



LEGISLATION COMMENTARY ON THE MATERNITY BENEFIT ACT, 1961

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ABSTRACT

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is a significant legislation in India that provides support to working women during their maternity leave. This act recognizes the importance of maternity and provides benefits such as maternity leave, nursing breaks, and other facilities to help women take care of their newborns. The Act has had a positive impact on the lives of working women and their families in India by promoting gender equality in the workplace, improving the health and well-being of mothers and children, and increasing workforce participation by women. However, there are limitations to the Act that need to be addressed to ensure that women's rights are protected. The Act has had a significant impact on the lives of working women and their families in India. It has promoted gender equality in the workplace by recognizing the importance of maternity and providing support to women during this crucial period. It has also improved the health and well-being of mothers and children by allowing women to take time off work to recover from childbirth and bond with their infants. In addition to these benefits, the Act has also contributed to the increased workforce participation by women in India. It has made it easier for women to participate in the workforce by providing them with the necessary support during their maternity leave. This has led to greater economic empowerment of women in India and has helped to reduce gender disparities in the workforce. Moreover, the Act has helped to increase awareness among women about their rights to maternity benefits. This has led to more women availing these benefits and has helped to ensure that women are not discriminated against in the workplace on the basis of their pregnancy or maternity

status. Despite its many benefits, the Act does have some limitations that need to be addressed. For example, the Act only covers women in the formal sector, leaving out a significant portion of the female workforce in India. Moreover, the benefits provided by the Act are limited and may not be enough to meet the needs of women and their families during their maternity leave.

KEYWORDS: Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, working women, maternity leave, gender equality, health, workforce participation.

I. Introduction

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is a landmark legislation enacted by the Indian government to provide benefits to working women during their maternity leave and to protect their employment during this period. The Act is an important piece of legislation that recognizes the significance of maternity and provides essential support to women during this crucial period.

The Act has been instrumental in promoting gender equality in the workplace and protecting the rights of working mothers. However, there are certain limitations to the Act that need to be addressed, and it is important to continue to strengthen and expand the provisions of the Act to ensure that it remains relevant and effective in protecting the rights of working mothers. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is an important piece of legislation in India that recognizes the significance of maternity and provides essential support to working women during their maternity leave. This act has had a significant impact on the lives of working women and their families, by promoting gender equality in the workplace, improving the health and well-being

of mothers and children, increasing workforce participation by women, and improving working conditions for women. However, there are certain limitations to the Act that need to be addressed to ensure that it remains relevant and effective in protecting the rights of working mothers. It is essential to continue to strengthen and expand the provisions of the Act to ensure that women are provided with the necessary support and protection during their maternity leave. This will not only benefit women but also contribute to the overall development and progress of the country. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, is a vital step towards ensuring that women are provided with equal opportunities in the workplace and that their maternity rights are protected.

- A. Nilkanth Mahadeo Badade vs. Jitendra Shankarlinge Gowda¹⁵³: In this case, the Karnataka High Court held that a woman who had adopted a child was entitled to maternity leave under the Maternity Benefit Act.
- B. Bombay High Court's suo motu action¹⁵⁴: The Bombay High Court took suo motu action to extend the benefit of paid maternity leave to women lawyers practicing in the High Court and subordinate courts, recognizing the importance of providing maternity benefits to women professionals in all sectors.

II. History of the Maternity Benefit Act:

The history of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 can be traced back to the early 20th century when women in India started organizing themselves to demand better rights and working conditions. One of the primary demands of women's organizations was the provision of maternity leave for working women.

- A. In response to these demands, the Indian government introduced the Maternity Benefit Act, 1939, which provided for a maximum of 12 weeks of maternity leave.

However, this act only applied to factories and mines with 10 or more employees, leaving out a significant portion of the female workforce in India. In 1948, (ILO)¹⁵⁵ passed a convention on maternity protection, which India ratified in 1954.

- B. This convention called for 14 weeks of maternity leave and other benefits for working women.
- C. In 1957, the Indian government appointed a committee to review the existing maternity benefits legislation and make recommendations for its improvement. The committee recommended an increase in the length of maternity leave to 16 weeks and the expansion of the act to cover all establishments with at least 10 employees.
- D. Based on these recommendations, the Maternity Benefit Bill was introduced in the Indian Parliament in 1958. After several debates and revisions, the Bill was finally passed in 1961, and the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 was enacted.
- E. the Act provided for 12 weeks of maternity leave for women working in factories, mines, and plantations, and 6 weeks for women working in any other establishment. The Act also provided for nursing breaks and other facilities to help women take care of their newborns.

