Economic, Normative, and Moral Reasoning in Employer Attitudes to Maternity Leave

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Employer attitudes towards maternity leave are often framed as a tension between opposition based on costs or ideal worker norms, versus normative or ethical support. How do employers combine and prioritise these justifications in practice? Drawing on interviews with thirty-seven British managers, this article develops a typology of employers – risk-averse, business-first, and value-driven – distinguishing the nature of support and underlying blends of economic, normative, and moral justifications. It shows how moral reasoning – often assumed to align only with a supportive stance – is also mobilised to justify exclusionary attitudes and even overt discrimination against maternity leave-takers. Further, against assumptions that shifting cultural norms and expanding rights foster greater employer support, discomfort with these changes can reinforce resistance. Relational dynamics also shape attitudes, with positive affective–personal ties between managers and staff prompting greater support. These findings offer a new lens on how family leave rights are interpreted in everyday managerial practice.

Introduction

Women's employment has increased across industrialised countries in recent decades. This owes partly to improved rights to paid leave following childbirth, which are associated with higher employment rates and longer working hours for women (e.g., Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). However, some family policy literature suggests paradoxical effects or trade-offs for gender equality. Statutory maternity leave rights can unintentionally block women's access to jobs carrying greater authority and higher pay (e.g., Mandel and Semyonov, 2006; Pettit and Hook, 2009; quLMandel, 2011, 2012), especially when leaves exceed one-and-a-half to two years (e.g., Evertsson and Duvander, 2011; Budig et al., 2012).

Research attributes these trade-offs partly to employer-side mechanisms, with employer attitudes toward family policies often analysed through an economic lens that casts them as rational, profit-maximising actors (Becker, 1983; Estévez-Abe, 2006). The broader family policy literature frequently draws on such economic theories to explain women's poorer labour market outcomes under more generous leave regimes (e.g., Gangl and Ziefle, 2009; Morosow, 2019; Hook et al., 2022). Employers avoid hiring women due to assumptions that women, as a group, are more likely to take leave after the birth of a child, alongside concerns about skill loss during leaves (Phelps, 1972; Becker, 1983; Estévez-Abe, 2006). Indeed, while UK mothers can transfer up to fifty weeks of leave to their partner, only 2–4 per cent of eligible men take up Shared Parental Leave

(Clifton-Sprigg et al., 2024). These patterns reinforce perceptions of women as primary leave-takers and caregivers, thereby sustaining the targeting of women for bias.

Yet, other research complicates the portrayal of employers as purely profit-driven 'antagonists' of family policies (Korpi, 2006). Some studies link unsupportive attitudes instead to ideal worker norms, arguing that employers penalise maternity leave as a deviation from expectations of constant availability and uninterrupted commitment, particularly in managerial roles or sectors prone to skill attrition due to rapid knowledge turnover, such as finance (Glass and Fodor, 2018). In contrast, other research highlights how non-economic motivations can underpin more *supportive* orientations. Managers driven by internalised moral obligations may view support for employees' family lives as 'the right thing to do' (Den Dulk et al., 2011; Been et al., 2016). External normative pressures – such as changing societal expectations and public demand for family-friendly workplaces – may also shape more supportive attitudes (Chung, 2019, 2020; Daiger von Gleichen, 2025).

While previous research acknowledges financial constraints, normative factors, and morality in shaping employer attitudes to family policies, less is known about how employers combine or prioritise these justifications in practice. This article addresses that gap. How do employers justify support for or resistance to maternity leave rights? Based on qualitative interviews with thirty-seven British managers, this study develops a new typology that captures the interplay of economic, normative, and moral reasoning in employer assessments of maternity leave. The typology maps employer attitudes along two dimensions: the nature of support (limited, pragmatic, inclusive) and type of justification (economic, normative, moral). Rather than presenting support as a simple continuum from low to high, the framework reveals the multiple, intersecting logics that determine when, for whom, and on what grounds support is (not) granted. By examining how employers blend pragmatic cost concerns with normative expectations and moral reasoning, the study offers a more nuanced account of how family leave rights are interpreted and enacted in everyday managerial practice.

Employer attitudes to family leave: previous research

This study builds on and extends previous literature by examining how economic, normative, and moral justifications intersect in shaping employer (non-)support for maternity leave. Beginning with economic perspectives, two theories are prominent. Human capital theory suggests that maternity leave interrupts skill accumulation, leading employers to undervalue or avoid hiring women (Becker, 1983; Mincer and Polachek, 1974). Statistical discrimination theory (Phelps, 1972) posits that, lacking complete information about individual workers, employers rely on group-level generalisations. In the context of maternity leave, women of childbearing age are statistically more likely than men to take parental leave. Thus, to minimise perceived risks of absence or productivity loss, employers treat women as a 'risk' category for future leave-taking, which may disadvantage women in hiring and promotion decisions. Because such discrimination targets women as a group – regardless of individual plans or productivity – individual women with no intentions of having children can also face exclusionary treatment (Glass and Fodor, 2011; Mandel, 2012).

