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Decisions at re-entry post child-birth: Experiences of Indian women

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Abstract

This paper shall focus on the experiences of women who left their jobs post child-birth and returned to the industry after a prolonged absence. Studies have examined dilemma faced by the working mother and subsequent choices of family versus work. In addition, most studies report the conflicting demands of work and family for women (almost negligible for men) (Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2019) which is perpetuated by organizational policies which are framed in gender neutral terms but accessed and even approved majorly for use by female employees.

Very few studies have examined experiences of re-entering by women who had chosen to leave the workforce voluntarily post child-birth irrespective of availability of paid maternity leave. While their exit may be examined by the previous theories of work-life and dilemmas or even salience of personal identity over professional identity, such theories are insufficient as they do not account for their social experiences which may impact their break and subsequent re-entry. Instead of taking the predicted change in career (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), these women seek to re-enter at similar or higher positions in the same industry, offering similar work hours and expectations as before. We use the term re-entry women to describe such women and seek to understand their experiences of re-entry. Based on inductive thematic analysis of interviews with thirty-eight women in various professions, we present their concerns regarding re-entry. Using Social role theory and Role congruity theory we describe three broad motives of women during re-entry and the strategies they adopted in order to re-enter and post re-entry into the corporate workforce.

Keywords: re-entry, role congruity, work-family

Introduction

Working lives are now faced with several interruptions, either due to employers' decisions, new regulations or individuals' choices, resulting in breaks, slumps, stagnations or even exits (Theunissen, Verbruggen, Forrier & Sels, 2011). These interruptions, caused by involuntary or voluntary reasons such as medical, family-related or self-employment, give rise to various categories of job seekers. One such bracket includes women seeking to re-enter the workforce after a period of voluntary exit. The exit of women is significantly high in middle and senior levels of an organization (Catalyst, 2013; Confederation of Indian Industry, 2013). Most South Asian countries face a challenge of low labor force participation of women (International Labor Organization, 2015). The striking under-representation of women in senior corporate leadership positions continues to attract a great deal of scholarly and policy-making attention (Catalyst, 2013; Confederation of Indian Industry, 2013).

One explanation for these dwindling numbers could be the impact of inflexible gender roles that increase the work load on women who have to manage child-care, elder-care and housekeeping responsibilities, resulting in higher turnover. For example, over 80% of Indians believe that “changing diapers, giving kids a bath, and feeding kids are the mother’s responsibility” (Sabnavis, 2015). Supporting the above, studies have shown child birth, among other family- related reasons, as the most prominent factor of turnover of women employees (Glass & Riley, 1998; Hirsh, 1992; Ravindran & Baral., 2013; Schilling, 2012). Gender-based discrimination and stereotyping against women increases when the woman starts a family resulting in fewer opportunities of growth and low job satisfaction (Joshi, Neely, Emrich, Griffiths & George, 2015; Little, Major, Hinojosa and Nelson, 2015) which is one of the major factors affecting exit of a woman employee. Studies on re-employment and re-entry highlight the presence of gender-based differences (for examples see Andersson, 2015; Koeber & Wright, 2006). Women face the bias of employers due to prevalent

stereotypes about women workers, resulting in significantly less likelihood to be re-employed than men (Koeber & Wright, 2006). Koch, D'Mello and Sackett (2015) showed the significant presence of gender congruity bias of employers in various experimental studies on hiring decisions. Andersson (2015) cited gender as the most significant predictor of re-employment in a study of blue-collar employees where males were seen to have greater success in getting reemployed as compared to women. A study by Arun et. al. (2004) reported higher wage penalty for women if they had taken a career break in order to care for their young. Thus the experience of seeking re-entry by women thus becomes an important area of exploration in gender diversity literature.