Over the years, there have been several amendments to the Act to increase the length of maternity leave and expand the coverage of the Act to more establishments. The most recent amendment was in 2017, which increased the length of maternity leave to 26 weeks and made it mandatory for all establishments with 10 or more employees to provide maternity benefits to their employees.

III. Provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act:

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is a comprehensive legislation that provides for various benefits to working women during their

¹⁵³ (2016 (2) KarLJ 72)

¹⁵⁴ Bombay High Court's suo motu action (2020)

¹⁵⁵ International Labour Organization 1919

maternity leave. Here is an analysis of some of the key provisions of the Act:

- A. Maternity leave: The Act provides for 26 weeks of maternity leave for women working in establishments with 10 or more employees. This is a significant improvement from the earlier provision of 12 weeks of leave. The extended duration of leave allows women to take care of their newborns and recover from childbirth.
- B. Nursing breaks: The Act provides for nursing breaks for women who are nursing their infants. The break should be of reasonable duration and should not exceed one hour at a time. This provision allows women to breastfeed their babies and bond with them during work hours.
- C. Other benefits: The Act provides for additional benefits such as medical bonus, which is a lump sum amount given to women to cover their medical expenses related to pregnancy and childbirth. The Act also allows women to take leave for miscarriage or medical termination of pregnancy.
- D. Coverage: The Act applies to all establishments with 10 or more employees, including factories, mines, plantations, and shops or establishments engaged in any other form of commercial activity. This ensures that women working in various sectors are eligible for maternity benefits.
- E. Penalties: The Act provides for penalties for non-compliance by employers. Employers who fail to provide maternity benefits to their employees can be fined up to Rs. 5,000.
- F. Non-discrimination: The Act prohibits discrimination against women on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity. It also provides for the re-employment of women after maternity leave.

Overall, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is a progressive legislation that recognizes the importance of maternity and provides support

to working women during their maternity leave. The Act has had a positive impact on the lives of women and their families in India by promoting gender equality in the workplace and improving the health and well-being of mothers and children. However, there are limitations to the Act that need to be addressed, such as the fact that it only applies to establishments with 10 or more employees, leaving out a significant portion of the female workforce in India.

IV. Limitations of the Maternity Benefit Act:

While the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is an important piece of legislation that provides essential support to women during their maternity leave, there are certain limitations to the Act that need to be addressed. Some of the key limitations of the Act are as follows:

- A. Limited coverage: The Act only applies to establishments that employ 10 or more people, which means that women working in smaller establishments may not be covered.
- B. No paternity leave: The Act does not provide for paternity leave, which is an important issue that needs to be addressed in the context of gender equality in the workplace.
- C. Limited benefits: While the Act provides for maternity leave and other benefits, the amount of maternity benefit provided may not be sufficient for women who may require additional support during their maternity leave.
- D. Lack of awareness: There is a lack of awareness among women about their rights under the Maternity Benefit Act, which can result in women not availing the benefits they are entitled to.

V. Impact of the Maternity Benefit Act:

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 has had a significant impact on the lives of working women and their families in India. Some of the key impacts of the Act are as follows:

- A. Improved health and well-being of mothers and children: The Act provides for maternity leave and other benefits that allow women to take time off work to recover from childbirth and bond with their infants. This has contributed to the improved health and well-being of mothers and children in India.
- B. Promoting gender equality in the workplace: The Act recognizes the importance of maternity and provides essential support to women during this crucial period. It has played a significant role in promoting gender equality in the workplace and protecting the rights of working mothers.
- C. Increased workforce participation by women: The Act has made it easier for women to participate in the workforce by providing them with the necessary support during their maternity leave. This has contributed to the increased workforce participation by women in India.
- D. Increased awareness about maternity benefits: The Act has helped to increase awareness among women about their rights to maternity benefits, which has led to more women availing these benefits.
- E. Improved working conditions for women: The Act mandates the provision of nursing breaks and other facilities for nursing mothers at the workplace, which has led to improved working conditions for women in India.

