

Family-friendly policies at workplace increase productivity^[1]

Benefits of breastfeeding to both a mother and her child cannot be underscored.

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Source: The Star, Kenya

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Aug 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

In May 2017, Larissa Waters, an Australian MP, made headlines across the world when she breastfed her two-month-old daughter in Parliament.

She also became the first MP to benefit from the new “family-friendly” rules effected in 2016 for Australian parliamentarians, which specifically allow MPs who are breastfeeding to bring their children into parliament chambers.

This was in stark contrast to an incident that had happened more than a decade earlier, where a female MP was ejected from the same parliament for breastfeeding her daughter in the chambers.

A lot has changed with regards to the wellbeing of women at the workplace; however, gender inequality is still a persisting global problem. Workplace issues such as gender pay gap, sexual harassment, discrimination during hiring and promotions, just to name a few, are still rampant all over the world.

A study conducted by McKinsey and Lean In in 2018 revealed that although companies report that they are committed to gender diversity at work, that commitment has not translated into any meaningful progress.

According to the World Bank, the competing demands of the workplace and raising children place a “penalty” on almost all female workers. These competing needs lead women to make trade-offs, especially during a child’s infancy, which is when they require intense supervision.

Evidently, there is a dire need for both governmental and private institutions to adopt and implement family-friendly policies that will allow for balancing women’s time between work and family, without having to choose one or the other.

This year, to mark World Breastfeeding Week, the World Health Organization joined with Unicef and its partners to promote the importance of family-friendly policies at the workplace to enable breastfeeding and help parents nurture and bond with their children in early life. World Breastfeeding Week is celebrated every year from August 1 to 7 to encourage breastfeeding and improve the health of babies.

The benefits of breastfeeding to both a mother and her child cannot be underscored. An increase in breastfeeding to near-universal levels could save more than 800,000 lives every year, the majority being children under six months. This is key in reducing the infant mortality rate in order to achieve SDG goal 3; by 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100 000 live births. Additionally, breastfeeding helps in decreasing the risk of developing breast cancer, ovarian cancer, type 2 diabetes and heart disease for mothers.

One can now see why it is crucial that WHO promotes family-friendly policies, including enacting paid maternity leave for a minimum of 18 weeks, and paid paternity leave to encourage shared responsibility. It is also recommended that mothers have access to a parent-friendly workplace to protect and support their ability to continue breastfeeding upon return to work by having access to breastfeeding breaks; a safe, private, and hygienic space for expressing and storing breastmilk; and affordable childcare.

Indeed, creating a friendly workplace for women can deliver positive results by boosting productivity and helping employees nurture healthy families.

MAS, a Sri Lankan garment company, saw a dramatic decline in absenteeism and high retention of female employees just by providing high-quality childcare at their factory based in Jordan.

Other companies such as Diageo, for example, are leading the pack and are one of the 230 companies included in the 2019 Bloomberg Gender-Equality index, which distinguishes companies committed to transparency in gender reporting and advancing women’s equality.

Earlier this year, East African Breweries Limited announced a new policy that will see mothers and fathers enjoy prolonged periods of paid parental leave, with its female employees getting up to six months paid maternity leave. This is part of its campaign “to create a fully inclusive and diverse workforce”.

This policy, which offers a minimum of 26 weeks of fully paid maternity leave, goes over and above the fully paid three-month maternity leave mandated by Kenyan law. Additionally, lactating mothers now enjoy flexible hours and nursing rooms set up at work, both in the offices and at the factory. Not leaving fathers behind, EABL is also setting a global minimum standard of four weeks' paternity leave on full rate of pay in all markets.

This new policy is expected to give workers enough time to take care of their families as they continue to thrive at work and will give both mothers and fathers prolonged periods of paid parental leave, regardless of how long they have worked at the company.

When global businesses such as Diageo make bold moves on policies and the environment in which their employees work to ensure progress, it places us on the path towards achieving gender equality and empowerment. This ensures women's full and effective participation, as well as equal leadership opportunities.

Region: Africa ^[3]

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