



Balancing Work and Childcare in Moscow

Background

The information presented below was published as a brochure in Moscow, Russia in 2008 under the editorship of O.B. Savinskaya. The research was conducted in August - October 2007 within the initiative "Returning to Work: Optimization of Combining Young Mothers' Work and Family Responsibilities", sponsored by the Moscow City Department of Family and Adolescence Policies. The project was also supported by the Moscow City Committee for Public Relations within the initiative "Development and Modernization of Family Policies in Moscow City Organizations". The project sought to identify the policy options needed to help working women balance responsibilities to work and child care. The researchers used the framework of economic self-sufficiency developed by Wider Opportunities for Women, USA, applying the concept of economic security, as opposed to deprivation, to families in Moscow City, Russia.

Social Benefits for Working Mothers in Russia

One of the most prevalent features of the Russian social system is that it is based on the remnants of the Soviet system with its generous benefits and federal universal provision of social institutions such as public schools and pre-school organizations. The latter have constituted the most necessary condition for women to return to work both during the Soviet period and in the present day.

In addition, Russian law requires that every mother receive 18 months of partially paid maternity leave, which can be extended up to 36 months (3 years) of unpaid leave with a guaranteed opportunity to resume working on the same job; moreover, these years count as work experience with regard to future Social Security benefits.

Barriers to Accessing Childbirth and Childcare Benefits

Unfortunately, some employers violate the Labor Codex of Russian Federation, taking advantage of low awareness of the labor rights and lack of motivation to seek legal actions among employees. Given these circumstances, career-building often depends on women's ability to make informal arrangements with their employers. When this is not possible, women are often reluctant to return to their previous job, and are forced to look for a new job - often with a lower salary.

Federal public pre-school organizations for children have traditionally played a major role in women's ability to return to work. Statistical data show that the most common time of returning to work for women is when their children are 2.5 to 3 years old, which is also the official minimum age when a child can start attending a public pre-school organization. Despite the constitutionally stated provision of universal eligibility, after the collapse of the Soviet Union only slightly more than a half of pre-school age children are able to attend pre-school organizations due to the space and personnel shortages. This forces women to consider alternatives, such as asking a child's grandparents to help with the care giving responsibilities, hiring a nanny, or even remaining out of the workforce entirely.

Family Type and Income Impact a Women's Ability to Return to Work

This situation is somewhat more favorable for middle-class and upper middle-class two-parent Moscow City families. In these families, women's decisions to return to work are usually based on the desire of self-realization rather than economic need. However, in lower middle-class and low-income families, especially in families headed by single mothers, economic insecurity and financial need are usually the main factors in women's decision to return to work.

Researchers found that majority of mothers planned to return to work and continue career-building. As Table 1 shows, the relationship between education and the choice of life strategy suggests Moscow women overwhelmingly choose to combine motherhood with career-building.



Table 1. Life strategy choice, % of participants

Level of Education	Concentration on family	Combination of work and motherhood	Concentration on career-building	Other	Total
Graduate degree	0	63.2	36.8	0	100.0
College degree	6.7	80.6	11.8	0.9	100.0
Some college	8.6	74.2	16.1	1.1	100.0
Certificate	14.6	77.5	7.2	0.8	100.0
High school diploma	16.1	77.7	1.8	4.5	100.0
Some high school	23.8	71.4	4.8	0	100.0
Total	10.4	78.4	10.0	1.2	100.0

Based on 29 detailed in-depth interviews with Moscow City women on maternity leave

Gender Stereotypes Are Strong in Russia

Interestingly, several interviews with men - husbands of surveyed women on maternity leave in the above-mentioned survey - revealed that men’s and women’s perceptions of childcare differ significantly. Particularly, men tend to underestimate everyday difficulties their spouses have to face routinely in the process of childcare, such as those produced by lack of stroller-accessible buildings and facilities in Moscow.

The study also revealed that gender stereotypes are strong in Moscow City families. Only two out of 29 surveyed women said they share childcare-related responsibilities with their husbands regardless of how each particular task is commonly perceived. The remaining women said they carry out childcare-related tasks with only partial help from their husbands or, in cases of single mothers, with no consistent assistance at all. Thus, returning to work places a double burden on women’s shoulders.

Policy Recommendations to Promote Work-Life Balance for Moscow’s Working Mothers

Currently, the extent to which Moscow mothers are able to balance work and family life largely depends on their employer. The most common practice is achieving an individualized balance between work and family as a result of employee-employer informal agreement. The need to provide employees with formalized family-work balance is not widely recognized. Social programs that would address the target audience of working mothers and make their successful return to work a priority seem to be the most promising approach. Social partnerships with commercial organizations are considered to be a promising federal initiative. For example, tax cuts and deductions for companies that encourage working parents (these companies can be identified in competitions such as *The Best Employer for Working Mothers*) can help meet this goal.

Specific policy goals may be articulated as follows:

- 1) Regulation of employees’ work schedule in order to allow for dealing with family matters (including childbirth);
- 2) System of benefits and deductions in order to provide parents with social protection;
- 3) Development of a system of services that would make it easier for parents to combine work with childcare.