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Positive Motherhood at Work: Factors Supporting a Sustainable Workforce Through Reintegration After Returning from Maternity Leave

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Abstract

This study explores sustainability through the successful reintegration of women into the workforce following maternity leave. It aims to identify the key factors that contribute to positive motherhood at work and their role in building a sustainable workforce. The research is based on a systematic literature review using Scopus-indexed sources from 2006 to 2024, focusing on "maternity leave" and "wellbeing." The study applies a grounded theory approach to analyze existing organizational policies and workplace practices that influence female employees' reintegration. The findings highlight the necessity of a supportive work environment that facilitates the balance between career and motherhood. Key factors affecting reintegration include organizational policies, workplace culture, and supervisor support. The study also identifies gaps in existing research and the need for further empirical studies on reintegration practices in different industries and countries. Successful reintegration of women after maternity leave is essential for fostering a resilient and inclusive workforce. Organizations that implement supportive measures enhance employee retention, satisfaction, and overall workplace sustainability. The study's insights will inform primary research on reintegration policies in commercial banks across multiple countries. The findings will serve as a foundation for developing a model and best practices to improve the reintegration of women post-maternity leave. This research has broader implications for policymakers, HR professionals, and organizations aiming to promote gender equality and workforce sustainability.

Keywords: Female, maternity leave, reintegration, sustainable workforce, wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

The most important societal challenges of our day are resource depletion, climate change, socioeconomic inequality, and environmental degradation [1, 2]. Addressing these unprecedented challenges requires an innovative approach to women's difficulties returning from maternity leave [3]. The successful reintegration of women into the workforce following maternity leave is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of building a sustainable workforce [4]. According to the data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office [5] between 2010 and 2022, examining the fertility rate, the number of live births, the age of women, and among other things, the impact of various state subsidies, more and more families are now having children. This fact presents challenges to both employers and their employees. This paper seeks to interpret sustainability through this lens, emphasizing the importance of supporting mothers as they navigate the dual responsibilities of career and motherhood. The transition back to work after the birth of a child marks a significant period for women, requiring a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities they face [6, 7]. This research explores the multifaceted aspects of positive motherhood in the workplace, focusing on key factors such as organizational policies, workplace culture, and support structures. By examining these elements, the paper highlights the necessity of creating a supportive environment that facilitates knowledge and skill enhancement opportunities, alongside robust supervisor support programs.

From a sustainability perspective, identifying and addressing these critical factors is essential for fostering a resilient and inclusive workforce, ultimately contributing to long-term organizational and societal sustainability.

2. Methodology

The framework for this study's conceptual design is grounded theory. It enables one to ponder, reassess, and think about what should be done and why, in order to investigate the study problem. "The underlying principle of grounded theory is to generate theory from data. Grounded theory can be presented either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties" [8]. The scope of review must be decided before moving on to the next stage. The body of current literature provides a foundation for a methodical examination of the subject. Relevant literature in the topic was obtained using a systematic literature review process that was well-structured.

Based on the results of previous work [9], there is a lack of literature on the keywords maternity leave and wellbeing, which serves as a basis for further analysis. In conducting the systematic literature review, a structured technique was applied within the following criteria: 1) the keywords (maternity leave, wellbeing); 2) the database (Scopus); 3) the disciplines (economics, business, and social sciences); 4) the language (only English); 5) the year of publication (2006-2024); 6) type of publication (articles); 7) the scientific standing of the journal (SCI ranking).

A second dive into the Scopus database between 2008 and 2024 yielded the following results: a total of sixty-nine articles were found by searching the title and subject with the keywords "maternity leave" and wellbeing. A total of 411 articles were found by searching the title and subject with the keyword "maternity leave". After that, the title and abstract analysis left twenty-two articles reporting "maternity leave" and wellbeing.

To better visualize the process, we summarized the main steps of the research in the following timeline (Figure 1).