The term 're-entry woman' has been previously used to define someone who is re-entering the workforce after a prolonged absence, or a modification of the same as women who still have children at home and are returning to work after 2-10 years (Ericksen et al., 2008). Thus 're-entry' essentially involves a quitting of the job held by the woman before or after childbirth, and the event of entry into a new organization with an intermediate period of absence from workforce. In this paper, 're-entry woman' is defined as a woman who had left her previous professional work after child birth and has now started working again in the professional workforce. We seek to understand the experiences of "re-entry women" who had made a conscious decision of quitting their organizations, instead of availing leaves on the grounds of medical conditions or pregnancy. For instance, Indian law mandates firms to provide women with three months of paid maternity leave. Some firms with favourable policies also allow women to extend their maternity leave beyond the three-month period with a loss of pay. However, a woman on maternity leave may view her situation and opportunities differently. Use of even the full three-month¹ leave may call for a stigma at the workplace by creating an image of a person who places family before work and is thus not as

¹ Under a recently passed Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 in India paid maternity leave has been increased to 24 weeks (as against the previous 12 weeks limit) in case of women having less than two surviving children.

committed to her career as a woman without children. Such anticipations are not unfounded as many studies regarding women and career have focused on the effect of pregnancy on managers' perceptions (Hoobler, Wayne and Lemmon, 2009; Leslie, Manchester, Park and Mehng, 2012), identity management by the pregnant employee (Little et. al. 2015), discrimination faced at the work place (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Halpert, Wilson & Hickman, 1993), gender harassment (Raver & Nishii, 2010) and hiring discrimination (Rajesh, 2013) .

Despite having a paid maternity leave, many women in India, employed in the corporate sector, choose to quit their jobs and seek re-entry once the child's schedule "has stabilized". By way of this choice and subsequent aspiration to re-enter corporate and not alternate career paths, these re-entry women's decisions are not accurately explained by salience of identities or even work-life literature. In a previous study, we had examined the reasons behind the need to re-enter full-time professional jobs by women who had quit their jobs. Instead of taking the predicted change in career (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), these women seek to re-enter at similar or higher positions in the same industry, offering similar work hours and expectations as before. We examined these in the background of neoliberal experience of middle-class women in India and found internalization of certain norms that helped us understand their decisions during re-entry, seeking a 'balance' in their daily lives as working mothers.

No study to our knowledge has focused on the period away from work and the experience of re-employment in the overall process of re-entry of a woman. The experience during re-employment provides a mother the first instances of interacting with and understanding her potential employers. It will affect her attitude towards joining and strategies as a new employee after joining. We address this gap by explaining the role of gendered expectations on the strategies used by women to re-enter. We use Social role theory

and Role congruity theory to analyse the behaviour of re-entry women during and after re-entry. By understanding the motives behind them, specifically seeking to reduce incongruity and increase positive response from co-workers as well as family, we seek to understand the effect of normative expectations of gender-based social roles on professional women's re-entry.

Literature Review

Studies have explored the 'dilemma' faced by working mothers who want to continue their professional journey alongside motherhood. This is placed as a conflict between two prominent identities of a working mother which is reported to become more significant if the woman has to navigate more traditional cultural settings (Maheshwari, 2014; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Kanji and Cahusac (2015) presented the 'work-life' balance chosen by women in the light of their continuous struggle to reconcile professional and maternal identities before and after workplace exit. Even in countries with numerous organizational and national support policies, the issue of gendered domestic responsibilities affects women's career as the majority of gender-neutrally presented flexibility options tend to be taken by the mother (Seierstad & Kirton, 2015). Maheshwari (2014) analysed the experiences of women during the motherhood phase through a grounded approach and reported the conflicts experienced by professional women due to their social and work roles, wherein women experience negative changes in the attitude of superiors, colleagues and even subordinates at work while also experiencing change in identity due to motherhood. Stone and Lovejoy (2004) studied the change in women's professional decisions after bearing children describing their decisions not as actual choices, but rather the result of the double bind faced by them due to the competing models of the ideal worker and ideal parent.

Social roles comprise of expectations that originate from membership in social groups such as gender or ethnicity, or from work and domestic roles. Of these, the normative

expectations can be seen to have a major role in women's career growth. We propose the use of Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) to understand the practices adopted by women in the re-entry process.

