Standpoints of reentry: A qualitative analysis of female maternity leaves with corporate communication implications

by

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Abstract

Navigating motherhood is a complex and cumbersome task. Many women in contemporary society are electing to take on motherhood while maintaining full time employment, necessitating a maternity leave. Because the U.S. does not guarantee any paid leave, mothers are left to the mercy of their employers. The policies, attitudes, and approaches of these employers have a large influence on the wellbeing of not only the employee-mothers within the workplace, but outside of the workplace, and on the wellbeing of their children. This influence insinuates a large responsibility resting on the shoulders of employers to provide the best maternity leave experience as possible, not only for the benefit of the employer and the workplace, but also for the benefit of the families affected. For this reason, scholarly study is needed to analyze the needs of new mothers reentering the workplace in order to recommend corporate communication strategies that benefit all parties. The present study uses feminist standpoint theory to gather this data and make recommendations for this purpose.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Diversity and inclusion are currently hot button issues, appearing within multiple news cycles and featuring incidents of inequitable treatment towards marginalized groups (Hayes, 2021; Hopper, 2021; Norton, 2021). Partner these headlines with the recent spotlight on the overwhelming mental load of mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grose, 2021), and the emphasis placed on mental health during the 2021 Olympic Games (Streeter, 2021), and no issue seems more relevant than the treatment of new mothers reentering the workplace.

During a time of immense adjustment that can encompass both physical and mental transformation, mothers in the United States find themselves with minimal protections from the government to navigate diverse and complex workplace specific policies and social dynamics. Equitable procedures and communication practices that support the mental health of new parents while also furthering the mission of the workplace may seem to be utopian ideals, but by listening to a diverse group of voices, pragmatic and tactical solutions can be found that achieve both of these goals. Using feminist standpoint theory as a guiding principle, this study highlights the needs of a major portion of the American workforce and provides recommendations for corporate communication strategies to enhance the experiences of both leave takers and leave providers as new mothers reenter the workplace.

Women in the American Workplace

According to the United States Department of Labor, women have progressed from 28.6% of the American Workforce in 1948, to 46.8% in 2016 (Women in the Labor Force, n.d.). Fifty-five percent of women in the United States with children under 18 are full time employees, while just 50 years ago only 34% of these mothers worked full time (Horowitz, 2020). As women have assimilated into the workplace, gender neutrality has become the goal for equitable treatment.

Maternity, however, confronts this neutrality head on by bringing sexuality into the workplace and establishing gender as a palpable issue (Buzzanell & Liu, p.465, 2007).

Gender neutrality as equality is also confronted by the continuous unequal pay of women compared to men. A Pew Research Center study examining average pays for full- and part-time employees in 2020 showed that women earned only 84% of their male counterparts' paychecks (Barroso & Brown, 2021). Women are also statistically less likely to hold leadership positions, with only 7.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs being female as of 2020, a statistic that has risen from 0% since 1995 (Pew Research Center, 2021). These underlying issues of inequality can compound the effects of other workplace issues that affect women, broadening the scope of the mental load women are enduring while balancing both work and home. In order to have employees operating at their highest levels of potential, employers should consider these issues of inequality and how they can affect the job performance of their traditionally marginalized members.

When leaving the office or workplace for the day, many women find themselves engaged in unpaid labor, taking care of the home and children and navigating complex relationships, or what is referred to as domestic labor (Tingey et al, 1996). Domestic labor becomes a second role for the woman employee to embody and can include cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, coordination of schedules, and emotional labor, such as conflict management and relationship maintenance (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Tingey et al, 1996). Women oftentimes find themselves fully responsible for such tasks, even though their partners sometimes pitch in. If demands at work and at home are high, women are likely to have higher stress levels that can influence their outlook on the workplace (Tingey et al, 1996). Disproportionate responsibility in the home also is shown to negatively affect women's psychological and bodily health (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). In terms of maternity leave, adding an additional child and, therefore, additional

responsibilities, into the equation can lead to additional overwhelment and possible negative health effects when navigating roles. Time to adjust to these new responsibilities is critical.

American women spend 1.7 times more time doing unpaid care work than their male counterparts (International Labour Organization, 2018). More care work makes for a longer work day, causing women to be more time poor than men (International Labour Organization, 2018). Exorbitant levels of care work at difficult levels can also lower the quality of the care produced, causing a ripple effect of negative impacts for the care receivers and caregivers. Care work levels are especially impacted by the presence of children ages 0-5. In 2018, women with children ages 0-5 represented the lowest employment rates, creating a phenomenon termed a motherhood employment penalty (International Labour Organization, 2018). Because more unpaid care work is placed upon women's shoulders, they tend to be unable to put in long hours at the workplace, thereby reinforcing gender bias within employment (International Labour Organization, 2018). The International Labour Organization (2018) states:

> No substantive progress can be made in achieving gender equality in the labour force until inequalities in unpaid care work are tackled through the effective recognition, reduction, and redistribution of unpaid care work between women and men, as well as between families and the State (p. XXXV)

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory posits that the unique viewpoint of women is created by the time-honored tradition of women being treated as less than their male counterparts, establishing the norm as habitually male within a system that is consistently gendered (Kronsell, 2005). One can conclude that knowledge, therefore, is conditionally based upon "power relations," "the struggle of the deprived and less privileged," and the "experience of being oppressed" (Kronsell, 2005,

p.288). Power relations, consequently and routinely, are influenced by race and gender, thereby indicating the arrangement of an individual within the systems of employment and authority in the United States (Allen, 1996). The theory not only represents the lives of women, but also how women interpret and "represent" this knowledge and their experiences to the world (Wood, 1992, p.14). This specifically created knowledge surrounding women and their exposure to oppression can be used to "challenge dominant and repressive social practices" (Kronsell, 2005, p.288). Scholarship surrounding feminist standpoint theory attempts to have "historically marginalized voices" heard in various spheres such as the workplace, political spheres, and domestic spheres (Wood, 1992, p.17). This theory, of course, can apply to any demographic that identifies with the experience of being oppressed, but for the purposes of this analysis, I will be focusing on the experiences of women.

Jagger (2004) describes the dynamic on which feminist standpoint theory is based as one in which "the prevailing world-view will reflect the interests and values of the dominant class" (p.56). This world-view of the dominant class is not because the groups in question are "fundamentally different," but because the circumstances in which each has culturally been forced to exist within "routinely differ" from those surrounding others (Wood, 1992, p.14). Socialist feminists believe that creating a "more reliable world-view" will necessitate more than just scholarly debate, but will require the "overthrow of the prevailing system of social relations" (Jagger, 2004, p. 56).