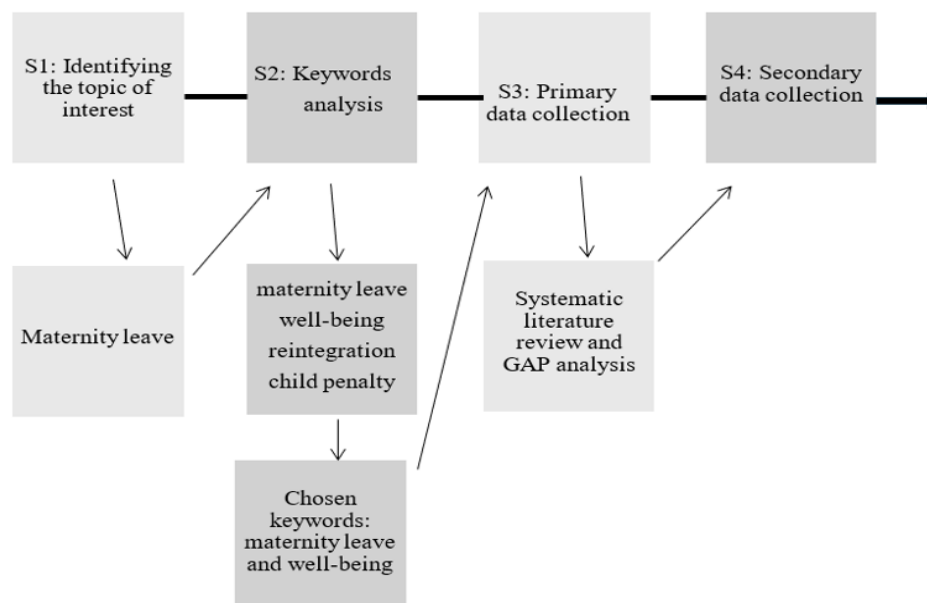


Figure 1.
Timeline of the research process.

2.1. Women in the Labor Market: Where Did Women Start?

Women's participation in the labor market has progressed and faced challenges in a dynamic interplay. Over the centuries, women have continuously shown their capabilities and resilience, from homemaking during the Industrial Revolution to contributing to the war effort during World Wars. A variety of legislative advancements, improved access to education, and family-friendly workplace policies have made it easier for women to participate and be recognized in the workforce. Integrating sustainability into this progression is crucial. Sustainable development emphasizes the importance of social equity and inclusivity, which are essential for creating a labor market that supports women's participation. The results of a study from Coulson et al. [10] indicate that factors relating to the women, their children, and external sources predict whether mothers return to work following childbirth. Meurs and Pora [11] find that the first, very simple indicator shows that, as in most OECD countries, there has been a significant increase in primary education since the 1960s, and this has disproportionately benefited girls rather than boys. One indicator of this is the proportion of graduates in each generation. This leads to more women in higher education. Schneider et al. [12] found that female university graduates are more likely to put their professional careers on hold in order "to provide better care to their children."

Kleven et al. [13] provide a simple explanation for the persistence of gender inequality based on administrative data from Denmark: the effect of children on women's careers is significant relative to men's and has not diminished over time. As a result, almost all of the remaining gender inequality can be attributed to children.

Kleven et al. [13] suggest that female gender identity is formed during a girl's childhood based on the gender roles of her parents. Furthermore, Schneider et al. [12] expand on this by highlighting the biological factors in rearing children that many women have after giving birth. Schneider, et al. [12] present this as discrimination in organizations against women, as there is a belief that "motherhood can 'disturb' or influence the female professional career." Kang [14] explains that as more and more women obtain higher education, they become more active participants in the labor market and consequently are less likely to give birth and raise children. Such phenomena are easily observed and perhaps even more likely to occur in economically developed countries. The most important thing is that the decrease in the probability of women having children and raising them, in addition to their participation in the labor market, is primarily due to the difficulties of reconciling child-rearing and work. Although low fertility rates have been observed in other developed European countries, since the end of the nineteenth century, Japan and Korea represent a special case because the cause of such phenomena can be attributed to a number of unique factors, as economic instability, social values and attitudes towards marriage and children have changed, women's social and economic activity has increased, and the influence of public policy on family planning has increased.

