



"Navigating Career Breaks: Challenges and Comebacks of Women in India"

Shreya Mishra

(student of Manav Rachna International Institute Of Research And Studies)

Department - School of behavioral and social science.

ABSTRACT

When searching for internships or jobs, many women come across special hiring programs designed to support those re-entering the workforce after a career break. These initiatives aim to help women regain financial independence and re-establish their professional identity. However, this raises a crucial question—why do women step away from their careers in the first place?

A career break is generally defined as an extended period (typically over three months) away from work for reasons other than redundancy. These breaks can stem from personal choices, health concerns, travel, maternity, caregiving responsibilities, or other life circumstances.

In India, career breaks among women are influenced by a unique set of social and structural challenges. Factors such as societal expectations, family pressure, lack of employer support, and workplace policies significantly impact women's decisions to pause their careers, particularly during their prime working years (typically between 23 and 35).

This paper explores two key objectives:

1. To examine the primary reasons behind career breaks among women in India.
2. To analyze industry policies and initiatives aimed at facilitating women's return to the workforce.

By addressing these aspects, the study seeks to highlight the gaps and opportunities in supporting women's professional continuity and reintegration into the job market.

KEYWORDS: Career break, industries, social prejudices, public policies

INTRODUCTION

India has one of the lowest female participation rates in the workforce among the developing countries. The country has seen a steady decline over the past two decades. Women in rural areas all over the country have shown a massive churn, a drop by 24% since 1993-1994. Women in India's urban areas saw a marginal decline from 25% to 22.5% during this period. The report also states that from the year 2011-19, women employed in industrial work during this period witnessed a marginal decrease from 19.9% to 19%, whereas, engagement of women in urban areas has increased.

Recent data showed a sharp decline from 2019-20 when women's participation in formal work was almost 23%. The reasons, according to industry experts and economists, include a general dearth of jobs, discrimination against women in a patriarchal society, the lack of a family support system in an environment marked by quarantined living conditions, and employers aiming to reduce the cost of employees by increasing working hours. (Women's workforce participation drops). Due to the pandemic, the worst hit is the working women, even more so, single-working mothers, who had to take a strong hit on their job as well as with the crippling economy of the country, while working hard to ensure good education for their children. Living in a patriarchal society, women working as labourers or in manufacturing units, the employers are opting for male members as they are able to put in more working hours as compared to women. This notion stems from the fact that most women are handling their houses while managing to work full-time.

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

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

SOCIOLOGICAL IMPACT

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

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

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

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

Based on these definitions and the inequality in opportunities, wages, rights, etc faced by women (which includes marginalised sectors as well) in India, we can see that factors including but are not limited to gender norms, social stigma patriarchy, there is a huge gap between genders in terms of basic equality and quality of life. Such factors have a direct play in the say of women in choices of career and the paths they end up taking as well as them not having much say in when they leave and join back their aspirations and jobs.

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

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

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

"Legislative and Corporate Initiatives Supporting Women Returning to Work"

MATERNITY BENEFIT ACT, 1961

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

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

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

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

KERALA'S SCENARIO

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

BIHAR'S SCENARIO

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

OBSERVATIONS

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

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

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

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

Challenges and Recommendations for Strengthening Return-to-Work Policies for Women”

The Maternity Benefit Act, 2005, is a significant step toward supporting women who take career breaks due to maternity responsibilities. However, a career break should not mark the end of a woman's professional journey. Despite its intent, the act has several limitations:

1. The act primarily benefits women employed in the government sector. While some private organizations have adopted similar policies, implementation remains inconsistent across states, with limited regulatory oversight.
2. The scope of the act is restricted, mainly covering women in the tertiary sector and skilled workers in the secondary sector. This leaves out a significant portion of the female workforce, particularly those in the primary sector and unskilled workers in the secondary sector, who are often excluded from its benefits.

