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## Job Insecurity of Women Academicians in India

Ad-hoc Job Contracts, Limited Maternity Benefits

By: Mehak Majeed

*Women who teach in colleges and universities in India on annual contracts have very little social security. They are often not eligible for paid maternity leave, which leaves them with the choice of either leaving their newborn baby at home or quitting their job.*

As women's participation in the global labour force has increased over the past century, the issue of maternity leave has affected the lives and prospects of many working women. Initially, women who participated in the labour force were left out of social protection, especially when it came to maternity benefits. Over the years, protests and legislations have led to some change in the system and outcomes.

For example, in Norway, paid maternity leave increased from 18 to 42 weeks between 1977 and 2011, and job protection was extended up to a year. However, in most developing nations, these laws are weak and only a very small fraction of the working age population is eligible for paid maternity leave.

India is no exception to the misery of women when it comes to maternity leave. The situation is even worse in the academic system. The pay grade of an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer and an assistant professor is the same. Both categories of public servants are supposed to get the same level of social security and protection from their employer, which is often the government. However, compared to IAS officers, it takes years of sustained work, teaching, research, and much more for an academician to be able to compete with fellow academicians for the limited number of posts on offer.

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During the early 2000s, two things happened almost at the same time. The first was the introduction of a number of new courses and the establishment of a number of new institutions across India. The second thing was a shortage of funds to hire teachers/academicians and pay their salaries and social security.

As a temporary coping strategy, the Indian government decided to hire some people to teach these new courses in new and old institutions for a short period of time until the fiscal pressure was over and long-term permanent employees were appointed. This was adopted by public universities and colleges across India. However, as events turned out, ad-hoc job appointment has evolved into a permanent feature of the Indian academic system in both private and public academic institutions.

In 2016, the number of girls who successfully the Class 10 board examination was much higher than the number of boys who made it. The *Educational Statistical Report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development for 2016* showed that the number of girls enrolled for undergraduate courses was 12.8 million, but it was only 52,000 for PhD programmes. The report also showed that during the same year, the number of male candidates who completed their PhD was 14,887 while the number for females was much less at 9,284.

An average woman who participates in the Indian academic system must be tough. She has to fight against cultural and traditional systems while aiming to pursue higher education. It takes all her energy and effort to gain the academic qualifications that make her eligible to participate in the academic labour market.

I belong to this group of academic Indian women. After I completed my 10th Class exams, I was very enthusiastic about the different courses that my school offered in Classes 11 and 12. But I was then not very well informed about the outcomes my choices would have in the future. It took me weeks of research on Google and asking my elders about the various things that could be done in different streams of knowledge to arrive at a decision.

I decided to pursue economics. Given the social set-up that I was raised in and the society that surrounded me, I had no idea what awaited me. However, I found myself immersed in the subject and passed my Class 12 examination. I was able to graduate from college without a hitch. Soon enough, I found my name on the list of those who qualified for a master’s programme in economics at the university. I cleared the University Grants Commission’s National Eligibility Test (NET) and was thus admitted to a PhD programme.

After completing my PhD, I decided to return to Kashmir. I was confident that with all the hard work I had put in, I would be able to find a spot in one of the universities in the region. However, I was disappointed when I learned about the hiring policy of these institutions. There were no rolling advertisements and no permanent positions advertised from time to time. The only thing I saw was casual advertisements for contractual and ad hoc positions for one academic year—all of them with the harshest terms of contract one could imagine.

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On finding one such spot, I joined up. The very first thing I became aware of was that there was a thick line dividing temporarily and permanently employed faculty members. Though the work done by these two groups of people was the same, their remuneration was poles apart. And the most disturbing thing was the total absence of social security for contractually employed people.

Ten months after I joined employment, I applied for maternity leave. It was impressed on me that there was little chance that leave would be granted and even if I was granted that there was no chance that I would be paid during it.

For someone who had worked hard for years and had family obligations, this news came as a big blow. The “role strain” hypothesis on women’s mental health, employment, and multiple roles put forward by W. J. Goode in 1960 suggests that humans have a fixed amount of time and energy. Adding a new role increases stress. With the birth of a baby, a mother is overwhelmed by a new role and burdened with new responsibilities.

If the mother is a working woman, the amount of stress is expected to be on the higher side. Research shows that it may even lead to anxiety and depression. In the absence of a distinct paid maternity leave policy, it may be impossible for a woman to find a work-life balance, and this may eventually force her to quit the labour force.

The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 was the first serious legal action taken by the Indian government to make maternity benefits available to female Indian citizens. The Act mandates 12 weeks of paid maternity leave for female employees giving birth and it applies to both public and private sector organisations with 10 or more employees.

The eligibility criterion is that a woman should have served an organisation for at least 80 days in the past 12 months. The Act was amended in 2017, extending the paid leave period from 12 to 26 weeks. It also directs organisations to allow work from home or a hybrid mode for their women employees during post-partum.

As an academician and research scholar, I was sure that I was entitled to paid maternity leave since I worked in a university with more than 500 employees. However, the reality turned out to be quite the opposite.

On checking, I found out that state and central universities, top public academic institutions, and private colleges and universities across India have all been following the same unfair policy towards women working for them. To keep the semester running, they all hire ad hoc staff. But when it comes to remuneration and benefits, nothing but the bare minimum is given.

In such a scenario, the best one can bargain for is the best one can get. Academicians like me try all they can to obtain the best deal possible. If paid leave was not something we could not apply for, the best we could aspire to was not being laid off. We women end up piling all the medical certificates and prescriptions we can get and writing application after application requesting universities to grant us a few more weeks or days of unpaid leave to take care of our new-born children and to recover from childbirth.

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Female Indian academicians are prone to long-term anxiety and depression due to the absence of paid and secure maternity leave. Women are left with very little choice. Either they part with their new born and return to work, or they quit academics and the job market after years of hard work.

At the end of July, I now have only a few days left to decide the trade-off I am going to make. I must choose between the hard work I have put into attaining this unstable academic position or sacrificing precious moments with my new born, who needs me every now and then. Given the trend of ad hoc academic arrangements in both Indian colleges and universities and the biological realities of women, a sustainable academic career with stable mental health seems like a farfetched dream.

The declining female labour force participation rate in India, especially among female academicians, can be attributed in part to inadequate policy intervention and administrative support from both public and private universities. This calls for remedial measures to be taken immediately.

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**References:**

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