Social role theory treats the differing assignments of women and men into social roles as the fundamental underlying cause of sex-differentiated social behavior. It suggests a double bind for women managers, as the stereotypes of nurturing, communal social roles in addition to "think leader, think male" stereotype leads them to be negatively evaluated by colleagues, affecting the quality of manager-subordinate exchanges and job-based resource outcomes. Women majorly face perceptions of being too emotional, less committed, not being capable of finishing tasks and of not planning to return to work after childbirth. As such, categorization of mothers (women employees) by managers (Hoobler et. al., 2009) affects mentoring, pay decisions and performance evaluations (Halpert et al., 1993) which are important workplace experiences for women. Such experiences, especially during and post pregnancy, play a major role in their decisions regarding work. One of the few studies on career breaks and re-entry of Indian professional women was carried out by Ravindran and Baral (2013) in which they identified factors contributing to women's exit and their decisions regarding return. The study reported the effect of workplace support factors such as policies, work-family culture and diversity climate on the job attitudes and behaviors of women. Expectations faced by women in the domestic and work sphere were captured as individual level differences of perception of demands that moderate the relationship between workplace support factors and job attitudes and behaviors of women returners leading to dilemmas of being a good employee and a good mother.

Like other social roles, gender roles have descriptive norms that are expectations about what people do, as well as injunctive norms that are expectations about what a person would ideally do. While descriptive norms are guidelines for reference, a deviation is

generally met with surprise. However, injunctive norms tell a person what is desirable and morally approved by significant others, a deviation from which produces emotions tinged more strongly with moral disapproval. Good mothers are typically present for their children, nurture and care for others, put needs of their family before their own and do not prioritize work over family (Powell, 2010). They may also take a few years of break from full-time paid work to be with their children till they are old enough to join pre-school.

For the re-entry woman, the existing mother role and the previously experienced ideal worker role are at a contradiction. The norms regarding the super woman or professional women who have it all may influence their behaviour during re-entry. As such, the aspired role of a successful professional alongside intensive mothering requires careful planning and decision making to reduce experienced and anticipated discrepancy with the norms associated with each role.

The discrepancies with expectations related to the ideal worker role have in part being explained by role congruity. The original application of Eagly and Karau's Role Congruity Theory (2002) was to explain the prejudiced behavior of employers towards women leaders who do not display the characteristic feminine traits of care and nurture by evaluating them poorly in their role as leaders. It has since been used to describe approval of certain behaviors and resulting prejudice against incongruent individuals (Diekman and Goodfriend, 2006; Eagly and Diekman, 2005). Gender roles can also induce differences in the behavior of men and women regardless of any inborn psychological difference between them by punishments and rewards. The expectation that women should be the care-givers and other-oriented may thus underline women's actions within the family as well as their work in terms of preference for particular job types, likelihood of extended absence from work, etc.

Eagly and Karau (2002), provided evidence of the mechanism through which social roles and gender categories interact to produce bias at the work place. They showed that

incongruities between social role prescribing women as communal and the social roles of leaders which should be individualistic and agentic, lead to prejudice against women relative to men within leadership roles. This mechanism of role congruity also highlights how information regarding a social role informs social judgments. For example, the presence of others and fear of normative discrimination may increase the salience of gender roles and their conformity for the individual. While social role theory has been used in extant literature to describe stereotypes and discriminatory behavior (Koenig and Eagly, 2014), role congruity provides an analysis of the way social roles impact behaviour of the individual in the specific role. For example, gender normative goals of men and women have been reported to have an impact on the kind of careers chosen by them (Diekman, Brown, Johnston and Clark, 2010; Evans and Diekman, 2009).

To this effect, social roles and normative expectations can be used to understand an individual's behavior (Duguid, 2015) under specific conditions. Re-entry women do not go into social situations trying to behave in line with or against prescriptive cultural behaviors attached to women and ideal worker. Instead, having assumed their responsibility and greater share of care-giving responsibilities towards their family, these women aim to reduce anticipated discrepancy with the image of a working woman, imbibing their personal norms regarding their roles as a professional woman and a mother. Having experienced discriminatory behaviour due to perception of being unproductive during their period away from work, and during hiring due to stereotypical expectations from women to be less committed and competent post motherhood; women's motives in adopting certain strategies at re-entry are to reduce discrimination at work while also reducing incongruity with their existing role as primary care-giver for their child.

