



CAREER RE-ENTRY OF WOMEN IN THE CORPORATES

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Abstract

The participation of women in India's workforce remains significantly lower than global averages, with one of the widest gender gaps in employment. A large proportion of educated women exit the workforce for family or personal reasons, yet only a small fraction successfully re-enter corporate employment. This paper explores the multifaceted challenges faced by women attempting to rejoin the workforce after a career break. Drawing on secondary data, industry reports, and literature review, it examines the psychological, organizational, and societal barriers that impede women's career re-entry. The study also highlights emerging corporate returnship programs and assesses their effectiveness. The findings underscore that while several organizations have initiated structured returnship programs, their reach and sustainability remain limited. To ensure equitable reintegration, companies must address skill obsolescence, unconscious bias, and workplace inflexibility, while fostering inclusive ecosystems that value women's diverse experiences.

Keywords: - Career re-entry, Returnship programs, work life balance, Career break, unconscious bias etc.

1.Introduction

1.1 Background

India continues to exhibit one of the widest gender disparities in employment globally. Female labor force participation (LFP) remains among the lowest for countries with comparable per capita income. According to a recent Avtar report, approximately 7 million women in India are actively seeking employment after taking a career break.

In response, organizations across industries—including technology, finance, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy—have begun implementing returnship or second-career programs to reintegrate women into the workforce. These programs typically offer project-based roles, training, and mentorship to help women rebuild professional skills and confidence. Examples include Titan's *Sequal*, Tally Solutions' *Reboot with Tally*, and Yubi's *Back2EPIC*. Despite these initiatives, participation and long-term retention remain limited. In urban India, 42% of educated women take career breaks between the ages of 30–45, yet only 27% return to full-time employment within a year (The Economic Times, 2024).

1.2 Reasons for re-entry: -

Women re-enter the workforce for a combination of personal, social, and economic reasons. One of the primary motivations is financial necessity, as many seek to regain financial independence or contribute to the growing financial demands of dual-income households. Economic pressures, such as rising living costs and long-term financial security, often compel women to resume professional work. Another significant factor is changes in family dynamics. As children grow older or when additional family or community support becomes available, caregiving responsibilities tend to reduce, enabling women to refocus on their professional aspirations. Moreover, personal fulfilment and career development play a crucial role in the decision to return. For many women, work is an integral part of their identity, providing a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and self-worth. The pursuit of intellectual engagement, social interaction, and career progression further motivates women to reintegrate into the workforce after a career break.

1.3 Key Challenges faced: -

Despite their motivation, women encounter numerous barriers when attempting to re-enter corporate roles. Recruiters often express hesitation toward candidates with employment gaps, resulting in implicit hiring bias that disadvantages returning women. Many also struggle with the loss of professional networks, diminished confidence, and the need to update technical skills—particularly in fast-evolving sectors such as technology and finance. Skill obsolescence frequently compounds these challenges, as employers may perceive returnees as less competent, less committed, or out of touch with current industry practices. Furthermore, women often face economic and emotional pressures, such as negotiating lower compensation, managing childcare responsibilities, and coping with feelings of guilt or inadequacy while balancing multiple roles. Limited access to training and upskilling opportunities also hinders successful reintegration, with many women lacking the time, financial resources, or awareness to pursue professional development programs. Underpinning these challenges is the persistence of unconscious bias, where assumptions about reduced reliability, ambition, or long-term commitment continue to shape employer attitudes toward women returning after a career break (The Times of India, 2024; *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022).

1.4 Problem Definition: -

Despite progress in gender diversity, a significant number of professional women exit the workforce due to personal or family responsibilities—such as maternity, caregiving, or relocation. However, when these women attempt to return to the corporate sector, they face numerous barriers that hinder their reintegration into the workforce.

These challenges include skill obsolescence, unconscious bias from employers, lack of structured re-entry programs, limited networking opportunities, and inflexible work arrangements. Traditional hiring practices often penalize career gaps, overlooking the experience and potential of returning women professionals.

