CAREER VS. CARE: DO WORKPLACE EMPOWER OR LIMIT PREGNANT WOMEN AND SINGLE MOTHERS

AUTHOR - MS. N PRIYA PARVATHY, STUDENT AT SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE IN LAW, TNDALU

ABSTRACT:

In Indias growing workplace, Pregnant women and single mothers face challenges that limit their equal participation and access to lot of opportunities, and it often creates a intersection between career aspirations and care giving responsibilities. Although laws like the maternity benefit Act aim to protect women, most working mother do not benefit from them due to weak enforcement and especially for women in informal sector where 94% mostly don't receive maternity related benefits. Pregnant employees often experience bias during recruitment, are given physically unsuitable tasks, and are excluded from promotions after maternity leave. On the other hand, Single mothers in India are often stereotyped as socially disapproved or branded or labelled within their workplaces and communities leading to social exclusion and discrimination, they end up in unstable jobs where they don't get much support for childcare or financial needs and are being judged socially or excluded them because society does not fully accept single parenting. The absence of support systems, limited access to mental health cares, and heavy caregiver duties causing emotional strain, isolation and low self-esteem among single mothers and pregnant women. Awareness of government welfare schemes is low only 40% of single mothers are aware of available support programs. The study focuses on challenges of both cultural bias and economic vulnerabilities faced by mothers in Indian corporate and informal sectors. It explores the impact of women with children experiencing substantial wage gaps and reduced career growth. The study aims to uncover how organizational policies and workplace culture either hinder or support the growth of working mothers. The findings highlight that the workplaces need to inclusive supportive HR policies, offer flexible work arrangements, and strict enforcement of existing legal protections, so that no women is made to sacrifice her dreams, ambitions or financial independence simply because she chooses motherhood.

KEY WORDS: Pregnant women, Single mothers, Workplace discrimination, Career vs. Caregiving, Motherhood penalty, Gender bias, Informal sector, Wage gap.

INTRODUCTION:

In India's fast-changing labor force, women are increasingly challenging traditional norms and making contributions across sectors, but their own participation continues to be informed by gendered assumptions about motherhood and caregiving. The overlap between a woman's career and caregiving engenders one of the most challenging issues in attaining workplace equality. For most women, pregnancy and solo parenthood introduce tipping points that have a powerful impact on their career trajectory, professional identity, and economic self-sufficiency. Even with step-by-step progress in inclusion of gender and work opportunities, the workplace is mostly a place where deeply rooted prejudices

continue to limit the professional development of mothers.

Pregnant women are often subjected to implicit discrimination in hiring and work, since employers generally believe lower productivity, increased absenteeism, or lack of long-term commitment. Research in India and internationally shows that women coming back from maternity leave tend to receive delayed promotions, restricted project assignments, and covert exclusion from leadership roles. This pattern is usually called the maternal wall or motherhood penalty, mirroring the way workplaces persist in underestimating women after assuming caretaking roles. By the same token, single mothers also face special obstacles over and above those confronting married women that flow from social stigma, absence of child care assistance, and psychological pressure. Single mothers tend to be stereotyped as socially deviant or perceived as less secure workers, which limits their entry into secure and fulfilling employment.

The Indian situation makes these problems even more intractable, as almost 94% of women work in the informal economy, where job security, maternity leave, and protections at the workplace are nil or minimal. Even in the formal economy, poor enforcement of policy and lack of organizational sensitivity lead to women having to make difficult career advancement-caregiving trade-offs. Lack of support systems, flexible working arrangements, and accessible childcare facilities is another reason why working mothers have poor retention rates. In addition to this, low awareness of government schemes for welfare and social stigmas related to single motherhood amplify these exposures, which tend to result in emotional burnout and decreased self-esteem.

