

## The choice to pursue a corporate career and motherhood are not mutually exclusive: A tale of breast-feeding moms

“Having a child is a growth and learning process in every respect. You ask yourself questions that hadn't even occurred to you before: Do babies have an internal alarm clock that goes off just as I sit down to eat a hot meal? Should I be worried that I'm humming nursery rhymes now, even if my baby isn't with me? And: when should I go back to work? What will it be like for my baby and I to be away from each other for so many hours? Can I continue breastfeeding? How does a breast pump actually work? Oh, there are different ones? How do I know how big my nipples are? 21 or 36mm? How much milk do you pump in how much time? I have no idea! Lots of unsettling questions. Another uncertainty: where do I pump my milk? Where will I be when my breasts are full to bursting and want to be milked like a dairy cow? It doesn't work everywhere. I need a clean, sheltered place with a table and a plug socket. I also need a fridge nearby where I can store my milk discreetly. Where can you find that?”

“Ironically, I recently found myself as the only woman who ever pumped in one of the biggest consulting and training institutes in Ethiopia - pity there were medical doctors, nurses and MIDWIVES who promoted breast-feeding as a career in that same institute. A couple of days before I was in a training institute and since I just got back from my maternity leave, I had to pump and store milk for my baby. But when I asked one of the training facilitators if there is a place I could pump (this facilitator is a midwife), she told me they don't have a room. So, I thought, it's just one day I could do it in the bathroom, then went there to find a very small, not so clean toilet sit with doors that don't close let alone lock. So, I went back to the midwife lady and ask her if they have an office I could use; then she took me to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor office where she and other two share. Now, I was happy! I finished pumping and went back to the ground floor to ask her if there is a fridge where I could store the milk; Of course, there isn't. Thankfully, the hotel that was catering for the event was nearby, so I gave the milk to one of the waiters.

Lately, as a country we went from: **Federal Ministry of Education (MoE) Guidelines on Gender equality and social Inclusion in Education: Section 5.3** “Pregnant students and mothers shall be provided with prenatal and postnatal care, childcare support and flexible learning options to enable them to continue their studies without interruption” to “Any higher education student who is absent from school for more than 15 days due to childbirth will not complete the school year.” Listening to this on the radio, it was mesmerizing for me how this is unfolding during the 16 Days of Activism, with all the women rights and empowerment advocacies, we are still fighting for the bare minimum of our basic human rights.

My daughter is 5 months old and breast-feeding is not something I want to give up just because I was going to work. Well, I'm not giving up!”

“Most of my work is in the field. When my baby was 6 months old, I went to the field, and the road took around 8 hours of driving. I tried to tolerate my tender breasts for a couple of hours, but I couldn't. During our lunchtime, I tried to search for a place to pump, but the small restaurant doesn't have one. What I decided was to pump inside the company car, and then I spilled some on the car floor - there is a saying “don't cry over spilled milk”- well you cry when that milk is breastmilk. After I reached the place where I was staying, the room didn't have a fridge, so I didn't have a choice other than to spill my milk again after pumping. This is the time I missed safe room at the office.”

The challenge of breastfeeding at the workplace is one of the main reasons for early breastfeeding cessation. In our project, where 41% of staff are women, we have created something truly special - a safe room that goes beyond expectations. The room has a safety key and can be locked, which lets others know if the room is occupied and gives privacy. This enabled us to combine breastfeeding and work. Preparing a lactation room in our workplace would cause us to experience less stress, have more positive thoughts about milk expression at work, and observe more organizational support.

As we work in the office, we entrust our precious babies to the care of our loved ones at home. That's why our breastfeeding room is primarily designed to meet the needs of milk pumping. It provides a private and supportive environment for our working mothers to express milk for their little ones, giving you the freedom to schedule breastfeeding hours which are flexible as per our needs. It is a haven of comfort and tranquillity offering a safe, clean, and cosy space, with the added convenience of a shared fridge in the kitchen next door for storing precious breast milk.

We believe that corporate women should not have to choose between their careers and motherhood. With our dedicated room, we are taking a feminist approach to supporting working mothers. A consensus is that we need more women in the corporate world, and providing a safe space is just one of the small but meaningful steps we can take to make their journey easier.

However, we also recognize that privacy is a universal need. In addition to serving as a breastfeeding room, this space can be utilized for other purposes as well. It can be used as a quiet space for moments of reflection, prayer, or even for taking important phone calls in a confidential manner. For us, this dedication to privacy represents not only practicality but also a commitment to respect, tolerance, and understanding. By providing a versatile space that meets various needs, we foster an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and supported.

So, let's celebrate the strength and resilience of our incredible women. By providing a safe space dedicated to milk pumping, as well as other private activities, we not only support their motherhood journey but also empower all individuals to find solace and bring their whole selves to work. Together, we embrace a future where compassion and inclusivity thrive, creating a workplace where everyone can flourish.<sup>1</sup>

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