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Travails of New Mothers Returning to Work in Corporate India: A Phenomenological Study

By Anil Jose Thomas¹ and N. T. Sudhesh²

Abstract

A woman's life is a myriad of experiences and none, perhaps, leaves a more lasting impression on her than motherhood. The child-birth event along with all its highs and lows not only has a deep psychological impact on her as a person but also impacts her career in many ways. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, we have studied the lived experience of women who returned to work in corporate settings after maternity leave. Our study found that not only do they go through an emotional upheaval during this phase, but they also see a marked shift in the way they approach their careers. A woman's natural instinct to mother her child comes in conflict with another natural (and equally important) desire to succeed in the workplace. Most women in our study experienced a stalling/break in their careers after childbirth and wished they had a mentor to assist them in transitioning back to office life. Besides trying to evaluate if childbirth was perceived as a threat or potential impediment to a high-flying career, we also explored how women were treated in their work environments, and whether their coworkers helped the women to cope during this phase. While the women in our study wanted to achieve success and satisfaction both within their families and careers, they found it most challenging to do so.

Keywords: Working mothers, Interpretative phenomenology, New mothers, Maternity, India, Corporate workplaces

We need women at all levels, including the top, to change the dynamic, reshape the conversation, to make sure women's voices are heard and heeded, not overlooked and ignored.

(Sandberg, 2013)

Introduction

The above words by Sheryl Sandberg, former COO of Facebook, sum up the importance of women in the workplace but also point to the need for society to listen to working women. Traditionally, career and motherhood have been seen as incompatible vocations. Notwithstanding

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the inner conflicts they might go through, Khoja-Moolji (2018) notes the unique role that young women play in our society by assuming different roles, not just within their families, but within their local communities as well. Young women have multifaceted abilities to transform themselves into workers, businesswomen, and consumers. One of the most eloquent feminists of the 20th century, Bernard (1971) pointed to the “stroking function” which women play in their worlds by “showing solidarity, raising the status of others, giving help, rewarding, agreeing, concurring, complying, understanding, and passively accepting” (p. 272).

The birth of a child is an experience that affects mothers differently than fathers (Spinelli et al., 2015), and the memories created, be they pleasant or otherwise, remain with mothers throughout their lifetimes. The challenge begins once the maternity leave (ML) ends, and it is time for a mother to go back to work. This is when a working mother experiences a roller coaster emotional ride as her limited reserves of time and energy come into conflict with the new demands of motherhood (Peterson et al., 2017). Women face challenges on many fronts. As per the Pew Research Center (2015), working mothers do more at home and still end up facing higher expectations at the workplace.

Gender theory debunks the “naturalness” of what men and women are expected to do. Potuchek (1992) observes that the social construction process designs the boundaries between genders, which in turn defines what is masculine and what is feminine. Post-modern feminist theory aims at more “egalitarian and non-exploitative ways” in the workplace, sexual relations, child raising, and other domestic situations (Ebert, 1991, p. 886). Childbirth, and the burden of responsibility that come along with it, is usually for the woman to carry alone, irrespective of which racial, ethnic, or social class she may belong to (Collins, 1990; di Leonardo, 1987; Dill, 1988; Uttal, 1999). Situations in corporate India are also far from egalitarian. Societal expectations also change when women take up positions of leadership in traditionally “male occupations” (e.g., manager, team-leader, etc.). Women in these situations, according to Gerson and Peiss (1985), are expected to behave in a masculine way in their approach towards their leadership work, which then feeds into the notion that there is a feminine way that a woman must behave in all other situations.

For a successful transition back into work life after childbirth, a new mother needs support from people in her environment. Often it is seen, however, that workload after childbirth is not borne by both parents equally. The contribution of men to the cause of childcare and how they engage in other household activities, especially during this phase, was found to be wanting by Berkowitz and Marsiglio (2007), LaRossa (1988), and Risman (1998). Due to the dual roles that she plays at home and office, the new mother has to bear most of the workload (Pew Research Center, 2015). As a result, her self-esteem, which is a crucial indicator of how her career progresses (Sadri & Bowen, 2011), takes a hit. Considering the role of gender and self-actualization, as explained in the above-mentioned theories, it was our aim to study how an urban woman in India experiences the impact of childbirth on her corporate work life. In the process, we evaluated how these subjective experiences shape her career choices and how the perceived support or the lack of it in her environment influences her career prospects after childbirth.

