



PREGNANCY AND MATERNITY AT WORKPLACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY TO KNOW THE EMPLOYERS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Background: - In the recent years, women have been bestowed a considerable number of paid positions in the labor market and continue to work even during periods of pregnancies. Even though, women form a large part of the labor force, they are being discriminated against at the work place just due to their unique biological ability to bear children. The main objective is to take point of view of employers regarding pregnancy at workplace, their concerns and challenges and how they place themselves in the whole scenario of changing environment for a worker.

Methodology A qualitative study design is selected that seeks in depth interviews with employers at different levels in institutes of Lahore.

Result: - Employers display unfavorable attitude towards the employment of childbearing age group women in the first place and pregnancy at workplace is not a welcoming event at all. All this negative attitude is due to the cost and HR issues raised by the absences and maternity leave of a pregnant worker. There is a great chaos regarding workload shared by the colleagues in pregnant women's absence. For maternity leave, cost of hiring a new person and training are the issues raised by the employers especially in small organizations.

Conclusion: -There is great need to increase the understanding of the employers regarding the unique phenomenon of pregnancy. They should be given ample knowledge about balance, between work and personal life of an employee and how to handle the sensitive situations like the pregnancy in a moral and ethically correct way.

Key words: - Employer, Interviewee, Working women, Mater

Introduction

There has been a significant rise in the women in paid positions in the labor market over the past few years. Although they continue to work during their pregnancies forming a large part of the labor force, they face workplace discrimination just due to their distinctive biological ability to childbearing ¹. Legal gender disparities not only discourage women's participation in the private sector, but also diminish their prospects for the top managerial and executive position of firms ². The maternity protection and anti-discrimination legislation have taken various steps internationally to safeguard principle of equality and non-discrimination to promote the participation of females in the working sector especially catering to pregnant women ³.

In the majority of countries, the proportion of employed women is higher today than several decades ago across various income levels. Women's work force participation internationally remains constant at around 52 percent from 1990 to 2010. However, in Northern Africa and Western Africa in 2010, women's share in the labor force remains below 30 percent while in Southern Asia the rates were below 40 percent ^{4,5}.

According to 'The Gender Snapshot 2023', if prevailing pattern continues, over 340 million females about (8 %) of the world's women population are projected to live in extreme poverty by 2030. Moreover, the next generation of women is anticipated to spend on 2.3 more hours per day on domestic work and unpaid care compared to men ⁶.

Gender equality is crucial to economic growth and sustainable development and a key goal within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 5 of the SDGs ⁷. Moreover, a recent study demonstrated that increased female labor force participation will directly boost economic growth and allocation of talent ⁸.

As far as developed countries are concerned, the dramatic expansion of women's labor force signified a substantial shift in fertility and family structure. The ratio of pregnant women in employment has been on continuous rise over the past decades since 1970 ⁹.

In United States, women's labor force participation reached its peak (60% and 61%) between 2002 and 2010. As of December 2022, labor force participation of women and men was 58.1% and 70.4% respectively ¹⁰. According to 'Pregnant Workers Fairness Act' in United States, the employers provide "reasonable accommodations", which are changes to the work environment to a worker's known limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions ¹¹.

In Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, it is common for women to work during pregnancy. Despite European Union directive for employers to ensure the health of pregnant women at the workplace, the rate of sick leave among pregnant Scandinavian women is relatively high. While pregnant, 2/3 of women take 48 to 73 days of sick leave associated with maternal age, socioeconomic status and assisted reproductive therapy. It is found that workplace adjustments reduce the number of days of sick leave taken by pregnant women ¹².

In Denmark, a randomized trial documented that short educational program for managers about occupational risk factors related to pregnancy and workplace adjustments was insufficient to reduce absenteeism in hospital and day-care settings during pregnancy ¹³. Workplace adjustments is a

complicated process that depends on several factors; concern and acknowledgment from the manager, support from colleagues, and acceptance of pregnant workforce of their need for adjustments ¹⁴.

In Denmark, it was reported that pregnant workers in healthcare sector, travel agencies, and restaurants took sick leave more often than non-pregnant female employees in these sectors ¹⁴. An important reason for inadequate adjustments at workplace and the retention of pregnant employees was a lack of communication with general practitioners who recommend sick leave. Guidance from health professionals in addressing pregnant workers was also appreciated and sometimes requested by the managers ¹⁵.

