Women's Re-entry into Workforce: Experiences from India

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Abstract Working lives face several interruptions, either due to employers' decisions, new regulations or individuals' choices, resulting in breaks, slumps, stagnations or even exits. Several types of job seekers thus arise due to such interruptions, of which one category comprises individuals seeking to re-enter the workforce after a period of voluntary exit. Most South Asian countries face a challenge of low labor force participation of women with the exit of women significantly high in middle and senior levels of an organization. The Indian workforce reports a reduction in the number of women at higher organizational positions. While the percentage of women employees hired at the entry level across industries is 21, it shrinks to 15% at higher positions; of these 28% quit their jobs at the executive levels. One of the primary reasons for women leaving the workforce is child-birth. However, recent years have seen such women seeking to return to full-time work after a voluntary exit. This chapter shall focus on the experiences of women who left their jobs post child-birth and returned to the industry after a prolonged absence. We use the term re-entry women to describe such women and seek to understand their experiences of re-entry. Based on interviews with 15 women in various professions, we present the work and family expectations as perceived by women and try to understand how they navigate these during re-entry.

1 Introduction

Working lives face several interruptions, either due to employers' decisions, new regulations or individuals' choices, resulting in breaks, slumps, stagnations or even exits. Re-employment candidates could arise as a result of such interruptions ending in either involuntary or voluntary turnover. Out of the job seekers thus created, one category is that of individuals seeking to re-enter the workforce after a period of voluntary exit. The reasons for such exits could be medical, self-employment or

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family-related such as re-location of spouse, marriage, elder-care and child-birth. Of the various family-related reasons, childbirth is the most prominent factor of turn-over among women employees (Glass and Riley 1998; Hirsh 1992; Park and Kim 2015; Rajesh 2013; Ravindran and Baral 2013). Most South Asian countries face a challenge of low labor force participation of women (International Labour Organization 2015). The exit of women is significantly high in middle and senior levels of an organization (Catalyst 2013; Confederation of Indian Industries 2015a, b). The striking under-representation of women in senior corporate leadership positions continues to attract a great deal of scholarly and policy-making attention (Catalyst 2013; Confederation of Indian Industries 2015a, b). While the percentage of women employees hired at the entry level across industries is 21, the percentage shrinks to 15 as one moves up the ladder. Of these remaining few, 28% reportedly quit their jobs at the executive levels (Catalyst 2014). According to a 2014 report by World Economic Forum on BRICS nations, India was seen to be a poor performer with respect to handling gender diversity. According to a survey by World Economic Forum, the ability of women to rise up to enterprise leadership positions in India is 3.9 on a scale of 1–7 which is reflected in the statistic of women forming only 7% of the members on the boards of listed companies (Singh 2015).

However the last few years have seen a positive trend of such women returning to work. Studies on re-employment after involuntary or voluntary breaks have focussed on successful re-employment of individuals. Theunissen et al. (2011) found gender as an interacting factor such that family leaves and unemployment were more harmful for re-employment success of men than women. Koch et al. (2015) showed the significant presence of gender congruity bias of employers in various experimental studies on hiring decisions. Andersson (2015) cited gender as the most significant predictor of re-employment in a study of blue-collar employees where males were seen to have greater success in getting reemployed as compared to women. The experience of seeking re-entry by women thus becomes an important area of exploration in gender diversity literature. This manuscript 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 et al. 2015). Few studies have focused on experiences of voluntary exit by women and their effect on women's re-employment (for exception, see Arun et al. 2004; Glass and Riley 1998; Houston and Marks 2003). In this chapter, we seek to understand the experiences of "re-entry women" who had made a conscious decision of quitting their organizations, instead of availing leaves on the grounds of medical conditions or pregnancy. For instance, Indian law mandates firms to provide women with 3[1] months of paid maternity leave. Some firms with favourable policies also allow women to extend their maternity leave beyond the 3-month period with a loss of pay. However, a woman

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

on maternity leave may view her situation and opportunities differently. Use of even the full 3-month leave may call for a stigma at the workplace by creating an image of a person who places family before work and is thus not as committed to her career as a woman without children. Such anticipations are not unfounded as many studies regarding women and career have focused on the effect of pregnancy on managers' perceptions (Hoobler et al. 2009; Leslie et al. 2012), identity management by the pregnant employee (Little et al. 2015), discrimination faced at the work place (Berdahl and Moore 2006; Halpert et al. 1993), gender harassment (Raver and Nishii 2010) and hiring discrimination (Rajesh 2013). The consequences studied include stigma of using flexi policies (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002), issues faced by pregnant employees, wage gaps, effect on women employees' performance and organizational commitment (Raver and Nishii 2010). Stereotypical beliefs and attitudes towards pregnant employees feed the motherhood penalty that women face when they later come back into the professional workspace.

