

Parenthood in the Workplace – A How-To Guide

When we talk about the progress of women's rights in the corporate world, it is often with glowing optimism. No one can deny that entry opportunities for women into fields like consulting, finance, and tech have improved. As students, we know that many firms have turned to actively handpicking women for their entry programmes. It is not uncommon to see insight events specifically with words like 'women', 'female', and 'empowerment' highlighted in bold in the job description. But, as we all know, a foot in the door is only one step in the right direction.

Glass ceilings and stumbling blocks in the working world lie at the intersections of women's identities and at the transition points through different stages of life. The struggle that many women of colour face is often discussed in numerous reports – the latest [McKinsey 'Women in the Workplace' report \(2021\)](#) draws attention to falling representation for this community. However, women's role as parents is often glossed over or co-opted into other minority markers.

Parenthood and specifically, motherhood, has remained a pervading issue for successful women in corporate life. It is the bogeyman hanging over their early thirties – it is the ultimate sacrifice they are societally expected to make at some undefined point.

Often, concerns about this stage of life, and the possibility of having to be the superwoman that manages to balance both motherhood and working life, are brushed aside.

'Current policy is comprehensive enough!'

'Look at all those other women doing it – it's definitely possible.'

'All you need is a supportive and loving partner, and everything will fall into place.'

This is not true. One of the most attractive parental leave policies, offered by insurance company [Aviva, provides 12 months of parental leave to both parents, with only 6 of those at full basic pay](#). The 'Big 4' UK consulting firms follow suit, offering about [6 months at full pay](#), and extended leave with only statutory pay available. To some, this may seem like enough, especially when the alternative is [around £600 a month](#), not including tax or National Insurance contributions. But, considering how much of an investment the early stages of a child's life is – [pregnancy alone can run you about £1,700](#) (Appleby, 2016) – it is simply a pittance.

That's considering the numbers. Taking a step back and thinking about the loss of a year in industry, for many women, it can be a career death knell. Internally, many struggles with the added responsibility of caring for a child. Becoming a parent changes your priorities and

availability, meaning that that 10 pm [meeting is not just draining, it is also unfeasible](#). . Externally, the loss of momentum means some women can be passed up for promotions, cannot easily move in response to business needs and can often feel alienated from office camaraderie. This, coupled with an unwittingly shallow assessment of the changes that parenthood brings to a person's life, makes the perfect storm for women exiting the workforce. In the US, the women's workforce participation rate has been on the decline since 2008.

Why do the current stopgaps fall short, then? For one, having a child is not a long-term illness, it's a lifelong commitment. Parents need a working schedule that understands that there is now another priority in their life. A move towards more flexible working schedules does not have to be at the sacrifice of business productivity. [Early research](#) into the 4-day work week in Iceland has shown hopeful results, with workers producing more value-added work in shorter periods of time. (Haraldsson and Kellam, 2021). Ultimately, workplaces need to understand that parents need more than a year off work, they need a complete transformation of working culture, one that can benefit us all, parents and non-parents.

Tolu Olejide