

Women's Career Exit and Reentry

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

India has witnessed increased participation of women in all sectors of labor market. However, the career path of Indian women is not a continuous one. Despite the overflowing career prospects, women continue to quit their jobs. Some reenter, while others are forever lost to the labor markets. Analyzing the reasons for their discontinuous careers, will go a long way in resolving the talent crunch, that today's industries face. This study aims at identifying the factors contributing to the career exit and reentry of Indian women. The research method used was in-depth semi-structured telephone and direct interviews, with a group of 40 women in India, who have reentered the career after a break. The study provides better insights to the needs, problems and career aspirations of Indian women who wish to reenter. The findings of this study would also help in women talent retention in organizations.

Introduction

Globally, there has been considerable interest in understanding the position of women in today's workforce, by both the media and the academicians. In India, the recently released 66th round data on 'Employment and Unemployment' by the National Sample Survey Organization, has alarming findings on the women's involvement in Indian workforce. According to Census of India survey, conducted in 2011, the labor force participation rate among women in India has reduced from 29.4% in 2004-05 to 23.3% in 2009-10. This confirms the fact that, women are being lost to labor markets in sufficient numbers. It is understandable that, women's career path is different than that of men with respect to the continuity of their careers. Career breaks are more common among women than men. Although a number of reasons have been identified by researchers for women's career break, motherhood is being portrayed as the most important cause. For some, the break is permanent and for the others, it is not. Sadly, despite having the necessary skills and talent, most of the women who reenter after a break, suffer a penalty in terms of either pay or status.

Researchers have also tried to explain the distinct career trajectories of women based on several gender specific career models. Several workplace-based strategies on career exit and reentry of women have also been studied extensively. However, there are very few studies to explain this scenario in the Indian context. Despite the several advancements made by the educated Indian women with respect to their identities, Indian society has always remained tradition-bound. Hence, studying the career exit and reentry of women in Indian context becomes paramount due to its unique culture and societal structures. The aim of this study is to fill the gap with respect to the scarcity of research in this context and in finding the reasons, which

contribute to pushing a woman out of workforce and, those that help in a woman reentering her career after a reasonable period of break.

Literature Review

Career Exit

Women's careers are mostly characterized by non linear interrupted patterns that are created by push and pull factors [1]. They take off-ramps, indulge in part time careers and hence have a hard time in maintaining a continuous career, which is necessary for recognition in the male competitive workforce. The result is, a lot of talented women either leaving their careers or getting sidelined in their careers [2]. Literature cites several reasons for women's career exit. Russo [3] declares that, the mother is expected to be the primary psychological parent. Hence, it is not surprising when, 52% of women cited child-care as the most important cause to exit the career [4]. House-hold responsibilities become the onus of women as men may avoid shouldering family responsibilities due to their own beliefs about husband-wife relationships [5]. Additionally, social pressure regarding appropriate behavior may also bar them from sharing house-hold responsibilities [6]. The career decisions of women are generally made on analyzing their impact on the members of their family [7]. Hence, women do quit careers for family reasons. Relocation of spouse is another important reason for women's career exit [1]. It is found that, women are more likely and more frequent than men to relocate for their spouses [8]. Additionally, the term 'daughter-track' similar to 'mommy-track', captures another important reason for career exit namely, elder-care, where women quit their careers to take care of their elderly parents [9].

There are a few workplace related reasons, which lead to career exit too. Perceived lack of opportunities for advancement, discrimination and harassment are such factors [10]. Due to fewer top level women executives and lesser role models, women lack the inspiration to succeed and may decide that continuing the careers are not worth the effort [11]. Non compatible organizational cultures may also push a woman out of work-force [12]. Higher Education, Sufficiency of Partner's income, Social Network, Work load, Bias and Stereotype, Safety and Travel are other factors that may force a woman to quit her career [2,13].

Career Reentry

Similar to career exit, reentry to the career is another complex phenomenon. It involves a lot of personal and environmental dimensions to facilitate a smooth reentry. Research has identified a lot of factors that may force a woman to decide on reentering the workforce. Career orientation and salience are good predictors of workforce reentry for women with young children [14]. Women who have more traditional views of women's role, are less likely to return [15]. Some women find that, their identity is lost during break and that they suffer from boredom and isolation [16]. This may also make them consider reentering the career. According to Bernard [17], employment is viewed by some women as a means to escape the demands of young children. Additionally, women who were the primary bread-winners of the family had no option, other than to return to the workforce [18]. Cabrera [1] found that, having an income, the satisfaction of having a career, intellectual stimulation, career development and job opportunity are some of the reasons for a woman to reenter the workforce. Financial independency, friendships at work may also contribute towards a woman reentering the workforce.

