

PREDICAMENT OF RETURNING MOTHERS

*A qualitative study on lived experiences of
maternity and career*



Easy decisions



A bump is a pause, should not be a full stop.



GENPACT CENTRE FOR
**WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP**

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maternity and career*

This research is an initiative of

**Ashoka University's
Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership,**

conducted with technical support from
Purple Audacity Research & Innovation Pvt. Ltd.



The Prelude

It is a well-documented fact that the Indian workforce is tilted in favour of men and skewed against women, with only 27% of workforce comprising of women¹. While there are few entry points for women, the exit gates are many - pregnancy, childbirth, child care, elderly care, lack of family support, and unsupportive work environment. These factors create a leaking pipeline that hinders women from reaching leadership positions. While 27% women join the workforce, 48% drop out within four months of returning from maternity leave. Additionally, 50% drop out mid-career before the age of 30 because of childcare² while only 16% of senior leadership roles are held by women in India.³

Behind these statistics are real women impacted by the realities of the world around them. Real women who have hearts and minds, fears and ambitions, guilt and desires. This report is a journey into those hearts and minds. It delves into the social, psychological, economic and structural reasons of why women



¹International Labour Organization, Global Employment Trends 2013: Recovering from a Second Jobs Dip (2013): p. 79.

²Francesco, Anne Marie and Mahtani, Shalini. Gender Diversity Benchmark for Asia 2011. s.l. : Community Business, 2011

³Credit Suisse, The CS Gender 3000: The Reward for Change (September 2016).

dropout of the workforce due to maternity and child care and what makes it hard for them to return. It also deconstructs the challenges at workplaces and the solutions that employers can provide to create an enabling environment that retains women employees after maternity & child birth. It reveals insights that can be used to provide support to all those women who face the challenge of integrating into the workforce not because of their qualification or calibre, but because of their sex and gender.

When a woman decides to drop out of work or re-join work after a maternity break, it is probably one of the hardest decisions she makes in her life. Often, she is not even in control of that decision. In most cases, the decision is not based on her desires and ambitions but on predetermined gender norms and role expectations.

The research design uses the socio-ecological model as a base for understanding the contexts within which decisions related to women's return to work are made. In that context, the research was not restricted to women only but also included men, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) experts and Human Resources (HR) representatives to get a 360-degree view of the problem as well as its context. Further, it explores the recent developments in the recruitment models and new players like Flexing It, Sheroes, etc. who offer innovative work options to women.

This is the first cross-sectional research around maternity and career in the corporate, media and development sector that attempts to explore the effect of maternity and motherhood on career paths of women. To this end, pregnant women, mothers who dropped out of work, and mothers who joined work after maternity but are facing challenges were researched. The research explored norms, attitudes, knowledge, and practices around women who are pregnant and working mothers. This report aims to reveal insights about this complex decision-making process with the hope that corporates, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and media houses can design programmes that help reduce gender-based attrition due to maternity and create an enabling environment for women to work and lead with equality and dignity.

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Acronyms

D&I	:	Diversity & Inclusion
HR	:	Human Resources
NGO	:	Non-Governmental Organisation
WEF	:	World Economic Forum
NSS	:	National Sample Survey
GDP	:	Gross Domestic Product
SDG	:	Sustainable Development Goal
GCWL	:	Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership
IDIs	:	In-Depth Interviews
FGDs	:	Focus Group Discussions
FLFP	:	Female Labour Force Participation
TG	:	Target Group
SEM	:	Social Ecological Model

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

It is a well-documented fact that the Indian workforce is tilted in favour of men and skewed against women. While there are few entry points for women, the exit gates are many – pregnancy, childbirth, child care, elderly care, lack of family support, and unsupportive work environment.

These factors create a leaking pipeline that hinders women from reaching leadership positions. While 27% women join the workforce, 48% drop out within four months of returning from maternity leave, 50% drop out mid-career before the age of 30 because of childcare while only 16% of senior leadership roles are held by women in India. If these exit gates remain open, achieving the global goal of 50:50 by 2030 will be challenging.

Research Need

In this context, Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership (GCWL) envisages to create an end to end platform that would address the re-entry barriers for returning mothers across sectors. To create a platform, it is imperative that the Breakthrough programme is embedded in a true understanding of the re-entry barriers faced by mothers and re-integrating challenges faced by employers.

To explore the complex network of individual, social, and workplace factors that force women to leave the workforce post pregnancy and child birth, GCWL undertook a research in urban India among the women in the organised sector. The research focused on mining insights on enablers and challenges faced by women at high risk of dropping out due to pregnancy and child care.

Following were the three key objectives for the research:

- To develop an in-depth understanding of the specific challenges that women face when they return to work after maternity
- To assess the training needs of women returning to workforce (including women returning from maternity leave, working women, and post maternity)
- To understand the challenges employers experience and foresee in engaging and integrating mothers returning to workforce.

Research Methodology

A total of 18 focus groups and 29 in-depth interviews were conducted amongst mothers. Mothers were divided into three cohorts -

- Currently Pregnant,
- Women who have dropped out, and
- Women who returned to work but facing challenges.

Five Diversity and Inclusion expert in-depth interviews and nine HR representative in-depth interviews were also conducted. The research was conducted in two metro cities - Delhi and Bangalore.

Research Findings

Challenges Common to all Cohorts

Women expressed challenges at four levels: individual, family, workplace, and social norms.

- **At an Individual level woman felt guilt:** They explained that if they chose to rejoin work after child birth, they felt guilty of putting themselves before their child and family. This was amplified owing to lack of childcare options and long present cultural conditioning. At the same time, professional work had provided them with financial independence, satisfaction, and a sense of self-worth. Many reported that they did not want to leave their jobs.
- **At a Family level, they felt they had to compromise:** At household level, husbands often expected women to be homemakers before being professionals. They neither helped with household chores or childcare nor confront their in-laws in times of a tussle. Rather, they felt that it is the woman's prerogative to compromise and adjust. Women explained this imbalance in the power equation, by saying that the husbands earned more than them and found no reason to compromise. Women claimed that their in-laws approved of their job after marriage. But familial support for their job decreased after the first child. The pressure of child and house-care was maximum when they had their second child, both young and difficult to manage. There was, therefore, a diminishing support from family with the passage of time.
- **At Workplace, supervisors felt women are unproductive and inefficient:** At workplace, many women mentioned that the attitude of their supervisor changed towards them after pregnancy. Often, they sensed that they were given lower-level assignments than they were given earlier. This made them feel like a less productive resource in the office.
- **Social Norms dictate that mothers should focus on child and home care:** Women in the previous generation had focused on child and home care. Husbands said that only mothers can take care of children. Women claimed that parents-in-law think that their primary duty is towards family and child. Therefore, the deep seated social norms around women being homemakers often do not align well with working women after maternity.

Differences Between the Three Cohorts

An amplification of guilt and workplace challenges were mentioned as key issues by all profiles. But, there were nuanced differences among the three profiles of women.

- **Currently Pregnant Women:**

The pregnant women said they were fearful of how they would manage the new responsibility. They said that if they were to leave their child and go to work, they would feel guilty about it. Their family and husband expected them to take care of the child. They claimed that if they had to

continue working they were expected to manage work and child on their own. At workplace, they had experienced no change in expectations and have found colleagues and bosses unsympathetic to their unique circumstance.

- **Women who dropped out of work post childbirth:**

The Drop Outs said that there was a need to choose between duty or career. The family saw no financial gain in their job as they spent large portion of her salary on day cares. At the same time, husbands did not help out in household chores or child care. The family expected them to be home makers before professionals. They talked about low flexibility at work and timelines. Alone, they needed to compromise and adjust. The myriad of issues at family and work front led them to drop out.

- **Women who returned to work but facing challenges:**

A strong sense of identity and support system at home helped these women to return to work after maternity. However, they were not without challenges. They mentioned that they were overworked and had no 'ME' time. They explained that any time spent on themselves was considered as 'selfish' by the family. This led to frustration and dissonance from stress as there was no leniency shown either at work or at home.

Differences between the Three Sectors

The research covered the social, private, and media sectors. While the social sector is based on the philosophy of altruism and allows for maximum consideration to the unique conditions of pregnant women and mothers, the private sector works for profit and there is certain awareness of what demands or concessions can and cannot be allowed. The media and advertising sector works on deliverables that are time sensitive and high quality. Due to these fundamental differences, the managers and employers in the three sectors face different challenges, offer unique support structures, and perceive different causes of drop out.

- **Organisational support to pregnant women and returning mothers**

To support the women after maternity, Human Resource (HR) managers from all the three sectors said that they provided flexibility in work timings and workload. While in the social sector, provisions were made to accommodate a woman's circumstances including paid leaves in case of child related issues, private sector was flexible about work load and timings. Some private sector organisations also provide for crèches to ensure that mothers can keep their children close by and safe. HR managers from the media sector also mentioned that special training sessions were organised to support women in getting 'up-to-speed.'

- **Organisation's challenges**

The HR managers from the private sector mentioned that organisations struggle with pregnant and returning mothers due to factors such as lower energy levels, more leaves and lower productivity. They emphasised that giving high pressure and demanding work would be unfair to the woman and could risk unfulfilled targets. As a result, they try and allocate less strenuous work to women. But women said that they felt the organisations were giving lower level work to them and it felt like a demotion.

The media sector works on aggressive timelines and when an employee leaves, the burden of her work is passed on to her colleagues especially because hiring staff on temporary basis is an expensive proposition. When the mothers return, they apply for flexi-hours and part time jobs. This poses problems in on-time completion of tasks.

There were fewer challenges mentioned by the social sector representatives. This could be attributed to the fact that social sector works on an altruistic mandate and have large number of female employees who understand the circumstances.

On an overall level, across private sector and media, maternity was considered a challenge and coping strategies mentioned were limited. There was a tacit acceptance of what can and cannot be allowed. Further, women felt that if they have to continue work, 'it would be them who have to compromise.'

Focus Areas for Programming and Interventions for Returning Mothers

The analysis of the research findings revealed the following *Six Action Areas* to empower women to cope with the myriad of challenges.

1. **Guilt management:** Women experience a tremendous sense of guilt. This stems from a deeply conditioned and widely accepted definition of their familial roles where women who pursue their careers at the cost of their child are frowned upon. Mentoring and counselling sessions to dissipate such feeling of guilt and training in time and stress management would help women cope with their evolving circumstances better.
2. **Negotiation skills:** Women are perpetually in a state of negotiation with the different members of their social and professional set-up, and often find themselves at a disadvantage. Therefore, negotiation skills are imperative for them to effectively negotiate with their families for participation in household chores, with their bosses for flexible work timings and work load, and with their colleagues for cooperation at work.
3. **Career Planning:** While many new portals and work options are emerging, women continue to maintain a very myopic view of their job possibilities. Emerging options like flexi-timings, work from home, freelancing, entrepreneurship, project/contractual jobs could provide more flexibility and control to mothers. Training in resume writing, job searches, job interviews and latest trends in the job market would go a long way in helping mothers consider re-joining work force.
4. **Re-skilling:** In the absence of a formal and uniform interaction about their job or with their colleagues, most women get completely distanced from their jobs during their maternity break. Therefore, women should be trained in a formal manner to stay updated about the professional field to prevent these ripples of action and reaction.
5. **Awareness and information:** At workplace, most women believe that pregnancy is their problem and remain unaware of their rights pertaining to maternity. In order to empower pregnant women and returning mothers, they should be informed about their maternity rights and the redressal system at work place.
6. **Management of time, home, and child:** Women constantly struggle to manage child and work. There is a need to aid women with tools that help them manage expectations (theirs' as well as other's) and balance childcare and career.

Potential Solution Strategies

The intervention areas identified above can be addressed through the following strategies:

Capacity Development and Coping Strategies

- **Cohort Specific Customisation:** Since there are nuanced differences in the challenges faced by each cohort, the training programme should include cohort specific modules to contextualise the initiatives to support re-integration of returning mothers.

- **Need For Continuous Intervention:** There is a need for continuous intervention from the time of pregnancy, continuing post childbirth till the woman has returned to work and settled.
- **Omni format; Where Both Online And Offline Modes Of Training Are Included:** While the online method of training was perceived to be convenient and cheap, the offline method enables mothers to have one-on-one interactions with mentors and draw strength by interacting with women who are in similar situations.
- **Collective Learning Via Case Studies:** Initiatives should be anchored around case studies and may impel women to leverage training to the best of their advantage through social learning. Role models that women can related to in their social and professional networks can go a long way in encouraging mothers to return to work post maternity.
- **Fee Structuring:** While many women mentioned a willingness to pay a fee for such training, the same cannot be generalised. The fee structuring needs to be explored and validated by a quantitative pricing research.

Private Sector Partnerships

Women encounter interpersonal problems at workplace. Lack of flexibility, dominance, lower-level work, insensitive colleagues are just some of the examples. It is, therefore, necessary to sensitise management and staff to the challenges faced by pregnant women and returning mothers and to discuss the benefits of having a gender balanced workplace. In an attempt to achieve this, a consortium of organisations could be created with the mandate to encourage women to have long term careers.

