

# An Exploratory Study on the Maternity Leave Policy and Normative Discrimination in the Greater Male' Region

Fathimath Eema Hussain\*, and Dr. Aminath Riyaz

Faculty of Arts, Maldives National University, Malé, Maldives

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## ABSTRACT

Literature has contemplated the discourse regarding discrimination against working mothers in the workplace from various angles. While contemporary studies consider the implications of maternity-related policies, this has not been studied locally. This study aims to identify if and how working mothers in the Maldives face normative discrimination due to the maternity leave policy, the motherhood penalties which ensue, and its contribution to the maternal wall, through the lens of patriarchal ideologies and gender roles. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 8 working mothers between the ages of 25 to 40 who have had at least one child after the maternity leave policy for civil servants was revised in 2019. A thematic analysis was conducted to evaluate the impact of the maternity leave policy for civil servants. The findings of this study demonstrate that preconceived gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies motivates a cycle of discrimination.

## 1. Introduction

A new maternity leave policy was implemented by an amendment to the Civil Service Regulation (2014/R-311) (Civil Service Commission, 2014), granting working mothers employed in the civil service six months of paid maternity leave instead of the standard 60 days given by the Employment Act (2/2008) (Attorney General's Office, 2008). The Employment Act allows additional unpaid leave of up to 1 year and to utilise their annual leave following their maternity/paternity leave. Subsequently, a few private sector companies also adopted this policy voluntarily.

During their leave, the organisation is required to uphold the employees' rights and benefits as specified in their employment agreements and facilitate them to return to their previous position without losing their entitlements. At the institution's discretion, flexible working hours may be granted to mothers of new-borns until their child turns three years old.

The current policy allows working mothers to extend their maternity leave beyond the minimum standard the International Labour Organisation (ILO,2000) has set while ensuring job security. Maternity policies aim to protect working mothers' employment and income security, promote equal opportunity and treatment, prevent gender discrimination, and

\* Corresponding author E-mail address: eema.hussain@gmail.com

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reproductive roles from compromising women's socioeconomic status (Fallon et al., 2017). However, the practical outcomes of such policies may only partially meet the desired goals.

Policy interventions can backfire due to evolving ideologies and changing circumstances, which impact their effectiveness. This can lead to unintended harm and discrimination against working mothers, perpetuating a cycle of abuse. Neglecting this potential outcome threatens the security of working mothers due to the complex and persistent nature of discrimination (Heijnders & Van Der Meji, 2006).

As stated by Mohamed (2019), implementing the new policy in the Maldivian context sometimes is used by institutions as an excuse to discriminate based on sex. Globally, women face scrutiny beyond their job performance simply because of their gender, including questions about marital status, plans for marriage, and family planning (Cross & Linehan, 2006). Employers may hesitate to hire women, fearing that they will prioritise motherhood over work responsibilities. Employers also raise concerns about the potential absence of employees for six months after childbirth, impacting institutional work (Mohamed, 2019). As a result, employers often find other trivial reasons to terminate women's employment when they are pregnant or when they get married (Greenberg, 1998).

## **2. Significance**

In the Maldives, 49% of the population is female, of which 43% of women are between the ages of twenty to forty (NBS, 2021). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2019) reported that 86% of Maldivian women had given birth at least once by age 35. On average, women in the Maldives have one child by their late twenties, two by their early thirties, and three by their early forties (Ministry of Health, 2018). This means that women between the ages of twenty to forty may go on maternity leave twice or thrice during their careers.

The traditional concept of a sole breadwinner in the Maldives diminished by the late 20th century (Razee, 2006), leading to a female labour force participation rate of 42.2% in 2016 (NBS, 2016). However, women still face ongoing challenges in the workplace, including discrimination in terms of pay and status (NBS, 2019). Comparative to approximately thirty thousand men (25% of the male population), around ninety thousand women (58%) remained outside the labour force. This disparity may be attributed to women spending a significant portion of their waking hours on unpaid care work, including cooking, cleaning, and childcare, averaging six hours per day compared to men's three hours per day. Despite women working seven hours per day on average at their primary job compared to men's nine hours, women's overall workload, including unpaid care work, is considerably higher (NBS, 2020).

According to NBS (2020), 49% of women were not seeking employment, primarily due to the significant amount of care work they had to undertake. Edström et. al., (2014) emphasise that patriarchal values contribute to the unequal burden of unpaid care work on mothers compared to fathers. These values dictate that women are primarily responsible for caregiving, leading to men's dominance in various aspects of society, including work life (Bornstein & Painter, 2012). The findings of this study will contribute to developing and strengthening policy to ensure that the rights of working mothers are ascertained.

