May 2024

“Everyone Here Is Smarter than Me”: Imposter Phenomenon among Indian Women Returning to Technology Careers after a Career Break

Swati Singh  
*ICFAI Business School (IBS), Hyderabad, India*

Sita Vanka  
*University of Hyderabad, India*

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“Everyone Here Is Smarter than Me”: Imposter Phenomenon among Indian Women Returning to Technology Careers after a Career Break

By Swati Singh¹ and Sita Vanka²

Abstract
Research on the imposter phenomenon (IP) is burgeoning. Most research, however, has studied the role of personality factors, attitudinal disposition, and individual beliefs as a determinant of IP. Surprisingly, the role of context has not been explored enough. Recent research indicates that context can trigger the experience of the imposter phenomenon. This study confirms these results and calls for contextualizing IP from a systemic or organizational perspective rather than as a personal challenge. In this study, we argue that women returning to careers in the technology fields after a career break may experience IP due to contextual and situational factors. To this end, we explore the experiences of IP among reentry women (who returned to the same career after a break) through a qualitative study. Analysis of data collected through interviews of women re-entering technology careers (N=31) yielded four major themes: dynamism, mandatory teamwork, situations that demanded initiative-taking, and information sharing and the need to ask for help. The themes indicated that IP is not only determined by personality and attitudes, but can also be triggered by situations like a team-driven work context. We discuss the findings of the study in relation to existing literature and present theoretical and policy implications.

Keywords: Women in STEM, Information technology sector, Imposter phenomenon, Imposter syndrome, Career break, Career reentry, Women in India

Introduction
Women’s empowerment is one of the primary objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The path to women’s empowerment and gender equality is paved by the financial security and economic well-being of women. Consequently, developing sustainable careers for women professionals assumes significance in all sectors (Herman & Lewis, 2012). However, the career trajectories and landscape are not easy for women professionals in every sector, especially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Women continue to drop out voluntarily from technology careers, as a study of Indian women reported (Alok et al., 2021a). This voluntary drop-out accelerates as their career progresses owing to several socio-cultural and systemic challenges. This results in few women persisting in their careers in the technology sector (Alok et al., 2021b) and fewer women in leadership roles (Singh & Vanka, 2020).

Corporations and governments understand the adverse effects of this dropout on businesses and the economy. Both corporations and governments worldwide have devised several ways to

¹ Swati Singh is an Assistant Professor at the ICFAI Business School (IBS), Hyderabad, India. Her research interests gravitate around issues and challenges linked to the career sustainability of women professionals in technology careers. She also works in the area of human-computer interaction (HCI), human-computer collaboration in the workplace and its implications on employee voice, and key organizational outcomes.
² Sita Vanka is currently a Senior Professor (Retired) and Former Dean at the School of Management Studies, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India. She has over three decades of teaching and research experience in the areas of Management, Women Studies, Human Resource Management, and Entrepreneurship.
address the issue of voluntary dropout of women professionals from careers in technology. These include family-friendly policies, supportive workplaces, extended leave for childcare and elderly care, and government regulations for maternity leaves, among others (Singh & Vanka, 2021). Despite such initiatives, career breaks among women professionals in the technology sector are prevalent (Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2023). Reentry to technology careers after a career break is difficult (Varma & Sivarajan, 2023; Saini et al., 2023). Several scholars have previously explored the phenomenon of career break and career reentry among women professionals in the technology sector (Herman, 2011; Panteli, 2006). The issues, challenges, and enablers of career reentry have been explored from different perspectives. Evidence indicates that women professionals need a supportive eco-system to return to technology careers after a career break (Singh & Vanka, 2021). Scholars highlight that there are few studies which have explored the experiences of women professionals after their return to technology careers and call for expanded research (Betz, 2023; Lucas et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2020).

It is well documented that career reentry to the technology sector after a career break is difficult for women professionals (Mennega & De Villiers, 2021). Career breaks have adverse effects on the economic, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of women professionals (Arora & Kumari, 2022; Wang & Degol, 2017). Career breaks result in a decrease in pay grade, designation, and technical skills. This often results in self-doubt, loss of self-confidence, and low self-efficacy (Frear et al., 2019). Moreover, adverse repercussions of self-doubt and low self-worth is well researched. A related concept is that of the imposter phenomenon (IP) which refers to the psychological experience of self-doubt among competent and capable individuals (Clance & Imes, 1978). Individuals experiencing IP feel a sense of inadequacy, doubt their achievements, and have a fear of being exposed as an imposter. In short, they doubt their abilities and attribute their success to external factors like luck (Clance & O'Toole, 2014). Further, a plethora of research suggests that individuals who experience IP often struggle to internalize their success (Chakraverty, 2022; Joseph et al., 2023). We posit that women returning to technology careers after a career break may experience IP owing to the industry specifics. While not every woman returning to technology careers experiences IP, this phenomenon is prevalent among reentry women. Hence, exploring IP among reentry women in technology careers has theoretical, practical, and policy implications.

