

# Helping pregnant women at work can hurt their chances of returning after maternity leave

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Courteous people routinely give up a seat on a bus, open a door or extend some other form of kindness to a pregnant woman. But when

colleagues at work try to lighten a pregnant woman's load, it can hurt her chances of returning to work after giving birth, according to new research from Rice University, the University of Memphis, Boston College and the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

"How Help During Pregnancy Can Undermine Self-Efficacy and Increase Postpartum Intentions to Quit" will appear in an upcoming edition of *Personnel Psychology*. The researchers, including Eden King, an associate professor of psychology at Rice, were interested in how [benevolent sexism](#)—the belief, rooted in [traditional gender roles](#), that men and [women](#) are better or worse at certain things—impacts a woman's feelings about her career during and following pregnancy.

The researchers surveyed 105 women on a weekly basis during their pregnancies and for nine months postpartum. They asked the women how often they experienced "helpful" behavior at work—for example, co-workers trying to shield them from unpleasant news, giving them easier tasks or assigning them lighter workloads. They also asked the women how this behavior made them feel about their work abilities.

Overall, they found that this "helpful" behavior—regardless of whether the women thought of it as helpful or harmful to their productivity—ultimately made them feel worse about themselves and their workplace abilities. When the women perceived the help as harmful to their productivity, it made them feel even less confident in their abilities. The worse these women felt about their abilities, King said, the less likely they were to return to the workforce following [maternity leave](#).

Oftentimes, this form of sexism can come across as positive or even complimentary—for example, wanting to treat a [pregnant woman](#) with kindness or shield her from unpleasantness at work, King said. However, she said this research clearly indicates it can have a long-lasting [negative](#)

[impact](#) on mothers' careers.

King and her fellow researchers hope this study will shed light on how subtle forms of sexism can impact people in the workplace and beyond.

**More information:** Kristen P. Jones et al, How help during pregnancy can undermine self-efficacy and increase postpartum intentions to quit, *Personnel Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12365](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12365)

Provided by Rice University

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