The Conclusion

To improve the gender imbalance in workforce, a dialogue with organisations and society needs to begin. But mostly, women need to be equipped with skills to manage the problems and pressures they have to manage at home and at work.

Genpact Centre for Women Leadership (GCWL) is committed to ensuring a comprehensive, sustainable and positive change in the workplace gender balance. Through a one of its kind research, GCWL delved into the psycho-social dynamics of the pregnant mothers and working mothers. The insights from this research will be used for programmatic interventions to support and empower pregnant women and returning mothers at workplace.

SECTION ONE

The Context

The Context

The gender disparity in the urban Indian setting is well-documented. This year has been especially bleak. India slipped 21 places on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index to a lowly 108, behind neighbours China and Bangladesh, primarily due to less participation of women in the economy and low wages⁴.

1.1 Problem Definition In India

India's greatest challenges lie in the economic participation and opportunity pillar, where the country is ranked 139, and the health and survival pillar, where the country is ranked 141, as per the World Economic Forum (WEF) index.

The workplace gender gap is reinforced by extremely low participation of women in the economy and low wages for those who work (136th ranking for estimated earned income), WEF has said, adding that "on average, 66 per cent of women's work in India is unpaid, compared to 12 per cent of men's".

India has abysmal participation of women in socio-economic and political spheres as well. India ranks 112th in women's representation in parliament. Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha have only 11.8% and 11% representation of women⁵. In India, the state of women representation in the judiciary is deplorable. Since its inception in 1950, the Supreme Court of India has only seen 6 women judges, and currently has one woman judge out of 25⁶. Across India's 24 High Courts, slightly over 10% judges are women, with not even a single woman judge in eight High Courts⁷. Further, women have occupied the post of a High Court judge only 86 times since the elevation of the first woman judge to the Kerala High Court in 1959⁸ (as of November 2017).

⁴World Economic Forum (2017). Global Gender Gap Report 2017. [online] Geneva: World Economic Forum,. Available at: <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2017>

⁵Mohan, Shantha; et al. "Women and Political Participation in India" (PDF). International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific. Retrieved 23 April 2014.

⁶Kanu Sarda, 'Only six women judges in the SC since 1950', The New Indian Express, 13th November, 2016, Available at: <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2016/nov/12/only-six-women-judges-insupreme-court-since-1950-1537905.html> (last accessed on 31st October, 2017)

⁷Judges of the High Court include Permanent and Additional Judges. Out of the total 696 judges across the High Courts, only 70 of them are female. Latest Data as of 1/11/2017 available at: <http://doj.gov.in/appointment-of-judges/list-high-court-judges> (last accessed on 2nd November, 2017)

⁸Aditya AK, 'Through the Looking Glass Ceiling: Woman Judges (or the lack thereof) in the Higher Judiciary,' Bar and Bench, November 4, 2017, <https://barandbench.com/woman-judges-higher-judiciary/>. This number excludes former judges of the Calcutta and Madras High Courts, and includes judges who have occupied posts in more than one high court.

Further, the National Sample Survey (NSS) (68th Round) indicates falling labour force participation rate among women aged 15-59 years. Participation rate for rural women dropped from 52.2% in 2004-05 to 37.8% in 2011-12. Urban female worker participation also fell from 26.1% to 22.2%. Global Wage Gap Report 2016-17 highlights that women represent 63% of the lowest paid wage labour.

According to Avtar⁹, a diversity and inclusion consulting firm, between 2003 and 2010 over 48% of employed women under 30 years of age dropped out of the workforce due to maternity and childcare. In a national survey by LinkedIn, 60% Indian women said they will slow down their careers once they have children¹⁰. At workplace, the gender gap in India is reinforced by extremely low participation of women in the economy. This has resulted in a leadership gap and underutilised talent.

Another survey by Outlook Business and AVTAR in 2010 showed that 62% women will either quit, take breaks, or move to organisations that are more women friendly for overall family care¹¹. There is an urgent need to initiate processes of gender inclusive changes. Yet, policy changes and non-government initiatives have not been promising.

At the bottom of this puzzling phenomenon is a deep-seated norm of patriarchy and gender norms that affect women in education and career.

Major factors affecting the participation of women in labour force in India at macro level include:

- **Cultural and societal factors:** Existing literature identifies ethnic and religious groups that are not comfortable with the idea of women harbouring aspirations to join the labour force. Further, even in communities where women and girls have the required support to join the labour force, their ability & aspirations are counterbalanced by the responsibility to take care of domestic chores.
- **Structural changes within a developing economy:** A developing economy often presents a landscape where there are fewer monetary incentives for women to work and the working male population earns enough to support the family adequately. The current economic landscape of urban India seems to be mirroring the same.
- **Increasing number of women in higher education:** The level of women's education in India has witnessed a sharp rise from 2001-2011, with 116% more women passing out as graduates or above compared to just 65% increase among men. There has also been an increase in the number of women completing post-graduation (151%) and those earning professional and technical degrees (196%)¹². Higher focus on education might be one of the reasons for women entering the workforce late.
- **Access to roles of power:** India has made an attempt to increase the awareness and participation of women in governance at the village level; however, across all states of the country, women have limited access to structures of power, making it difficult for them to appear as influential role models. There is a possibility that men are still wary of women participating in decision-making positions which are mostly held by men. Women are mostly concentrated in the informal sector; drawing a relatively low income and working without benefits such as health insurance, maternity leave, etc.

If the above macro level barriers were any indication, the story is half told.

Even when women join the work force, mid-career attrition due to maternity and childcare remains high. This has led to an ever-increasing number of dropouts among working women in urban India. However, such mid-career attrition has not been exhaustively studied across various sectors and different cohorts of women leaving workforce.

⁹<http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/more-girls-studying-but-84-drop-out-after-graduation-16526>

¹⁰Moyes, Ngaire. What Do Women Want? At Work, That Is.... [Online] 2013.<http://blog.linkedin.com/2013/02/28/linkedin-what-women-want-study/>

¹¹Credit Suisse, *The CS Gender 3000: The Reward for Change* (September 2016).

¹²: Manash Gohain, Gender gap narrowing in higher edu: HRD survey, January 8, 2018: The Times of India

1.2 Resulting Effects of the Problem

As per McKinsey Global Institute's Report, 2015, *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in India*, the female labour force in India contributed only 17% to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The report highlights the deplorable state of female participation in the Indian labour force which constitutes less than a quarter of the national labour force. Some of the causes for such dismal statistics are:

- Unconscious bias due to social stereotypes
- Gender Pay/Wage Gap
- Sexual harassment at workplace
- Safety and security

Even among those who are employed, maternity and child care lead to slowing down or dropping out of work. Societal norms that mothers should prioritise childcare, added to diminished skill-set due to a long break leads to demotivation and drop outs.

The same report also discusses a "full potential" scenario, wherein women and men have an equal participation in the economy. If India can achieve the "full potential" scenario, India's GDP in 2025 could rise by 60%. It would also lead to empowerment of women balancing the power equation in the society.

1.3 Major Interventions to Combat the Problem

On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Development Agenda titled *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. A set of 17 Global Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) covers a broad range of issues related to sustainable development. However, sustainable development on any issue is improbable without the inclusion of women who comprise almost 50% of the global population. It is argued, therefore, that gender equality will make or break the global goals. (SDG #5) aims at achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Specific targets on SDG #5 focus on economic empowerment of women. Gender equality in the workforce is a business imperative as evidence suggests that women's participation in the workforce has a direct and positive impact on productivity and profitability. However, it would be challenging to achieve the global goal of 50:50 by 2030, if exit gates for women in the workforce are not sealed. And maternity and child care is a big reason for women exiting the workforce.

In spite of that, policy changes to create regulations to ease return of women after maternity have been slow. Mid-career attrition has seen few initiatives from the development sector as well. This has led to an ever increasing gender gap at workplaces.

With the objective of enabling women to retain their careers post maternity, the Government of India and corporates are now designing targeted initiatives and policy measures. Some of the efforts made in this direction are listed below:

Sustainable Development Goals

Target 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. Indicators:

5.4.1. Percentage of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age group and location.

Target 5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

5.5.1. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments.

5.5.2. Proportion of women in managerial positions.

- **Policy Measures:** The Maternity Benefit (Amendment Law, 2016), increased the maternity leave for working women from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. This act also mandates establishments with 50 or more employees to provide for crèche facilities within a prescribed distance. Increasingly, companies are also introducing customised policies such as remote work, flexi-time & partial work, work from home, special commute arrangements, fair performance management systems, childcare assistance etc. in an attempt to plug the leaky pipeline.
- **Return-ship and Career Reboot Programmes:** A formal pathway to employment for returning women (and mothers) who intend to resume their corporate careers. These programmes offer a range of options from 6-12 month internships, flexi-work, part-time and full-time assignments to work from home.
- **Coaching and Mentorship:** Mentorship and Maternity Management programmes are designed to provide support to returning mothers to ease their transition and boost their career aspirations.
- **Job Portals and Support Networks:** Job portals such as Sheroes, Jobsforher, Flexing It, Avtar-Iwin, Second Innings etc. curate work from home opportunities and flexible work options for women/returning mothers. There are also strong community-led initiatives and support networks for returning mothers such as mombloggers.com, mycity4kids.com, Gurgaon mothers etc.

Even though there seems to be a progressive shift in the overall ecosystem to enable women to return to the workforce after maternity, the fact is that nearly half the women (48%), who return from their maternity leave - drop out of the workforce within the first four months of their return. There are a range of challenges that women face during as well as returning after their maternity leave.

1.4 The Programme: Breakthrough-Back From The Bump

The focal phenomenon of mothers returning to work post pregnancy is influenced by a host of interdependent demographic, cultural, economic, and social factors. Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach needed to be adopted to (re)-integrate returning mothers into the workforce.

In this context, Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership (GCWL) envisages to create an end to end platform that would gradually address the re-entry barriers for returning mothers across sectors. The Centre firmly believes that maternity is a pause in women's career, and must not be a full stop. The intervention aims to strengthen the existing eco-system and accelerate integration of returning mothers in the workforce to ensure that maternity and childcare is not a deterrent for women in pursuing their career aspirations.

GCWL's initiative - Breakthrough - aims to address the mid-career attrition of women due to maternity by being a one-stop service provider for trainings, resources, and job opportunities. Breakthrough programme envisages to offer ongoing support for women looking to re-join the workforce post maternity. The support also extends to women who resume work but continue to face hurdles in career progression and those who have dropped out of the workforce. The platform aims at offering support to women from corporate and development sector, across levels, both offline and online.

The Programme Breakthrough Back from the Bump Specifically aims to :

1. Re-skilling and capacity building for women to succeed at work, post maternity break.
2. Acting as a platform for employers to connect and hire returning mothers.
3. Creating knowledge and resources for women and organisations to address post maternity attrition.

1.5 This Research: An Introduction

To create a platform for returning mothers across sectors, it is imperative that the Breakthrough programme is embedded in true understanding of the barriers and hurdles faced by mothers while returning to work,

challenges faced by employers to re-integrate the returning mothers, and the interpersonal dynamics at home and at work due to social norms.

To explore and understand this complex network of individual, social and workplace factors, GCWL undertook research in urban India among the women in the organised sector. The research focused on mining insights on enablers and challenges faced by women at high risk of dropping out due to pregnancy and child care.

To this end, phenomenological approach of enquiry was followed that emanates from the academic disciplines of philosophy and psychology. The focus of phenomenological inquiry is the lived experience of people in regard to a phenomenon and how they interpret those experiences.

Inquiry delved into three critical aspects of the phenomena: Perceptions, Understanding and Response.

1.6 Objectives

While there are researches available on pregnant mothers, mothers returning to work or their employers, this is a cross-sectional research on returning mothers in the Indian context, the men's perspectives, the organisation's challenges and goes beyond defining the problem by offering key strategies to address the need-gaps. The research aim to garner insights that would aid in designing interventions to contribute to the SDG #5, particularly targets related to gender equality at workplace Following were the three key objectives of the research:

- To develop an in-depth understanding of the specific challenges that women face when they return to work after maternity
- To assess the training needs of women returning to workforce (including women returning from maternity leave, working women, and post maternity)
- To understand the challenges employers foresee and experience in engaging and integrating mothers returning to workforce

SECTION TWO

Research Approach and Methodology

Research Approach And Methodology

A cross-sectoral, descriptive study design was utilised to conduct research in the urban settings of Delhi and Bangalore. Information and data has been gathered by applying a qualitative methodology which, in turn, incorporated the following data collection methods: In-Depth-Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with the target audience.

2.1 The Research Approach- Phenomenological Approach of Enquiry

The focal phenomenon of returning mothers is influenced by a host of interdependent demographic, cultural, economic, and social factors. Hence, the phenomenological approach of enquiry was adapted as a design of enquiry. The focus of phenomenological inquiry was the 'lived experiences' of working women with regards to the phenomenon of 'returning to work post pregnancy' and how they interpret those experiences.

