

Pregnancy discrimination persists in the workplace, Edmonton researcher says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As a judicial intern at India's High Court, Shivani Kapur once watched in horror as her colleagues tried to steal the job of a young stenographer who had just announced she was pregnant.

"People seemed to think she should be at home because she was pregnant," Kapur told the CBC's Radio Active. "They were very antagonistic."

Now a masters student at the University of Alberta, Kapur is turning her outrage into research — exploring discrimination against pregnant women in the Canadian workforce.

During her study, Kapur said she found that although overt pregnancy discrimination is rare in Canada, stigmas and systematic barriers still exist.

'It's the glass ceiling'

An employer may choose to overlook a female candidate in favour someone who isn't interested in raising a family. Women with children may struggle to advance in their organizations. And for those who face more overt forms of discrimination, there is little recourse, Kapur said.

These policies and attitudes give professional women like her pause when planning families, Kapur said.

"It's the glass ceiling," Kapur said. "Men never face the choice to delay their careers to have children ... the workplace culture is hostile to women who even plan on having children."

'Gender equality begins at home'

For example, Kapur noted that parental leave in Canada is still being recognized as extended maternity leave, which reinforces the stereotype that women should be the primary caregivers.

She also pointed to labour force participation rates in Canada, which tend to be lower for women with young children. That suggests child-care responsibilities still largely fall on women.

"For me, gender equality begins at home," she said. "When you're more equal at home, you're more equal in the workplace."

"The current policies are reinforcing that men are the ideal workers. Jobs are set up for the male norm, and anyone who can fulfil that norm must choose between her family and her career."

The situation is even more troublesome for those who face more overt forms of discrimination on the job, Kapur said.

The only reliable mechanism to seek redress is by filing a complaint with the Human Rights Tribunal, an ineffective process that places further financial and emotional strain on working mothers, Kapur said.

She hopes her research will inform more equitable employment policies and inspire reform at the federal level.

"Discrimination on the basis of pregnancy is an evil which has spread its tentacles almost everywhere" Kapur wrote in her study. "It compels the women to choose between their bliss of being a mother and their desire to pursue their career."

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Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: women ^[4]

mothers ^[5]

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