  - **Surveys and Focus Groups:** Regularly gather input from employees to assess the effectiveness of policies and identify areas for improvement.
  - **Open Communication Channels:** Encourage dialogue between management and staff to promptly address concerns and suggestions.

By setting these objectives and employing targeted methodologies, Indian corporations can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for postpartum employees, benefiting both the individuals and the organization as a whole

**4. Data exploration**

**Table1.1. maternity Leaves: Return to work trends at India Inc.**

| Company                   | FY24  |       | FY23  |       | FY22  |      |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
|                           | RTWR  | RR    | RTWR  | RR    | RTWR  | RR   |
| Reliance Industries       | 100   | 96    | 93.55 | 87.1  | 95.06 | NA   |
| Tata Consultancy Services | 99.9  | 92.9  | 91    | 90    | 89    | 93   |
| HDFC Bank                 | 97.52 | 64    | 83.91 | 49.05 | 99.75 | 6.6  |
| Bharati Airtel            | 98.6  | 98.6  | 100   | 97.4  | 96    | 87   |
| ICICI Bank                | NA    | NA    | NA    | NA    | NA    | NA   |
| INFOSYS                   | 99.2  | 74.1  | 99    | 68    | 87    | 75   |
| ITC                       | 100   | 93    | 100   | 85    | 100   | 98   |
| Hindustan Unilever (HUL)  | 95    | 82.4  | 96.4  | 86    | NA    | NA   |
| HCL Technologies          | 99.67 | 65.65 | 98.87 | 63.9  | 99.2  | 77.2 |
| Larsen & Toubro           | 89.6  | 85.9  | 96    | 78    |       | NA   |

**RTWR: RETURN TO WORK RATE      RR: RETENTION RATE      Source: Economic Times Human Resource world (2024)**

**Table1.2. Maternity Leaves: Return to work trends at India Inc.**

| Company                   | FY24  |       | FY23  |       | FY22 |      |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|
|                           | RTWR  | RR    | RTWR  | RR    | RTWR | RR   |
| Reliance Industries       | 100   | 94    | 97    | 93    | 97   | NA   |
| Tata Consultancy Services | 99.9  | 92.9  | 91    | 90    | 89   | 93   |
| HDFC Bank                 | 99.25 | 73.23 | 95.92 | 48.67 | 99.9 | 5.6  |
| Bharati Airtel            | 99.8  | 91.5  | 100   | 89.6  | 100  | 86   |
| ICICI Bank                | NA    | NA    | NA    | NA    | NA   | NA   |
| INFOSYS                   | 99.9  | 82.3  | 100   | 69    | 86   | 73   |
| ITC                       | 100   | 88    | 100   | 86    | 100  | 98   |
| Hindustan Unilever (HUL)  | 98.2  | 89.1  | 99.2  | 95.7  | NA   | NA   |
| HCL Technologies          | 99.8  | 73.97 | 99.42 | 66.8  | 99.2 | 77.2 |
| Larsen & Toubro           | 89.6  | 85.9  | 96    | 78    | 89   | 96   |

**RTWR: RETURN TO WORK RATE      RR: RETENTION RATE**

**Source:** Economic Times Human Resource world (2024)

## 5. Findings

In India, corporate settings are increasingly recognizing the importance of supporting working mothers to foster a more inclusive and productive work environment. Key developments and considerations include:

### Maternity Benefits:

- **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:** This legislation extended paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks for women employees, applicable to all establishments employing 10 or more individuals. It also mandates that organizations with 50 or more employees provide crèche (childcare) facilities, allowing mothers to visit during work hours.

### Corporate Initiatives:

- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Companies are adopting policies such as remote work, flexible hours, and part-time roles to help mothers balance professional and personal responsibilities.
- **On-site Childcare:** Some organizations offer on-site crèche facilities or financial support for childcare services, enabling mothers to remain close to their children during work hours.
- **Employee Support Programs:** Initiatives like counseling services, support groups, and mentorship programs are being introduced to assist mothers in transitioning back to work and managing work-life balance.