This study endeavors to examine how corporate culture, organizational approaches, and social attitudes together empower or constrain pregnant and single mothers in India's labor market. Through examination of both formal corporate and informal working environments, as well as the integration of survey research findings, the study aims to outline women's actual-life processes navigating the intersection of career and caregiving. Overall, this research underscores the necessity of inclusive, compassionate, and adaptive workplace arrangements whereby women are able to achieve both motherhood and substantial professional development without sacrificing either.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The experiences of single and pregnant mothers at work have been widely researched globally and particularly in India, highlighting their career and workplace inclusion enablers as well as challenges. David HS et al (2023) studied work-related stress among working pregnant women in Chennai and found that pregnant working women have much greater pregnancy-related stress, reflecting occupational influences on maternal productivity and health. Their results indicated the need for interventions at the workplace to deal with stress and establish additional support mechanisms.

In the same light, Rajasekar H. (2025) researched work-life balance among self-reliant pregnant women and found major challenges such as social isolation, negative stereotyping and lack of emotional support. Interventions included pregnancy recognition by workplaces, flexible working conditions and family support with the overall objective of enhancing productivity and well-being of pregnant women.

Lastly, Thomas AJ and Sudhesh NT (2023) researched on the experiences of new mothers' re-entry to work in corporate India. Thomas AJ and Sudhesh NT explored the challenges of re-entry to work and revealed that gender stereotypes, role ambiguity, and lack of support harmed job satisfaction as well as career progression. Thomas and Sudhesh presented justification for formalising organisational support cultures and policies.

A study report by the Gender and Child Welfare League (GCWL) (2024) explored the situation of mothers returning to work, identifying obstacles such as the need to manage feelings of guilt, develop new skills, and possess negotiation skills that were characterized as necessary to ease the transition back to work. Training areas were suggested in the report that inform action on program delivery to address some of the challenges in practice.

An analysis of the legal and policy (V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, 2012) noted gaps in implementing laws on maternity benefits and childcare provisions in India and indicated that poor infrastructure such as crèches and unclear policies restrict women's stable work post-maternity. A recent review in professional programs for workplace wellness specifically aimed at working mothers supports the finding of positive benefits of employer engagement in health promotion, mental health/wellness, and structured maternity return to work support: all increase employee satisfaction and retention rates significantly. Taken together, state and national reports outline a complex matrix of systemic, cultural, and personal challenges that impact working pregnant women and single-mothers at work across Indian contexts. They converge on the recommendations for clear policies, flexible work arrangements, unbiased career paths, and an empathic organisational culture that accept a need to promote inclusion within the workplace for the profession and personal success of women and single-mothers returning to work

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Type of Research:

The study is done through descriptive and analytical research with a view to describing the lived experiences, perceptions, constraints and support systems of pregnant women and single mothers engaged in the labour market in India and to assess the impact of workplace culture and biases on their career path.

Research Objective:

1. Identifying the demographic characteristics (age, employment status, nature of work) of respondents who are pregnant women or single mothers.

2. Examining the types of bias, exclusion, or challenges faced by these women in their employment.

3. Assessing how workplace environment and organizational practices affect their career progression and emotional well-being.

4. To establish the level of awareness among respondents regarding maternity-related benefits, support policies, or welfare schemes.

5. To propose recommendations for more inclusive HR practices and support structures for working mothers.

Research Statement:

This research investigates how workplaces in India either empower or limit pregnant and single mothers by exploring their job experiences, perceptions of bias, awareness of benefits, and the intersection of career and caregiving responsibilities.

Hypothesis:

Null Hypothesis H_0: Pregnant women and single mothers do not encounter severe workplace discrimination that influences their career or emotional outcomes.

Alternative Hypothesis H_1: Pregnant women and single mothers encounter severe workplace challenges and discrimination that impede their career development and emotional well-being.

Sample and Population:

In this project we used a small sample of 36 respondents in the workplace who were either pregnant or were single mothers. The respondents were recruited from various employment settings, including but not limited to: offices, educational institutions, healthcare

services, and informal working. Although the number of women is relatively small, it provides a fairly rich perspective on the lived experiences of women in an endeavor both career and caregiving.