The nature of workers' roles and broader institutional factors may amplify these perceived economic risks. Employers who make heavy investments in workers' skills may be particularly discriminatory if they anticipate low returns on such investments (Estévez-Abe, 2006; Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). Consequently, higher training costs, greater firm-specific knowledge requirements, and potential difficulties securing suitable replacements may heighten leave-related discrimination in specialist, managerial, and skilled occupations (Estévez-Abe, 2006; Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). This aligns with the 'disruptiveness' hypothesis, which posits that managers assess leave requests based on their anticipated operational impact (Den Dulk et al., 2011). Discrimination may also be greater in fast-evolving sectors requiring continuous upskilling, like technology or digital marketing, where possible skill attrition during maternity leaves sparks particular concern (Glass and Fodor, 2018). In some contexts, strong employment protection

legislation may further compound these concerns by limiting employers' flexibility to hire temporary replacements during leaves (Estévez-Abe, 2006).

However, other research suggests that economic arguments can instead lead to more supportive stances. In more competitive labour markets, supportive leave practices can aid recruitment and retention (Brinton and Mun, 2016; Glass and Fodor, 2018; Chung, 2019). Framed as a business strategy, a supportive approach can boost loyalty, morale, and productivity (Den Dulk et al., 2011; Been et al., 2016; Chung, 2019). This 'business case' reflects an instrumental logic: support granted not for its own sake, but because it enhances performance. Contrary to human capital theory, some studies suggest employers may be more supportive of leave-taking by 'valuable' and hard-to-replace workers, aligning with 'dependency' arguments (Den Dulk et al., 2011).

Beyond cost-benefit calculations, normative factors can shape employer responses, too. Ideal worker norms cast committed employees as continuously available and unencumbered by caregiving (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000), while cultural scripts of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) reinforce expectations that caregiving is a woman's primary role. By disrupting the ideal of the ever-present worker while reinforcing gendered expectations of motherhood, maternity leave may lead employers to view leave-takers as less committed, less reliable, or more difficult to accommodate, particularly in roles requiring constant visibility, leadership presence, or long hours (Correll et al., 2007).

Alternatively, normative pressures can foster a supportive stance. Employers may seek social legitimacy by aligning with public expectations for work-life balance (Been et al., 2016; Chung, 2019; Daiger von Gleichen, 2025). Such normative isomorphism is most evident in the public sector and large firms, which face greater public scrutiny and reputational pressures. Larger organisations with more resources and established Human Resource systems may also be better equipped to implement leave policies (Chung, 2020).

Conversely, support may be rooted in moral or ethical commitments. For instance, Been et al. (2016) found that top managers in Dutch organisations described a 'social duty' to accommodate workers' caregiving needs. Similarly, financial sector managers in the Netherlands and Slovenia framed support for working mothers as 'the right thing to do' (Den Dulk et al., 2011). These beliefs can operate independently of business interests, reflecting deeper values about fairness and employee wellbeing.

Overall, this body of work advances our understanding of how economic, normative, and moral factors shape employer support for versus opposition to family policies. It also touches on how sectoral pressures, institutional contexts, organisational characteristics, and workers' roles can moderate such dynamics. Extending this work, this study develops a novel typology of employer attitudes showing how economic, normative, and moral perspectives can coexist and interact within an employer's rationalising of support for – or resistance to – maternity leave.

The British context

The study draws on interviews with managers across England, Scotland, and Wales. In the UK, women can take up to fifty-two weeks of maternity leave, with Statutory Maternity Pay covering thirty-nine weeks. For the first six weeks, pay is 90 per cent of earnings, followed by the lower of 90 per cent of earnings or a flat-rate benefit for the remaining weeks. In 2015, when the interviews took place, this flat rate was £139.58 per week (Atkinson et al., 2022). In 2013, around two-thirds of UK workplaces offered no enhanced maternity pay over and above statutory amounts, with a further 19 per cent of employers not knowing whether they did or not; by 2018, these figures had reduced somewhat, to 55 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively (Department for Business and Trade, 2023). Employees ineligible for Statutory Maternity Pay may get Maternity Allowance, which is the lower of the flat-rate allowance or 90 per cent of earnings for all thirty-nine weeks. Leave-takers keep statutory pay even if they do not return, and employers are reimbursed 92 to 103 per cent of statutory pay from the government, depending on company size. Upon return, leave-takers are entitled to the same Statutory Sick Pay as other employees (Atkinson et al., 2022).