According to Lucia-Casademunt et al. [15], today, women are more often faced with conditions to return to work after childbirth than men (e.g., childcare, women's responsibility for childcare, changes in women's habits, daily physical and emotional effort to reconcile, home and work duties). Therefore, the general conditions offered by governments to reconcile work and family responsibilities may not be sufficient, and some companies may be encouraged to supplement these with appropriate policies and practices, but this is not always the case.

The arrival of a child causes a loss of income for mothers, largely due to changes in their working hours. The main reason for the persistence of the gender pay gap is the effect of motherhood on careers.

The transformation of gender roles in the workplace has a direct impact on sustainability strategies, as women are increasingly involved in environmentally conscious businesses and innovation [16]. By acknowledging the historical context and advocating for equitable practices, society can move towards a more inclusive and just labor market. This not only enhances the well-being of individual women but also contributes to the overall sustainability of the workforce. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to contribute economically, while also fulfilling their roles in other areas of life, fosters a balanced and sustainable approach to economic and social development.

The main research areas and validated literature methodologies will be presented in terms of "maternity leave" and wellbeing in the following (Table 1).

Table 1.
Relevant sources and their content related to "maternity leave" and well-being.

Source	The goal of research	Methodology	Results
Bencsik and Juhasz [17]	Identify the workplace preferences of women with children	Survey	Women with children face negative perceptions in the labor market
Carluccio, et al. [18]	Examining the relation between the rigidity of maternal beliefs and well-being	Questionnaire	Rigid maternal beliefs influence how working mothers perceive supervisor support upon returning to work
Keyes, et al. [19]	It examines the relationship between subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological well-being (PWB).	Administrative data	Optimal well-being was linked to higher age, education, extraversion, and conscientiousness
Kleven, et al. [13]	They study the impacts of children on gender inequality in the labor market.	Administrative data	Despite progress in gender equality, significant disparities remain, largely driven by the impact of children

Franco-Santos and Doherty [20]	Researches the relationship between human resource management and well-being.	Survey	A more supportive approach to performance management could yield better outcomes
Kang [14]	Comparing and contrasting the policy initiatives of Japan and Korea	Literature review	For both Japan and Korea, the recommendations are that they should seek to alter the societal and cultural influences
Lucia-Casademunt, et al. [15]	Increasing work-life balance (WLB) and social support (SS) increase women's wellbeing at work after childbirth.	Survey	WLB and SS positively influenced the well-being of female employees after childbirth
Meurs and Pora [11]	How to restart progress towards gender equality in the labor market? What can policy-makers and companies do to effect changes?	Survey	Lower hourly wages before childbirth lead to changes in women's labor supply
Schneider, et al. [12]	What factors influenced women's decisions to leave the labor market after their first child's birth?	Interviews and questionnaires/Statistical data	"Material needs," "personal and professional achievement," "search for family income supplementation," and "fear of rejection"

2.2. Influencing Factors After Maternity Leave: Family-Friendly Workplace, Wellbeing in the Company

From the perspective of the labor force, employees' job satisfaction, personal well-being and life satisfaction can change the labor market. Studies report that there were significant social and economic changes occurring in European countries, including Hungary [17]. Returning to work after childbirth is not always associated with adequate performance levels for new mothers, especially when employers lack work-life balance commitments. Therefore, managing women's return to work after childbirth is a challenge for companies' HR departments. Managers' opinions regarding implemented practices may be quite different from employees' opinions.

Over the past few years, employee well-being has occupied an increasingly prominent place in organizational psychology. Research on wellbeing is a broad domain that has flourished in recent decades [19]; however, there is no academic consensus on its definition and measurement Franco-Santos and Doherty [20]. Elshaer et al. [21] suggest that work-family balance is important and that maintaining boundaries may be key to successful reentry. The research may support the argument that flexibility in working hours and working conditions (e.g., hybrid or part-time work arrangements) can reduce work-family conflict.