Review of Literature

Before undertaking our research, we went through a trove of related studies which were identified through a systematic search in *JSTOR*, *EBSCOhost*, and *Taylor & Francis* repositories. The keywords used to identify relevant literature were “new mother in companies,” “working mothers,” “workplace discrimination,” and “challenges of working women.” The literature that

was reviewed discussed workplace experiences of working women in general and also specifically focused on new mothers who return to work. The areas of discussion included: low level of women's participation in the workforce (Budhwar et al., 2005; Government of India, 2011; Vankipuram, 2019), return to work policies in organizations (Dekkers-Sánchez et al., 2011; Presmanes, 2015), gender disparity issues (Hymowitz, 2013; Chênevert & Tremblay, 2002; Sandler & Rao, 2012), conflicts women face at home and in the workplace (Buzzanell, et al., 2006; Budhwar et al., 2005), and the support system that women have or lack in their workplaces (Rohde-Abuba, 2015; Gani & Ara, 2010; Burt, 2018; Boushey, 2008; Zimmerman, 2017).

Employers are usually wary of hiring new mothers as employees (Gash, 2009). At 48.52%, women constitute just under 50% of India's population (Government of India, 2011). However, as of 2019, they formed only 30% of the workforce in corporate India. According to Vankipuram (2019), the proportion drops further when we look at women in middle-level management (20%) and women in leadership roles (11%), which underscores the challenging task of retaining women, not just in India but all over the world and hints at motherhood as a potential impediment to career progression (Budhwar et al., 2005).

Research points to the lack of "Return-to-Work" (RTW) policy within organizations as a major contributing factor that affects women's transition back to work after a long leave. Sometimes there is an RTW policy, specially trained professionals, and an effective communication system through which policies can be communicated to all concerned to assist the returning employee (in our case, the new mother) to transition effectively; however, these are not present in all companies (Dekkers-Sánchez et al., 2011). Not having a robust policy that enables all the stakeholders to interact freely and clarify expectations adversely affects employee morale as mothers feel alienated after returning to work (Presmanes, 2015).

Another struggle faced by working women is that of gender disparity, both at home and in the workplace. While Hymowitz (2013) favors the idea put forth by Sheryl Sandberg that half the world (including half the corporate world) should be run by women and half the homes should be run by men, she acknowledges that the reality is far from that even in a developed country like the USA. Hymowitz asserts that even in the West, men still spend more time at work outside their homes and less time doing household chores than women. If only we could somehow ensure their partners spend equal time contributing to house-hold chores, women would be able to have a better work-life balance. As if having to handle more than her share of housework is not enough, women also have to undergo gender-based discrimination at an organizational level. When it comes to a promotion and career advancement in management, not only do men have an advantage over women, but women also have to do more to earn their promotions (Chênevert & Tremblay, 2002).

Most women, at some time during their career, are expected to make the "life-changing choice" between career and family (Buzzanell, et al., 2006). A popular narrative is that they must either do one or the other, or do both solely on their own, which Sandler and Rao (2012) call feeding women with half-truths about work-life balance. In the same light, Goulden and associates (2011), in their study on post-doctoral scholars, found that childbirth was the most common reason for women scholars to leave a job. All this adds to the subtle pressure put on a woman to make the decision to quit her career and commit fully to family life (Budhwar et al., 2005). If she wishes to pursue both career and family, a woman is expected to go the distance on her own with little or no encouragement from society (Rohde-Abuba, 2015). Thus, it is not surprising when Gani and Ara (2010) found that the top four factors that add to the conflicts that Indian women face were work overload, incompatible role expectations, ambiguity and uncertainty, and the attitudes of other family members. These further lead to stress which, according to Cornwell (2013), most women

experience until they are in their mid-forties.

In a UK based survey of more than 1000 women, 37% of new mothers considered resigning from their positions because of the lack of support and isolation they felt in their workplaces, and not even 20% felt comfortable after returning to work (Burt, 2018). The importance of a healthy remuneration and a stable work environment cannot be stressed more as Boushey (2008) asserts that these factors, when designed in consultation with the employee, help in a smooth transition back to work and go a long way in retaining her. Zimmerman (2017) also corroborates these findings. According to her, the three most important areas which a company must address and incorporate in its policy for mothers returning to work after maternity leave are: a generous maternity leave policy, the assurance that it is financially viable for her to return, and a well-managed transition phase upon returning to work.

