

Determinants of Women's Return to Work After Childbirth: The Interplay of Social, Economic and Demographic Factors Across Employment Sectors in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Women's return to work after childbirth is a multidimensional social-demographic process shaped by the interaction of family support, childcare responsibilities, economic necessity, career continuity, maternity leave provisions, workplace flexibility, spouse and household characteristics, and residential circumstances. Rather than being determined by employment sector alone, women's decisions to resume employment reflect the ways in which family, workplace and economic resources are combined to negotiate the competing demands of motherhood and paid employment. Therefor The primary objective of this study was to identify how social, economic, demographic factors impact for women when returning to work after childbirth. A qualitative research approach had been used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 female employees from each of six selected institutions (two institutions each from the public, private, and semi-government sectors), resulting in a total of 30 participants. Findings revealed that women's return to employment after childbirth was influenced by the interaction of social, demographic, economic, and workplace factors. Family support, childcare arrangements, household economic conditions, and spousal employment shaped women's ability and decision to return to work. Economic necessity and the pursuit of financial independence were important motivations, particularly among women from lower-income households. Workplace factors, including maternity leave, breastfeeding facilities, flexible working arrangements, career stability, and length of service, facilitated employment continuity. Differences across public, private, and semi-government institutions further highlighted the importance of institutional support.

Key Words: Women, Childbirth, Returning to work, Family

INTRODUCTION

The National Policy Framework, "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour" (2019), highlights the role of women in both the economy and society. Chapter 3, titled "A Country that is Always Safe and Secure," focuses on issues related to women's safety and security. Chapter 4, titled "A Productive Citizen and a Happy Family," recognizes women's economic and social contributions (UNDP, 2021).

Women perform multiple roles in society, including reproductive, productive, and social responsibilities. Therefore, reducing the constraints that negatively affect their employment and self-fulfillment is essential (Madurawala, 2009).

Sri Lanka continues to experience a substantial gender gap in labour force participation, with the female labour force participation rate at 31.3% compared with 68.6% for males in 2023. This gap highlights the importance of understanding the factors that influence women's continued participation in employment. Globally, reducing gender employment gaps could increase GDP per capita by approximately 20%, demonstrating that women's employment is important not only for individual and household well-being but also for economic development. Childbirth is a critical stage that can interrupt women's employment and create challenges in returning to work due to childcare responsibilities, family support, household economic conditions, maternity leave, workplace arrangements and other social and demographic factors. However, national labour force statistics do not adequately explain why some women return to employment after childbirth while others face

difficulties in doing so. Therefore, this study examines how social, demographic and economic determinants influence women's return to work after childbirth, with particular attention to women employed in public, private and semi-government sectors in Sri Lanka. The study aims to provide context-specific insights that can contribute to policies and workplace practices supporting women's employment continuity after childbirth.

The study by Choi, 2023 examines how maternal leave, employment stability, education, and household dynamics influence mothers' return to work following childbirth. Using Employment Insurance Coverage Survey (EICS) data from 2009 and 2019, Choi reveals that high-income, highly educated women with secure, full-time jobs and access to paid maternity benefits return to the workforce significantly faster and at higher rates. Conversely, women in non-standard or temporary employment face higher labour force exit rates and greater delay in returning to work.

Another study, conducted by Cameron, Suarez, and Tseng, 2023 using Indonesia Family Life Survey (IFLS) data (1988–2014), evaluates maternal post-childbirth labour market re-entry in a developing economy context. The authors emphasize that women with prior formal sector experience, higher education, and access to family business or informal support structures are far more likely to re-enter the labour market within five years post-childbirth compared to those without formal work experience. Furthermore, regional factors—such as living in urban versus rural areas—and age differentials strongly dictate whether mothers transition into self-employment, informal labour, or formal work.

Moreover the study that, led by Wallace, Josephes, and Cubizolles, 2014 in France (Nancy and Poitiers regions), focuses on how health, occupational hierarchy, and job type impact return-to-work dynamics. Examining women 12 months post-birth, the study demonstrates that women holding higher-level professional or managerial positions return to work at substantially higher rates (94.6%) than lower-skilled workers (56.8%). In addition, maternal mental health (such as postpartum depression) and structural job demands act as major socio-personal determinants influencing whether women successfully re-enter employment.