At the same time, the respondents included are of varying ages and job classifications and socioeconomic status. Therefore the findings are balanced, and the details presented on working mothers' experiences from contemporary India (despite the limited number of respondents) are useful in understanding wider workplace dynamics.

Sampling Technique:

A convenience sampling approach was employed, with the survey distributed through online and personal networks and respondents selected on the basis of their availability and suitability to the study (i. e. as pregnant women or single mother working in any sector).

Data Type and Collection Technique:

The study relies on both secondary and primary data to have a balanced and complete picture of the subject. The primary data was gathered with a formatted online questionnaire created via Google Forms, aimed at obtaining direct feedback from pregnant working women as well as single mothers who are working. 36 responses were collected from participants who worked in different sectors, such as corporate firms, schools, hospitals, and informal settings. The questionnaire contained both factual and perception-based questions to determine their workplace experience, career issues, familiarity with maternity benefits, and emotional state. Online data collection offered convenience, maintained confidentiality, and gave participants autonomy to respond at their convenience.

The secondary data was drawn from credible and scholarly sources such as academic journals, research articles, and institutional reports from organizations like the World Bank, ILO, and ResearchGate. These sources helped in establishing theoretical support for the primary findings and in comparing global trends with the Indian context. Together, both data types strengthen the study by combining real-life experiences with academic perspectives, allowing for an informed and critical analysis of how workplaces influence the professional and emotional lives of pregnant and single mothers in India.

Research Limitations:

1. The sample may not be fully representative of all pregnant women and single mothers in India due to its reliance on online distribution.

2. Women without internet access or from remote or rural areas might be underrepresented.

3. Self-reported data may have bias (e.g., exaggeration or underreporting).

4. The cross-sectional nature of the survey captures perceptions at one point in time, rather than changes over time.

Research Gap:

Whereas existing literature reviews motherhood penalty and employment discrimination in general, there is insufficient research that simultaneously investigates the experiences of pregnant women and single mothers across corporate and informal sectors in India. This study addresses that gap by combining demographic data, subjective perceptions, and workplace experiences to draw connections between policy, culture, and women's career outcomes.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

This section provides a balanced and in-depth examination of the survey data collected for the research study that sought to identify how workplaces empower or constrain pregnant and single

mothers. The dataset includes both quantitative responses, which are mainly from structured multiple-choice and rating-scale items, as well as qualitative data derived from open-ended questions that capture the lived experiences and nuanced perspective of the participants. The analysis used descriptive statistics to determine trends and patterns, as well as thematic classification of qualitative answers to bring out the actual challenges such women experience in work environments. From both methods, the section seeks to present a comprehensive understanding of organizational, social, and cultural drivers shaping workplace support, discrimination, career development, and inclusiveness for pregnant and single mothers. Particular care is given to examining the scope of perceived support in the workplace, incidents of bias or discrimination, the effect on performance appraisal and promotion, as well as the responsiveness of organizational culture to non-traditional family forms.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS:

The survey gathered response from a varied group of participants with different employment statuses and maternal conditions.

The distribution given below:

Employment Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unemployed	18	45
Employed (Full-time)	12	30
Employed (Part-time)	3	7.5
On Maternity Leave	3	7.5
Other/Unknown	4	10

Table No.1 - DEMOGRAPHICS AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The majority of respondents are unemployed, which could reflect workplace challenges and exclusion in employment in the studied population. A considerable portion were engaged in full time.

Similarly, the respondents identified under these categories given below:

Maternal Status Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neither (filling on behalf)	27	67.5
Pregnant Woman	4	10
Single Mother	3	7.5
Both (Pregnant & Single Mother)	2	5

Table No.2 – MATERNAL STATUS
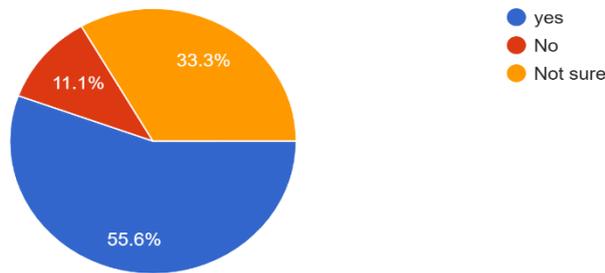
PERCEPTION OF WORKPLACE SUPPORT:

