



Returning to Work After Childbirth in Sri Lanka: Workplace Challenges Faced by Mothers Across Public, Private, and Semi-Government Sectors

G.D Nethmi Dedunu Kumari

Assistant Lecturer

Department of Demography, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Corresponding author: nethmidedunu2001@gmail.com

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Abstract

Global patterns and trends in female labour force participation indicate that women face various barriers to labour force participation due to gender inequalities and socially constructed gender roles. In the Sri Lankan context, variations in maternity protection provisions across different employment sectors have resulted in women employed in the public, private, and semi-government sectors encountering diverse challenges when returning to work after childbirth. The primary objective of this study was to identify the workplace-related challenges experienced by women during the transitional period of returning to employment after childbirth. A qualitative research approach had been used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 female employees from each of six selected institutions (two institutions each from the public, private, and semi-government sectors), resulting in a total of 30 participants. In addition, four institutional heads were interviewed to gain broader organizational perspectives. The findings revealed several key themes related to the challenges faced by women upon returning to work after childbirth. These included the impact of changes in job roles and responsibilities, challenges affecting work performance and productivity, the level of support received from colleagues and the organization, the influence of maternity leave on career progression and professional goals, and overall job satisfaction. The study concludes that the challenges encountered by women during their return to work after childbirth require greater attention in both organizational practices and public policy development. Strengthening institutional support mechanisms and improving maternity protection policies are essential to facilitate women's successful reintegration into the workforce and to promote gender equality in employment.

Keywords: *Childbirth; Labor Force Participation; Returning To Work; Women*

INTRODUCTION

The National Policy Framework, "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour" (2019), highlights the role of women in both the economy and society. Chapter 3, titled "A Country that is Always Safe and Secure," focuses on issues related to women's safety and security. Chapter 4, titled "A Productive Citizen and a Happy Family," recognizes women's economic and social contributions (UNDP, 2021).

Sri Lanka has ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Convention, 1952 (No. 103). Convention No. 103 establishes minimum standards for maternity benefits and prohibits placing the financial responsibility solely on employers. Instead, it requires that maternity benefits be financed through public funds or social insurance schemes. However, it remains unclear to what extent small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) comply with maternity protection legislation. Furthermore, maternity legislation does not guarantee an equivalent position upon a mother's return from maternity leave, nor does it provide parents with the right to request flexible or part-time working arrangements. In the private sector, the provision of paternity leave is generally left to the discretion of individual employers (UNDP, 2021).

Women perform multiple roles in society, including reproductive, productive, and social responsibilities. Therefore, reducing the constraints that negatively affect their employment and self-fulfillment is essential (Madurawala, 2009).

A study conducted in the St. Paul metropolitan area, Minnesota, examined the relationship between flexible work arrangements and work–family conflict among women one year after childbirth. The findings showed that access to maternity leave and strong family and social support reduced work–family conflict. However, mothers with flexible work schedules were more likely to continue working at home because they had to balance work and childcare simultaneously. In contrast, women in inflexible work environments experienced greater stress due to childcare responsibilities. The study concluded that workplace flexibility alone is insufficient to reduce work–family conflict without adequate childcare and social support. (Grice, McGovern, & Alexander, 2015).

A qualitative study in Malta explored the experiences of first-time mothers returning to full-time employment after maternity leave. The findings revealed that mothers experienced challenges such as limited time with their children, breastfeeding difficulties, sleep deprivation, stress, health problems, and workplace adjustment issues. Although mothers gradually adapted to balancing employment and motherhood, the study highlighted the importance of supportive workplaces, family support, and fathers' involvement in easing the transition back to work. (Spiteri & Xuereb, 2015).

A study conducted in Sri Lanka examined how gender roles influence women's employment after childbirth. The findings showed that childcare responsibilities, household duties, limited family support, and high childcare costs were the main reasons women left employment. Many women also faced limited career advancement opportunities and lacked awareness of maternity rights. The study recommended improving childcare services, promoting family-friendly workplace policies, and strengthening government support to encourage mothers to remain in the labour force. (Madurawala, 2009).

