

Women-Sensitive Employment Benefits: Options and Implications for Employed Women's Labour Productivity

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Abstract: The empowerment of women is a crucial focus of gender policies in many countries. The issue has become a focal point because in their efforts towards being socially productive, women irrespective of social or economic background are confronted with constraints at different points by different natural and cultural conditions. By nature, an average woman will menstruate, perhaps get pregnant and even experience menopause at some point in her life. These conditions, coupled with housework, which in most cultures is exclusively allocated to women as their primary and traditional role, are not without physical and emotional health implications. This paper explores the constraints posed by these conditions to employed women in their performance and labour productivity. The paper further stresses the need for women-sensitive employment benefits and incentives such as domestic servants, specialist medical and counseling services, as well as holiday periods in organizations, highlighting how they can function to empower employed women to weather the constraints they face, and still optimize performance and productivity at work.

Keywords: Employed women, Labour productivity, Women-sensitive, Employment benefits

INTRODUCTION

Surveys among women in paid employment have revealed that most of them are associated with characteristic like geographical immobility and frequent interruptions in work [1], limitation in hours put into work, as well as when such hours can be [2], absenteeism and labour wastage cited in [3]), as well as lateness to work [3]. Studies further revealed that part of the reason for the existence of these trends among employed women is their primary/traditional role house work, which not only takes bulk of their time, but also put them under pressure and stress, [3]. In addition, at different times women are faced with diverse and adverse health conditions as a result of menstruation, pregnancy or even menopause (for the ones who are advanced in age). Given these conditions, maximum performance and increased output will remain an uphill task for employed women unless appropriate mechanisms are put in place to support them. This paper addresses the need for women to be provided with employment benefits that cater for the challenges they often face. If women are systematically and institutionally supported to cope with their diverse natural and cultural challenges, hopefully their productivity at work place will be optimal, the challenges they encounter notwithstanding.

EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS AND LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY

Employment benefit refers to additional reward provided by employers to employees as a result of their employment. It has also been described as any compensation cost borne by employers in addition to pay, given to individual employees [4]. Employment benefits also sometimes described as 'fringe benefits,' do not often come as direct financial compensation. They may come indirectly as 'non-pay' packages or 'benefits- in kind', although in some cases they are converted to financial forms. Examples are pension schemes, health insurance, medical services, subsidized food services, car loans/allowances, children education schemes etc. Labour productivity on the other hand refers to output per unit of labour input [5]. Labour productivity is related to the concept of efficiency, which is the amount of output produced relative to the amount of resources put into production. In the context of this paper, the concept is used to mean the level of efficiency of an employee as indicated by level of performance and output or result produced by each employee. Thus, it is used in this context alongside performance and output to simply mean the extent of an employee's efficiency or how much results an employee produces.

To improve and increase performance and indeed output/productivity among employees in an organization, a number of conditions need to be satisfied. From the perspective of the contingency approach to management and organization, a large

number of variables and situational factors influence labour productivity [6]. For instance, it would be necessary to boost the morale of employees. If prevailing conditions in an organization are such that they have positive influence on the morale of employees to a large extent, performance will be enhanced and labour productivity will be on the rise. Besides normal salaries/wages, employment benefits constitute a set of incentives that function to positively influence worker's productivity. Abraham Maslow and Fredrick Herzberg captured this in their theories of motivation. In his 'Hierarchy of Needs', Maslow outlined five levels of human needs [6]. They include: physiological needs such as food and clothing's; safety needs such as need for security and protection from pain; social needs such as friendship and sense of belonging; esteem need such as desire for recognition and attention from others and self-actualization need.

