

## Maternal Employment and Well Being- A Conceptual Understanding

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to highlight the relevance of giving support to mothers after birth when they are in a conflict of going back to work or staying at home. In case they choose the former, then possible solutions and strategies should be shared failing which the mother is left feeling confused and guilty following the changes in their duties and responsibilities. It also shows how a mother and child's wellbeing is correlated with the support provided by their close ones. It brings to light the changes a woman goes through and how it should be a mandate in the process of postpartum care.

**Keywords:** Maternal employment; Maternal health; Social support; Mother-infant relationship; Working mothers.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most dramatic changes over the years has been the number of mothers joining the workforce [1]. In India especially, we see the sudden shift of women from the role of a housewife to that of a corporate lead. A study by the International Labour Organization (2016) shows that as of 1990, the female labor force participation was 35 percent; however, it fell to 27 per cent in 2016 for which reasons are unknown.

Along with it, came the studies on role changes, cultural cutoffs, role struggle, and family functioning under stress due to which maternal employment is now seen as a social marvel [2]. Maternal employment is something that has long been looked down upon in India. It is required to touch upon this topic because of the increasing number of women setting foot in the working world. Being a mother, taking care of the child and household is seen to be some sort of a "natural" work and when a woman starts working it is "unnatural" and not her responsibility [3]. However, women are slowly gaining a breakthrough and are changing roles from that of a "primary caregiver" to a "bread earner".

Mariko [4] in his article talks about the three best ideals of a mother: (i) the mother is the best care taker and mentor of children, (ii) the infant-mother relationship is the most natural and primary one in human relationships, and (iii) no other job is better or more suitable for women than nurturing.

With so many expectations or rather predetermined roles that are put on the mother, many tend to forget the impact of childbirth on the mother. Individuals have an innate tendency to point out flaws

of other individuals so much so that they forget to understand the situation of the person and what the person is feeling. Keeping this in mind, there are infinite studies available on how the employment level of the mother can impact the child's social or cognitive development. When a mother gives birth to a child, it marks a significant rupture in the life trajectory of the woman [5]. Everything in the mother's life changes, from her lifestyle, her body, her relationships, all of it undergoes a contextual metamorphosis. Going through labor itself can be quite excruciatingly beautiful, however this can certainly imprint the mother with a ton of emotions, stress and confusion. It can take quite a toll on the mother considering these factors are not taken care of, or the right kind of support is not provided at the right time. The aim of this paper therefore, is to highlight the struggles that employed women face, and how maternal health needs to be brought to the forefront along with other factors that recent mothers can experience and gain from.

### MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT

The employment pattern drastically changes due to motherhood- of those who return to the work force, some tend to change their jobs, change their employer or even change their occupation [6]. Some

might not even return due to their perseverance of giving full attention to their child. However, there are mothers who wish to return to jobs, and they do but they leave after a while because they realize they are unable to effectively balance between their work and their child. Most studies have also commented on how working mothers are engulfed by guilt and anxiety because they are afraid they are not spending as much time with their infants as they should. Being a mother is a very difficult job and it has countless number of responsibilities and requirements, due to which some women find it hard and they leave their job. Here comes the question of social support, and as it may point out, a little about gender equality and patriarchy as well. While the most convenient answer to the imbalance might be for the mother to leave her job, and stay at home, even if it's against her wish, what happens to the husband and other family members whose presence in this time of distress help the mother to a great extent.

The transition to motherhood is a stressful time and can also influence the wellbeing of the mother, however it is also one of the most transformative experience for women [7-9]. Due to the constant juggle between the new responsibilities, distress and the feeling of being trapped by their parenting role, the mother might start to doubt her efficacy and can cause stress [9, 8]. Most mothers try to compensate their absence by trying harder to be good mothers, some others lack confidence in their childrearing roles, and other mothers try too hard to prove themselves to others that they are not neglectful of their children and that they too spend as much time with their children as non working mothers too [2]. There is also a robust need to excel in work and be as efficient as their male counterparts while sustaining an active engagement in their social lives [10]. This may be one of the reasons why most mothers would go back to work after giving birth to a child. Not being the only reason, with the changing times it has become an integral part of a woman's life to break all barriers and work, it has become a necessity now as every woman wishes to be independent and earn her own money and live life. In India especially, a woman is expected to stay at home and be dependent on the husband for monetary needs and everything else, however, most women now recognize the need to be by themselves and create their own identity.

