

The Pregnant Pause: Challenges in Reproductive Leave for Professional Dancers

Sarah R. B. Ahmadi, Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) Candidate, Australian Institute of Business

Dr Svetlana De Vos, Discipline Leader (Marketing and Entrepreneurship) and Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Dr Bora Qesja, Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Dr Samaneh Soleimani, Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

AIB Review, Issue 12

“A serious dancer puts her career first – a child comes after retirement.”

The celebrated choreographer, George Balanchine, was known for his attitude echoing [the above statement](#). Is this statement still an [unspoken reality](#) in the professional dance world? Can a dancer consider having a child when it can mean a departure from the [stage for a year](#) or more, shortening an already limited time-span career when she has [invested years](#) to attain it? What [challenges](#) do dancers who are planning or have had children face?

These, and many other questions, result from considering the personal, legal, physical and organisational implications of pregnancy for professional dancers. The article explores this matter by looking at the employer’s legal obligations (such as reproductive leave) as well as outlining some considerations of pregnancy and leave emerging from dancers’ lived experiences. Is there a gap between legislated reproductive leave and the reality faced by dancers?

Maternity Leave in Canada

[Provincial legislation](#) provides direction to companies and pregnant women. [For the employer, these stipulations](#) include an obligation to modify the functions of a job or a reassignment to another role on the provision of a medical certificate if the current position places her or her baby at risk. An employer cannot force an employee to take maternity leave unless it can be demonstrated that the dancer can not fulfil the requirements of the job. Moreover, during the maternity leave period, the employer continues to have responsibilities that include matching contributions to pension, health and disability benefit plans as well as informing the employee of opportunities for promotion and training.

Perhaps the most critical component of labour law in Canada is that an employer can not layoff, discipline, fire, suspend or demote an employee due to pregnancy, nor can pregnancy and reproductive leave impact a decision regarding training or promotion. While the legislation is clear, how are these guidelines applied in the dance world?

While there are differences in [maternity leave](#) management between provinces in Canada, there are common rights for pregnant dancers. While some companies have encoded specific maternity and parental leave details within the [employment contract](#), often companies reference [provincial](#)

[guidelines](#) in contracts, many with no details on pregnancy and maternity provisions. It is the dancer who must acquaint herself with the rights and responsibilities during pregnancy and maternity leave.

Emotional Considerations

[‘Pregnant women ... may feel like they're expecting a bundle of anxiety along with the joy’](#). To the dancer, navigating the waters of pregnancy leave, the added ambiguity can be overwhelming. Exacerbated by the psychological and emotional adjustments to changes in her body, in addition to [the uncertainty of maintaining a work-life balance](#) and employment, creates additional stress. While for some, dance provides a means of controlling her environment and her body through [living her passion](#), there are others for whom pregnancy creates anxiety, fear, [isolation](#) and [limits](#), not only in the dancer’s mind but for others inside and outside the dance industry.

Physical Considerations

Pregnancy results in several [changes to a woman’s body](#), impacting movement ability. Increased flexibility from hormonal changes requires care in preventing injuries; a shift in the body’s balance centre represents a higher risk of falling. Yet, taking care to adjust for changes that accompany pregnancy, a dancer who has been physically active at a professional level [can continue to move safely](#) (with regular follow-up and guidance from a medical practitioner) and [dance up to 39 weeks of pregnancy](#).

Despite a wealth of research that demonstrates the [beneficial role of movement](#) and exercise during pregnancy, there remains a sense that women must be careful and [‘take it easy’](#). Audience members may be uncomfortable with watching a pregnant woman dance or anxious for her or her baby’s health. Company leadership may struggle with the idea that they may be judged as careless with dancer safety.

Other than the perceived impact on safety, the concept of a dancer’s body being the physical representation of the company’s image is a consideration. Does a dissonance between a company’s image and the shape of a pregnant woman feature in their reaction?

Company Image

Dance companies are not alone in considering whether the pregnant body fits their ‘image’. There is ample evidence that some companies have [pulled pregnant women from performances](#) or did not call back company dancers after birth. Thus, while there are a few companies with dancers who perform during the second trimester, many [hide](#) their pregnancy [until their](#) shape changes.