A study in this area is critical to understand the impact of the newly adopted maternity leave policy. Accordingly, this study examines the impact of the increased maternity leave policy on normative discrimination, motherhood penalties and the maternal wall by examining how normative discrimination presents itself in the workplace, instigates motherhood penalties, and cements the maternal wall.

### **3. Literature Review**

Understanding the root cause of normative discrimination is crucial for addressing the issue. To comprehend normative discrimination, sexism must initially be understood as a form of prejudice characterised by faulty generalisations and negative stereotypes (Allport, 1954). Prejudice, rooted in patriarchal ideologies and gender stereotypes, varies across cultures, races, classes, statuses, and ethnicities (Valentine, Jackson & Mayblin, 2014). While blatant expressions of sexism are declining (Watkins et al., 2006), it persists in more subtle and ambiguous forms (Basford, Offerman & Behrend, 2014), such as normative discrimination described in this study.

Working mothers face challenges balancing their work and caregiving responsibilities, which impact their work-life balance (Benard & Correll, 2010). Wattis. et. al., (2013), describe work-life balance based on women's lived experiences and challenges in combining work and care, including interactions in the private sphere (partners, grandparents) and the public sphere (co-workers, supervisors), while emphasising the significance of family policies in supporting working mothers.

#### **3.1. Maternity Protection**

While implementation of maternity protection has improved, the predominant focus on maternity leave alone is insufficient to ensure working mothers are provided with the necessary support they require. Therefore, better practices are necessary to support mothers to adequately achieve the desired outcome (ILO, 2010). However, policies addressing women, families, dependents, and education remain controversial due to biases arising from ideological differences (Guerrina & Murphy, 2016), and therefore these need to be addressed further.

#### **3.2. Gender Stereotypes and Patriarchal Ideologies**

Rich (1986) described motherhood as having dual meaning: it refers to the relationship between women and their reproductive abilities and children, and as a societal institution which imposes norms and ideologies on women. Motherhood is not solely biological or innate but also a social and political component of communities. Understanding this perspective is crucial in evaluating the implications of maternity protection policies.

#### **3.3. Intensive Mothering Ideology**

The concept of 'intensive mothering' coined by Hays (1996) is essential for understanding patriarchal societies. It portrays women as the primary caregivers responsible for consistently nurturing their children. Intensive mothering entails investing considerable time, energy, and resources into child-rearing and prioritising the child's needs. It emphasises the separation of mothering from professional work, as patriarchal societies consider childcare and nurturing invaluable in monetary terms.

This ideology portrays women as nurturing, selfless, and self-sacrificing, which conflicts with the traits of the 'ideal worker.' The goal of evaluating policies from this angle is not to disregard the genuine emotional bond between mothers and their children (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), but to explore the influence of these ideologies on maternal attachment to provide a more comprehensive understanding of motherhood. Considering this intersectional reality adds dimensions to policy implications and feminist theories related to maternity. Reforms in maternity leave policies may be caught between traditional, patriarchal institutions and emerging feminist mothering (Hallstein, 2006). Debates exist regarding the Eurocentric nature of intensive mothering (Frischmuth, 2006) and the bias in international law (Jones, 2006). It

raises questions about whether favouritism of certain types of maternity protection reflects past conservative Western ideologies.

Nordic countries, such as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, are notable for their intensive mothering and ideal motherhood concepts, particularly regarding policies that embrace different types of care work. These countries have adopted a unique welfare state model prioritising family-friendly policies, resulting in high maternal participation and increased female employment (Gupta, Smith, & Verner, 2008). This approach assists in addressing challenges posed by an ageing population. Despite the increased tax pressure to sustain their welfare systems (Hagen & Sitter, 2006), these countries remain among the world's wealthiest and rank among the happiest (Helliwell et al., 2021).

However, family-friendly policies that support female employment and women's position in the labour market have had unintended consequences. Countries such as Sweden and Denmark experienced a 'boomerang' effect, wherein the welfare schemes resulted in stagnant gender wage gaps and penalties for educated women. This created a 'system-based glass ceiling' that penalises all women (Gupta, Smith & Verner, 2008). Such damaging effects on women's labour market status can be minimised by considering both parents in policies (Gupta, Smith & Verner, 2008).

### **3.4. Ideal Worker vs Ideal Mother and Normative Discrimination**

Mothers face negative bias due to stereotypes about their abilities and traits (Benard & Correll, 2010), influenced by gender norms that dictate societal expectations (Berger, Cohen & Zelditch, 1972). The ideal worker and the ideal mother embody contrasting gender stereotypes (Dean, 2009; Crowley, 2013), with masculine traits associated with the ideal worker and feminine traits associated with the ideal mother. Society considers women to have nurturing qualities and men to be assertive and competent (Benard & Correll, 2010). However, research challenges this assumption by illustrating that women can simultaneously value work and motherhood (McQuillan et al., 2008). Despite this, mothers face penalties in terms of being seen as less capable of work upon entering motherhood. At the same time, institutions tend to see men positively as responsible family men (Kmec, 2011).