Method and Materials

This study was conducted using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). While analyzing interview data and interpreting the results thereof, we have attempted to be as true as possible to the three dimensions of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Smith and associates (2009) explain phenomenology as a philosophical approach to the study of experience which is concerned with a thorough and in-depth study of the lived human experience. According to Firmin (2008), one of the important roles that a qualitative researcher plays is to intensely engage with the findings of their research based on the theoretical leanings that they have. Human beings can be interpreted through the meanings which they ascribe to their habits, practices, and everyday rituals. Interpretive inquiry is involved, at a deeper level, in the process of interpreting how the participants interpret themselves and those around them (Smith, 2008). In interpretative phenomenology, the focus is on understanding the practical world of the participants, who are made to reflect in depth on their experiences while they were living out the phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2017). It explores human consciousness and, thus, helps us in getting a nuanced understanding of humans' subjective worlds (Howitt, 2016). While being true to the text is critical to the process, validation from the members themselves is also an integral part of this research paradigm (Benner, 2008).

Keeping the fundamental matter of their experiences at the forefront, six women between the ages of 30 and 43 who returned to work after their ML were chosen as participants, and they were not known personally to the researchers. The participants were approached through a purposive sampling method through other individuals known to the researchers. Once they showed interest, details of the study were explained to them, and then they were asked to sign the informed consent form (ICF). The ICF had a screening questionnaire that captured their important demographic details which have been reproduced in Table 1 below. Participants were based out of four Indian cities and all either had a degree in Engineering/Technology or Management. Three of the participants were from Bengaluru (South India), two were from Mumbai (formerly Bombay, West India), and one was from the city of Bhubaneswar (East India). All hailed from a middle to upper-middle-class background, with five out of six reporting more than Rs.10 lacs (Rs. 1 million) as their annual family income.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

	Current age	Age when she became mother	Years of work experience	Job title before maternity leave	Location	Education	Industry
P1	35	30	10	Systems analyst	Mumbai	B.Tech	IT
P2	30	29	7	Sr. Executive	Bangalore	MBA	Banking/IT ES
P3	33	31	10	Assistant manager	Bhubaneshwar	B.Tech	IT
P4	43	28	19	Sr. officer	Bangalore	MBA	Banking
P5	35	33	11	Associate manager	Bangalore	B.Tech	IT
P6	29	27	7	Software engineer	Bangalore	B. E	IT

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between April and November 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via tele or video call and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. As D’cruz and associates (2014) state, in order for us to understand the lived experience in a phenomenological study, a process of deep questioning was applied which involved open-ended and exploratory questions. Therefore, though our interviews were with fewer participants, they were conducted in a much more in-depth manner. Questions centered around topics of initial experiences at the workplace, after childbirth, the kind of challenges she faced at the office after returning, the support she received from different stakeholders, and the impact of maternity break on her career. To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned code names, P1 to P6. The interviews lasted between 46 and 58 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to multiple close readings. What the participant communicated was interpreted through interpretive strategies (Murray & Holmes, 2014) of IPA. The in-depth analysis of interview transcripts was a three-step process. Firstly, participants’ responses were subjected to a close analysis with a focus on the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of what they said (content) and how they did so (the tone and tenor of speech). In the second stage, these exploratory comments were then further interpreted to form the emergent themes. Finally, using a combination of abstraction and subsumption techniques (Smith et al., 2009), the emergent themes were later refined to derive five super-ordinate themes (Table 2).

Results and Discussion

The five super-ordinate themes (Table 2) and the emergent sub-themes from which they evolved, form the crux of this section. From Tables 3 to 7, each of the emergent sub-themes are shown in separate tables with sufficient interpretations and relevant evidence from transcripts.