In India, over 80% respondents of a survey believed that "changing diapers, giving kids a bath, and feeding kids are the mother's responsibility" (Sabnavis 2015). Even in countries with numerous organizational and national support policies, the issue of gendered domestic responsibilities affects women's career as the majority of gender-neutrally presented flexibility options tend to be taken by the mother (Seierstad and Kirton 2015). Inflexible gender roles increase the workload on such women who have to manage child-care, elder-care and house-keeping responsibilities in an environment that lacks or even downplays the importance of supportive facilities for child and family care. Males and females are situated differently in the Indian society, and workplaces reflect this societal structure. Bringing in the societal context of workplace experience is thus essential to understand why women may be facing these dilemmas and hurdles, especially in countries like India where traditions and culture are held in high regard (Ravindran and Baral 2014). Impact of the societal structure on workplace experiences indicates a need to adopt a socio-organizational perspective to understand workplace dynamics in a better manner. The manner and process of re-employment require further understanding in the cases of such women re-entrants. The study by Arun et al. (2004) reported higher wage penalty for women if they had taken a career break in order to care for their young. Arun and colleagues also highlight the effect of reason for the break on the likelihood of women planning a return to work, such that a child-related was more likely to lower the likelihood of return to work. No study to our knowledge has focused on the period away from work and the experience of re-employment in the overall process of re-entry of a mother. The experience during re-employment provides a mother the first instances of interacting with and understanding her potential employers. It will affect her attitude towards joining and strategies as a new employee after joining. We address this gap by explaining the role of gendered expectations on the tactics used by women to re-enter. By analysing the effect of normative expectations of gender-based social roles on professional women's re-entry, this chapter offers an understanding of barriers to women's advancement that lie outside the scope of organizations to the body of knowledge on gender diversity.

The Indian context with its traditionally gendered norms is likely to have a major impact on a mother's process of re-entry. The focus of the current study was on the experience of women who exited after child-birth and returned to the industry after a prolonged absence. We use the term re-entry women to describe such women and seek to understand their experiences of "re-entry." "Re-entry woman" has been defined in previous studies as someone who is re-entering the workforce after a prolonged absence, or a modification of the same as a woman who still has children at home and is returning to work after 2–10 years (Ericksen et al. 2008). Based on 15 interviews with women in various professions, this chapter seeks to explain their re-entry experiences and how they navigate the different expectations of family and work.

2 Literature

Good mothers are typically present for their children, nurture and care for others, put needs of their family before their own and do not prioritize work over family (Powell 2010). They may also take a few years of break from full-time paid work to be with their children till they are old enough to join pre-school. These conflicts become significant if the woman has to navigate more traditional cultural settings (Maheshwari 2014; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). Maheshwari (2014) analysed the experiences of women during the motherhood phase through a grounded approach and reported the conflicts experienced by professional women due to their social and work roles, wherein women experience negative changes in the attitude of superiors, colleagues and even subordinates at work while also experiencing change in identity due to motherhood. Many studies have explored the dilemmas that may arise out of a conflict in identities of working mothers who want to continue their professional journey alongside motherhood. Kanji and Cahusac (2015) presented the 'work-life' balance chosen by women in the light of their continuous struggle to reconcile professional and maternal identities before and after workplace exit. The decision to exit has been debated by scholars to reflect the choice of family over work or a resultant situation due to various external constraints faced by the women (Cahusac and Kanji 2014; Stone and Lovejoy 2004). Social roles comprise of expectations that originate from membership in social groups such as gender or ethnicity, or from work and domestic roles. Of these, the normative expectations can be seen to have a major role in women's career growth. We propose the use of Social role theory (Eagly 1987) and Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau 2002) to understand the effect of the period of break and re-employment in the development of women's understandings of their roles as mothers and professionals and the reported conflict between these roles.

Social role theory (Eagly 1987) describes the self to exist only through the interaction with others by which the social-self develops. Consequently, there are multiple selves. A person also develops a sense of generalized other that defines what people, in general, would expect and how they would evaluate his or her

actions. Within this context, roles are particular behaviors and expectations tied to particular positional labels. Actions are built into ordered systems which affect an individual's interpersonal as well as societal behavior. A position in the social system is thus simply a collection of rights and duties attached to it, and social roles are the behavioral enactment of these rights and duties by an individual.