### Challenges:

- **Workplace Discrimination:** Despite legal protections, instances of discrimination persist. For example, reports have highlighted cases where companies excluded married women from certain roles due to assumptions about family responsibilities.
- **Safety Concerns:** Women's safety, especially during commutes and within workplaces, remains a significant issue. Incidents of harassment and violence have led to increased scrutiny and calls for better protective measures.

### Societal Perspectives:

- **Work-Life Balance:** Debates around work culture, such as suggestions for extended work hours, have sparked discussions about their impact on family life and the well-being of working mothers.
- **Gender Roles:** There is a growing conversation about redefining traditional gender roles, with some advocating for more men to take on caregiving responsibilities to support women's career advancement.

While progress has been made in supporting working mothers in India's corporate sector, ongoing efforts are essential to address challenges and promote a more equitable work environment.

## 6. Suggestions: How this could be applied at workplace

Supporting postpartum employees in corporate settings is essential for their well-being and productivity. Employers can implement several strategies to assist new mothers during this critical period:

1. **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offering options such as remote work, part-time schedules, or flexible hours allows postpartum employees to balance work responsibilities with their new caregiving roles. For instance, companies like Hugo Boss provide flexibility and remote work options for new parents.
2. **Parental Leave Policies:** Implementing comprehensive parental leave policies, including paid maternity and paternity leave, enables parents to take necessary time off without financial strain. Some

businesses have adopted favorable policies to support workers, recognizing benefits like reduced turnover and increased productivity.

3. **On-site or Subsidized Childcare:** Providing corporate childcare facilities or subsidizing childcare costs helps alleviate the burden of finding reliable care, allowing employees to focus better on their work. Corporate childcare initiatives have been shown to increase employee loyalty and reduce absenteeism.
4. **Lactation Support:** Designating private, comfortable spaces for breastfeeding or expressing milk, along with providing necessary breaks, supports nursing mothers. In the U.S., the PUMP Act mandates that employers provide break time and private spaces (not bathrooms) for breastfeeding employees.
5. **Mental Health Resources:** Offering access to counseling services, support groups, or Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) addresses the emotional and psychological challenges postpartum employees may face. Employers can support new mothers by providing mental health resources and creating a supportive work environment.
6. **Reasonable Accommodations:** Ensuring that workplace policies accommodate the medical needs of postpartum employees, such as allowing for temporary changes in duties or providing ergonomic support, is crucial. Under the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, most workers have the right to reasonable accommodations during or after pregnancy.

By implementing these measures, companies can create a supportive environment that promotes the health and retention of postpartum employees, ultimately benefiting both the individual and the organization

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, organizations have begun to take various measures like flexible work options, employee resource groups, creche subsidies, onsite childcare, nursing rooms, and designated parking spots to support new mothers in the workforce and these measures aim to ease their transition back to work after maternity leave. But also, not all companies adopt and apply the policies for the effectiveness of its leave policy, employee support system & retention system for postpartum employees.

The Central Government has made significant strides in legislating maternity benefits, the Code on Social Security, 2020 has the provisions like increased paid maternity leave, maternity leave for adoptive and commissioning mothers, Work from home option, creche facility, enhancement of paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks, provision for mandatory crèche facility in the establishments having 50 or more employees, permitting women workers in the night shifts with adequate safety measures, etc. there is gender discrimination against women having childbearing age, financial burden on the employer, women losing their jobs draws attention.

Yet statistics alarms at Indian women leaving their jobs after giving birth or to take care of their children; and even among those who manage to return, drop out within few months of rejoining the workforce and those retained report getting wage cuts after maternity breaks.

Hence the organizations should shift their focus on the policies to aid female employees post-partum to manage both work and life as mothers to enhance productivity, employment rate, retention ratio in India. These issues should have bottom-up approach as this directly contributes not only to the welfare of women and child but to the society as whole. The Industries in Bharat should go the extra mile to support new mothers in the workforce for the nation's economic progress.

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