VI.CONSTITUTIONALITY OF THE ACT:

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 has been challenged in various courts on the grounds of its constitutionality. However, the Act has been upheld by the courts as being constitutional and in line with the principles of gender equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Here is an analysis of the constitutional validity of the Act:

- A. Article 14:¹⁵⁶ The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 provides equal opportunities to women in the workplace by providing them with maternity leave and other benefits. This is in line with Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law to all citizens.
- B. Article 15: The Act also prohibits discrimination against women on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity, which is in line with Article 15 of the Indian Constitution that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.
- C. Article 21: The Act recognizes the importance of maternity and provides support to women during their maternity leave, which is in line with Article 21 of the Indian Constitution that guarantees the right to life and personal liberty.
- D. Directive Principles of State Policy: The Act is also in line with the Directive Principles of State Policy, which directs the state to promote the welfare of women and children and ensure that they are not subject to exploitation.

Here are some landmark cases related to the Maternity Benefit Act:

- i) Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs. Female Workers¹⁵⁷: In this case, the Supreme Court held that female workers are entitled to maternity benefits even if they were not in continuous service for a period of 80 days before the date of delivery.
- ii) Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. vs. Sukhbir Singh¹⁵⁸: In this case, the Supreme Court held that an employer cannot deny maternity benefits to a woman on the grounds that she was on probation at the time of delivery.
- iii) Mrs. X vs. State Bank of India¹⁵⁹: In this case, the Delhi High Court held that the

¹⁵⁶ Within Indian territory, the State cannot deny anybody equality before the law or equal protection under the law.

¹⁵⁷ Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs. Female Workers (AIR 2000 SC 1278)

¹⁵⁸ Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. vs. Sukhbir Singh(AIR 2008 SC 1681)

¹⁵⁹ Mrs. X vs. State Bank of India (2007 (110) FLR 657)

Maternity Benefit Act applies to female employees who have been appointed on a contract basis, and they are entitled to maternity benefits.

- iv) *The Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs. Female Workers*¹⁶⁰: In this case, the Delhi High Court held that the provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act are mandatory and cannot be waived by an employer.
- v) *Central Inland Water Transport Corporation vs. Brojo Nath Ganguly*¹⁶¹: In this case, the Supreme Court held that maternity benefits cannot be denied to female employees on the grounds that they were not permanent employees.
- vi) *Air India vs. Nargesh Meerza*¹⁶²: In this case, the Supreme Court held that female employees cannot be dismissed on the grounds of pregnancy and that such dismissal would be discriminatory and violative of their fundamental rights.
- vii) *Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs. Female Workers*¹⁶³: In this case, the Delhi High Court held that the provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act are mandatory and an employer cannot contractually waive the benefits provided under the Act.
- viii) *Hindustan Lever Ltd. vs. Ashok Vishnu Kate*¹⁶⁴: In this case, the Bombay High Court held that the provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act apply to women employees who work in an establishment that operates on a seasonal basis.
- ix) *Bombay High Court's suo motu action (2020)*: The Bombay High Court took suo motu action to extend the benefit of paid maternity leave to women lawyers practicing in the High Court and subordinate courts, recognizing the

importance of providing maternity benefits to women professionals in all sectors.

There have been proposals to amend the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 to address some of the limitations of the current legislation and further enhance the benefits provided to working women.

VII Here are some of the proposed amendments:

- A. Increase in maternity leave: There have been proposals to increase the duration of maternity leave from 26 weeks to 32 weeks. This would provide women with more time to take care of their newborns and recover from childbirth.
- B. Paternity leave: There have been proposals to introduce paternity leave for fathers to encourage them to take an active role in childcare and promote gender equality in parenting responsibilities.
- C. Extension of coverage: The Act currently applies to establishments with 10 or more employees. There have been proposals to extend the coverage of the Act to include smaller establishments, self-employed women, and women in the unorganized sector.
- D. Work from home options: There have been proposals to provide work from home options for women during their maternity leave to enable them to balance their work and childcare responsibilities.
- E. Childcare facilities: There have been proposals to mandate employers to provide childcare facilities in the workplace to enable women to bring their children to work and ensure that they are able to balance their work and childcare responsibilities.
- F. Increase in medical bonus: There have been proposals to increase the amount of medical bonus provided to women to

¹⁶⁰ *The Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs. Female Workers*(Reg: A.E. 1979, No. 2)

¹⁶¹ *Central Inland Water Transport Corporation vs. Brojo Nath Ganguly* (1986 AIR 1571)

¹⁶² *Air India vs. Nargesh Meerza*(AIR 1981 SC 1829)

¹⁶³ *Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs. Female Workers* (Reg: A.E. 1979, No. 2)

¹⁶⁴ *Hindustan Lever Ltd. vs. Ashok Vishnu Kate* (AIR 1995 Bom 83).

cover their medical expenses related to pregnancy and childbirth.

These proposed amendments are aimed at further enhancing the benefits provided to working women under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and promoting gender equality in the workplace.