Table 2: Five Super-ordinate Themes with Contributions from Participants

Theme titles	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Psychological impact on new mothers returning to work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Changed priorities of a new mother	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Whether or not boss and co-workers are friends	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The dual role conflict: New mother vs. Returning employee	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does having a baby mean the end of a career?	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Theme 1: Motherhood, a Myriad of Emotions***Table 3: Emergent Themes within Theme 1**

Themes	Key Phrases
Separation anxiety of a new mother	“anxiety,” “lost all my strength”
Job insecurity	“Is there anyone back-filling my position?”, “Low on self-confidence,” “I am not as indispensable!”
Challenges of going to work with baby at home	“daily chores,” “new project”
Mother’s agony of leaving her child while returning to work	“heart breaking”
Regretting motherhood and missing office	“I want to go back to office,” “being a mother is never enough”
Anxious about making superiors unhappy	“unfortunately,” “I don't think my organization took it very well”

As we progressed through our study, we came across new mothers detailing their various accounts of experiences during the phase of returning to work. This is a phase when our participants went through a myriad of complex emotions which left a deep psychological impact (Table 3). Some of the women experienced anxiety, insecurity, guilt, regret, and other issues

relating to self-confidence. The idea of maternity leave (ML) itself can be frightening for some, as was the case for P6, a management graduate from the Indian Institute of Management, Indore (IIM-I) in central India. P6 joined the company a few months before she went into ML; she was in turmoil even as she contemplated how and when to inform her boss about her pregnancy. P6 felt that she might be judged and that fear somehow lingered on even though no one actually said anything:

But I got that feeling that I was being judged for the fact that...like I came in and got pregnant...So I don't think my organization took it very well, at the beginning that I was pregnant...and it was something that I think probably stuck on for a while. (P6, personal communication)

For some mothers, leaving one's newborn can also be very traumatic. P1 experienced anxiety when her baby fell sick, and she was unable to be there for her child due to work:

...more than my daughter...I was dealing with it, meaning I could not deal with separation anxiety. Once she was sick, I lost my...all that strength with which I was leaving her at home and going off to office.... I was like Oh my God! That disturbed me on a level and I felt I should be there for her 24/7. (P1, personal communication)

As it turned out, separation anxiety was not the only thing on their minds. A lot can happen in a fast-paced organization over a period of three to six months while the employee is on leave. The uncertainties of what might happen to her position within her team after she returns can be an anxiety-inducing experience for a woman and a big factor leading to being insecure about the job itself. As P2 put it, "...don't know what things might happen...what are the things that might change... Hmm.....is there anyone backfilling my position...those things were little scary" (P2, personal communication).

However, not all participants experienced the same phenomenon. P5's experience, when she worked as a senior team-lead in a large IT firm, stood contrary to the other participants' experiences. P5's issues arose more from being confined to the home after the baby was born and missing out on office life. As she recalls, "I got frustrated in the last one month (of the leave). First 2-3 months were ok but after that, I was very frustrated... I was not even enjoying being with my baby. I was like, "I want to go back to the office and do something where I can use my mind" (personal communication). For P5, her identity was not in motherhood alone, as she recalled that "being a mother [was] never enough for me."

Theme 2: Changed Priorities of a New Mother

...I was actually very clear that I wanted to continue working even after my child was born....it was important to be financially independent...(But) you obviously know your priorities have changed. I kind of care less of what is happening. I would rather be somewhere else (with baby). (P4, personal communication)

These words of P4, an officer with a multinational bank at the time, shed light on how women's priorities change. Hitherto, she had originally aspired to remain financially self-reliant, but P4 now found herself prioritizing her baby over her personal ambitions. We observed that some of our participants' approach towards their career, in particular, underwent a sea-change after childbirth.

Table 4 below shows some of the ways this was shared by participants. Another aspect was their lack of willingness to raise their voices when there was a perceived injustice/unfairness in the way they were treated at the workplace. Due to a change in priorities, they did not deem it worth raising the issue to the management. As put succinctly by P6, “I think at that point, it’s not your priority. You just want to try and figure out how you want to manage this whole (motherhood-career) thing. So you kind of, you just let it go.... work didn’t feel very fulfilling” (personal communication).

Table 4: Emergent Themes within Theme 2

Themes	Key Phrases
New mother’s priorities	“He needs my attention.”
New mother’s guilt of a working woman	“I would rather be somewhere else.”
Not able to continue	“It kind of hit a low.”
Ruminating about baby’s well-being while at work	“So those things always go in my mind.”
Shifting priorities post motherhood	“I don’t know what happened in those seven months.”

Even P5, who admitted that she once focused on her career, realized that she was drawn towards her baby and found herself drifting away from her career. She used to be “very career-oriented...I mean personally speaking and uh, it never crossed my mind ever to take a break and all...but I mean...I...don’t know what happened in those seven months (after joining back). I took a back seat...mentally and ambition wise” (P5, personal communication). Here again, we see how even those participants who were once serious about career and assigned a high value to their personal freedom and self-sufficiency found themselves becoming more preoccupied with motherhood.