Despite the rich insights provided by existing literature on the determinants of maternal post-childbirth labour force re-entry, a significant research gap remains regarding how these dynamics manifest within the unique socio-demographic and economic landscape of Sri Lanka. While studies in developed or other developing nations emphasize factors such as formal job security, paid maternity benefits, higher educational attainment, and structural childcare support, they fail to capture the socio-cultural realities of Sri Lanka, where exceptionally high female human capital indicators coincide with low female labour force participation and strong patriarchal caregiving expectations.

METHODOLOGY

According to the Labour Force Survey data published by the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka in 2023, the highest proportion of female employment in both the public and private sectors is recorded in the Western Province. Within the province, the Colombo District reports the highest female participation in the service sector, accounting for 74.6%. Furthermore, based on the geographical distribution of private and semi-government institutions employing more than five employees who contribute to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), the Colombo District accounts for the highest concentration of such establishments, representing approximately 36% of all institutions. Therefore, the Colombo District was selected as the study area because it provides an appropriate setting for examining differences in women's return to work after childbirth across the public, private, and semi-government sectors (labour, 2022).

Data were collected using a purposive sampling technique. The study sample consisted of women employed in the public, private, and semi-government sectors who had returned to work after childbirth and had at least one year of work experience following their return. Mothers with one child under the age of two years were selected for the study. The total sample comprised 30 participants, including 10 officers from two selected public sector institutions, 10 officers from two selected private sector institutions, and 10 officers from two selected semi-government sector institutions. In addition, four key informant interviews were conducted.

Structured and semi-structured interview methods were used to collect data. Interviews with women who had returned to work after childbirth lasted approximately 30 minutes, while interviews with institutional heads were conducted for approximately 10 minutes.

The collected data were analyzed by using Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Framework for thematic analysis. In addition, thematic data analysis and the case study approach were used to interpret the findings.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that women's return to employment after childbirth is influenced by a combination of social, demographic, economic, family and workplace-related factors rather than by a single determinant. The majority of participants were aged 30–34 years, a life-course stage in which family formation, childbearing and career development occur simultaneously. Educational attainment also differed across employment sectors, with degree and postgraduate qualifications being more common among public and private sector participants, while diploma and G.C.E. Advanced Level qualifications were more prevalent in the semi-government sector. Family structure emerged as an important social factor, as 23 of the 30 participants lived in extended families. Such family arrangements could provide childcare, household and emotional support, although the findings also demonstrated that the presence of an extended family did not necessarily ensure support, as its influence depended on family attitudes, childcare expectations and the sharing of domestic responsibilities. Returning to employment was also associated with women's economic independence, personal value, social recognition and the ability to contribute to household expenses. Household economic circumstances were particularly important, with monthly household income ranging from Rs. 150,000–260,000 in the public sector, Rs. 150,000–300,000 in the private sector and Rs. 60,000–150,000 in the semi-government sector. The findings suggest that for women in economically constrained households, returning to work could become an economic necessity, particularly where families faced debts, childcare expenses and other household financial responsibilities. Workplace conditions and maternity leave provisions were also found to facilitate employment continuity.

Paid and unpaid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, insurance coverage, transportation facilities, flexible working arrangements, childcare leave and reduced working hours helped mothers manage the transition between motherhood and employment. However, the availability of extended maternity or childcare leave did not necessarily result in women utilizing the full entitlement, as income requirements, career responsibilities and workplace flexibility also influenced the timing of their return. Career continuity and length of service were further important considerations, with participants recognizing the need to maintain employment, income, professional experience and future career opportunities. Spousal employment was another relevant socio-economic factor, as the employment conditions and income of spouses influenced household economic stability and the sharing of childcare and domestic responsibilities.

Residential circumstances also shaped women's experiences, with 18 participants living in rural areas and 12 in urban areas, while 12 participants had changed their residence after childbirth, in some cases to obtain greater family, childcare or workplace support. The results demonstrate that women's return to work after childbirth is a multidimensional process in which family support, childcare responsibilities, household economic conditions, career continuity, maternity benefits, workplace flexibility, spouse characteristics and residential circumstances interact to shape women's employment decisions. Importantly, differences observed across the public, private and semi-government sectors suggest that institutional context influences women's experiences, but the employment sector alone cannot explain their decisions to return to work.