Social roles of men and women, which are defined on the basis of sex, and the division of labor that has been seen to exist between them are gender roles. While roles developed due to this division over the ages, stereotypes around them formed due to expectations that arose for the role, incorrectly ascribed to the sex of the individual and hence have extended beyond those positions to any and every behavior of the individual. Due to these traditional roles, women are often expected to be more warm and nurturing while men are expected to be dominant and competitive. Thus, social role theory treats the differing assignments of women and men into social roles as the fundamental underlying cause of sex-differentiated social behavior. It suggests a double bind for women managers, as the stereotypes of nurturing, communal social roles in addition to "think leader, think male" stereotype leads them to be negatively evaluated by colleagues, affecting the quality of manager-subordinate exchanges and job-based resource outcomes. Among these evaluations, women majorly face perceptions of being too emotional, less committed, not being capable of finishing tasks and of not planning to return to work after childbirth. As such, categorization of mothers (women employees) by managers (Hoobler et al. 2009) affects mentoring, pay decisions and performance evaluations (Halpert et al. 1993) which are important workplace experiences for women. Such experiences, especially during and post pregnancy, play a major role in their decisions regarding work. One of the few studies on career breaks and re-entry of Indian professional women was carried out by Ravindran and Baral (2013) in which they identified factors contributing to women's exit and their decisions regarding return. The study reported the effect of workplace support factors such as policies, work-family culture and diversity climate on the job attitudes and behaviors of women. Expectations faced by women in the domestic and work sphere were captured as individual level differences of perception of demands that moderate the relationship between workplace support factors and job attitudes and behaviors of women returners leading to dilemmas of being a good employee and a good mother.

Like other social roles, gender roles have descriptive norms that are expectations about what people do, as well as injunctive norms that are expectations about what a person would ideally do (Eagly et al. 2000). While descriptive norms are guidelines for reference, a deviation is generally met with surprise. However, injunctive norms tell a person what is desirable and morally approved by significant others, a deviation from which produces emotions tinged more strongly with moral disapproval. Eagly and Karau's Role Congruity Theory (2002) explains the prejudiced behavior of employers towards women leaders who do not display the characteristic feminine traits of care and nurture by evaluating them poorly in their role as leaders. It has been used to describe approval of certain behaviors and resulting prejudice against incongruent individuals (Diekman and Goodfriend 2006; Eagly and Diekman 2005).

Gender roles can also induce differences in the behavior of men and women regardless of any inborn psychological difference between them by punishments and rewards. The expectation that women should be the caregivers and other-oriented may thus underline women's actions within the family as well as their work in terms of preference for particular job types, likelihood of extended absence from work, etc.

Eagly and Karau (2002), provided evidence of the mechanism through which social roles and gender categories interact to produce bias. They showed that incongruities between social role prescribing women as communal and the social roles of leaders which should be individualistic and agentic, lead to prejudice against women relative to men within leadership roles. This mechanism of role congruity also highlights how information regarding a social role informs social judgments. For example, the presence of others and fear of normative discrimination may increase the salience of gender roles and their conformity for the individual. While social role theory has been used in extant literature to describe stereotypes and discriminatory behavior (Koenig and Eagly 2014), role congruity provides an analysis of the way social roles impact behaviour. For example, gender normative goals of men and women have been reported to have an impact on the kind of careers chosen by them (Diekman et al. 2010; Evans and Diekman 2009). The congruity perspective extends the social role framework to understand how social roles influence goal selection and progress towards goals (Diekman and Steinberg 2013).

Social roles and normative expectations can be used to understand an individual's behavior under specific conditions. For our study, Social role theory and Role congruity can be used to understand how the contrast between expectations from a working professional and those from a mother may impact the behavior of women after childbirth. In what follows, we use gender role congruity and social role theories to understand how a woman navigates the immediate role of a mother and the aspired role of a professional when she seeks to re-enter the workforce after a period of voluntary break from full-time employment. We thus aim to understand the process of re-entry by women after a career break due to child-birth.

3 Method

An interpretive qualitative approach using in-depth, semi-structured interviews was used to understand women's expectations, anticipations and behavior during the period of their absence from work as well as the period of search for re-employment. In-depth interviews are useful in capturing experiences of those who have lived the problem of interest. It is also the preferred method to use in research exploring personal and sensitive issues (Rubin and Rubin 2011). We used semi-structured interviews that provided a guiding structure to focus on the particular period of re-entry while also allowing flexibility to probe for more details. This helped in capturing insights from the participants (Fontana and Frey 1994; Patton 1990).