To this end, we discuss the recent literature on IP among women and career break and its effects on women’s careers, the methodology adopted in the study, and then our findings in the light of existing literature. We also discuss the theoretical, practical, and policy implications. Recent research emphasizes the role of context and situations while exploring IP (Feenstra et al., 2020). We build our propositions on this insight and posit that an individual’s feeling of IP is not solely a result of their personality and attitudinal disposition but depends on the context and environment. We propose that career break and related challenges present difficulties for women professionals but there are unique challenges in the technology sector that may trigger IP. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to examine the experience of IP among women who re-entered technology careers after a career break. More specifically, this paper explores the situations in the workplace that trigger IP.

**Literature Review**

*Imposter Phenomenon among Women Professionals*

In this section, we explore the recent literature on the experience of IP among women professionals. The concept of the imposter syndrome or IP was first proposed by Clance & Imes.
(1978) who described it as a feeling of self-doubt. They further reported with respect to IP that it “is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies” (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter phenomenon is a belief about self-worth held by a subset of competent, accomplished, and successful individuals who believe that their accomplishments are due to luck and who see themselves as deceiving others (Clance, 1985).

The concept of IP has received considerable scholarly attention in the recent past. A plethora of work has been carried out in different contexts with respect to IP. Most research attributes IP to personality factors (Vergauwe et al., 2015), attitudinal dispositions, perfectionistic tendencies (Dudău, 2014), and attachment styles (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008). The phenomenon is found to be related positively to feelings of inadequacy (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010), lack of motivation (Vaughn et al., 2020), and individuals doubting one’s intelligence (Stone & Lovejoy, 2019) among others. While IP is experienced across genders, research indicates that women and minorities (ethnic or racial) are more vulnerable (Bernard et al., 2018). Furthermore, women who work in sectors where they are underrepresented have reported a higher level of IP as compared to men. Recent research on IP in different sectors indicates that women professionals working in a complex, dynamic work environment such as software development, nursing, and neuroscience may report a higher level of IP (Zavaleta Bernuy et al., 2023).

Table 1 depicts a summary of recent research on IP among women professionals. Research suggests that the IP is magnified in sectors that demand brilliance. The underrepresentation of women in those sectors amplify the low self-efficacy and imposter feelings (Muradoglu et al., 2022). In the same vein, Siwale and Mwalemba (2023) reported that African women identified IP as a major challenge with respect to their participation in STEM professions. Scholars have found that IP is one of the major reasons for the gender gap in STEM professions and medicine (Noronha et al., 2022). Furthermore, scholars reported that distress resulting from discrimination acts as a source of IP among women professionals (Bernard et al., 2018). Those experiencing IP attributed their success to luck (Vaughn et al., 2020). Scholars also argued that it is vital to combat IP among women professionals to encourage them to pursue leadership roles (Sibener et al., 2022), and it is essential to combat imposter feelings to be successful in competitive work environments (Harrison et al., 2022).