Gender role congruity and norms – social and personal are used in this study, to understand how a woman navigates the roles of a mother and a professional when she seeks to re-enter the workforce after a period of voluntary break from full-time employment.

Method

Drawing on interview with re-entry women, we generate a new explanation to help understand the persistence of ‘balance’ as the overarching means to work for an Indian middle-class woman, employed in the corporate workforce. To understand women’s expectations, anticipations and behavior during the period of their absence from work as well as the period of search for re-employment, we used in-depth interviews which are useful in capturing experiences of those who have lived the problem of interest. It is also the preferred method to use in research exploring personal and sensitive issues (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). We used semi-structured interviews that provided a guiding structure to focus on the particular period of re-entry while also allowing flexibility to probe for more details. This helped in capturing insights from the participants (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Participants were broadly approached through a combination of “snowball” and “purposive” techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994, Patton, 1990). We tried to capture maximum variance within the sample (Patton, 1990). We started the preliminary round by approaching participants of executive management programs at an esteemed management institute in eastern India, requesting them to introduce us to women in their companies or their friends who have children and have re-entered the workforce after a previous exit from work. We continued in a similar manner to get in touch with women had re-entered or were seeking to re-enter corporate sector. The focus was on private sector jobs as public sector jobs² may not require the employee to quit due to availability of different policies of leave. The aim was to interview women who are married, have children and have re-entered the

² Public sector jobs in India refer to positions in companies in which the Union Government or State Government or any Territorial Government owns a share of 51 % or more. Other companies comprise the private sector.

workforce after a prolonged absence from work. A period of five years at home is seen to result in career re-orientation in women (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Moreover, in the case of new mothers the first two years have been seen to be more demanding (Leibowitz et al., 1991). We thus tried to interview mothers with younger, school going kids. We discuss findings based on interviews with thirty-eight women who had left their previous jobs (including one woman who took a year-long sabbatical leave). The duration of break from professional work was mostly 2-3 years. The participants were from different regions of India (viz. National Capital Region (NCR), Hyderabad, Bangalore, Pune and Mumbai) and were working in different industries (see Table 1 for summary of demographics of participants).

Insert Table 1 about here

These cities are major metropolitan areas and industrial hubs of India with many people migrating from different states to work in organizations located here. Hyderabad and NOIDA (in NCR) host several companies from the IT sector. Mumbai, Delhi and Gurugram³ (in NCR) are majorly known for finance and banking industries. Due to migration for work, most of our participants had a nuclear set up at home with frequent visits by in-laws and parents. Another aspect bringing diversity in their experiences was the time of exit; while eleven of these women had left their jobs while on maternity leave, four of the participants had quit before the pregnancy.

The interviews were conducted in person unless under exceptional circumstances (only one participant was interviewed telephonically as a face-to-face meeting could not be set up). The interview durations varied from 45 min to about two hours and were conducted either at the women's homes or cafes near their workplaces. Interviews were audio-recorded

³ Gurgaon, a city in the Indian state of Haryana is part of the National Capital Region of India. It was officially renamed 'Gurugram' in April 2016. However, many companies continue to use "Gurgaon" in their addresses or signage.

(with the interviewee's permission) and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on their exit from work, period away from work, decision to return and experiences post return. We asked the women general questions about their experience in the current jobs and their decisions to exit the previous jobs. We also asked them to describe a typical day during the period of their absence from work, what they did, who they interacted with and the manner of work at home. We then asked questions related to their job search, their decision of going back to work, preparation for re-entry, discussions with family members or others and who they had approached for advice or guidance.

Our approach for analysis is influenced by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Silverman (2000). Using methods recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), interviews and conversations were first documented and coded using detailed line-by-line coding. We then identified key themes using inductive thematic analysis to discover the patterns in our data.