Such perceptions result in imposition of penalties on mothers due to perceived lower competence and commitment. This discrimination often goes unnoticed, leading to ambivalence among mothers. However, the experiences of those unaware are equally unpleasant. Crowley (2013) found that social circles influence individuals' perceptions of discrimination. Mothers who have experienced discrimination tend to become accustomed to it, and higher-earning mothers are more likely to notice discrimination due to their education and position in the hierarchy. Research suggests a significant wage gap exists between mothers and non-mothers, but it is unclear if normative discrimination is the cause (Oesch, Lipps & McDonald, 2017). Women may consciously choose not to have children because of this (Baker, 2012). Overall, these studies establish that working mothers face normative discrimination, resulting in them being subject to barriers to advancement. Whereby if they utilise leniencies awarded by policies (such as maternity leave), they are likely to experience penalties.

### **3.5. Motherhood Penalties**

Mothers face prejudice in the workplace, leading to reduced chances of them getting hired or perceived as competent for jobs elsewhere or promoted within the current organisation (Correll, et. al., 2007). Mothers may feel incompetent due to peer perceptions and mistreatment from employers, regardless of their awareness of discrimination (Lamar & Forbes, 2020). As Budig

and Hodges (2010) highlighted, while the qualities associated with motherhood “make” mothers unfit leaders, the same qualities when added to working fathers, give them an edge that helps them advance in their respective fields.

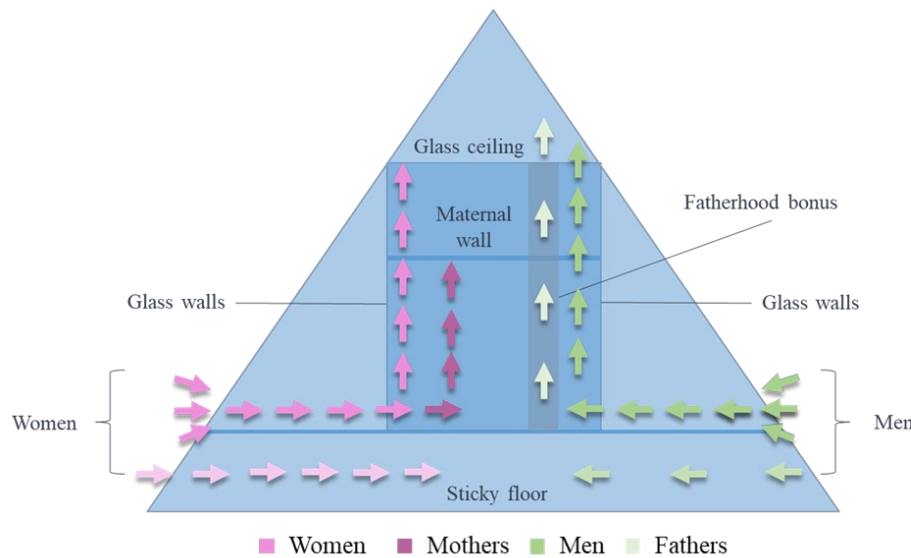
Mothers face ongoing challenges and dilemmas in overcoming prejudice, whether they leave their jobs, stay home for unpaid care work, or confront workplace-centred patriarchy (Bornstein & Painter, 2012). When they exhibit traits typically associated with men, they are likely perceived as having lost their "motherly qualities" (Benard & Correll, 2010). Conversely, when mothers demonstrate competence and commitment, they can be seen as impersonal, hostile, and less likeable (Crowley, 2013). The negative perception of mothers extends to how they are viewed as workers (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Aranda and Glick (2014) found that emphasising devotion to their job can help working mothers overcome the motherhood penalty. However, mothers still face more significant challenges than working fathers in establishing their self-worth.

Even where mothers persist, a gender wage gap of 20% continues, with more women in lower-income positions than men. This disparity is reflected in political representation and the number of women in the Cabinet (NBS, 2020).

Employers perceive mothers differently from fathers and non-parents, leading to differential treatment. It is questioned whether this treatment is justified due to the incompetence of mothers. The findings of Samtleben et al. (2019) instate mothers are more likely to report negative career consequences for utilizing their maternity leave even though they are legally entitled to that leave. As a result, motherhood penalties often accumulate to cement the maternal wall, hindering mothers from advancing in the workplace.

