

Supporting Working Mothers in Hospitality and Tourism

Justine Jasuale

Student

Stockton University

jasualej@go.stockton.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify obstacles new mothers face when returning to careers in the hospitality and tourism industry after childbirth and provide businesses with recommendations to support new mothers. Length of maternity leave and whether leave is paid or unpaid has been found to be related to higher levels of stress and depression and lower levels of well-being for new mothers. Longer, paid maternity leaves are associated with job success and better health outcomes for new mothers. Additional support from companies employing new mothers, including childcare services and flexible scheduling, is related to levels of success among mothers in their return to the hospitality industry. Governments can also support working mothers in hospitality and tourism by passing laws requiring paid maternity leave and offering subsidized childcare to low-income families. This paper discusses practical considerations and future directions for research.

INTRODUCTION

Women are a driving force in the hospitality and tourism industry. Women make up 60% of the hospitality workforce in the United Kingdom and 70% worldwide, but they are still underrepresented in senior management positions (Gebbers et al., 2020). Though the gender wage gap has lessened in the last half century, women in hospitality industries still make less than men, despite making up a larger portion of the workforce (Kogovsek & Kogovsek, 2015). Women face obvious gender discrimination in the hospitality and tourism sectors, which create barriers to advancement. If women decide to have children, these barriers increase as many women struggle to return to the workforce following maternity leave and balance work and family life.

Returning to work following the birth of a child proves to be extremely difficult for many women. Forty percent of women drop out of the workforce following the birth of a child, despite 75% of pregnant women planning to return to work after giving birth (Xu et al., 2021). A large portion of new mothers who do not return to work are likely influenced by stress, societal pressures, and a struggle to balance work and family life (Ma et al., 2021). Within the hospitality industry, this issue is compounded by the limited availability of paid maternity leave. Only 8% of employees in the leisure and hospitality industry have access to paid family leave, compared with an average of 16% across all industries (Ma et al., 2021). These issues pressure new mothers within the hospitality and tourism industry to return to work before they are ready, especially single moms and those in working class positions who need the income to support their children. Furthermore, unconventional working hours and frequent travel are common aspects of the hospitality industry that make returning to work difficult for mothers. Therefore,

women within the hospitality and tourism industry require support from their employers and the government, through extended maternity leave, flexible scheduling, and childcare services, to find success when they return to work after childbirth.

This article reviews the existing literature focusing on the return of new mothers to work within the hospitality industry. The literature reviewed discusses policies and practices that provide support to working mothers as well as maternity leave laws in the United States and abroad to generate an understanding of their impact on both working mothers and infants. The current existing literature focuses on mothers' opinions on maternity leave policies, work-life balance, and barriers to career advancement. Current literature is lacking in identifying the long-term effects of support for working mothers on job performance and career advancement within the hospitality industry. The purpose of this article is to examine the current maternity leave policies and working conditions for new mothers in the United States and identify opportunities for improvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Maternity Leave for Mothers in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Much of the existing literature focusing on working mothers centers on the length and quality of maternity leave. Xu et al. (2021) compiled information on maternity leave policies for six major hospitality companies in the United States and interviewed new mothers working for these companies to understand their personal experiences. They found that mothers and children alike benefit from longer amounts of maternity leave as it helps them establish a routine and build a strong bond (Xu et al., 2021). Their study also indicated that mothers with shorter maternity leaves suffer from depression, work-life conflict, and reduced productivity while mothers given longer leaves have better physical and mental health (Xu et al., 2021). In addition to the length of leave provided, whether leave is paid or unpaid can impact the health of new mothers. An online survey of 700 working mothers found that those who took fully or partially paid leave saw a 50% reduced chance of being hospitalized or seeing a mental health care provider compared to those with unpaid leave (Jou et al., 2018). The availability of paid maternity leave enables women to focus on themselves and their children rather than work, reducing the amount of stress they are under. Additionally, they are less likely to feel pressured to return to work too soon after their pregnancy, giving them ample time to recover physically and mentally, which results in reduced health issues.

Infant health and child success is also impacted by the quality of maternity leave. Women who take 12 or more weeks of leave are 75% less likely to have their infants re-hospitalized, compared to women who take no leave (Jou et al., 2018). Length of maternity leave has also been proven to impact the long-term success of children. Prior to July 1, 1977, mothers in Norway were entitled to 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but women giving birth after this date were granted four months' paid and 12 months' unpaid leave. Carneiro et al. (2015) conducted a study that followed children born immediately before and immediately after the policy change from 1977 to 2010. They compared the high school dropout rates, college attendance, and wages at age 30 of the two separate groups. The study found that the increase in maternity leave resulted in a 2% decrease in high school dropout rates and a 5% increase in wages at age 30 for children whose mothers had the longer maternity leaves (Carneiro et al., 2015). When mothers have

longer maternity leave, they can provide extended care to their children without additional stress coming from work. They can focus on their children, creating a strong foundation for their children's future.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that longer, paid maternity leaves lead to success for both mothers and their children, women in the hospitality industry often do not have access to extended leave after childbirth. Ma et al. (2021) interviewed 20 female hotel employees who had taken maternity leave in the past five years. Their research found that most hotels in the U.S. offer only four to six weeks' paid leave, with an additional six to eight weeks being partially paid or unpaid (Ma et al., 2021). Working mothers in the lodging industry voiced their opinions on maternity leave, stating that 12 weeks is not enough time to recover both physically and mentally or to bond with their new child (Xu et al., 2021). The hospitality industry lags other industries in providing long-term paid maternity leave. Without enough time to recover from childbirth, mothers return to work mentally and physically exhausted, often resulting in them deciding to leave the industry altogether.