Previous studies have identified childcare responsibilities, workplace flexibility, and family support as important factors influencing mothers' return to work after childbirth. However, most international studies were conducted in developed countries and may not reflect the Sri Lankan context. Although the Sri Lankan study examined women's labour force participation, it did not specifically explore mothers' experiences of returning to work after maternity leave or compare these experiences across the public, private, and semi-government sectors. Furthermore, the available Sri Lankan evidence is relatively old, highlighting the need for updated research that examines the current challenges and experiences of mothers returning to work after childbirth.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the challenges women face in the workplace when returning to employment after childbirth.

In Sri Lanka, the female labour force participation rate is 31.3%, while the male labour force participation rate is 68.6% (statistics, 2023).

Eliminating gender employment gaps across countries worldwide could increase gross domestic product (GDP) per capita by approximately 20% (group W. b., 2024).

As female labour force participation in Sri Lanka is lower than that of males, understanding the barriers to returning to work will help policymakers develop and implement strategies to retain women in the labour force.

METHODOLOGY

According to the Labour Force Survey data published by the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka in 2023, the highest proportion of female employment in both the public and private sectors is recorded in the Western Province. Within the province, the Colombo District reports the highest female participation in the service sector, accounting for 74.6%. Furthermore, based on the geographical distribution of private and semi-government institutions employing more than five employees who contribute to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), the Colombo District accounts for the highest concentration of such establishments, representing approximately 36% of all institutions. Therefore, the Colombo District was selected as the study area because it provides an appropriate setting for examining differences in women's return to work after childbirth across the public, private, and semi-government sectors (labor, 2022).

Data were collected using a purposive sampling technique. The study sample consisted of women employed in the public, private, and semi-government sectors who had returned to work after childbirth and had at least one year of work experience following their return. Mothers with one child under the age of two years were selected for the study. The total sample comprised 30 participants, including 10 officers from two selected public sector institutions, 10 officers from two selected private sector institutions, and 10 officers from two selected semi-government sector institutions. In addition, four key informant interviews were conducted.

Structured and semi-structured interview methods were used to collect data. Interviews with women who had returned to work after childbirth lasted approximately 30 minutes, while interviews with institutional heads were conducted for approximately 10 minutes.

The collected data were analyzed by using Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Framework for thematic analysis. In addition, thematic data analysis and the case study approach were employed to interpret the findings.

RESULTS

The analysis of the impact of work-role conditions revealed that, in the public sector, there were changes in work roles after maternity leave. However, teachers in the school included in the study experienced challenges such as working beyond official working hours and taking work-related tasks home.

In the private sector, participants from one selected institution reported high levels of work-role pressure, whereas participants from the other institution indicated that work pressure had decreased because some of their job responsibilities had been reduced after returning from maternity leave.

In the semi-government sector, officers employed in an institution with flexible work schedules reported that they were able to manage their work responsibilities effectively. In contrast, in the other institution, changes in work roles after maternity leave were observed, similar to those identified in one of the public sector institutions included in the study.

The analysis of the impact on work performance showed that, in the institution where work roles had changed after maternity leave, participants reported that their performance was not negatively affected because they were able to adapt to their new roles. However, the teachers included in the study indicated that their work efficiency was affected due to their heavy workload and lack of sufficient time to complete their responsibilities.

In the private sector, participants stated that their work performance was not adversely affected because they continued performing the same job roles they had undertaken before maternity leave and therefore did not need to adapt to new job requirements.

In the semi-government sector, participants from the institution with flexible work schedules reported experiencing difficulties during night shifts, which negatively affected their work performance. In the other institution, challenges arose because work responsibilities were not distributed equitably among officers, creating difficulties in carrying out their duties efficiently.

When examining the support received from staff members in carrying out official duties, participants from one public sector institution reported receiving support from both their colleagues and the head of the institution. However, they also highlighted difficulties encountered when taking emergency leave, particularly within the school setting.

In the private sector, participants from one institution stated that they did not receive support from other staff members due to the diversity of job roles and responsibilities. In contrast, participants from the other private institution reported that a flexible work arrangement was implemented, which facilitated their work responsibilities.

With regard to the semi-government sector, participants from the institution with flexible working schedules reported receiving support from their colleagues. However, in the other institution, the diversity of departmental functions resulted in a lack of support from both the head of the institution and other staff members.