Drawing from Maslow's analysis, behaviour and consequently performance is thus a function of whether or not these needs are satisfied. That is to say, individuals will be motivated if their needs are satisfied and unmotivated if their needs are not met. This implies that meeting a particular need of an employee by way of employment benefits can motivate the employee. This will result in better performance and increased productivity. The items identified previously as constituting employee benefits form part of the different levels of need outlined by Maslow. Pension Scheme, which falls under safety need, is an example. The realization that an employer is providing such a benefit to safeguard welfare after retirement will certainly motivate an employee, and positively influence his performance and output. Similarly, in Herzberg's 'Motivation-Hygiene Theory', two sets of factors were identified as influencing motivation in employees [7]. One set of factors described by Herzberg as hygiene factors, are those which if absent in work context cause dissatisfaction among employees. They include issues that relate to job context and job environment such as company policy, and administration, supervision, salary interpersonal relations and working conditions. The other set of factors, identified by Herzberg as motivators or growth factors are related to job content of the work and include achievement, recognition, nature of work responsibility as well as growth and advancement. These factors observed Herzberg motivate workers to give their best.

A close examination of both the motivators and hygiene factors shows that a number of employment benefits fall under both categories and must be on ground both to create motivation, as well as remove dissatisfaction among workers, to ensure optimum performance and productivity. No worker can put in maximum performance, which in turn determines increase in output, when he or she is dissatisfied and or unmotivated. It is therefore evident from Maslow and

Herzberg's theories, that besides pay or salary, other factors which can be categorized as employment benefits and incentives, function to influence workers performance and output. Invariably, if these benefits are on ground, not only will there be minimal or no dissatisfaction, there will also be motivation, which will in turn tell positively on both performance and output of employees.

IMPETUS FOR WOMEN-SENSITIVE EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

Women-sensitive or women-friendly employment benefits are employment benefits and incentives that accommodate specific needs of women. They are work place fringe benefits that cater for needs of different categories of employed women. In every employment setting with female employees, they are usually of different categories. Some could be married and others single. Whether married or single, some may have completed child bearing while others are still into child bearing. Furthermore, regardless of marital status, some women in work place are in their pre-menopausal age while others are in post-menopausal years. Women-sensitive employment benefits are therefore employment benefits that are directed at addressing the specific or general needs of the different categories of women outlined.

By virtue of their physiological placement, women from the period of puberty are faced with conditions that are capable of jeopardizing their abilities, performance and output in any kind of work. These conditions are simply accompaniments of womanhood as such escaping them is more or less impossible. Women's monthly bleeding or menstruation is one of the conditions in question. Menstruation is usually accompanied by a number of symptoms most of which simply incapacitate women while they last. They include; constipation, tiredness, abdominal cramps lower back and waist pain, sore muscles as well as mild diarrhea [8]. Others are headaches, irritable feelings, feelings of frustration [9]. These symptoms vary with individual women. In some women they are mild, where as in some others, they are extremely severe. However, on a general note, women find menstruation not only inconveniencing but also a nuisance. Thus, in a study in Sydney, it was found that of the 1200 young women surveyed, over three-quarters of them indicated that if there were safe reversible methods, they would prefer not to menstruate [9].

The second set of conditions an average woman (employed or not) is likely to encounter are pregnancy and child birth. These conditions also destabilize women for a period of time. Like menstruation, pregnancy is characterized by symptoms which make it somewhat difficult for an average woman to perform and produce maximum results in whatever position she finds herself. Pregnancy is

associated with, tiredness, frequent urination and vomiting, heartburn, nausea, leg cramps, waist and back pain, swelling of feet as well as irritable feelings [8], [9]. After pregnancy is child birth, which is followed by the challenge of breastfeeding and nurturing the baby. The fact that the women at this point needs to give the baby plenty of attention puts the woman under serious pressures. It is even more demanding if the woman decides to engage in exclusive breastfeeding for six months, as prescribed by health experts. No woman laden with these conditions can perform as much as she could if she were 'free'.

The third must-face condition for an average woman employed or not is menopause. Though a natural phenomenon, like menstruation and pregnancy, menopause is usually accompanied with health challenges which can affect an employed woman's capabilities in her job. The most common symptom of menopause according to health professionals is hot flashes. According to [9] hot flashes are noticed in at least three-quarters of menopausal women and in half of them, they are severe enough to cause physical upset. Other health conditions associated with menopause depression, fatigue and other emotional problems [9].