While the hospitality industry in the United States does not provide ample time for maternity leave, other countries guarantee much longer leaves for mothers. In Finland, new mothers are guaranteed three years of job-protected leave and are given a maternity package including baby clothes and other baby care products (Neckermann, 2017). A study of 15 developed nations found that the median leave time provided to mothers is 60 weeks, which is five times more than that offered in the United States under the Family and Medical Leave Act (Neckermann, 2017). The guarantee of longer leave in other developed nations indicates the United States does not offer ample support to new mothers. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for research as studies can be conducted on how the varying lengths of leave in different countries impacts mothers' health and careers.

Work-Life Balance in Hospitality and Tourism

The hospitality and tourism industry can demand employees work unconventional hours. Hotels are open 24/7, events often occur on nights and weekends, and restaurants and bars are open late for tourists and local diners. Working weekends and nights can put working mothers in difficult situations as they struggle to balance work and family life. Liu et al. (2020) surveyed female hotel employees in China and found work-life balance can reinforce women's organizational commitments and help improve their career advancement. Often, women are faced with pressure from society to focus on family life while less emphasis is placed on the advancement of their professional careers. When women have the support of both their families and companies to better balance work and family responsibilities, they can see greater opportunities and long-term career success.

Mothers in the hospitality and tourism industry must take on more family responsibilities than their male counterparts. Deiana & Fabbri (2020) conducted a quantitative survey that asked female employees in hotels throughout the U.K. and Ireland to identify factors that influenced their decision to apply for senior management positions. They found that female leaders in the hospitality industry identified family responsibilities as the main barrier preventing them from advancing in their careers (Deiana & Fabbri, 2020). A telephone survey of 588 male and female hotel managers within the U.S. lodging industry was conducted to obtain information on work-

family issues (Lawson et al., 2013). Female hotel managers reported experiencing more negative work-family spillover than male hotel managers (Lawson et al., 2013). Women often experience personal, familial, or societal pressure to take care of their children and focus on home life rather than work. Men, on the other hand, do not face this pressure and thus are more likely to balance their work and family responsibilities as they see fit. Women do not have the same flexibility in determining their work-life balance.

DISCUSSION

Work-life balance is a huge issue for working mothers as they must fulfill both familial and work responsibilities. Issues of work-life balance, including long working hours and lack of flexibility, are exacerbated in the hospitality and tourism industry because of low wages and hours focusing on nights and weekends (Deery & Jago, 2009). This is a large issue for working mothers, more so than fathers, because they often feel societal pressures to be at home with their children. One study identified time support from employers, including leaving work on time, having paid time off, and having free time with family and friends, as the most important factor of work-life balance among female hotel employees in China (Liu et al., 2020). Employers within the hospitality and tourism industry must be able to provide time support to retain mothers as employees and ensure the success and advancement of working mothers in their careers.

One way employers can support mothers is through longer maternity leave with pay, so working mothers do not feel pressured to return to work too soon after childbirth for additional income. Many new mothers believe 12 weeks is not enough time for maternity leave and even identified not enough leave time as a reason for leaving their careers (Ma et al., 2021). Proper maternity leave is positively related to career-related outcomes such as job satisfaction and retention as well as the physical and mental health of mothers (Kim et al., 2022). Longer maternity leave benefits not only mothers and infants but businesses as well. Since higher-quality maternity leaves are associated with higher retention rates, companies will be able to reduce turnover by providing higher-quality maternity leave. A reduction in turnover helps reduce training and hiring costs for companies. Furthermore, studies have proven the psychological well-being of employees is related to job performance ratings (Wright & Croanzano, 2000). Since mothers with proper maternity leave have better mental health when returning to work, they will likely perform better at work than those without access to high-quality maternity leave. For companies to meet their strategic objectives and maintain a competitive advantage, it is crucial for them to have high-performing employees (Shmailan, 2015). Therefore, providing proper maternity leave to new mothers benefits the business by retaining high-performing employees, giving them a competitive edge and enabling them to achieve their goals.