When examining the impact of maternity leave on women's progress towards their career goals, it was found that the impact was relatively low among participants in the public sector. However, they particularly highlighted that maternity leave had disrupted their educational pursuits and professional development activities.

In the private sector, maternity leave was found to have had a noticeable impact on participants' progress towards their career goals.

In contrast, participants in the semi-government sector reported that maternity leave had not affected their progress towards achieving their career goals.

When analyzing job satisfaction, it was found that women employed in the public sector were generally satisfied with their jobs because their positions were aligned with their educational qualifications. Women in the private sector expressed dissatisfaction due to high work pressure and their inability to achieve their expected career goals. In the semi-government sector, flexible working schedules contributed to job satisfaction in one institution. However, in another institution, a lack of support from the head of the organization as well as from colleagues resulted in job dissatisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The Impact of Changes in Job Roles

The first public sector institution examined in this study provided female officers with the opportunity to transfer to a workplace that offered a more suitable working environment. This transition contributed to enhancing their long-term career sustainability and overall job satisfaction.

Case Study 01:

"In my previous workplace, I was responsible for nearly 200 personal files. The work related to those personal files could not be delayed, so I was under constant pressure. There was also a supervisor who monitored my work all the time. However, when I joined this institution, there was not much work during the first few days. Compared to my previous workplace." (32-year-old Statistical Officer, Public Sector)

Job role arrangements that are implemented with empathy and a human-centered approach for female officers returning to work after maternity leave facilitate their reintegration into the workplace, reduce psychological stress, and enable them to perform their duties more productively.

Case Study 03:

"Previously, I was solely responsible for entering the salaries of all employees in the department into the payroll system. However, after returning from maternity leave, I was assigned to salary preparation, where five of us share the work. Earlier, I handled the task alone. Therefore, I feel that the pressure in my previous role was much greater than it is now." (33-year-old Management Services Officer, Public Sector)

The findings indicate that carrying out responsibilities within a shared workload arrangement is more manageable than performing duties individually. During maternity leave, female employees temporarily step away from the job roles they had continuously performed. Therefore, upon returning to work, distributing responsibilities among several employees provides them with both psychological and physical space to readjust to the work environment. Such arrangements contribute to reducing work pressure, improving work organization, maintaining workplace productivity, and establishing a supportive and secure working environment.

The opinion of a head of an institution regarding this issue is presented below.

Key Informant Interviews No. 01

"After returning to work, mothers can be assigned to lighter duties for about one year. If their responsibilities involve high-level tasks such as preparing confidential personal files or entering data into institutional systems, another officer can be assigned to assist them." (Deputy Director with two years of service, Public Sector)

According to interviews conducted with several teachers in the school selected for the study, difficulties were experienced when preparing to resume teaching after maternity leave, depending on the subject taught and the grade level assigned.

Case Study No:8

"I teach an aesthetic subject. My subject includes both theoretical and practical components. I did not forget the theoretical knowledge, but it was difficult to teach practical dance lessons to the students. I had gained weight and my physical strength had decreased after childbirth. Therefore, it took me about two months to readjust to the practical aspects of teaching." (32-year-old Teacher, Public Sector)

After returning to work following a long period of leave, employees require a period of reintegration to readjust to the workplace, colleagues, and working environment. The absence of such a transition period creates challenges. The opinion of a Deputy Principal interviewed in this regard is presented below.

Key Informant Interviews No. 02

"It would be beneficial if mothers who are about to return from maternity leave could come to the school one or two weeks before officially resuming work to become familiar with the latest developments and updates. Otherwise, when they return directly to work, they need to spend part of their working time adjusting to the changes and new procedures before they can fully settle back into the workplace." (Administrative Deputy Principal with four years of service, Public Sector)

Working outside official working hours and taking work home were identified as factors that reduce the time available for rest and family responsibilities. Women are expected to fulfill not only their professional roles but also their social and family responsibilities. As a result, the home, which should serve as a private space for rest and recovery, often becomes an extension of the workplace.

