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WELLESLEY CENTERS FOR WOMEN

## Working Paper Series

### Project Paper: Women's Experiences With Maternity Leave

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Paper No.PP04

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## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH MATERNITY LEAVE

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THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CONNECTION  
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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a report of the results of a study conducted in 1991, by the Center for Research on Women, with Working Mother magazine, of over 4,000 women, most of whom had returned to work by the time their baby was a year old. The paper provides information on women's experiences with maternity leave, or time off after the birth or adoption of a child, their reasons for returning to work, and their experiences at work after their return.

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH MATERNITY LEAVE

In the 1950's, for most middle class families, the arrival of a child generally meant that the mother stayed home, at least until the child entered school. That is no longer true in the 1990's -- over half of all mothers return to work by the time their child is a year old. What are women's experiences at their work sites when they return to work? Are women happy about returning to work? Are women's employers supportive of their time off for the baby, and of their return to work?

In 1991, the Center for Research on Women conducted a survey, with Working Mother magazine, of over 4,000 women.<sup>1</sup> Most of the readers who answered the survey had returned to work by the time their baby was a year old, the majority of them returning by the time their baby was 6 months old.

The readers reported that employers' support for women taking time off for a baby, and then returning to work, varies considerably.

- One in six women described their company's maternity-leave policy as generous, about half described the policy as adequate.
- One in four described their company's maternity-leave policy as miserly, and one in seven had no maternity-leave policy at all, at the time of the survey (before the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993).

### Workplace Culture

Women's experiences with maternity leave are influenced by more than just policy, they are also affected by the general culture of the workplace. About two thirds of the readers reported that their employers were at least somewhat supportive of their taking time off for their baby:

- More than two out of three women agreed that "my boss was supportive of my taking time off after my last child."
- More than two out of three women agreed that "Taking a leave hasn't hurt my career at all."

However, many readers reported receiving little or no support from their employers:

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, N.L. (1992). Who are the happiest mothers? Working Mother, 15 (5), 20-22. This study was conducted before the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was passed by the U.S. Congress, and signed into law, in 1993. While the FMLA may have changed women's experiences with some employers, I suspect that women today can still benefit from hearing the stories of women's experiences in 1991.

- One in three women reported "I was treated less favorably after my leave."
- About half reported that "where I work, women who take maternity leave are seen as less committed to their jobs than other workers."

### Higher Job Satisfaction

For women returning to work after a baby, employer policy and workplace culture are key factors in how they feel about their jobs.

- Almost half of the women with generous maternity-leave policies were very satisfied with their current jobs, compared to only one in four women with miserly policies.
- Twice as many women whose bosses were supportive of their taking time off after their last child reported that they were very satisfied with their jobs, compared to women whose bosses were not supportive (43% compared to 20%).

### Profiles

Women had different experiences when they returned to work, shaped by their workplace, the characteristics of their job, their family's financial situation, and their own beliefs about motherhood. When we looked at women's responses closely, we found four "profiles" of mothers who returned to the job in the first year.

The full-time-by-choice worker. About one in eight readers returned to work full-time after the baby, and wanted to go back full-time from the start. Women who fit this profile were more likely to describe their jobs as careers and to work as executives, administrators or managers than were other women. They were also much more likely to report that the importance of their work is the key reason that they returned to their jobs when they did. These women were very satisfied with their current jobs, and were more likely than other women to feel that "taking a leave hasn't hurt my career at all." Almost every one of the full-time-by-choice women believes that working makes her feel good about herself, and very few find that "working leaves me with too little time to be the kind of parent I want to be."

Like other women, most of these women reported that they missed their baby a lot during the day, but most of these women (82%) did not feel strongly that they had to leave their babies sooner than they wanted. In fact, among women who returned full-time-by-choice after their babies were 6 months old, no one felt she returned too soon. For these women, working full-time while raising their children gives them the right balance of the rewards of work and parenting.

One of these women, a mother of two who works 50 hours a week, said, "I never even considered not returning to work. Working defines part of who I am as a person. I love my children -- intensely -- but after 6 weeks off I could not wait to get back to work. I even went into work and attended meetings with my daughter in tow during my 6 weeks maternity leave."

The full-time-because-we-need-the-money worker. Another one out of four readers returned full-time because they needed the money, even though they would have preferred to return part-time at first. These women were able to return when they thought their baby was old enough.

While work is less central for these women -- and finances were the main reason they returned when they did -- they were very similar in other ways to the full-time-by-choice worker. One of these women, a mother of three, said the key reason she was able to return to work full-time by the time her youngest was 6 months is because her employer gave her the flexibility she needed, such as being able to come in late or leave early. She adds, "We have three wonderful adjusted children. They enjoy their day care and probably, given the choice, would take day care over being with mom all day. They have lots of friends there. When you have an A+ day care, it makes the decision of going back to work a lot easier."

The part-time worker. One out of four readers wanted to return to work part-time, at least at first, and were able to do so. They were more likely than women who returned full-time-by-choice to say that "it was easy to come back because my employer gave me the flexibility that I needed." Part-time workers were more likely to work as professionals, and less likely to work as executives, than were other women. These women have often created their part-time work options on their own -- they were less likely than other women to have had maternity leave policies at their old jobs, and more likely to have switched jobs, and employers, when they went back to work.

One reader, who returned to work part-time by the time her youngest was 6 months old, said, "I'm not cut out to be a full-time mother. As much as I love my kids, they drive me up a wall sometimes. The money I make basically pays for day care. I miss some of the benefits that a full-time job would give me - like life insurance and disability coverage - but, for me at least, the part-time job/part-time parenting keeps me sane."

The conflicted worker. Two out of five readers felt that they had to leave their babies sooner than they wanted, and that they had to return to work full-time, even though they wanted to return part-time. While most mothers missed their babies during the work day, the conflicted worker felt "constantly torn about not being with my baby." These readers were experiencing serious conflicts as working mothers.

The conflicted worker was less likely to report rewards from working -- only one in three conflicted workers said that "working makes me feel good about myself," and only one in four was very satisfied with her job. Three out of four conflicted workers said that "working leaves me with too little time to be the kind of parent I want to be."

Conflicted workers were more likely than other women to be employed as administrative support, secretaries, clerks, technicians, machine operators or assemblers. They were also more likely than other women to say they would have lost their jobs if they had not returned when they did. And they were less likely to describe their employer's leave policy as generous, and more likely to describe it as

miserly.

While it is tempting to say that part-time work would solve the dilemmas these conflicted workers face, in fact, it would not. These women returned full-time because they need a full-time salary. These workers would benefit from longer, paid maternity leave policies.

## CONCLUSION

More and more women are returning to work within the first year after they have a baby. U.S. society has been slow to adapt to this change. As a result, in 1991, many women still worked for employers with inadequate leave policies. And the combination of low pay, and lack of paid maternity leave, forces some women to return to work before they feel that they and the baby are ready. Other women return full-time out of financial necessity, when they would have preferred to start back part-time, even if they plan to return to full-time status later.

Better pay and paid leave are not enough, however. Supervisors' attitudes, and the general workplace culture, determine whether a workplace is supportive of a woman's time off for a baby, and her subsequent return. When women find such support, they are happier with their jobs, and less likely to change jobs, which makes them more productive employees. Our society faces the challenge of ensuring that the workplace of the 21st century is responsive to the changing nature of the workforce, and of the American family.