The British context provides a crucial case for examining employer attitudes toward maternity leave. Some scholars argue that its highly flexible labour market and comparatively weak employment protections may reduce employers' hesitancy to hire women of childbearing age, since dismissal is a more viable option if maternity leave presents challenges (Estevez-Abe, 2006). Yet, it may be counterargued that such flexibility simply shifts the locus of discrimination from hiring decisions to post-leave treatment: that is, while employers may hire (potential) leave-takers, they may be more willing to dismiss or sideline employees who take leave (e.g., occupational downgrading) when they perceive leave-taking as inconvenient or costly. Compounding this, UK statutory provisions grant line-managers significant discretion in implementing maternity leave, heightening the risk of such discrimination (Den Dulk et al., 2011). For instance, while UK managers cannot legally deny maternity leave, they can reject requests for flexible working on return based on business grounds, such as operational need, staffing levels, or impacts on service delivery. Further, enforcement of anti-discrimination protections remains weak: three in four UK mothers report negative or potentially discriminatory treatment during pregnancy, maternity leave, or upon return, with 11 per cent feeling forced to quit their jobs (Adams et al., 2016). These factors underscore the importance of understanding how workplace-specific logics and constraints shape employer views on maternity leave and potentially lead to different outcomes even within the same institutional setting.

Method

Data

This study is a Qualitative Secondary Analysis, producing 'new' insights from archived material. The Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills and Equality and Human Rights Commission authorised IFF Research to conduct the 'parent' study. This study investigated the pervasiveness and manner of workplace pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination across Britain via a quantitative telephone survey with 3,034 employers, followed by semi-structured qualitative interviews with a sample of these employers (Large, 2016).

I draw on the face-to-face interviews ($N = 37$). The Supplementary Material includes descriptive statistics (Table A1, Appendix A) and the interview schedule (Appendix B). While the parent study offered valuable insights through rigorous analysis of the quantitative survey data, it treated the qualitative interviews primarily as illustrative, using selected quotes to support trends identified through the survey. In contrast, this study approaches the qualitative interviews as a standalone dataset, analysing them independently to uncover novel and previously unexamined patterns of meaning not visible through the survey analysis alone. Although the survey captures the prevalence of certain views – for example, 27 per cent of employers agree that maternity leave is an 'unreasonable cost burden' (Large, 2016) – it cannot illuminate how such views are formed or justified. Analysing the qualitative data independently is therefore essential for understanding the reasoning processes that underpin employer attitudes toward maternity leave. This qualitative lens allows for a deeper exploration of how employers construct, justify, and negotiate their views, to reveal the complex logics and tensions that aggregate survey trends may minimise. In this way, the present study provides a complementary interpretive perspective to the parent project.

The parent-study researchers drew the telephone survey sample from the Inter-Departmental Business Register via a stratified approach to ensure representation of different sectors and company sizes. They then selected interviewees from among those survey participants who consented to being re-contacted (66 per cent), with variation by firm size (small: 5–49 employees; medium: 50–249 employees; large: 250+ employees) and reported experiences of managing pregnancy and maternity leave ('positive'; 'mixed'; 'negative'). The one-hour interviews took place between March and May 2015 at participants' company location and were recorded with permission. The parent-study researchers deposited the anonymised transcripts on the UK Data Archive (Large, 2016). The University of Bath's Social Science Research Ethics Committee gave ethical approval for this study (Number: 0019-26).

Coding

I took a flexible approach to coding (Deterding and Waters, 2021). I compiled a preliminary list of codes and sub-codes from previous studies: for example, business-case arguments, 'doing the right thing', and differences by skill level (Den Dulk et al., 2011; Been et al., 2016; Brinton and Mun, 2016; Glass and Fodor, 2018). I then read and re-read each transcript for evidence of these codes, while adding to the list any new codes that emerged from the interview data (e.g., friendships with staff). Through repeated readings of each transcript, I refined my codes to better capture empirically and theoretically significant patterns. For example, I broke down the initial broad code, business-case arguments, into more specific sub-codes – such as high costs, staff loyalty, and company reputation – to allow for more nuanced categorisations of how employers weigh the costs and benefits of maternity leave.

Based on these codes, I developed a threefold typology of employers – risk-averse, business-first, and value-driven – to capture the distinct combinations of rationales used to justify (or withhold) support for maternity leave-taking. As Table 1 shows, the typology is organised along two conceptual dimensions: (i) nature of support for leave-taking – limited, pragmatic, inclusive – and (ii) type of justification – *economic* (cost and operational risk), *normative* (social or organisational expectations, like ideal worker norms or legal compliance), and *moral* (judgements of fairness or what is morally right).