Another participant, P1, a system analyst from Mumbai, went through a highly emotional phase due to her child’s health issues and was forced to shift her priorities towards her baby, although she was offered good support by her colleagues:

Once that entire (medical) fiasco ended and she got better...that is the time when I decided to go for a break, I was like, uh, it’s enough...my manager still did not want to let me go but I told him, you know what, let me take a break (resign)...I told him I just wanted to give some time to my child now because she’s growing up and then she needs my attention, like full, focused attention at all the times... (P1, personal communication)

Theme 3: Whether or Not Boss and Co-workers Are Friends

“[I]t felt a little cold, as a place” is how P6 summed up her feelings about the state of affairs at her office and “there weren’t too many women” with whom she could share her issues (P6, personal communication). Whatever P6’s company had advertised to show diversity in workforce and women empowerment was only on paper. The ground reality was far from ideal. Our study found that the role of co-workers and that of the reporting manager was crucial during this phase. Table 5 below depicts this phenomenon. It was observed that the level of an employee in the

corporate hierarchy, and the function/department she was part of, influenced the way colleagues and superiors responded to her needs at the workplace. Being the experienced one in the team and maintaining good interpersonal relationships came in handy, and if colleagues looked up to her and her boss seemed willing to change the way the team functioned, they were able to accommodate P6's needs.

Table 5: Emergent Themes within Theme 3

Themes	Key Phrases
Positive impact of supportive superiors and colleagues	"They were always very willing to help."
Support, or the lack of it, from manager/colleagues	"Oh, you got six months leave."
Social support at workplace	"did not get any negative vibes or anything"
Role of immediate supervisor/manager	"Final word has to go from the manager."
Doubting superiors, Interpersonal relationships	"There was some amount of resistance."
Lack of warmth in culture	"There weren't too many women," "felt a little cold as a place"

P5, a senior member in her team, said,

it became very clear to my manager also that I'm not going to take morning calls...so all the calls were scheduled after 11 o'clock...but I would say the only advantage I had was because I was with the organization for close to nine years and I had very good rapport with everyone...If it was a new organization, I think I would have got a warning (P5 personal communication).

Additionally, the senior team members were given concessions with respect to timings and flexibility, which junior team members were denied. P5 confirmed it further, "Those rules didn't apply to me, I had the flexibility actually to work from home...I mean, frankly speaking, I did not get any negative vibes or anything" (P5, personal communication).

The experience of P2 was opposite to that of P5's. A young professional working at an entry-level position, when P2 returned after maternity leave, she felt it was more challenging for her to have someone understand her own specific needs during this phase. From having to hear tasteless remarks of colleagues to subtle pressure from seniors to start performing, P2 experienced it all: "...Whoever went on maternity leave when they come back, they say like, 'Ooh, you got six months leave.'...to digest it was not very easy" (P2, personal communication). Also, her doctor had advised her to rest, and she found it difficult to approach her boss because "...like you have only one hour of break and if you exceed your break, then you will be questioned." She had to live with this fear and anxiety. While managers in her company could easily go home to their newborn

and work from home if needed, “but we, the lower levels, we don’t get that opportunity” (P2, personal communication).

Those who had supportive colleagues had a more comforting experience after returning. According to P1, “Everybody was very helpful, and they used to ask me, they used to make sure that I’m comfortable and the timings, the traveling, everything was comfortable” (P1, personal communication). However, P1 also mentioned how important it was for an employee to be in the manager’s good graces, especially when the company itself does not have any policy for new mothers returning to work. A manager's discretion plays a vital role. In her own words, “If you have a good rapport with your manager, you can tell them, you know, *chalo* (okay in Hindi), I’m coming late, I may come in at 12 o'clock, maybe and leave early” (P1, personal communication).

P3, our only participant from a non-metro city (Bhuvaneshwar), believed that the manager’s discretion is important in all areas and not just limited to this phase; “the final word” as per her “has to go from the manager” (P3, personal communication). Conversely, if one’s superior did not have faith in the employee, then she felt let down and started losing confidence in the system, and a feeling of being discriminated against started to develop in her mind. P4 recalled a similar occasion in which she perceived some sort of resistance whenever she had to take leave to attend to her sick daughter: “I could sense that they felt that, uh... you know... I had a certain limitation as an employee and may be perhaps...I felt that may be there was some kind of discrimination that I felt” (P4, personal communication).