DISCUSSION

Table No:1 Age group of the participants

Employment Sector	Age Group			
	30 - 34	35 - 39	40 - 44	45 - 49
Government Sector	9	-	1	-
Private Sector	10	-	-	-

Semi Government Sector	6	3	-	1
Total	25	3	1	1

Study,2025

n=30

The majority of the women who participated in the study belonged to the 30–34 age group. This age period is an important stage of life in which family formation, childbearing, and career development are closely interconnected. Therefore, factors such as household income needs, career stability, economic independence, childcare, and domestic responsibilities may influence women’s decisions to return to work after childbirth. In addition, the support of husbands and other family members, the availability of childcare facilities, and workplace support are important in facilitating women’s return to employment. Accordingly, the higher representation of women in the 30–34 age group should not be interpreted as a direct effect of age itself, but rather as an indication of how demographic, social, and economic factors interact during this particular stage of the life course.

Table No:2 Educational attainment of the participants

Employment Sector	Educational Attainment			
	Postgraduate Degree	Degree	Diploma	A/L Passed
Government Sector	2	5	2	1
Private Sector	2	8	-	-
Semi Government Sector	-	-	6	4
Total	4	13	8	5

Study,2025

n=30

When considering the educational level of the female officers who participated in the study, it was identified that the majority of the officers employed in the public and private sectors possessed degree-level and postgraduate educational qualifications. In contrast, among the officers employed in the semi-government sector, a higher proportion was observed to have diploma-level and G.C.E. Advanced Level educational qualifications.

These educational differences may be associated with women’s employment opportunities, career stability, and income levels. In particular, women with higher educational qualifications may have greater access to professional employment opportunities and economic independence, which may create a stronger need or desire to continue their careers after childbirth. Furthermore, educational attainment may influence women’s decisions to return to work by being associated with economic factors such as occupational position, salary, and job security.

Accordingly, educational attainment can be considered an important demographic and socio-economic factor in explaining women’s decisions to return to work after childbirth.

Table No: 3 Family living arrangement of the participants

Employment Sector	Family living arrangement	
	Living in nuclear family	Living in Extended family
Government Sector	3	7
Private Sector	3	7
Semi Government Sector	1	9
Total	7	23

Study,2025

n=30

When considering the family structure in which the participants live, it was identified that 23 female officers out of the total sample live within extended family structures. This situation can be considered an important social factor influencing women's return to work after childbirth. Living in an extended family can provide opportunities to share childcare, meal preparation, daily household activities, and other domestic responsibilities among family members. In particular, support received from mothers, mothers-in-law, fathers, siblings, or other family members may enable mothers to manage childcare responsibilities while facilitating their return to work.

Furthermore, one of the major challenges faced by women returning to work after childbirth is maintaining a balance between employment responsibilities and household responsibilities. Support from members of an extended family in caring for the child can reduce this burden to some extent. As a result, women may be less dependent solely on external childcare services and may be better able to continue their employment. Particularly during the early stages of a child's life, the day-to-day support provided by family members can play an important role in helping mothers maintain a balance between their work and family lives.

Moreover, the support provided through an extended family structure is not limited to practical assistance but may also include emotional and social support. Family support can help reduce the psychological stress associated with returning to work after childbirth, anxiety related to separation from the child, and conflicts arising between work and family responsibilities. Therefore, living within an extended family can also be considered a form of social capital that indirectly influences women's employment decisions.

Case Study No. 9

"My mother is a teacher. She had no objection to me going back to work. She told me not to take no-pay leave because it would result in a break in my service."

(31-year-old teacher, Public Sector)

Similarly, women's return to employment is influenced by their ability to cope with dual-caregiving responsibilities within the family and by the extent to which such challenges can be minimized. This situation is determined by social support, family structure, the age of the children, and career aspirations. Under these circumstances, difficulties in time management may arise, while increased responsibilities may lead to higher levels of psychological stress. Women may also be encouraged to take no-pay leave or leave their employment altogether, which can subsequently lead to economic difficulties.