An important power dynamic comes to the forefront within Feminist Standpoint Theory. That is that those in the position of less power and those being oppressed, must learn the points of view of their oppressors for their own survival, while the oppressor has little to no motivation to assess and understand the standpoint of those without power or the oppressed (McClish &

Bacon, 2002, p. 28). This structure of motivation to understand one another creates a perpetuating dynamic of the oppressed being continuously overlooked and discounted in society. This systematic disregard requires significant change in order for the attention of the oppressor to become focused on the plight of the oppressed.

Another intriguing point brought about by this theory, is that research and scholarship itself is "shaped by one's standpoint" indicating "both the questions asked and the range of potential answers generated" are directly influenced (McClish & Bacon, 2002, p.28). Feminist Standpoint Theory renews research processes "from the perspectives of those outside of the cultural center," disrupting the systematic dismissal of the opinions and viewpoints of the habitually oppressed (Wood, 1992, p.12). The use of the theory can generate knowledge that enables "oppressed groups to improve the conditions of their lives…" (Allen, 1996, p.259).

Feminist Standpoint Theory also can assist with further combating the idea of a uniform image of femininity, or the tendency of some to generalize the experiences of women into one large lump. As Julia Wood so eloquently states, "Championing any singular model of womanhood creates a mold into which not all women may comfortably fit. It is this restrictiveness that motivates efforts to deconstruct women into their particularities" (Wood, 1992, p.7-8). While working to further women's issues is certainly important work, acknowledging the diversity within the category of women is a necessary step in ensuring equity.

Feminist Standpoint Theory has an unlimited potential in positively impacting the workplace, not only for marginalized groups, but for the entirety of the working population. The theory, when applied to the workplace, encourages the practice of empathy, or placing oneself in the shoes of the less powerful individual within the system. By doing so, members in the upper tiers of the power structure can see with their own eyes the pitfalls of current systems and work

to make corrections. The theory discourages the use of sweeping generalities, instead emphasizing the unique nature of each participant within any system. While addressing issues applicable to generalized groups can sometimes be a step forward, the fact that not all members of a group experience the world in the same way should take precedence. All individuals that identify as women are not mothers, for instance, and all mothers are not of the same socioeconomic status or race. Individual intersectionality is key when creating a successful and supportive workplace culture.

For example, Buzzanell (2003) uses Feminist Standpoint Theory to analyze materinity leave for women with disabilities. She utilizes one woman's experiences to extrapolate implications upon policies, creating a precedent for this study to follow in exploring a specific phase of maternity leave, reentry. Buzzanell (2003) states, "Feminist standpoint research can contribute to complicated and richly nuanced understandings of maternity leave tensions through its emphasis on commonality while incorporating difference…" (p. 54). Individual and complex sensemaking processes and standpoint development belonging to diverse women can provide "points of departure for innovative communication theory and practice" (p. 61, Buzzanell, 2003). Buzzanell emphasizes the importance of listening to the voices of diverse women in order to bring to light the complex power relations that women navigate daily (Buzanell, 2003).

Maternity Leave Policies

Forty countries offer a minimum of two months of *paid* leave, with a year and a half being the most offered leave option (Livingston & Thomas, 2020). Finland offers parents approximately 14 months of paid leave (Finnish Government, 2021), Belgium 18 weeks, (European Commision, n.d.), Sweden 480 days (European Commision, n.d.), Iceland 12 months (The Directorate of Labor | Iceland, n.d.), Norway up to 59 weeks (European Commision, n.d.), and

Denmark 52 weeks (European Commision, n.d.), to name a few. Meanwhile, the United States does not sanction *paid* leave for parents at all.

According to the United States Department of Labor, The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 provides for up to 12 workweeks of *unpaid* leave within a 12-month period for *qualified* employees of *covered* employers. The act ensures that when the employee returns to work that they return to the same job or a job of an equivalent status or nature. It also ensures the continuation of group insurance coverage if the employee was enrolled before the time of leave (U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, 2012).

Covered employers are public or private secondary or elementary schools, public agencies, or private employers who for a minimum of 20 of the previous workweeks in the current or previous year have 50 or more employees (U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, 2012).

Eligible employees must work for a covered employer and have a previous work history of at least 12 months, consecutive or nonconsecutive, with that employer and a minimum of 1,250 working hours. The employee must also work at a business location where within a 75-mile radius there are 50 employees (U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, 2012).

The policy leaves room for and asserts the authority of existing policies within the place of employment in regard to leave, meaning that covered employers have the authority to go above and beyond the minimum that FMLA has created. Covered employers also have the right to deny leave when specific conditions are met. If an eligible employee receives a top 10% salary of employees within a 75-mile range, then that employee is considered key. If the covered employer would "suffer substantial and grievous economic injury" by reinstating the "key" employee, then the employer can provide notice, deny restoration, and "provide the employee a

reasonable opportunity to return to work" (U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, 2012, p. 2). In 2018, 44% of United States employees were ineligible for FMLA leave and more than half of United States employees had inaccurate understandings of which situations are actually covered under FMLA (Brown, et al., 2020).

Because of the complicated nature of the United States' leave policies that also allow room for the incorporation of employers' own policies, it can be inferred that some employees misunderstand the guidelines of their leaves.

Reentry

Women are feeling increased pressure to return to work more quickly after giving birth as compared to past years. In the 1960s only 21% of new mothers returned to work six months after giving birth. Between 2005 and 2007, that number reached 73% (Gao & Livingston, 2020). Some research indicates that women become so frustrated with their treatment during pregnancy that they do not return to work at all. Liu & Buzzanell (2004), through analysis of women's discourse, record as many as one third of their study participants leaving their workplaces after maternity leave and with one half of participants commenting that they were treated as incompetent after becoming pregnant. For those who do not have the socioeconomic luxury of discontinuing employment, navigating a negative workplace environment, as described above, can add to even more mounting social pressure that comes with new motherhood and navigating the roles of employee and mother (Degroot & Vik, 2021).

