

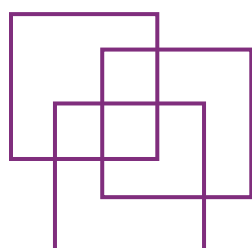


International
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Maternity protection in SMEs

An international review



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With contributions from

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Foreword

Maternity protection is an important dimension of work quality and gender equality. It is also necessary for sustaining social reproduction and economic production. The aims of maternity protection are to protect the health of mothers and their babies and minimize, and ultimately eradicate, the difficulties and disadvantages that working women face because of giving birth. The success of national and workplace strategies to promote gender equality at work are dependent on adequate and accessible maternity protection as well as family-friendly working conditions, benefits and services. Nevertheless, maternity protection can be perceived as a challenge by individual firms, especially small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Although rarely quantified, the cost of maternity protection in SMEs is widely perceived to be greater than the benefits and to lead to competitive disadvantage. The short and medium term benefits for firms are often expressed in terms of the retention of valued (women) workers and productivity. However, the longer term economic and social benefits of offering effective and accessible maternity protection to all women employees are often more difficult to demonstrate, or for SME employers to perceive, due to immediate resource issues, other economic challenges or cultural values and expectations.

Sensitive to the needs of workers and employers and convinced that by improving working conditions in SMEs, productivity and profitability can also be enhanced, the ILO commissioned this independent research as part of the ILO's work on "Productivity and Working Conditions in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)", which has been identified as an Area of Critical Importance (ACI) for the Organization. It builds on and extends the review of working conditions in SMEs by Croucher et al. (2013). Both reviews relate to the ILO's aim of promoting business-case as well as human-rights-based justifications for shifting perceptions of improved working conditions from business costs to business investments, with returns that can be measured in improved productivity and competitiveness.

The report reviews the key international literature on the outcomes of maternity protection in SMEs, addressing the questions of how, to what extent and under what conditions effective maternity protection in SMEs can lead to improved or at least sustained productivity. Although research regarding maternity protection in SMEs is very limited and mostly derived from developed countries, this review suggests that effective maternity protection may be feasible in SMEs and can have a range of positive productivity related outcomes for firms, as well as wider social benefits. But for these positive effects to arise and maternity, paternity and family responsibilities to become "a normal fact of business life", maternity protection and other work-family balance measures need to 'fit' into practices and interests of SMEs. A multi-pronged approach is proposed, involving strategies adopted at state, market, community and family levels to combat gender inequality and ultimately support SMEs and wider economies.

In particular, both national laws and workplace measures can contribute to ensuring that maternity protection translates into positive outcomes for firms. Effective regulation which protects maternity at minimal or no cost to employers, in combination with supports to enable SMEs to manage any disruptions or potential costs arising from maternity protection and family responsibilities, are key conditions for the achievement of positive links. The report also highlights that further study is needed to build evidence of the feasibility and benefits of effective maternity protection in SMEs, especially in developing and emerging economies where there is a dearth of attention to this issue.

We would like to thank the authors of the report, which was prepared by a multi-disciplinary team of academics from the University of Middlesex, United Kingdom, led by Professor Suzan Lewis. The report has been enriched by comments and contributions from ILO colleagues and an external peer reviewer as well as a range of national and international experts in enterprise development, working conditions, gender equality and work-family policies.

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This review was undertaken by a team of researchers at Middlesex University Business School in London, United Kingdom led by **Suzan Lewis** (S.Lewis@mdx.ac.uk), Professor of Organizational Psychology. Suzan's research focuses on gender and work-life balance issues in relation to workplace practice, culture and change in diverse national contexts. She has led many national and international research projects on these topics and has worked with employers and policy-makers on work-life issues in Europe, Asia and North America.

Bianca Stumbitz (b.stumbitz@mdx.ac.uk email) is a Research Associate in the Business School. Her research interests include small businesses, social entrepreneurship and equality issues in the labour market. She is also a co-author of the ILO publication *Can better working conditions improve the performance of SMEs? An international literature review* (Croucher et al., 2013).

Lilian Miles (l.miles@mdx.ac.uk) is a Senior Lecturer in the Leadership, Work and Organisation Department. Her research explores the impact of legal and political systems, culture and religion on corporate governance and employment relations policies and practices. She is currently looking at ways in which workers' capabilities in the Asian workplace may be expanded.

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