Participants were broadly approached through a combination of "snowball" and "purposive" techniques (Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 1990). We tried to capture maximum variance within the sample (Patton 1990). We started the preliminary round by approaching women attending executive management programs at an esteemed management institute in eastern India to interview women who have children and have re-entered the workforce after a previous exit from work. In addition, the focus was on private sector jobs as public sector jobs[2] may not require the employee to quit due to availability of different policies of leave. The aim was to interview women who are married, have children and have re-entered the workforce after a prolonged absence from work. We then asked these women if they could get us in touch with someone they knew who'd be willing to share their experience for our research. A period of 5 years at home is seen to result in career re-orientation in women (Lovejoy and Stone 2012). Moreover, in the case of new mothers the first 2 years have been seen to be more demanding (Leibowitz et al. 1992). We thus tried to interview mothers with younger, school going kids and who had recently come back to work (One participant was appearing for job interviews at the time of this study). We discuss findings based on interviews with 15 women who had left their previous jobs (including one woman who took a year-long sabbatical leave). The duration of break from professional work was mostly 2–3 years with only one woman who had an 8-year gap before her re-entry. The participants were from different regions of India (viz. National Capital Region (NCR), Hyderabad and Mumbai) and were working in different industries (see Table 1).

These cities are major metropolitan areas and industrial hubs of India with many people migrating from different states to work in organizations located here. Hyderabad and NOIDA (in NCR) host several companies from the IT sector. Mumbai, Delhi and Gurugram[3] (in NCR) are majorly known for finance and banking industries. Due to migration for work, most of our participants (12 out of 15) had a nuclear set up at home with frequent visits by in-laws and parents. Another aspect bringing diversity in their experiences was the time of exit; while 11 of these women had left their jobs while on maternity leave, 4 of the participants had quit before the pregnancy.

The interviews were conducted in person unless under exceptional circumstances (only one participant was interviewed telephonically as a face-to-face meeting could not be set up). The interview durations varied from 45 min to about 2 h and were conducted either at the women's homes or cafes near their workplaces. Interviews were audio-recorded (with the interviewee's permission) and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on their exit from work, period away from work, decision to return and experiences post return. We asked the women general

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

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

Table 1 Participant details

Participant[a]	Domain of work before exit	Domain of work after exit	No. of children	Age at time of interview	Whether already returned to work	Work exp. before exit (months)	Duration of break (months)	Time since re-entry (months)	Staying with in-laws	Interviewee's city	Interview duration (min)	Transcript length (words)
Neha	Finance	Finance	1	36	Yes	86	6	60	Yes	New Delhi	80	9934
Niharika	IT	IT	2	39	Yes	108	12	24	No	New Delhi	45	3129
Nisha	IT	IT	2	38	Yes	21	12	72	Yes	Noida	72	8079
Nishtha	IT	IT	1	35	Yes	36	34	58	Yes	Noida	50	4252
Hema	IT	IT	1	33	Yes	96	18	12	No	Hyd	94	13,923
Henna	HR	NGO	2	33	Yes	60	36	72	Yes	Hyd	95	11,597
Himanshi	Nil	Self-venture	2	37	Yes	54	24	30	Yes	Hyd	90	8565
Harleen	HR	HR	2	38	Yes	84	48	72	No	Hyd	136	13,242
Swati	IT	IT	2	32	Yes	72	24	12	No	Hyd	120	9986
Shikha	IT	IT	2	39	Yes	147	32	12	No	Hyd	77	7820
Sana	IT	IT	2	32	Yes	72	72	12	No	Hyd	109	14,967
Megha	Law	N.A. (appearing for job interviews at time of interview)	1	27	No	60	24	0	No	Mumbai	59	7110
Mitu	IT	IT	1	31	Yes	90	18	20	No	Mumbai	61	8927
Mona	Education counsellor	Media and Advertising	1	36	Yes	12	18	96	No	Mumbai	128	11,793
Mansi	NGO	Media	1	29	Yes	44	20	18	No	Mumbai	90	6351

[a]Order in which author met the participants

questions about their experience in the current jobs and their decisions to exit the previous jobs. We also asked them to describe a typical day during the period of their absence from work, what they did, who they interacted with and the manner of work at home. We then asked questions related to their job search, their decision of going back to work, preparation for re-entry, discussions with family members or others and who they had approached for advice or guidance.