Findings

In this section, we present the results of thematic analysis of the interviews that explain decisions regarding re-entry taken by the women. Our study of the women's narratives revealed that virtually all employees spend extremely long hours at the workplace in order to be recognized as productive and ideal employees. The work-family narrative argues that as women face a greater conflict of time demands due to family commitments, they fail to succeed in such jobs. Work-family accommodations offer little help towards women's advancement prospects and often have hurt them due to stigmatization of users of support policies and derailment of their careers (Padavic et. al., 2019). The responses shed light on various areas affecting the women's experiences of re-employment during re-entry and experiences post re-entry. When the participants of this study spoke of their experiences during the period of job search, application for jobs and hiring interviews for re-entry, almost all women voiced concerns regarding employer's evaluation of their skill due to their break

for child-care. Women anticipated discrimination during hiring and issue with time management. We thus look at behaviour of re-entry women as strategies to seek greater positive recognition at work and satisfaction as a care-giver, guided by broader motives of reducing discriminatory behaviour by employers.

We first describe various concerns and constraints faced by women during re-entry. We then describe the motives and subsequent strategies that emerged in women's narratives as they described their plans for re-entry.

Women narrated various constraints they face during re-entry. We first describe these constraints as experienced while seeking re-entry and post re-entry. We then examine the strategies adopted by re-entry women for various motives, with a common broader objective of seeking least incongruity with their role of a working middle class woman during re-entry.

Concerns

Lower self-worth

Most participants felt that domestic work was not perceived as productive work, even by friends and family, and therefore, felt the need to return to paid work. The idea of their jobs being meaningful roles in their lives was a recurrent theme across interviews. Women felt underutilized during their period of break and expressed concerns regarding their self-worth as they were unable to apply their learnt skills and education towards paid work which held greater value as compared to 'just' taking care of their child.

Tina* : *“On a wed after noon I would wonder what to do! I would sit at home and say now what? What do I do all day here with a daughter in school, with a husband at work, and everyone's doing their own thing? And I'm just like ' I do nothing! I don't know the kitchen, my helper picks my daughter up from school, and there is a set routine '. I am not needed! What am I doing? And if I have such a supportive family*

* We have used pseudo-names for names of all participants and organization throughout the paper.

that will help me go out and help me with the kitchen and help me with the baby, then it's a sheer waste of talent if I'm sitting at home."

In addition to their own concerns of being underutilized, women spoke of perception of family members or friends regarding their 'productivity' during their period of break. Nancy, a dentist residing in Pune described the greater worth of working women in Indian society.

Nancy – *"...she (mother) used to tell me 'Always be working! Because respect for a woman is always different than for a housewife'. And I realized it. I feel, see the most difficult thing is to be a housewife. It's not easy! But you won't get that respect that you get when you are working. From society - everyone! When I was on break, people used to ask me 'Oh you are not working?'"*

Women expressed anxiety they felt regarding their decreasing worth as educated, working women while they took care of their child and home during the period of break.

Discrimination during hiring at re-entry

Based on the perceived workload and experiences (vicarious and self) of stereotypical biases against working mothers, women experience fear and anticipation of loss of jobs available after a break in career. Participants shared their experiences of rejections from employers and perceived bias against after the break mothers and the resultant strengthening of their belief in the lack of opportunities for women who take a break for child-care.

Megha: *"Another place, I was called for the interview, I gave the interview and towards the end you know, I think they missed the fact that I am currently not working...So they were like "Oh! So you are not working right now?!" I said I have a break of two years...So they said "ok, ok". (Shrugging) so the interview went very well then I didn't hear back (laughs). So probably because of the break – that's what I understand."*

Discrimination by supervisor post re-entry

The most common concern among the participants of this study regarding work was the seemingly unsurpassable set of expectations from employees. Many companies have a minimum number of hours of work required per day. However, overtime is generally evaluated positively, creating an informal norm of working late hours. Another factor which may contribute to this norm is that most service sector firms cater to international clients leading to new requirements arising after mid-day. This may require employees to stretch work hours to meet strict. Women spoke of the expectation from employees to spend time at work beyond office hours and on weekends as well. Physical presence in office, irrespective of productivity in terms of work was the perceived expectation as it was the most often brought up factor in evaluation discussions. However, such norms assume that spouses manage the employee's personal front. In such a scenario, use of flexible working hours appears as a cost borne by the company and an expression of reduced commitment of women post maternity. Such norms perpetuate stereotypes around women's reduced commitment and competence for work post child-birth as most women tend to avoid overtime to be with family.