Much of the ambivalence around visible physical changes during pregnancy results from the view of what dancers should look like. The idea of the ‘ideal’ body type for a dancer, particularly for ballet, continues to be promoted by [height](#), weight and proportion. Although [this view](#) is being challenged, it is still considered that a specific [physique](#) is a requirement for which dancers [should be held accountable](#). While appreciating that pregnancy can lend to enriched movement, other dancers struggle with the visual aesthetics of pregnant dancers on stage.

Juxtaposed to the legal requirements governing pregnancy and reproductive leave lies the fact that, just as athletes or manual labourers are in positions because of their physical abilities, dancers are hired based on how they look as well as their talent and skill set. This 'look' is one that fits with the artistic direction of the company. Many contracts have policies on visual image changes such as [tattoos, piercings, hair colour or length](#). Each dancer represents the 'face' of the company, and contracts can include a [code of conduct](#) that includes personal choice requirements to which dancers must adhere.

Given the visual presentation demanded of dancers, does a material change to body shape resulting from pregnancy contravene the artistic image of the company to the point that it can be demonstrated that she is no longer able to fulfil her duties as a dancer on stage? This is, and has been, the experience of many dancers. Yet, is removing a pregnant dancer from performance the only option?

Thinking Outside the Box

There is hope that the underlying bias around pregnancy and dance will change. Steps are being taken to raise awareness around [parenthood](#) in [dance](#) and the [normalisation](#) of [dancing through pregnancy](#). There are groups that support the [dancing mother](#) and are [pushing the boundaries](#) of speaking to the place [mothers and children have](#) in the dance world by creating opportunities for dancers to perform with their children. Yet, [breaking the barriers](#) of featuring a [pregnant woman in a performance](#) is still in its infancy.

While progress is being made, there is evidence to suggest that we must work to create broader awareness of the disconnect between legislated reproductive leave and the lived reality of so many in the field. Dancers continue to be held to specific aesthetic standards. However, the right to be a mother and pursue a vocational passion should not be mutually exclusive. To make this a reality, it is imperative to explore what we could be doing to raise awareness of the gap between reproductive leave policies and lived reality. What is our individual responsibility in this matter? Have we changed our own perspective?



Sarah R. B. Ahmadi

Doctorate of Business Administration Candidate, Australian Institute of Business

Sarah is a passionate proponent of children's programs with over 35 years of experience in organisational and team management, fund development and strategic planning, and an advocate for collaboration and cooperation. She leads a team of dedicated individuals in developing a multi-program approach to performing arts education and has built a community of compatible independent organisations that work in collaboration for synergies in operations, creating community ownership of the pursuit of excellence across the Arts, Athletics and Academia.



Dr Svetlana De Vos

Discipline Leader (Marketing and Entrepreneurship) and Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Svetlana is the Discipline Leader for Marketing and Entrepreneurship and a Senior Lecturer at AIB. She has over ten years' experience in industry and academia. Svetlana earned her PhD degree in Business at the University of Adelaide, for which she received the Dean Commendation Award for Doctoral Thesis Excellence. Svetlana holds an MBA (summa cum laude) from the Uzbek-American Academy in collaboration with Tashkent State University of Economics, and earned a Master of Public Health (cum laude) from the University of Maastricht, the Netherlands.



Dr Bora Qesja

Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Bora is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at AIB. She has over ten years of experience working in academia and industry. Bora obtained her PhD from the University of Adelaide (Australia) funded by the ARC Training Centre for Innovative Wine Production, graduated with honours from a MSc in Luxury Goods and Services from the International University of Monaco (Monaco), and has a BSc in Bioinformatics from Jacobs University (Germany), which equipped her with strong analytical skills.



Dr Samaneh Soleimani

Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Samaneh is a self-motivated researcher with a multi-disciplinary background in the marketing and tourism management fields. Samaneh holds a PhD in Business and Management from the University of South Australia (UniSA). Samaneh was awarded a University of South Australia President's Scholarship, School of Management/Marketing Scholarship and top-up Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science Scholarship to investigate the niche market of astrotourism.

Cite this article:

Ahmadi, S, De Vos, S, Qesja, B & Solemani, S 2024, 'The Pregnant Pause: Challenges in Reproductive Leave for Professional Dancers, *AIB Review*, Issue 12.

Explore more articles from [AIB Review](#)