While some organizations have begun implementing “returnship” or re-entry programs, many of these initiatives lack scale, structure, or long-term commitment. As a result, the re-entry journey remains fragmented and discouraging for many qualified women.

Therefore, the core problem lies in the insufficient availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of corporate career re-entry programs tailored to support women in transitioning back into the workforce after a career break.

1.5 Re-entry Penalty

Women face a measurable re-entry penalty upon returning to the workforce, which manifests in several interconnected forms of disadvantage. One of the most evident is the wage penalty, as women often return at lower salaries and with fewer benefits compared to peers who maintained continuous employment. Despite possessing similar qualifications and prior experience, their compensation is frequently reduced due to perceived skill deterioration or diminished professional relevance.

Another dimension of this penalty is career regression, where returning women are compelled to accept positions below their previous level of seniority or expertise. Many are overlooked for leadership or strategic roles, with employers assuming that a career gap indicates a decline in ambition or capability. This regression not only impacts professional growth but also undermines confidence and long-term career prospects.

Bias in hiring further compounds these challenges. Gaps in resumes often trigger implicit stereotypes among recruiters, who may question a woman's technical competence, commitment, or ability to adapt to changing industry trends. Such biases reduce the likelihood of women being considered for competitive or high-profile roles.

Finally, even after successful re-entry, women encounter limited opportunities for career advancement. Many experience slower promotion trajectories and are excluded from high-visibility projects or stretch assignments that are critical for progression. These cumulative disadvantages reinforce structural inequities, making the re-entry journey more challenging and discouraging for women professionals.

2. Objectives of the Research :-

- To understand the psychological and emotional challenges experienced by women during career re-entry and how they impact their reintegration.
- To examine the perceptions and attitudes of employers towards women re-entering the workforce after a break.
- To assess the availability and effectiveness of existing career re-entry programs, policies, or support systems.
- To identify the personal, organizational, and societal barriers faced by women during career re-entry.

3. Research Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data obtained from authentic and credible sources.

4. Literature Review

Existing literature on women's career re-entry highlights a complex interplay of psychological, social, and structural factors that shape women's return-to-work experiences.

Research indicates that high-velocity and rapidly evolving industries, such as technology and finance, tend to penalize career breaks more severely than other sectors. This stems from the widespread assumption of rapid skill obsolescence, wherein employers perceive that women returning after a hiatus may lack updated technical knowledge or familiarity with current tools and practices. Consequently, even experienced professionals may face skepticism regarding their ability to adapt to fast-changing industry dynamics, which hinders their re-entry prospects and limits career progression opportunities (India Today, 2025).

One of the most persistent challenges identified in the literature is unconscious bias. Employers often harbour stereotypes about women who have taken career breaks—perceiving them as less committed, less ambitious, or possessing outdated skills (PWC, 2024).

The duration of the career break has been shown to significantly influence these perceptions; longer interruptions are often associated with greater skepticism regarding a woman's ability to reintegrate effectively. This phenomenon is compounded by the “mommy tracking” stereotype, wherein returning women are confined to less demanding or slower-growth roles due to assumptions about their priorities and availability (PWC, 2025).

Empirical evidence also indicates that women who successfully re-enter the workforce are often highly motivated, loyal, and adaptable employees, bringing valuable maturity and perspective to their roles. Many such returnees have demonstrated strong performance and have been promoted within relatively short periods (Mint, 2025). However, not all corporate re-entry or “second-career” initiatives have yielded consistent results.

According to *The Economic Times* (2019), the success of these programs is limited by persistent skill gaps and the lack of flexibility in most organizational structures.

Another recurrent theme in the literature pertains to workplace flexibility. Although flexible arrangements such as remote work, part-time roles, or job-sharing are crucial enablers of successful re-entry, many organizations either do not offer them or remain skeptical about their long-term feasibility (PWC, 2024). The absence of such accommodations often forces women to choose between professional aspirations and familial obligations, leading to attrition or underemployment.