Health and Wellness Impacts

Clark et al (1997) find that shorter lengths of leave taken by new mothers leads to less positive interactions between mother and baby, and longer lengths of leave showing an increase in positive interactions. A 2015 study based in Europe shows that women who give birth while

employed and who have a more generous maternity leave exhibit lower scores on depressive symptom scales later in life (Avendano, et al, 2015).

Returning to work after the birth of a child has also been found to lessen the likelihood of sustained breastfeeding (Guendelman et al, 2009). Breastfeeding is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention as the main form of nutrition for infants with the ability to reduce the risk of multiple illnesses for both mother and baby (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Formula is no longer promoted within the U.S. as a first choice for infant nutrition and, as such, some mothers choose to pump breastmilk to continue to be able to feed their infant while away at work. The CDC recommends pumping breast milk as often as the infant consumes breastmilk, which on average is every 2 to 4 hours (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The CDC also stresses the importance of keeping breast pump parts clean and storing pumped milk appropriately (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The Fair Labor Standards Act, amended in 2010, requires that employers with 50 or more employees provide "reasonable break time for an employee to express breast milk for her nursing child for 1 year after the child's birth each time such employee has need to express the milk" along with "a place, other than a bathroom, that is shielded from view and free from intrusion from coworkers and the public, which may be used by an employee to express breast milk" (United States Department of Labor, 2018). Employers, however, are not required to compensate employees for break time spent pumping (United States Department of Labor, 2018).

With length of maternity leave proving to be of crucial importance to the wellbeing of both mother and infant, it follows that the return to and reincorporation into working life will prove to be just as critical. By employing feminist standpoint theory to analyze the experiences and sense making processes of women who have reentered the workplace after a maternity leave,

recommendations can be made to improve the corporate communication practices of employers, thereby impacting the lives of mother-employees, their children and their families.

Childcare

If the woman has returned to work, the question arises, who will care for her infant while she is away from the home? Enter the American childcare system. The average annual cost of having an infant in a daycare center in Alabama in 2019 was $7,280, or 9.1% of the median income (Childcare Aware, 2019). This cost rises as high as $16,452 annually, or 17.5% of the median income, in California in 2019 (Childcare Aware, 2019).

Historically, subsidized child care has only been available for families based on need, except for during World War II. Women were called into the workforce to take the place of men fighting overseas. The government revised the Lantham Act which created child care centers in every state but New Mexico (Cohen, 2015). An investment equivalent to a $1 billion dollars today was made between 1943 and 1946 into these centers. The cost to all mothers to send their children to these centers was subsidized, amounting to only the equivalent of $7 today, including the child's lunch and snack (Cohen, 2015). After the war ended, so did the childcare services. Rhaina Cohen, a producer and editor for NPR, eloquently states:

> ...the absence of policies such as universal childcare have constrained women's ability to hold down employment and have children, especially in a labor system that demands long working hours, dictates high childcare fees, and pays men and women unequally (Cohen, 2015, para. 18).

COVID-19

COVID-19 was first reported in the United States on January 14, 2020 (Wise, et al., 2020). All 50 states had a minimum of one person infected by March 17th. What began as a local epidemic

across the globe has become a global pandemic that continues to rage (Wise, et al., 2020). Along with sickness and death, the pandemic has caused job loss, childcare closures, school closures, and remote work. Women have been immensely impacted. Workplaces with high female employment rates, healthcare, retail, and restaurants, were hit hard and early with job loss (Cohen, 2020). State and local governments who employ high percentages of women were also hit with job cuts. With childcare centers and school closings, childcare falls to many mothers (Cohen, 2020). Childcare needs not only push women out of the workforce, but keep them out, impacting their future job possibilities and lifetime earnings (Cohen, 2020). Data taken between 2001 and 2015 shows that women who take one year off from work earn 39% less than women who worked a consistent period of fifteen years (Rose & Hartmann, 2018). If women take off four or more years, their loss jumps to 65%, whereas men face only 57% loss (Rose & Hartmann, 2018).

The strain on mothers due to the pandemic is even more clear when the number of women experiencing anxiety and depression is taken into account. Before the onset of the pandemic, 15% of 900 participants in a study self-identified as depressed and 29% identified with anxiety (Davenport, et al., 2020). During the pandemic those numbers rose to 40.7% identifying with depression and 72% with anxiety (Davenport, et al., 2020).

Organizational and Corporate Communication and Employees

Organizational communication is an expansive area of study that contains varying standpoints. Organizations can be seen as being created by communication and organizations can be seen to use communication to accomplish their common goals (Jones, et al., 2004). Organizational communication is not only studied by communication scholars, but also by those outside of the field in other social sciences, creating a large breadth of knowledge (Jones, et al., 2004).

Corporate communication can be described as the overall efforts of a corporation to communicate "effectively and profitably" (Goodman, 1994, p.1). Corporate communication can be used as a tool to "lead, motivate, persuade, and inform" both the public and employees (Goodman, 1994, p.1). It is a term that applies to both internal and external communication endeavors (Goodman, 1994). Communication goes beyond straight forward function and begins to shape the corporation's character and culture, reinforcing the principles and ethics that it creates and having influence over employee attitudes and public perception (Whitney, 1994). Because communication disseminates vital information within and outside of an organization, the method in which it is transmitted becomes paramount, "help[ing] or hinder[ing] company goals" (Whitney, 1994, p. 185).

Considerable organizational advantages come from the productive administration of communication (Tourish & Hargie, 2004). Dimensions of communication highly relate to job satisfaction and perceived organizational climate (Muchinsky, 1977). Formal Communication is also definitively connected to productivity levels (Litterst & Eyo, 1982). Kennan and Hazelton (2009) go as far as to say that those who are capable of managing internal public relations are more able to adapt and reach goals. A supportive work-family culture, as defined by Thompson, et al. (1999), is "related to higher levels of affective commitment, lower intention to leave the organization, and less work-to-family conflict" (p. 409).

The creation and implementation of organizational policies falls within these categories of organizational and corporate communication and play a large role in the experiences of women navigating working motherhood. The aim of the current study is to improve the communication surrounding these policies with possible implications for policy change.

