

Professional women's re-entry into the workforce after child-birth

Abstract

Working lives face several interruptions, either due to employers' decisions, new regulations or individuals' choices; resulting in breaks, slumps, stagnations or even exits. These interruptions, caused by involuntary or voluntary reasons, give rise to several types of job seekers, of which one category comprises women seeking to re-enter the workforce after a period of voluntary exit. The reasons for such exits could be medical, self-employment, or family-related such as relocation of spouse, marriage, elder-care, or child-birth. Of the various family-related reasons, childbirth is the most prominent factor of turnover among women employees. The exit of women is significantly high in the middle and senior levels of an organization and continues to attract a great deal of scholarly and policy-making attention (Catalyst, 2013). However, women's decision to exit may or may not involve the intention to exit their career permanently. With certain recent initiatives such as policies attempting to ease employees' workload, there has been a positive trend of women returning to full-time work post a career break (Barratt, 2018; CII, 2015). Despite studies on re-employment highlighting the presence of gender-based differences, research on re-employment of women in the broader context of their experiences in the professional workforce is absent.

This thesis focuses on the experiences of women who quit their jobs post child-birth and are now seeking to re-enter or have re-entered the professional workspace. The thesis explores the aspirations of women and the decisions they take regarding re-entry, embedded in the social context of neoliberal India. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the norms framing the "new Indian woman"?
2. What are the mechanisms by which women negotiate re-entry?

In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-eight women across five major corporate regions in India – Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad and NCR. An inductive

qualitative analysis was performed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to address the research questions.

The first study examines how the neoliberal context informs women's aspirations regarding work and family using a social constructionist lens (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I analysed practices followed by women concerning motherhood and during their re-entry, to interpret norms surrounding professional women as rooted and layered within neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007) and patriarchy. Findings show that the importance given to choice and empowerment; and a revival of the argument of an inherent sexual difference, makes leaving work for home a matter of choice and not obligation. At the same time, women's continual self-evaluation during the period of break highlights the perceived inability of stay-at-home mothers to maximize the utilization of their personal resources which is an important characteristic of the neoliberal woman. Thus the professional woman's need to re-enter and perfect the balance between home and work, can be understood as an aspiration to maintain her empowered status as the new Indian woman.

The second study describes the perceived normative expectations and the decisions that women make during exit and re-entry. I use social role theory (Eagly, 1987), social norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to analyze the decisions taken by re-entry women. A thematic analysis of women's experiences of re-entry revealed a stage wise progression of a professional woman's journey towards re-employment. Re-entry can be understood as comprising of the four phases - Pre-exit, Break, Job search and Post re-employment. Four major decision making events marking the end of four phases of the re-entry journey are identified. Based on my findings, I propose a process model of a woman's decision making for re-entry based on her attitude towards compliance with norms. The process comprising of the phases: (1) Acceptance (2) Exploration (3) Compromise and (4) Integration helps to understand women's decisions in each phase as an

evolving means of managing anticipated and experienced incongruities with motherhood and work norms.

Overall the thesis contributes to the understanding of the re-entry phenomenon. The period away from full-time employment alienates women from their previous day-to-day experiences of productivity. Economic productivity can be seen as a central quality aspired by educated, middle-class women. Such qualities are socially constructed in a neoliberal context where entrepreneurial spirit and economic evaluations of success are paramount. The thesis supports and contributes to feminist literature that critiques the neoliberal empowerment discourses by helping researchers grasp self-improvement, choice and economic productivity not as neutral givens but rather as negotiated practices within social and economic domains. By focussing on broader societal structures in neoliberalism and internalization of ensuing norms by women, this thesis supports the call for research in gender diversity to include barriers to women's advancement that lie outside the scope of organizations and yet have important implications for gender integration within these organizations (Joshi, Neely, Emrich, Griffiths & George, 2015). In presenting re-entry as a process, and describing the path-dependency in women's decisions during re-entry, the thesis contributes to understanding women's decisions regarding 'work-life balance.'

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