### **3.6. Maternal Wall**

The 'glass ceiling' is an invisible barrier that hinders women's career advancement (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) of the USA identified societal, internal, and governmental barriers contributing to this phenomenon. The glass ceiling prevents women from reaching higher positions and achieving pay equity with men (Cabeza et al., 2011). Women face obstacles in both horizontal and vertical career progression, termed as glass walls and sticky floors (Lopez, 1992; Berheide, 1992; ILO, 2015). These challenges hinder women's career growth (Morgan, 2017), while in contrast, the 'fatherhood bonus' suggests fathers enjoy career advantages compared to nonfathers, mothers and nonmothers (Lundberg, 2012). Social factors such as marital status, care work responsibility, and motherhood contribute to such phenomena (Hussin et al., 2021). Some scholars (e.g. Williams & Westfall, 2006) view the maternal wall as a distinct phenomenon linked explicitly to pregnancies. Working mothers hit the maternal wall before they reach the glass ceiling. Figure 1 provides a conceptual illustration of the interactions and implications of the phenomena: the glass ceiling, glass walls, sticky floors, and maternal wall.



*Figure 1.* The glass ceiling, maternal wall, glass walls, sticky floors, and glass escalators in the organisational pyramid (adaption from Wirth, 2004)

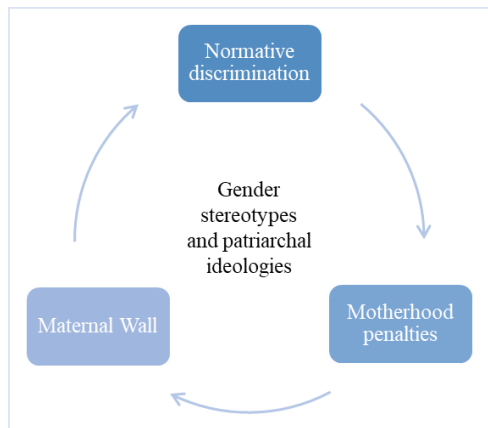
This conceptualisation emphasises the complexity of the issues, considering intersectional feminist theories and the importance of considering individuals as part of diverse groups shaped by both sex and socio-economic factors. As organisational structures and cultures influence barriers faced by individuals (Berheide, 1992), the maternal wall and its implication on working mothers should also be considered multidimensionally, with reference to mothers and extraneous factors that may influence their situation. Mothers may feel held to higher standards than nonmothers (Gorman & Kmec, 2007). As a result, they overcompensate and are hesitant to use their maternity leave fully.

### **3.7. Maternity Leave**

According to the ILO (1998), over 120 countries provide paid maternity leave. However, simply granting leave for an allocated period does not result in the desired and required level of protection for working mothers (ILO, 2010). Furthermore, controversy surrounds women, family, and caregiving policies, as societies often adhere to traditional ideologies (Grillo, 2008). Consequently, maternity leave potentially negatively impacts working mothers, creating undesirable impressions of their reliability within the labour force (Mohamed, 2019).

## **4. Conceptual Framework**

The literature demonstrates that normative discrimination leads to motherhood penalties and the maternal wall, perpetuating a vicious cycle. Policies for working mothers should address this interplay and cycle.



*Figure 2. The conceptual framework: the ‘maternal discrimination loop.’*

It is important to acknowledge the interconnection of these variables when assessing the consequences of leave policies. Normative discrimination gives rise to motherhood penalties, solidifying the maternal wall and perpetuating discrimination (Correll, et al., 2007; Berheide, 1992). This vicious cycle is fuelled by gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies (Benard & Correll, 2010).

## **5. Methodology**

The research focused on Maldivian women aged 25-40, employed in civil service or private-sector organisations that follow extended maternity leave policies aligned with the Civil Service Regulation (2014/R-311). The research aimed to explore the impact of the newly enacted maternity leave policy on normative discrimination, motherhood penalties, and the maternal wall. Given that this research focuses on a particular area that has not yet been studied in depth, a qualitative approach was preferred to delve into the phenomena from the perspective and experiences of those subject to it to understand the interplay between the considered factors.

The sample consisted of women with at least one child after the maternity leave policy was revised in 2019. Abdulla (2021) reported 2243 women had utilised this leave up to their point of reporting. For accuracy and to reduce variances that may arise from other factors, the study targeted women residing in the Greater Male' region (Male', Hulhumale', and Villingili). Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used due to the limited number of women in the target demographic. Eight working mothers participated in semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The data was analysed thematically using NVivo by assigning initial codes based on themes identified through the existing literature. Additional codes which emerged during the analysis were considered and grouped into themes according to the study's conceptual framework.

The study's findings are not meant for generalization but for exploration of the phenomenon to study the impact of extended maternity leave. The topic's sensitivity may have influenced participants to withhold certain information about their experiences, and the subjective perception of discrimination could have influenced the study's outcome.