Kirby and Krone (2002) remind us with their examination of discourse surrounding work-family policies that policies are not necessarily ironclad, with much left to individual interpretation, both by managers and individuals. Those wishing to take advantage of work-family policies may feel pressure from the organization or from peers to remain at work because of higher workloads caused by their absence, policies may not be fully understood, or managers may not seem supportive (Kirby and Krone, 2002). All of these issues compound upon policies that may be less than ideal when supporting mothers reentering the workplace. Creating a "supportive climate for work-family policies" is an important aspect of ensuring that vital information concerning work-family policies is communicated effectively (Kirby and Krone, 2002, p. 72). While Kiby and Krone (2002) utilize documents, focus groups, and interviews through the lens of Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory to examine the discourses surrounding leave policies, the present study wishes to examine the discourses surrounding reentry to the workplace after maternity leave with feminist standpoint theory through the employment of focus groups to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How do employers communicate with women about their reentry to the workplace from maternity leave?

Method

A qualitative approach was used to gather diverse standpoints of individuals identifying as women at least 19 years of age who have experienced a maternity leave from a working position and then reentered the workplace. Participants were placed into virtual focus groups held via Zoom due to the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, and led by the researcher with a flexible interview schedule (See Appendix A). Zoom added communication components that would normally not be present within an in-person focus group, allowing participants to add comments

with the chat function and react to what other participants were saying with meeting reaction emojis.

The use of focus groups, as defined by Morgan (1996), is a strategy used by researchers that "collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (p. 130). Focus groups are recommended when issues of "power differentials" come into play, because the groups allow the individuals normally dismissed to express their thoughts with "peers" creating a shared foundation from which to share personal opinions (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p. 11). A "cuing phenomenon" also occurs during focus groups, where the thoughts of one participant may prompt a response from another participant, allowing more information to be gathered (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p. 12). Focus groups also set the stage for active listening and respectful reception of opinions and ideas, creating a somewhat neutral ground that may not be conveyed by circulating surveys (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

My own personal standpoint and experiences were also ever-present during the focus groups and analysis of data. I am a mother of two, ages six and one, and have returned to the workplace after both births and maternity leaves. My experiences were similar to many of the women, and while I refrained from sharing in the focus groups as a participant, I did reveal that I was also a mother in an effort to make the participants feel at ease.

Protocol

Focus group sessions for this study were recorded with video and audio via Zoom. The researcher acted as the focus group moderator. Zoom recordings were later transcribed with the help of transcription software, otter.ai, so as to be analyzed for common themes and directions. Groups consisted of no more than seven participants due to their virtual nature, with three total groups and 19 total participants. Four to eight participants is normal procedure (Wilkinson,

2004). Pseudonyms were assigned in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant, while encouraging open dialogue without fear of repercussions. The three focus groups generated 78 pages of transcription along with nine pages of notes.

Participants were solicited through flyers distributed on Auburn University's campus and social media posts, creating a convenience sample somewhat specific to the Auburn, Alabama area. IRB approval and guidelines were implemented throughout the study, with participants being able pass on any question and leave the focus group at any time with no negative consequences. Focus groups were held on October 24th, October 30th, and November 4th.

Thematic analysis of the recorded focus groups occurred through the coding of the transcripts with an emphasis on the individual participants' lived experiences and standpoints (Charmaz, 2006). The collection of these viewpoints was used to create recommendations for future policies and communication strategies within corporate communication in regard to the transition of working mothers back into the workplace after a maternity leave.

Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a type of analysis that does not necessitate the use of theoretical or technical knowledge of approaches and is considered an approachable technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is able to "work[s] both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) Phases of thematic analysis include: (a) Familiarizing yourself with the data; (b) Generating initial codes; (c) Searching for themes; (d) Reviewing themes; (e) Defining and naming themes; and (f) Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A good thematic analysis is transcribed accurately in detail; gives data equal attention, codes thoroughly, inclusively, and comprehensively; contains coherent, consistent, and

distinctive themes; is transparent about assumptions; analyzes, not paraphrases, data; showcases consistency between the reported method and actual analysis; contains an analysis that matches the data in an organized narrative; and showcases an active researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One advantage of thematic analysis is that it "can be useful for producing qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development," one of the goals of the proposed research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97).

Results

Many unique standpoints were found within the data collected, representing a diverse group of women. While common themes did emerge, each woman brought her own singular voice to the discussion, bravely sharing very personal, and sometimes emotional details of her experiences within an environment that many times seemed to not be built for her. These unique maternal standpoints each held vital data to inform communication practices, and, collectively, hold the power to challenge negative systemic practices created by the dominant class.

Focus group participants voiced multiple concerns regarding the communication, or lack thereof, surrounding their reentry into the workplace from maternity leave. The women were in agreement that there is much room for improvement in these areas and most were eager to see changes implemented within the organizations that employ them. A sense of camaraderie emerged within each of the virtual focus groups, with the participants reiterating points made by others and adding their own perspectives to the collective narratives of the group. While some participants were more eager to return to the workforce than others, common themes emerged when it came to concerns and pain points within the transition back to the workforce.

The majority of participants were white, with all identifying as female. Participants ranged in age from approximately 31 to 41 and were mothers to 1 to 3 children. The women worked in varying industries with academia, K-12 education, the automotive industry, the medical industry, and retail being represented.

"Women get pregnant and have babies, so go ahead and address it"

When asked to describe the communication they received concerning maternity leave, many participants replied that they had not received any communication from their employers. The majority of participants described having to seek out information on their own, initiating phone calls and emails to clarify policies, procedures, and logistics. One participant commented that she felt that "there was zero communication (Laurel, 31)," while another said that "communication is not one of the good things about going out on maternity leave (Willow, 37)."

Leave systems and policies

Participants expressed frustration with navigating organizational policies and leave systems in conjunction with government policies such as FMLA. Many mothers were left to calculate their sick leave and vacation leave balances, estimate paid and unpaid leave times with little assistance, guidance, or communication from human resources departments. One woman attributed her successful maternity leave experience to "luckily" having a friend within the same organization:

> I asked them...So how long can I take as a maternity leave and what should I do and they told me only the part that they are taking care of. And I also asked the HR department because I wasn't sure if I need to do something else… I was just sending him, keep sending emails between them… It wasn't clear, actually for me ... But luckily, I had a

> postdoc friend, and she told me what to do in time, so she helped a lot to me. (Patricia, 34)

Because official avenues of communication in regard to maternity leave were unhelpful to Particia, she was forced to go by second-hand information from a friend. When asked how they could have been better supported by their employer, one woman answered:

> … just [be] more proactive, like, Okay, here's the form you need to fill out. Do you need any help doing this? Is there anything that we can provide when you do come back? … just be more proactive … rather than waiting for us to say, hey, I need this or where do I go for that kind of thing. (Katie, 37)