When asked about workplace supportiveness towards pregnant employees, the responses from the respondents were mixed:

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	20	50
Not Sure	12	30
No	4	10
No Response/Neutral	4	10

Table No.3 – WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Pie Chart No. 1 –

My workplace is supportive toward pregnant employees
36 responses

WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Even though half of the respondents affirmed support, the considerable portion of uncertainty or negative response signals inconsistent maternity support policies in workplaces.

EXPERIENCING OF HIRING AND PROMOTION BIAS:

Hiring and promotion bias due to maternal status, the respondents perspective reflected concern and neutrality.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	14	35
Agree	8	20
Strongly Agree	7	17.5
Disagree	5	12.5

ILE MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL [IF SCORE – 7.58]

VOLUME 4 AND ISSUE 2 OF 2025

APIS – 3920 – 0007 | ISSN - 2583-7230

Published by

Institute of Legal Education

https://iledu.in

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	2	5
No Response	4	10

Table No.4 – HIRING AND PROMOTIONAL BIAS

I have faced hiring or promotion bias due to my maternal status

36 responses

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
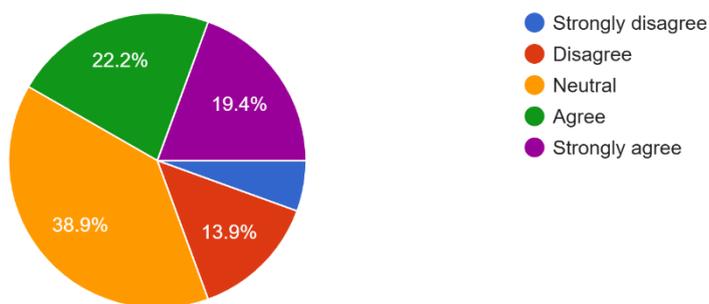
Pie Chart No.2 – HIRING AND PROMOTION BIAS

These responses convey that a considerable amount of respondents perceive bias adversely affecting career progression for pregnant and single mothers.

IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AND PROMOTION OPPORTUNITIES:

Responses to whether performance appraisal and promotions were negatively influenced by pregnancy and maternal status:

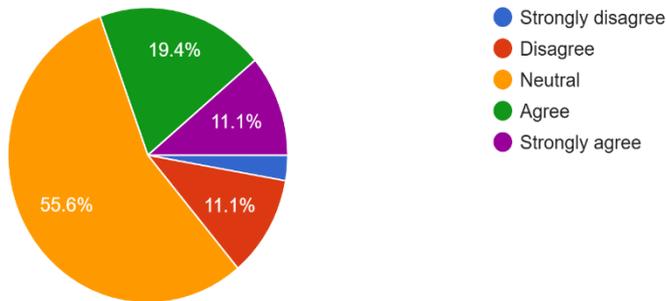| Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	20	50
Agree	7	17.5
Disagree	4	10
Strongly Agree	4	10
Strongly Disagree	1	2.5
No Response	4	10

Table No.5 – PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AND PROMOTION OPPORTUNITIES

This pattern reflects ongoing challenges and promotion practices in workplaces.

My performance appraisal or promotion opportunities were negatively influenced by my pregnancy or maternal status.

36 responses

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Pie Chart No.3 – PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AND PROMOTION OPPORTUNITIES

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND ACCEPTANCE OF NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILIES:

Respondents were asked if the organizational culture supports non-traditional family structure such a s single parenting without bias.

