

Lack of legal protection leaves working women vulnerable

Gemma Holliani Cahya

THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA

Her baby boy was only 10 days old when Anita — not her real name — decided to go back to her workplace in North Jakarta last year.

Although Anita would have liked to spend more time with her firstborn, breast-feed him and give her body more time to heal after delivery, she could not, for she feared she would lose her job.

"Her fear is real," said the chairwoman of the Joint Federation of Independent Labor Unions, Natalia, on Tuesday, adding that the federation had recorded many cases of female workers being fired because they insisted on taking maternity leave.

"We received a report of a female worker at a factory in Bekasi, who was fired after taking maternity leave. She had been working for the company as a contract worker for 20 years, yet they fired

her," Natalia said.

After being unemployed for a year and getting tired of begging the company to hire her again, the woman decided to leave her home in Bekasi, West Java and had returned to her hometown in Central Java, Natalia said.

Pregnancy and childbirth are among the most life-changing events for women. They put women through extreme physical and emotional changes, particularly after delivery. Thus, maternity leave is deemed important for mothers to recover and adapt to a new life.

Although Articles 82 - 84 of the 2003 Manpower Law entitle female employees to receive full wages during three months of maternity leave, many female workers in Indonesia do not get to enjoy that privilege in practice.

"They say we are protected by law, but that's not the case with female employees. We are ne-

glected," Natalia said.

A study conducted by women's rights group Perempuan Mahardhika from August to November on female workers employed at 45 factories in the Kawasan Berikat Nusantara (KBN) industrial complex in Cakung, North Jakarta, showed that 50 percent of them felt insecure about their job once they got pregnant.

"They hide their pregnancy, because they are worried they might lose their job or have their pay cut," Perempuan Mahardhika national secretary Mutiara Ika Pratiwi said, adding that "dismissal due to pregnancy among their female colleagues was rampant."

Although 80 percent of garment industry workers in Indonesia were women, their role in the industry was often underestimated, Mutiara said.

"They are supposed to have a strong support system during pregnancy and be protected by

the government, but if we look at the way the government handled this case, we see that what happened was the opposite," she said.

Such discriminatory treatment was also found in white-collar jobs sector. Records include the case of a female lecturer being demoted after pregnancy.

"She took maternity leave, but when she came back, she had been demoted to another position at her university," Mutiara said. "They did that because she was considered unproductive."

Meanwhile, Galita Nur, a member of the Federation of Indonesian Port and Transportation Workers, said the situation had worsened over time because of poor supervision by the authorities.

"There is no deterrent effect for employers [who fail to grant women their rights at work]. Maintaining this situation is tantamount to preventing women from getting pregnant," she said.