Research on IP related to women professionals indicates that it has a negative impact on work and career outcomes, on performance as well as career growth. In this connection, recent research has also attempted to explore the role of context in triggering IP, such as organizational and job-related variables (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Emerging research in this area also highlights the role of situational factors (KH & Menon, 2020). Reentry in technology careers after a career break may act as a situation that can trigger IP among women professionals. Furthermore, reentry women may face unique challenges after they resume their career in a dynamic work environment such as IT software. We explore recent literature on career breaks among women professionals in STEM fields in the next section.
### Table 1: Summary of Literature Examining the Imposter Phenomenon among Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors (year)</th>
<th>Sample / Method</th>
<th>Key findings (antecedents/ consequences of IP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Siwale &amp; Mwalemba (2023)</td>
<td>African women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) professions</td>
<td>IP was identified as one of the clear challenges experienced by African women with respect to participation in STEM careers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muradoglu et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Underrepresented Minority Women in Academics</td>
<td>Imposter feelings get magnified in fields that value brilliance. It is also related to a lower sense of belonging in a field and lower self-efficacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibener et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Women in Neuroscience</td>
<td>Effective management of imposter syndrome is needed to be successful in neuroscience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noronha et al. (2022)</td>
<td>Review of gender balance in the medical workplace</td>
<td>Imposter phenomenon is among the key factors that explain the gender gap in the medical profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zavaleta et al. (2023)</td>
<td>A survey among students in computing</td>
<td>Women experience higher incidence of imposter syndrome than men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinkenreich et al. (2022)</td>
<td>94 women in the Software Industry</td>
<td>Imposter phenomenon emerged as a major challenge in career advancement in the software industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison et al. (2022)</td>
<td>182 women in the global health field</td>
<td>Strategies to combat imposter syndrome is important to enhance women leadership opportunities in health sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vajapey et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Review of studies in the medical field</td>
<td>Rate of identification with imposter syndrome, stress, and burnout are higher in women than men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaughn et al. (2020)</td>
<td>1,326 women professionals in academia</td>
<td>Feelings of competence and relatedness, attributions to luck, ability, ease, and effort predict IP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao &amp; Gloria (2019)</td>
<td>224 women in STEM-related doctoral degree</td>
<td>Women’s levels of self-efficacy and perceptions of their doctoral environment accounted for the effects of impostorism on their attitudes about academic persistence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard et al. (2018)</td>
<td>African American college students</td>
<td>Distress resulting from racial discrimination resulted in high levels of IP among African American women.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Career Reentry in Technology Careers

Career reentry has been studied as a vital aspect of the career trajectory of women professionals. Scholars have explored several dimensions related to career reentry. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) presented a review and synthesis of women’s career break and career reentry experiences and highlighted the work outcomes after career break. They also noted long-term impacts of career breaks that hinder reentry of women professionals. Most studies have focused on studying the career trajectory of returning mothers. In this connection, Stone and Lovejoy (2019) presented a comprehensive picture of women’s careers and challenges faced by mothers during career reentry. In their panel survey, they were able to re-interview about 80% of the sample whom they had interviewed 10 years prior to explore the reasons for career opt-out. Employing
the same life history interview approach, they reported that four-fifths of their respondents returned to work but in different fields, and with less prestigious careers and positions than earlier. They concluded that women do not resume their careers but restart and reconstruct them. It is established that women experience several challenges while attempting career reentry after a career break.

Career breaks increased downward mobility in terms of careers and remuneration (Evertsson, 2016). Research reveals that women’s decision to return to careers depends upon their experience before the career break and experiences of gender inequality (Moorthy et al., 2022). In this respect, Herr and Wolfram (2012) carried out a study on the secondary data and found that women who worked before their career break in an organization that was not family friendly were reluctant to return to their careers. Furthermore, women on a career break require support from organizations for reentry, and organizational support policies and interventions influence career reentry positively (Panteli, 2006). It is, however, vital that women on a career break work on their adaptability and enhancing human and social capital, which were found to be vital for re-employment after a career break (McArdle et al., 2007).

Research on career reentry thus reveals a tough trajectory for women professionals in technology careers. Career reentry also presents an opportunity to explore IP among reentry women in the technology sector.

**Methods**

Scholars who explored IP in different contexts have primarily employed qualitative methods. Further, interviews have been predominantly used to collect data from the respondents (Gullifor et al., 2023). Hence, a similar methodology was employed in this study.

The study was conducted in India, a leading player in the global technology sector. Indian IT and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) companies are recognized worldwide for their technological prowess and services (Coquard, 2023). While the Indian IT sector is widely recognized for its services, diversity in this sector has been a topic of concern (NASSCOM, 2021). Reports reveal that dwindling gender representation across organizational levels is evident in the Indian technology sector. More specifically, it is seen that women drop out of IT careers in the mid-career stage, resulting in few women in top positions in the technology sectors (NASSCOM, 2021). While IT organizations in India have attempted to re-hire women professionals after a career break through career reentry and restart programs (Bhattacharya, 2023), not much has been explored academically. The Indian IT sector provides a context to study experiences of reentry women in technology sectors.

Target respondents for this study were women professionals working in the IT sector in top IT cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune. The contact with women professionals was established through social media, seminars, conferences, and personal networks. The first author of the study attended seminars and conferences that focused on women’s careers in technology and issues and challenges faced by women professionals during career break and reentry. Women professionals attending those conferences/seminars were approached, the purpose of the study was explained to them, and their participation was solicited. They were assured that their responses would only be used for academic purposes. They were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential (Kaiser, 2009). Thus, a candidate was included as a respondent in the study after their consent. Further, in order to reach out to potential participants, the respondents were requested to refer or suggest potential respondents from their network (Goodman, 1961). This process ensured that the researcher had a pool of potential candidates. Thus, purposive sampling
followed by snowball sampling was used in the study. Further, candidates were approached with due consideration of the importance of diversity among the respondents (Tarrant et al., 2003).