Other participants were concerned about the amount of flexibility managers were given in implementing policies within an organization, making communicating the actual policy and its unbiased application almost impossible. One participant described her experience with a manager:

> ...I had contacted and reached out to HR because my chair kept telling me things would be taken care of, but she really didn't give me an idea of how it would be taken care of. And I had asked for a plan. So, I reached out to HR, and she found out about it and was angry … HR told me that I had four weeks built up and when I told my chair that I had four weeks built up, she kept saying to me things like well, you know, that's the end of the semester and you need to really finish out the semester and laying a lot of guilt on me about coming back to finish out the semester… (Camilla, 39)

Overall, the participants within this study were dissatisfied with the communication of the leave systems and policies in place within their organizations. The select women that were satisfied described themselves as “lucky” and “grateful.” Along with communication about leave

policies and systems, women also showed concern and dissatisfaction with communication surrounding needed accommodations when returning to work, including those accommodations that would allow them to successfully continue breastfeeding their infants.

Breastfeeding and Pumping

The ability to pump and store breast milk was a main concern for the majority of participants that was left unaddressed by employer communication. Many of the women that participated in the study were forced to seek out information on available breastfeeding and pumping resources independently, with more than a few encountering resistance to the provision of legally mandatory resources, such as a private space other than a restroom, to pump breast milk. Several women noted milk supply as their number one worry when returning to work from maternity leave:

> ...my plan was to...feed her breast milk for a year. I would pump, and then I'll come home pump, also … breastfeed her. But it got so stressful, I was okay, I'm going to stop in three months. After I went back, I was planning to stop at six months. But I have to end up rearranging my pumping. Where like, let's just pump at lunchtime. I would have my lunch break; I would eat lunch while pumping. So, to juggle all that to figure out how it's going to work, and become less stressed. It was tough. It was really tough. (Patricia, 34)

Patricia planned to breastfeed for a year, but because of the obstacles she encountered attempting to pump at work, her goal for length of time breastfeeding continuously decreased from one year to three months.

One mom had her partner drive her baby almost an hour each way to her on her lunch break in order to breastfeed, while another had her child's caregiver text every time the baby was eating so that she could pump at the same time to maintain their schedule. The logistics and

planning involved with pumping were left to be navigated by the mothers in this study relatively independently, which many noted as especially stressful:

> And then making sure you pump, and making sure it stays cold enough that it doesn't go...bad. All those logistics. It was very overwhelming. And again, you're leaving the baby for the first time for eight hours. (Stella, 36)

With nearly no communicated information about breastfeeding and pumping policies and logistics from employers, employees becoming new mothers were left to piece together snippets of policies and procedures where and how they could, causing substantial stress. Some employers were even unaware of federal laws mandating that mothers be provided with a space to pump, causing the employee to have confrontational communication in order to gain access to a needed resource.

"... I guess you could call it support."

Participants, when asked about support, seemed to have a difficult time identifying what real support looked like within their places of work. Many participants listed things such as being able to leave work to attend doctor appointments, being provided with time and space to pump, and baby showers as support, even though those things seem to be somewhat basic or essential rights, as one participant stated, "... I kind of have come to … expect the bare minimum…"

Coworkers vs. Managers

Participants mentioned throughout the focus group that they felt supported by coworkers within their places of employment, but many noted that managers were less than understanding of their needs. Participants offered reasoning behind this feeling of non-support,

saying that their managers were male or did not have children. They added that female coworkers who were also moms were the most supportive in their return to work.

As one participant said:

> I have some great female coworkers who are very like-minded with me about family, and they all just really encouraged me to put family first. And that was the most helpful thing. (Savannah, 33)

Another participant described a situation before she left work for leave when her HR manager made her feel particularly unsupported:

> My HR manager when I was gathering all my things from my office, made a comment to me with my husband, who was also in my office and said, you know, oh, I wish I could just go out on vacation for eight weeks. (Lucy, 31)

Lucy's communication with her HR manager set the tone for a very low standard throughout her leave and very clearly brought to her attention the lack of understanding that was present when it came to maternity leave, the care of her infant, and her own recovery from birth.

Samantha noted that pumping was especially difficult for her male supervisors to understand and support.

> ...So that was really hard to shift from being comfortable at home pumping to now being in my office, shutting my door, doing things like that to where all of my supervisors and bosses are men and don't understand, like, what I'm going through in general, much less like what it's like to pump… (Samantha, 36)

The perceived lack of understanding from her male supervisors made Samantha feel awkward about pumping and taking care of her baby's and her own needs. Communication from

her supervisor indicating their support could have alleviated some, if not all, of Samantha's concerns.

Laurel noted that her male supervisor was ignorant to her situation, contacting her up until her the day before she delivered:

> ...the men that I work with and work under … were excited for me and … wanted me to take that leave, but then they also were, like, a little, I don't want to say naive, but maybe a little ignorant to like, what is really going on … the day before I'm scheduled to be induced, they're like, emailing me stuff to do or, you know, asking me questions...Hey, man, I'm, I'm packing my bags here...I've got other things going on… (Laurel, 31)

By engaging in communicative acts such as emailing on the day before a scheduled induction and calling maternity leave an 8-week vacation, individuals contributed to establishing a non-supportive working culture. While it can be argued that the phenomenon of support is not entirely communicatively established, it is at the least partially constructed in this manner. If support is not found within the workplace, it is reasonable to assume that women will search for support outside of the workplace.

When asked about advice for other mothers, many of the moms took to using phrases that appeared as positive negatives, giving a message of persevering through hard times, saying things like "nothing is permanent." "you're not going to have a perfect day… but you'll get through it … you'll look back and say, Wow, okay, that was bad. But we made it…," and "... four hours to lunch and then … from lunch to the end of the day, it was only four hours. So, it was easy to say, okay, I can do it. I can do four hours like I can make it … through the day."

These positive negatives were honestly hard to hear, giving voice and proof to the low, if not inexistent, level of support mothers in the United States are accustomed to experiencing. The

American belief that we should all just push through and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps became evident through these statements and emphasized the need for more support and care for the working mothers in the United States.