Apart from these three natural conditions, there is also the cultural issue of housework. In most societies, women, especially the married ones are laden with the responsibilities associated with housework. In fact, whether married or single, it is women who are primarily responsible for taking care of other family members. Housework or housewife role covers all activities or chores women perform at home namely: cooking, washing, shopping cleaning, ironing, child care, as well as caring for the husbands [10]; and this role takes precedence over other roles as the traditional role of women [11]. It became the primary role of women owing to familial ideology which considered women's responsibility as being those of housewife and mother [12]. As such, the role is exclusively allocated to women [11], and through the instrumentality of gender role socialization the values associated with the role are continuously transmitted into women. As a consequence women not only render it priority attention, even when they get involved with other roles like those of paid employment, they do as migrants from the domestic domain, and still view housework as their real work [13]. Research has shown that women find housework dull and tedious. In the words of Jessie Bernard cited in [11], "it makes women sick, both emotionally and mentally". Furthermore, it is time-consuming, occupying women for an average of seventy-seven hours per week [10]. Until recently, the consensus value seemed to be for women to concentrate only on endangering domestic comfort and child care [12]. Today however, the fact of women extending their activities beyond housework to domains like paid employment has become inevitable not only for straight

economic reasons, but also for some social and psychological reasons.

Because of the several challenges women encounter in their health due to their monthly cycle, pregnancy and childbirth, menopause, as well as the demands of housework, there is no doubt that for the employed women, they will experience limitations at different points in their capabilities. For instance, [13] notes that because of the tedious time-consuming nature of housework, it will be an uphill-task for employed women, especially the married ones, to combine it with paid employment. Similarly, no individual can function effectively if confronted with pains, cramps, stomach and headaches, loss of appetite, tiredness, nausea, anxiety, depression, fever and other physical and emotional health conditions which women are often subjected to due to menstruation, pregnancy, menopause and even housework. When all these are put together, the overall effect will most likely be ineffectiveness and minimal labour output. This perhaps explains why advocates of Welfare Approach to women and development suggest that women are incapable of contributing to development, but are rather passive recipients of development benefits, due to their cultural and biological roles in mothering and child bearing. On the contrary however, the Human Resource Approach to women and development considers women as not only having reproductive roles, but also productive capabilities which can facilitate growth and development in different spheres of life [14]. In other words, despite the social, psychological and health limitations posed by menstruation, pregnancy/child birth, menopause and housework, to employed women (just like other women) which challenges the effective utilization of their full capabilities in the paid employment, among other spheres of life, women could still have their capabilities enhanced to make for better and more effective performance, and optimal labour productivity. In line with this, the Empowerment Model of women in development advocates that women be encouraged to exercise greater control over competencies endowment and interests [15]. Scholars of this model lay strong emphasis on the empowerment of women which means positioning them properly and enhancing their capabilities so as to give them room for effective functioning as workers in organization, among other responsibilities. These stressed [15] can be achieved by giving them access to all the resources needed to improve their capabilities. For employed women, this implies that if provided with resources that accommodate and cater for their needs in work place by way of women-directed/ women friendly or women-sensitive employment benefits, then maximum and effective performance and increase labour productivity could still be derived from them despite the challenges of their physiology and traditional role.

WOMEN-SENSITIVE EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS: OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYED WOMEN'S LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY

Women-sensitive employment benefits are crucial because they will function to provide part of what constitutes "the enabling environment" for the employed category of women. Enabling environment is defined as the overall framework and commitments made in recognition of the unequal opportunities for women and the need to achieve gender-equality and women empowerment [16]. This is part of the essential component of Gender Management System (G.M.S) developed by the Commonwealth Secretariat in response to the need to strengthen gender equality. Options, to be considered in providing employment benefits that would cater for the needs of employed women in the face of the domestic and physiological challenges already outlined can included but are not limited to the following:

First and foremost, domestic related benefits. These constitute very crucial employment benefits that employed women would need to effectively cope with the world of paid employment. Specifically, there is need to provide employed women especially the married ones, with domestic servants. It is not being suggested that organizations should directly hire domestic servants for married female employees. Rather, financial incentives can be provided with which they can hire domestic servants. Better still, employed women can hire domestic servants whose wages will be borne by their organizations. As already noted, women, irrespective of marital status, but more especially the married ones, are saddled with tasking responsibility of house works their traditional role. If such women are employed, it is estimated that they work for about 105 hours per week [17]. All women faced with this predicament definitely need help if they must both perform effectively and optimize output in their workplace. Studies have revealed that women who double as paid workers and housewives/mothers experience role overload, a term which as cited in [18] signifies difficulty in fulfilling multiple demands. Role overload stressed [18] results to fatigue, exhaustion, tiredness and higher levels of sickness among women. Similarly, stress theories assert that a combination of roles cause stress because obligations associated with multiple roles often conflict, and stress will result, manifesting in headaches, stomach upset, intense weariness and depression [18]. Considering the obvious implications performing housework alongside paid holds for the physical and emotional health of women, it becomes extremely necessary therefore that assistance be systematically provided for them by way of domestic servants. This is a sure way of minimizing stress and other health problems resulting from role overload, because of domestic servants will relieve them in the area of domestic chores at least. The effect of this is that

they will be more disposed to invest more energy, time and adequate concentration on their jobs. This will in turn tell positively on their performance and productivity. Unfortunately, it is observed that in most organizations, it is when employees have reached senior/managerial cadre that provisions are made for their domestic servants. The big question is; who needs a domestic servant more? The woman who has reached managerial/senior cadre and is likely no more involved in child bearing and perhaps has children grown enough to help out with house chores, or the woman who is young in the job and probably young in age with children who might still be very young and tender, and need care or might even still involved in child bearing? The time has come for this trend to be reversed, so that from the start of employment, every married woman is allowed to be entitled to at least one domestic servant as part of her employment benefit. This is not to say that older women who are still in employment should not be entitled to domestic help. They need domestic help as much as those who younger in age and employment. This is because for some of the women, their children may have grown and left home to live on their own, leaving them with nobody to help. All categories of employed married women therefore need domestic help.

Apart from domestic helps, crèche can also be provided as employment benefits for employed women particularly those still into child bearing and those with children who are below school age. Crèches will give these women plenty of space to concentrate at work. Any organization that will get the best out of such women will do well to provide crèche facilities as part of employee benefits of the organization. Organization must not necessarily set up crèches. They can contract existing ones to service the needs of their female employees. However, for any organization employing not less than 30 female workers, setting up and maintaining a crèche is absolutely necessary. Clearly, without such facilities, the tendency will be that female employees with pre-school age children or even infants will be confronted with loss of concentration at work, because of concern for the welfare of their children, which is part of their primary role. Sometimes, some (especially those who cannot afford domestic help are seen dragging their children around during work hours when they should be giving full attention to their jobs. Without doubt, the labour productivity of such women will be negatively affected. This therefore draws attention to the urgent need for domestic helps and also for crèches to be provided by organizations as part of fringe benefits for working women.

Leave/leisure periods constitute another employment benefit organizations should take seriously if the performance and productivity of female employees must be optimized. Labour laws support this benefits but unfortunately many organizations

compromise in this area even when employees make requests. So far only government and few private organizations have been complaint in allowing women observe leave periods. Some organizations still play down on even a serious leave period like maternity leave by allowing them just a few weeks of rest, after which they are expected to resume duties. Women need not just their maternity leave (for period of child delivery), but also annual, casual and sick leave, and organizations whether public or private must uncompromisingly see to this. These leave periods are particularly necessary because they give women room to get the needed rest considering the complicated health conditions they often face. These periods of leave also gives women room to tidy up accumulated and pressing domestic issues which if not taken care of can affect concentration at work. If the leave periods of employed women are compromised, like Herzberg pointed out, dissatisfaction can set in. If this collides with their health challenges, then the impact on performance and output will be negatively huge. Besides, all work and no play make Jack a dull boy. Observing leave/leisure periods will give women room to relax and resume work stronger. Thus, Parker in his study on leisure found that nearly three-quarters of his subjects saw their leisure time as refresher to enable you do more work[19].