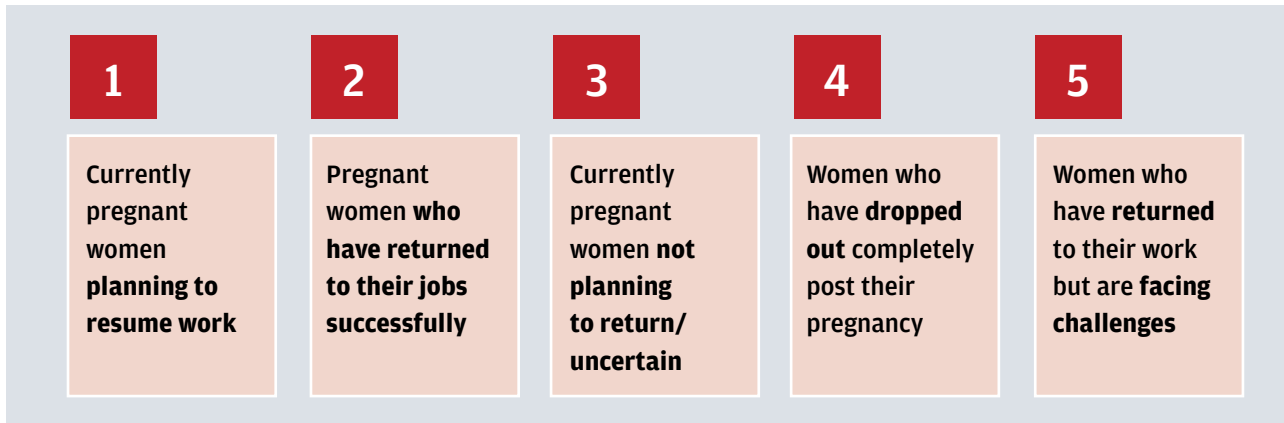
This approach of enquiry was from a position of flexibility and open-endedness, to facilitate a richer understanding into three critical aspects of the phenomena:

- Perception towards the Phenomenon
- Understanding of the Phenomena
- Response to the Phenomena

2.2 Sampling Frame

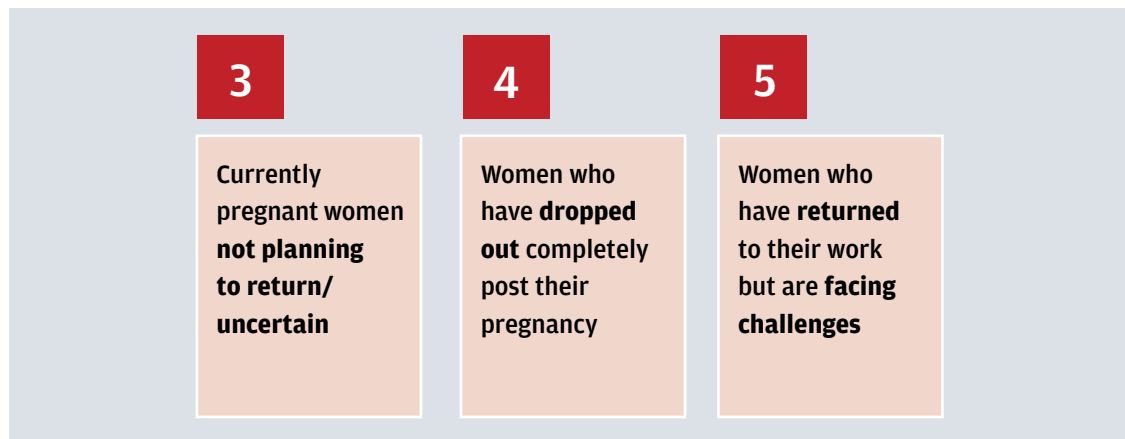
The five eligibility definitions of members of the population for inclusion in the sample was purposive and based on anecdotal and empirical evidences.

The focal phenomenon (of returning mothers) was further segregated into five possible sub-phenomena to define the initial sampling frame as one can see below.



As the findings of the research would be used in development of interventions to address the re-entry barriers for returning mothers, it was decided that the purview of the research be solely focused on ‘challenges and barriers’, rather than on ‘triggers.’

This necessitated a relook at the sampling frame and thus, the following three cohorts were shortlisted.



The other two cohorts i.e.

Cohort 1: Currently pregnant women planning to resume work and

Cohort 2: Pregnant women who have returned to their jobs successfully, were dropped

2.3 Target Group Definition

As mentioned above, primary target audience (i.e. women) was divided among three different cohorts:

- I. Currently pregnant women not planning to return/uncertain
- II. Women who have dropped out completely post their pregnancy
- III. Women who have returned to their work post their maternity leave but are facing challenges

The second level of segregation ensured representation from three sectors:

- I. Private sector
- II. Social and development sector
- III. Media and communication

The public sector was deliberately kept out the sample with the assumption that there would be ample initiatives and policy measures among public sector companies.

Other Demographics included:

- **Age:** 25-35 years, because as per NSSO 2011, close to 80% dropouts among work-force are among women less than 35 years
- **Number of children:** Mix of mothers with 1 or more than 1 child
- **Type of families:** A mix of nuclear and joint families
- **Designation:** Mix of higher management, middle and lower management
- **Socio-Economic Class (SEC):** A2B1 (the highest dropout is seen in post-secondary level of education)

Primary Target Group (TG) i.e. the women encompassed the following:

- I. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with women** to unearth the commonalities in challenges faced among working women- both laterally and well as individually among each cohort (Table 1)
- II. **In-Depth-Interviews (IDIs) with women** belonging to the three different cohorts to identify the nuances in challenges faced among target group both laterally and individually among each target (Table 2)

TABLE 1: The sample size of women achieved through Focus Group Discussions

Social Sector		Currently Pregnant	Dropped Out	Facing Challenges
Delhi	Executives and Junior Managers	I Social		I Social
	Mid Management		I Social	
Bangalore	Executives and Junior Managers		I Social	
	Mid Management	I Social		I Social
Private Sector				
Delhi	Executives and Junior Managers	I Private	I Private	I Private
	Mid Management	I Private	I Private	
Bangalore	Executives and Junior Managers	I Private	I Private	
	Mid Management	I Private		I Private
Media and Communication Sector				
Delhi	Executives and Junior Managers	I Media & Communication		
	Mid Management		I Media & Communication	
Bangalore	Executives and Junior Managers			
	Mid Management			I Media & Communication

TABLE 2.: The sample size of women achieved through Depth Interviews

Social Sector		Currently Pregnant	Dropped Out	Facing Challenges
Delhi	I Child	I Social		I Social
	> I Child	I Social	I Social	I Social
Bangalore	I Child		I Social	
	> I Child	I Social	I Social	I Social
Private Sector		Currently Pregnant	Dropped Out	Facing Challenges
Delhi	I Child	I Private	I Private	
	> I Child	I Social	I Private	I Private
Bangalore	I Child	I Private	I Private	I Private
	> I Child	I Private		I Private
Media and Communication Sector		Currently Pregnant	Dropped Out	Facing Challenges
Delhi	I Child			
	> I Child	I Media & Communication		
Bangalore	I Child		I Media & Communication	
	> I Child			I Media & Communication

In addition to the primary TG i.e. the women, perspectives were gathered from other stakeholders, which helped triangulate understanding. To achieve this:

- I. *In-Depth interviews with Diversity & Inclusion Experts* were conducted to get an expert review and in-depth interviews among HR Representatives to collect the employers’ perspective with regards to engaging and integrating returning mothers to the workforce (Table 3).
- II. *Focus group discussions were conducted with men/ husbands* whose wives had completely dropped out post their pregnancy, or those whose wives have returned to work post their pregnancy but are facing challenges (Table 4).

TABLE 3.: The sample size of D&I experts and HR representative achieved through Depth Interviews

Particulars	Number
Diversity & Inclusion Experts in-Depth Interviews	5
HR Representations- In Depth Interviews	9

TABLE 4.: The sample size of men achieved through Focus Group Discussions

Center	Age	SEC	Particulars	Number
Delhi	25-35 years	A2/B1	Husbands of women who are facing challenges at work	1
	25-35 years	A2/B1	Husbands of women who have dropped out of work	1

2.4 Data Management

Data processing was standardised using quality control measures, including checking for consistency and completeness before the data entry. The following process was applied to data management procedures:

FIGURE- 2: Data management processes



Qualitative data from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was typed, edited and entered into a computer and summarised using MS Excel. Texts were coded and clustered along the developed framework for subsequent analysis. The approach for analysis emphasized pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or ‘themes’) within the data.

A framework was generated for the analysis, which included inductive as well as deductive approaches. An inductive approach to qualitative research begins with gathering data on a specific topic or issue; searching for relevant patterns within this data, and applying the findings in a more generalized manner. A deductive approach, on the other hand, works with a pre-established theory and are generally used to test a hypothesis.

2.5 Quality Assurance

The research was conducted by a team of experienced qualitative researchers. Prior to the fieldwork, a training programme was organised for the research team to strengthen their understanding of the research, share a-priori hypothesis, and existing subject knowledge.

Field supervision efforts were undertaken to monitor quality of recruitments to ensure that high-quality data was collected. Also, since the research approach was phenomenological approach on enquiry, data saturation was measured constantly. This meant that data collection throughout the course of the research was an iterative process.

2.6 Limitations

This is a first of its kind cross-sectoral analysis of returning mothers to workforce across income groups. Consequently, the research had certain limitations. Future researches in this field should be cognizant of these limitations. Presented below are some key points:

Sampling Related Limitations:

- The study tackles only formal employment and does not take into account informal employment
- Representation of men/husbands was added as an afterthought. This sample was added post completion of the preliminary analysis with regards to the women, who were the primary target group of the study.

Unaccounted Profiles:

Since the focus of the research was challenges & barrier, it did not take into account the following two sub-phenomena discussed earlier:

- Cohort 1: Currently pregnant women planning to resume work and
- Cohort 2: Pregnant women who have returned to their jobs successfully

Data Collection Limitations:

- The topic of discussion was too personal. Anecdotal evidence was needed to substantiate the information given by women. Thus, the discussion was deliberately kept free-flowing and enough time was given to the women to make them feel comfortable and create safe spaces for discussion.

Research Findings

SECTION THREE

Predicament of Working Mothers In India

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Predicament of Working Mothers in India

The research found progression of women's career and highlighted the inflexion points such as marriage and pregnancy. Pregnancy as an inflexion point had also led to challenges such as amplification of guilt & fear and lack of knowledge about physical and mental well-being post childbirth. The research also unveiled the diminishing support from family and work at the time of pregnancy.

3.1 Working Women

The research found the following life-cycle of the Indian urban working woman. At the end of her education, a woman who joins work has few preferences about timings, location or travel. As she moves ahead in her personal life through marriage, in-laws and children, her work life evolves and changes

based on emerging circumstances. The research revealed that for most women prior to their pregnancy, hurdles in life were limited and work was an integral part of her life.

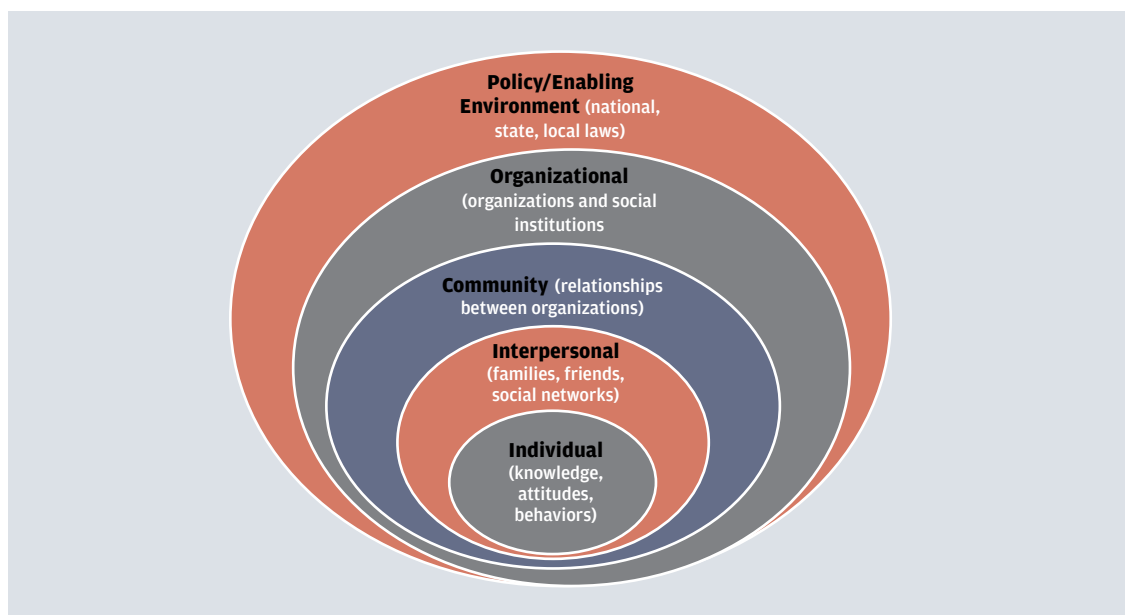
Moreover, these women expressed their willingness to continue to work post-marriage with their husbands. However, preferences such as location of the job, timings of the job, work industry etc. started to set in post marriage which otherwise were not vividly seen.