Nonetheless, we see a presence of women who are adaptive insofar as they commit to both work and family domains, however when they do make the choice to go back to work it is highly circumstantial [8]. The decision to go back to work is guided by the mixture of external opportunities and preferences, and that a woman's orientation will alter depending on these factors. Factors like income levels relative to costs of child care, perceived anticipated support from organization for return to work, and extent of personal planning for return all support the idea of going back to

work [11]. However, the anticipated lack of support may stem from any negative experience in the work place such as being excluded from any assignment or being reassigned to another work [8]. It can be quite taxing on the mother as she is now worried about the magnitudes of leaving the child alone and going back to work, and if there is no help or encouragement from family members, friends or even work place, the mother's decision can be influenced and she may stay at home even if she wants to work [12]. This is because mothers also experience some amount of emotional difficulties at the prospect of leaving their child behind, adding on that the societal pressure can highly be impactful of the mother's decision making it a tough call for her.

We do not see much availability of resources to educate the mother after birth, and whatever is present is quite limited and is more in terms of physicality rather than cognitive or affective. It is very important because expectations regarding childbirth, the ability or the lack of ability to handle physical pain during labor, the sense of lack of control during childbirth procedures, the threat to wholeness of one's body and the lack of information regarding procedures practiced by health professionals may turn the experience of childbirth into serious pathological disorders [13]. This brings us to the next aspect of maternal wellbeing- maternal health.

#### **THE RETURN**

Most women describe returning to work after childbirth as a key turning point in their life course. Due to the extended absence from the labor market many women also feel devoid of social and human capital [5]. Around 90 per cent of women who are pregnant also work, with the majority of them working till the month of delivery. Out of these, approximately 60 per cent of women who return to work after giving birth, around two thirds of them are back at work within the first three month itself [14]. More and more women who return to the work force due to reasons unknown, describes motherhood as a process that no one prepared them for [15]. Most women chose to portray their returning to the work force metaphorically. One of the participants in the study conducted by Spiteri & Xuereb [15] described it as an "uphill climb", seeing it as a demanding task, but the more she climbed this hill, the more she started to view it as something she could cope with. Another participant described entering the work field as being struck by lightning, as it brought about a change in priorities, relationships, and within themselves.

Most women seemed to experience a whirlwind of emotions which included feelings of worries, bad mood, uncertainty but at the same time they felt some form of excitement and looked forward to returning to work [16, 15]. Along with it, they definitely felt guilty of letting their children down and

felt as though they were losing control. Some of these women couldn't fathom the burst of emotions they felt and had difficulty choosing appropriate words and had a very repetitive pattern of speaking and explaining their emotions [15].

Women experience a kaleidoscope of emotions after childbirth, whether it is attributed to the hormonal changes or to the situation, it is crucial to look in to the matter. From the studies conducted, it is quite clear that women have a hard time going back to work and face a problem in being bombarded by new duties and responsibilities. Initially it is very difficult for a woman to deal with this whole new situation at hand and hence, it is important to provide some form of support whether in the form of interventions, support groups or even through love and affection provided by the family and friends, it can go a long way to help the mother.

### **MATERNAL HEALTH**

Even though pregnancy is a natural process for reproductive age, very little research has been done on the emotional changes that typically occur at this point [14]. Understanding these changes that could be possible risk factors for decline in the functional status would help in providing interventions for these women [14]. A study conducted by Boorman, Devilly, Gamble, Creedy and Fenwick [17] saw a 14.3 per cent incidence rate of traumatic birth in women. Most women after the birth of their child have been found to be persistently afraid that something is going to happen to their child, or they tend to feel angry, lonely, socially isolated, irritable, anxiety, depressed, have poor concentration, and also experience sleep and appetite disturbance, making it difficult for them to bond with their child [18, 19]. Women are most prone to developing postpartum depression, PTSD, anxiety disorders, postpartum psychosis and are more likely to be admitted in a psychiatric ward after birth than any other time [20, 21]. Albeit it is known that along with pregnancy a mother is bound to experience changes, it also includes biological, psychological, sociological and cultural components [19].

It is common for women to experience maternal blues, PTSD post delivery, however it is manifested differently in women coming from distinctive cultures. As many as 6 per cent of women develop post traumatic stress (American Psychological Association), up to 13 per cent experience symptoms of depression [22], both of which can adversely affect the mother's wellbeing including her relationships with others [23]. Quick return to work after birth not only affects the mother, but also affects the mother's wellbeing [5]. Coming to cultural contexts, African women tend to somatize their symptoms and place significant emphasis on childrearing, as Japanese and Chinese women do. However, these mothers incline towards describing concerns regarding care given to

their newborn whereas North American and European women lean towards affective symptomology [19].