As for colleagues on her level, P4 felt they gave her more of “lip service,” but when it came to work, it was more like, “you know, we have to do these x, y, z things. We don’t care how you do it...uhh... but you have to do it, you know” (P4, personal communication).

Theme 4: The Dual Role Conflict: New Mother vs. Returning Employee

P4 also said, “Somewhere I felt that I was not a good mother.... And the second thought which comes into my mind is, am I not a good employee?” (P4, personal communication). Caught between these polarized ruminating thoughts, P4 shed light on the conundrum she faced, calling it “living the dual life.” The stress that working women face, both at home and in the office is well documented and also forms part of our literature review covered in the earlier section. This stress gets compounded when the working woman becomes a working mother, and P4 was not the only participant to have gone through that. In Table 6, we have captured in a nutshell what our participants went through under this theme.

Table 6: Emergent Themes within Theme 4

Themes	Key Phrases
Conflicts between mothering priorities and work priorities	“At home you could have done so much more.”
Dual role conflicts	“You’re living a dual life.”
Work suffering due to dual role conflict	“At times, I’d miss my cab.”
Stress from demands of dual roles	“difficult to manage”
Guilty mother vs. Guilty employee	“Those kinds of (thoughts) keep gnawing you at times.”

For the participants it was as if there was no escape from the stressful daily cycle of an extremely busy schedule. P2, the youngest and the one with the least work experience of all the participants, felt it was akin to fighting battles on two separate fronts where on one side, “You lose your sleep and everything...but you need to get up early, do everything for the baby and then get ready, run for the cab. At times, I’d miss my cab...” (P2, personal communication). On the other hand, at the office, it also affected her social life because she had to refuse invites for team dinners because she needed to go home to her baby. Another realization the new mother gets after returning to work is that time is both precious and limited. During her maternity break, a woman could wholly devote her time to her baby but after returning to work, she no longer viewed time spent with colleagues as important. For P1, the time spent with her friends was no longer “fruitful” as she continues, it was “like hang around in the office pantry or in the work café... You interact with the colleagues... (then) you suddenly feel... what are you doing with your time? You know at home you could have done so much more, instead of just loitering around” (P1, personal communication). The conflict came from being pulled in two different directions by two different vocations that she was trying so hard to maintain, and it led to feelings of guilt and remorse about not being able to do either to the point of satisfaction. In the words of P6, “You feel guilty about the fact that you are not spending enough time with your child...those kind of (thoughts) keep gnawing at you at times. But if you spend too much time (with the child), you also feel guilty about the fact that your work is not going on” (P6, personal communication). Similarly, P5 was so greatly caught up in the rigmarole of managing a sick child at home and the constant client calls that she could not participate in that “it became a little bit of an issue” at her office, even for a senior employee like her (P5, personal communication).

Theme 5: Does Having a Baby Mean the End of Her Career?

“That is a big prejudice, it is there. It is there. So that is a big prejudice in our system” (P1, personal communication). P1 was simply asserting emphatically that employers have a bias against women who take a break after attaining motherhood as she had experienced it first-hand. As we have previously seen, having a baby causes many new emotions and multiple challenges. Very often, it is her career that is the first casualty, as women end up paying the price of parenthood more than men. This was echoed by P6, “Usually what I realize is women are the most susceptible

to quitting their jobs just after they come back from the maternity break” (P6, personal communication).

Our participants also touched upon a range of sub-themes (Table 7) that affected their careers, including prejudiced employers, comparing themselves to other colleagues who may have superseded them, compromising on their roles, and doubting their abilities.

Table 7: Emergent Themes within Theme 5

Themes	Key Phrases
Comparison with other colleagues who have moved ahead	“Your friend has gone ahead and become a manager.”
Impact of childbirth on career progression	“That’s genuine worry for a woman,” “I feel like I’m two years behind.”
Work suffering	“I was not perhaps as competitive.”
Pressure to make compromise in career choice due to break	“Big prejudice”
Covert ways organizations filter out women, Women leaving work after childbirth	“Do you have kids...”