There is no consensus with respect to the sample size in a qualitative study. Most scholars use theoretical saturation to decide sample size. Theoretical saturation “refers to the point in data collection when no additional issues or insights emerge from data and all relevant conceptual categories have been identified, explored, and exhausted” (Hennink et al., 2017, p. 593). In this study, theoretical saturation was reached at N=31.

Findings and Discussion

Table 2 depicts the participants’ characteristics with respect to variables relevant to their careers. It also provides information about the span of career break and type of IT functions (Core, Support or Managerial) that respondents were engaged in.

Table 2: Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Participants</th>
<th>Number of Participants (out of 31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30 years old</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35 years old</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40 years old</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 years and older</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IT Function</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core IT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support IT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Span of Career Break</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 3 years</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6 years</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 6 years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We found that there were four situations that triggered IP among reentry women in IT: the dynamism of the IT industry that triggered fear of obsolescence, mandatory teamwork, situations that demanded initiative-taking, and the situation of seeking help.

Dynamism of the IT Industry and Fear of Obsolescence

Career breaks adversely impact individuals’ financial, social, and psychological well-being. This was highlighted by the respondents in different ways. Moreover, respondents
highlighted that the fear of the unknown was largely due to the adverse effect of career breaks resulting in potential skill obsolescence as highlighted below:

I started my career after a break of 4 years. I struggled a lot in the dynamic environment at work. Things changed a lot in those 4 years. There were new technologies, new collaboration tools, and more virtual work, everything had changed. I was unsure about everything around me; I had that fear of some notification popping up and asking for something that I might not know. (Respondent #15, personal interview)

Respondents highlighted that even though they focused on active upskilling before resuming their careers after the career break, they experienced uncertainty. This uncertainty resulted in self-doubt about their abilities among respondents, as the following participant noted:

I joined a cross-functional global team when I returned from the career break. Most of the work was asynchronous. There was a lot of uncertainty with respect to the work, expectations, and performance… I always doubted myself… would I be able to fit here, I was too scared and also embarrassed to share this with anyone in the team. (Respondent #7, personal interview)

These findings are compatible with the literature that report the role of fear as an emotion in triggering IP, for example fear of failure (Schulze, 2020), fear of being discovered (Kumar et al., 2022), and fear of being exposed (Vergauwe et al., 2015), among others. Our findings add to this discourse by highlighting that the peculiar nature of the IT industry amplifies the fear of obsolescence in triggering IP. Furthermore, the fear of the unknown that our respondents experienced indicates that reentry women require support in terms of greater clarity of roles and responsibility and support mechanisms so that such feelings can be minimized.

**Mandatory Teamwork**

Information Technology is largely driven by teamwork, and all our respondents worked in a team. A team usually had five to ten members. In a close-knit team culture, social comparison is not uncommon. While these teams work with a common objective to achieve a specific goal, respondents revealed that social comparison happens in a subtle way. As rightly pointed out by a respondent:

In IT teamwork is everything. We work in teams always and sometimes we also work in a cross-functional teams….I was the only one…who had a career break of 7 years. I always felt low and down in team meetings and discussions. I felt I was the only one who still trying to make my place. In fact, mostly I felt out of place during those meetings. I looked for a reason to avoid team meetings and team outings. I felt my team members, most of them who were younger to me, some new joiners, also knew everything and for me, everything was a challenge, everything was new. (Respondent #26, personal interview)

As the respondents returned from a career break, there was a general perception of skill obsolescence regarding their technical skills. Most of the respondents, however, agreed that they actively engaged in upskilling themselves in new technology, but they still felt weaker than their teammates after rejoining. The below quote highlights the concern of the respondents:
Working in the tech field is not easy, technology changes, platforms change, software changes… People look at you weirdly if you say something which is outdated. It can be a valuable platform, but things become outdated very quickly in technology sector. I remember once mentioning about a platform I used for UX design and people in my team were like, “Who uses it now?” I felt so embarrassed. I had just joined work after a break of 2.5 years. I knew new platforms, but I wanted to share how good the other platform was. But probably they thought, “I am still stuck in the past” (with respect to) technologies. (Respondent #11, personal interview)

The above responses highlights the role of social comparison within the work team in triggering IP among respondents. Social comparison is a basic aspect of human experience. It is an “almost inevitable element of social interaction” (Brickman & Bulman, 1977, p. 150), and workplaces are no exception to this. Brown and associates (2007) reported that social comparison at work is characterized by contrast, that is when a person is different from others in the organization in terms of identity, achievement, competence, or experiencing a different context. For reentry women, our findings reveal that a career break was linked to this contrast effect that triggered social comparison. More specifically, as career break instigates skill obsolescence, the contrast effect and social comparison can be exacerbated, resulting in experiences of IP.