The timing of the pandemic coincided with changes in the maternity leave policy, leading to disruptions in government organisations. Consequently, distinguishing between crisis responses and normative discrimination became challenging.

### 5.1. Demographic Data of Informants

This study interviewed eight working mothers, a target aged twenty-five to forty years in the Greater Male' Region, who were either civil servants or employed in a private organisation that adheres to extended maternity leave policy. These women have had at least one child since their workplace implemented the extended maternity leave policy. Therefore, the findings present eight pregnancies and corresponding maternity leaves.

Table 1.

*Demographic data of informants*

Personal details				Employment details			Maternity leave		
Participant	Age	Marital status	Highest educational qualification	No. of children	Status	Job title (category)	Duration	Addition al leaves	Start of maternity leave (approximate date)
RES_01	34	Married	Undergraduate Degree	2	Employed	Support officer	6 months	N/A	July 2020
RES_02	35	Married	Postgraduate Degree	1	Employed	Senior civil service	6 months	N/A	December 2019
RES_03	34	Married	Postgraduate Degree	3	Employed	Support officer	6 months	Annual leave (1 month)	January 2020
RES_04	28	Married	GCE O' level (Secondary School)	1	Employed	Support officer	6 months	Annual leave (1 month)	September 2019
RES_05	29	Married	Undergraduate Degree	1	Employed	Professional level	3 months	N/A	May 2019
RES_06	36	Married	Postgraduate Degree	2	Employed	Support officer	6 months	N/A	July 2019
RES_07	33	Married	Undergraduate Degree	3	Employed	Middle management	6 months	N/A	July 2020
RES_08	27	Divorced	Undergraduate Degree	1	Employed	Support officer	6 months	Annual leave (1 month)	August 2020

The informants' ages range from 27 to 37 years. Most informants held at least an undergraduate degree, with three having a postgraduate degree. All informants were married when they took maternity leave and had one child after 2019. Informants fully utilised their maternity leave except for RES\_05, who was terminated three months into her leave. The jobs are categorised according to the classifications in terms of the Civil Service Job Structure (Civil Service Commission, 2014). Thereby, 5 participants are categorised as support officers; that is, they are classified at the lower end of the administrative job classification. The remaining 3 participants are in senior positions.

### 6. Findings

Table 2 presents the four main themes and eleven sub-themes identified, classified into overarching and interrelated themes. The following section describes these themes and sub-themes based on the discussions, opinions, and sentiments expressed.



Table 2.

Main themes and sub-themes of this study

Main theme	Sub-theme
Gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies	Intensive mothering ideology Work/life balance
Normative discrimination	Discrimination as perceived by informants Co-workers' perception of informants' maternity leave Management's perception of informants' maternity leave
Motherhood penalties	Work during maternity leave Motherhood as a barrier Return to work
Maternal wall	Potential/missed opportunities Barriers to advancement

### 6.1. Career Driven Mothers

Five of the eight informants expressed strong career aspirations and ambitions.

*I worked hard to be where I am today. I want to climb up the hierarchy. I want to make a name for myself. I have a 10-year plan to achieve my goals. RES\_08*

They shared their dedication to their current position, long-term plans, and determination to climb the career ladder.

### 6.2. Work/Life Balance

All informants explained that they do not have a specific work-life balance plan and that they adjust their work schedules to accommodate their family responsibilities.

*'I do not think I can balance my work and family life. I do whatever is necessary daily and hope I get through the day.'* RES\_01

Six out of eight informants preferred leaving their children with family members while they went to work, and the remaining informants hired babysitters as they did not live with their extended families.

*'It was tough leaving her with the babysitter at first. But we have built that trust now. I would prefer to leave her with family, or at least have a babysitter while my family is there, but I do what I must'* RES\_05.

Four out of eight informants expressed interest in utilising daycare services if they were affordable or available at their workplace.

*'I would want to send her to daycare if there were facilities in my office building or nearby, so I can check up on her occasionally. It would help with my anxiety.'* RES\_01

Participants further highlighted that balancing work and home life has become more challenging post-pandemic due to flexitime and work-from-home policies.

*'... as I can work from home. I am sometimes required to work at night, at home.'* RES\_06

All participants reported exhaustion and a lack of personal time due to the challenges of balancing work and family life.

*'I cannot keep working myself to the bone. I also need to do something about its toll on my mental health. I simply cannot find the time.'* RES\_05

Although six informants felt their co-workers and management adequately assisted them in juggling their professional and personal lives, all informants expressed that they could have been further assisted, particularly by their supervisors.

*'On rare occasions, I have had to go home; and they gave me written disciplinary notice. That does not mean I can stay at work when my daughter needs me.'* RES\_04

### **6.3. Informants' Perception of Their Maternity Leave**

Most informants were not anxious about missing work but expressed concern that their absence would result in understaffing in the workplace. The informants also felt that their co-workers also had a negative perception of them utilising their maternity leave.