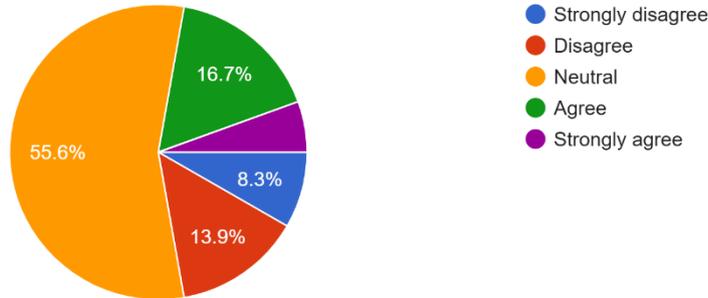| Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	20	50
Agree	6	15
Disagree	5	12.5
Strongly Disagree	3	7.5
Strongly Agree	2	5
No Response	4	10

Table No.6 – ACCEPTANCE OF NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY

The majority neutrality tells the insufficient support or lack of clear awareness about organizational acceptance of diverse family forms.

ILE MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL [IF SCORE – 7.58]

VOLUME 4 AND ISSUE 2 OF 2025

APIS – 3920 – 0007 | ISSN - 2583-7230

Published by

Institute of Legal Education

https://iledu.in

The organizational culture supports non-traditional family structures (e.g., single parenting) without bias

36 responses

Pie Chart No.4 – ACCEPTANCE OF NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY

STEREOTYPING AND STIGMA FACED BY SINGLE MOTHERS:

Regarding the stereotype that single mothers are less reliable or committed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	19	47.5
No	17	42.5
No Response/Neutral	4	10

Table No.7 - STEREOTYPING AND STIGMA FACED BY SINGLE MOTHERS.

This reveals persistent stigmatization as a critical issue impacting workplace inclusivity.

Single mothers are often unfairly stereotyped as being less reliable or committed.

36 responses
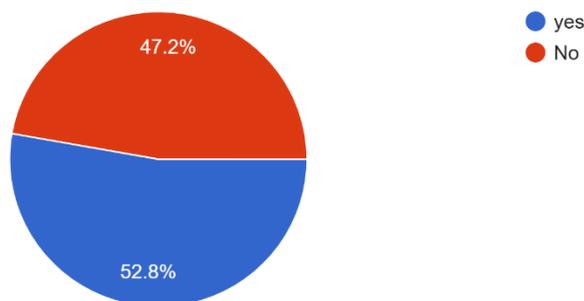
Pie Chart No.5 - STEREOTYPING AND STIGMA FACED BY SINGLE MOTHERS

IMPACT OF PREGNANCY AND MOTHERHOOD ON CAREER PROGRESSION:

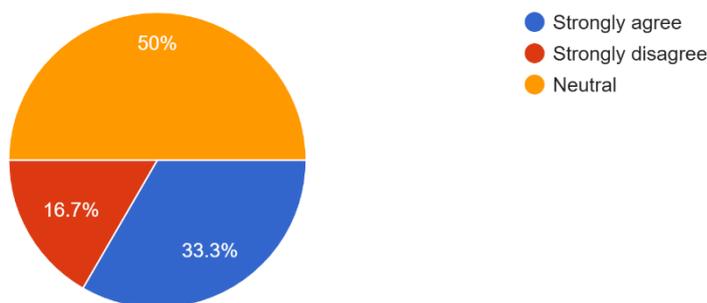Responses tell that motherhood significantly impacts career advancement:

Table No.8 – CAREER PROGRESSION

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	20	50
Agree	7	17.5
Disagree	4	10
Strongly Agree	4	10
Strongly Disagree	1	2.5
No Response	4	10

I believe motherhood slows down a woman's career growth in India

36 responses

- Strongly agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neutral

Pie Chart

No. 6 – CAREER PROGRESSION

INTERPRETATION OF DATA:

The data gathered through this survey offers important insights into complex realities faced by pregnant women and single mothers in Indian workplace. Most of our survey respondents were younger women, suggesting relevance for working women and parents in early stages of their careers. Many reported being unemployed or on maternity leave suggesting interruptions to full-time work. While half of the respondents reported their workplace supported pregnant employees, many were unsure or had a negative impression suggesting poor management of formal maternity leave policies. A significant number of respondents felt that they were discriminated against during hiring, promotion and performance assessment processes due to their status as mothers, which illustrates the motherhood penalty identified in other studies of Indian workplaces. The organizational cultures in the workplaces were often neutral or unsupportive about non-traditional family structures of single mothers, with half the respondents perceiving that single mothers were stereotyped as less committed employees. Qualitative data revealed societal judgment, fear of discrimination and a desperate need for flexible workplace policies and organizational cultures where empathy was displayed. In general, the data reveals workplaces that were only marginally supportive at best, with

entrenched systemic biases and cultural barriers to career success and opportunities for inclusion of pregnant women and single mothers.

