

# After maternity leave: Can Africa's female professionals really have it all? <sup>[1]</sup>

Can we really have it all? That question flooded my thoughts over several days as I prepared to return to full-time work in June 2019, four months after giving birth and six months after taking maternity leave.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Too often, the debate about women in the workplace has focused almost exclusively on gender diversity as an end in itself, and not enough on the quality of women's experience in the workplace.

You would be hard pressed to find a global industry today, at least in the formal sector, that is immune from the "pyramid effect" of the corporate ladder – that is, on average, the proportion of women in the corporate workforce shrinks as you begin move up the management ladder. In the global energy industry for instance, this drops from 25% to 17% according to a 2017 survey by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

**Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest female labour participation rate** anywhere in the world: 74% of women are at work in Africa compared to 61% of men. At first glance this would suggest that many African women choose to stay in work or return to work. However, this is by no means a valid measure of how well companies have tried to retain the best female talent through all seasons of their careers, since the bulk of female employment in SSA is actually in the informal sector.

- There, concepts such as maternity leave are alien, and their enforcement virtually non-existent.
- For those in formal employment, cultural norms and expectations in some African societies (despite progressive efforts to create a more level playing field) still weigh heavily. In reality, childcare is still very much a woman's domain in Africa.

**Taking maternity leave is essentially taking a career break**, however long or short. Like millions of other career women across Africa, and globally, I was faced with a decision on whether to return to full-time work, change roles or career direction, opt for entrepreneurship or leave work altogether.

If women decide to return to full-time or even part-time work, there may be fears over job security, a lull or halt in career advancement, missed promotions, missed training opportunities and imposter syndrome, i.e. feelings of insecurity or self-doubt around one's abilities, despite evidence to the contrary.

Although Africa is second only to Europe in the percentage of women in senior management positions, no African country featured in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) 2018 list of the top 10 countries with the best maternity- or parental-leave policies. And I'm a firm believer that the strength and quality of a company's maternity-leave policy provides a useful indicator of female employees' experience at work, post-maternity leave.

**Practices such as flexi-working, teleworking and working from home**, while still relatively new in some parts of Africa, are being introduced across corporations in Africa as firms wake up to emerging employment trends globally.

- A recent survey carried out in South Africa showed that working remotely could boost the South African economy by \$1.2bn, especially given the amount of commuting time it potentially saves.
- In addition to flexi-working, on-site crèches and facilities earmarked for nursing or milk pumping can be crucial indicators of just how seriously employers want women to succeed both as executives and as mothers.

However, these overtures to new mothers can seem like mere box-ticking exercises if returning mums don't have supportive and proactive corporate cultures. There is clearly a need for employer support to go beyond maternity leave and policy, especially since the notorious mid-career drift is more likely to happen after a woman has just had a baby.

**Return-to-workplace policies are crucial** in helping women achieve something close to a balance between work life and family life. Targeted mentoring and re-orientation for returnees is key to helping women regain momentum and catch up on critical developments and changes in the organisation structure during their absences. In certain instances the absence of such deliberate support can influence retention and, often, advancement to senior and executive management roles.

- There is a strong correlation between productivity at work and employee fulfilment. Without suggesting special treatment for returning mothers, there is a risk that a support vacuum could result in the loss of talent, which would cost companies considerable time and resources to replace.
- Research done by consultancy KPMG in 2017 showed that globally companies spent \$47bn hiring and training replacements for women who exit work after childbirth. Corporate culture in relation to maternity leave, and its aftermath, ultimately impacts diversity.

**Some African governments, and the private sector**, are finally waking up to the reality of women's experience in the workplace. Measures such as paternity leave are gradually being rolled out to help families balance commitments. In a large part, these improvements are being driven by forward-thinking private sector organisations, since trying to influence change through national policy is beset by obstacles.

- Nigeria's parliament rejected an optional paternity-leave national bill in May 2018 on the grounds that local culture was not ready for such change. In the same year, however, the government did increase maternity-leave entitlements on full pay from three to four months.

**Women need to overcome their fears** about their perceived competence, drive and energy levels after a period of absence from work. I, for instance, eventually lost count of the number of times many of my colleagues assumed I wouldn't return to work after having a baby, so it's clear that firms must recognise the impact childbirth can have on a woman's career outlook and promote a change in the workplace culture.

- During her maternity leave, and especially after a baby arrives, a woman may have spent a considerable amount of time re-evaluating her career choices and options. There are numerous ways in which corporate culture, HR policy and team support can help Africa's female executives maintain career momentum after childbirth.
- The importance of visible representation also cannot be overemphasised: women are generally inspired by other women pursuing high-ranking careers, and the more female decision makers there are in African corporations formulating policy in this area, the easier it should be to make lasting change.

**Bottom line:** Much will depend on the specific industry and type of role. Technology could be a game changer, enabling women to carry out more roles remotely, but only if corporate culture embraces the value this can bring.

**Related link:**

**Region:** Africa <sup>[3]</sup>

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