Case Study No. 9

"When I was pregnant with my baby, my husband's mother became ill and was bedridden. She had cancer. When I had about a week left before my maternity leave ended and I was supposed to return to school, my mother-in-law passed away. That period was very difficult because I also had to spend time taking care of her."

(31-year-old teacher, Public Sector)

However, living in an extended family cannot always be assumed to have a positive impact. Its influence may vary depending on factors such as family members' attitudes, their views regarding childcare, the sharing of household responsibilities, and the family's acceptance of the woman's participation in employment. Accordingly, an extended family structure should not be understood merely in terms of the presence of a larger number of family members. Rather, it should be examined in relation to the nature of the social support available to women in managing childcare, household responsibilities, and employment responsibilities after childbirth. Therefore, the fact that 23 of the female officers in this study lived in extended families can be identified as an important social factor that warrants attention in understanding the relationship between family structure and family support in women's return to work after childbirth.

When considering social factors, it was found that returning to work provides significant support for women's independence. The following case study confirms this perspective. Here, independence refers to economic

independence, the ability to make decisions, social recognition, and a sense of personal value. After becoming mothers, many women may become confined primarily to family responsibilities, which can hinder their personal aspirations, career goals, and economic contribution.

Case Study No. 21

“I feel that returning to work was a very good decision for me. Since I am economically strong, I feel that I can face anything.”

(31-year-old Management Assistant Officer, Semi-Government Sector)

Women who are employed are often accorded greater respect and recognition in society, which can enhance their self-confidence and happiness and motivate them to return to employment. The social recognition that parents receive after becoming employed can serve as a role model for their children, encouraging them to aspire to receive similar recognition in the future. The commitment, responsibility, and personal development demonstrated by a working mother can serve as an example to her children and encourage them to pursue similar aspirations in their future lives. This is supported by the following case study.

Case Study No. 23

“I am proud because both my mother and father worked. Although we were looked after by people who were employed to take care of us, when we were old enough to understand, we felt happy about it. We also received the respect that they had in society. Therefore, I believe that having a job is also good for my child.”

(36-year-old Management Assistant Officer, Semi-Government Sector)

Table No:4 Residential Sector of the participants

Employment Sector	Residential Sector	
	Rural Area	Urban Area
Government Sector	6	4
Private Sector	4	6
Semi Government Sector	8	2
Total	18	12

Study,2025

n=30

When considering the residential area, it was identified that the majority of the female officers who participated in the study lived in rural areas, while a considerable proportion of officers living in urban areas was also observed within the sample. Furthermore, it was found that the majority of the officers residing in rural areas were employed in the semi-government sector, whereas most of the officers residing in urban areas were employed in the private sector. This difference is important for understanding the social and economic environment that influences women’s return to work after childbirth.

Women living in rural areas may have opportunities to live in close proximity to family members and receive childcare support from them. This may enable them to manage childcare and household responsibilities to some extent when returning to work after childbirth. On the other hand, employment opportunities, childcare facilities, and transportation facilities may be more limited in rural areas compared to urban areas. Therefore, women may have to spend additional time and money on commuting to work.

Among private sector employees living in urban areas, employment opportunities and childcare facilities may be more readily accessible. However, factors such as the nature of private-sector employment, longer working hours, commuting time, and greater competition in the workplace may influence their experiences of returning to work. In addition, since the cost of living in urban areas is relatively high, the economic necessity for women to return to work in order to maintain household income may also be greater.

Accordingly, the observed relationship between residential area and employment sector indicates that women's decisions to return to work after childbirth are not determined by a single factor. Rather, these decisions are influenced by the interaction of several factors, including place of residence, employment opportunities, income requirements, transportation facilities, childcare arrangements, and family support.

When considering changes in place of residence after childbirth, it was identified that three officers from the two government-sector institutions, five officers from the private sector, and four officers from the semi-government sector had changed their place of residence after childbirth. Changing one's place of residence after childbirth can be considered an important demographic and social factor that affects the relationship between women's family responsibilities, childcare, and working life.

In particular, moving closer to family members for childcare can be identified as one reason for changing residence after childbirth. For some women, living with their parents or other family members may enable them to receive the necessary support for caring for their children. Such family support may facilitate women's return to work after childbirth and help them maintain continuity in their employment responsibilities.