3.2 Challenges of the Indian Working Women

The dynamic universe of a working woman that includes her own dreams and aspirations, children, husband, home, work and society is a complex one. To explore this complex interweaving of various influences & variables, and to understand how these interact with each other, the research findings are underpinned in the socio-ecological model.

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) is a theory-based framework for understanding the multi-faceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behaviours and for identifying behavioural and organisational leverage points and intermediaries for correct-practice promotion within organisations or ecosystems. There are five nested, hierarchical levels of the SEM: Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Organisational, and Policy/Enabling Environment.

FIGURE- 3: The Socio-Ecological Model



3.2.1. Individual Barriers

Marriage is one of the biggest life-changing events in a woman's life. Women often prepare themselves for the change at the time of their marriage. As part of the smooth transition after marriage, many women reported that they negotiated with their future husbands and in-laws that they would continue to work, "before getting married, I had told my in-laws that I would continue working after marriage," said a woman with two children living in a joint family who returned to work and is facing challenges in continuing work. After marriage, they not only move to their husband's home but also try to learn and follow the customs, habits and ways of his family. There is a strong cultural imprint to adjust to the spouse's family and to give preferential treatment to the husband's needs and career over their own. They coped with these emerging changes well and claimed that they continued to manage their home and work

with relative ease, *“of course, when I was married I had to consider my husband’s opinion before taking any decisions and with time I made him understand that my career is equally important,”* said a woman who returned to work after first childbirth.

However, when they become pregnant and eventually mothers, they are confronted with new responsibilities, little experience and difficult choices. They said that, if they chose to resume work after child birth, they felt guilty of putting themselves and their needs before those of their child, husband or family. This sense of guilt is amplified owing to childcare, due to work and long present cultural conditioning. This feeling of guilt was found to be severe among those mothers who had two children, both young and difficult to rear together, *“both my kids are young and it feels so bad to leave them at home and come to work,”* said a woman with two children who returned to work.

“My child was very weak and it was only me who had to take care of me,” said a woman with two children, from a nuclear family, who returned to work and is facing challenges.

At the same time, professional work had provided them with financial independence, satisfaction and a sense of self-worth. Many reported that they were not comfortable with leaving their jobs and perceived it as a compromise, *“I do not want to leave this job, at this point I cannot let go of my financial independence,”* said a currently pregnant woman. However, loss of financial independence was mentioned across the three cohorts of women interviewed across two research centers.

Mothers were found to be confronted with the choice of either neglecting their children or compromising their careers, *“my mother-in-law passed a comment about how can I work and leave my child at home,”* said a woman, from a nuclear family, who returned to work after first child and is facing challenges.

3.2.2. Challenges at Family Level

Women spoke affectionately about their husbands and described them as supportive and understanding. But, most husbands did not help in household chores or child care. They felt that their primary responsibility is to earn for the family and home management was the prerogative of the wives. Women mentioned that their husbands expected them to be homemakers before being professionals. Group discussions with fathers/husbands corroborated this, *“like my mother has always handled the house, similarly I want my wife to be at home and take care of the house,”* a man said during the group discussion. Most husbands claimed to have seen fewer examples of working women pre-or post-pregnancy at their side of the family or within their social circle. Hence, the normative behaviour among the majority in their social circle gets perceived as the norm. This put pressure on working mothers to manage work, home and child-care with little support from spouse.

Further, women mentioned that often husbands did not confront their in-laws in times of a tussle. Rather, they felt that the husbands think that it is woman’s prerogative to compromise and adjust, *“he asked me to listen to my mother-in-law and follow what she said,”* said a woman who dropped out of work after her first child. They elaborated that the husbands often administer terms and conditions to the freedom of a woman and also have the right to revoke that freedom.

“In my family, women have left work after delivering their babies and I think it is a good decision to take,” said a husband

This leads to most women having little help in household chores and limited participation in household decision making. Decisions like continuing to work after pregnancy need participation and co-operation from the husband, who often defers it to the mother-in-law. Therefore, women feel isolated and unempowered to take decisions about their careers that require support from husband and his family, *“he asked me to listen to my mother-in-law and follow what she said. I wanted to continue and I had stated that to my husband. But my mother-in-law did not approve. My husband did not take my side in that matter,”* said a woman who dropped out of work post maternity leave.

*“My husband clearly said that he will only earn money for the house and the rest is up to me”-
Currently Pregnant, Nuclear Family, 1 child*

When asked about this imbalance in the power equation, women explained that the husbands often earned more than them and found no reason to compromise, *“he earns more than me, he doesn’t want to compromise with that,”* said a woman who dropped out of the workforce. One elaborated that her husband treats his income as ‘his own’ while she treats it as ‘our income’ (referring to the couple). Due to such deep-seated attitudes, women reported being extremely careful not to hurt their husband’s ego and self-respect.

Most women, a-priori to marriage, negotiated with their in-laws and continued to work in the initial years of marriage. However, with the passage of time they were expected to contribute more in the household chores and the support for their careers reduced. Most discussed in-laws at length and explained that the woman’s ability to negotiate support starts to decrease after the first pregnancy with additional responsibilities of child care. They mentioned they encountered the strongest opposition at the time of their second child, *“in the industry, it is very common that women leave job after their second kid. This is primarily because they do not get support at home to take care of kids,”* said a D&I Expert.

“After baby, when I was working - my mother-in-law used to say that she will not take care of him every day.” -Women who dropped out, has two children, from a joint family.

In such a case, when family support for professional work and childcare reduced, many women tried to look for day-cares and crèche facilities around their workplaces. Majority of women and their husbands were found to have a negative disposition towards private day-cares and crèche facilities because of the negative media attention and bad word of mouth. *“There are so many incidents that we see every day in the news that happens in a day-care,”* said a woman who dropped out of work after her first child. Many husbands mentioned that they are not confident about the quality of care in day-cares and would rather have their wives take care of their children, *“there is no trustable day-care near my office”,* said a Currently Pregnant Woman with 1 Child living in a Nuclear Family.

With the lack of support from family, inadequate infrastructure and increasing responsibilities, many women felt ill-equipped to continue working. D&I experts interviewed affirmed the same.

3.2.3. Workplace Hurdles

After pregnancy, women face a two-pronged problem at work place - interpersonal and policy related.

Many mentioned that the attitude of their supervisor changed towards them after pregnancy. Often, they sensed that they were given easier or lower-level assignments than they were given earlier. This made them feel like a less productive resource in the office. Some mentioned that it felt like a demotion, *“I was given a junior position and a lower salary when I went to work and that did not make sense to me,”* said a woman living in joint family who dropped out of the workforce after her first child. Most men claimed that they see few women in the workplace after a child. They are dictated by the subjective norms that women must take care of their family and home above all.

*“No, I did not ask for any policy related things.”
Currently Pregnant Woman, Nuclear Family,
1Child*

At the same time, with a child at home, women sometimes require help and support from colleagues. They also asked for leaves-of-absence to manage child care, for example. These special requests and requirements would be considered based on the ‘good’ mood of the boss, most women interviewed said.

Majority of the women felt that their pregnancy was ‘their’ problem and not a natural process, *“this is my problem and not my office’s, so let’s see how I will manage,”* said a pregnant woman in focus group

discussion. The same sentiment was reported across groups. Many were unaware of company policies on maternity. Interestingly, many women said that they felt that they were inadequate to carry on work, and did not report inefficiencies of the systems and processes to provide them support to carry on work.

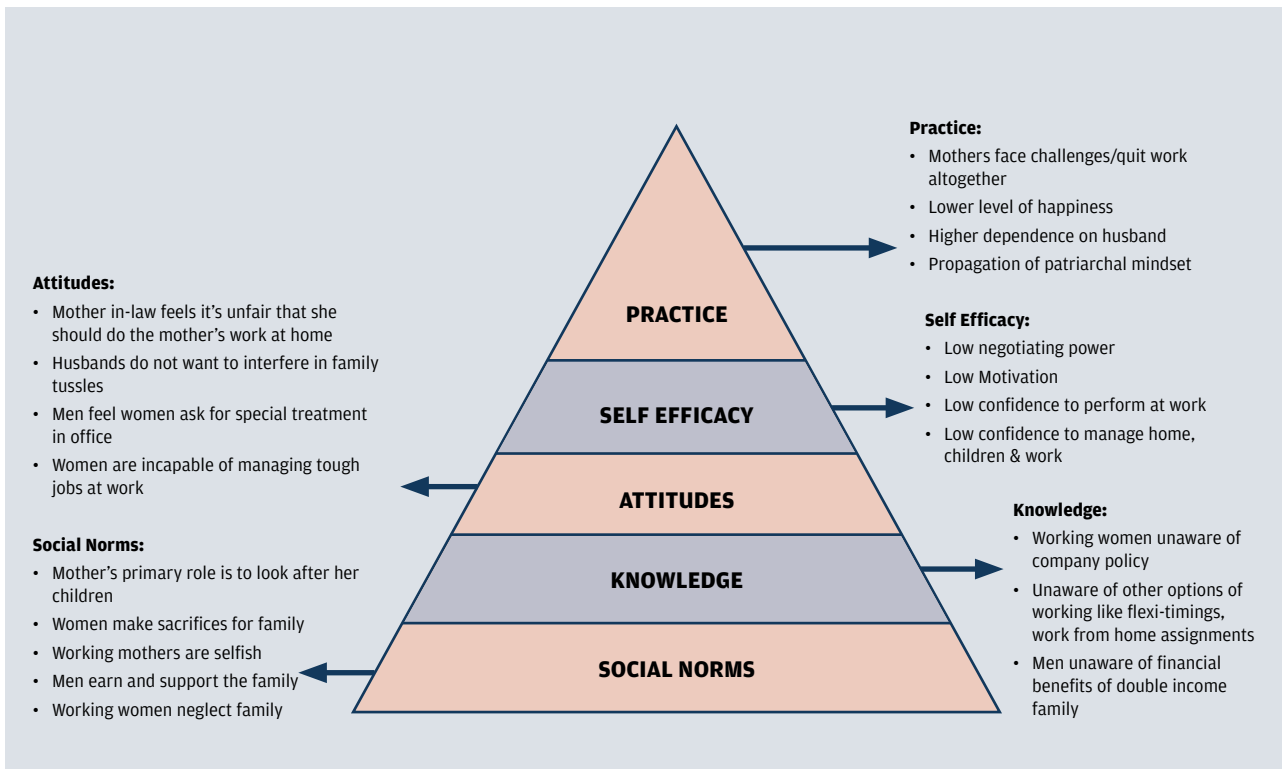
3.2.4. Socio-Cultural Dynamics

The deep seated social norms around women being homemakers often do not align well with working women after maternity. The premise lies in the fact that most men and women in the previous generation have not seen younger women work in their generation. While they ‘encourage education and professional work’, they believe that women’s primary role is to take care of her family and children. These social norms affect men and women in different ways.

“My husband said that if I want to work then I can but I will have to manage everything on my own” -Currently Pregnant, Nuclear Family, 1Child

Men are accustomed to seeing most mothers as home-makers and few mothers at workplace. This fuels the descriptive norm that other mothers focus on caring for family and home. Further they believe that their own role is defined as the bread-earner and home management is the role of the women.