*'People were weird that I would be away from work for half a year. They would comment, "Things will be easy for you since you will be home. I will have to take on your work for six months.'* RES\_08

Despite being granted leave from work, most informants attended work tasks at various times during their leave.

*'I have constantly been on the phone as they are unfamiliar with my work. No one else has the experience to do my work.'* RES\_01

Participants also reported that negative remarks and exasperation would follow work calls because their co-workers had to assume additional responsibilities.

*'The person managing my work in my absence asked, "Is your maternity leave still not over?" They are stressed about the additional workload.'* RES\_07

Institutions should have facilitated replacements despite the additional costs and/or difficulty finding suitable replacements for highly skilled informants. However, frequent contact with their workplace made some informants feel valuable and irreplaceable.

### **6.4. Co-workers and Management's Perception of Informants' Maternity Leave**

Informants denied experiencing unfair standards and career hindrances due to motherhood. However, narratives gathered from informants illustrate that co-workers and management had differing views. Particularly, male colleagues lacked understanding of maternity leave.

*'When they were informed that I was going on maternity leave, my seniors asked why so many days were given.'* RES\_01

Six of eight informants received leniency for family responsibilities but desired more support from management and co-workers. Despite leniency, they perceived motherhood as more challenging.

*'Of course, it is harder for mothers. We have two jobs that we are expected to excel at. It was much easier to focus on work before I had kids.'* RES\_08

### **6.5. Discrimination Based on Maternity**

Most informants believe that discrimination based on sex and maternity is a concern, but they did not specify experiencing it.

*'I do not feel bullied or discriminated against because of my pregnancy or because I went on a lengthy maternity leave.'* RES\_01

However, based on their narrations, it can be deduced that informants may have experienced job and hierarchical discrimination.

*'I have established myself [in my career]. I think it is easier once you have established that. People respect you more. It would have been harder if I was in the early stage of my career.'* RES\_08

Informants reported discriminatory behaviour in responding to general questions but denied it when explicitly mentioned; either they were unaware of it as they considered those incidents normal, or they were dismissed as jokes.

*They would say, "I should get pregnant to stay home too." ... "You're still planning on getting more?" They also imply that my career is going nowhere because I am a mother.'* RES\_07

*'They would say, "You got pregnant because you get six months maternity leave now." It is just teasing among my close-knit circle of colleagues. I did not think anything of it.'* RES\_04

However, it was evident that informants were discriminated against despite being unaware of it.

*'I had hoped Covid would prolong. Nobody would have known I gave birth or that I got pregnant. I think it would have been easier if no one knew.'* RES\_01

Despite this, most informants reported that they did not feel their maternity leave was perceived negatively by co-workers or management, but some felt anxious telling them they were pregnant.

*'When I told my colleagues that I was pregnant for the second time, I felt as if they were thinking, "She's going on maternity leave again?"'* RES\_06

## 6.6. Potential/Missed Opportunities

Four informants did not feel they missed opportunities due to motherhood, but some of the informants thought women in higher-level positions had an advantage.

*'I did not feel I was passed up for a promotion or work just because I was pregnant. It might have been different if I was at a lower level in the hierarchy chain.'* RES\_06

Most informants believed mothers have equal opportunities and are not unfairly sanctioned for motherhood.

*'I do know mothers who do everything their male peers do. I just choose not to. They are not mistreating me if I decide not to work like that, right?'* RES\_06

The responses indicate that working mothers are evaluated based on criteria for single men and overlook added responsibilities. They feel compelled to work similarly, opting out of leniencies for potential opportunities.

*'I considered returning after three months. Being away for 6 months is not wise. I told them I could work from home if they needed help.'* RES\_08

## 6.7. Patriarchal Ideologies and Gender Stereotypes

Informants believe motherly qualities are not seen as opposite to ideal-worker qualities, but co-workers and supervisors perceived them as inconsistent.

*'Before giving birth, people viewed me as a very blunt person. However, their perception of me changed once I returned from maternity leave.'* RES\_06

## 6.8. Primary Caregiver

Most informants believed mothers should be the primary caregivers, while others believed caregiving should be a shared responsibility, equally between parents.

*'I believe that mothers will be the primary caregivers as there are some things that fathers cannot do.'* RES\_05

## 6.9. Motherhood as a Barrier

Half of the informants reported experiences of workplace discrimination due to their status as mothers, affecting promotions, training, and perceived competency.

*'In assigning work, supervisors and co-workers consider there are additional responsibilities on mothers. People without children or single people are usually preferred for important tasks. I do feel like being a mother hinders me.'* RES\_02

Nevertheless, most informants tried to excuse their supervisors' or management's perspectives.