Flexible Scheduling

To help mothers find a balance between their work and family lives, companies can provide more flexibility in scheduling. In the hospitality industry, it is common for employees to work late nights or weekends. However, many mothers would likely prefer to spend this time with their children to both bond with them and reduce work-related stress. Mothers who struggle to meet the demands of both their work and family responsibilities may experience increased levels of stress and depression. Some mothers have identified the inability to accommodate flexible scheduling as a reason for leaving their company to find other employment (Ma et al., 2021). Schedule flexibility enables employees to manage their life demands and reduces work-family

conflict, which can affect turnover intention, job performance, and stress at work (Mansour & Tremblay, 2018). Providing flexible scheduling to working mothers can help reduce stress and increase retention among companies.

Childcare Services

Companies within the hospitality and tourism industry can also support working mothers by providing childcare services. Single mothers and those in working class positions may struggle to pay for childcare during nights and weekends when they must work. A literature review of 13 studies found a significant relationship exists between childcare subsidies and reducing turnover (Kim et al., 2022). Oftentimes, if a couple cannot afford childcare, there is societal or familial pressure placed on the mother to leave work to take care of their children. Hospitality and tourism workers often earn low wages, so they may struggle to pay for childcare. Thus, women in hospitality may leave work to take care of their children, rather than continue working for low wages. Additionally, when children are sick, there is a pressure on their mother, rather than their father, to stay home and take care of them. Companies that provide arrangements for sick children may see fewer instances of mothers missing work (Kim et al., 2022). Hospitality organizations should provide on-site childcare or subsidized childcare to help support working mothers and prevent them from having to leave the industry to take care of children. The addition of childcare services will help companies retain employees and prevent them from incurring additional costs for training new employees.

Support from Government Initiatives

To ensure working mothers in hospitality and tourism receive the support they need, governments can pass laws regarding the amount of paid leave new mothers should receive. In the United States, eligible employees are guaranteed 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child under the Family and Medical Leave Act (Family and Medical Leave (FMLA), n.d.). However, studies have proven that longer maternity leaves benefit both the mother and the child (Carneiro et al., 2015; Jou et al., 2018). Working mothers have also voiced the belief that there needs to be a societal shift in how Americans view maternity leave for new mothers (Xu et al., 2021). Therefore, the U.S. government should require companies to provide longer maternity leave with pay for mothers to recover adequately. Unlike most other developed nations, the United States does not guarantee any paid maternity leave for new mothers. By following other developed countries, the United States could empower working mothers to continue working after giving birth.

In addition to maternity leave, subsidized childcare could also be provided by the federal government to support working mothers. A study conducted in Europe found that parents and childless employees have similar levels of stress and life satisfaction in countries with resources and support for parents while parents with less resources and support experience more stress and strain (Pollmann-Schult, 2018). Finding affordable childcare can be extremely difficult for working parents, especially for those in the hospitality industry as they are often paid low wages. In these cases, many women are pressured into leaving their jobs to instead care for their children. By providing subsidized childcare, the government can reduce stress and increase life satisfaction for working parents and potentially reduce the number of mothers who leave their jobs.

Recommendations

While increasing the length of paid maternity leave would be ideal for working mothers, it may not be realistic for every company, especially small businesses that cannot afford paid leave. Additionally, businesses may have to hire temporary workers to fill positions left by women on maternity leave. As a start, hospitality organizations can provide training to pregnant women to inform them of their rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act. This training should also explain that some employees may be able to take disability to receive full or partial pay while on maternity leave. Businesses can also offer two to four weeks of additional unpaid leave on top of what is guaranteed by the FMLA. The U.S. government could also provide pay for new parents to alleviate the pressure mothers feel to return to work.

Flexibility in scheduling should also be considered for working mothers, though this may be difficult for hospitality organizations to provide. Though mothers may not want to work nights and weekends, hospitality organizations often operate at these times and may need them to cover these shifts. Businesses should take motherhood into consideration when creating work schedules. For employees who can work remotely, they should provide working mothers with the option to work from home one or two days a week. Furthermore, supervisors and managers should be flexible when working mothers need a day off or to come in late. It is important that supervisors understand their employees' circumstances and do everything they can to help accommodate them.

CONCLUSION

Working mothers in the hospitality and tourism industry face several challenges in managing their work and family responsibilities. Without proper maternity leave, women and their newborns often face health issues. Many working women also experience high levels of stress when returning to work after maternity leave. Additionally, unconventional and inflexible work schedules make it difficult for mothers in the hospitality industry to balance their work-family conflicts and find childcare resources. Businesses can help support and retain working mothers by providing long-term paid maternity leave, flexible scheduling, and childcare services. This would help reduce stress on working mothers, increase their job performance, and help the company meet their objectives. Governments can also pass laws requiring employers to provide paid leave and offer subsidized childcare for hospitality workers to help provide working mothers with the support they need to continue in their positions.

This research can be applied to hospitality organizations throughout the world. Stress among new mothers balancing work and family life is universal, though the United States falls behind other developed countries in their support for working mothers. Retaining working mothers and ensuring they do not become overwhelmed is extremely important in hospitality, as it is a field dominated by women. Businesses can reduce turnover and increase job performance by providing support to mothers, leading to a reduction in training costs and meeting the objectives of the organization.

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