According to Kleven et al. [13], after maternity leave, women tend to return to work in more family-friendly workplaces, such as the public sector or workplaces where there are women with young children in management. According to Meurs and Pora [11], mothers, in particular, at the birth of the second child, will be more likely to be in companies that offer more flexible working hours, are closer to their home, and are less highly paid.

Lucia-Casademunt et al. [15] suggest that gendered work-life balance practices should be encouraged and stress the relevance of the human factor over human resource practices in addressing the difficulties that women returning to work face after childbirth. Therefore, well-being is important for both employees and their organizations.

Inflexible working conditions and fewer prospects for advancement are the main causes of the salary disadvantage linked to having children, according to research by Casarico and Lattanzio [22]. Mothers sometimes wind up in lower-paying jobs as a result, which eventually causes the gender pay gap to expand. Managers can influence their employees' well-being at work by changing the dimensions of organizational functioning, such as working hours, tasks, or rewards. Employees and employers can benefit from better well-being at work. Specifically, employees who feel bad are less productive, make poorer quality decisions, and are more prone to absenteeism, and therefore the company suffers from reduced performance [15]. Wellbeing at work plays a central role, not just for employees, but also for organizations, the economy, and society.

Scandinavian countries have been praised for providing better opportunities for women to combine work and family than most other countries. This view is based on the existence of generous family policies—job-protected parental leave and public provision of childcare—and the perception that gender norms are comparatively egalitarian in Scandinavia. Consistent with this view, Denmark has one of the highest female labor force participation rates in the world, currently about 80 percent compared to about 70 percent in the United States, and there is almost no remaining gender gap in participation rates [13].

According to Meurs and Pora [11] family policies are involved in parents' choice of work after childbirth: the possibility of taking a fixed amount of parental leave after the birth of the first child is more attractive to workers close to the minimum wage than to workers in higher paid jobs; conversely, childcare costs are more easily covered by high wages. Therefore, it is advisable to examine the wage penalty following the birth of the first child, if there is one, between the mother's salary levels.

Adda et al. [23] have shown that having children reduces women's long-term earning potential, which contributes to the persistence of gender inequalities in the labor market. One reason for this is that women with children are less mobile in the labor market and are more often forced into lower-paid, more flexible jobs. The gender gap in earnings is currently between 15–20 percent in the United States and in Denmark too. Despite the existence of very different public policies and labor markets in these countries, their gender gaps are converging over time. Since 2002, the maternity leave in Denmark has been extended to 18 weeks of maternity leave and 32 weeks of parental leave to be shared between the mother and father. Kleven

et al. [13] maintain that the impact of children on women is large and persistent across a wide range of labor market outcomes, while at the same time, men are virtually unaffected. Second, they have shown that the share of child-related gender inequality has increased dramatically over time, from about 40 percent in 1980 to about 80 percent in 2013. Thus, to a first approximation, the remaining gender inequality is all about children. Future work should look more closely at the underlying mechanisms and the implicit welfare implications.

2.3. Influencing Factors After Maternity Leave: Supervisor Support

Carluccio et al. [18] claim that returning to work (RTW) after maternity leave is a transition in women's lives that must be reckoned with. Falco and Corso [24] suggest that the uncertainty of fixed-term contracts significantly reduces the well-being and job satisfaction of working mothers. Insecure employment status makes employees less likely to plan for the long term, which can hinder their reintegration into the workplace and their opportunities for advancement. In the absence of adequate support from organizations, women often postpone motherhood because colleagues and managers suggest that they are not fit for work. Women must choose between being a "good mother" and an efficient worker. In other words, they must choose between social norms and competencies, effort, and commitment. Researchers often use the terms "motherhood penalty" and "child penalty" to refer to this issue. The findings of Schneider et al. [12] concur with this; however, they found that there are other reasons for the mother to return to work, which include: "' financial needs' and 'personal & professional accomplishment,' in addition to seeking 'complementation of the family income' and 'fear of being rejected' after being away for an extended period." According to Carluccio et al. [18], from an organizational point of view, it is important that supervisors receive adequate training to know how to behave on a daily basis in managing return to work after maternity leave. They should have clear and specific recommendations to guide their daily activities.