*'I think they are trying to be considerate, but it comes out wrong.'* RES\_08

Most informants did not believe there should be harsher standards for women or working mothers but felt the need to work harder for equal footing.

*'Mothers should not have to work harder to prove themselves to supervisors. Instead, they should focus on delivering better results. It should not matter how many commitments they have outside of work'* RES\_02

Half of the informants believed mothers must work harder upon returning to establish themselves, which requires an adjustment period.

*'I will have to work twice as hard once I go back to show that I am still capable of doing everything I was able to do before.'* RES\_07

## 6.10. Perception of Maternity Leave

All informants are grateful for the extended leave and believe mothers need at least six months post-maternity for recovery and bonding.

*'People should consider maternity leave as a period allocated for the mother to recover, but they think those six months are for the baby. Institutions do not consider postpartum depression, caesarean recovery, and the mother's overall health.'* RES\_07

Informants hesitated to voice their opinion on the maternity leave policy, fearing seeming unappreciative. They believed institutions would struggle in their absence, making additional leniencies unfeasible.

*'I think it would be harder for institutions if every time someone gave birth, they were absent for six months; they are not that advanced. They could be more lenient, but we cannot have everything.'* RES\_02

## 7. Discussion

Working mothers struggle with the intersection of work and motherhood due to societal, ideological, and political pressures. Understanding the implications of gender stereotypes,

discrimination, and maternal penalties is crucial for maternity protection and policy formulation. Informants unknowingly reinforce gender stereotypes by conforming to the intensive mothering ideology. Evaluating policies and their implementation is crucial considering the influence of ideologies, as discussed by Gupta et al., (2008). While informants stated that motherhood qualities align with leadership, their experiences reveal conflicts between the 'ideal mother' and 'ideal worker'. This aligns with Heilman and Okimoto's findings (2008) that working mothers are perceived as less competent.

Findings demonstrate that taking on two roles has negatively impacted working mothers, leading to mental/emotional distress and a loss of identity. It is unreasonable to expect women to be the ideal mother and worker simultaneously (Christopher, 2012), as such, a shift in the way responsibilities is assumed among parents, families, and the State is necessary.

### **7.1. Gender Stereotypes and Patriarchal Ideologies**

Intensive mothering ideology considers women as primary caregivers, who must excel and achieve balance in a male-centric workplace (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). As a result, juggling work and family becomes increasingly challenging for working mothers (Hampson, 2018), as was narrated by informants.

### **7.2. Normative Discrimination**

Working mothers are often subject to bias by their employers due to a perceived lack of necessary qualities for success. Awareness of discriminatory practices is crucial for understanding mothers' perceptions of discrimination. Informants' perceptions of workplace discrimination are influenced by their peers (Crowley, 2013). Many informants were ambivalent and unaware of their experiences, likely due to women being accustomed to various forms of discrimination throughout their life. Notably, informants were more likely to narrate discriminatory experiences when the term 'discrimination' was not explicitly used in the questions. Providing examples of discriminatory behaviour elicited similar experiences, indicating discrimination.

Crowley (2013) states that mothers in higher positions are more likely to perceive discrimination. Informants in this study, who held high posts per Civil Service Commission classifications, reported experiencing discrimination consistently. Lower-level staff may face additional challenges in combating discrimination, aligning with Crowley's findings.

Informants' perception of discrimination affected their belief about motherhood hindering career advancement. Co-workers and management, especially male colleagues, expressed negative sentiments about their leave and motherhood status, which aligns with Oesch, Lipps, and McDonald's (2017) findings. This could contribute to hesitancy in hiring women resulting in an additional competence penalty (Lamar & Forbes, 2020).

### **7.3. Motherhood Penalties**

Due to biological and cultural disadvantages, motherhood bias affects mothers in the workplace regarding pay, benefits, and perceived competence. Studies indicate that working mothers face disadvantages in hiring, promotion, and training (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007). This is consistent with narratives of informants that supervisors and co-workers consider motherhood in providing opportunities. Despite not feeling directly penalised, informants shared experiences reflecting motherhood penalties. Mothers had to work harder to combat prejudice and demonstrate competence, commitment, and devotion (Aranda & Glick, 2014).

Most informants worked during maternity leave, while expressing frustration yet feeling valued. This perspective aligns with the findings of Fitzenberger et al. (2016). According to Samtleben et al. (2019); mothers often experience negative career consequences for taking maternity leave. This may explain why half of the informants felt the need to work harder after returning to establish themselves and prove their competence. Society and self-imposed prejudice contribute to this bias against working mothers, as discussed by Hays (1996). Informants also believed that established women have an easier time returning to work, facing lesser competence penalties.

