

[Click here to print](#)

MailOnline

Special report: The rise of the micro maternity leave

By [Viv Groskop](#)

Last updated at 8:00 PM on 13th August 2011

Like { 61

We're entitled to a year off work when we have a baby, but in the current economic climate and with job security a thing of the past, more and more of us are returning to the office as soon as possible, *Viv Groskop* reports



When TV presenter Myleene Klass returned to work after the birth of her second child, she simply strapped six-week-old Hero in a papoose, grabbed four-year-old Ava's hand and off she went, appearing on *Loose Women* and *Daybreak*. 'I don't break a sweat and I take my babies with me,' she said at the time. Before Hero was three months old, her mother had hosted the *Classical Brits* and presented the ITV series *Popstar to Operastar*.

Victoria Beckham vowed to keep working right up until the birth of her daughter Harper, and to keep going after: 'Maternity leave -- what's that?' she tweeted.

The micro maternity leave, a staple of office life up until 1992 (when the statutory six weeks leave was upped to 14) is back. Despite current legislation allowing us to take up to a year off after having a baby, many women are opting for as little time off as possible. For some it's less of a choice than for others. Many can't afford to take as much time off as they'd like because in the current economic climate they need to stay on full pay or fear that their job commitment will be questioned. Others, such as fashion designers Stella McCartney and Roksanđa Ilincić, take a short maternity leave because, being self-employed or running their own business, they can work around their children.

I'm in the self-employed camp. I have never taken any maternity leave with my three children, aged seven, five and ten months. I'm a freelance writer – I work from home and can scale my work up and down. I have never thought about cutting it out completely, even for a few days, because then I would have to galvanise myself to start all over again – and that would just make more work. Sometimes it feels impossible. But then I remind myself how lucky I am to be in charge of my own time.

So is the micro maternity leave a sign of a woman in control – or desperately clinging on? Is it a reaction to tough economic times or sheer workaholicism? Last year Dr Helen Wright, then 39, headmistress of St Mary's school in Calne, Wiltshire, went back to her desk seven hours after giving birth because, she says, 'I'm expected to be pretty special and a role model. Most mothers want their daughters to have a career they love and the joy of a family. I want to show the girls of St Mary's that that's not an impossible dream.'



Victoria Beckham vowed to return to work straighter after Harper Seven Beckham was born

The queen of the micro maternity leave is, of course, the former French justice minister Rachida Dati who, in 2009, was back at work five days after a caesarean. Her micro reasons: an unmissable meeting (the first French cabinet session of the year); a crucial statement by the boss (President Sarkozy's far-reaching legal reforms). Dati, then 43 and a single mother, arguably had no choice. But others saw this as a betrayal of long-fought-for women's rights. 'This is bad for Rachida Dati and bad for us too,' wrote political commentator Madeleine Bunting.

But it is easy to judge women in the spotlight who have fought long and hard for rare opportunities. With celebrities, in particular, there will always be someone younger snapping at their heels. After seeing her chair being filled by the likes of Nicole Scherzinger and Pixie Lott, who can blame Dannii Minogue for rushing back to The X Factor when baby Ethan was just weeks old?

Workplace expert Cary Cooper, professor of organisation psychology at Lancaster University Management School, believes we will see more short maternity leaves in the future. 'In a climate where there is job insecurity, people will want to show commitment. That means longer hours and not taking advantage of the benefits on offer, such as part-time work or full maternity allowances.' He is sceptical about the government's plan for shared parental leave. 'It will be tough on small and medium businesses. I think we'll see all that going down the drain.'

'If you take a long maternity leave, there are big and long-term wage effects'

Although companies still have to offer the same benefits as they did before the recession, there has been a psychological shift in whether women will actually take up their full entitlements. In the US, where maternity leave is discretionary for employers, micro maternity leave has always been a workplace mainstay. According to a study by Columbia University in New York, 40 per cent of new mothers in the US are back at work within three months, many of them after six to eight weeks. The National Bureau of Research in the US found that while mothers who returned to work full time three months after giving birth showed higher levels of stress than those who weren't working, returning at six months seemed to add to the wellbeing of the family and the mothers' stress levels dropped.