The Village

The expression "it takes a village" is a common phrase used in the United States to describe the task of raising a child and, as such, help from family was a common subject within the focus groups. Many moms described themselves as "lucky" to have their own mothers or sisters keeping their babies while they returned to work. Having this help from trusted family members was noted as relieving and giving peace of mind:

> My mom actually kept all three of mine for the first 18 months. So that also gave me a true peace of mind that my mom was with my babies. (Willow, 37)

Savannah commented that her mother keeping her child helped her feel more at ease about returning to work:

> I don't know if you ever are ready [to return to work], no matter how much time passes, but my mom was keeping my son, so that helped me a lot. (Savannah, 33)

Leslie echoed this sentiment:

> I came back, my daughter went to my mom and then both of my sisters would watch her for a day, so super grateful, it was easier for me to leave with family watching her for sure. Although still, in general, not easy to leave your baby. (Leslie, 31)

Even with family caring for their infants, both Savannah and Leslie commented on the difficulty of leaving their children to return to the workplace, further emphasizing the struggle that they both faced in their reentry.

For those without family close by or family not able to assist them, daycare was described as difficult and stressful to find, adding to the mental load of the mothers:

> So we found a daycare in town that would take her and we took her and it was terrifying (Missy, 35)

Some moms even feared for their children's lives, noting their child's safety while at daycare as their biggest concern returning to work.

> So, with my first, I remember my biggest fear being like SIDS, that they're going to be lost in the sea of kids at daycare, and they're going to not be lying on their back or in the swing or blanket and like, they're going to stop breathing … and I mean, he was in a perfectly safe place with perfectly capable people. But like, that was my biggest fear with the first one. (Katie, 37)

Fearing for your child's life while you are at work is certainly not a small fear, and, it can be assumed, would diminish the ability to focus while in the workplace. Communication and flexibility within the workplace could alleviate this fear and allow mothers to have more peace of mind while at work and away from their children.

Finding a daycare with an open place for the child was also mentioned as a difficulty:

> We had called and got on a ton of waiting lists for daycares, but when COVID hit it was kind of an awkward thing. A lot of babies weren't in daycare, but then a lot of teachers also weren't teaching so the numbers that they were taking were a lot lower. And so when I had to return in February, the reason my mom was actually going to be our caretaker was because we didn't have daycare until March. (Savannah, 33)

Parents with multiple children needing care in a daycare facility also commented on the lack of possibility to move their children if they became unhappy with their care.

> ... if I wanted to move my three children now, finding a daycare that could take all three of them is not possible. Fortunately, we're happy where we are, but you know, it just, it's not a good feeling to feel like you're limited in your choices of who's taking care of your children. (Nancy, 39)

The cost of daycare was also mentioned as a hardship.

> And so, daycare was costing more than what I was making full time (Lena, 33)

Some women felt they couldn't justify the cost of childcare in relation to their salaries and the treatment they were receiving in the workplace.

> Because at some point, I was like, this isn't worth it. You know, I wasn't getting paid enough to justify the cost of daycare, if I also was gonna have to fight for everything. (Nancy, 39)

The age of the baby when placed into daycare, along with difficulties finding care for babies with special medical needs were also topics that were mentioned by mothers when asked to describe their reentry into the workplace from maternity leave. Alleviating child care concerns for mothers within the workplace, as evidenced in the comments above, could make a large difference in the ability of the mothers to perform to their highest capabilities. Employers communicating information in regard to child care would have been a welcome resource for the mothers interviewed. Forms of support already being offered to some of the participants, however, appeared to be less effective in empowering the women to perform well.

Baby Showers and Doctors' Appointments

When asked about types of support, many of the women mentioned coworkers and managers throwing a baby shower for them or giving them a gift card, while other mothers felt they were given little to no support at all:

I mean the office threw me a baby shower, so I guess that was supportive. That was nice… (Lucy, 31)

Lucy had a difficult time being able to label any of her maternity leave experiences as supportive, and as a result, grasped at the one experience that seemed somewhat positive, a baby shower thrown for her at work.

The authenticity of the support offered was also questioned, with participants struggling to define what support actually meant in regard to the workplace and maternity.

I don't think there was an instance of true support…(Savannah, 33)

Experiences were also compared between maternity leaves for older and younger children belonging to the same mother.

… so my first time going back to work, I would say there was no support. (Leslie, 31)

Nancy agreed with Leslie.

… definitely did not feel super supported the first time (Nancy, 39)

Many participants were somewhat stumped by the question of support and ended up replying that they felt there was none.

Um, I really don't know what to say about support, like, I don't feel like I felt supported at all (Missy, 35)

A handful of the mothers did feel as if their places of employment were supportive, citing things like the ability to bring their children into work, flexible schedules, the ability to go to doctor appointments and baby well checks, places to pump, and baby showers as evidence of such support.

I'd say they were fairly supportive. I did have a baby shower for the first, that was really nice. And then also with the third, the third one was during COVID. So they they couldn't like do a shower. But they gave me a gift card, which is nice… (Katie, 37)

Willow went as far as to call her office very supportive.

So they let me flex my schedule with the first one. And then … with … the other two babies … they did provide me a private office that I could pump in. So I would say all in all, my office was very supportive. (Willow, 37)

Heather also described her workplace as very supportive, saying that support is one thing that they do very well.

… support wise I will say that is one thing that my employer does really well at, they were very supportive … for both of my maternity leaves up until I was out, threw a baby shower for both, was very supportive of me leaving for doctor's appointments and coming back like because doctor's appointments were always middle of the day like it was never got the first appointment or the last appointment of the day, I would leave and come back. Very supportive of that. And even after like returning now, still supportive of needing to leave for well-baby checkups or other appointments or stuff like that, just as long, I mean, it's kind of an understanding because I am salaried that as long as I get my 40 hours in the week that it's really kind of however I can do it. Like if I have to take something home and work on it, you know, after the girls go to bed like I can do that as long as I get my stuff done (Heather, 31)

While levels of support varied among the women who participated, the majority agreed that there was much left to be desired when offering support to working mothers, with baby showers alone not being enough to communicate a supportive workplace. This lack of needed

support became even more apparent to those that were pregnant, on leave, or returning to the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"... thank goodness for COVID"

The COVID-19 pandemic affected some, but not all, of the participants' return to the workplace. Those that it did affect commented on the many positives that came with the pandemic, while listing fewer negatives.

> This sounds terrible. But thank goodness for COVID. I got to work from home my last trimester and I was pregnant with twins. And I was high risk because I was 35 and a multiple pregnancy. And I also had supraventricular tachycardia where like my heart would beat really fast. (Katie, 37)

While gaining needed accommodations before COVID was difficult and time consuming for Katie, the accommodations that she needed became a given when the pandemic took hold, alleviating many points of stress for Katie and significantly improving her working conditions while pregnant.