Neha: "...I didn't want to be in that flexi position...Of course it has an effect. And it's natural also that you aren't there. You are working at 60% along with others who are working at 100%. You know, you'll not be rated at par...Which is fine... Ya, so opting for fewer hours was never an option because it was available as an HR policy but we're all high performance oriented kind of people and we want to be rated the best. And if you're not available, then you're not rated the best."

Neha's justification of such norms on the grounds of a fair system of apparent merit also highlights the thought process of working women who feel that becoming a "high performer" in an organization can be achieved if one closely ascribes to ideal worker norms.

Making Work-Life majorly women's issue, organizations have contributed in the practice of stereotypical expectations and evaluations of female employees. Women reported experiences (self and vicarious) of such discriminatory behaviour leading to anxieties of incongruities with the role of ideal worker during interview with prospective employers and upon re-entry. Women also narrated anxieties regarding management of time for child-care activities. Thus to reduce incongruity from their role as a mother, women adopt strategies to that enable them to achieve perfection within the boundaries of a middle-class working woman in India. We describe women's strategies for the broader motives of increasing self-worth by productivity, reducing discrimination and reducing incongruity with role of mother; categorized by the time during re-entry – At re-entry, which includes the period of job search and re-employment efforts; and Post re-entry, which includes the experiences of the women after they returned to full time corporate jobs.

Strategy to increase self-worth

Women look towards re-entry or some form of paid employment to increase their worth as educated middle-class woman, capable of being 'productive'.

Deep: "I think a lot of us woman know that we are capable of lot of things...you're all the time evaluating yourself as a person, you're all the time trying to see if you are up to the mark. You know, you compare yourself your peers and who were with you at that time- work, college, whoever you are in touch. Then you that feel need for proving yourself. Not to anyone else but to yourself that you are capable of much more than this."

Most women spoke of their need of being occupied in meaningful jobs. Women pursued various alternate jobs such as online content writing, part-time jobs or even self-initiatives like starting their own blogs or starting a play/study circle for kids while at home. However they expressed dissatisfaction regarding the ability of such jobs to use their

education and the monetary returns as compared to full-time jobs. Strategies thus include seeking alternate jobs as well as accepting full-time corporate jobs even at lower positions in order to reduce their period of break.

Mansi: *“I wasn’t really working fulltime anywhere so what I would do is I would find some website online which asked me to help with articles or somebody who would do proof reading and this and that so that would sort of keep me busy I thought – because I was getting depressed that ‘I haven’t got work!’ and...stuff like that. So I thought that would keep me busy and I was feeling that I wasn’t really doing anything...”*

The perception of loss of job opportunities after a break in career may push women towards accepting job profiles which are lower than the ones they had before the break in order to return to work.

Megha – *“And now actually you know, after 2-3 months of searching, a lot of my seniors and peers were advising me to take up any job that came my way. Urging me to just get back into the industry somehow – that’s what people are advising me....I don’t want to totally compromise on the profile but now I am in the position that...a little bit (of compromise)...it’s fine [shrugs]”*

Strategy to reduce discrimination

As described earlier, women expressed concern and anticipated discrimination at re-entry due to the presence of a break in their career. In addition, women are met with stereotypical perceptions of employers due to their role as mother being highlighted by the break. In sharing their experience of hiring interviews, we see a common thread of concern amongst prospective employers regarding the woman’s capability of managing childcare along with work responsibilities, as perceived by women.

Establishing credibility

Women spoke of their anxieties due to such anticipated discrimination and thus sought to work with known peers or seek employers through personal referrals to establish credibility at re-entry. Swati, an IT professional, experienced great anxiety regarding her perceived productivity post maternity, as she had moved to a new company as a means for growth in her career. This led her to go back to her previous employer as she hoped her past performance would establish her credibility as a productive employee and not as a cost to the company due to her request for flexible working hours.