In the UK, women are increasingly under more pressure to take less time off because wages aren't keeping up with inflation, says financial expert Sarah Pennells, who runs money management website savvywoman.co.uk. 'The cost of living is rising sharply and credit is no longer easily available,' she adds, 'so you can't garner funds there. In the past, many women would live off savings or even remortgage their home in order to enjoy the extended maternity rights that came into force in 2003. It coincided with the property boom, when there was plenty of equity and money was easy to borrow. Now it's harder to remortgage if you don't have a good credit rating or 25 per cent equity in your home. For a growing number of families, surviving on maternity pay is increasingly difficult.' And for the one woman in five in the UK who is now the main earner, returning to work to pay the mortgage is imperative.

Headhunter and mother of three Moira Benigson agrees. She has had both long (six months) and short (no time off) maternity leaves. 'When maternity benefits were increased to a year, people took them for granted and businesses just swallowed the extra cost. But I think it had a marked effect, both on business and mothers. You have to ask yourself, was it ever reasonable? How do you come back after such a long time? Now companies can't afford to give people a year's maternity leave.' After taking time off with her first two children, she took none with her third. 'I lived close to the office and someone used to bring my son in for his feeds. But that is a luxury because I run my own company. I think there is an argument for reintroducing yourself to the workplace gradually. Take three months off to bond with your baby, but after that do the odd day a week. To disappear for a year is a nightmare because the business will have moved on without you.'

Claire Brynteson, owner of personal assistance service Buy:Time and mother of three, has never taken maternity leave. 'As it's my own company, I could have taken time off but I was very keen to make sure I did a few phone calls a day or spent time looking at a new business plan. It's a tough world out there and I think people are nervous about maintaining their position.'

The micro maternity leave is still an extreme solution, though. One study of 17 countries recently showed that women's job prospects suffer after the five-month mark. Political scientist Ariane Hegewisch says, 'There are big and very long-term wage effects, even in low-paid jobs. And you lose out on seniority.' For women who want to work, the solution is less clear at the moment. Claire Brynteson says that although she loves what she does, she doesn't blame women who opt out entirely. 'Lots of women are fulfilled by giving up work. But there have to be choices other than, "Do I go back to work or don't I?" You've just got to create those choices yourself.'

FAST-WORKING CELEBRITY MUMS



Orlando Bloom's wife and Victoria's Secret model **Miranda Kerr** was back in skimpy swimsuits for a photo shoot just three months after son Flynn was born. And there wasn't a trace of baby fat in sight — she managed to shift two stone in just 12 weeks.



Actress-presenter **Denise Van Outen** went back to work two weeks after giving birth, having complained months before that she had been axed from a TV show because she was pregnant.



Model **Gisele Bündchen** had six weeks off after giving birth to her son Benjamin. At her comeback photo shoot sources declared that she was 'in shape as always'.



The Apprentice's **Karren Brady** took just three days' maternity leave after the birth of her daughter Sophia, now 14. 'That was a mistake. When Paolo [now 11] was born I took more time off and worked from home. I tried bringing both children into the office but that didn't work out. I had to have full-time help in the end.'



Actress **Nicole Kidman** took three weeks off after having daughter Sunday. 'I'd just given birth, so I was like, "I'm still a woman — I want to do this film! And I have a life other than feeding this baby." When you give birth you're itchy to get back to work, you want to feel that life still goes on.'



Fashion designer **Roksanda Ilincic** worked from her hospital bed with her first baby Efimia, and took just one week's maternity leave: 'I'd been building my label for so long, I didn't want to let it go.'

People:

[Dannii Minogue](#),
[Karren Brady](#),
[Gisele Bundchen](#),
[Denise Van Outen](#),
[Orlando Bloom](#),
[Nicole Scherzinger](#),
[Victoria Beckham](#),
[Rachida Dati](#),
[Miranda Kerr](#),
[Stella McCartney](#),
[Nicole Kidman](#),
[Pixie Lott](#)

Places:

[France](#),
[United Kingdom](#)

Comments (45)

- [Newest](#)
- [Oldest](#)
- [Best rated](#)
- [Worst rated](#)

[View all](#)

"It's such a shame that people can't spare a year to dedicate to their child, which they chose to bring into this world. And that goes double for the celebrities that can't even claim to be going back to work for monetary reasons." How many men do you know who take a year off after having a child? Do you not think the men "chose to bring it into this world" too? Why should it be up to the woman to lose her career? This is a complete double standard - when a male minister goes back to work a week after having a child no one is shocked. People would be amazed if a man took a month's paternity leave, let alone 3 or 6 months. Why should women be expected to do this? Yes, of course someone has to do the child care - but why does it have to be the female partner? Many women can't or choose not to breast feed anyway so that argument is irrelevant to them.

