



BREAKING BARRIERS: ANALYZING THE CAUSES AND CHALLENGES OF CAREER BREAKS AMONG WOMEN

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the reasons behind career breaks among professional women, the challenges they face in balancing job responsibilities with family duties, and the suggestions they offer to address these issues. Utilizing a survey methodology, both closed-ended and open-ended questions were employed to gather comprehensive data from a sample of 120 professional women. The sample demographics include 45.9% of women aged 25-35, 40.5% aged 35-45, 10.8% aged 45-55, and 2.7% aged 55-65. Findings indicate that women from middle-class families are more likely to experience pressure to take career breaks compared to women from rural areas, who often lack social and financial stability. The survey results highlight a significant gender gap in terms of basic equality and quality of life, which exacerbates the challenges women face in maintaining continuous professional careers. The study reveals that societal expectations, childcare responsibilities, and the absence of supportive workplace policies are key factors contributing to career breaks. The respondents provided various suggestions for mitigating these issues, including the implementation of flexible working hours, increased access to childcare facilities, and enhanced parental leave policies. This paper contributes to the understanding of the intricate dynamics between professional and personal lives of women, offering insights into potential strategies for creating more supportive work environments that can help women sustain their careers alongside family responsibilities.

Keywords: career breaks, professional women, family responsibilities, gender equality, work-life balance

INTRODUCTION

Career contributes to be an essential part of an individual's identity and makes that individual an independent entity in the social structure of our society. Such identity and individuality should not be constrained through gender bias and should be something that every individual has access to without any gender stereotypes acting as a barrier.

Now, referring to the terms we quoted gender bias, this term denotes the restrictions and duties which we impose upon individuals in accordance to their gender and ultimately leading to defining the Gender Roles. Often these are the expectations that are imposed upon people according to their gender by the society and then they eventually turn into a self-imposed bias which becomes deep- rooted in our behavior and we accept the expectations or the set behavior which is established by the society.

Moving forward gender bias leads our way into creating Gender Stereotypes which can explain a generalized view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by males or females or the roles that are or should be performed by them. These stereotypes become an obstacle when it limits women's or men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives and life plans. However, women receive a shorter end.

Following these ideas it is often seen how careers of a woman take a back seat due to these gender roles and stereotypes. One of such aspects is Career Break as our society expects a woman to be the caretaker of the family and consider it as her prime duty due to which the majority of women are compelled to take a step-back from their established careers or even the ones that they are on the road to build.

It is a sad reality that despite of education and empowerment it becomes difficult for a working women to establish peaceful and supportive bridge between their personal and professional lives as the society clearly mentions that it is only a woman who has to put the needs of her in-laws, husband and children before anything else and she is the one who is burdened with the duty to maintain peace in the household. Hence, the solution that the society suggests is to make compromises in her personal sphere because they don't even consider a woman having a professional sphere as an independent being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

India has one of the lowest female participation rates in the workforce among developing countries. The country has seen a steady decline over the past two decades. Women in rural areas all over the country have shown a massive churn, a drop of 24% since 1993-1994. Women in India's urban areas saw a marginal decline from 25% to 22.5% during this period. The report also states that

from the year 2011-19, women employed in industrial work during this period witnessed a marginal decrease from 19.9% to 19%, whereas, engagement of women in urban areas has increased. Only in the recent period, attention was given to the fact that career growth in females is different to males in the same industry. (Wiggins, 1995)

There is an innate difference in how a woman is perceived in society having been limited to traditional roles of a caregiver and caretaker. She has been reduced to the roles of wife and mother in adulthood and hence, a difference in career trajectory. In contrast to males, who have never had to face any conflict between the complementary roles of husband and father. (Diamond, 1989). Even at work, a female is expected to be called to take care of her kid or her family during any emergency without any substantive pressure on the husband (Valdez and Gutek, 1989). These biased gender norms also play a huge part in the way a woman is granted maternity leave and how it affects her decision to take a break from her career.

