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MATERNITY COACHING



FRANCES
CUSHWAY
WRITES ON THE
IMPORTANCE
OF SUPPORTING
WOMEN
THROUGH
MATERNITY
LEAVE IN THE
POST-COVID
WORLD



Before the Covid pandemic, the number of women in the labour force was at a record high of 72%. However, the pandemic has not affected men and women’s roles equally.

The Women and Equalities Committee’s February 2021 Report on the gendered impact of Covid found women were:

- at higher risk of job loss
- less likely to have received discretionary top ups on the furlough scheme.

In addition, they found that mothers were more likely than fathers to ask to be furloughed. ONS data shows that the highest percentage of job losses is among women aged between 25 -34 years, peak child-bearing years.

But Covid isn’t the only thing stalling women’s careers.

The gender pay gap

The UK gender pay gap has been slowly closing over the last decade, however it isn’t doing so uniformly across age groups.

It remains close to zero for full time employees under 40, but for the 40-49 age group and above it’s still over 10%. Fewer women over 39 years are moving into higher-paid managerial occupations, with the higher pay these roles bring. So why is this happening?

ONS data shows mothers in both higher and lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations are more likely to have their babies in the 30-39 age group. Herein lies the challenge for both mothers and organisations: a larger proportion of women on track to reach senior roles in organisations are having their babies at crucial points in their careers.

How does maternity leave affect women’s careers?

HR training providers DPG found that 88% of mothers experienced problems returning to work after maternity leave. O’Neil and Bilimoria (2005) aptly named the second phase in their career model, which covers the mid-career ages 36-45, ‘pragmatic endurance’. Women in this stage are ‘doing what it takes to get things done’. They are often dissatisfied and disenfranchised with the workplace and taking time out to have children means they have often stalled at middle management. They are at risk of dropping out of their chosen career paths with the loss of expertise, experience and economic productivity this brings.

Most of us don’t realise that up to three-quarters of the average working mother’s career happens after maternity leave, and work and accomplishment can be as important later on in women’s careers as when they first started. The post-menopausal career can bring women a renewed sense of purpose, energy and increased vitality for work.

Women leaving the talent pipeline impacts not only on the individual but on organisations and our economy. Diversity of employees at all levels is good for the bottom line. The *Pipeline Women Count 2020* found that London-listed companies with at least one-third women on their executive committees have a profit margin ten times greater than companies with no women at this level.

Why is it difficult for some women to return after maternity leave?

The lack of flexible working opportunities has often been a causal factor for women. The effect extended home working during the Covid pandemic will have on this is yet to be seen. Confidence is also a big issue. An AAT survey of women on maternity leave found 57% of women said they no longer had the confidence or felt capable enough to re-join their industry and take up the same level of responsibility as before they had children.

In my experience as a maternity coach, the biggest obstacle to a successful return to work after maternity leave is understanding the process known as 'matrescence' - the mind, body and hormonal transition to motherhood.

Becoming a mother is probably the biggest identity change a woman undergoes after adolescence. Our identity needs to adjust to a huge variety of changes - to our bodies, minds, relationships, lifestyle and potentially our careers. Sometimes, mothers feel they have changed too much to return to their previous roles or careers. There is an element of truth in this.

Neuroscience has shown the surge of hormones circulating through mothers' bodies when pregnant doesn't just cause physical changes, but changes in their brains too. Areas of the brain that control anxiety, empathy and social interaction become more active. These changes are what help us bond to our new baby and are where the feelings of overwhelming love, fierce protectiveness, worry and anxiety come from. We develop a greater understanding that others may have different needs to our own, which helps us attend to our babies' needs. Nature effectively changes us to focus on our babies.

While these changes are hugely important for bonding with new babies, and their survival, they can greatly impact the preparation and experience of returning to work, and whether mothers return to work at all.

How does maternity coaching fit in with this?

Whilst maternity coaching has been in practice for about fifteen years, it's still not widely provided in organisations. Maternity coaching supports mothers through this normal but important life stage, increasing the likelihood they remain in the workforce and consequently can help narrow the gender pay gap. The benefits it brings at a societal level will be crucial in helping to rebuild diversity in the post-Covid world.

When working with new mothers I think it is crucial I help them understand their new identity and the psychological journey they have been on in becoming a mother. It's an immediate confidence boost to sleep-deprived mothers to understand that how their brain is

working at the moment is driven by their hormones (and lack of sleep) and not a permanent state of affairs.

Next, helping them visualise their future self and goals for their career brings a new sense of perspective to planning their return to work.

We are in real danger of undoing the progress women have made in the labour market, if we don't provide support for women's return to work in the post-Covid world. Maternity leave is not a holiday. It is a time when the complex interaction of hormones, life stage and identity create the perfect storm that can completely disrupt a woman's career. Through maternity coaching, however, she can emerge on the other side, transformed, rebooted and ready for the rest of her working life.

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