Swati: *“So I was still in touch with my old manager...I was telling him...I am looking...he was happy to take me back he said, “Your thing (job position) is still open we are still looking for people I will it take you back” ...You have various stuff like working part time and again how you... how you sign up with your manager...not everybody get that it depends on how you...how your relationship is there with the manager, your past work -how you've done it...”*

Proof of skill

Women spoke of their limited opportunities for re-entry. A career break for family reasons is cause for a greater penalty during re-employment due to stereotypical evaluations by employer. To overcome such stereotypical evaluations of their competence and skill, women prepared for re-entry by keeping themselves updated either by pursuing short courses available through online educational websites or taking up part-time jobs or self-initiates.

Henna – *“So 8 months (ago) I started searching, then I started preparing as it was a gap so I used to reread whatever data I had...the printouts HR...just to brush up myself... [Printouts related to work from her previous jobs]”*

Strategy to reduce discrimination post re-entry

Workplaces continue to demand 'ideal workers', who put in long hours, and are on call at all times. Such demands can be fulfilled only if the employee's non-work domain is managed by a spouse, thus presenting the ideal worker to be the ideal male worker.

Rekha: "One day my manager said that there are people who feel that you do not do enough work. So I said "give me more work, that's fine with me. But I will not sit late. I am not doing what they are doing...taking so many breaks... I am just doing my work and they are not doing that and then they are sitting till 9...So he didn't have answers..."

Participants thus spoke of managing time such that they are viewed as being efficient employees and thus aimed at being visible at the workplace, following the practice of overwork to alleviate any doubts on commitment and showing their work to their superiors to avoid being unfairly evaluated.

Ila: "So just to compensate for all of this. If I get a feedback, normally people would work on it in the evening and send it the next day. I'd send it the same day to ensure that in case there are exigencies anywhere - in my personal life or at work, nothing drops. I should not drop a ball! So then it was like a crazy amount of self-imposed pressure that I had which lasted for a very long time"

Women's narratives show their awareness of prejudice and an acceptance of their inability to resist the gendered system of evaluation existing in organizations. Anticipating negative evaluations, women planned to increase visibility of their skill by 'showing' their work.

Niharika: "Second time (second sabbatical leave) I didn't even get the basic salary increase. So I got the same salary as I had the last year. But this happens. And when you're taking a break you know this happens. So it's okay but once you are back you will do everything to show you can do it...Not necessarily do extra work, but whatever

you do, you have to say it. You have to show your work. Like 'See? I can do it!'...

You have to; else there are people who will think, "Oh this girl has come back from such a long break, she won't be able to do it and all that"'"

Strategy to reduce incongruity with role of mother at re-entry

We see an acceptance and participation of both – the woman and her husband in traditional child care beliefs. The woman enacts the 'good mother' role by staying at home and performing all the tasks of childcare. We present instances in their narratives highlighting this struggle for time to fulfill gendered duties of a mother alongside work. A woman may manoeuvre her work role by looking for jobs which reduce traveling distance such that she is able to pick up her child from the daycare, or apply to companies offering flexible hours of work with the broader motive of reducing incongruity with their role as mothers during re-entry.

As described earlier, the gendered system of child-care does not change even when the woman returns to the industry, which has its own set of work norms as previously experienced by the woman. Participants shared their conscious search for jobs profiles or companies that would offer them more time for family.

Bharti: "Then suddenly you're looking for a job...and that too I have a small child so I want a comfortable job. Not a 9 to 6 everyday with nightshifts etc. - I can't do that! I want little flexibility with my job. Say if 9 hrs. is required, then I'll go for 5 hrs. and 4 hrs. I'll do from home so that I can just bring my child back from his playschool. So that was also a restriction in finding a job."

We see women trying to manoeuvre their work role on re-entry in a manner that does not lead to much incongruity with the normative role of mother as the primary care-giver.