Behaviors of supervisors have already been developed, for example, through Supervisor to Support Return to Work, which is a system to support the return to work after medical leave. Overall, Carluccio et al. [18] results show that a supervisor who is willing to consider workplace accommodations and make RTW as stress-free as possible, is patient and empathetic, promotes team spirit, and listens to the concerns of returnees contributes to their greater engagement and performance. Supervisors play an important role, as they provide feedback and have the power to assign tasks and responsibilities [25].

Carluccio et al. [18] highlight the need for further research on return-to-work (RTW) processes, particularly during the earlier stages of maternity, such as pregnancy planning and considerations during vacation periods. They emphasize the importance of fostering organizational well-being and optimizing work group dynamics. Modern interventions can now leverage innovative technologies, including virtual reality, to facilitate these transitions. Additionally, networking among working mothers is encouraged, providing a platform to discuss work-life integration challenges, explore career development opportunities, and openly challenge societal myths regarding what constitutes a "good" mother.

According to Kang [14], the lack of freedom to balance work and personal life is the "main culprit" that encourages women aged 25–49 to leave the labor market and take on various household responsibilities, including childbearing and childcare. They must be diverted from work during these periods. Therefore, after marriage or raising children, female workers face difficulties in achieving a work-life balance that would allow them to return to the workforce.

Both Japan and Korea recognized that promoting a family-friendly work environment would effectively alleviate work-life balance tensions and increase women's labor force participation [14]. Since the conflict between work and family leads women to reassess their priorities, which reduces engagement, work-life balance is valued at the organizational level as well. Well-being at work is satisfaction with work and non-work.

Kang [14] explained, two main differences can be observed in the recent political orientations of Japan and Korea. Japan, the former, started earlier than Korea, and recognized the low participation of women in the labor market as a decisive economic factor. Japan has spent more time experimenting and initiating concrete measures to address key issues related to women's labor market participation. Second, subsequent policies adopted by Japan have sought to offer childcare arrangements to female workers, while Korea has recently shifted from supporting childcare arrangements for working women to increasing the marriage rate. These undertakings will further help in a more detailed analysis of policies and programs related to the participation of women in the labor market.

Lucia-Casademunt et al. [15] found that not all female employees reacted to the work-life balance alternatives offered by their firm in the same way, as other circumstances played a role in this process. In other words, not all women experienced increased well-being because of the mere existence of reintegration practices in their firms. In this respect, the work-related social support may differ from one firm to another.

In conclusion, supervisor support is a critical influencing factor in the successful reintegration of women into the workforce post-maternity leave. By demonstrating empathy, offering flexibility, maintaining open communication, supporting professional development, and providing emotional and practical assistance, supervisors can significantly improve the reintegration experience for returning mothers. These efforts not only benefit individual employees but also enhance organizational performance, workplace culture, and contribute to the achievement of broader sustainability goals. Therefore, fostering a supportive supervisory approach is essential for creating a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable workforce.

2.4. Sustainability of Women in the Workforce

Sustainability, as defined by the Brundtland Commission [26], encompasses not only environmental but also social goals. The concept of sustainability is multifaceted, extending beyond environmental concerns to encompass social and economic dimensions. One critical but often overlooked aspect of building a sustainable workforce is the successful reintegration of women into the workplace following maternity leave. This process is not only vital for the individual well-being of mothers but also for the broader organizational and societal sustainability.

Social policy concepts are combined into four elements of social sustainability: quality of life, social cohesion, democracy and governance, and equality and diversity. The act of lessening disadvantages for particular groups or assisting them in removing obstacles, so they can have more control over their life, is the equality dimension [27].