Our approach for analysis is influenced by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Silverman (2000). Using methods recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), interviews and conversations were first documented and coded using detailed line-by-line coding. We then identified key themes using inductive thematic analysis to discover the patterns in our data. The responses shed light on various areas affecting the women's experiences of their break, manner of re-entry and the resultant experiences post re-entry. However, when the participants of this study spoke of their experiences during the period of job search, application for jobs and hiring interviews for re-entry, almost all women spent time on why they had exited in the first place, and their change in preferences for certain kinds of job profiles or organizations. Therefore, we believe that work expectations based on previous work experiences, along with motherhood expectations play an important role in the women's decision to re-enter. Our analysis includes their previous, personal as well as vicarious, experiences at work and how they may be major factors in the re-entry of the women. Interviews highlighted the impact of societal norms of gender and related expectations from women on their systems of child care.

4   Findings

In this section, we present the results of thematic analysis of the interviews in the form of four themes that explain decisions regarding re-entry taken by the women:

(a) Perceived work expectations
(b) Unequal share of childcare
(c) Perceived loss of job opportunities
(d) Re-entry tactics

4.1   Perceived Work Expectations

The experience of women at the workplace, especially during their pregnancy plays a significant role in their decision to continue or quit their jobs. These experiences could involve interactions with supervisors and peers as well as organizational and environmental variables such as organizational policies or organizational culture. The most common concern among the participants of this study regarding work was the seemingly unsurpassable set of expectations from employees. Many companies

have a minimum number of hours of work required per day. However, overtime is generally evaluated positively, creating an informal norm of working late hours. Another factor which may contribute to this norm is that most service sector firms cater to international clients leading to new requirements arising after mid-day. This may require employees to stretch work hours to meet strict deadlines (10 out of 15 participants expressed anxieties over work expectations). Women spoke of the expectation from employees to spend time at work beyond office hours and on weekends as well. Physical presence in office, irrespective of productivity in terms of work was the perceived expectation as it was the most often brought up factor in evaluation discussions. However, such norms assume that spouses manage the employee's personal front. In such a scenario, use of flexible working hours appears as a cost borne by the company and an expression of reduced commitment of women post maternity. Such norms perpetuate stereotypes around women's reduced commitment and competence for work post child-birth as most women tend to avoid overtime to be with family.

While speaking about her decision to quit instead of availing her organization's maternity leave, Neha[4] recalls the only example of a woman employee in her firm who had opted for flexible working hours post maternity. Her reactions bring to fore the ingrained expectations from the ideal worker in most firms and the fear it can create about falling short and being penalized in an attempt to integrate family with work:

> She'd gone on a regular six-month leave (post maternity) and then she'd come back. So yeah all these conversations happened. Whether you really want to leave or not. . . And we'll give you a. . .you know, you'll get everything. But I didn't want to be in that flexi position. . .Of course it has an effect. And it's natural also that you aren't there. You are working at 60% along with others who are working at 100%. You know, you'll not be rated at par. . .Which is fine. . . Ya, so opting for fewer hours was never an option because it was available as an HR policy but we're all high performance oriented kind of people and we want to be rated the best. And if you're not available, then you're not rated the best. And if you take a flexi position so then obviously you're. . . just to be fair to the rest you're not putting in as much above average compared to what your colleagues are putting and hence you can't be asking, raising your hand for your next promotion and umm best grade.

Neha's justification of such norms on the grounds of a fair system of apparent merit also highlights the thought process of working women who feel that becoming a 'high performer' in an organization can be achieved if one closely ascribes to ideal worker norms. Workplaces continue to demand 'ideal workers', who put in long hours, and are on call at all times. Such demands can be fulfilled only if the employee's non-work domain is managed by a spouse, thus presenting the ideal worker to be the ideal male worker (Acker 1990). This leaves women employees striving to manage time between work and home post maternity which may cause anxiety regarding one's 'productivity' at work. Swati, an IT professional, experienced great anxiety regarding her perceived productivity post maternity as she had moved to a new company as a means for growth in her career. This led her to go back

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[4]We have used pseudo-names for names of all participants and organization throughout the chapter.

to her previous employer as she hoped her past performance would establish her credibility as a productive employee and not as a cost to the company due to her request for flexible working hours.

Swati   "*it was not easy especially immediately after coming back to work. You had to convince your manager that you will be available (at work) only for 5–6 hours and then go home and then maybe I (will) connect in the night and all that but things didn't work out for me and I quit and I joined ABC back. So back to the first company...so people are supportive but somewhere I think every woman has that feeling in her, of trying to do justice here and (emphasis by Swati) there. Guilt is there so that was more of an internal guilt that I was fighting with more than support from the organization...the organization could... guilt with respect to work...am I really doing what I would have done a year back you know, where I didn't have many responsibilities—the kind of work the effort I used to put in then am I able to do that or not*"

Participants felt unfairly evaluated and voiced their unhappiness at such norms of late and long hours at work. The expectation from the employees to ascribe to the 'ideal male worker' traits weakens any organizational initiative towards flexibility and work-life balance as it disallows them to integrate family with work.