To verify the distinctiveness of each employer group, I stored this typology as an attribute in NVivo and queried its intersection with my codes (Deterding and Waters, 2021). This process verified that different rationales clustered in distinctive ways across the three employer types, supporting the typology's validity. For example, the sub-code staff loyalty intersected ten times with a value-driven logic, four times with a business-first logic, and zero times with a risk-averse logic, confirming it as a primary rationale for a supportive approach.

Results: a typology of employers

Risk-averse

A minority of employers ($N = 5$) expressed limited support (Table 1). Risk-averse employers sought to minimise the perceived economic (direct financial costs), moral (suspected employee dishonesty), and normative (regulatory scrutiny or departure from ideal worker and mothering norms) costs associated with maternity leave. One even self-identified as such: "It's us being so risk averse" (Richard, general manager, mid-sized communications firm, no children). These employers, of varied genders and parental statuses, worked mainly in smaller private-sector companies and had less exposure to maternity leave than others (Table 2). Notably, three of the four business owners in the sample fell into this category (Table A1, Appendix A, Supplementary Material).

Economic arguments dominated risk-averse employers' reasoning. They prioritised immediate cost-cutting and operational efficiency, framing maternity leave as a financial burden and a source of disruption due to the need for cover staff. They emphasised 'hidden' costs not reimbursed by the state – such as agency fees or other costs for recruiting replacements – and viewed leave as a drain on company resources. Janet (partner, small real estate business, no children) exemplified this perspective. She described maternity-related expenses as unjustifiable 'extras', proposing that leave be capped at one or two children per woman. She further dismissed the statutory one-year entitlement as 'too much' and openly admitted she would practice overt discrimination against a pregnant applicant: 'Yes, I would discriminate against a pregnant applicant... I wouldn't say anything to her face, but I wouldn't recruit her'. Her perception of leave as inherently burdensome applied across all roles: 'I don't think the [skill] level matters'.

Moral arguments reinforced risk-averse employers' cost-cutting priorities. They framed their reluctance to support maternity leave as fair and necessary, drawing on moralised assessments of leave-takers as dishonest and unreliable, coinciding with a culture of mistrust. Several believed

Table 1. Employer attitudes to maternity leave: nature of support and underlying justifications by employer type

Employer Group	Nature of Support	Economic Justifications	Normative Justifications	Moral Justifications
Risk-averse ($N = 5$)	**Limited**: Minimal support driven by a desire to avoid perceived economic costs, regulatory scrutiny (normative risk), and moral risks linked to suspected employee dishonesty.	Maternity leave viewed as costly and disruptive, with 'hidden' costs not covered by government.	Frames maternity leaves as incompatible with ideal worker and ideal mother norms. Concerns over discrimination claims reflect anxiety about adapting to evolving workplace norms.	Leave-takers portrayed as 'dishonest' or 'undeserving'. Leave-taking deemed 'unfair' to employers. Some judge mothers for taking a temporary rather than permanent break from employment.
Business-first ($N = 17$)	**Pragmatic**: Support is granted when aligning with operational needs (economic). Limited for 'critical' roles (e.g., senior or specialist), with normative reasoning reinforcing these limits.	Support granted when 'disruption' is minimal but critical roles are seen as too costly to accommodate.	Ideal worker norms justify selective support: maternity leave deemed incompatible with full-time presence, availability, and leadership demands in high-level roles.	Moral justification absent – decisions framed as pragmatic.
Value-driven ($N = 15$)	**Inclusive**: Consistent support grounded in ethical commitments to fairness and employee well-being. Economic and normative arguments play a secondary, reinforcing role.	Acknowledges short-term economic costs but sees them as manageable within a longer-term strategy of employee loyalty, retention, and productivity.	Norms around supportive workplace cultures reinforce inclusive stance.	Support framed as a moral duty tied to fairness, empathy, and personal rapport with employees.

Note: Employer groups were identified through qualitative analysis of thirty-seven interviews with British managers, using a flexible coding procedure (see Methods section). The table synthesises patterns across employer types; individual participants may have drawn on multiple justifications but are categorised here by their dominant reasoning. Table A1 (Appendix A, Supplemental Material) provides individual-level participant characteristics by employer group.