Case Study No:8

"I teach an aesthetic subject, so there are many extracurricular responsibilities at school. We have to prepare dance performances for art festivals, sports meet, and the school's annual color night. Therefore, I often stay after school to complete work. During examination periods, I sometimes mark papers until early morning. When I had only one child, I somehow managed to cope with everything. But now that I have two children, it is much more difficult because they have different sleeping schedules." (32-year-old Teacher, Public Sector)

A study conducted in Europe found that cognitive job well-being increases as the number of children increases, as experienced mothers are generally better able to manage both work and household responsibilities. However, such a pattern was not observed in the present study (Lucia-Casademunt, Garcia-Cabrera, Padilla-Angulo, & Cuellar-Molina, 2018).

When examining the situation in the private sector, it was evident that in one institution the high-risk nature of the job required employees to remain attentive to work-related responsibilities even when taking leave during emergencies. Since the organization expects high productivity based on employee performance, officers often have to continue completing their work after official working hours by taking office tasks home.

Case Study No. 15

"I work in a highly demanding job. There are many responsibilities, including decision-making, problem-solving, and providing feedback. Even after I go home, if I fail to respond to even a single email, it becomes a major issue. I have very little mental freedom. Sometimes I even feel like requesting a transfer to another department." (30-year-old Senior Executive Officer, Private Sector)

The findings indicate that the competitive work environment in private sector organizations, where performance is continuously evaluated based on work outcomes, has contributed to work-family conflict by creating tension between family responsibilities and professional obligations. This has also had a negative impact on employees' psychological well-being.

Case Study No. 12

"I never get any rest. There are problems at work, and when I go home, I still have household work to do. I feel physically exhausted, and it becomes difficult to spend time with my baby in the evening. Because of that, even small issues feel like major sources of stress." (34-year-old Senior Executive Officer, Private Sector)

Furthermore, participants reported missing opportunities to attend various organizational training programs. Since maternity leave in the private sector lasted only four months, they stated that it was relatively easy to regain familiarity with their job roles upon returning to work. However, during the four-month maternity leave period, their responsibilities had been distributed among the remaining staff, increasing the workload and work-related stress experienced by their colleagues. The position held by the employee was found to be an important factor in this regard. As these participants occupied executive-level positions, the organizations generally did not recruit temporary replacements for such a short period.

However, the situation in the other private sector institution differed considerably. This organization had implemented flexible work arrangements by providing greater opportunities to take leave and reducing employees' workload during the period in which they were entitled to breastfeeding breaks. Employees were also allowed to adjust their working hours according to their personal needs. Such institutional flexibility increased long-term employee retention while creating a more supportive and accommodating work environment, ultimately benefiting the organization as well.

Case Study No. 16

"I was given only four months of maternity leave. The organization recruited an intern to cover my work. Even after I returned to work in four months, the intern was still there. So, after discussing it with the management, I worked only about three days a week until my baby was around six months old." (31-year-old Sales Executive Officer, Private Sector)

With regard to the selected semi-government sector institutions, the organization operating under a shift-work system did not maintain rigid work schedules. Instead, flexible work arrangements reduced the conflict between employees' personal lives and professional responsibilities. This created a favorable environment for maintaining an employee-friendly organizational culture.

Case Study No. 26

"I work the shift from 2.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. That allows me to finish the household chores and take care of my baby until around noon before leaving for work." (32-year-old Customer Service Officer, Semi-Government Sector)

According to a study conducted in St. Paul, Minnesota, flexible work schedules were associated with employees taking work home (Sheff & McGovern, 2015). However, the findings of the present study differ from this evidence. Participants employed in the semi-government sector institution, where flexible work arrangements and shift work were practiced, reported that the shift system enabled them to manage both work and family responsibilities more effectively. In contrast, participants from the private sector institution with less supportive flexible work arrangements reported that they frequently had to take work-related responsibilities home (Sheff & McGovern, 2015).

CONDITIONS AFTER RETURNING TO WORK

It was identified that institutions provided appropriate training on updated procedures and workplace changes when employees returned to work. In addition, employees were able to obtain leave conveniently through telephone communication during emergencies. Furthermore, when transportation-related difficulties arose, employees were permitted to work at another nearby branch of the institution, demonstrating organizational flexibility in supporting working mothers.