P1’s emphatic declaration above came from her ruminating on a loss in seniority while she was away on ML and comparing it with the growth another woman may have had. P1 said, “When you compare your resume, they will see that you are a senior consultant, while your friend has gone ahead and become a manager...when you’re joining after the break or if you have young kids at home, they do not consider you for such a role” (P1, personal communication). P6 also found it awkward answering questions on the number of children she had and her husband’s job stability during her interview at the next job she applied for. All this according to her was done to check if she would stay in the company for long. She felt as if her own work experience and qualifications were of lesser importance (P6, personal communication).

Making compromises with respect to the job was used as a survival technique to continue in the industry by P1, who had to shift from pre-sales to technology which is perceived as a lower-level function. She felt that after the break she had taken, she was no longer as good in her previous role: “After 3 years...I lost that edge in pre-sales” (P1, personal communication). Anxiety relating to an impending promotion/bonus was also observed among participants as they were not sure if they would get their due after they return. P3, who had already worked hard to move up the corporate ladder, described her doubts like this: “just before going to leave I was working as a ‘Lead,’ but I was expecting a promotion...then I started my leave, the promotion didn’t happen. So yeah, that’s a genuine worry for a woman... I was kind of, 90%...99% sure that it (promotion) won’t happen for me” (P3, personal communication). P6 had a similar experience where upon returning from maternity leave, she found that her contributions towards a particular project, prior to going on leave, were not credited to her at all. She described it as, “But when you come back, you realize whatever you’ve done and beyond, ... it’s just the work that you have done has not been recognized and the entire credit has been given to somebody else” (P6, personal

communication). While P3 was eventually promoted, P5 does not consider herself as fortunate because she lost two years of seniority and blamed her pregnancy for the same: “(If) the whole pregnancy thing would not have happened, probably I would have got that manager position before two years only” (P5, personal communication).

If employers not showing confidence in new mothers for higher roles was an external issue, equally serious was the internal issue of self-doubt among new mothers which, in turn, affected their career progress. While for P6, it was “a whole phase of doubt and questions and guilt” (P6, personal communication) about herself as a professional, for P4 it was her loss of competitiveness and lack of ambition that affected her professional growth: “I was not perhaps as competitive as I was earlier because somewhere in my mind...I know that I have to work hard and if I need to get up the ladder, I had to put in my hundred percent and somewhere that hundred percent was not happening” (P4, personal communication). The transition period after the leave was far from temporary and influenced the way they approached their work-life. This hurt their professional ambitions and competitiveness at work. Clearly, the change in the way they approached their jobs also impacted their careers.

Discussion

Motherhood transitions women into a new and unique phase of life (Smith, 1999). As confirmed by Shloim and associates (2019), women go through a range of psychological experiences during this phase. Our study also showed that this experience is “multifaceted, profound and perplexing” (Vejar et al., 2006). Whether it is the way they relate to themselves, their environment, or the way they approach key decisions of their lives, every aspect of their lives is impacted. Women experience a range of emotions from separation anxiety to depression to insecurity in regard to workplace dynamics. On one hand, this was evidenced by Nomaguchi and Fetto (2018), who found that new mothers of children up to 15 months experienced greater pressure at the workplace compared to mothers of older children. On the other hand, Coulson and associates (2012) found that neither the new mother’s own health issues nor her child’s illness were predictors of anxiety or depressive symptoms among mothers. This choice of spending more time with the child and less or no time at work was due to the individual personality traits of the women who experienced separation anxiety (Huston & Aronson, 2005).

Motherhood also brought about changes in the priorities of our participants, most of whom were hitherto career-oriented women. They found it almost inexplicable that their priorities shifted from their careers toward motherhood due to a need to be closer to their newborn (Smith, 1999), while also trying to cope with the challenging work environment they faced upon returning. Participants reported that prior to going on maternity leave, the thought of leaving their career or taking a long sabbatical never occurred to them, but after returning to work, they found themselves feeling the need to personally do more for their baby. Contrary to this observation, we also had a participant who chose to return to the office rather than spend the whole time with the baby at home, despite the fact she too was deeply concerned about her infant. Compromising with her identity as an independent working mother and replacing it entirely as a stay-at-home mother was something she was not ready for (Smith, 1999). Mentoring was cited by most participants as a big part of their support system (Linehan & Scullion, 2008) which they could use to wade through their professional issues, but most did not have access to such mentoring.