The emotional and psychological dimensions of career re-entry are equally significant. Being out of the workforce often results in the loss of professional and social networks, leaving women feeling isolated or “out of the loop” upon returning. This sense of disconnection can drive excessive efforts to “catch up,” leading to over-preparation, overwork, and, ultimately, mental exhaustion or burnout (Sage Journal, 2024). Moreover, for many women, work forms a central aspect of personal identity. Career interruptions can therefore trigger profound identity disruptions, forcing women to renegotiate their sense of self between professional and caregiving roles. Feelings of guilt—both for taking time away from work and for the perceived neglect of family upon returning—further heighten emotional strain (Sage Journal, 2024).

A significant sociological perspective underscores the pivotal role of mentorship—both formal and informal—in supporting women, particularly mothers, as they transition back into the workforce. Mentors provide not only vocational guidance but also psychosocial support, helping returnees navigate feelings of guilt, imposter syndrome, and self-doubt. This mentorship fosters renewed confidence, professional identity, and a sense of belonging within organizational settings.

Studies have shown that women attempting to re-enter the workforce often encounter early-stage hiring bias, with many reporting that their job applications are dismissed before receiving serious consideration. This tendency reflects the persistent stigma associated with career breaks, where employment gaps are interpreted by recruiters as indicators of reduced competence, commitment, or relevance to current industry needs (PWC, 2024).

5. Findings and Discussions

1. Fear of Judgement and pressure: -Women often feel judged for prioritizing family or personal life over career, leading to guilt or defensiveness during re-entry. Re-entering women frequently face emotional exhaustion due to dual responsibilities at home and work, leading to increased stress and risk of burnout.

2. Many returning women experience imposter syndrome, a pervasive feeling of inadequacy or self-doubt despite their qualifications and prior achievements. This psychological barrier often manifests when women question their competence or believe they do not truly deserve the roles they are re-entering into. The issue is particularly pronounced in fast-paced or male-dominated industries, where heightened competition and rapid technological advancements can amplify feelings of being “out of place” or “behind.” Such internalized self-doubt not only affects confidence and performance but also discourages women from seeking leadership roles or negotiating for fair compensation. Overcoming imposter syndrome, therefore, becomes an essential part of the re-entry process, requiring mentorship, supportive organizational cultures, and validation of the unique experiences and strengths returning women bring to the workplace.

3. Many women experience significant self-doubt and identity loss when attempting to re-enter the workforce after a career break. Time away from professional environments often leads to feelings of diminished competence and uncertainty about one’s ability to perform at previous levels. This is further intensified by the rapid pace of change in workplace technologies, skills, and expectations, which can make returning professionals feel out of touch or undervalued.

4. Many women report feelings of decreased confidence, self-worth, and competence after a career break, often driven by the rapid evolution of workplace skills and technology.

4. Biasness: -Many employer’s have the assumption that returning women may lack commitment, updated skills, or flexibility.

5. Industry-specific perceptions play a critical role in shaping the re-entry experiences of women professionals. In sectors such as technology and finance, the fast-paced and constantly evolving nature of work often intensifies existing biases against women who have taken career breaks. These industries place a high premium

on up-to-date technical expertise, continuous learning, and adaptability to new tools and methodologies. Consequently, women returning after a hiatus are frequently perceived as having outdated skills or being less prepared to meet current industry demands, regardless of their prior experience or competence.

6. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in mindset among progressive organizations that are beginning to recognize the value of women returning to the workforce after career breaks. Rather than viewing career gaps as liabilities, these forward-thinking companies are increasingly acknowledging that returners bring a wealth of experience, emotional intelligence, and resilience to their roles. Women who re-enter the workforce often display high levels of motivation, adaptability, and a renewed sense of purpose, which make them valuable assets to organizational growth and innovation.