Success Stories: Women Who Made a Strong Comeback -

Women across various industries in India have defied challenges, taken career breaks for personal reasons, and made inspiring comebacks. Here are some remarkable success stories:

1. Neha Bagaria – Founder & CEO, JobsForHer

- **Career Break:** Took a three-year break after marriage and motherhood.

Comeback:

- Realized the lack of structured support for women re-entering the workforce.
- Founded JobsForHer in 2015, a platform that helps women restart their careers through job listings, mentorship, and upskilling.
- Today, Jobs For Her is one of India's leading platforms for career re-entry, supporting thousands of women in their professional journeys.

Lesson: Turn your challenges into opportunities—Neha's own struggle led her to create a platform that benefits countless other women.

2. Ruchi Kalra – Co-founder, Oxyzo & OfBusiness

- **Career Break:** Took a break after completing her education to focus on personal commitments.

Comeback:

- Co-founded OfBusiness, a B2B commerce and lending platform, in 2015.
- Later, launched Oxyzo, a fintech company that became India's first woman-led profitable unicorn.
- Despite the competitive fintech industry, she built a billion-dollar business.

Lesson: A break doesn't define your capabilities—persistence and skill-building can lead to extraordinary success.

Conclusion

A career break should not be viewed as a setback but as a phase of personal growth and transition. However, the challenges women face while re-entering the workforce highlight the need for a more inclusive and supportive professional environment. To ensure that career breaks do not become career enders, a collective effort from society, employers, and policymakers is essential.

One of the most crucial steps is shifting mindsets to normalize career breaks. Hiring managers should evaluate candidates based on their skills and experience rather than employment gaps. Societal perceptions must also evolve to encourage women to resume their careers without fear of judgment. Media and educational institutions can play a role in creating positive narratives around career breaks, helping to change deep-rooted biases.

At the policy level, both government and corporate sectors need to introduce and strengthen initiatives that facilitate women's return to work. Expanding maternity benefits across all sectors, including the informal workforce, is crucial. More companies should adopt structured returnship programs, offering skill-building opportunities and gradual reintegration into the workforce. Flexible work arrangements, such as hybrid models, part-time roles, and project-based engagements, should also be encouraged to accommodate women's diverse needs.

Building strong support systems is another key factor in making the workplace more inclusive. Establishing mentorship and networking platforms can help women regain confidence and reconnect with industry professionals. Employers should also invest in affordable childcare and eldercare solutions, allowing women to balance work and personal responsibilities more effectively. Additionally, encouraging men to take an active role in caregiving will help break gender-based expectations and create a more balanced home and work environment.

Investing in upskilling and reskilling programs is essential to bridge skill gaps and improve employability. Companies and government initiatives should offer training programs tailored for women returning to work. Encouraging entrepreneurship and freelancing can also provide alternative career options, empowering women to build their own businesses or work on their terms. Collaborations with educational institutions can further enhance career-relaunch courses to support skill development.

Ultimately, creating a truly inclusive workforce is a shared responsibility. Employers must adopt progressive hiring practices, policymakers should implement supportive measures, and families should provide encouragement. With the right support and opportunities, women can return to their careers with confidence and contribute significantly to India's economic and social progress. A career break should be seen as a comma, not a full stop—and by fostering an inclusive environment, we can ensure that every woman has the chance to reclaim her professional journey.

REFERENCE

1. <https://www.stmpl.co.in/18-surge-in-job-opportunities-for-women-returning-to-work-after-breaks/?hl=en-US>
2. <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://m.economictimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/career-comebacks-not-all-uphill/articleshow/95775168.cms&hl=en-US#sfbfu=1&pi=https://m.economictimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/career-comebacks-not-all-uphill/articleshow/95775168.cms>
3. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/career-breaks-tricky-for-women-survey-reveals-challenges-faced-by-women-re-entering-the-workforce/articleshow/108312127.cms?hl=en-US>
4. <https://www.pnewswire.com/in/news-releases/on-womens-day-a-new-godrej-dei-lab-and-ceda-report-calls-for-bold-action-on-womens-career-comebacks-302396862.html?hl=en-US>