Megha   "*You can't expect people to you know...and this is another thing...a lot of people who are single or who don't really have a family...they don't mind stretching hours. And that sets a very wrong culture in the organization. Stretching in the sense—if it's a necessity then it's okay but there are some who, even if there is no work they'll just sit around and browse. But they are there! Now I'm very worried about when I do join back it's gonna be very tough managing the whole thing. It's important to a good boss. Company is important but it's very important to have a, you know, cooperative boss. Cooperative in the sense that I don't expect to be granted leaves as and when and work from home...but at least there should be some reasonable expectations to be set.*"

We thus see the perceived set of expectations for a 'productive' employee to be very demanding and hence a major factor in women's decisions regarding re-entry.

4.2   Unequal Share of Childcare

The period away from work post maternity involves great uncertainties for a mother as she transitions from being a full-time working professional to a full-time care-giver. It involves a change in the woman's self-image with the gendered, social role of the mother becoming salient. The changes in environment, role and self-image affect the different actions taken by women in this phase and also their decisions during re-entry. A standard explanation given by women regarding their decision to

stay at home was the need for them to take care of the children till they joined school and the mutual decision taken by the women with their spouse. For example, Niharika mentions that the decision for her to leave her job was taken in consultation with her husband as that time spent in caring for the child is 'her' time.

Niharika   "*We are the ones who have to manage. You have to take a call. Like my husband. . .we decided that I have to be here. And also this is the time that I get to be with them (children). This is my time. After that these kids will grow and they will have a thought of their own and they'll start going to school. And this is the time that I have with them so I also wanted to be here. So that is basically how you manage.*"

This reflects an unquestioned acceptance of an irreplaceable role of a mother with her child. We thus see an acceptance and participation of both—the woman and her husband in traditional child care beliefs. The woman enacts the 'good mother' role by staying at home and performing all the tasks of childcare. Even on return to work, women's daily routine included feeding the family, taking care of household chores or even dropping and picking up the child up from daycare; thus conforming to the father's role as primary earner and that of mother's as care-giver. This provides a deeper understanding of role-congruent behavior of women leaving work for child-care and not just maternity.

Neha   "*I had decided that I'd rather be a good mom and you know, look back to this time that yes I was there for my son when he had no clue. And do that well than. . .*"

Nisha   "*So I was the one who was solely responsible for taking care of the baby. Yeah, they [family] gave me some domestic support system, but my main responsibility was to just clean, eat and drink with the baby, in the night and the day, and just have my routine with him. . .after a while he was so much dependent on me that after a while I could not leave him even for an hour and go to any place.*"

Both, the father and mother perform their roles according to prevalent norms such that the 'division of chores' is disproportionate with the father's chore limited to overseeing the child only when asked.

Neha   "*No, no I would do everything (smiling). Without being. . .so you know all the physical activity. . .I was only doing. I enjoyed doing it also and I was okay. Sometimes I would ask him to do but otherwise I was only doing it. I didn't need. . .want him. And you know, that's the reason also why I decided I'll only do it, I'll take a break. All of that. So I was only doing it. I've not seen a different side to it. I mean, in my head also. The issue is in my head also. I didn't see anything else in my time. That [division of chores] in fact we do that now. The last. . . end of month and end of quarter is extremely hectic for me [at work]. I have to sometimes get back by 9. Those days you know, he comes back home early. We divide that a bit. So even . . .then on we're a team*"

This belief aligns with the societal expectations of women to be the primary caregivers in the family. In the absence of alternative practices of child-care in their immediate context, women may develop these beliefs. It is thus common for women to perform all activities around the child such as feeding, bathing, cleaning, etc. and have no expectations from their spouse in sharing the work. The norm of fathers continuing their jobs with no change in work pattern further lends support to our argument that gendered expectations and striving for congruity have a major impact on women's re-entry.

4.3 Perceived Loss of Job Opportunities

Based on the perceived workload and experiences (vicarious and self) of stereotypical biases against working mothers, women experience fear and anticipation of loss of jobs available after a break in career. Participants shared their experiences of rejections from employers and perceived bias against after the break mothers (11 out of 15 participants) and the resultant strengthening of their belief in the lack of opportunities for women who take a break for child-care.