The 2020 pandemic has, certainly, played a significant role in causing a shift in statistics ; 58% of working moms still planned on having more children in 2018 while the percentage dropped 16 % points to just 42 % of Millennials moms planning to have another child ¹⁶.

In Pakistan, the Government emphasizes the women empowerment and measures are taken to protect women rights at work place including provisions of maternity benefits .Pakistan Medical and Family Act, 1993, guarantees unpaid leave of 12 weeks and employer is prohibited to dismiss a woman due to pregnancy or maternity leave. The Labor Law prohibits employers to discriminate between male and female employee for type of work, wage, employment or promotion ¹⁷.

Nonetheless, in Pakistan, female labor force participation is 22% ranking among the lowest in the world due to gender discrimination, lack of safe transport, restrictions on higher education, social norms, taboos and lack of jobs in almost every sector of the economy. It is common that women has to work late hours and workplaces neither offer facilities for women nor ensure maternity leave. Therefore majority of the women have to choose between a career and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, they resign from their jobs when they become pregnant and do not resume their careers. Once the influence of Pakistan's patriarchal gender society is controlled, female education enables women to better employment access ¹⁸.

Pregnancy discrimination has an adverse impact not only on female labor force but on the baby they are carrying while experiencing the discrimination through stress. Employers can provide the support that pregnant employees need at workplace, ensuring a good atmosphere for their excellent productivity, to reduce stress and the adversity ¹⁹.

Given the insights from previous research and the current circumstances prevalent in female labor force in our country, the focus of this study is to highlight the issues related with women labor force, exploring strategies to address these issues and to support women throughout pregnancy. This study will be of reference value to provide recommendations for developing policies and regulations for the physical and mental well-being of women at their workplace along with their job security.

Objectives:

Objectives of this study are:

1. To find out the awareness of employers regarding their responsibilities with respect to pregnant workers
2. To determine the factors which create a hindrance in fulfilling the rights of pregnant workers in an organization.
3. To understand the perspective of employers regarding pregnancy at workplace.

Material and Methods

Design of the Study: Through the use of pre-developed guidelines, semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of a qualitative study design. Comprehensive interviews were carried out with employers at various levels at several Lahore institutes.

Example: -The candidates were selected based on their hiring-related

Study Design: -A qualitative study design was adopted by conducting semi-structured interviews for which a guideline was developed beforehand. In depth interviews were conducted with the employers at different levels in different institutes of Lahore. Transcribing and early data analysis were done concurrently as part of the qualitative analysis to look for emergent ideas. Up until every interview was completed, thematic analysis was carried out, and fresh concepts were compared with the information. Primary coding was used in the qualitative analysis of the interviews, and these codes were clustered to find recurring themes. All authors came to a final agreement. This method made it possible to thoroughly examine the experiences and viewpoints of the participants with relation to the problem.

Sample: -The interviewees were chosen on the basis of their role in hiring, making general rules and policies and in implementation of those policies. It should also be noted that study interviewed only those employers who have dealt with at least one case of pregnant worker in last year. Open-ended format with some guidelines was used as it offers maximum flexibility.

Table 2: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDELINES WITH EMPLOYERS

Serial No	Interview checklist	Coding
1	Interview checklist	Interview
2	ID of the respondent	ID
3	Organization and Duration (years and months)	ID
	Questions	
1	What do you think about working of women while being pregnant? Especially till end of their pregnancy.	
2	How do you describe facilities available to pregnant mothers at your workplace? Probe regarding Transport Medical policy Day care facilities Flex hours etc.	
3	What is your organization's maternity leave policy?	
4	What is your organization's policy regarding breast-feeding?	
5	What do you think about discrimination of women due to their pregnancy? What is the organizational policy and remedial actions against this problem?	

Results

The main objective to do this part of research was to take point of view of employers regarding pregnancy at workplace, their concerns and challenges they face in handling this situation and how they place themselves in the whole scenario of changing environment for a worker. The participants were chosen keeping in view that they have either handled at least one case of pregnancy at work place during the last 12 months or in the process of handling the above said situation. The participants chosen for in-depth interviews were also in position to make policies, planning and have role in implementation of those policies to make workplaces as pregnancy friendly.

A total of 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted for collecting relative data from two CEO's, three Owners of institutions and three executive Managers working in private organizations. The data from public sectors have already showed that problems lie within the private sector mainly.