FIGURE- 4: Socio Ecological Ladder for working methods

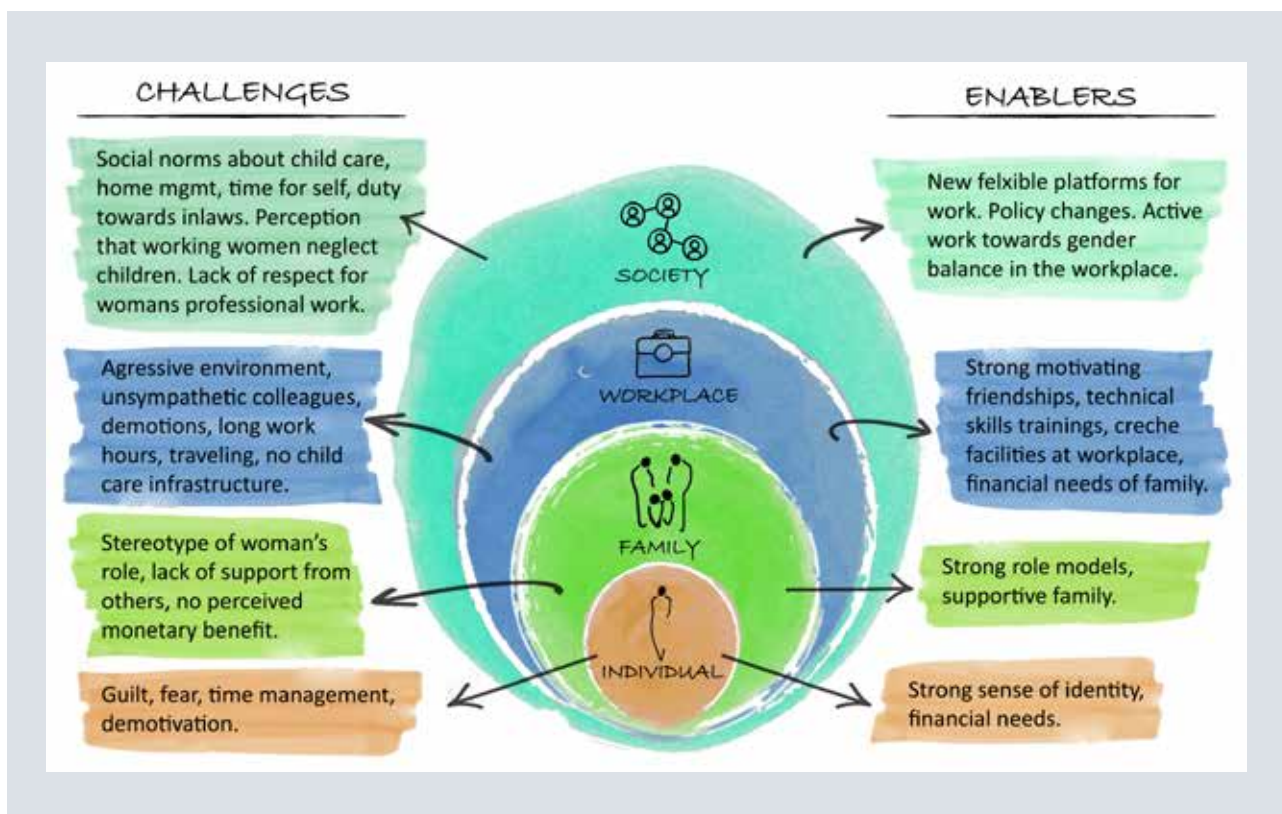


“Family thinks that I am passing time at office and they compare me with other women who are sitting at home” - Women with two children who returned to work but is facing challenges, from a joint family.

Due to such strong norms, women believe that they should compromise on their personal growth and aspirations for the good of the family. They stay fearful of being blamed if something goes wrong. Many women mentioned that working mothers are often talked-down-to and are compared with other women who have left work to take care of their child, “my mother-in-law passed a comment about how can I work and leave my child at home,” said a woman living in nuclear family who returned to work after child birth.

Therefore, the notion of women prioritising professional work over childcare in the current scenario does not augment well for the majority.

FIGURE- 5: Socio-Ecological Model for Pregnant Women and Returning Mothers



SECTION FOUR

**Challenges Faced
By Women Who
are Currently
Pregnant**

SECTION FOUR

Challenges Faced by Women Who are Currently Pregnant

The research included women who were pregnant with their first child as well as those who were expecting their second child. Challenges at many levels were captured and are presented below. A vivid distinction was found among those in a nuclear family set up versus those who lived in joint families.

4.1 Currently Pregnant Women

The research included women who were pregnant with their first child as well as those who were expecting their second child. Challenges at many levels were captured and are presented below. A vivid distinction was found among those in a nuclear family set up versus those who lived in joint families. Following the socio-ecological model, presented below are the findings at four key levels- at individual level, family level, work place, and societal level.

4.1.1. Individual Barriers

Across groups and interviews, expectant mothers went through a host of complex emotions and often found themselves trying to balance their feelings towards work, self, home, and child.

A clear sense of fear emerged among all pregnant women. Majority of the first-time pregnant women articulated that they were afraid of what to expect. Pregnancy, child-birth and childcare is a new experience that is hard to prepare for. In addition, they feared how they would manage work, home and child simultaneously, *“this will be my first child. I don’t know how will I manage work with the child,”* said a currently pregnant woman, and the same concerns were echoed by many during the group discussions and interviews. They were also unsure if they would be able

“I have taken 6 months leave, do not know if they would keep me back, I handed over my work to a colleague before leave,” a woman from joint family.

to join work back or be welcome by the team/organisation. Many voiced their concerns of having taken a very long break and worried that they may not get their position back.

Working women who were pregnant for the second time were found to be surer of themselves in terms of child-birth and care but expressed fear about the added responsibility of managing two children along with work. The sense of fear was further amplified owing to the expectation that they would be single-handedly blamed (of being careless, selfish and putting themselves ahead of their children), if something were to go wrong. All pregnant women were found to be living in fear at multiple levels of overwhelming responsibilities, of things going wrong, and of going back to work.

“I don’t want that when my child grows up, he says that I had not given time to him,” said a woman with one child, from a joint family.

While all respondents wanted to continue working, at least at a subconscious level, all mothers experienced guilt as well. Mothers who had continued to work and were expecting their second child were acutely aware of the compromises they had made with care of their first child. They felt guilty for these compromises and did not want to repeat similar experience with their second one, *“I could not give enough time to my son because I was working, I don’t want to do the same with this one,”* said a woman currently pregnant with her second child. Many

mentioned that they did not want to come across as unloving mothers. Those who were pregnant for the first time also worried about child-care but said that they would feel guilty if they could not justify their role at work after child birth. *“I don’t want that when my child grows up he complains that I have never given him time when I was supposed to,”* remarked a mother who dropped out of the workforce. It seems that pregnant women felt trapped with no good choices wherein any course of action would make them feel bad, *“I don’t know if I should enjoy my motherhood or pursue my career,”* said a woman currently pregnant with her first child.

While they thought about going back to work, women mentioned that the long temporal gap post childbirth has led them to suffer low motivation and confidence. They said that they were unsure if they would be able to perform at work. This discouraged and demotivated them to continue to work. This lack of self-efficacy was amplified due to the fast changing requirements at workplaces (like technological advancement) to cope up with current dynamics of work, *“like I am in accounts, so there were so many changes that happened like GST and demonetization while I am away,”* said a currently pregnant woman.

4.1.2. Challenges at Family Level

Most women talked at length about the lack of support and empathy from the family. The women with more than one child talked about the diminishing support of their mothers-in-law with the care of their second child compared to the first child as managing the health of the woman and the child was perceived as a burden by mothers-in-law. And therefore, they were advised to stay at home and take care of the child. Some women talked about the constant criticisms that they were subjected to if they returned late from work.

“My mother-in-law was supportive at the start, then after some time, she started to say that you will have to leave the job, currently pregnant woman from joint family.

Most women expressed the diplomacy of their husbands. Women mentioned that their husbands “allow” them to continue work after childbirth. However, the decision making on whether she can continue work, where and what type of job remains in the hands of the husbands, *“my husband clearly said that I should look for a teaching job because there the timings are fixed,”* said a currently pregnant woman belonging to a nuclear family. Further, they stated that they found their husbands unwilling to participate in household chores, childcare and defending her stance against the family. Household management was perceived as the sole and primary responsibility of the woman and she had to manage both home and work. *“Just like our job is to earn for the family, woman’s role is to look after the house and child,”* explained a husband.

4.1.3. Workplace Hurdles

The experience of pregnant women at their workplace has been mixed. While most mentioned challenges; some also talked of empathy and consideration.

The work side challenges are linked to the competitive environment at the workplace because of which colleagues often do not empathise with pregnant women and expect them to work equally hard as they do. This was observed mainly in male dominated environments. Many women stated that the change in their physical health did not result in flexibility at work. The intensity of workload remained consistent, with which most were unable to cope during the later stages of their pregnancy. This often resulted in a perception that they were not contributing equally or was at par with others in the organisation. Many women said that while colleagues would generally help and support, they were at the mercy of their mood and available time. Many supervisors encouraged pregnant woman to go on maternity leave early, obliquely discouraging them to continue working, *“in my 7th month of pregnancy, my boss asked me to take maternity leave but I knew I could continue,”* said a woman who was pregnant for the first time.

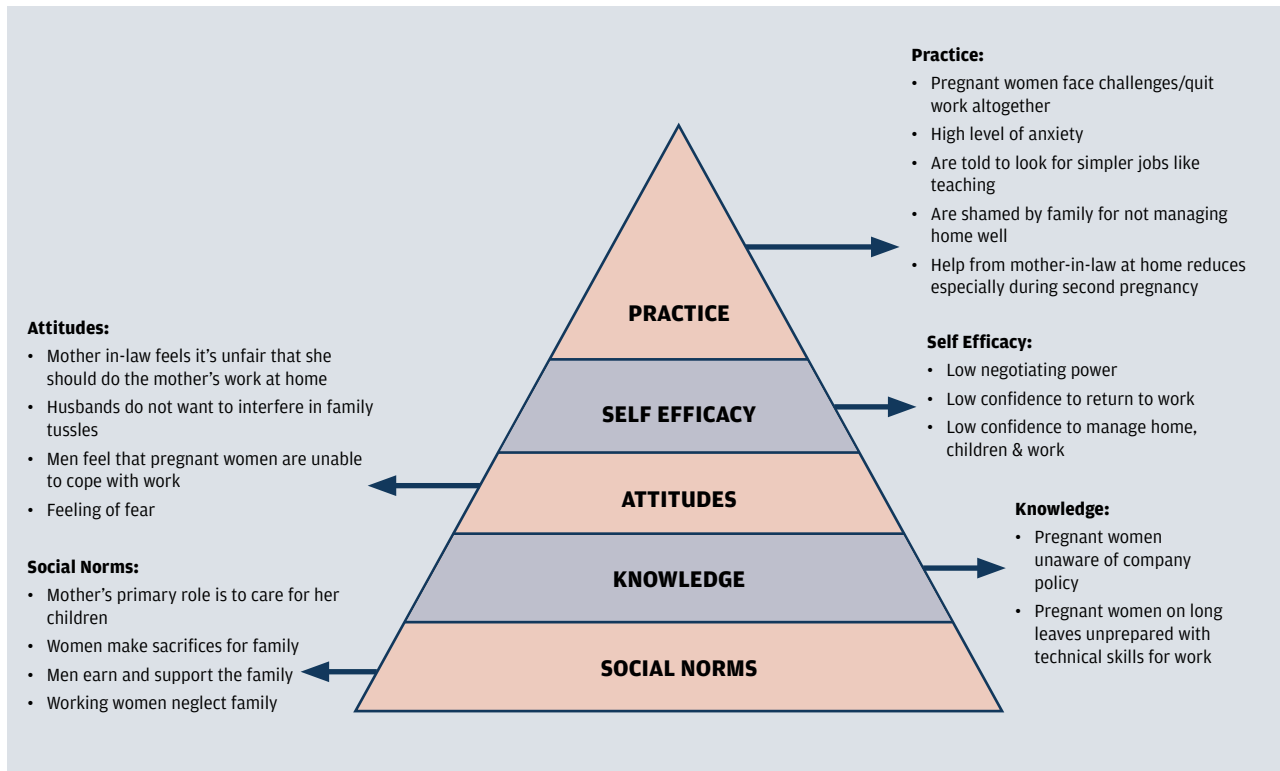
They felt that they are considered as a dispensable resource. Furthermore, most women expressed that lack of relaxation and flexibility with respect to work timings had caused uncertainty to return to work.

At the same time, many women talked about the positive support they get from their colleagues. Interestingly, women did not expect special treatment or consideration due to their new circumstances, *“if company is paying me then they will take 100% out of me, which is their right irrespective of what my condition is,”* said a currently pregnant woman. They fear that their special requests may not be considered kindly.

4.1.4. Socio-Cultural Dynamics

Most women affirmed that they had witnessed very few or no women working post their pregnancy in their social circles. And therefore, do not have many role models to demonstrate that work-life balance with child care is possible. In addition, some women also mentioned that they were constantly compared with other housewives in the neighbourhood and are shamed by discussing how well homemakers manage their families.

Most women also talked about the archaic thought process of their husbands who think that household work is only a woman’s job and earning money is a man’s prerogative.

FIGURE- 6: Socio-Ecological Ladder for women who are currently pregnant.

SECTION FIVE

Challenges Faced By Women Who Dropped Out From Workforce Post Pregnancy

Challenges Faced by Women Who Dropped Out from Workforce Post Pregnancy

Women who have dropped out completely post their pregnancy experience both intrinsic and extrinsic challenges. Intrinsic challenges refer to the health condition of the women herself and her battle between her motherhood and her demanding career. Extrinsic challenges include lack of support, low flexibility, and socio-cultural norms.

5.1 Women Who Dropped Out of the Workforce Post Maternity

These are the primary reasons for the women to drop out post their pregnancy. Considering that these women have dropped out completely, it can be safely concluded that the challenges that they were faced with were also the toughest among the three cohorts. These are detailed below.

5.1.1. Individual Barriers

Doing the best for their children was the most important consideration for mothers. Most women stated that they prioritised motherhood over work because later in life they did not want to be seen as unloving mothers. Furthermore, some mothers (especially the ones who had two children) mentioned that they felt guilty for not giving adequate time to their first child and did not wish to repeat the same with their second child; hence, they compromised on work, *“when my second child was born, I wanted to give time to him that I did not do with my first child,”* said a woman who dropped out of work after her second child.