Table 2. Employer groups by key characteristics

	Typical Roles	Dominant Sector	Company Sizes	Example Company Types	Number of Maternity Leaves Managed	Gender and Parental Trends	Dominant Framing
Risk-averse (N = 5)	Owner/partner (3), general manager (1), head of HR (1)	Private (5)	Mostly small/medium (4); one large	Pub, real estate, cleaning, marketing, large manufacturer	Fewer (typically ≤5) – but one higher (15)	Mixed (2 men, 3 women), varied presence of children (3 parents, 2 non-parents)	*Economic, moral,* and *normative:* Limited support for maternity leave framed as 'risk avoidance' – economic (costs), moral (perceived employee dishonesty), and normative (regulatory scrutiny; 'failure' to meet ideal worker and mothering norms).
Business-first (N = 17)	Mainly operational managers (9), owners/directors (5), and some HR managers (3)	Mostly private (13), some public (2) and third sector (2)	Mostly small (8); some medium (4) or large (5)	IT, retail, manufacturing, recruitment, education	Low to mid-range, with some high numbers (1–70)	Notable presence of men (7 men, 3 women, 7 unknown) and parents (9 parents, 3 non-parents, 5 unknown)	*Economic* and *normative:* Support based on business pragmatism; some support for lower-level roles but limited for 'critical' demanding roles based on operational disruption and ideal worker norms.
Value-driven (N = 15)	Mainly HR managers (7) and operational managers (6), with one team leader and one CEO	Mostly private (9), some public (3) and third sector (3)	Mostly large (8); some medium (5) or small (2)	Law, care, manufacturing, retail, government, charity	Low to mid-range (1–30)	Notable presence of women (2 men, 9 women, 4 unknown) and parents (8 parents, 1 non-parent, 6 unknown)	Primarily *moral:* Inclusive, supportive approach framed as a social and ethical responsibility.

Note: For further details, see Table A1 (Appendix A, Supplemental Material), which provides information on these characteristics by participant.

that women exploited paid sick leave to unfairly prolong absences: 'Because they get paid for it . . . Sick notes at the end of the twelve-month period, I believe it's not necessarily needed' (Emily, head of HR, large manufacturer, mother). Relatedly, risk-averse employers assumed that women rarely intended to return yet feigned that they would so they could continue accessing statutory pay: 'There is a charade – because of paid maternity leave no-one is going to say they're not coming back as [it] could affect their pay' (Richard). Similarly, Julie (owner, mid-sized cleaning business, mother) said, 'It is inevitable for us that most women will not return'. Thus, they saw leave not as a temporary absence but as a probable permanent loss that was unjust to employers given training costs: 'It's reasonable to expect somebody after they've gone on a period training to do some work for you at least before they disappear on your money' (Janet).

Normative arguments surfaced in reference to anti-discrimination laws and maternity leave regulation. Despite, as aforementioned, some stated willingness to discriminate, risk-averse employers described maternity leave regulations as 'a bit complicated' (Richard) and as favouring leave-takers at employers' expense: 'It sometimes feels like the pendulum has swung too far from employers to employees, especially as you can now accrue holiday pay on top of maternity leave. So, they can be off for a year and then they tag on twenty-one days' holiday' (Julie). They used words such as 'uncertainty', 'frightened', 'worry', 'risky', and 'careful' when dealing with pregnant employees and maternity leave: 'We know how easy it is to be taken to tribunal' (Julie). Such language suggests more than a 'rational' concern about legal liability: it reflects a normative discomfort with shifting cultural expectations. Risk-averse employers seemingly felt vulnerable or scrutinised in a context where maternity rights increasingly constrain managerial discretion and fair treatment of leave-takers is legally mandated and culturally expected, pointing to an underlying resistance to evolving workplace norms they may not fully endorse.

This group further justified their stance through normative appeals to ideal worker and ideal mother expectations. Richard invoked the former, framing returnees as emotionally fragile and insufficiently available against expectations of full commitment and flexibility: 'Being separated from their child for the first significant time. They can be fragile initially. Also, they are often very time sensitive. You can't arrange a meeting with them for 5pm'. Graham (pub landlord, father) relied on ideal mother norms, which prescribe caregiving as the primary responsibility of women – but not men (Hays, 1996). Hence, his objection was not to women's employment per se, but to what he saw as women's moral failure to fully embrace motherhood, since maternity leave entailed a temporary break rather than permanent withdrawal from employment: 'I am really not into maternity leave . . . If you don't want to look after children, don't have them'. His reasoning thus combined normative ideals of maternal devotion with moral judgement, framing working mothers as deficient for not 'opting out' to become stay-at-home mothers.

Business-first

A second group ($N = 17$), business-first, offered pragmatic support based on operational continuity, with any broader sense of moral or ethical obligation absent (Table 1). These employers worked mainly across private-sector industries in operational or senior/executive management. About half were from smaller businesses, and most had extensive experience managing maternity leaves. They were predominantly male, many with children (Table 2; Table A1, Appendix A, Supplementary Material).

Business-first employers supported maternity leave selectively, primarily based on *economic justifications*. Some mentioned productivity and efficiency benefits: for instance, Matt (HR manager, large manufacturer) commented that ensuring maternity leave-takers 'feel comfortable being able to go off' meant they 'tend to work better' on return. A few cited *normative arguments* around boosting staff retention and company reputation. However, support was selective, limited to lower-level or routine roles. These employers were more reluctant to accommodate maternity leave when it involved senior, specialist, or client-facing positions.