Nisha "*Ya so I started preparing. . .that phase again was difficult because in this particular field I had no experience so everything demands experience and I faced lot of issues also in the beginning because they were also offering me low-grade roles and low-grade salaries and many places they didn't even consider me because I was inexperienced and also because I had taken a break. So I was actually on a long break—break and then there was that school experience. So corporate job—now I was away for two years—so it was difficult.*" [Nisha had decided to apply to a different job profile within the IT industry to avoid working in a project based environment which generally had steep deadlines and called for long work hours at office.]

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

Mona "*So the time just passed with all of that. But then when we felt that the need is there that even I will have to do a job so that's where I started looking out because I had that feeling that it shouldn't be too late you know, getting opportunity and all.*"

These women had limited opportunities for re-entry. A career break for family reasons is cause for a greater penalty during re-employment as compared to a career break on study or medical grounds. In sharing their experience of hiring interviews,

we see a common thread of concern amongst prospective employers regarding the woman's capability of managing childcare along with work responsibilities, as perceived by women. This lends support to prevalent studies on the effect of stereotypes on hiring decisions.

Hema   "*When they are hiring you maybe they have this kind of…in their mind…you're coming back from break and all. They'll not give you the role and all that you were previously playing. They'll probably give you a little less one so it is easy for you to get into the system. So like in my previous job I was Tech Lead. So I was leading a team but here when I joined, I was not hired at a lead role. I was hired at a lesser role. I mean here the ranks [hierarchical level of the job title in the organization] may vary but I'm just telling you the job.*"

Henna   "*So 8 months (ago) I started searching, then I started preparing as it was a gap so I used to reread whatever data I had…the printouts HR…just to brush up myself… [Printouts related to work from her previous jobs] So on the phone they asked me about the gap [of 1 year]. It was like for 8 months I was applying. So I told that it was because of my son. Again the next question—now who will take care of your son? All these days you were taking care. All these days only… my mother is there so that's why I decided to join. But this was the question…So usually they used to ask about why is this gap and now who'll take care of your child…*"

Megha   "*It (job interview) was technical but everybody does ask you: do you have a family? Do you have a kid? What do you intend to do with the kid when you go to work and you know, things like that. (Smiling)…So I was not prepared with answers in advance you know…so they asked me what do you plan to do? I had already of course planned because I can't go to work without planning for my kid. So I had planned to put her in day care and after day care, my parents are nearby so they can take care of her.*"

Such experiences then affect women's choice of firm/industry/work profile such that they are able to get back to work.

4.4   Re-entry Tactics

Most of our participants (11 out of 15) expressed their need and efforts towards 'managing' the hours spent at work in order to fulfill the added responsibilities of childcare. This theme captures instances in their narratives highlighting this struggle for time to fulfill a non-overlapping set of expectations. A woman may manoeuvre her work role by looking for jobs which reduce traveling distance such that she is able to pick up her child from the daycare, or apply to companies offering flexible hours of work.

4.4.1 Accept Lower Job Profile for a "Foot in the Door"

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

Nishtha "*So one thought process was that now she's [her daughter] small and she needs me. That's the thing but when she grows up—12–13 years, she'll be completely busy with her studies and at time what should I do? If I don't work and take a long gap...already I was at home for two years! If it extends more than 2, like 3–4 then it's very difficult to find a job also. So that's what I thought about at that time that it was better to move on.*"

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

Mitu "*See earlier I had in mind that I want to look for something in Thane[5] only! I don't want to get out of Thane because reaching home would be easier. But then things didn't work, I didn't get something in Thane. So there are companies, but I didn't get a call. I had applied in companies on portals like Naukri[6] and other portal but...So I thought let's start...This is a good firm but what I am doing is not of a level of which I had worked earlier...It's better than doing nothing so let's start and then in 6 months we'll look. So after six months when I again started looking, so then also in Thane I didn't get anything. Again you have to travel all over Mumbai. So I thought this is a better job than traveling all over Mumbai.*"

4.4.2 Change in Nature/Place of Work

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

Himanshi "*Ya I gave my resume even at a playschool as a playschool teacher! I thought I should go for a job! That and that timing should not disturb my kid.*"

Swati "*ok so juggling 9, 8 hours in office going back home looking after the kids was really tough...no they (in-laws) were there but I wanted to get home, you're getting my point right; although they were there, I always*

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[5]Thane is an area in the Mumbai Metropolitan region.

[6]Naukri.com is a popular Indian job portal offering a platform for jobseekers, recruitment consultants and employers to meet. 'Naukri' is a word in Hindi language that means 'job'.