In the other semi-government institution, women experienced different challenges depending on the department in which they worked. In one department, women returning to work after maternity leave were given opportunities for internal transfers while considering their personal needs. This enabled them to work under more suitable conditions and reflected the institution's progressive organizational culture, its support for female employees, employee appreciation, and efforts to retain staff.

Case Study No. 23

"When I had to participate in fieldwork, I had to stay away for several days. I couldn't leave my baby and go like that. Therefore, I only took part in duties that could be completed within office hours. Later, I requested an internal transfer and was appointed to a Management Assistant position." (36-year-old Management Assistant, Public Sector)

Furthermore, officers employed in one private-sector institution and one semi-government institution stated that during their maternity leave, they had to provide guidance over the telephone to trainees who had been assigned to perform their duties, explaining how to carry out work-related tasks.

IMPACT ON WORK PERFORMANCE

In one public-sector institution included in the study, it was reported that the job roles performed after returning from maternity leave differed from those carried out before maternity leave. Since employees had to adapt to these new roles, they stated that this did not negatively affect their work performance. However, teachers expressed a different opinion, stating that their efficiency had been adversely affected due to the demanding nature of their work. They found it difficult to perform administrative duties, prepare classroom lesson plans, and monitor students' study progress with the same level of completeness and quality as before.

Case Study No. 08

"I don't get enough sleep. Because of that, I can't work as efficiently as I used to. I also experience physical discomfort, and mentally I feel exhausted and unsettled." (32-year-old Teacher, Public Sector)

A study conducted among nurses returning to work after childbirth in Hunan Province, China, similarly found that insufficient sleep and fatigue caused difficulties in performing work-related duties. The findings of the present study are consistent with those reported by Liu, Yang, Zhu, and Chen in 2024.

In contrast, when considering the private-sector institutions, participants reported that their job roles remained unchanged after returning from maternity leave. As a result, they believed that their work efficiency had not been negatively affected. This finding contrasts with that of the public-sector institution discussed earlier. The relatively short duration of maternity leave, due to the high demand for employees and the organization's emphasis on operational efficiency, meant that employees were not absent from work for an extended period. Consequently, they did not require additional time to readjust to workplace processes, thereby maintaining continuity in their professional roles.

Case Study No. 15

"I continued doing the same job role as before. The designs and themes we dealt with had changed, but that didn't affect my ability to perform my job." (32-year-old Senior Executive Officer, Private Sector)

When considering the semi-government sector, participants employed in an institution operating on a shift system identified the distance between home and the workplace as a major challenge, particularly during night

shifts. The officers reported commuting distances ranging from 18 km to 42 km, and all of them relied on public transportation.

Case Study No. 27

"This isn't a job that runs only from 8.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. When I have night shifts, it's difficult to leave my baby and go to work. It also takes me about two hours to travel to the workplace. All of these factors affect my work efficiency." (36-year-old Customer Service Officer, Semi-Government Sector).

SUPPORT RECEIVED FROM STAFF DURING OFFICIAL DUTIES

The participants expressed that they received considerable support from their colleagues both during their maternity leave and upon returning to work, particularly in understanding the updates and changes that had occurred during their absence. Becoming familiar with workplace developments after returning to work is an essential step for successful reintegration into employment. Technological advancements, the introduction of new policies and procedures, and clarification of job roles contribute to improving employee performance. These conditions are more likely to be observed in organizations with a well-established organizational culture.

Case Study No. 5

"When I returned to work, I had forgotten some of the GIS-related tasks I used to perform before going on leave. I relearned them with the help of my colleagues." (40-year-old Development Officer, Public Sector)

The duration of maternity leave also has an influence on this situation. All of the officers interviewed in this institution had received six months of maternity leave.

A good understanding from institutional leaders is crucial for women to successfully resume their professional careers. It is important to avoid assigning excessive workloads immediately after their return and instead introduce mechanisms such as appropriate training and orientation programs. Organizational equality and professional security also contribute to long-term employee performance and organizational effectiveness.