The IT sectors are largely project-oriented and driven by teamwork where comparison with peers in the team is common, leading to a general perception of skill obsolescence especially among women who return after the career break. Being under constant scrutiny and comparison with peers in a performance-focused environment heightened IP, resulting in powerful and persistent feelings of inadequacy and habitual comparison with others (Chodoff et al., 2023).

*Situations that Demand Initiative-taking*

Initiative-taking involves extra-role behavior and a proactive approach. Women returning from a career break may find it difficult to engage in initiative-taking, and this was highlighted by the respondents who noted experiencing IP whenever they had to take initiative. This was specifically true for respondents who had long career breaks. Furthermore, this phenomenon was also reported by women who had to take the initiative shortly after they rejoined the work. This response highlights it well: “I thought taking initiative would expose my feelings or that emotion which made me feel like someone who is not competent enough. I thought I would rather be quiet” (Respondent #23, personal interview). Another respondent also shared a similar belief:

When I joined after a break of 3 years, our team was sent for a Hackathon. We together (a team of 4) built a great tool to solve internal queries. Hackathon went on for two days and as everyone had presented, it was my turn to present on the second day. I was so scared. I felt I knew nothing. I just did not want to present. I was feeling that….Probably everyone knew I came from a long break; I could hardly contribute. I did not want to present. Although, I was the one who wrote the initial algo for the tool. (Respondent #6, personal interview)

Respondents also shared that they felt that taking the initiative would expose them as an imposter: “I thought I was lucky to get the job after a break of 5 years. I should focus on completing the
task...and that’s it. Any initiative may expose. I had that kind of fear” (Respondent #17, personal interview).

The IT sector is dynamic where situations demand initiative-taking on a regular basis. Initiative-taking in such situations involves a proactive approach and extra-role behavior. Women returning from career breaks may find it difficult to engage in such behaviors. IP is caused by the need to learn and adjust in the work environment, triggering a fear of exposing themselves in their transition. The role of gender and personality traits, along with familial and social influences (Siwale & Mwalemba, 2023), deter women from taking initiative in the workplace. While organizational support (e.g., Tata Consultancy Services initiatives to support career reentry of women in India) and government regulation is a welcome step in the current work scenario, a proactive systemic response to encourage women to demonstrate a more proactive approach is needed. Research confirms that aptitude, interest, and organizational support are critical in initiative-taking (Hong et al., 2016). Interventions for young women to choose STEM courses in school may itself act as a motivator to combat career challenges and take initiative in the workplace when required.

**Seeking Help**

In the IT sector work, collaboration and teamwork are key to job performance because they enable productivity and enhanced performance of IT employees. Hence, requesting information or seeking help while working in a team is not only common but also encouraged. Respondents, however, highlighted that they had an experience of IP when they sought help from their team members. The feeling was exacerbated because they were returning from a career break. As pointed out by a respondent, “When I returned to work, I remember being stuck at every point. Whenever I asked for help, I felt like I was stupid. It is not that others were not supportive, but I felt like…‘Oh! I do not know even this much’” (Respondent #2, personal interview).

Respondents also pointed out that the nature of work in the IT sector is fast-changing. Consequently, teamwork is encouraged to accomplish the task and target. Experienced employees play a crucial role in this respect as they bring clarity with respect to targets. Respondents highlighted that although they had work experience and accomplishments before the career break, they still found it difficult to seek help in their team. A respondent said:

I had 10 years of work experience when I took a break for my marriage. I intended to take 2 months break but before I realized it was 3 years of break because of relocation, and motherhood. I finally returned to work after 3.5 years. While at work I always thought how I used to work before my career break. As people knew that I had good experience and understanding of tools, they came to ask for help. I was also happy to help them. But when I needed any help, I always felt awkward…It was like I have 10 years of work experience and here I want help on these tiny issues…I was never comfortable. I also felt people might make an opinion about my abilities if I went and asked for help. So, I actually struggled in silos to figure out ways whenever I was stuck. (Respondent #16, personal interview)