Similarly, changes in residence may be associated with the distance to the workplace, transportation facilities, and commuting costs. If the new residence is located farther from the workplace after childbirth, maintaining a balance between work and family responsibilities may become more challenging due to increased commuting time and expenses. Conversely, moving to an area closer to the workplace or childcare facilities may make returning to work easier.

It is also important to note that these residential changes were observed differently across the government, private, and semi government sectors. In particular, the identification of residential changes among five private-sector officers indicates the need to pay greater attention to the relationship between the workplace, family needs, and childcare requirements. However, this difference cannot be concluded to have occurred solely because of the employment sector; the family, economic, employment, and childcare circumstances that contributed to decisions to change residence must also be taken into consideration.

Accordingly, changing one's place of residence after childbirth can be interpreted not merely as a geographical change but also as a decision made by women to establish a balance between family life, childcare, the workplace, and economic needs. Therefore, changes in residential location can be considered an important social-demographic factor in understanding women's ability to return to work after childbirth and their experiences following their return to employment.

When considering the length of service of the female officers before taking maternity leave, it was identified that, in both institutions in the public sector, the length of service among the officers ranged between 1 and 5 years. In both institutions in the private sector, this period ranged from 2 to 5 years, while among the officers in the semi-government sector, a relatively longer period of service, ranging from 5 to 11 years, was observed. These differences help to understand that work experience and career stability are important factors influencing women's return to employment after childbirth.

In particular, women who have worked in the same institution for a longer period may have developed a professional relationship with the workplace, job stability, and institutional experience. Therefore, returning to work after childbirth may be important for them to maintain continuity in their careers. In particular, the presence of female officers in the semi government sector with 5–11 years of work experience suggests that the value of maintaining employment may be greater for women who have established long-term employment relationships.

On the other hand, the relatively shorter periods of service observed in the public and private sectors may indicate that, at the time of childbirth, some women were still at a stage of establishing and stabilizing their careers. In such circumstances, returning to work after childbirth may be important for maintaining career continuity, protecting future promotion and career development opportunities, and ensuring the continuity of their income.

Accordingly, the length of service prior to maternity leave can be identified as an important employment related and economic factor reflecting women's work experience and career stability. However, it cannot be concluded that a longer period of service alone determines women's return to work. Therefore, it is more appropriate to analyze the length of service in relation to other factors, such as maternity leave policies, workplace support, salary and economic needs, childcare arrangements, and family support.

When examining the economic conditions, the maternity leave benefits and other workplace facilities provided to mothers by their institutions can be identified as important factors influencing their return to employment after childbirth. In this context, factors such as the duration of maternity leave, whether the leave is paid or unpaid, breastfeeding breaks, insurance coverage, health and transportation facilities, flexible work arrangements, and leave provided for childcare have influenced mothers' continuity in employment.

In both public sector institutions, mothers were entitled to 84 days of fully paid leave, 84 days of half-paid leave, and 84 days of unpaid leave. They also received benefits such as breastfeeding breaks and Aghara insurance coverage. Accordingly, many of the mothers employed in these institutions had the opportunity to remain away from work for approximately six months to care for their children without completely losing their income. Therefore, maternity leave benefits provided economic security that reduced the financial risks arising after childbirth and supported mothers in returning to employment.

Differences in maternity benefits could also be identified between the two private-sector institutions. The first private institution provided facilities such as meals during pregnancy, assistance with hospital expenses related to childbirth, breastfeeding breaks until the child reached one year of age, insurance coverage, transportation facilities, and assistance in resolving problems through the Human Resources Management Division. These facilities contributed to reducing the personal expenses associated with childbirth and childcare and, thereby, created an economic incentive for mothers to continue their employment.

The second private institution provided 84 days of paid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and support from the Human Resources Management Division. An interview conducted with the Assistant Administrative Manager of the institution also revealed that institutional policies and procedures allowed some flexibility in determining the duration of maternity leave. In particular, the following statement illustrates this:

Key Information interview No:3

"If a medical recommendation can be obtained stating that the mother must breastfeed the baby for six months, we can consider providing additional leave based on that."