> *wanted to be available for my child . . .it was not at all easy you know, let me tell you. I knew that I had to do justice to family as well as to work. You can't come, log in—log out and move because I had some commitments.*"

Mitu   "*It was a better option because I was getting flexibility. First thing is that flexibility in work is more required. What do I do if my daughter is ill? I can't go to office and sit when she's ill. I should get that flexibility to work from home. Or I should get the flexibility that I can take a leave and all. . . .So that was one of my first criteria—it should be around where I live. So at least half an hour travel is fine. But since that was not going very well, then I have expanded my search. I don't mind traveling although not to certain locations which are very far. So 1 hour [referring to travel time] was okay. . .*"

The woman's decision to resume work after childbirth and the manner in which she chooses to work are aligned with a mother's 'duty' towards child and family. In support of social role theory, we see women trying to manoeuvre their work role on re-entry in a manner that does not lead to much incongruity with the normative role of mother as the primary caregiver.

5   Discussion and Conclusion

Social role theory helps explain the set of expectations around a woman's role in the domestic sphere and the significance of a mother's role as the primary caregiver. It also helps support our argument of the ideal worker being primarily male, allowing him undivided resources to fulfill the primary role of earner. We describe the decisions taken by women to re-enter as attempts to follow these normative expectations, providing support to role congruity theory. Our results show the perception of expectations at work, based on women's previous experiences while working, to be a major factor in their decisions regarding job search for re-entry. While social norms inform women of their primary role in the domestic sphere, the use of flexible working hours as a means to accomplish the role while pursuing a career attracts penalty from the employer. This can be explained by using role congruity theory which postulates penalty for incongruity by women leaders who display agentic behavior. We extend the concept of the double bind by explaining it to be based in the incongruity with ideal worker role rather than female caregiver role such that returning mothers face being negatively evaluated at work post maternity while trying to integrate family and work expectations.

Previous experiences of work norms and level of family integration at work lead to the development of expectations from the professional self. The woman's unequal share in caregiving responsibilities and the norm of woman 'sacrificing' professional lives for the 'more important' family life shapes her understanding of expectations from the personal or 'family' self. These two, non-overlapping sets of expectations

from self, lead to dissonance which the woman seeks to reduce, bringing a sense of equilibrium to her life. The factor coming into play here is the set of constraints within which the women need to achieve reduced dissonance. The decision to permanently exit professional career and that of not having children at present form the extremes of the continuum of solutions for reduced dissonance. Organizational initiatives towards gender diversity offer flexible timings at reduced pay or profiles with lower work responsibilities as acceptable solutions for a working mother. Within these constraints, the woman endeavors to fulfill both sets of expectations, making decisions based on the salient significant self. The new role of primary caregiver can be seen to play a major role in her attitude towards full-time work. In the period away from paid work, the identity of the previously working mother is moderated by social role expectations and has an impact on her future career interest. In this manner, the Indian context, with its traditionally gendered norms can be seen to have a major impact on a mother's process of re-entry. Few studies have focused on the exit of Indian professional women (for exception, see Ravindran and Baral 2013) and the role of social norms on the dilemmas they face between being a good employee and a good mother (for exception, see Maheshwari 2014). Our findings describe the manner in which the period of job search and application for re-employment offers mothers a chance to interact with potential employers, which may affect her attitude towards joining and strategies as a new employee after joining. No study to our knowledge has focused on this phase in the process of re-entry of a mother. We address this gap by explaining the role of gendered expectations in the tactics used by women to re-enter. Anxiety regarding performance and perceived productivity at work results in a change in her manner of job search, looking for jobs and firms that offer the optimal solution for reducing her dissonance within self-images.

We also see a reference to the implementation of organizational policies, such as flexible working hours, affecting women's planning of child-care, ultimately affecting her intention to quit as well as re-enter. This can be empirically tested to extend the current literature on the effects of organizational policies on gender diversity. Further studies can be designed to test the efficacy of policies on women's career growth. It would also be interesting to study the attractiveness of organizations which offer such policies for women seeking to re-enter. Many companies in India (for a list, see sheroes.com 2015, 2018) have introduced support and re-entry programs targeted at these women, but their success in terms of the women's inclusion and experience at work remains unresearched and would be a promising area for future research. Our results highlight the need for more meaningful alternatives to parents in general. Apart from women-focused policies, organizations and governments should thus look towards initiatives that may alter the existing gender regime by strengthening opportunities and incentives for men to share domestic responsibilities and not reinforcing women's gender roles as primary care providers.

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