“There are so many incidents that we see every day in the news that happens in a day-care” -woman living in nuclear family who dropped out of workforce after first child.

Some women stated that their health was a persistent challenge after childbirth. Weight gain was a constant theme and the embarrassment of being imperfect led to low self-esteem. Many also mentioned a difficult pregnancy and a long gap in work, post childbirth. This had led to diminished motivation and low confidence. This was amplified due to lack of hard skills to cope up with current dynamics of work. For example, as technology

advances, women feel under-confident to cope with it. Many women were either unaware or had negative disposition towards other work areas such as freelancing, part-time and entrepreneurship, *“part-time job options are all about feeding data into the system. You will not get anything beyond this,”* exclaimed a woman who dropped out of work after her first child.

Further, they said that employing an external help to take care of family members would affect her image as a good homemaker.

5.1.2. Challenges at Family Level

Health of the family was another important reason for many women to drop out of workforce. Most women asserted that the brittle health of their child and the deteriorating health of their parents-in-law was the reason of dropping out. In essence, she had to choose between her own career and duty towards family.

“My mother-in-law is now old and my husband taunts me if I don’t take care of her,” said a woman who dropped out of workforce post childbirth.

At home, a lack of active support was another important factor. Majority of women stated that their mothers-in-law were less considerate with regards to their work and also extended no motivation to them while they were working and nurturing their child. Some women talked about the constant taunts that they were subjected to if they returned late from work. The husbands did not provide active support and continue to be unwilling to help in household chores, child care or supporting her stance

with her in-laws, *“my mother-in-law told me to quit job and my husband also did not tell her about my plans to resume work,”* said a woman with two children, who dropped out of the workforce, living in a joint family.

There was a very myopic view of the woman’s job and was only understood as extra or additional income generation. When asked about their job, many women complained that their husbands and in-laws did not find economic sense in them earning and hence, they were asked to stay at home and look after the child, *“my mother-in-law said that since I am saving negligible from my salary, it is better that I stay at home and look after my family,”* said a woman with two children, who dropped out of the workforce, from a joint family.

The lack of economic sense among family members widens with the increasing salary/profits of the husband. Most husbands said that men, in general, earn more than the women and there was no financial reason for women to work. They gloated that they can afford to give their spouses an amount equivalent to the woman’s salary as pocket money, *“whatever she is earning, I can give her. So, she should sit at home and take care of the house,”* said a husband. Therefore, their employment does not make sense, especially if it causes an imbalance in the family. Majority of the men perceived that women are inadequate to handle both work and home simultaneously. They explained that there is discord and tension at home whenever household chores are disturbed, *“if she comes late and the house is in a mess or the child is suffering, there are fights in the house,”* said a man. This was echoed by other men in the groups.

At the household level, the woman's employment is seen as superfluous and without any benefits. Rather, she stays under pressure to perform all her household duties if she desires to continue working.

5.1.3. Workplace Hurdles

At work, there was a lack of human support and motivation. Most women said that they dropped-out post pregnancy because their bosses considered them dispensable and incapable when they were pregnant. Some women said that they were demoted from their position, given lower salary or were given an unfair appraisal post their return from maternity leave, *"I was given a junior position and a lower salary when I went to work and that did not make sense to me,"* said a woman who dropped out of work after her first child. *"When I returned to work, my salary was decreased and I was made to work with my juniors,"* another said. The mothers said that they had consistent workload and were expected to work with the same rigor after they joined back from maternity leave. There were rigid policies for timings and leaves of absence, *"at times when I wanted to go home early either because of my health or my child, I could not leave,"* said a woman who dropped out of work after her second child. They needed some flexibility for timings and had no option but to resign.

While regular full day office work was very difficult to manage for new mothers, they continued to have fixed ideas about the type of job and sector that they should work in. Therefore, they did not explore the jobs with options of short project work, flexi-timings, freelancing or work from home. Many were unaware or had a negative perception of such jobs, *"I really do not know which organisation will give me part-time job that I want. Organisations look for full-time employees only,"* said a woman who dropped out of work.

Some women spoke of the support they got from their colleagues but it was at the mercy of available time and mood of their colleagues, *"sometimes they help me with my work but it's not every time. Also, they are the ones who complain to the boss as well,"* said a woman who dropped out post her second childbirth.

Women articulated that for them to be able to continue work, infrastructural support such as day-cares and crèche are essential. However, there is a general lack of such infrastructure. Also, many of them mentioned that their office had no provisions of the same. Further, they had a very negative perception of the day-care facilities and said that such places are not safe for their children.

5.1.4. Socio-Cultural Dynamics

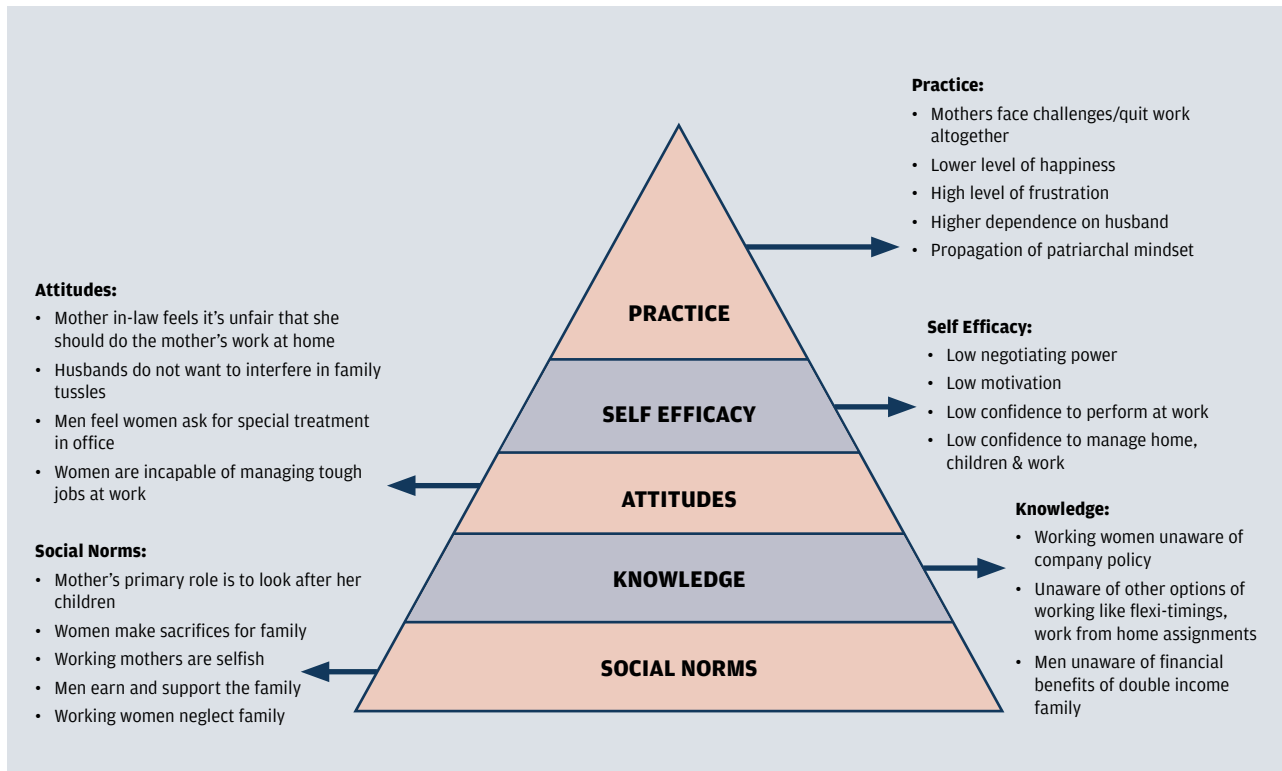
Most women also talked about the archaic thought process of their husbands who think that household work is only a woman's job and earning money is a man's prerogative. However, they fail to understand the economic implication of dual earners in the family.

Most women affirmed that they had witnessed very few women working post their pregnancy in their social circles. Hence, it seemed normal in their surrounding that mothers would stop working and take care of home and child. In addition to this, some women also mentioned that they were constantly compared with the housewives in the neighbourhood on how well they manage their families.

"He told me that now I have a stable job and I can afford all expenses, so he asked me to take care of the house," said a woman from a nuclear family.

Most men had seen fewer examples of working women post pregnancy/working at all at their side of family or with in their social circle. Hence, to them, it was normal that mothers would not be working.

Some men mentioned that women around them had dropped work post childbirth to take care of the family and children. Hence, looking after the family is a woman's prerogative and the family is dependent on her.

FIGURE- 7: Socio-Ecological Ladder for women who dropped out of workforce post maternity


SECTION SIX

Enablers and Challenges Faced by Women Who Returned to Workforce Post Pregnancy

Enablers and Challenges Faced by Women Who Returned to Workforce Post Pregnancy

The research found that a strong sense of self-identity, role models, support from social circles, and in some cases, financial requirements worked in favour of women returning to work post maternity. However when they did, women faced different kind of challenges.

6.1 Enablers for Returning to Work

While many pregnant women and mothers dropped out of work after the child, there were some who did not succumb to the various challenges and joined the workforce back. This section explores the specific variables that worked in their favour.

- **A Strong Sense of Identity**

The returning women were strong, independent and had high self-worth. They vehemently talked about financial independence as a primary trigger for women to return to work. Majority of the women said that they desired for an identity of their own and disliked asking husbands for money or give justification of expenses.

“When you ask for money from your husbands, they typically say- Why do you need it. It really gets me irritated,” said a woman, who returned to workforce and facing challenges, one child.

“My sisters-in-law are all working, so it was not difficult for me to work,” said a woman, with one child, who returned to work.

- **Normative Triggers**

The research indicates that women who returned to work were influenced via availability heuristic. Most women asserted that they had precedence of women working in their family. Therefore, mothers-in-law and husbands had supported them to continue work. Moreover, they also mentioned that they had seen other women around them excelling at work and managing house, *“all my friends have gone back to work after delivery and they are doing so good at work.”* This gave them confidence and motivation to continue working.

- **Support from Social Circle**

“There were so many loans and EMIs, I had to work,” said a returning mother.

Most returning mothers continued to work in the same organisation for a long period of time. This resulted in the formation of social circle that was completely owned by them. Their friends and colleagues truly listened and understood their challenges and offered support and guidance, *“since it’s been long in this organisation so I had friends here who supported me when I came back. They always helped me with my work,”* explained a woman. This was a strong motivation to return to work.

- **Financial Requirements**

Some women stated that financial instability or sub-optimum income flow at home, as a key trigger to continue work. In such cases, these women also talked fondly about how their husbands supported them with household chores and childcare and hence, it was easier for them to continue work.

6.2 Challenges for Returning To Work

Even though there were enablers that worked in favour of returning mothers, they were not without challenges. Presented below are the challenges faced by the mothers who returned to work.

6.2.1 Individual Barriers

Most women stated that their professional work does not get recognised in the family as it should be and their identity as homemaker trumps their identity as a professional.

“If I go out on holidays, my mother-in-law taunts that I only think about myself,” said a woman with two children, returned to work and facing challenges.

Managing home, child and work kept women very busy and many said that it was difficult for them to spare time for themselves. They elaborated that they often work or finish household chores on weekends. If they take out time for themselves on the weekends they get tagged as ‘self-centric.’ This lack of validation and respect for their professional work led to disappointment and frustration.

6.2.2. Challenges at Family Level

Many felt that their professional work is not understood or given credibility at home. Family members do not give any concessions for the fact that they return home exhausted after many hours of work. Some elaborated that their work is not perceived as an income source rather as their entertainment opportunity.

Men were found to have a negative attitude towards women continuing to work after childbirth. Majority of the men perceived that women are inadequate to handle both work and home simultaneously. They said that if the woman is working prior to marriage, she is likely to continue till her first child. However, women should drop out of work post-delivery for 3-4 years as it is imperative for the holistic development

of the child. They pointed out that working mothers may not be able to focus on their children leading to lower emotional quotient, lower level of safety and lower level of physical development of the child. They further said that while they can contribute financially, they cannot substitute a mother, *“I can buy toys for my child but cannot feed or give her the care she needs,”* said a husband. Some had discussed child care while planning their family and had mutually agreed that the wives would quit their jobs if required.