This reluctance reflected the belief that leave in 'critical' roles brought greater disruption and costs than benefits. For instance, Phillip (director, small temping agency, father) explained that difficulties handing over client responsibilities made it hard to redistribute workloads or arrange cover without potentially jeopardising client relationships. Managers of smaller firms especially emphasised the challenge of workload sharing because such positions 'aren't mirrored' (Fiona, managing director, small private service provider, mother) and the leave-taker is usually 'the only person doing it' (Sandy, director, small charity). Tight budgets, skill shortages, or the time required to train a replacement constrained cover options.

This conditional approach – where support for leave-taking depended on the nature and perceived replaceability of the role – extended beyond existing staff and influenced hiring decisions as well. Many business-first employers acknowledged – sometimes explicitly – that they weighed pregnancy or the potential for maternity leave differently, depending on the role. For instance, Lydia (salon owner, no children) admitted she would hesitate to hire a pregnant assistant manager but would consider a trainee because 'it's less of a cost'. Likewise, Peter (HR manager, large port operator, father) explained it 'would make a difference' if 'someone in a more specialist role' took maternity leave:

> Our OH [Occupational Health] advisor is a lady; we've only got one and she's qualified. We'd be a bit more concerned if she was off. To back-fill that person, we're not just talking about ringing an agency, it would be a specific thing and costs.

Business-first employers further deployed *normative justifications* to reinforce the economic rationale for selective accommodations, invoking ideal worker norms of constant availability, presence, and full-time visibility for high-skilled positions. For instance, Kevin (CEO, small charity) admitted that pregnancy influenced hiring for senior roles based on assumptions of returnees as less available and too fatigued:

> If I was employing a head of service, it [a pregnancy] might influence it if we needed them . . . You have two fantastic candidates and one is about to go off, you pick the one who is not going to go off for a year and come back exhausted, especially for the senior roles.

Another feature of business-first employers' approach was differential support for leave-returners based on the intensity, responsibility, and demands of the role. Freja (operations manager, small private-sector research agency, mother) remarked that women returning to senior researcher roles 'found it difficult to split their head between work and family'. Her comment highlights a common perception among business-first employers that new mothers struggle to balance the cognitive demands of high-responsibility, intensive roles with the emotional and physical toll of early motherhood. So, while business-first employers readily approved part-time or phased returns for junior staff, they often rejected such accommodations for senior workers or even renegotiated them into less critical roles. For example, Dan (manager, mid-sized energy business, father) had allowed a part-time return for an admin worker but not for a manager, citing 'business impact'. Similarly, Cole (branch manager, mid-sized financial service provider, no children) had denied a manager's request to return part time and hybrid while acknowledging 'a different decision' for a junior staff member. This selectivity indicates role-based discrimination underpinned by ideal worker norms: while willing to hire, retain, and support mothers in lower-status or easily substitutable roles, assumptions about reduced availability, stamina, and commitment discouraged accommodations for more demanding positions.

Value-driven

Value-driven employers ($N = 15$) took an inclusive approach to maternity leave. Unlike the other groups, they were motivated primarily by a sense of doing the 'right' thing and social duty

(Table 1). These mainly HR and operational managers worked across medium to large private-sector firms, with some in the public and third sectors. Most were women, many with children (Table 2; Table A1, Appendix A, Supplementary Material).

Value-driven employers grounded their *moral justifications* in fairness and equality. Providing 'positivity and support' (Charlie, HR manager, large manufacturer) and 'looking after' leave-takers (Rachel, CEO, mid-sized charity, mother) were core ethical commitments embedded in the organisational culture. These employers viewed discrimination as fundamentally unjust, drawing analogies between maternity and long-term sick leave to stress the universality of the need for extended workplace absences: 'We could all be in that scenario' (David, facilities team leader across eight sites for a large government department, father).

For many, personal experience and empathy also shaped this outlook. Having faced their own fertility challenges, David and Sara (school business manager, mother) underscored the lack of control women often had over pregnancy and the associated need for maternity leave. Maeve (partner coordination manager, large retailer) spoke from anticipation: 'Personally speaking, as a woman who wants to have children at some time, I want a company that can actively support me when I decide to'. Hence, maternity leave provision was integral to building an inclusive and compassionate workplace, from which she herself hoped to benefit in the future. Crucially, value-driven employers endorsed equal support across all job levels: 'A grade two, which is our lowest, and a grade seven, which is our management team, are all on a par' (David); 'We deal with all employees in the same way whatever the level' (Maeve).