- Eleanor, UK, 15/8/2011 16:00

[Click to rate](#) __ Rating 3

[Report abuse](#)

Did any of these women actually want their babies? - FrouFrou, Leeds, 14 I am really disgusted and hurt by this comment. How dare you suggest that I don't want my baby! I have to go back to work next month when he will be 5 and a half months old not because I don't want him but because we need the money to pay essential bills. It's really upsetting to me and I'm utterly dreading it but have no other option. The condemnation of smug idiots just makes it worse. We managed to save a little and have lived off that but now it is dwindling and we cannot eek it out any further. There is a major recession on, not all women have the luxury of a well paid husband, many breadwinners (male or female) face cut hours and redundancy. I suppose you'd slate me if I gave it all up and went on the social too. Think before you open your uneducated mouth in future.

- AMT, UK, 15/8/2011 01:04

Click to rate __ Rating 4

[Report abuse](#)

Why have a child if you don't spend time with it or can't afford it? Why are people obsessed with having MORE children when the world is more than crowded enough. Why not adopt if you feel the urge, or better still just get sterilised and do the most environmentally friendly thing of all - ie not procreate!!

- Am, Norfolk, 14/8/2011 23:14

Click to rate __ Rating 1

[Report abuse](#)

It's almost as though people would rather sacrifice their kids than their lifestyle these days. Not EVERY woman who returns to work would be destitute if she didn't, but she would have to lose some of the things which people seem unable to live without now.....

- Flo, Bristol, 14/8/2011 20:02

Click to rate __ Rating 1

[Report abuse](#)

Catherine , St Albans, UK - Not all women have the choice to be stay at home mothers - I am the main breadwinner in my household and do not choose to work to afford 'luxuries' like foreign holidays and a car but simply to afford to keep a roof over our heads and pay our bills as we could not do this on my husband's wage alone. So please stop being so self righteous. Furthermore, if children of stay at home mothers supposedly 'do better' then how do you explain the endless numbers of badly behaved kids in our society whose mothers are obviously at home all day on benefits?

- Rachel, London, 14/8/2011 18:33

Click to rate __ Rating (0)

[Report abuse](#)

You want a kid You make the sacrifices There is no reason why an employer should pay the price Dont bother with the future generations stuff There are already way too many kids out there End of story GG

- Gia Glasgow, Scotland, 14/8/2011 17:45

Click to rate __ Rating 2

[Report abuse](#)

The views expressed in the contents above are those of our users and do not necessarily reflect the views of MailOnline.

Site Web



Ads by Google:

[High Cholesterol Level?](#) Discover how Flora pro.activ can help you lower your cholesterol www.floraproactiv.co.uk

[Flexible working rights](#) See How To Minimise Operational Costs While Increasing Productivity blog.bt.com/FlexiTime
[Over 50s Holiday Cover](#) The Over 50s Experts, 220 Medical Conditions Covered Free Of
Charge! www.Staysure.co.uk/Travel-Insurance
[XpertHR Liveflo](#) Step by step HR guidance on maternity leave and pay entitlement www.xperthr.co.uk/Liveflo
[Workplace Sick Leave](#) 5 Tips To Reducing Absence At Work Yours For Free! Download
Now www.CronerSolutions.co.uk/Absence
[Vodafone™ Free SIMs](#) 1000 Mins Free When You TopUp £10 Start By Getting Your Free SIM
Now! Vodafone.co.uk/FreeSIM
[Your Baby Can Read](#) Teach Your Child to Read Proven system and free gifts. www.yourbabycan.co.uk
[55/YO Mum Looks 35](#) Mum Reveals Shocking Trick for Erasing Wrinkles! Doctors Hate
Her www.CollagenRenew.net/Anti_Wrinkles

Find this story at www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-2024142/Special-report-The-rise-micro-maternity-leave.html

Published by Associated Newspapers Ltd

Part of the Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday & Metro Media Group

© [Associated Newspapers Ltd](#)