Table 6: In-Depth Interview Participants

Serial No	Level	Code for finding
1	Owners (small organizations)	Owner 1 Owner 2
2	CEO's (national or multinational organization)	CEO 1 CEO 2 CEO 3
3	Executive Managers (Both)	Manager 1 Manager 2 Manager 3

The Interviews with different levels of personnel's were conducted in order to get picture of the other side. They were asked questions related to their views about their attitude regarding pregnancy at workplace, issues and their concerns about this situation and how they handle it

Views regarding pregnancy at workplace

The participants showed a varied behavior and attitude regarding the pregnancy at workplace. This can be begun with the one end with positive attitude towards them and on the other end, some showed hostility towards workers who are either pregnant or mothers.

The main factors contributing this resentful attitude were the obligations and responsibilities that were placed on the employers due to pregnant workers. In this wide range of views, it can be seen easily that participants who had shown positive attitude towards pregnancy and maternity at workplace, at some point expressed their concern regarding difficulties, which small organizations have to face in handling this situation. Small organizations, no doubt, see pregnancy at workplace as a potential problem that they have to handle, not a welcoming situation.

For small organizations, the hostility factors against pregnancy and maternity at work place come from the fact that they, generally, do not support labor law and have resentful attitude towards maternity act specially. The reason behind this attitude seems to be paid leaves, which they think is burden on an organization.

"We cannot set aside other issues when we talk about pregnancy at workplace. I mean, it's good for the worker but for the employer that will be another burden. I mean giving paid maternity leave and then handling the replacement for that period. It's really hard for a company as small as mine."

Owner 1

"Yes, if you are a small organization, then to replace the person for a certain period, to give extra money, to bear maternity charges along with paid leaves, you feel that you are at losing end." Owner 2

Along with these views, when same question was placed in front of two other participants who were employees of multinational organizations, were of the opposite view but they also saw sharing of burden of pregnancy and maternity somewhat hard and of the view that legislation regarding this is in favor of employee and is not in favor of small organizations.

"The protection in law for employee is more than for employers but honestly speaking, apart from multinational, very few of them follow this law." CEO 1

They not only expressed their agreements on working of women but also providing them with the environment conducive to their working while pregnant.

“ To say they should work during pregnancy will not be enough. Actually measures are needed to encourage them to come for work during this stage of their life. ’ CEO 3.

Similarly

“ As far as, I know, by law employers are at losing end especially of smaller organizations. All the responsibilities lie within the employers. Not a single law putting any obligation on pregnant worker for working full time, hard or returning back to same company etc.” CEO 2.

CEO 1 stated that *“They should be hired even during their pregnancy and should be given insurance regarding their job even after delivery”* gave another view of this.

When same thing was discussed with the executive managers who were responsible for implementation of policies formulated at higher levels, they showed some reservations.

“ As far As their right to antenatal appointments are concerned, I can give time off but regarding 100 percents payments, I don’t think it’s feasible or manageable for my institute.” Manager 1.

They should be hired but most of them became problematic at the end and to handle them at work makes the environment a bit lousy.” One of manager stated.

“Yes, I think, they should work and be facilitated by the management at all stages of pregnancy, as they are nurturing our future.” Female Manager of a teaching institute stated.

“ To be good employer in this competitive world, you have to respect the legislation but to make option viable, we as an organization have right to make some amendments according to our own convenience. Actually to afford one maternity in a year is okay but what about 2, 3 or even 4 in a year. Its really difficult to manage work load, replacements and above all payments “. Owner of a female dominant teaching institute explained.

At the end, it was very interesting to note the views of female employers who owned a small business or were heading some institution. They could see the pregnancy and maternity at workplace from both perspectives, as an employee and as an employer as well.

As an employee, they were of the view that increased rights and supportive attitude should be offered to all the pregnancies at workplace but as an employers, they shared the same concerns of over burdening of the smaller organizations

Issues and Concerns regarding pregnancy at workplace

When explored issues and concerns of participants about pregnancy and maternity at workplace, it was found that they face same types of issues and their concerns were consistent. The different questions asked and themes and subthemes, which emerged, were: -

Hiring of pregnant workers

The issue that was directly concerned with pregnant workers and all other women of childbearing age is their recruitment, as mentioned by some of the respondents.

“I think, when we over emphasize the rights of being paid maternity leave and medical expenses of pregnant workers and mothers at work place, we should not forget that we are placing them in a situation where employers will hesitate to hire them in them the first place and they have to face discrimination at hiring level in this situation. Yes, they can do so to save themselves from future problems.” CEO1.

