

Holistic approach is necessary to free women of 'motherhood penalties' at the workplace

By IIM Bangalore | Mar 8, 2022

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Ambitious, aggressive, who ruthlessly dealt with competitors, and worked hard to nurture and grow her brand identity in a male-dominated sexist industry. If you wonder who fits this description, it is none other than India's melodious and beloved daughter, Lata Mangeshkar, laid to rest a few weeks ago. The encomiums that poured in described her as the breadwinner of a struggling family, loving and caring, and giving up her childhood to cater to her family. Our collective hearts melted. Both these descriptions of Lata Mangeshkar are accurate. But the glowing tributes and obituaries almost exclusively focused on her warm, loving nature, and any references to her competitive streak were brief and apologetic in tone. But why? Do these words dim her aura as a woman or as an artist? This is another example of how shackled we are to the gendered roles in society. The [language we use](#) not only reveals our biases but also restricts our imagination of what we are capable of as individuals.

The modern workplace continues to be stifled by patriarchal impulses. While much has improved, true gender equality remains elusive. Overt gender discrimination in hiring is not permissible anymore. The Women, Business and Law database shows that most countries have some form of legislation that prevents blatant discrimination, even as other forms of gender discrimination are legal (access to credit, for example). However, legislation cannot strike down insidious forms of gender discrimination that come into play because management leadership (usually dominated by men) is tied to social norms that assign prescribed roles to men and women.

Recent evidence from developed and developing countries show a '[motherhood penalty](#)' or a negative impact of childbirth on working women. Mothers exit the workforce or reduce their hours of work. These activities impact women's earnings in the immediate or long term. Or women move to jobs that are family-friendly and offer flexible timings. Again, these, too, have a cost that may not be immediately apparent. Research shows that in certain careers, flexibility is penalised; there is a nonlinear relationship of earnings with hours worked. The ideal worker for many companies is available to work long hours can forgo evenings and weekends at short notice. These individuals are remunerated highly for their non-flexible presence at the workplace. Interestingly, no such penalty is experienced by fathers. Biology is responsible for pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding differences between men and women. Social norms created childcare and social reproduction distinctions between men and women.

Well-meaning but poorly crafted policies are harmful to gender equality and reinforce social norms of caregiving. The Indian Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017 is an example. By providing maternity leave for six months only to mothers, the Act does a grave disservice to employed women. There are examples galore, particularly from Scandinavian countries, that have tried variations of family leave that gives compulsory paternity and maternity leave and some options to combine them. The country governments partly bear these expenses. The paternity leave provision in the Indian Maternity Benefits Amendment Act is a measly two weeks. This Act has made it more costly to recruit young women as there is no government sharing of costs. It does not require much to figure out how companies will respond.

Post-Covid-19, companies are offering geographic flexibility in work arrangements to employees. Good move. However, when work from home flexibility is allowed only for mothers with young children, it screams patriarchy. It reveals deep-seated gender normative biases and sends completely wrong signals to employees. It tells young men (and perhaps not so young men) that your job is done with the child being born. You do not need to be a human being or a father, just be a worker. It assumes that for the fathers in the organisation, there is a woman, employed or otherwise, who will handle all social reproduction responsibilities.

Mothers pay a childcare tax when they work from home, even if hours are not reduced. Physical absence could mean lost opportunities for training, networking, and perhaps even critical assignments. Managers are more likely to not give important projects to a mother working from home due to the bias that they are not fully engaged with the workplace. The portfolio that could have been handed to her, gets handed over to someone else. Fathers do not pay the childcare tax in their career opportunities, but they pay a tax in terms of time lost with children, bonding in early years, and cultivating a work-life balance. And the wheels of patriarchal gender norms continue to spin; [young girls and boys will see](#) employed mothers juggling various tasks and fathers clocking in long hours at employment.

Workplace [gender discrimination](#) is impossible to legislate away. To achieve equality, we also need to change our normative views regarding gender roles in society, including contributions to paid and unpaid work. As an educator interacting with young people, I am optimistic about change. Young men and women show greater fluidity in their views and are open to pushing boundaries across gender roles. The limiting factor here is management. In most organisations, top management is male-dominated, older and out of sync with current needs. To be agile and change normative views, including older women's voices alone will not make a difference. We need younger men and women to take charge or at the very minimum, ensure that their voice is heard when workplace policies are contemplated.