Camilla said that spending her pregnancy in lockdown was a good thing, helping to prevent a miscarriage, a loss that she had experienced before that shaped her standpoint.

> … we actually found out we were pregnant on the day that the world shut down for COVID, so my whole pregnancy was spent in … lockdown, basically, which was good. I had had prior miscarriages, and I was already high risk because of my age, so I think that was a blessing … because I could stay home and I could, most of my pregnancy I was in the bed because I was just very sick, and I think that's what kept anything from happening… (Camilla, 39)

The choice between continuing to work with a possible miscarriage and losing your salary to have a live birth seems to be an impossible one, but with the onset of the pandemic, Camilla was able to continue working while keeping her baby safe in utero.

Katie attributed being able to pump to being at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

> I was really worried about would I be able to pump in that office environment. Again, being able to stay home part of the time, I was able to keep pumping. Once I did go back full time, I only pumped twice instead of three times and my supply started to drop at nine months. So we started supplementing with formula… but the office environment definitely changed my like ability to keep pumping. (Katie, 37)

With milk supply and pumping being one of the main concerns of the women participating, Katie's enhanced ability to pump while at home is a tremendous positive of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ability to work from home.

Other participants commented on the expanded mindset of employers when it comes to means of communication due to the pandemic:

> … there's been some pluses and some minuses. Like some people have mentioned, the fact that everybody is constantly calling out sick because of a possible exposure or whatever, made that a little bit easier. There's not the expectation that you'll be in the office… on the days that I'm not there, nobody's like, oh, you know, you weren't there on this day, or people give you an option about zooming in for meetings and whatnot, so that part has been good. (Nancy, 39)

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workplaces were forced to implement more flexible means of communication and management. These new procedures and policies inadvertently assisted many new and pregnant mothers and, for some, became a sort of saving

grace, giving them the flexibility in procedures and communication that they needed in order to better balance the responsibilities of motherhood with the requirements of the workplace.

Discussion

Employing Feminist Standpoint Theory, the gathered standpoints of the female participants through focus groups are used as data to create recommendations for changes to existing corporate communication practices. With emphasis on gathering the women's knowledge and own evolving experiences, the information synthesized, as Kronsell (2005, p. 288) states, "challenge[s] dominant and repressive social practices," and allows "historically marginalized voices" to be heard (Wood, 1992, p.17).

This study found that there is much room for improvement when it comes to the communication surrounding reentry from maternity leave. The data collected confirms that working mothers are operating within an environment that is not created for or by working mothers. Many of the concerns and points of stress brought up by the female participants could have easily been avoided or addressed through improved communication from employers, but, as one participant stated, "... supporting mothers in this country is pretty abysmal…" The voices of working mothers from their maternal standpoints need to be heard in order to create change.

Proactive Initiative

Many participants felt that they had to actively seek out information that should have been provided to them in order to comply with maternity leave procedures and regulations. Multiple emails, phone calls, and individual contacts were made in order for the mothers to take their leaves and reenter the workplace, and even then, they sometimes lacked critical information needed to continue performing their duties both as an employee and as a mother. While employers may not be able to inquire if an employee is expecting, once an employee has freely

disclosed that they are pregnant, this study shows that women would appreciate upfront, proactive communication from their employers. Employer initiated communication would reduce stress for the women and allow them to focus on bonding with their infants and adjusting to their new families.

Consistent and uniform communication from all levels within the organization of employment would also ease the stress felt by new mothers, allowing them to truly know what to expect when they return to the workplace and ensuring equity in their treatment. Consistent with the findings of Kirby and Krone (2002), flexibility within the interpretation of work-family policies became problematic for the mothers. Building trust between the employee and employer can be achieved through consistent communication, ensuring that the employee-employer relationship remains positive and establishing a constructive climate for work-family relations (Muchinsky, 1977).

For example, a large number of participants had concerns surrounding being able to pump breast milk to be able to continue to feed their infants when returning to work. If participants received any information about locations to pump, where to store their milk, or related information before they went on their maternity leaves, it was because they independently and actively sought out that information. Many of the participants noted that this caused them concern. Proactive communication on the part of the employer in regard to resources available to new mothers in order to be able to pump, like pumping rooms, available refrigeration, and pumping schedules, would relieve stress for new mothers and allow them to plan for their return to the workplace more successfully and with less apprehension, creating a positive work-family culture. A supportive work-family culture is a key component in the ability of employers to

retain employees and also has impacts on work-to-family conflict for employees (Thompson, et al., 1999).

Premade informational materials or in-person or online information sessions for women experiencing maternity leave could be extremely helpful and a powerful resource for new and expecting mothers. Working mother support groups or working mother mentors could also be advantageous communicative resources for both mothers and employers, helping to create two-way symmetrical communication between the parties.

Continuous training for human resources employees who act as the gatekeepers for maternity leave information would ensure that full understanding and knowledge of laws regulating the treatment of mothers within the workplace is achieved. This training is critical in order to adequately serve mothers in the workforce and should be treated with high priority. As the main source of information and communication for this large portion of the workforce, it is imperative that human resources liaisons are supplied with accurate and up to date information to distribute. Because maternity leave and breastfeeding policies and procedures can quickly become complicated and contain intricate processes, it may be advisable to employ a specialist to handle only maternity and mothers' issues. An expert to guide this portion of the workforce could help build trust and ensure smooth transitions for both the employee and employer.

Supportive Environments

While some participants stated that they had supportive work environments, many felt that they had unsupportive and even ignorant managers who had little to no motivation to understand the viewpoints of the mothers, a key element of Feminist Standpoint Theory (McClish & Bacon, 2002). Participants excused this behavior by blaming the cause on the gender of the manager or the manager not having children, meaning that the manager could not or would

not understand what they were going through. Communication and training could be used as a tool to inform and educate managers who are genuinely ignorant to the needs and concerns of new mothers entering the workplace. While having supportive coworkers is important, it can be argued that it is even more important to have supportive managers, as they typically hold more power within the workplace and are able to affect more change, improving or deteriorating the condition of the mothers' lives (Allen, 1996). Improving the lives of mothers within the workplace could, in turn, improve working conditions for others, allowing for more flexibility for those caring for a parent or sibling, or battling their own health issues by creating a precedent to refer to when making accommodations.

