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No one is irreplaceable. Especially women after maternity leave

Every child reduces a mother's work hours. Genuine change may only come from those who have been absent from the equation so far: fathers

Roni Bar

"No one is irreplaceable," goes the old saying, which for women in their child-bearing years is translated from a philosophical exercise into a concrete reality. In the version updated for the workplace, it goes something like: "No one is irreplaceable, especially women after maternity leave. See, we replaced you and we're doing just fine."

This saying plays over and over in my head as I walk through the doors of Haaretz, my workplace that has been like my second home for many years. I haven't been summoned to a hearing ahead of being dismissed, though an intense feeling of vulnerability washes over me when I return from a second maternity leave to the hallways I know so well.

Many women are familiar with this thought: If they got along fine without me in the months I was gone, why would they want to pay me now? One out of every six calls by a woman to the Israel Women's Network's free legal aid hotline has to do with coming back from maternity leave. According to attorney Amit Kobo-Rom, the hotline's director, that's a lot considering that the legal aid on offer relates to every aspect of life for women in the workplace, from gender discrimination to pay equality to sexual harassment.

Because of the anxiety associated with maternity leave and the fear it will impact their standing at work, their work conditions and even their earning ability in the long term, many of the women who call the hotline want to find out their rights should they quit to stay home with their child.



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"It's a situation that no one wants," says Kobo-Rom. "Not the women, not the employers, not the state. No one wants mothers who are about to return to work to feel that they are standing on such shaky ground."

What is behind this paralyzing insecurity? Human nature, more or less. Take any employee - no matter how essential and important he seems right now - out of the system for a period of months, and you'll be amazed: The sun still rises, newspapers still get published, coffee still gets poured and sipped and the watercooler talk goes right on without him.

The world, especially the business world, will absorb the blow, divide the absent worker's duties among other employees or hire a replacement. Hey, it could be just the opportunity for a reorganization. This scenario could

apply to anyone, male or female, but it is only women who have to actually contend with it again and again. Men maintain employment continuity and seem to become an integral part of the office, the carpeting and the walls.

Israeli paradox: Most children, most work hours

On the one hand, Israel ranks at the top for fertility in the West and among countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. An Israeli woman even has more children (3.1 on average) than a woman in Saudi Arabia (2.4) or India (2.3). On the other hand, Israel is also a leader in the rate of women in the work force - perhaps because of the high cost of living and the need to have a double income to support a family.

Working women and the long work hours that put Israel sixth from the bottom on the OECD index of work-life balance - close to countries like Japan and Chile - is such a common phenomenon here that it's not unusual to see headlines like "Israeli women work the most in the world." In other words, society is hinting to us that we shouldn't be satisfied with anything less than all of it: career and family, both in full measure.

One might have presumed, therefore, that the local labor market would have already adapted to this: pregnancy, birth, maternity leave, return to professional activity. You'd expect it to be able to encompass these brief, foreseeable periods in the lives of Israeli women without impacting their ability to keep a job or earn equitable pay. But ap-



No one is irreplaceable, especially new moms

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parently Israeli society isn't quite ready for that. A 2015 Haaretz survey found that 47 percent of Israelis think the mother should work part-time. Thirty-seven percent responded that they should work full-time and 9 percent said they should stay at home. Surprisingly, when the first figure was broken down by gender, it turned out that more women than men felt this way.

This also corresponds with June 2019 figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics, based on a survey of more than 3 million people: One out of every four (!) mothers responded that she stopped working after her children were born. It virtually didn't matter if the woman was Arab (25 percent) or Jewish (23 percent).

Women who left the workforce weren't the only ones who felt the direct impact of parenthood on their employment: 19 percent of mothers cut back on their hours after having children, 3 percent took unpaid vacation, 3 percent moved to another workplace, 2 percent changed professions or positions, and 3 percent made some other change in their employment. Add it all up and you'll find that parenthood impacted the employment of a majority (54 percent) of Israeli women. In comparison, only 18 percent of men made a change in their employment after becoming fathers.

Hadas Fuchs, a researcher with the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, takes issue with the statistics bureau figures, which include women of all ages, including those who are not new mothers. The situation is actually less severe, says Fuchs, citing a 2014 National Insurance In-

stitute study that found that 92 percent of women return to work within a year after giving birth.

We get caught in a vicious circle. Generally speaking, an Israeli woman devotes her fourth decade (age 30-40) to having a family. In the decade before that, this often isn't possible – for circumstantial or economic reasons – and is also not culturally acceptable in certain parts of society. In the decade after that, having children becomes harder and sometimes impossible (blame evolution). But this fourth decade, when a woman's career is often interrupted and disrupted, is also when the biggest leaps in salary are usually made.

"Even if the woman is at home for just half a year after each child, that's a year-and-a-half absence from work compared to men," says Fuchs. "And even afterward, to get promoted you

need to work 10-12 hours a day, and for a woman with young children, that is often just not possible."

A 2019 Taub Center study of the labor market found that Israeli women go back to work even after the birth of their third child, but that each offspring leads to a reduction in their work hours. The vicious circle does its magic once again: Logic dictates that if someone must take a step back in their career for the sake of caring for a child, it should probably be the parent who earns less. But as long as we keep going on maternity leave, we won't be able to close the wage gap.

Maybe children aren't the real obstacle to mothers' careers, but rather marriage and the social norms on which it is based. Genuine change, say some of the women who tackle these issues, may only come from those who have been absent from

the equation so far: fathers. If they were entitled to real and extended parental leave, paid for by the state, and if they would actually take it when their spouses finished their maternity leave, and if they were more involved in raising the kids – not just on weekends – things could balance out.

Things can be different. Just think about how divorced fathers are suddenly able to leave the office to pick up the kids from school half of the week.

But is it smart to leave the key to employment equality solely in the hands of the other gender? Another solution is to take the reins ourselves: to advance to leading positions and introduce workplace environments that are friendlier to parents of young children – fathers and mothers alike. These parents won't be the only ones who benefit. All workers will enjoy a better work-life balance. More flexible hours, working remotely and the chance to be away from email for a few hours are some of the effective tools that can be used to achieve this goal. We can do all that and more – as long as we survive the next personnel hearing.

Fuchs is ready to dash any expectations of gender equality in 2020: "Maybe we're seeing things too optimistically," she says. "Apparently most men still don't do a significant share of the child-rearing, and when that's the case, the woman is less available for work because she has no choice."

What does all this say about the goal of equal pay? "Unfortunately," says Fuchs, "I don't see how we can achieve equal pay when work hours in the Israeli market are so long."

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A woman pushing a stroller in London.

Dylan Martinez/Reuters