The perpetuation of the gender gap in the Indian workplace is attributed to the very low level of female participation in the economy and the comparatively meagre remuneration received by women, as seen by India's 136th ranking in terms of estimated earned income. (Rawat et al., 2019). The unpaid nature of work in India exhibits a significant gender disparity, with women contributing an average of 66 per cent of unpaid labour, while males contribute only 12 per cent. The report was published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2017.

The reasons, according to industry experts and economists, include a general dearth of jobs, discrimination against women in a patriarchal society, the lack of a family support system in an environment marked by quarantined living conditions, and employers aiming to reduce the cost of employees by increasing working hours. Due to the pandemic, the worst hit is the working women, even more so, single-working mothers, who had to take a strong hit on their job as well as with the crippling economy of the country, while working hard to ensure good education for their children (O'Donnell et al., 2021). Living in a patriarchal society, women work as labourers or in manufacturing units, the employers are opting for male members as they are able to put in more working hours as compared to women. This notion stems from the fact that most women are handling their houses while managing to work full-time.

The ‘opt-out revolution,’ a term coined by the US media (Belkin, 2003) to describe an apparent trend among college-educated, married, professional women of electing to leave their careers either temporarily or permanently to become full-time mothers.

A minor detail to look at is that the majority of the rural population has women who work on their lands as farmers or work in production houses, manufacturing units, as maids in someone else’s homes, etc. but are not a part of this data as such small works are not considered to be part of the growth index or as we knew it as the GDP of the country. Unfortunately for us, all such household work still works even if not counted in the economy of the country.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the reasons for the career break of professional women.
2. To study the problems faced by professional women while doing a job along with family responsibilities.
3. To assess the suggestions given by professional women to continue their job.
4. To assess the legal support in the form of policies, acts and organizational support to professional women to continue their job.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a survey method which includes closed-ended questions as well as open-ended questions. 120 professional women are selected as sample for this study out of which 45.9% of women are between 25 to 35 age group, 40.5 % of women are in the age group 35 to 45 years, 10.8% women are in the age group 45- 55 years, 2.7% are in the age group 55-65 years. They are from various fields like law, Education, Technology, Human resource, Banking etc. as professionals.

FINDINGS

1. Reasons behind leaving a job

- The major reason for leaving a job is responsibilities towards family as mentioned by almost half of the women i.e. 56.1%.
- The second important reason for leaving a job is Pregnancy as mentioned by 28.8% of professional women.
- 7.6% of women mentioned the reason for leaving their job is the transfer of their husband's job.
- 9.1% of professional women expressed the pressure from families to leave the job in order to give more priority to family and children especially when the husband's earnings are sufficient to run the family.

- Work pressure emerged as a reason only for 4.5% of professional women.
- 3% mentioned marriage as a reason for leaving their job.
- 1.5 % of women mentioned other reasons such as politics in the office or health.

DISCUSSION

1. 75% of professional women left the job when they were in their 30's whereas only 10 % of women left before 30 and 15% left after 40 years of their age. It clearly indicates and supports the reason. This is a crucial phase when career is in the rising phase but at the same time, family responsibilities, pregnancy or small kids are other demanding responsibilities, especially in the case of India. Due to the patriarchal system, gender stereotyping and male-dominated society, there is no support available for women.
2. Some of them i.e. 67.2% of women took voluntary decisions, while others i.e. 25.4% had to take them under pressure and by force. They were finding it very difficult to manage home and family due to noncooperation or non-availability of assistance from home and lack of support from the organization as well.
Mainly women miss the feeling of independence, passion and satisfaction which they used to get from the job.
3. 23.7% felt it was the wrong decision whereas 36.8% felt it was the right decision. 39.5 % are not clear. Overall there is a dilemma, and confusion in the minds, as for them it is a choice between your children and your dreams.

When asked to give suggestions to other women who are in this dilemma the responses are suggestive. Mainly this decision is not simple as it involves many elements and concerns. It depends upon the situation and the support available. So overall all these women feel that it is everyone's personal problem and so they should take decisions and take accountability for it. Most of them suggested not leaving their jobs and finding solutions.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMPACT

The deep-rooted issue of women taking a career break in India is of social nature rather than a legal one and requires an understanding of what compels women, in their prime career, to take a break. It is always expected of women to take care of their family and put the needs of their husbands, in-laws and children ahead of their own needs and dreams and "compromise" to live a happy and sated lifestyle. Although some women wish to have that social and economic security while staying at home, many don't.