However, deciding to reenter, by itself, is not sufficient for a successful reentry. Spousal support remains an important factor that promotes a woman's reentry [19]. Additionally, having

taken a break, the woman might feel less confident in her skills and knowledge as they would have become outdated and that, she might be unaware of the personal and technological changes which might have occurred during her absence. Hence, she might lose confidence in herself and may be reluctant to return to work [16]. Finding an affordable child-care is another big problem for women who wish to reenter [20]. Underdeveloped professional networks can also be a big inhibiting factor for a woman who wishes to reenter [1]. The length and type of career break may also impact the woman's decision to reenter [21]. Longer the break, less likely is the decision to reenter. Additionally, women with higher educational qualifications are more likely to return than women with lower educational qualifications [21]. Negative attitudes from significant others in the family, can highly discourage a woman from reentering [22]. Prior work experience also has a positive effect on a woman's career re-entry. On top of all these, employers are more prone to discriminate against women who take child-related career breaks. They expect the first break to be followed by similar child related breaks in future [23].

While leaving a career is easier, reentering a career is much more difficult. Even more challenging is prevailing in a career after a successful re-entry. One of the most important challenges is the income penalty. Women reentering the career after a break, face a definite income penalty [21]. This penalty is higher if the break is long and child-related. Gender bias and stereotyping continue to prevail in organizations and, women who follow traditional work-life balance models (part-time, flexi-time, etc.) get discriminated [24].

There are a few references made in literature as to why a woman must refrain from continuing as a homemaker. Being away from work, not only poses serious risks for the women and their children because of the present divorce rate, but also because husbands may become unemployed, incapacitated or die at a relatively early age [25]. The homemaker role is low in status and forces financial dependency [19]. Additionally, the bargaining capability of a woman who is jobless, tends to be low, even in families where all goes well [26].

From the organizations' perspective, the benefits obtained by hiring women are tremendous. The tugs and pulls of family life as suggested by various researches, explain a part of the divergence between male and female career paths, but other kinds of distinctions need to be weighed too. Women's ambitions are much different from those of men. While money is the important motivator for men, it is much less important for women. Several other factors which include high quality colleagues, recognition by bosses and flexi time options are the real motivators for women to work [2]. When opportunities for career advancement exist, women are more loyal [10]. Realizing the different 'value proposition' of women is critical for organizations that attempt to hire and retain women. According to Valentino Carlotti, the president of Goldman Sachs bank in Brazil, "Because of the obstacles they have often had to overcome, they bring a determination and a can-do approach to coming up with solutions" [2].

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- What are the primary reasons for career exit among Indian women?
- What are the challenges faced by women before and after career reentry?
- What are the primary reasons for career reentry?
- What are the supporting factors that facilitate career reentry?

Methodology

This study, with its qualitative nature, was designed to shed comprehensive knowledge about the career exit and reentry phases of women. The 40 participants were chosen to be of no particular domain or industry. They all satisfied the following criteria adopted for this study:

- Must have full-time job prior to the break
- Should have formally resigned the job prior to the break
- Duration of the break is for a minimum of 3 months
- Break due to maternity reasons is considered only in the cases of women who have formally resigned. Maternity leave and sabbaticals are not considered.

This study used in-depth semi-structured telephone and personal interviews. Women were asked to express in detail their career choices and about what led to those decisions. They expressed their career choices and prioritized the causes for them, when more than one factor was involved. The responses of their families, during the time of exit or entry, were also recorded. Their general attitudes and beliefs on career exit and reentry were also noted. They also shared their aspirations and where they consider themselves to be in future. Additionally, when answers were required to be clarified regarding their feelings or views, follow-up questions were asked. This was done during the interviews or later through e-mail exchanges. Interviews were recorded and detailed notes were prepared which were transcribed immediately. Data was analyzed using basic descriptive statistics and content analysis.

In order to validate the findings, the interview transcription and summary notes prepared were sent to five of the participants. The accuracy of the transcription and the interpretation of the data was validated. Peer examination strategy was also used wherein, a research associate with knowledge in qualitative data analysis, was asked to review as findings were developed. The research associate independently reviewed the content themes and the individual interview transcripts to confirm the categorical placement for each. The analyses and ratings from all the researchers were most thoroughly similar and matched well.

Results

In terms of sample description, it was found that around 59% of women surveyed took career break during the age bracket of 26-30 years. 70% of women took career break with duration of 2-4years. 40% of women found job after career break through personal contacts. The results of this study are analyzed under the following 4 sections: a) Reasons for Career Exit, b) Reasons for Career Reentry, c) Challenges faced before and after reentry and d) Factors that enable successful Career Reentry.