Other studies show that a mother's positive beliefs about maternal employment predicts better psychological wellbeing, this includes beliefs such as beneficial effects on children due to the employment [12]. Despite of the stress that changing between roles brings about, with the achievement of being able to successfully balance between work and family, it generates benefits for mental health by instilling a sense of high self esteem, financial security and recognition as well [20]. Deriving from this, it can be assured that in spite of all its hassles, being taught healthy adaptive methods and parenting strategies can go a long way in helping the mother. This can help in keeping the wellbeing of the mother up to par as the risk of developing depression in older age is higher if the woman has had at least one episode during the postpartum period [20].

It was thought that something as simple as psychological debriefing could prove to be wondrous to the new mother. Originating in the 1990's, it helps women to share their birthing experience with a midwife or an obstetrician [22]. However, certain studies [24-26] argued that the debriefing is quite ineffective in treating post traumatic stress. Nevertheless, it is still used as an informal method on a daily basis in the UK [22]. The argument laid here is that regardless of what kind, some form of step taken to provide care to new mothers can prove to be fruitful. Whether it is talking about the birthing experience, or sharing whatever problems that the mother may face it can help them. As it will be discussed further in this paper, the support given to a new mother is on a gamut, it doesn't commence when the mother is in labour, nor does it cease when the baby is born.

### **SOCIAL SUPPORT**

As discussed previously, presence of social support to women influences their decision to go back to work after giving birth. Social support instills a sense of belongingness to a part of the community that loves and cares for the individual and values him or her [11]. Lack of support not only from family members or friends, but even lack of perceived actual support from the organization itself is deemed to be one of the reasons why women may quit their jobs after a short duration of time of getting back from giving birth [8, 12]. This can be attributed to the lack of knowledge and the perceived or actual lack of support as well. Support seems to be quite crucial and effective in facilitating mothers with going back to work [7] especially when the transition itself is stressful. However, social support as a continuum is advisable, right from the time the mother is pregnant till the time she is able to meritoriously cope with both maternal and work demands.

On the home front, women said that receiving help from their husbands with infant and household chores can be of great importance to them [7, 11]. Phang & Lee [11] conducted a study on 10 Korean mothers and their experience of social support after birth. A husband's emotional support was identified by his refusal of complaints about inconvenience caused by his wife's work, making breakfast, taking care of children and sharing household chores. Similarly, workplace support consisted of help received from a family friendly organizational culture and workplace benefits provided for working mothers, including paid maternity leave [11].

Unlike men, women tend to measure their success level based on the amount of support they receive from the social networks that they are a part of [11]. These women tend to have lower burnout rates and also accounts for both the mother's and the infant's wellbeing [7, 11]. Of those women who were part of support groups, it was found to reduce symptoms of depression in women while increasing feelings of self esteem, perceived control and satisfaction with partner communication [27, 20] and of those who did not receive support during the postpartum period were found to be at high risk of developing Postpartum Depression (PPD) [27, 22].

From this, it can be seen that social support is highly associated with maternal health and is crucial for the mother's wellbeing. Not being provided support or being told off by other people for going back to work after childbirth can put the mother through feelings of guilt, worries, sadness and frustration. A mother requires support even if she decides not to get back to work, going through labor itself can induce changes in the mother, which she may not be able to handle alone by herself. In this case, support from friends, family, and other networks seems like a saving grace and gives the mother the essential motivation and encouragement to move forward.

## **CONCLUSION**

Postpartum period is a time of stress and is like an open invitation to all forms of worries, troubles and negative emotions. It is a time of foremost importance for a woman as she is at a high risk of developing psychiatric conditions. Therefore, it is critical to ensure proper care during and after labor as many issues can arise at this point, from body issues, problems relating to infant care, problems relating to normal household chores and even going back to work issues. Once recognized, these issues must be resolved through interventions and support. Support from social networks they belong to is considered to be of utmost importance because it gives them some hope and the required love and affection. Support not only during pregnancy and after, but also when the mother decides to go back to work as this is where things tend to get a little out of hand, and women feel like they are losing control. They

require proper guidance, and talking to other women from the same background and in the same situation helps them the most. Hence, consultation with a mental health professional post birth should be included in the process of postpartum care; even being part of support groups could be recommended depending on the severity of the mother's distress. It is a matter of high relevance and not much research has been made in this area. It still remains untouched and it is necessary that equal importance be given to both mother and infant after labor as it is a delicate period. Keeping this in mind, a mother's and infant's wellbeing can improve drastically and less mothers would be afraid of heading back to the work force without feeling guilty or being told not to, leaving the mother and her child content and happy.

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