Our findings indicate that seeking advice and/or help can trigger IP among reentry women. This can be problematic for women professionals as help-seeking is crucial in technology sectors. Consequently, a woman returning from career break may avoid seeking help to evade the emotional and social costs linked to it. Such decisions may impact performance poorly and negatively influence task completion and delivery. On the other hand, if she seeks help after a
career break, she may experience emotions of inferiority and incompetence. Thus, in both scenarios IP can be triggered. The dark psychological side of help-seeking in triggering IP is therefore indicated by our findings, which confirm the emotional and social cost of seeking assistance at work addressed by prior research (Bamberger, 2009). These costs are related to implicit acknowledgement of incompetence, dependence on others, and inferiority to those providing help (Lee, 2002). In other words, seeking help may be viewed as a potential deterrent to positive self-image (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992) among reentry women as it can provoke IP.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the experiences of IP among reentry women in technology careers. Respondents highlighted these factors as triggers of IP:

1. The dynamism of the IT sector characterized by rapidly changing tools, technology and application of technology, which triggered fear of obsolescence;
2. Mandatory teamwork which triggered fear of peer comparisons;
3. Situations where they were required to take initiative;
4. Situations where they needed to seek advice or help.

Other context-specific variables relevant to IP include non-traditional fields for women in which they are under-represented, especially in leadership. This context seems to trigger the fear of taking initiative. Further, workplace environments which are not family-friendly triggered women’s fears of not fitting in, as did discrimination based on the intersection of sex and race. Any one or more of these context-specific variables can trigger the experience of IP for women. The study carries meaningful implications for practice, theory, and policy.

Career breaks adversely impact the individual’s financial, social, and psychological well-being. Further, in high performance work cultures like the IT sector, the tasks involve clear goals but few boundaries. Such ambiguity deters women from introducing novelty for fear of failure. We suggest organizational remedies in the form of identifying imposter feelings among women and providing training, therapeutic intervention, and a supportive ecosystem including peer group and supervisory assistance. An empathetic attitude coupled with team-building activities should reduce the stigma around career break and situations triggering IT, thus alleviating these debilitating experiences among reentry women.

Further, the paper contributes to theories and academic understanding of the experience of IP among reentry women in technology careers from both a qualitative and institutional perspective. More specifically, it highlights the unique situations/emotions at the workplace that triggered IP among reentry women, thus indicating the role of context as a trigger. The paper also provides an understanding of the gendered experiences women faced in the technology sector. Its use of interviews convey personal experiences, thus contributing to the evolving research across similar settings and sectors (medicine, education, and IT) in IP research.

This paper also calls for policy initiatives on several fronts. Although a number of initiatives and interventions have been undertaken by companies and governments, IP is still a challenge for women across sectors and contexts. IP feelings are not simply individually determined but are triggered by the system, thus requiring proactive systemic interventions. Governments at the macro level can introduce interventions regarding standards of work and well-being, with the guidelines of national and international agencies like the United Nations and the International Labour Organization. The key to mitigating IP feelings is organizations’ treatment...
of women. Appropriate policies must be formulated to ensure that women feel that their merits and contributions to the team are recognized by their organizations. Early childhood interventions at the school and family to motivate young women to take up STEM courses, and policy to recognize and encourage merit through fellowships, should help women to pursue STEM careers and also navigate challenges due to career break and career reentry.

Limitation and Future Research
The present study, like any research, is not devoid of limitations. The limitations of the present study, however, provide avenues for future research. The study employed a qualitative research method and explored IP among 31 reentry women professionals working in the IT sector in India. The special focus on the IT sector and the sample size can be viewed as a limitation in terms of replicability in other sectors. Nonetheless, we attempted to ensure diversity within the sample to make our findings rigorous. Future studies can also focus on other sectors like medicine or mathematics to explore IP among women professionals. We used a cross-sectional research design in this study. We believe that carrying out a longitudinal study of experiences of IP among women professionals could provide a more robust and nuanced insight. Furthermore, a longitudinal study on women professionals, career break, and experiences of IP can also unravel the issues and challenges pertaining to career sustainability among women professionals.

Overall, our study highlighted the role and importance of context in the understanding of imposter phenomenon. An understanding of contexts as triggers of IP is crucial for organizations to devise strategies and practices to minimize its occurrences and magnitude. We believe that the results of this study would be meaningful in promoting further discourse about IP and women’s careers in STEM.

References


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