Reduce incongruity with role of mother post re-entry as motive

Even on return to work, women's daily routine included feeding the family, taking care of household chores or even dropping and picking up the child up from daycare; thus conforming to the father's role as primary earner and that of mother's as care-giver. Most of our participants expressed their need and efforts towards 'managing' the hours spent at work in order to fulfill the added responsibilities of childcare.

Sana: "So it's all about... you cannot work 7 days a week, so it is about how you manage your time...you still work out, you still umm look into the work day to day work, you still look into children I come home by 4:30 I make sure the homework is done ok, their studies their homework their food and everything; little play because that is the basic time there if you miss that time with the children you will not get the basic balance of having a relationship with them"

The return to full-time corporate jobs includes planning for change in the manner of work so that work tasks are managed in the reduced number of hours in office such as fewer breaks, clarification of hours with supervisor or requesting work from home assignments

Conclusion

This paper contributes to gender diversity and management research by shedding light on an under-researched area, namely re-entry of women. The participants of this study were middle class women working in the corporate sector who have access to alternatives such as flexible hours or even the economic capital enabling them to quit their jobs. In doing so, it offers a novel angle to explain how gendered structures persist despite organizational strategies aimed at gender equality. Re-entry comprises of various phases such as the event of exit, the period of break, the planning of re-entry and the event of re-entry.

We highlight the various gendered expectations a woman has to navigate in the Indian context. While the practices of women at re-entry include reaffirming, balancing as well as breaking of the gender regime, there were greater number of decisions and strategies that

reaffirmed gender roles. The transition from working professionals to full time care givers involves a change in the woman's self-concept with the gendered, social role of mother becoming salient as a result of managing various set of expectations from self and other with respect to child care. In the absence of alternate ways of division of responsibilities between men and women, the woman's subsequent actions are planned so as to seek congruity with her newly adopted role in the house. However, these women were working professionals before their exit and in order to re-enter the full-time professional front, they have to navigate the conflicting expectations of work and family roles. Previous experiences of work norms and poor support for family integration at work lead to the development of expectations from the professional self. The desire to meet expectations clashes with the experienced load of responsibilities and need for a personal self at work. The woman's unequal share in care giving responsibilities and the norm of woman 'sacrificing' professional lives for the 'more important' family life shapes her understanding of expectations from the personal self. These two non-overlapping set of expectations from self, leads to dissonance where the woman seeks to find a means to reduce and bring back a sense of equilibrium to her life. Decision to permanently exit professional career and that of not having children at present form the extremes of the continuum of solutions for reduced dissonance. The balance reached through flexible timings at reduced pay or under employment given by existing organizational initiatives towards gender diversity instead reaffirms the unequal gender structure. Although the gender diversity of organizations has increased and women are increasingly being seen as profitable assets in the workforce, the there is little or no change in attitudes towards occupational and homemaker roles. Instead, studies reported gender-based differences in attitudes towards these roles with societal norms and expectations affecting work-life balance for married women (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011). Our analysis lends further support to gender role literature by analyzing the navigation of gendered expectations by the women in their

period of re-entry. It highlights gendered nature of practices of work-life balance which is present in organizational literature as a gender neutral issue faced by employees. The manner of women's re-entry extends our understanding of how gender role congruity is achieved by women and gender regimes persist.

Limitations

This study is limited by the participants being located in a nuclear setup in metropolitan areas of India. Increase in companies and offices in these cities has led to development of required support structures such as maids for household chores, day-care centers, etc. These are important factors in the woman's decision of re-entry. It would be interesting to study the manner in which women navigate gendered expectations in the context of smaller towns and support system restricted to that provided by family members.

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Table 1. Summary of participants' demographics

Age group	N
25 to 30	8
31 to 35	15
36 to 41	15
Domain of work	N
Information Technology	14
Banking/ Finance	5
Telecommunication	2
Dentist	1
Law	1
Education	1
Architecture	1
Self business	1
Media	4
NGO	2
Marketing/ Sales	3
HR	3
City	N
Bangalore	2
Hyderabad	14
Mumbai	12
NCR	6
Pune	4