(A 36-year-old Assistant Administrative Manager, Private Sector)

This statement indicates that the institution could provide flexibility beyond the legally stipulated or standard leave period based on the needs of the mother and child. Such flexibility assists mothers in meeting the needs of their children during the early stages of life and subsequently returning to employment.

Institutional policies in the semi government sector have also influenced mothers' continuity in employment. In the first semi-government institution, following 84 days of paid maternity leave, mothers were able to obtain unpaid childcare leave for up to one year if necessary. However, the manager of the institution stated:

Key information interview No:4

"We are able to provide extended maternity leave in this way because we recruit others for internship training."

(A Manager with seven years of work experience, Semi Government Sector)

This clearly demonstrates that the institution's human resource planning capacity is an important factor in providing extended maternity leave. In other words, the institution's ability to cover the duties of an employee who is temporarily absent by assigning other individuals enabled mothers to obtain longer periods of leave.

Furthermore, this semi government institution provided facilities such as exemption from night shifts until the child reached one year of age, breastfeeding breaks, reduced working hours during pregnancy, transportation facilities, additional benefits during maternity leave, and insurance coverage. These facilities reduced the conflict between employment and motherhood and made it easier for mothers to return to work.

However, an important contrasting situation could also be identified. Although the opportunity to obtain extended maternity and childcare leave was available, the mother employed in the semi government institution that offered flexible work arrangements did not take the full one-year childcare leave. Instead, she returned to work after taking only approximately four months of leave. This demonstrates that the mere availability of extended leave does not necessarily mean that mothers will fully utilize it. Rather, the need to maintain a continuous income, work responsibilities, flexible work arrangements, and the support provided by the institution influenced their decision to return to employment.

In the second semi government institution, mothers were provided with 84 days of paid leave, 84 days of half paid leave, and 84 days of unpaid leave, as well as Agrabara insurance coverage. The mothers in this institution also took approximately six months of leave. Therefore, these institutional benefits enabled mothers to have sufficient time to care for their children after childbirth without losing their employment.

When considering the employment status of the spouses of the female officers who participated in the study, it was found that the majority of the spouses were employed in the private sector. Among the spouses of female officers employed in the public sector, 7 were employed in the private sector, 2 were working abroad, and 1 was engaged in self-employment or running their own business. Among the spouses of female officers employed in the private sector, 8 were employed in the private sector, while 2 were employed in the public sector. When considering the spouses of female officers employed in the semi-government sector, 8 were employed in the private sector, 1 was employed in the public sector, and another had retired from public service.

Accordingly, it is evident that the majority of the spouses of the female officers who participated in the study were employed in the private sector. Since the employment status of the spouse is associated with household income, economic stability, and the sharing of family responsibilities, it can be considered a significant socio-economic factor influencing women's return to employment after childbirth. In particular, when the spouse is employed in the private sector, factors such as working hours, income stability, and job-related responsibilities may influence the sharing of daily household and childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, if the spouse's income is sufficient to meet the family's basic expenses, the economic necessity for the woman to return to work may be reduced. Conversely, when household expenses are high, the woman's income may become important for maintaining the family's economic stability.

Furthermore, the nature of the spouse's employment may also be associated with the level of support available to the woman. Long working hours and greater work-related responsibilities may limit the spouse's participation in childcare and household activities. Under such circumstances, the woman may require support from other family members or formal childcare services. Therefore, the spouse's employment should not be considered merely as a source of income rather, it can be analyzed as a socio-economic factor associated with women's employment continuity, the sharing of household responsibilities, and their ability to return to work after childbirth.

When considering the overall monthly household income of the female officers who participated in the study, it was found that the monthly household income of officers employed in the public sector ranged between Rs. 150,000 and Rs. 260,000, while that of officers employed in the private sector ranged between Rs. 150,000 and Rs. 300,000. In the semi-government sector, the monthly household income ranged between Rs. 60,000

and Rs. 150,000. Accordingly, the fact that the lowest level of overall monthly household income was observed among officers employed in the semi-government sector is particularly noteworthy.