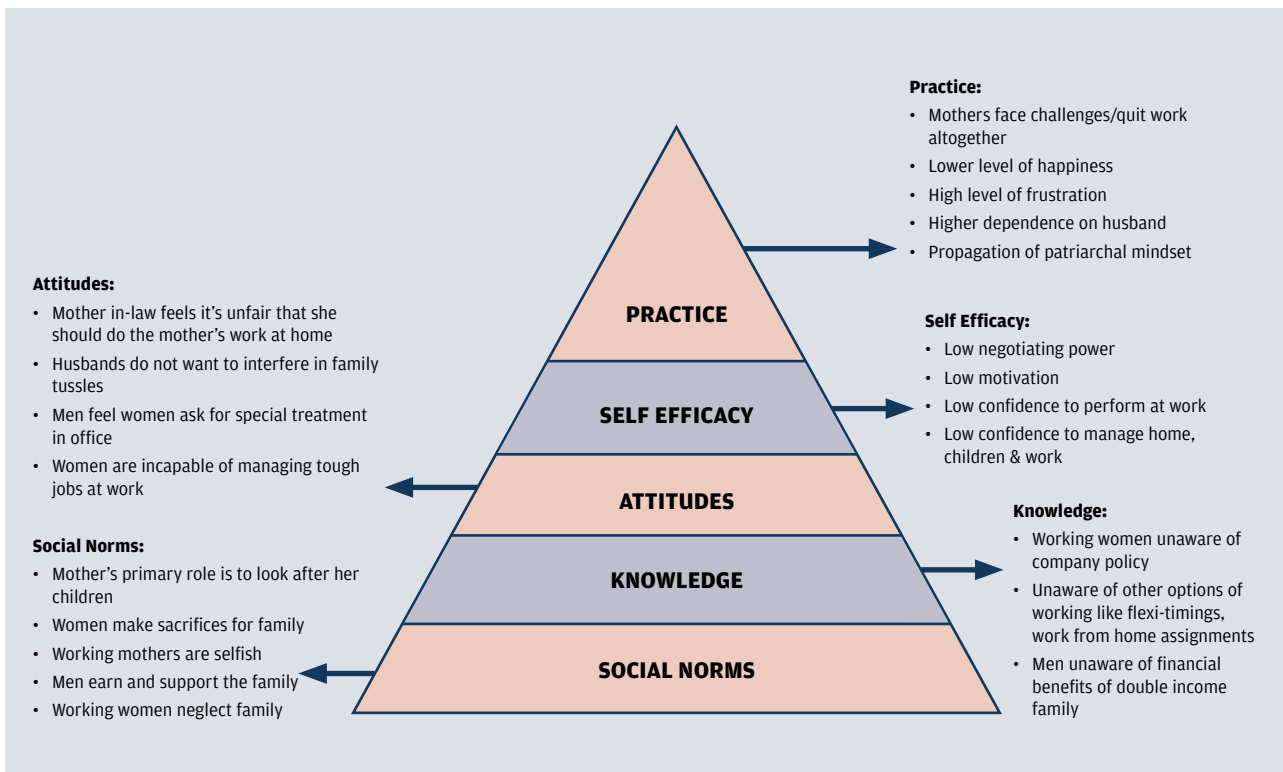
“My wife said that after the baby she will drop her job if she has to,” said a man whose wife is pregnant.

6.2.3. Workplace Hurdles

Returning mothers had faced similar issues of subtle discrimination that pregnant women and drop outs felt. Many talked about low level of confidence and technical skills. Their bosses often talk in a demotivating manner and the tonality seemed to question their capability to perform the task. For example, the boss would use the words *‘can you do this job’* rather than simply saying *‘please get it done.’* This was not only demeaning but also frustrating, *“like women cannot do sales job after they return from maternity because this requires physical strength and activeness,”* said an HR person explaining that returning mothers can do some kind of job after childbirth but not all kinds.

In such a scenario, mothers felt hesitant to express opinions and discuss pregnancy and motherhood with their boss or employer. Hence, an awkward silence remains between the two parties on a sensitive topic like maternity. Further, many pointed out that while policies and procedures may be documented in the office, they are not always applied in real situations.

FIGURE- 8: Socio Ecological Ladder for women who returned to work post maternity



SECTION SEVEN

The Employer's Perspective On Pregnant Women & Returning Mothers In Three Industry Sectors

The Employer's Perspective on Pregnant Women & Returning Mothers in Three Industry Sectors

On an overall level, managers of all three sectors (social, private and media) recognised the challenges of returning to work after pregnancy. They validated that childcare and maternity are the key exit gates for women. They also agreed that demotions of returning mothers often lead to resignations.

7.1 The Employer Perspective- HR

For the project to develop a comprehensive analysis, it was imperative that HR managers be included to give insights on two key issues:

- Manager's awareness of and outlook towards the various challenges being faced by the women
- Organisations' challenges in re-integrating women into their workforce.

On an overall level, managers of all three sectors (social, private and media) recognised the challenges of returning to work after pregnancy. They validated that childcare and maternity are the key exit gates for women. They also agreed that demotions of returning mothers often lead to resignations.

Managers in the private and media & communication sector said that they foresee and plan for the challenges in projects that would be managed by pregnant mothers and returning mothers. Most pointed out that low productivity, extended leaves of absence, lack of activeness being relevant in high pressure environments with non-negotiable deadlines makes it difficult to re-integrate mothers in the workforce. The sales departments were the most inflexible in terms of giving any concessions to pregnant women or mothers.

Even though the managers were aware that women face challenges at work, their perspectives were different from those of the women. These are presented below:

TABLE 5: Comparative Differences in HR & Woman’s Perspectives

Issues	HR perspective	Women’s perspective
Leaves of Absence	Managers stated, that they grant ample of leaves to women who are pregnant or who return to work post childbirth- Managers from Private Sector	Women from private sector expressed that managers do allow leaves but also point them as less committed to work in comparison with other colleagues- Dropped Out
Sales Designation	HR Managers from private sector asserted that they re-integrate women in other job positions which are easy to handle, unlike sales department which requires extensive physical activeness- Managers from Private Sector	Who were in the sales job- women articulated that when they are shifted to a different job role, they feel that they are demoted and given a sub optimal option. Facing Challenges
Re-integrating	Managers from media and communication sector mentioned that they give retuning women an option to freelance with them so that they can continue to work post childbirth- Managers from Media and Communication	Women from media and communication sector stated that their employers find them unfit to perform the job. Currently Pregnant, second child

Many of these differences in opinion can be narrowed through open, candid and sensitised communication between the HR managers and mothers that recognise the challenges faced by the women as well as the organisation. A vote of confidence by the supervisor that women would be completely integrated back to their former positions in a given time-frame might go long way as well.

7.2 Working Conditions in Three Sectors

Due to the nature of work in the social, private and media sectors, there are unique differences in the attitudes of employers in the three sectors of work. Table 6 explains the same.

While the social sector is based on the philosophy of altruism and allows for maximum consideration to the unique conditions of pregnant women and mothers, the private sector works for profit and there is certain awareness of what demands or concessions can and cannot be allowed. The media and advertising sector works on deliverables that are time sensitive and high quality. While there is empathy for pregnant women and mothers, it is an extremely aggressive environment with constant travel. Due to these fundamental differences, the managers and employers in the three sectors face different challenges, offer unique support structures and perceive different causes of drop out. This comparative analysis is captured in table No. 7.

TABLE 6: Attitudinal differences among three sectors

Attitudinal differences among the three sectors		
<p>SOCIAL SECTOR</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The basic premise of social sector is based on altruism. 2. Therefore, colleagues and bosses are naturally more empathetic and the organization tries to create solutions for the women. 3. Moreover, it was found that there existed a strong informal support system within the organization 	<p>Vast difference</p>	<p>PRIVATE SECTOR</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It was found that there was a mutual understanding between the women and their bosses. Majority of the women mentioned that their bosses helped them the best they could in their capacities 2. At the same time, there is awareness about what they can and cannot do given the demands of the job. Hence, there was no animosity for them
		<p>MEDIA AND ADVERTISING</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There was empathy for women. However, at the same time, the need to constantly travel and the nature of the job is non-negotiable. Therefore, there is a limitation on what the bosses can and cannot do for the woman

TABLE 7: Comparative Differences amongst Industry Sectors

SOCIAL SECTOR	PRIVATE SECTOR	MEDIA
Support System at Workplace		
<p>Flexibility at Work - Women are granted flexibility at work with respect to timings and workload.</p> <p>Infrastructure Support- Provisions to provide infrastructure support to women such as, appropriately ventilated rooms, comfortable seating arrangements and abundance of housekeeping support. <i>“We give them duties in classrooms that are airy and well-lit so that she does not feel sick.”</i></p> <p>Financial Support- Paid leaves in addition to maternity leave of six months are also provided to women in case they suffer from health issues or any child related issues.</p>	<p>Flexibility at Work- Women are granted flexibility at work with respect to work load and work timings.</p> <p>Infrastructure Support- Organisations such as Genpact and Airtel asserted that the provision of day-cares/crèche is available to all returning women irrespective of their designation in the organisation. Women have the liberty to visit their child whenever they want to.</p>	<p>Flexibility at Work- Women are granted flexibility at work with respect to work load and work timings.</p> <p>Training- Women who return to work post maternity leave are provided with training sessions to update them with the industry dynamics.</p>

SOCIAL SECTOR	PRIVATE SECTOR	MEDIA
Challenges for Organisation		
<p>Social sector face fewer challenges in reintegrating women to the workforce post pregnancy in the lower-middle management. This is attributed to the fact that the sector has a substantial female employee representation who are ready to help and support each other.</p>	<p>Sanctioning Leaves- HR managers said that women who are pregnant or have returned from their maternity leave apply for frequent leaves either for childcare or because of their own health. While they empathize, they also mentioned boundaries at work.</p> <p>Low Productivity- HR managers claimed low productivity of pregnant women or returning mothers. Low productivity results in unfulfilled targets as well as increased burden on colleagues.</p> <p>Lack of required Physical Activeness- HR manager from sales department said that women are unable to cope up with work dynamics due to their brittle health.</p>	<p>Pressure on other Colleagues- When women go on maternity leaves, their work gets distributed among other employees. This extra workload often creates a pressure on the existing workforce.</p> <p>Search for New Employees- Managers also affirmed that filling the position either on temporary basis or permanent basis is often a challenge for them especially because hiring a new resource involves abundance of investment.</p>
Challenges for Mothers/Pregnant Women		
<p>Childcare- Childcare is the primary reason for women to drop out of work. Women prioritise motherhood over work.</p> <p>Family Composition- Women from nuclear families drop out because of lack of human support from their family in the process of child rearing.</p>	<p>Childcare- It is found to be the primary reason for women dropping out post maternity leave in private organisation. HR managers mentioned that due to absence of childcare facilities such as crèche in most organisation, women drop out.</p> <p>Insufficient Maternity Leaves- It is observed that maternity leaves in private organisation ranges from 3-6 months. HR managers asserted that this period is found to be insufficient for women to return to work.</p> <p>Demotion at Work- HR managers affirmed that owing to health problems that women go through post pregnancy, their productivity at work is low. Keeping this in mind, they are demoted to a junior position when they return to work post maternity leave.</p>	<p>Completion of Work- HR managers stated that women who return post maternity often apply for part-time jobs or flexi-hours than full-time jobs. This often poses a challenge for the organisation to complete tasks in the desired time frame.</p> <p>Lower Productivity- HR managers explained that women who return to work post maternity, often have insufficient support system at their homes to take care of their child. Therefore, they demand holidays and leaves which lead to lower productivity at work coupled with decline in individual performance.</p>

SECTION EIGHT

**The Diversity &
Inclusion Experts
Perspective**

SECTION EIGHT

The Diversity & Inclusion Experts Perspective

D&I experts were included in the study to encapsulate the re-entry challenges of employers and women employees in a holistic fashion. The section attempts to present the dynamic ecosystem in which the employees and employers face limitations and challenges.

8.1 Expert Opinions

The challenges that pregnant women and returning mothers deal with are layered with individual barriers, conditions at home and societal norms. The struggles at workplace, especially those of interpersonal nature, make the fight to return to work discouraging and unrewarding. The findings from the expert interviews validate many that are already presented in earlier sections of the report.

8.1.1. Individual Barriers

Experts explained that after the maternity leave wherein they had focused entirely on the child, women are found to have less confidence, less energy, and less motivation to join work back. They also suffer from low self-esteem and loss of identity because of the shifting of ‘focus on self’ to ‘focus on child.’ Lack of hard skills to cope with current work further weakens their morale. Women who return after a break suffer from low motivation and confidence which disables them to return to work, *“if the woman is working in a tech-driven industry, then mostly their maternity leave, leaves them behind the current technology and it becomes very challenging for them to return to work,”* explained an expert.

They elaborated that the lack of support and infrastructure to ensure that their child would be cared for during their worktime is a big stumbling block. In such a scenario, most women choose 'care for child' over 'career.'

Women are often hesitant to voice their concerns with their supervisors and employers as they believe that pregnancy and child care is their problem, not that of the office. This creates an environment where the organisation is unable to provide assistance even though they are willing and able to, *"most of the times women think, what will the boss think about them if they go to raise their problems again and again. Because of this fear they do not tell them all the things."*

8.1.2. Challenges at Household Level

Family structure and educational qualification of the family affect the support that is available to the mother.

They distinguished the difference by saying that joint families often have members who can support the child while the mother is at work assuring safety and care. Support barriers are mainly seen in nuclear families wherein crèches and day-cares are the only options. These are often considered sub-optimal, unsafe, and uncaring.

Further they articulated that there is a positive correlation between the educational qualification of the family and the support for the returning mother to her work, irrespective of the family setup. A family where members have higher qualification supports the returning mother to resume professional work *vis-a-vis* family with lower education.