Case Study No. 1

"While I was on maternity leave, my current institution conducted several training programs because I had recently transferred to that workplace. However, I was excused from attending those training sessions and was instead asked to participate in the meetings through Zoom." (32-year-old Statistical Officer, Public Sector)

However, within the school environment, limited support was received from school administrators when emergency leave was required. This was mainly due to the difficulty of appointing substitute teachers at short notice and the additional workload placed on other teachers. Nevertheless, during periods involving major responsibilities, such as preparing term examination papers and handling extensive academic duties, other staff members cooperated by informing the principal of these difficulties and helping to minimize the inconvenience.

Key Informant Interview No. 2

"Once a teacher is assigned a timetable, they have the responsibility to complete the syllabus for every class allocated to them. Frequently taking leave disrupts those responsibilities. However, if a teacher requests a reduced teaching load, we usually consider it." (Deputy Principal – Administration, four years of service, Public Sector)

When considering the private sector, the high level of work pressure and the risky nature of certain job roles often reduce the support available from colleagues. Strong performance expectations and highly competitive work environments tend to overlook women's multiple responsibilities, while the absence of supportive management practices and collaborative systems creates additional challenges. Although this situation was evident in one organization, another organization demonstrated that the sensitivity shown by management and colleagues, together with mutual respect, had become an important feature of its organizational culture. As a result, employees developed greater trust in the organization and were motivated to contribute their maximum effort.

Case Study No. 16

"Although our official working hours are from 8.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m., on some days I leave around 4.00 p.m. My supervisor has given me permission, and none of my colleagues in the department have objected to it." (31-year-old Sales Executive, Private Sector)

A study conducted in Europe using data from the Sixth European Working Conditions Survey (2015) found that support from colleagues in the workplace enables women to balance work and family responsibilities more effectively. The findings of the present study also support this conclusion (Lucia-Casademunt, Garcia-Cabrera, Padilla-Angulo, & Cuellar-Molina, 2018).

Within the semi-government sector, one institution provided a supportive work arrangement by exempting mothers from night shifts until their child reached one year of age.

However, in another institution, the absence of support from both managers and colleagues resulted in lower job satisfaction and increased psychological stress. Since other employees had acted as substitutes during maternity leave and because there were no systematic or well-planned procedures, employees often experienced a sudden increase in workload when duties were redistributed across departments after the mother's return.

Case Study No. 22

"The amount of work assigned to us exceeds what one person can reasonably handle. Although many employees are attached to this division, only a few actually carry out the work. Even though I hold the position of Management Assistant, I am performing the duties of an Accounting Manager." (45-year-old Management Assistant, Semi-Government Sector)

IMPACT OF MATERNITY LEAVE ON CAREER PROGRESSION

Within public sector institutions, female officers stated that maternity leave does not negatively affect promotions because maternity leave is guaranteed under the Establishments Code. Under the Maternity Benefits Ordinance, female employees covered by the Act are entitled to 12 weeks of maternity leave for any live birth (Labour, 2025).

However, teachers reported that maternity leave interrupted their higher education. Since educational qualifications are essential for career advancement, responsibilities related to childcare, difficulties in managing time on a daily basis, and the need to perform work-related tasks outside official working hours created challenges in continuing their educational pursuits.

Case Study No. 6

"I started my postgraduate degree before my baby was born. I was able to sit for the examination, but I could not complete my dissertation." (31-year-old teacher, Public Sector)

In the private sector, maternity leave was found to create barriers to career progression due to rapid technological changes, organizational restructuring, and being detached from ongoing projects during the leave period.

Case Study No. 15

"I have been working in this organization for five years. The period I took maternity leave affected my chances of getting promoted. While I was at home, I couldn't perform my job. If someone else at my level performed better during that period, they would receive the promotion opportunity instead." (30-year-old Senior Executive Officer, Private Sector)

However, a different situation was observed among other private sector employees depending on the nature of their job position.

Case Study No. 13

"I received a promotion while I was expecting my baby. Although I was promoted, it felt as though the organization was paying me a salary for about six months without me working. I stayed at home for four months, and during the last months of pregnancy my productivity for the organization was naturally lower. From my own experience, I have seen that organizations carefully consider whether to promote employees who are about to go on maternity leave." (33-year-old Management Assistant, Private Sector)

In both semi-government institutions included in the study, maternity leave did not have any noticeable impact on women's career progression or their ability to achieve their professional goals.