Household income can be considered an important economic factor influencing women's return to employment after childbirth. Particularly in families with lower household incomes, women's earnings may be important for meeting daily living expenses, children's education and healthcare costs, and other family responsibilities. Therefore, returning to work after childbirth may also function as an economic necessity. On the other hand, in households with relatively higher incomes, the pressure to depend on the woman's earnings to meet basic family needs may be lower. In such circumstances, factors such as childcare costs, transportation expenses associated with commuting to work, and conflicts between employment and family responsibilities may influence the decision to return to work.

Accordingly, household income is an important economic factor in explaining women's decisions to return to work after childbirth. Its influence should be analyzed in relation to the employment sector, the spouse's income, childcare costs, and other economic responsibilities of the family.

The total household income, the spouse's income, the amount of money that needs to be spent each month, and the ways in which these expenses can be managed are important factors influencing this decision. For women from low-income households, returning to work has become an economic necessity. It also contributes to the economic stability of families, particularly for women who come from backgrounds where financial assistance cannot be provided by their families. Furthermore, returning to employment has an impact on women's economic independence.

Case Study No. 22

"I don't earn a very high salary. After paying for transport and my personal expenses, there isn't much left to contribute to the household. Even if we send the baby somewhere else for childcare, we have to spend around Rs. 20,000. If we bring someone home to look after the baby, we have to pay even more. It is difficult to live on just one salary. My husband can afford to cover my expenses, but I also have to take care of my mother and father."

(45-year-old Management Assistant Officer, Semi-Government Sector)

Thus, it was possible to identify situations in which the number of dependents within an extended family increase, as well as contrasting situations in which women receive financial support from members of their extended family. This can be further understood through the following case study.

Case Study No. 23

"If I take unpaid leave and the baby becomes sick, once I exceed the 42 days of leave available per year, my daily salary is deducted. Since that is risky, I return to work after my half-pay leave is over. If my husband had a good job, there wouldn't be much of a problem. But because we have debts and other expenses, I rarely take unpaid leave. Since our income is not very high, my parents also contribute towards our expenses."

(36-year-old Management Assistant Officer, Semi-Government Sector)

When considering the employment status of the elderly parents living in the same household as the female officers who participated in the research, among the female officers in the public sector, two families were identified in which both the mother and father were employed, two families in which only the father was employed, and two families in which the elderly parents were retired. Among the female officers in the private sector, two families were identified in which only the father was employed, while in the other families, the elderly parents were found to be neither employed nor receiving pensions. Among the female officers in the semi government sector, one family was identified in which both the mother and father were employed, and

another family in which the mother was receiving a pension. Accordingly, the highest level of employment among elderly parents was observed in the families of female officers working in the public sector.

This situation highlights important aspects of family support available to women when returning to work after childbirth. If elderly parents living in the household are employed, the childcare support they can provide may be limited. In particular, in families where both the mother and father are employed, alternative childcare arrangements may be necessary. On the other hand, living with retired parents may provide greater opportunities for them to spend time caring for the child, thereby providing family-level support for the woman's return to employment.

Furthermore, the employment status of elderly parents may also influence the economic stability of the household. The income generated by employed parents can contribute to reducing the financial burden on the family, while pensions received by retired parents can also serve as a source of household income. Therefore, the employment and economic status of elderly parents may be associated with the family's dependence on the woman's income, the availability of childcare, and the necessity for her to return to work after childbirth.

Accordingly, the employment and economic status of elderly parents living in the household can be identified not merely as a demographic characteristic of the family, but as a socio-economic factor that influences the childcare support available to women, household economic stability, and the sharing of domestic responsibilities. In particular, the higher level of employment among elderly parents in the families of public sector female officers indicates that the availability of childcare and household support within these families may vary depending on whether the parents are employed or retired.

When women take unpaid maternity leave, their income temporarily disappears. This can affect the family's ability to meet its day-to-day expenses. In the absence of a stable source of income, receiving financial support from family members becomes a temporary solution to these economic difficulties. Therefore, women may seek to return to employment in order to regain their full income level.

Case Study No. 5

"Since some new expenses have been added, it is better for both of us to work. The things we need for the household are sent from the village. However, we have taken out a loan to purchase land."

