

MATERNITY LEAVE

is a basic worker right

A woman becomes a mother not only because of her own right, but also because this keeps the ball rolling for family, society, and the nation. From the day a child is conceived to the time it is born, the development of the child is not the sole responsibility of the mother. Then why are women still being forced to sign away their right to motherhood while seeking a job?

What is most interesting is that we make our best efforts to 'celebrate motherhood.' Every year, on special days, mothers are honoured at our workplaces. On Mother's Day, motherhood is deified in various ways at offices. But it is ironic how the same workplace does not even accept the pregnancy of the same mother. In fact, in a manner quite opposite, every effort is made to ensure that rather than seeking what is rightfully hers, a pregnant mother quits her job. It is because of this adverse attitude from employers that many women and expecting mothers suffer anxiety while planning a family.

Maternity leave in Bangladesh is

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often only a clause on paper, with no real implications for many women. According to the Labour Act 2006, article 45, a female employee is entitled to 120 days of leave, with full benefits. But how much of this is being implemented in the workplace? Can a pregnant mother truly enjoy all the rights the law allows her?

Maternity leave is a privilege enjoyed by a selected few. We are all aware how women are being deprived of their rights at the workplace, especially when it comes to maternity leave, despite them being a driving force in the development of the country.

Many offices are now dependent on their female workforce, like the country's biggest forex earner—RMG. In that very sector, many women have been dismissed from their position, forced to resign, or forced to re-join only 60 days after delivering their babies. In many instances, from the fear of reprisal from foreign buyers, women in the RMG sector are given maternity leave, however the salary is deducted from their account for the said period.

Apart from the few non-government

organisations, and big corporate houses, very few offices provide their female employees the right to maternity leave, despite it being a binding legal obligation. While the government tried to reduce workplace inequalities due to gender, sexism still remains a big issue in most jobs.

According to the Labour Force Survey (2016-17), the total workforce of Bangladesh is approximately 58.3 percent, of which 65 percent are men and 35 percent women.

Among the total workforce, 31.7 percent of the workforce are youth, and of this special workforce, some 70 lakh, or 11 percent, are women. We should be thinking more about this large female workforce. Are they thinking of continuing their jobs while they become mothers in the future, or are they planning to give up on being mothers for the fear of losing their jobs and having to compete with men?

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the issue has been a significant point of discussion at the global level too. In order to ensure women empowerment, women have been encouraged to rearrange their familial duties and get involved in matters of socio-political importance. In the workforce, employers must ensure an environment that encourages female involvement by providing day care facilities, and provisions for rest during the pregnancy period.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals 5 mentions bridging the gender gap and

empowerment of women. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also ensures women the right to actively participate in the work place. However, despite being ensured of such rights in local and international forums, how much freedom is a pregnant employee enjoying in real life?

The very purpose of maternity leave is to ensure that a woman can provide the necessary care to the new born child, free from work responsibilities. When a healthy mother returns to her work, she can devote herself fully to her responsibilities.

Leading international organisations are now thinking of extending the maternity leave to 6 months, along with increasing other benefits. We are however, lagging behind poorly. Our employers believe that allowing the stipulated 120 days of maternity leave will cause losses for the company. If this attitude prevails, it goes without saying that they will be discouraged to employ female employees, and those who have already joined the workforce will continue to fall behind their male employees.

If women are faced with a constant battle to access what is lawfully theirs, the participation of women in the workforce will reduce, and it will be impossible to achieve development goals without the wholehearted participation of women.

I would like to end by sharing a personal experience. It was 25 years ago, I had just had my baby, and was looking for a job. At an interview, the employers expressed his grievances over employing females in the workforce because of the liability of ensuring maternity leave etc. I was so desperate to get the job that I said that I had already had my first child, and did not plan to have a second child in the next five years.

Truth is, I am still the mother of a single child. The authorities concerned however now allow maternity leave, but in most work places the situation has remained unchanged, for the last 25 years!

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