Qualitative Insights and Recommendations:

The participants expressed their concern regarding the stigma of society and discrimination and the need for flexible work policies. Respondents articulated: "The main barrier is societal judgement regarding balance between family and work." "We need to be more flexible in terms of our hours, as well as providing support for child care." " post-maternity growth opportunities are limited"

FINDINGS:

1. Half of the respondents reported that their workplace environment was supportive of pregnant employees, but 30% felt unsure and 10% believed it was an unsupportive work environment. This indicates a large scale inconsistency in the implementation of maternity support policies and variability in engage in workplace cultures that ultimately affects pregnant women's confidence and well-being in the workplace.

2. About 40% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they experienced hiring and promotion bias with respect to their maternal status, and 35% were neutral. This is indicative of a strong perception of career obstacles stemming from maternity status which highlights the systemic disadvantages observed by pregnant and single mothers in the workplace.

3. Nearly half of respondents were neutral in their articulation of if being pregnant or a mother's status affected performance appraisals and promotion, but almost 30% of respondents agreed that being a mother or

pregnant negatively impacted their pathways to career growth. These results suggested that motherhood creates chronic halting or delays in their professional career path, as observed in the workplace.

4. Responses tended to lean neutral (50%) on having an organizational support for a non-traditional family the involves single parenting, with 15% reporting an affirmative response. This indicates a critical gap in workplace norms and organizational policies that would be inclusive of both maternity support and non-traditional family statuses.

5. Responses regarding the stigmas associated with single mothers being reliable or committed were almost a split decision as well, indicating that this stigmatization still exists within the job environment and will likely impact job satisfaction, inclusion, and promotion on behalf of single mothers.

6. Some of those surveyed indicated concern and fear, related to requesting flexible working hours, or working from home situations, which indicates there may be an absent workplace culture that endorses negotiation requests, or recognizes or values supporting work-family conflict or caregiving responsibility.

7. Differences in perspectives concerning the clear policies around maternity leave and parental policies indicate that it is important, if not necessary for

organizations or companies to communicate clear policies, and have a strong enforcement of policies to help embolden employees who are pregnant or parenting.

8. Some of those surveyed indicated that they were asked questions during a job interview that related to their marital, or maternal, status, which suggests that in spite of organizers or companies claiming to be committed to equal opportunities for all individuals could be in fact engaging in discriminatory hiring practices, and violate equal opportunity phrases, specifically exclusion based on gender, or motherhood status.

9. The participants believed, for the most part, that motherhood status created a delay in women's career timeline in India, which alignes with the research literature suggesting that the 'motherhood penalty', and that caregiver role had an influence on the equity of advancement, funding, or salary.

10. The results presented qualitative data that indicated mothers experienced social stigma, fears of exclusion, and trying to balance work with caregiving responsibilities. There was a strong need for a supportive workplace culture - having empathy, and flexible policies, would be a significant support for women with caregiving responsibilities, mothers.

11. Overall, this data indicates and demonstrates a presence of systematic and cultural challenges in Indian workplaces that shape and undermine the career work experiences of pregnant and single mothers who conduct caregiving responsibilities. The findings provide the urgent need for systematic policies and cultural change; and systematic transformation is essential if workplaces are to truly support and value women in both their professional and caregiving roles.