(40-year-old Development Officer, Public Sector)

This case illustrates that family economic needs and debt obligations can increase a woman's need to remain employed. In other words, employment not only provides her with a personal income but also becomes a major source of financial support for meeting household expenses and repaying debts.

A study conducted by two universities in France found that women with higher levels of education, better employment conditions, and higher incomes were more likely to return to employment (Wallace, Josephe, & Cubizolles, 2014). However, in the present study, women in the semi-government sector demonstrated the lowest monthly income levels, and economic difficulties appeared to have a considerable influence on their decision to return to employment.

When considering information on housing tenure, it was found that among the female officers in the public sector who participated in the study, only one family lived in a rented house, while all the other officers lived in houses owned by their families. In the private and semi government sectors, all the female officers were found to be living in their own houses. This is an important economic and social characteristic that indicates a relatively high level of housing stability among the families who participated in the study.

Housing ownership can be considered an important indicator of a family's economic stability and standard of living. Living in an owner-occupied house reduces the need to incur monthly rental expenses, thereby

increasing the family's ability to allocate its income towards childcare, education, and other essential needs. In addition, housing stability may contribute to the long-term economic security of the family.

Housing conditions may also be important in relation to women's decisions to return to work after childbirth. In families where housing related expenses are relatively low, the economic pressure placed on women's income may be reduced to some extent. Conversely, when childcare expenses, household expenditures, and other financial responsibilities are high, a woman's income may become important for maintaining the family's economic stability. Accordingly, housing ownership can be identified not as a direct determinant of women's return to work, but rather as a background factor that influences the overall economic circumstances of the family and shapes employment related decisions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women's return to employment after childbirth is a multidimensional process influenced by interconnected social, economic and demographic determinants. The findings indicate that family support, childcare arrangements, household income, spouse's employment, educational attainment, career continuity, residential circumstances and supportive workplace conditions all contribute to women's ability to return to work. In particular, supportive family environments and institutional provisions such as maternity leave, breastfeeding facilities, flexible working arrangements and childcare leave can facilitate employment continuity, while economic responsibilities and childcare challenges can influence the timing and necessity of returning to employment. The study also demonstrates that the employment sector alone does not determine women's return-to-work decisions rather, decisions are shaped by the interaction between family, economic and workplace circumstances. Therefore, the primary objective of the study was achieved by identifying the main social, economic and demographic determinants associated with women's return to employment after childbirth. The significance of the study lies in demonstrating the need for a multidimensional approach to supporting working mothers, where workplace policies are complemented by adequate childcare, family support and economic security. Such an approach can help women maintain employment continuity, career development and economic independence following childbirth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends an integrated policy approach to facilitate women's return to employment after childbirth. The findings suggest that maternity leave alone is insufficient to ensure employment continuity; therefore, institutions should strengthen maternity and childcare leave provisions together with flexible working arrangements, breastfeeding facilities, childcare support and appropriate return-to-work mechanisms. Workplace policies should also protect women's career continuity by ensuring that maternity and childcare responsibilities do not negatively affect opportunities for promotion, training and professional development. In addition, greater attention should be given to affordable and accessible childcare services, as childcare responsibilities and related costs were identified as important challenges influencing women's return to work. Since family support emerged as an important social determinant, policies and awareness programs should also encourage greater sharing of childcare and domestic responsibilities between spouses and other family members. Economic support mechanisms may be particularly important for women from lower-income households, where returning to employment may be an economic necessity due to household expenses, childcare costs and financial obligations. The differences observed among public, private and semi-government institutions further highlight the need for gender-responsive human resource policies that provide minimum standards of maternity and post-maternity support while allowing institutions to respond to the specific circumstances of working mothers. However, these recommendations should be interpreted within the limitations of the study, as the research was based on a purposively selected qualitative sample of 30 women drawn from two selected public-sector, two private-sector and two semi-government institutions, with 10 participants from each sector. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all working women in Sri Lanka or to other societies. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable contextual evidence of how social, economic and demographic factors interact with workplace conditions to influence women's return to employment after childbirth. Accordingly, future policies should move beyond a single-sector or single-factor approach and develop a comprehensive support system that combines family support,

economic security, childcare provision, maternity and childcare leave, flexible employment arrangements and protection of career continuity.

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