Reasons for Career Exit

To address this question, the participants were asked to describe the important factors that prompted them to quit their careers. These include child care (67.5%), husband's job and relocation (27.5%), marriage and relocation (25%), seeking new opportunities and challenges (10%), dependent care responsibility (10%), higher education (7.5%) and unsuitable working hours (2.5%).

Table 1: Reasons for Career Exit

Reason for exit	Word count	Percentage
Child birth	27	67.50%
Husband's job and relocation	11	27.50%
Marriage and relocation	10	25%
Seeking new opportunities and challenges	4	10%
Dependent care	4	10%
Higher education	3	7.5%
Unsuitable working hours	1	2.5%

From the results obtained, it is clear that child care tops the factors that push a woman out of workforce. However, other factors like spousal relocation and dependent care responsibility also cause considerable career exit.

Reasons for Career Re-entry

To address this question, participants were asked to detail factors that were responsible for their decision on career reentry. The following are the factors that were highlighted by the respondents: Financial reasons (35%), Passion for career (35%), Children grown up and at school (35%), Need to be self supporting(32.5), Search for identity (feels good about oneself) (27.5%), Boredom (25%), To regain status/power (20%) and Friendship at workplace (20%).

Table 2: Reasons for Career Re-entry

Reason for re entry	Word count	Percentage
Financial Reasons	9	35%
Passionate about career	3	35%
Children grown up and at school	9	35%
Need to be self-supporting	4	32.50%
Search for identity	8	27.50%
Boredom	3	25%
To regain status/power	8	20%
Friendships at workplace	8	20%

Career reentry is not always voluntary. This is highlighted by one participant's statement as follows:

"I had always assumed that I would not work after the baby was born. But due to our financial difficulties, I had no other choice but to rejoin the job. As soon as our financial commitments get fulfilled, I will become a full-time stay at home mom."

Some participants were strong in their views towards having a career. Here are some interesting statements:

"I don't think why we can't manage both personal and professional lives. I don't like the thought of having to choose between them both."

"I feel that one cannot be whole if they don't do something they wish to. I never thought of sacrificing my career for my family. I was very clear from the beginning that I would always return to work after my years of career break."

Hence, a positive and career oriented attitude goes a long way in contributing towards career reentry.

Challenges faced before and after reentry:

When the participants were questioned on the challenges that they had faced before reentering the career, the following were the most listed ones: Job became redundant (47.5%), Lack of confidence (42.5%), Commitment and productivity issues (42.5%), Depreciation of skills (40%), Difficulty to find job/job search (37.5%), No promotional opportunities (32.5%), Lower quality job/status (27.5%) and no suitable position to return to (22.5%).

Table 3: Challenges faced while Re-entry

Challenges faced while re entry	Word count	Percentage
Job became redundant	19	47.50%
Lack of confidence	17	42.50%
Commitment and productivity issues	17	42.50%
Depreciation of skills	16	40%
Difficulty to find job/job search	15	37.50%
No promotional opportunities	13	32.50%
Lower quality job/status	11	27.50%
No suitable position to return to	9	22.50%

Before reentry, most of the women had found it difficult to get an appropriate job. According to them, the longer duration of the break had made it more difficult in getting a job. Lack of confidence is another challenge that women face while trying to reenter, especially the single mothers. One particular participant remarks that,

“When I got separated from my husband, I was at the lowest curve of my life. I was already out of job for the previous 7 years. I had a 7 year old daughter to take care of. I was under a lot of stress and had no confidence that I would land a job and get on with my life. It took me 10 months to finally get a job and those months were the worst that I had ever faced in my life.”

Thus, emotional factors also pose a major challenge to women trying to reenter. When faced with considerable stress, women do tend to lose confidence. This makes the already challenging job hunt even more difficult.

Results regarding the challenges faced by the participants after reentry highlighted the following as the major ones: Inability to adapt to work environment(47.5%), Re-entry culture shock(45%), Sense of loss and isolation(45%), Working hours(42.5%), Mother’s guilt feeling(42.5%), Psychological stress(40%), Change in technology(37.5%), Discrimination from colleagues(35%), Re-socialisation(32.5%), Income penalty(30%), Travelling(27.5%), No time to spend with family(25%).