Employers although denied doing this but confessed that they had seen this practice many times even in their own organizations when a male worker was given preference over a female worker due to this issue.

“They actually wanted to hire a male worker to replace a pregnant worker while she was going on maternity leave to save themselves from future hassles.” a female manager stated

Maternity leave and cost

All the interviewees raised many concerns regarding this issue but the most striking one was paid maternity leaves and the difficulties a firm faced due to absence of a particular employee.

Respondents reported that at many times, the main concerns was not only paid maternity leave and medical expenses which were obvious and well calculated ahead but the hidden costs and expenses which were not quantified and included cost of recruitment and training to the replacement person. His salary and benefits and time factor was another factor.

“Sometimes, it’s a more a time and training issue rather than finances.” A manager

“ Oh, It’s a mess ... a real mess. When you have trained a person for a particular job and in our full running season, she had to go on leaves for three months. Its not only a disaster for the company in terms of hiring a new person on locum but also we had to bear the loss in terms of losing our customers and so many more losses and still there was not surety that she would return back after delivery and availing the so called maternity leave.” A manager

Re-joining the job

It was found to be more complicated for the small organizations, where all the above issues seemed to be compounded by the doubts about re-joining of female workers after delivery.

“ Mostly the female workers don’t return to their jobs after delivery and we have to hire another person for that job. I will not lie, but we usually try although in softer way that she can give us any clue about her return to job but don’t get any many times.” A training institution manager reported.

The uncertainty related with rejoining of female workers after their delivery and maternity leave found to be a huge problem for the employers. In many instances, employers reported that their employee had said that they would join but did show up after leaves

Female employers were sympathetic about this but male employers were clearly not ready to accept the situation.

“ One of my employee said, she will come back after leaves and we planned accordingly but at the nick of time she changed her mind and stayed at home. It was really a upset and we had to face many consequences. I mean. That was a real emergency at that time to handle the situation.” A manager.

Another view shared by a female employer

“I know, its difficult to decide especially when you are pregnant first time whether to join or not but what about other side. What should we do/ can we leave the vacancy open forever. Come on we have to run our business.”

This issue was noted more upsetting for small employers

“It’s really difficult to arrange replacements for three months and when somebody did not show up after leave on expected date, the process started again. It’s wastage of time, training and finances. Very difficult for a small institute where human resource matters a lot.” An employer

Time –Off during pregnancy

Many interviewees shared their concerns about time-off taken by pregnant workers for antenatal visits or for any medical related. They stated that many of their employees had taken extra advantage of this facility in the form of longer time off than required.

“How could one know whether time off is for antenatal or any medical appointment or for anything else? Once, I found my employee doing shopping while she was actually availing that time off. It looks so indecent to ask for some proof of medical appointments.” A manager reported.

Women employers were of supportive view regarding time off for antenatal or medical visits as they themselves had passed through this experience.

“Actually pregnancy is a whole new experience for a woman and the organizations and employers should support it in such way to make it memorable for her. It will definitely add value to her work and pay back to company in the long run.”

Issues with other staff

When asked about any issue or concerns of other staff members regarding pregnancy at work place, almost fifty percents of participants reported about the difficult to handle attitudes and behaviors of their other staff members. One to two employers even reported resentful behavior of staff towards pregnant colleagues because they had to do extra work or some assignment due to her absence.

“ They are happy if she is not demanding extra medical leaves or any other support but the moment, she demands for some favour like flexi hours or breaks etc., you hear comments like “pregnancy is a normal process” “Why treat her differently when paid equally” or something in a humorous way ‘ is there anything like this for us too.” Or even like ” such a lucky lady. No work but full pay.” Manager reported

“ Sometimes, Its really hard to handle others as, they have to do extra work and give her cover.....I have to think and act diplomatically in these situations.” Another manager stated.

Almost half of the employers seemed to be a right and happy with the attitude their staff members displayed towards their pregnant colleagues and that was mainly a supportive one but this type of attitude was mainly reported by employers working in multinational or big companies.

“I think my colleagues had no issue with my pregnancy and I did not witness any such thing from their side for any other employee as well. They are so supportive that they sometimes went out of way to give them comfortable environment. We recently had an example and she was really happy with their attitude and caring behavior. I know that still they are in contact with her and waiting for some good news.” A female employer stated.