Added to this, some value-driven managers harboured multiplex relationships with staff, which blend business and affective-personal dimensions (Methot and Rosado-Solomon, 2019). For example, Kim (HR manager, large construction company, mother) noted: 'We do socialise quite a bit together'. Likewise, Olivia (business manager, mid-sized home-care provider) said she maintained contact with maternity leave-takers 'as a friend'. These personal bonds and emotional connections often complemented or even superseded standard professional obligations, further reinforcing value-drive employers' commitment to supporting staff as whole people with family responsibilities, sometimes beyond formal duty. Kim, for instance, shared how her friendship with an employee led her to support the employee through a maternity health scare:

> She telephoned me absolutely hysterical, and I ended up just picking my bag up and leaving and going to the hospital and ended up doing this 999 journey with her just to go and support her. Some people would say, well that's a bit beyond your role, which it might be but ... I went to school with this girl's mum ... She wouldn't phone her mum because her mum was seriously ill ... So, it's a bit more than [a] manager/employee relationship.

Value-driven employers further supported their core ethical stance by drawing on *normative justifications*, seeking to align with positive norms of a supportive workplace culture. Many used relational language to describe their organisations, such as 'family feel', 'supportive', 'close-knit', and 'community'. In this way, they sought to signal their identity as 'ideal employers', recognising that accommodating leave-takers helped retain talent and experience.

Economic justifications were complementary but secondary. While some acknowledged the immediate costs of leave-taking, they considered them 'manageable' (Louise, office manager, small wind farm developer) and embedded within a long-term strategy of positive business outcomes: 'If you have a happy workforce, you have a productive workforce' (Joseph, corporate services manager, small government department). This perspective was especially evident when accommodating flexible or part-time returns. Rather than denying requests, value-driven employers often found practical solutions, like creating a job share from a full-time position by re-advertising the 'missing' hours.

Concluding discussion

Of the thirty-seven employers interviewed, twenty-three expressed views suggestive of direct or indirect discrimination against pregnant women and maternity leave-takers. These included explicit admissions of illegal hiring practices, reluctance to hire or promote women, and implicit biases that could disadvantage mothers' career progression. A widely accepted argument in the family policy literature attributes such discrimination and bias to concerns about financial costs and the need for cover labour (e.g., Mandel and Semyonov, 2006; Mandel, 2011). Other research highlights how normative expectations and moral commitments can also shape – and sometimes strengthen – employer support for leave-taking (e.g., Den Dulk et al., 2011; Been et al., 2016; Glass and Fodor, 2018; Daiger von Gleichen, 2025).

This study contributes to the debate by analysing how British managers rationalise their support for or resistance to maternity leave in practice. It offers a typology of employer orientations – risk-averse, business-first, and value-driven – that systematically captures how economic, normative, and moral reasoning are combined, prioritised, and instrumentalised. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that moral reasoning always aligns with support for family policies and inclusive practices. Risk-averse employers – who essentially function as 'antagonists' (Korpi, 2006) of maternity leave by opposing it and offering limited support – mobilise moral arguments to *justify discrimination* and exclusion. Besides viewing maternity leave as an economic burden and structural disruption to ideal worker norms, they construct it as *morally objectionable:* unfair, undeserved, or even deceptive. This aligns with findings that people more readily express bias when they perceive it as morally justified (Tilcsik, 2021), and offers a new lens on how discriminatory practices are rationalised in workplaces.

Risk-averse employers further draw on normative arguments to reinforce their resistance. Contrary to expectations that shifting cultural norms and expanding social rights push employers towards greater support for workers' family lives (e.g., Chung, 2019, 2020; Daiger von Gleichen, 2025), this study finds that some actively resist such change, even admitting to discriminatory practices. Risk-averse employers' narratives reflect a discomfort with regulatory obligations and evolving expectations around gender and work. Their invocation of ideal worker and 'good mother' norms place women in a double bind: condemned as unreliable for taking leave – especially if they do not return – yet judged as neglectful mothers and moral failures if they do return. These contradictory expectations risk legitimising mothers' labour market exclusion. They also expose the limits of regulatory frameworks in challenging deeply ingrained beliefs about who belongs in the workplace and under what conditions, suggesting limits to statutory protections for achieving substantive equality.

While risk-averse employers engaged in often overt and unapologetic forms of discrimination, business-first employers also exhibited discriminatory behaviour – albeit more selectively, depending on leave-takers' roles. Business-first employers acted as policy 'consenters' (Korpi, 2006) when support for leave aligned with business interests, typically for lower-level or routine roles. However, they became 'antagonists' when they viewed leave as disruptive – as for senior, specialist, or client-facing roles – citing high costs (economic) and deviations from ideal worker expectations (normative) as barriers to support. Discrimination was sometimes overt, such as downgrading returnees' occupational standing; other times, it was subtler, like granting flexibility only to returnees in lower-status positions. Business-first employers framed these decisions as pragmatic and business-driven, referencing what they saw as rational concerns, like the exhaustion of early motherhood or operational or financial constraints. Regardless of intent, such practices still restrict women's access to career progression and reinforce occupational inequality.