Table 4: Challenges faced after Re-entry

Challenges faced after re entry	Word count	Percentage
Inability to adapt to work environment	19	47.5
Re-entry culture shock	18	45
Sense of loss and isolation	18	45
Working hours	17	42.5
Mother’s guilt feeling	17	42.5
Psychological stress	16	40
Change in technology	15	37.5
Discrimination from colleagues	14	35

Re-socialisation	13	32.5
Income penalty	12	30
Travelling	11	27.5

After reentry, most of the challenges come from the workplace. Shifting to work environment do take some getting used to for most of the women. Additionally, working mothers have a lot of guilt feeling in leaving their children at home or not spending sufficient time. This is rightly put forth by one young mother's statement:

“Leaving my daughter behind was the most difficult thing I had to do. Having my mother at home to look after her didn't make things better for me. For the initial 1 month, I was so full of guilt at not being able to take care of my kid myself.”

Factors that enable successful Career Reentry

The factors that enhanced the chances of a successful Career Reentry are found to be: Educational level (60%), Work Experience (42.5%), Constant Contact with Employers and colleagues (35%), quality of work done before career break (32.5%), age (27.5%), Skill Enhancements during break (25%), Re-entry programs/career internship programmes (22.5), Social network (15%) and short duration of break (15%). Post reentry, factors like support from family (47.5%), good daycare (35%), flexible working hours (30%), organizational support (22.5%), work-life balance programs (22.5%) and having workplace near home (2.5%) helped the reentry women.

Table 5: Factors that supported Re-entry

Factors that supported reentry	Word count	Percentage
Educational level	24	60%
No. of years of work experience prior to career break	17	42.50%
Constant contact with employers & colleagues	14	35%
Quality of work done before career break	13	32.50%
Age of women at the time of re –entry	11	27.50%
Skill enhancements during break	10	25%
Re-entry programs/career internship program	9	22.50%
Social network	6	15%
Short duration of break	6	15%
Support from family	19	47.50%
Good day care/maid	14	35%
Flexible working hours	12	30%
Organizational support	9	22.50%
Work-life balance programs	9	22.50%
Work place near homes	1	2.50%

Having good education and work experience made a significant difference to women while trying to reenter. Training and Reentry programs, attended during the break period, also helped in some cases. Apart from the afore mentioned skill based assets, attitudinal orientation and the network with which a woman associates herself also go a long way in enabling a successful career reentry. This is reiterated by a participant whose statement is given below:

“In my family, every woman, including my mother, is working. When I left my job to have a baby, I began to feel very awkward. I would avoid going to family functions as it would mean facing all sorts of questions regarding my quitting the job. I felt as if my status has gone down. Though all my family members completely supported my decision, I was of the opinion that I had made a mistake. Hence as soon as I delivered the baby, I reentered back to my previous job.”

Interestingly, there was another participant who also asserted the same view:

“I had always thought that, when my mother could manage both family and her profession, why can't I.”

These statements highlight the influence of one's network on the person's attitudes and values. Interestingly, these statements also highlight the fact that, women having working mothers, do tend to decide more towards reentering the workforce.

Conclusion

In accordance with the literature, the findings indicate that the reasons for women's entry and exit are multiple and complex. Majority of women do seem to quit for child care and its related issues. The other major reasons for exit are relocation of spouse and marriage. In addition to these reasons, dependent care, higher education and seeking new opportunities also lead to career exit.

When it comes to career reentry, financial reasons, passion for career, children grown up and being at school, need to be self supporting, search for identity, boredom, to regain status/power and friendship at workplace are some of the reasons that lead to a woman's reentry. However, irrespective of these reasons, a woman's decision to reenter or not, may not be always by choice. Several economic and social factors play a role in preventing or facilitating a woman's reentry. Adding to these factors are the attitudes and values of the women themselves, which tip the scales of the final decision. This is evident from the fact that not all women suffer from poor self esteem and commitment issues, which do affect a woman's reentry in general. Apart from these reasons, the network with which a woman associates herself may also influence her decision to reenter.

Though this study has given a general view on women's career exit and reentry decisions, a lot of other dimensions are yet to be studied. Further research can be carried out in understanding if women belonging to high income group are more prone to reenter. Additionally, though the study has pointed out that, not many women are motivated to reenter by flexible work policies and reentry programs, additional research needs to be done to dig out the causes for it. The impact of mother's working status on reentry women is also a cause for a more detailed research.

Even though organizations provide a lot of incentives and provisions like flexible hours, the actual implementation of such benefits need to be analyzed as, according to a few participants, a lot of them are yet to be implemented in some organizations. Additionally, these provisions are not, by themselves, sufficient to motivate women's reentry. The attitudes and beliefs of the women towards career and family responsibilities need to be addressed to bring about a considerable change. This can only be achieved with proper intervention from the government regarding maternity and paternity benefits and, considerable awareness on employees' rights and privileges.

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