Building more equitable economic systems requires addressing interconnected issues like gender equality and sustainability. Nonetheless, there is still a dearth of information about their connection, especially when it comes to creative entrepreneurship in developed nations. In order to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth, more and more innovative businesses are paying attention to increasing women's empowerment, especially in green and socially responsible industries [28]. While there is a wealth of literature on the subject in other economic contexts, there is very little academic research on the issue in Hungary, making it difficult to advance the cause of women's economic empowerment and ecological sustainability.

Prior studies have mostly concentrated on the disparities between genders in innovation and entrepreneurship, emphasizing the propensity of women to pursue lower-tech business endeavors [29, 30]. Female entrepreneurs constitute the most rapidly expanding demographic within the entrepreneurial landscape. Their contributions to national economic output are substantial, primarily through job creation, the generation of economic benefits, the introduction of innovative solutions, and the stimulation of market dynamics [31]. While some research has looked at the relationship between social ideals and women in corporate boardrooms (e.g., [32, 33]), little is known about how these relationships relate to environmental sustainability.

Employers should also consider how AI-powered HR strategies can help make mothers' return to the workforce smoother and provide them with the technology training they need. To guarantee that AI-driven projects support long-term organizational success, human resource management techniques need to be carefully matched with corporate goals and priorities [34]. However, as Gelencsér et al. [35] pointed out, there is little empirical data on the impact of AI on HRM.

From a sustainability perspective, the reintegration of women into the workforce post-maternity leave is fundamental. A sustainable workforce is one that is resilient, inclusive, and capable of adapting to the diverse needs of its members [36]. By addressing the unique challenges faced by returning mothers, organizations can reduce turnover rates, increase employee satisfaction, and enhance overall productivity.

Moreover, supporting the reintegration of mothers contributes to gender equality in the workplace, which is a cornerstone of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [37]. It ensures that women can continue to contribute economically while fulfilling their roles as mothers, thereby promoting economic stability and growth.

According to Ventura et al. [27], all social actors need to recognize women as important contributors to social sustainability and collaborate to foster an atmosphere in which they can assume leadership positions.

The successful reintegration of women into the workforce following maternity leave is not just a matter of individual well-being but also a critical component of organizational and societal sustainability. By implementing supportive organizational policies, fostering an inclusive workplace culture, and providing robust support structures and development opportunities, organizations can ensure that returning mothers are empowered to balance their careers and motherhood effectively. This, in turn, builds a more resilient and sustainable workforce, contributing to long-term economic and social stability.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper highlights the critical role of successfully reintegrating women into the workforce post-maternity leave to achieve a sustainable workforce. The research underscores the importance of a supportive work environment that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities faced by returning mothers. Key factors such as organizational policies, workplace culture, and support structures are pivotal in facilitating a smooth transition back to work. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the significance of providing knowledge, skill enhancement opportunities, and supervisor support programs to empower mothers in balancing their careers and maternal responsibilities. From a sustainability perspective, these insights into the reintegration process are fundamental in building a resilient and inclusive workforce.

Organizations that prioritize helping women return to the workforce successfully can increase productivity, lower attrition, and improve worker satisfaction. In addition to fostering human well-being, this strategy also advances organizational and societal sustainability on a larger scale. Organizations enable women to effectively manage their jobs with parenting by providing chances for growth, fostering an inclusive workplace culture, and enacting helpful policies.

In addition, assisting women in reintegrating into society is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [37], especially ones pertaining to gender equality. Women's roles as important contributors to social sustainability are reinforced when their contributions to the workforce are acknowledged and valued. This promotes economic stability and growth. All social actors must work together to establish conditions that allow women to take on leadership roles and propel sustainable development. Furthermore, the successful reintegration of women post-maternity leave is fundamental to achieving a sustainable workforce.

This study of the literature will pave the way for primary research that will gather information on the policies and practices that commercial banks now follow across a number of nations, as well as how women are perceived to be returning to the workforce. This data will be used to develop a model and best practices to tackle this issue.

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