JOB SATISFACTION

Compared with the other institutions examined in the study, female officers in the public sector reported relatively higher levels of job satisfaction. This was mainly due to having occupations that matched their educational qualifications, receiving an adequate income, enjoying social recognition, and achieving their intended career aspirations.

Case Study No. 1

"I don't want to change my job. I have freedom here. Previously, I worked as an Assistant Manager, and I obtained that position based on my Advanced Level results. My current position is appropriate for someone with a university degree, so I have no concerns." (32-year-old Statistical Officer, Public Sector)

Teachers also identified the several school vacations periods available each year as an important factor contributing to their job satisfaction.

Within the private sector, some participants expressed satisfaction with their employment because it enabled them to be financially independent and to establish themselves as independent individuals in society rather than depending on someone else.

However, in another private sector organization, participants reported dissatisfaction with their jobs because they were unable to achieve their professional aspirations. The absence of opportunities to develop new technical skills through new responsibilities and remaining in a limited professional environment for a prolonged period encouraged them to reconsider their career direction and seek more challenging employment that would better support their professional development.

Case Study No. 17

"I worked in this organization for two years. I feel that nothing new was added to help me develop professionally." (31-year-old Senior Executive Officer – Human Resource Management, Private Sector)

In the semi-government sector, flexible working schedules contributed positively to job satisfaction. In another institution, however, job satisfaction varied according to the department in which employees worked. Unequal distribution of responsibilities and insufficient support from colleagues performing similar roles contributed to feelings of frustration and confusion within the workplace. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that being employed enhances personal motivation, self-confidence, and social relationships, thereby making a positive contribution to employees' quality of life and psychological well-being.

Case Study No. 23

"For someone who has been employed, staying at home with a child all the time can result in losing their sense of psychological freedom." (36-year-old Management Assistant, Semi-Government Sector)

CONCLUSION

The study achieved its primary objective of identifying workplace-related issues experienced by women after returning to work following maternity leave by examining job roles, workload management, workplace support, work performance, career progression, and job satisfaction across public, private, and semi-government sectors. The findings revealed that supportive organizational practices, including workload adjustments, flexible working arrangements, training, workplace orientation, and assistance from colleagues and supervisors, facilitated successful reintegration and improved work–life balance. However, returning mothers also experienced challenges such as increased workloads, work–family conflict, fatigue, difficulties adapting to workplace changes, limited career development opportunities, and reduced support in some organizational settings. The impact of maternity leave on career progression and job satisfaction varied by sector, with public-sector employees experiencing greater job security and satisfaction, while private-sector employees faced more career-related challenges due to organizational changes and reduced workplace visibility.

This study is significant as it highlights the importance of family-friendly workplace policies, flexible employment practices, supportive leadership, and effective reintegration strategies in improving women's employment continuity and long-term career sustainability after maternity leave. The findings provide valuable insights for employers and policymakers to address workplace barriers, reduce work–family conflict, enhance female labor force participation, and develop more inclusive and supportive work environments. Furthermore, the study contributes to future research by providing evidence on the relationship between maternity leave experiences, workplace conditions, and women's career outcomes in Sri Lanka.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study should be considered with an understanding of its limitations, as the research was conducted using purposively selected institutions from public, private, and semi-government sectors, and therefore the findings may not be fully generalizable to all working mothers in Sri Lanka. In addition, the study focused only on mothers who returned to work after childbirth; therefore, challenges experienced by women who discontinued employment after childbirth may not have been fully captured. Based on these limitations, future policies should adopt a broader approach that considers both women who successfully return to work and those who leave the workforce after childbirth.

At the policy level, there is a need to conduct larger-scale studies covering diverse institutions, occupations, and geographical areas to develop evidence-based maternity and employment policies. Organizations and policymakers should pay greater attention to identifying the factors that influence women's decisions to remain in or withdraw from employment after childbirth, including childcare availability, workplace flexibility, organizational support, career barriers, and economic conditions. Policies should not only focus on maternity leave

provisions but also address post-maternity employment retention through flexible work arrangements, affordable childcare services, supportive workplace cultures, and career protection mechanisms. Such measures would contribute to reducing female labor force withdrawal after childbirth and promoting sustainable participation of women in the workforce.

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