Table 7: In-depth Interview Themes

Themes	Aspects
Views regarding pregnancy at workplace	• Viewed as a problem • Unwelcoming but unescapable issue • Maternity law favours employee • Other employee see it as a burden • Burden for smaller organization
Issues and concerns regarding pregnancy at workplace	
Hiring of pregnant workers	• Hesitation in hiring • Preference to male workers
Maternity leave policy	• Clear-cut in line with government • Hidden costs and expenses • Time and training issues • Difficult to find replacements
Re-joining the job	• Uncertainty on the part of employers • Mostly do not join after delivery
Time off during pregnancy	• Concerns of taking extra advantage
Issues with other staff	• Fifty percent non-supportive even resentful • Fifty percents supportive

Discussion

The main objective of conducting this part of research was to explore and understand views of employers regarding pregnancy at workplace. It also aims to share their experience and to know their

concerns and issue they face while having a pregnant employee at their workplace. Our research tried to take an insight right from beginning of pregnancy at workplace to going for a maternity leaves and then inducting back the employee after childbirth and postnatal period.

As the participants belonged to both small and large organizations, therefore female employers were also included in interviews, the viewpoint gained was quite elaborate and self-explanatory. General attitudes regarding pregnancy at workplace was found to be discouraging and unwelcoming. Rather it was seen as a problem to handle by small organizations where persons to replace the employee were difficult to find and hire (Buzzanell & Liu, 2007. Adam, McAndrew & Winterbotham, 2005). The employer type and size of an organization was found as main factors in negative treatment faced by pregnant women (Dasborough, 2006). It was highest in retail companies. It was equally noticed on both ends like managers and lower staff workers. Studies showed more negative attitudes faced by pregnant women who were first time pregnant, having high income before pregnancy or have a short tenure in companies (Brown, Ferrara & Schley, 2002).

Another feeling shared by participants were that they think that maternity leave policy is more friendly to the employee than employers and being small institutes, they were unable to cope with the emergencies or personal favors. Small organizations with less number of employees faced more difficulties in handling pregnancy at workplace, as they mentioned about problems they faced in arranging for substitutes for leaves and managing workloads by other staff members (Young & Morrell, 2005a). The issues, which were shared by most employers, making arrangements of substitutes, their training and most of all the uncertainty, which is related, with the returning of the workingwomen after delivery or maternity leaves.

Managing paid maternity leaves for 12 weeks were also seen as a problem for smaller institutes and many of them were not following the statutory policies established by government in this regard. Studies have shown that more awareness about the regulations and policies regarding maternity leave resulted in fewer problems for the pregnant workers. Similarly, working women of private sector faced more negative treatment as compared to public sector (Adams, McAndrew & Winterbotham, 2005). None mentioned about ant risk management for the pregnant workers at all. Although legislation is there but also to act upon these legislations was seen far fetch dream. Almost all the employers showed some hesitation regarding hiring of women in childbearing age. Even the female employers were of the view that they had seen this discrimination but were unable to do something. Similar findings were reported in a study where working women were refused for flexible timing and made redundant due to their pregnancy (Vlasblom & Schippers 2006). Another study supported this finding with the reports of family unfriendly policies of smaller organizations and their effects on the pregnant women especially (Stier, Lewin-Epstein & Braun, 2001).

Conclusion

Employers have their own views regarding this issue. They have unfavorable attitude towards the employment of childbearing age group women in the first place and pregnancy at workplace is not a welcoming event at all.

All this negative attitude is due to the cost and HR issues raised by the absences and maternity leave of a pregnant worker.

There is a great chaos regarding workload shared by the colleagues in pregnant women absence, any sick leave or maternity leave. For maternity leave, cost of hiring a new person, to give her some training and time cost along with payment for maternity also and medical leave are the issues raised by the employers especially in small organizations.

Recommendations

There is great need to increase the understanding of the employers regarding the unique phenomenon of pregnancy. They should be given ample knowledge about balance between work and personal life

of an employee and how to handle the sensitive situations like a pregnancy in a morally and ethically correct way. Supervisors should be given training regarding maternity handling through some developmental programs.

General discussions with the all employees regarding maternity policies, and moral and ethical aspects need to be discussed by the employers in a friendly way. It is equally important for the organizations to value the different workers in order to maintain diversity of experiences to promote commitment and willingness to return to job

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