Most families, even with a sound financial background, in the view of experts, have a patriarchal mind-set that opposes women to return to work. This is because the male members in the family are at a higher designation at work. This leads to financial sufficiency in the house and with women's role perceived as home makers, women tend to drop out.

There is no perceived economic benefit of a woman's earning. Experts observed that women at middle management allocate majority of their earning towards childcare support and infrastructure like day-cares, baby sitters etc. Therefore, a negligible part of the income gets saved. This happens to be an unappreciated proposition for the women and hence they drop out.

8.1.3. Workplace Hurdles

Re-integrating women comes at an economic loss to the organisation because employers have to pay the women while they are on maternity leave for six months. In expert's opinion, this is layered with training expenses after a woman re-joins the workforce. Small and mid-level organisations often face economic challenges to re-integrate women in the workforce.

Experts mentioned that employers find rotation as a cheaper option. Many a times, employers fill the position of a woman on maternity leave via rotation as it is seen to be a cost-effective process for an organisation. This is so because this does not involve training expenses. This is seen primarily with women at lower and mid management.

Even when women are reintegrated into the system, employers often do not place returning mothers at a position and role desired by the women. Rather, they are retrofitted in the system and are often offered lower designations and salary. This leads to high drop-out, said experts.

A woman who had joined recently stands at an even bigger disadvantage. There exists a lack of an emotional investment with a woman who has newly joined because of lack of interaction both laterally and vertically. If the same woman returns to work after maternity, employer does not push much to retain

them in the organisation. In the view of experts, organisations should have an emotional investment with their employees.

When a woman returns to work, experts believe that the returning mother is pre-occupied with thoughts relating to her child and struggles with her brittle health. This leads to challenges for the employers with regards to productivity.

Male employees in the organisation often do not co-operate and empathise with returning women especially with regards to office timings, workload, and competence. Provisions such as flexi-hours and roles, work from home etc., are not integrated in policies pertaining to returning women, *“in offices, since they give six months maternity there is hardly any provision of half day or flexi hours in the organisation”*, said a D&I experts. Hence, it leads to a stressful and unsatisfactory work environment.

Even though there are many challenges for employers to accommodate returning mothers, experts highlighted the incentives of re-integrating women. There are three-fold incentives- loyalty, attrition and diversity.

8.1.4. Socio-Cultural Dynamics

At the macro level, society plays a major role as a hurdle for women to return to work after maternity. Judgments from family and distant relatives form the core of socio-cultural barriers. Women working after maternity are talked down to and are compared with other women who have left work to take care of their child. The premise lies in the fact that older women in the family have not seen younger women work. Therefore, the notion of women working over taking care of her child in the current scenario does not sediment. Moreover, the cultural imprint of a women’s responsibility is that she takes care of the family.

SECTION NINE

Recommendations for Solutions

Recommendations for Solutions

The previous chapters focused on a comprehensive understanding of the problems and challenges faced by women and organisations that prohibit an effortless re-entry into the work force. These insights were triangulated through the D&I experts and HR managers. This chapter extends the same discussion from the lens of possible solutions.

9.1 Focal Areas for Intervention

The purpose of this chapter is to distil the various challenges so as to recommend focal areas for training programmes and other interventions that may be planned. The chapter journeys through two sections:

Section 1: Identifying focus areas for the training programme: This section attempts to define the scope of the training programme by analysing and articulating the core issues which often manifest as challenges. In other words, challenges need to be unmasked to reveal these hidden core issues. The training programme should be able to address these core issues in order to empower women.

Section 2: Guidelines regarding execution of the training programme: The purpose of this section is to share the expectations of women as well as the D&I and HR professionals about how the programme must be conducted. This section should not be construed as prescriptive in terms of pedagogical directives, rather the attempt is to provide suggestions in developing teaching strategies.

9.2 Identifying Focus Areas of the Training Programme

The analysis of the research findings revealed several challenges faced by pregnant women and returning mothers. These should be addressed in the training programme to ensure their smooth transition back into work life. The following Six Action Areas often manifest themselves through a myriad of challenges.

9.2.1. Guilt Management-

There is a tremendous sense of guilt among women. This stems from a deeply conditioned and widely accepted definition of their familial roles where women who pursue their careers *at the cost of* their child are frowned upon. This is a result of deep-seated social norms whereby women are transfixed in the role of home makers. These social norms not only affect mothers and their families but also their employers and husbands - who believe that mothers should prioritise family over work.

Hence, there is a need to shift societal norms around working mothers and to change the mind-set with which pregnancy and motherhood is perceived. Women deal with guilt of leaving their child behind for work often leading to low motivation. Mentoring and counselling sessions to dissipate such feeling of guilt, training in time management, and stress management would help women cope with their evolving circumstances better.

9.2.2. Negotiation Skills

Women are perpetually in a state of negotiation with the different members of their social setup- be it at the family side or the work side, women often find themselves at a disadvantage. As a result, women invariably tend to let their careers suffer in the absence of negotiation skills.

Women should, thus be trained to negotiate with-

- *Their husband and in-laws-* with regards to their participation in household chores and child care as equal partners. This would help them continue with their careers and balance their home-work life. Their employment and income would contribute towards long-term stability and prosperity of the family.
- *Their boss-* with regards to flexible work options, sufficient time to settle in their workplace post their pregnancy.
- *Their colleagues (especially males)-* about cooperation at work- also validated by the D&I experts.

9.2.3. Career Planning

While many new portals and work options are emerging, women continue to maintain a very myopic view of their job possibilities. Emerging options like flexi-timings, work from home, freelancing, entrepreneurship, project/contractual jobs could provide more flexibility and control to mothers. Training in resume writing, job searches, job interviews and latest trends in the job market would go a long way in helping mothers consider re-joining work force.

9.2.4. Re-skilling

With the pace of change around us, most women drop out of work during their pregnancies as they are either not updated on the changes at work and continue to feel ill-equipped to handle the work. In the absence of a formal and uniform interaction about their job or with their colleagues, most women get completely distanced from their jobs during their maternity break.

The manner of interaction among bosses, colleagues and women during their maternity break remains very informal and goes through longer periods of silence as more and more time passes by. This results in a complete alienation of women, their work and workplace.

It cascades into constant procrastination which hampers the woman’s confidence and further fuels their uncertainty about a return. Therefore, women should be trained in a formal manner to stay updated about the professional field to prevent these ripples of action and reaction.

9.2.5. Awareness and Information

At workplace, most women believe that pregnancy is their problem and remain unaware of their rights pertaining to maternity. This puts them in a position of disadvantage. Further, there is complete ignorance about formal redressal systems in a situation where these rights are violated.

In order to empower pregnant women and returning mothers, they should be informed about their maternity rights and the redressal system at work place.

9.2.6. Management (time, home and child)

Women constantly struggle to manage child and work. The above sections provide ample evidence to suggest the same. Even when they return to work, they struggle with infrastructural deficiencies (perceived or real) for child care. Issues of time management, stress management, expectation management emerge as they struggle to maintain the highest standard at work, at home and for child care. Often, as we have seen in the previous sections this is unsustainable.

There is a need to aid women with tools that help them manage expectations (theirs’ as well as other’s), and balance childcare and career.

With this understanding of the six broad training need gaps, we present, in the table below, the specific training needs for the three cohorts of women are presented below:

TABLE 8: Defining the Training Scope

CORE ISSUE/AREA	Currently Pregnant Women	Drop Out Women	Facing Challenges
Managing Guilt	✓ Women who were pregnant for the second time had a higher sense of guilt than women who were pregnant for the first time.	✓ Very high sense of guilt was observed	✗
Negotiation Skills	✓ To negotiate mainly with in-laws, husbands and child (if pregnant for the second time)	✓ To negotiate primarily with bosses, HR and In-laws	✓ To negotiate with bosses and male colleagues
Career Planning	✗	✓	✓ For better opportunities
Awareness & Information about Rights	✓ Maternity related rights should be the focal point	✓	✓ Rights about redressal system

Technical and Professional Training	✓	✓ Very high need of training	✗
Management Skill Development	✓ Very high need of training, to minimize uncertainty especially for women who are pregnant for the second time and are from nuclear families. Secondly, management of work-home-child should be the point of focus	✗	✓ Especially for women from nuclear families. Management between work and child should be the point of focus.

9.3 Potential Solution Strategies

Potential solution strategies are broadly segmented into two categories: Capacity Building and Private Sector Partnerships. These are elaborated below:

Capacity Development and Coping Strategies

- Cohort Specific Customisation:** Since there are nuanced differences in the challenges faced by each cohort, the training programme cannot have a 'one size fits all' approach. Hence, in addition to common modules, there should also be cohort specific modules to contextualise the training programme.
- Need For Continuous Intervention:** Since most women seemed to have continued anxiety about the dual responsibility of managing their careers and their family, one off or intermittent trainings may not be effective for change.

Hence, there is a need for continuous interventions and milestones starting from the time of pregnancy, continuing post childbirth till the woman has returned to work and has settled.
- Omni-format; Where Both Online And Offline Modes Of Training Are Included:** While the online method of training was perceived to be convenient and cheap, the offline method is of equal importance because of three key reasons:
 - It would enable mothers to have a one-on-one interaction with mentors, solve their queries, etc.
 - It would start the process of leaving home and child for professional work.
 - It would help her meet other women in similar situations and would give her confidence to return to her job.
- Collective Learning Via Case Studies:** There should be collective/community training for it to be effective. This may impel women to leverage training to the best of their advantage through social learning. These trainings should also be anchored around case studies of women of their strata who have made a successful return and overcome challenges.
- Fee Structuring:** While many women mentioned a willingness to pay a fee for such training, the same cannot be generalised. As the nature of the findings were qualitative, the research cannot conclude whether women or their employers should be financing the courses. Hence, the fee structuring needs to be explored and validated by a quantitative pricing research.

2. Private Sector Partnerships

While on one hand, women are trapped in the archaic societal norms, on the other hand they encounter interpersonal problems at workplace. Lack of flexibility, dominance, lower-level work, insensitive

colleagues are just some of the examples. It is therefore necessary to sensitise management and staff to the challenges faced by pregnant women and returning mothers and to discuss the benefits of having a gender balanced work-place. In an attempt to achieve this, a consortium of organisations could be created with the mandate to encourage women to have long term careers.

The Conclusion

The gender pay gap in India for the year 2013 was recorded at 24.81% and a curious statistic is that this gap increases with age. Women below the age of 30 earned 23.07% less than men, while those in the age group of 30-40 years earned 30.24% less than men. There's a clear gap in growth charts in a career for a man and woman in India. There is also a dearth of women in key and senior leadership positions in India.

One of the biggest reasons why women occupy fewer leadership positions is the leaking pipeline that results due to the lack of support after marriage and after childbirth, both professionally and domestically. Although times are evolving, women are still subtly pressured to make professional compromises for the family. Biases in performance appraisals, apathetic approach of supervisors, fast-paced changing work environment, difficult work-life balance and poor child care support make these issues that much more challenging.

The traditional stereotypes of woman's role in society and family limit her to the role of caretaker of family, home and child. This outdated normative construct is not only damaging the educated urban woman but also the economy. Shaming working mothers, lack of support to manage household chores, elderly care, child care, low salary and savings are some of the outcomes of obsolete attitudes.

In such a context, pregnant women and working mothers truly need to be superwomen. They are expected to play the role of a home maker, mother and employee to perfection, all at once. Without co-operation from family and colleagues, the resulting amalgamation of pressure, guilt, responsibility and fear break even the resolute to move forward with their careers.

In specific, the research focused on three cohorts of women- 'pregnant women', 'mothers who dropped out' and 'mothers who joined work but are facing challenges'. While the three cohorts have many similarities, there were nuanced differences as well. All cohorts talked about stereotypes in the society that child care is considered to be woman's domain. This led to a feeling of guilt and fear. Lack of reliable and safe structural support for child care was found to be an important cause of slowing down of their careers. They also discussed the challenges at workplace elaborating that the workload and the attitudes of their boss do not consider their unique condition kindly.

However, all three cohorts had some key differences as well. Those who returned to work after maternity had a strong and supportive family wherein 'working women' was the norm. A strong sense of identity and desire to make a mark for themselves was what made these women special. Further, they had a strong friend circle at work who understood their problems. In contrast, those who dropped out mentioned a lack of support at home and from husband. They mentioned that their primary responsibility was towards their family and feared that they would be blamed if anything went wrong.

To improve the gender imbalance in workforce, a dialogue with organisations and society needs to begin. But, mostly women need to be equipped with skills to manage the problems and pressures they have to manage at home and at work.

Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership (GCWL) is committed to ensuring a comprehensive, sustainable and positive change in the work place gender balance. Through one of its kind research, GCWL delved into the psychosocial dynamics of the pregnant mothers and working mothers. The insights from this research ratify the focus of the interventions planned by the Center. These trainings focus not only on the technical skill development but also on the social skill set required to cope with the high stress conditions in which working mothers live in.

#RegenderingTheNorm



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