India being a country of cultural and religious diversity faces issues in its diversity. Cultural

values put the spotlight on women in all the wrong ways and provide them with an ultimatum of sacrifice with the promise of a happy married life. The presumption of Indian families that a girl child should be allowed to have economic and social freedom after she is married is flawed in so many ways. Not only does it instil low self-confidence in girls and women but is also sexist in nature while showing misogyny through and through.

The first issue prevalent in India, inequality in genders, can be understood by the theory of social differentiation, the one which we have been fighting for a long time now with not much progress. The process by which one institutional activity is separated and specialised into two or more independent institutional activities is known as social differentiation. Social differentiation according to Karl Marx introduces the idea that social differentiation is associated with inequality and that conflict among social classes is one of the principal motors of social change.¹ Differentiation was accompanied by the functional need for increased integration and interdependence in more complex societies. H. Spencer, an English philosopher who borrowed the term "differentiation" from biology and declared it a universal law of the evolution of matter from the simple to the complex, was the first to propose a theory of differentiation at the end of the nineteenth century. The division of labour, according to Spencer, is an expression of the universal differentiation process in human society. E. Durkheim, a French sociologist, believed differentiation resulting from labour division to be natural law and linked social function differentiation to population density and the deepening of interpersonal and intergroup connections, M. Weber, a German philosopher and sociologist, regarded distinction as the product of the rationalisation of values, norms, and interpersonal interactions.²

As a society, we need changes that must be as per the notions of right and wrong.

Based on these definitions and the inequality in opportunities, wages, rights, etc faced by women (which includes marginalised sectors as well) in India, we can see that factors including but are not limited to gender norms, social stigma patriarchy, there is a huge gap between genders in terms

¹ <https://nptel.ac.in/content/storage2/courses/109103023/download/Lecture%2014.pdf>

² "social differentiation." *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, 3rd ed., 2000. HarperCollins Publishers 31 Jul. 2021

of basic equality and quality of life. Such factors have a direct play in the say of women in choices of career and the paths they end up taking as well as them not having much say in when they leave and join back their aspirations and jobs.

Career break among women varies as per their social class and economic backgrounds, that is to say that women from middle class families are more prone to be pressured to take a career break due to having a financial net than women from rural areas doing labour work due to lack of social and financial stability. This is known as social stratification is the allocation of individuals and groups according to various social hierarchies of differing power, status, or prestige. Although divisions are often based on gender, religion, or race and ethnicity.

According to **Ogburn and Nimkeff**, "*The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification.*" As per **Raymond and Murray**, "*social stratification is a horizontal division of society into higher and lower social units.*" For **Lundberg**, "*a stratified society is one marked by inequality by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being lower and higher.*"

In India, there is a looming pressure of society on women to graduate at a certain age, to marry at a certain age and to settle at a certain age as well. With this pressure from the family, relatives and society to follow a certain predetermined path.

POLICIES AND ACTS ENACTED FOR WOMEN ON CAREER BREAK

MATERNITY BENEFIT ACT, 1961

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 is legislation that was enacted to protect the employment-related interests of women during their maternity, by providing full wages during their absence from work during their maternity or during the period of aftercare. The act holds its applicability in factories, mines, plantations and all government organizations and even to any commercial establishment where more than 10 people are appointed.

The following act was enacted to ensure that society follows the idea of equity, as women need special care and rest during certain situations and to see that a woman's career is not at stake due to her maternity. As an educated and gender-neutral society leading towards development and growth, it becomes our sole duty to create a system of balance and ensure that maternity should not act as a hindrance to the personal growth of females in their careers and they are forced to take a backseat.

Although different states in the Union of India have amended these policies as per their societal conditions and needs, the aim and the objective remains the same. Recently, in 2017 the above- laid legislation was amended and then further enacted where in the amendment

proposed a new idea to introduce Crèche Facilities as well.