Other employment benefits that could be provided to meet the needs of employed women in work place are essentially health-directed. The first of them is provision for specialist medical services and possibly health insurance scheme. It is not in contest that women face several health challenges at different points in their lives. These have already been outlined to include the hot flashes and emotional distress of menopause, the cramps and pains of menstruation, and the stress related illness associated with housework. It is not surprising that often they rely on pills to enable them cope with these conditions. Even more complicated are the challenges employed women face in pregnancy. Data from British Cohort studies reveal that working women had significantly higher stillbirths and neonatal death rates. Also data from Finland confirms that women in physically active jobs had higher rates of spontaneous abortion, while studies in USA reveal that working women had lower birth weights [20]. In view of all these, it is needful to support employed women maintain good health status so that their performance and output at work can be maximized. Certainly, it takes only a healthy employee to perform efficiently as well as increase productivity. No one can do much when his/her health state is not in good condition. Therefore, providing employed women with specialist medical services as part of employment benefits will make a world of different as far as achieving optimum productivity and output among employed women is concerned.

Providing female employees with counseling services as part of employment benefit will also have a positive impact on their productivity. Incidentally this area is largely ignored. Organizations are yet to realize the particular importance of counseling to employees generally and female employees in particular. Part of the condition identified as characterizing women at different times due to pregnancy, menstruation, menopause and house work are various emotional disorders. Organizations can provide their female employees with professional counseling services and by so doing safeguard their emotional health. Only a worker that is in a state of emotional balance can perform up to expectation or beyond at work. The condition under which women work in organization should also be taken into consideration when providing them with job benefits or incentives. Currently, the natural environment is getting warmer as a result of climate change. This affects women differently from men. When pregnancy has reached advanced stages, it is common to find that women complain of excessive heat, especially if the period does not fall under the wet season. This coupled with the increasingly warm environment will certainly be traumatic for not just pregnant women, but also women in their post-menopausal ages, who themselves are associated with hot flashes. If organizations with these categories of women provide such facilities as air conditioners and fans in their offices, they will go a long way in creating a working environment favourable enough for these categories of employees to optimize their performance and productivity.

Lastly, women need more than anything else understanding employers/superiors. Unfortunately, everyone else expects a woman to put her family before her job except her employer [18]. However, an understanding employer or boss will make a world of difference to the employed women. Only such individuals can show concern and even offer help when female employees are caught up with role over load due to housework or health problems like the ones outlined. An understanding employer/superior would also not hesitate to approve leave for female employees. If employers/superiors do not learn to show understanding towards female employees under the conditions described, they may run into crises and if it happens, there will be a setback in performance and productivity. To say the least, an accommodating attitude from an employer or superior could be reciprocated by a female employee by way of extra effort and time at work when necessary. This will definitely have a positive impact on productivity.

CONCLUSION

In recent times, there has been much emphasis on women empowerment. One may ask, empowering them for what? The answer is not farfetched. Empowerment will enhance women's capabilities,

thereby making them more effective and productive in the home, at work, in community as well as the larger society. Women-sensitive employment benefits will to a large extent serve as employment tools for employed women. When in place, they will enhance women's coping-abilities in the face of their physiological and housewife-role challenges, thereby giving room for them to still optimize performance and productivity at work. The time is ripe for a major paradigm shifts in the areas of employment/labour policies and sexual division of labour. Labour laws need to be adjusted to take into consideration specific challenges of women, like the ones discussed, so that demand will be placed on organization/employers. Lastly, division of labour between sexes at home needs to be reviewed. Much as women are now taking up paid employment, so that it is no more the sole responsibility of men to provide financial support for the family, there is need for housework to also be shared between the sexes. Cultural values regarding gender roles should be reshaped, so that both men and women are given similar socialization towards housework. By so doing men can learn to help out with house chores when necessary, so that women do not always get overloaded. In fact the time has come for organizations to also grant men paternity leave. At such periods they can lend a helping hand at home, thereby giving women room to put in more effort paid employment, or at least save them the stress that results from the demands of housework.

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