SUGESSTONS:

It is important for organizations to provide high priority to the development and dissemination of clear maternity and parental support policies, so that pregnant women and single mothers are aware of their rights and available benefits. Flexible work experiences, such as telecommuting, flexible hours, and part-time work, will greatly mitigate the tension of balancing work demands with caregivers' responsibilities, and contribute to the retention of a workforce. It is essential that hiring and promotion protocols are free from bias, and that some safety net checks, such as advising on discrimination for marital or maternity, be built into recruitment and promotion practices. Also, unconscious bias training should be made available to HR and leaders regarding hiring and promotions. A supportive organizational culture is additionally essential; this is done in part, through diversity programs, support groups, and conversations that recognize, value, and adopt non-traditional family types, including single parenthood. The same opportunities for advancement should be made available as promotions and performance reviews be disconnected from the act of parenthood or maternity, along with mentoring programs for mothers returning to work. There should also be regular open communication practices so employees feel empowered to express caregiving barriers, with the support of access to counseling and an employee assistance program.

Employers can also consider sensitivity training to minimize stereotyping and maximize

empathy on the part of single or pregnant workers. Organizations can also evaluate work policies regularly through issuing questionnaires and feedback mechanisms for ongoing improvement to facilitate maternity. As far as possible, organizations can form alliances with nurseries or provide onsite day care facilities to ease working class mothers further who are burdened. Finally, working together with policymakers to enhance protections in law and implement anti-discrimination policies is able to make a shift in policy or institutional level to be able to support working mothers who are pregnant or unmarried.

CONCLUSION:

The study's findings demonstrate both critical and durable challenges which pregnant and single mothers face in Indian workplaces. In spite of pre-existing legal protections such as the Maternity Benefit Act, there continues to be an oversight regarding the policies workplace policies such as: maternity leave, flexible work options, and an equitable pathway to advancement within the organization. The 'motherhood penalty' continues to be a significant barrier to entering or advancing one's career because of the explicit and implicit assumptions and ideas around motherhood. Additionally, the cultures of the workplace very rarely have unpacked policies to support family structures other than the traditional family model, promoting the stereotype of a traditional family model, in particular, that of the single mother, engendering feelings of exclusion and discrimination. For instance, while some respondents report experiences of positive workplace support, the majority of respondents in the study exhibited negative or doubts, implying inconsistency in organizational commitment to women's gender diversity. It is clear that it is the full responsibility of the organization to establish transparent policies, an inclusive culture, eliminate bias through education, and make institutional changes. Pregnant women and single motherhood are not only a cynical approach toward gender equity, but a mechanism to increase employee satisfaction, retention, and overall organizational excellence. In conclusion, developing truly supportive workplaces required an all-out, collective effort, and sustained work around legally guaranteed protections, organizational policies, and social beliefs to overcome barriers to the career performance of pregnant and single mothers in the Indian workforce.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. V.V. Giri National Labour Institute. (2012). *Analysis on Effectiveness of the Implementation of Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 in the Unorganized Sector in India*.

2. Centre for Women's Development Studies (2024). *Women's Work, Maternity, and Public Policy in India*.

3. International Journal of Reproduction, Contraception, Obstetrics and Gynecology. (2017). *Pregnancy outcome in working women with work place stress*, 6(7), 2891–2896.

4. Nititantra. (2024). *The Impact of Maternity Leave Policies on Women's Career Progression and Workplace Equality in India*

5. National Commission for Women. (2021). *Analysis on Effectiveness of the Implementation of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961*.

6. Ojha, S., Chatterjee, S., & Dimova, R. (2024). *Labor Market Penalty for Single Mothers* [PDF] Indian Institute of Management Calcutta.

7. IndiaSpend. (2024). *Workplace Maternity Benefits Elude 94% Working Indian Women*.

8. Economic Times. (2024, August 9). *Many working women face 'maternity penalty', finds survey*.

9. Sarkhel, S., & Mukherjee, A. (2024). *Motherhood and Labor Market*

Penalty. A Study on Indian Labor Market. GLO Discussion Paper.

10. Indian Journal of Forensic Community Medicine. (2025). *Work life balance among self-dependent pregnant women: challenges and solutions* .