To understand the scenario, through this paper the focus would be laid through describing the situations of two states i.e Kerala and Bihar. Both the states have different backgrounds as well as varied literacy rates. The rate of literacy in Kerala is 96.2% and in Bihar, it is 70.9%.³

KERALA'S SCENARIO

Kerala is the first state in the country that decided to bring its female employees including the teachers of unaided private educational institutions under the umbrella of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961. It has been observed for the first time that a state government is taking measures towards bringing the unaided private education sector under the act mentioned above. The central government has accepted the state's request of increasing the extent and reach of the Maternity Act. Through these changes now even the unaided private institutions may avail the benefits provided under the ambit of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.

BIHAR'S SCENARIO

On the other hand in the state of Bihar, the application of the Maternity Benefit Act completely differs. In January 2015 the state government tried to increase the benefits of the act by increasing the maternity leave from 135 days to 180 days. Despite this, the state's application of the act has certain limitations attached to it. The benefits such as the leaves are granted to any women who serve as government servants for two children only during the entire period of their service.

³<https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/international-literacy-day-2020-kerala-most-literate-state-in-india-check-rank-wise-list/story-IodNVGgy5hc7PjEXUBKnIO.html>

OBSERVATIONS

Through the above scenarios of two different states of India a state of comparison can be drawn along with certain observations. Although both the states adopted the Maternity Benefit Act but still they differ in its implication and success.

On one hand we have Bihar, where the literacy rate is low as compared to Kerala and the majority of people are engaged in the primary working sector. On the contrary in Kerala we have a high literacy rate and the majority of people here are engaged in the tertiary working sector.

This draws our attention that the states where the working sector for women is majorly constituted in the tertiary or the secondary sector with skilled workers, the aim of the act proposed is achieved, whereas women working in the primary sector or the secondary sector with unskilled workers still lack in the effective implementation of the act.

Another observation that can be drawn from the above cases is that the implementation of the act still limits itself to the Government employees, although Kerala did become the first state in the country to extend the perspective of this act by giving its benefits even to the female employees including the teachers of unaided private educational institutions under the umbrella of Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.

LOOPHOLES AND SUGGESTIVE MEASURES FOR THE ACT

The Maternity Benefit Act, 2005 is a step forward taken towards ensuring and addressing the problem of how women have to sometimes take a career break but the break should never turn a women's career with a full stop. Still the act has several loopholes attached to it which are as follows-

1. The act evidently addresses the females employed in the government sector only, although few private sectors are adopting these policies but still not every state has control over regulation of the same act.
2. The act has a limited scope, as the females employed only in the tertiary sector or in the secondary sector with skilled workers are constituted under the benefits of the act. Due to which women working in the primary sector and in the secondary sector with unskilled workers are often neglected and not considered under the benefits of this act.

CONCLUSION

Through a survey-based study involving 120 professional women, it becomes evident that women often face pressure to take career breaks due to family obligations, pregnancy, and societal norms that prioritize their roles as caregivers. The research highlights the significant impact of gender stereotypes, lack of support systems, and societal expectations on women's career trajectories, leading many to make difficult decisions between their personal and professional lives.

In India, where gender disparity is pronounced, women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid labor, face discrimination in the workforce, and struggle to maintain a work-life balance. The study reveals that women from middle-class families are more likely to face pressure to take career breaks due to financial constraints, while those in rural areas encounter challenges stemming from social and financial instability. The research underscores the need for gender equality, policy reforms, and organizational support to empower women to continue their careers without sacrificing their personal aspirations.

The findings indicate that a significant number of women leave their jobs in their 30s, a critical phase when career growth is essential, but family responsibilities often take precedence. The study shows that many women feel compelled to leave their jobs due to societal expectations, lack of support, and the struggle to balance work and family life. While some women make voluntary decisions to leave their jobs, others feel pressured or forced to do so, highlighting the complex nature of the challenges faced by professional women.

Moreover, the sociological impact of women taking career breaks, emphasizes that the issue is deeply rooted in social norms rather than legal constraints. It underscores the need to challenge traditional gender roles, address cultural biases, and promote gender equality in both the workplace and society at large. By examining the implications of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, in different states like Kerala and Bihar, the research reveals disparities in the implementation and effectiveness of policies aimed at supporting women in the workforce.

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