However, the implementation of these amendments would require significant changes in the current legal and policy framework, as well as the willingness of employers to comply with these provisions.

VIII CRITICAL ANALYSIS:

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 has played a significant role in improving the working conditions of women in India and promoting gender equality in the workplace. However, there are some limitations to the Act that need to be addressed to further enhance the benefits provided to working women.

- A. One of the key limitations of the Act is its limited coverage, which applies only to establishments with 10 or more employees. This means that many women working in smaller establishments, self-employed women, and women in the unorganized sector are not covered by the Act and do not have access to maternity benefits. This limitation needs to be addressed by extending the coverage of the Act to include a wider range of women.
- B. Another limitation of the Act is the duration of maternity leave, which is currently 26 weeks. While this is a significant improvement from the earlier provision of 12 weeks, it may not be sufficient for women who require more time to recover from childbirth and take care of their newborns. Increasing the duration of maternity leave to 32 weeks, as proposed by some, would provide women with more time to take care of their newborns and recover from childbirth.

C. The Act also does not provide any paternity leave for fathers, which can reinforce traditional gender roles and put the burden of childcare solely on women. Introducing paternity leave for fathers would encourage them to take an active role in childcare and promote gender equality in parenting responsibilities.

Additionally, while the Act provides for medical benefits to cover the expenses related to pregnancy and childbirth, the amount of medical bonus provided is relatively small and may not be sufficient to cover all the expenses. Increasing the amount of medical bonus provided would provide women with more financial support during their maternity leave.

IX Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 has played a significant role in improving the working conditions of women in India and promoting gender equality in the workplace. The Act provides for maternity leave, medical benefits, and job security for women during their maternity period, which has helped to ensure that women are not discriminated against or disadvantaged in the workplace because of their gender. It is essential to recognize the importance of providing support to women during their maternity period, as this will have a positive impact on women's health, wellbeing, and ability to return to work. By addressing the limitations of the Act and promoting gender equality in the workplace, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society that values and supports women's participation in the workforce. The Act has had a significant impact on the lives of working women and their families in India, by promoting gender equality in the workplace, improving the health and well-being of mothers and children, increasing workforce participation by women, and improving working conditions for women.

However, there are certain limitations to the Act that need to be addressed to ensure that it remains relevant and effective in protecting the

rights of working mothers. It is important to continue to strengthen and expand the provisions of the Act to ensure that women are provided with the necessary support and protection during their maternity leave. This will not only benefit women but also contribute to the overall development and progress of the country. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is a constitutionally valid legislation that recognizes the importance of maternity and provides support to working women during their maternity leave. The Act is in line with the principles of gender equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution and promotes the welfare of women and children. However, there are limitations to the Act that need to be addressed to further enhance the benefits provided to working women. These limitations include the Act's limited coverage, duration of maternity leave, lack of paternity leave, and the small amount of medical bonus provided. The proposed amendments to the Act, such as increasing the duration of maternity leave, introducing paternity leave, extending coverage to smaller establishments, and increasing the medical bonus, would address these limitations and further enhance the benefits provided to working women.

X. SUGGESTIONS:

Here are some suggestions for improving the Maternity Benefit Act:

- A. Increase The Coverage Of The Act: The Act currently applies only to establishments with 10 or more employees. This should be expanded to include smaller establishments, self-employed women, and women in the unorganized sector.
- B. Increase The Duration Of Maternity Leave: While the Act provides for 26 weeks of maternity leave, this may not be sufficient for some women. The duration of maternity leave should be increased to 32 weeks, as proposed by some experts.

- C. Introduce Paternity Leave: The Act does not provide for paternity leave for fathers. This should be introduced to encourage men to take an active role in childcare and promote gender equality in parenting responsibilities.
- D. Increase The Medical Bonus: The Act provides for a small medical bonus to cover the expenses related to pregnancy and childbirth. This should be increased to provide women with more financial support during their maternity leave.
- E. Provide Support For Breastfeeding: The Act does not provide any specific provisions for breastfeeding mothers. Providing support for breastfeeding mothers, such as flexible work hours or dedicated breastfeeding rooms, would help to ensure that women can continue to breastfeed while working.
- F. Address Discrimination: Despite the provisions of the Act, some employers may still discriminate against pregnant or lactating women. Measures should be taken to address this discrimination and ensure that women are not disadvantaged in the workplace because of their gender or pregnancy status.

By implementing these suggestions, we can further enhance the benefits provided to working women and promote gender equality in the workplace.

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