This change in perception has been particularly evident in organizations that have established formal returnship programs. Such programs are specifically designed to ease the transition back into corporate life by offering structured opportunities that include training, mentorship, and hands-on project work. Companies like Goldman Sachs, IBM, and TCS have pioneered initiatives that not only help women update their skills by introducing 3 -6 months training and mentorship but also rebuild confidence and professional networks. Through these programs, employers have begun to recognize that returners bring a level of maturity and perspective that can contribute meaningfully to team dynamics and leadership pipelines.

7. The effectiveness of career re-entry programs varies significantly depending on their structure, design, and implementation. Programs that are thoughtfully crafted with a holistic approach tend to yield better outcomes in terms of both retention and long-term career growth for returning women. Key elements such as mentorship, skills training, and flexible work models play a crucial role in determining the success of these initiatives.

Mentorship, in particular, has been found to be a powerful enabler in easing the transition back into the corporate environment. Having access to mentors—both formal and informal—provides returning women with guidance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. It helps them navigate workplace dynamics, rebuild professional confidence, and overcome self-doubt that often accompanies a career break.

Similarly, structured skills training and upskilling opportunities help bridge the gap between current industry requirements and the competencies of returning professionals. Programs that focus on updating technical knowledge, digital literacy, and leadership skills empower women to compete effectively in fast-evolving sectors such as technology, finance, and consulting.

Another critical success factor is the incorporation of flexible work arrangements, including remote or hybrid models, part-time options, and adaptable schedules. Flexibility enables women to balance professional responsibilities with ongoing family or caregiving duties, reducing stress and improving overall job satisfaction.

Organizations that integrate these three components—mentorship, skill development, and flexibility—tend to experience higher re-entry success rates and improved retention of women employees. In contrast, programs that lack structured support or rely solely on short-term interventions often fail to create lasting impact. Therefore, a well-designed re-entry framework not only facilitates smoother transitions but also fosters a more inclusive and sustainable corporate culture.

Women re-entering the workforce often face personal barriers such as low self-confidence, limited time for job searching due to caregiving duties, and skill gaps caused by time away from evolving industries. Balancing family responsibilities with career aspirations can hinder their ability to network or upskill effectively. These challenges highlight the need for supportive measures like mentorship, training programs, and flexible work options to help women rebuild confidence and reintegrate successfully into the corporate environment.

Women returning to work often face several organizational barriers that hinder their successful reintegration. Many companies maintain rigid work structures with limited flexibility in hours or work arrangements, making it difficult for returnees to balance professional and personal responsibilities. Recruitment systems, such as Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS), frequently filter out candidates with career gaps, preventing qualified women from even reaching the interview stage. Additionally, the lack of structured upskilling programs and mentorship opportunities limits their ability to rebuild confidence and update skills. A non-

inclusive workplace culture further exacerbates these challenges, leaving returning women feeling undervalued and isolated within corporate environments.

Societal barriers significantly affect women's workforce re-entry. Traditional gender norms often prioritize women's roles at home, while limited access to affordable childcare or eldercare restricts their ability to commit to work. Additionally, social stigma around career breaks can lead to perceptions of reduced ambition or commitment, affecting both hiring decisions and women's confidence. Overcoming these barriers requires cultural shifts that normalize career breaks and support shared caregiving responsibilities.

Conclusion

From the above discussions we can understand that career re-entry of women in the corporates remains a major challenge which gets influenced by personal, organizational and societal issue. Despite having progress in gender equality and introduction of returnship programmes by companies, returning to career remains a highly challenging matter as they frequently have to experience re-entry penalty in the form of pay cut, fewer prospects for promotion and many other forms of subtle discrimination. Moreover, self-doubt, identity loss, juggling between personal and professional front further contribute to this issue.

While Organisations with progressive culture have initiated second career options for women to join back organisations, however their scope and effects still remains limited. Research indicates that re-entry programs that incorporates flexible work schedule, upskilling, mentorship etc have proven to been successful in getting women back in their career.

To truly enable women re-engagement in the organisation, companies must create supportive ecosystem that normalises career break for both men and women, values women experiences thereby unlocking an underutilised talent pool for creativity and innovation in the organisation.

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