

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

The unintended consequences of maternity leaves: How agency interventions mitigate the negative effects of longer maternity leaves

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Recommended Citation

Hideg, Ivona; Krstic, Anja; Trau, Raymond N. C. Dr; and Zarina, Tanya (2018) "The unintended consequences of maternity leaves: How agency interventions mitigate the negative effects of longer maternity leaves," *Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgg/vol2/iss2/2>

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Abstract

To support women in the workplace, longer legislated maternity leaves have been encouraged in Scandinavian countries and recently in Canada. Yet, past research shows that longer maternity leaves (i.e., one year and longer) may unintentionally harm women's career progress. To address this issue, we first sought to identify the mechanism underlying negative effects of longer maternity leaves: others' undermined perceptions of women's agency. Second, we utilize this knowledge to test interventions that boost others' perceptions of women's agency and thus mitigate negative effects of longer maternity leaves. We test our hypotheses in three studies in the context of Canadian maternity leave policies. Specifically, in Study 1 we found that others' undermined perceptions of women's agency mediated the negative effects of a longer, i.e., one year (vs. shorter, i.e., one month) maternity leave on job commitment. In Study 2, we found that providing information about a woman's agency mitigates the unintended negative effects of a longer maternity leave on job commitment and hireability. In Study 3, we showed that the usage of an organizational program that enables women to stay in touch with the workplace while on maternity leave (compared to conditions in which no such program was offered; a program was offered but not used by the applicant; the program was offered, but there was no information about its usage by the applicant) enhances agency perceptions and perceptions of job commitment and hireability. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.