Participants made note of the stress that came along with leaving their infants while they went back into the workplace. Many were fortunate to have family step up to watch their children while they were away, easing their minds and alleviating their stress, while others described being nervous about daycare, being placed on long waiting lists, and being unable to switch daycares because of at-capacity centers. Communication could also be used in this situation to provide valuable resources to new mothers. A list of area daycares, references for independent nannies, a network of mothers with children in daycare willing to discuss their experiences are all communication resources that, if offered by employers, would be of huge value to mothers as evidenced by this study.

In listening to these mother's experiences, it becomes clear that a baby shower is not enough when it comes to supporting mothers reentering the workplace. While, as some participants described it, it is "nice" to provide a baby shower, mothers are in need of so much more when they return to work. As evidenced in these focus groups, women's main concerns are associated with pumping, flexibility, their child's wellbeing, and their ability to do their jobs. A

baby shower, of course, is “nice,” but without a supportive work culture and environment with proactive, accurate communication, a baby shower becomes beside the point, a hollow social ritual emphasizing the lack of understanding of what would actually decrease the stress and burden of working mothers – communication. Participants, overall, had come to expect very little from their employers and while some stated that they did feel supported in their workplaces, things like the ability to go to doctor’s appointments and baby well checks seem to be basic human rights, not actual support. A supported working mother who is provided with skillfully managed internal communication and a positive work-family culture, as evidenced in previous research, is more loyal, less likely to leave their employer, and has less work-family conflict (Thompson et al., 1999).

COVID Positives

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to shape and change the ways in which we operate and live our lives, both within the workplace and at home, with the lines between the two becoming blurrier. As evidenced within the data collected, many of the women interviewed saw the changes that came with COVID to have many positive benefits. Opposite from much of the literature collected, the standpoints collected within the current study found mothers that were unburdened of constraints and obstacles that come with an in-office setting. Some were able to work from home, relieving stress and making dealing with sickness easier. Some were able to breastfeed longer and create deeper bonds with their children because remote work suddenly became an option for them. Alternative means of communication, such as ZOOM, made having a large, pregnant belly less awkward, and made walking long distances or multiple flights of stairs with a pregnancy complication a non-issue. A global pandemic became many of these

women's life buoys, giving them resources that they wouldn't have normally had access to in order to successfully navigate pregnancy, maternity leave, and workplace reentry.

The pandemic has highlighted a need for flexibility within the workplace. Policies should be crafted with flexibility as a priority, allowing for a certain level of customization depending on an individual's specific needs instead of depending upon generalizations assuming that all employees prefer the same outcomes. Employers should be motivated to explore these intersectionalities and viewpoints because of the mutually beneficial working relationship created by the employer-employee contract. Implementing positive corporate communication that explores these issues and allows employees to voice their needs and opinions can create higher levels of commitment to an employer, lower intentions to leave, and lessen conflicts that arise between work and family, creating a win-win situation (Thompson et al., 1999).

Limitations

The data gathered from the presented focus groups is unable to be generalized to the entire population of working mothers within the United States, making recommendations from the data somewhat limited. Because of the nature of focus groups, only nine questions were able to be asked of participants, restricting the breadth and depth of the data able to be gathered. Participants were also recruited through local channels, limiting the diversity of the women taking part in the study.

Future Research

Future research is needed in order to further explore the maternity leave communication experiences of more women within the American workplace. While preliminary recommendations can be made based on this study, the sample represented should be expanded upon so as to be applicable to more areas of the United States. Further information could also be

gathered from perspectives of management and employers in order to understand the motivations and obstacles that are involved when communicating with expecting and new mothers within the workplace. As we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and as additional legislation is proposed and passed, this research will need to be expanded upon and continued in order to better serve this large part of the American workforce.

Adding an additional research method could also be productive, such as a survey, as it would allow more questions to be asked of more mothers, creating an additional, more diverse pool of data from which to pull information and create further recommendations for corporate communication strategies.

Conclusion

This study gathered diverse female standpoints centering on reentry into the workplace from maternity leave and, employing Feminist Standpoint Theory, created recommendations for communication practices that challenge and advance the cause for women operating within the confines of contemporary society. While basic in nature, the main recommendation produced from the data collected is that more proactive communication is needed across the board in order to better serve working mothers.

The women interviewed have navigated systems unfamiliar and unfriendly towards them. Corporate communication has, in essence, failed them. Because of the mothers' positions as non-members of the dominant class, the prevailing views of their workplaces do not reflect their interests or values (Jagger, 2004). If given proper communication channels and resources, this portion of the workforce could be capable of extraordinary achievements. Training for management and human resources liaisons in regard to the needs of new mothers so as to not be ignorant to their struggles would be a recommendation, and, while "nice," baby showers should

not be the only form of communicated support or resource offered. Working mother support groups and working mother mentors are also possible communicative resources that could be employed to increase perceived support within the workplace.

As one participant stated, “Women … are expected to have children like we don’t work and work like we don’t have kids.” Easing this burden for this traditionally marginalized group within the American workplace with proactive corporate communication should be a priority. The implementation of feminist standpoint theory is uniquely able to accomplish this task through the provision of diverse, courageous voices. By giving the dominant class an opportunity to listen, a rudimentary exercise, advanced and intricate change has the freedom to take place. Without the detail and emotion provided by the working mothers’ own standpoints, this research would not be as powerful or visceral, limiting its impact for future change. Each woman had her own standpoint and her own story, but, collectively, implications for future changes emerged. By making these changes resulting from the collective, each individual mother can be uplifted, her own personal burden decreased and her world made more her own.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. Ice Breaker Question: Tell me about when you returned to the workplace from maternity leave.
2. Describe the communication you received from your employer in preparation for taking leave and returning to work after leave. (Were leave policies explained / were the options and requirements for FMLA leave explained by your employer? Were expectations for leave and reentry made clear?)
3. Describe your organization's overall culture in regard to maternity leave.
4. What types of support were offered by your employer?
5. How did you feel about returning? Describe your return experience.
6. What was your biggest concern surrounding returning to work?
7. Did the COVID-19 pandemic influence your experiences in regard to returning to work from maternity leave? If yes, how so?
8. How could your employer have better supported your reentry into the workplace?
9. What advice would you give to someone returning to the workplace from maternity leave?