Conversely, value-driven employers functioned most closely as maternity leave 'protagonists' (Korpi, 2006), exhibiting no discriminatory attitudes. While acknowledging business benefits, their support was primarily grounded in ethical principles of fairness, employer duty, and employee wellbeing, echoing prior research (e.g., Den Dulk et al., 2011; Been et al., 2016).

A distinctive contribution of this study, however, is the identification of an additional driver of support: the affective-personal dimensions of manager–employee relationships. Many value-driven employers described 'multiplex' ties with staff, which blend personal and professional bonds (Methot and Rosado-Solomon, 2019) and apparently deepened a sense of moral responsibility toward maternity leave-takers. This relational dimension extends existing accounts of managerial attitudes by foregrounding interpersonal dynamics alongside structural and normative influences.

While such multiplex relationships can foster greater empathy and flexibility, their significance raises concerns about equity. Women from marginalised backgrounds may face barriers to developing such ties. For instance, Nelson (2019) found that Black minority teachers tended to form 'thinner' multiplex relationships than their White colleagues, due in part to geographic distance and lower participation in informal workplace networks. These dynamics align with relational inequality theory (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt, 2019), which argues that social interactions and the uneven distribution of relational resources can reproduce organisational inequalities. Thus, although statutory maternity leave policies aim to ensure universal entitlements, access to meaningful support in practice may depend on informal relationships that reflect and reinforce broader social hierarchies.

Differences in employer attitudes and underlying rationales may partly indicate variations in company and managerial characteristics. Risk-averse employers had typically handled fewer maternity leave cases than the other groups, suggesting a lack of exposure potentially fuels misconceptions or ignorance about its productive benefits (Stumbitz et al., 2018). This group also included three of the four owner-managers in the sample, likely reflecting owners' vested interest in their organisations' immediate costs and survival. Further, most risk-averse employers and a large share of business-first ones came from smaller, private-sector firms. In these companies, smaller workforces, less developed HR policies, and tighter financial margins may make it harder to manage maternity costs, redistribute workloads, navigate employment law, or accommodate perceived deviations from ideal worker norms (Stumbitz et al., 2018). Indeed, large organisations dominate the value-driven group, consistent with findings that bigger firms are better resourced and more responsive to institutional and societal expectations (e.g., Been et al., 2016; Brinton and Mun, 2016; Chung, 2020).

Striking contrasts also emerged by gender and role. Business-first managers were mainly men and fathers, whereas value-driven employers were predominantly women and mothers. This may indicate how female managers often bring an added layer of ethical support that challenges ideal worker norms, likely shaped by their own lived experiences. Additionally, business-first managers were mainly operational, senior, or executive managers, who typically prioritise operational continuity and financial performance (economic arguments). Value-driven managers instead comprised more HR managers, who usually focus on employee wellbeing, workplace culture, and compliance with legal and normative standards (moral and normative arguments).

While the study highlights diversity in employer attitudes toward maternity leave, its qualitative design limits the extent to which findings can be generalised. Building on the patterns identified here, future research using large-scale, representative data could explore associations between employer characteristics and managerial interpretations of leave on a broader scale. Meanwhile, studies on employer attitudes toward fathers who take leave could help determine whether discrimination stems specifically from gendered assumptions about mothers' commitment and productivity, or from broader concerns about leave-taking regardless of the leave-taker's gender.

Limitations aside, the findings carry important policy implications. Arguably, state support to offset some of the non-statutory costs of maternity leave could help reduce discrimination. Targeting support at small businesses is especially important, given that many problematised such 'hidden' costs - and 99 percent of all UK firms are small businesses (Department for Business, 2024). Increasing men's leave uptake through well-paid, non-transferable leaves for fathers could

further reduce discrimination by repositioning all workers as potential caregivers, while knowledge-sharing technologies and more standardised procedures could ease the burden of covering specialist roles (Goldin, 2014). Additionally, greater hostility among employers with less exposure to maternity leaves raises the need for government-backed training programmes or advisory services that challenge misinformation and improve managers' knowledge of and confidence in navigating often complex leave processes. Finally, the importance of personal manager–employee relationships highlights the need for cultural change beyond formal policies. Broader initiatives, such as employee resource groups and leaders modelling supportive behaviour, can help foster empathy, inclusion, and relational trust within workplaces.

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