Co-workers are an integral part of work-life, and the third theme captured in this study was the returning mother’s interpersonal relationships with them. Often, our research participants found their commitment to work being questioned. Although they found support from some in

their offices, these women faced negativity after returning. Their experiences ranged from subtle workplace bullying from colleagues (D'Cruz & Rayner, 2012) in the form of snide remarks for taking a “long” maternity leave to feeling unwelcome in the team upon return. Organizations without a balanced representation of women were perceived by the returning mother as lukewarm places where they found little cooperation and much less empathy from male colleagues. This, at least partially, was on account of the men’s cliques and networks which were challenging to break into for women (Flood & Pease, 2005). That said, there were a few positive experiences as well. Some managers were incredibly supportive through this phase, which contributed to more ease in women’s transition back to work.

In our fourth theme, which focused on the dual roles which women play at their home and office after returning to their work, we found that there was a conflict. When more than 50% of new mothers returned to work within three months of childbirth, there was bound to be stress between home chores and responsibilities at the office (Marshall et al., 2009). Five out of our six participants experienced this conflict which was in line with the ground-breaking study done by Hochschild (1989). Childcare, during this phase, became a very important area of conflict, which if resolved, led to a highly satisfied woman employee (Luppi & Arpino, 2020). If not resolved, it led to frustration, guilt, and self-doubt among participants.

The fifth and final theme was the negative impact of motherhood on a career. The answer to this question was an overwhelming yes among our participants. All the participants described combining motherhood and career as a serious challenge. Some studies have shown that even as job applicants, women start facing discrimination at the hands of employers during the pregnancy stage (Hebl et al., 2007). Another impact on careers that our participants reported experiencing was the loss of seniority or stalling of a career (Connolly & Gregory, 2008) in which women were either forced to move to a different vertical (department) or were made to wait for (or lose) their promotion which they were due for. Both of these scenarios not only meant a loss of career progression but also a psychological loss.

Implications

The authors of this paper hope that this study becomes a small step towards more elaborate, nuanced, and advanced research in the field of mothers in the workplace. In the corporate world, top management must be responsible for initiating and running a coherent, equitable, and inclusive human resources policy. A small step towards policy change would be to give the new mothers freedom to work from home (without any conditions) for at least two years after childbirth. The study done by Eyring and Stead (1998) continues to be relevant even in the contemporary business world. The practices suggested by them include making senior management directly responsible for the advancement of women within their organization through mentoring, gender sensitization, identifying star performers among women employees and fast-tracking them, and allowing a flexible schedule. The results of our study also point to the need for such initiatives. Parental leave must be normalized for both parents (Cox, 2021), and the needs of both parents should be kept in mind while drafting leave policies. Having a new father go on parental leave will contribute to taking that extra pressure off the new mother at home. We also advocate for the use of ecosystems model-based approach (Marshall et al., 2009), which emphasizes the need to get every stakeholder, be it employer, colleagues, family, policymakers and the community at large, on board to make this transition back to the workplace for new mothers as hassle-free as possible.

Researchers' Reflexivity

One of the authors has a background in the corporate world and has observed colleagues who have had similar experiences. There were times when he reminisced about his past observations, and at a subconscious level these memories may have influenced him. Having another co-author who is an academician with no experience in the corporate world helped to counterbalance any bias which could have cropped up during the process.

Limitations and Scope

As rich and descriptive as the data generated in qualitative research can be, there are some inherent limitations that such studies are bound to have, the number of participants being one of them. Another limitation was that the study was done on women living in cities and working in the private sector. This meant that the experiences of a large segment of women who lived outside urban areas and belonged to a lower-middle-class segment, or those who worked in government undertakings or unorganized sectors, could not be tapped as part of this study. The authors would feel encouraged to see that future studies could be done within those populations that could not be covered in this paper.

Conclusion

As we move deeper into the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is imperative for us as a society to ensure that the participation of women in the corporate world continues to grow. While the decision to continue or discontinue a career after having a child, is and should always be the personal choice of the new mother, employers, on their part, need to ensure that new mothers do not leave permanently due to lack of a policy-driven support system or an absence of a safety net in their organizations. This break was found to impact new mothers' careers in the long run as returning to work after a gap of a year or more is always difficult to explain to a new employer. Additionally, finding a job that suits one's experience and caliber is also a challenge. Such long breaks typically impacted the career progression of our participants, either directly or indirectly, as they were either forced to take a pay cut or were offered a position lower than their previous jobs while re-entering the workforce.

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