#### **7.4. Maternal Wall**

Like the glass ceiling, the maternal wall discriminates against women; in this case, discrimination is based on pregnancies and associated maternity leave (Williams & Westfall, 2006). Working mothers encounter the maternal wall before reaching a glass ceiling, and many never surpass it.

Scholars such as Hadas and Micheal (2009) asserted that defamilialization is needed to overcome the maternal wall and increase female participation in the labour force, as this concept considers the extent to which a household's welfare and caring responsibilities can be eased due to the state's involvement. This is based on the welfare state regimes theorized by Esping-Anderson (1999), which are found in three cornerstone institutions of society: the labour market, the welfare state and the family, and the consequent interaction of the three. This concept is largely dependent on decommmodification, which is the degree to which individuals can uphold an acceptable standard of living independent of market participation (Esping-Anderson, 1999). The general idea is that individuals should not have to choose between doing care work and possibly being subject to poverty and forsaking their responsibilities in order to achieve/maintain an adequate standard of living.

The maternal wall is influenced by peers' perceptions and motherhood penalties for working mothers. Informants did not personally feel subjected to unfair standards hindering career advancement due to motherhood, but their narration of the behaviour of co-workers and management implies an opposing perspective. Informants felt the need to overcompensate to outperform their counterparts, which aligns with the findings of Gorman and Kmec (2007) on employers perceiving mothers as inferior workers compared to non-mothers.

Half of the informants reported not feeling disadvantaged as mothers, possibly influenced by their perception of discrimination and bias, as highlighted by Crowley (2010). The participants believed they had equal opportunities as non-mothers but acknowledged a shift in their priorities after becoming mothers. This shift, although natural, could result in mild consequences for mothers' perceived competence in the workplace. As such, the male-centric workplace structure in Maldives may lead to competence penalties and hindered career advancement for working mothers. Consequently, some mothers choose not to use leniency, contributing to the maternal wall that limits their progress.

This study acknowledges that the maternal wall's assessment is limited as barriers faced by working mothers vary based on individual experiences, sector, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other factors (Özcan, 2010). Societal expectations and gender stereotypes deeply influence women and are ingrained in their thought processes. This study highlights that these factors perpetuate normative discrimination, contributing to the maternal wall influenced by maternity leave policies.

## **8. Recommendations**

Detriments working mothers face are rooted in societal beliefs rather than the policy itself. The interviews revealed a connection between the maternity leave policy, normative discrimination, the maternal wall, and motherhood penalties. The intensive mothering ideology and traditional beliefs contribute to the struggle of working mothers to balance their roles as ideal workers and mothers. This can lead to motherhood penalties and the formation of the maternal wall, affecting how peers assess their competency.

A shift in parental responsibility is needed to break this cycle influenced by perceptions of gender roles. Informants relying on their families for caregiving indicates the need for improved practices in supporting women post-maternity. Defamilialization initiatives in family policies can be crucial, but some informants hesitate to explore other childcare options. Therefore, introducing defamilialization incentives may not guarantee their utilisation by mothers. The effectiveness of maternity interventions remains insignificant if women continue to be perceived as the primary caregivers and parenting is seen as inherently feminine. The duration of maternity leave alone will not address this issue.

A shift in gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideologies can prevent women from choosing between care work and careers, reducing poverty risk (Esping-Anderson, 1999). This aligns with the theory of decommodification proposed by Esping-Anderson (1999), which emphasises the importance of individuals fulfilling their responsibilities without sacrificing their standard of living. Working mothers in the Greater Male' Region may not be prepared to introduce such initiatives. A potential solution could be a hybrid model where caregiving responsibilities are shared with the state or the market. Additionally, male-centric workplace structures should be addressed by challenging traditional long hours and full-time schedules (Bornstein & Painter, 2012). This can be accomplished by degenderizing care work alongside the implementation of policies, which includes the restructuring male-centric workplace structures to combat traditional long hours and the full-time schedule.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study highlights the impact of the revised maternity leave policy on working mothers and emphasises the need to consider external factors that influence policy effectiveness. It underscores the importance of examining policies from various perspectives, including societal and gender-related issues. The discrimination loop mothers are subjected to cannot be broken unless there is a shift in how responsibility is assumed among parents, which heavily depend on the way gender roles are perceived. There is little significance as to which maternity interventions are imposed under such circumstances. If women continue to assume the role of the primary caregiver, and parenting is considered something inherently feminine, the maternity policy interventions will not yield the intended results, regardless of whether maternity leaves are awarded for 6 months, or a year. The findings enhance understanding of maternity and family policies and open avenues for future research in related areas, to safeguard the rights of working mothers, with view to increase female participation in the labour force.

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