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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WHILE RETURNING TO THE WORKFORCE: A CASE STUDY

Siya Agarwal and Priyonkon Chatterjee

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Abstract

One of the best ways for the enriching development of women is them joining the workforce as it gives them financial as well as social independence. However difficult it may be for a woman to join the workforce; it is even more tough for them to join back the workforce after taking a break due to various reasons. This paper showcases and analyses the problems faced by women mainly in the workforce and more so, the problems they face while joining back the workforce after a long break. It provides solutions to these problems based on a survey conducted. This paper addresses an issue which is not only bad for the society, but also for our economy.

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Introduction:-

Women empowerment is a concept known to many nowadays, but the true meaning of women empowerment and its importance is not known to all. According to the textbook definition, women empowerment refers to a process that enables women to gain control over their lives, make informed decisions, and achieve economic, social, and political equality. In today's world, where most of the fields are male dominated, it is vital for a society to focus on the empowerment and rise of women in the outside world and give them a domineering persona rather than someone qualified only for household chores and "feminine" tasks. In the olden times, women were considered inferior to men and fit for only superficial jobs. They were denied basic human rights such as education and were married off at a very young age and forced to bear children and look after their families their entire life. No matter how cliché this sounds, these were the biggest obstacles in the path of women which delayed their development. Yes, there have been developments in the status of women in the outside world compared to the past but, they are still not enough. Women face problems such as gender inequality, income disparities and workplace harassment till date in their workplaces and these do not make up for even 10% of all the problems females all around the globe face every day. Various statistical surveys are conducted which give us a clear objective of the problems faced by women even in today's world. Several recent instances clearly suggest that our society still has a long way to go and a lot more to achieve in terms of women empowerment. A few of them include the Foxconn Hiring Practices (July 2024) and Sexual Violence in Kolkata (Aug 2024). Such heart-wrenching instances highlight the importance of women empowerment and reinforces the need for their independence and safety in our country.

Literature survey:-

There are various writers all over the world who have written several articles regarding women empowerment and a few of them are as follows- Lisa Belkin (2003) talks about how women are 'getting real' about their limitations and realizing that their values were more traditional than they thought they were. This is leading them to sacrifice their

careers in favour of traditional motherhood³. Hewlett, S. A., & Luce, C. B. (2005) describe the obstacles women face from family caregiving responsibilities, which often affect their careers⁴. Stone, P. (2007) argues that women don't simply leave the workforce by choice, but are compelled to leave due to workplace inflexibility and lack of support⁵. O'Neil, D. A., Hopkins, M. M., & Bilimoria, D. (2008) emphasize the internal conflict and identity shift experienced by women trying to re-enter the workforce⁶. Manfredi, S., & Vickers, L. (2009) describe how career interruptions affect women's earnings, promotion prospects, and confidence⁷. Fouad, N. A., & Singh, R. (2011) identify hostile climates and inflexible practices as key reasons for women's exit and non-return in certain sectors⁸. Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) described the scenario in her essay that sparked a global conversation about the challenges women face in balancing career and family. Slaughter discusses her decision to step back from her high-powered role to focus on family⁹. ILO (2018) Calls for a "care economy" that will support re-entry of women into the workforce by valuing unpaid work and investing in support structures¹⁰.

Deshpande, A., & Kabeer, N. (2019) review caste and class dimensions of female labour force participation in India, identifying social class and caste as crucial factors¹¹. Christine Lagarde (2019), a former Managing Director at the IMF, believes that women's empowerment is a global imperative for the world's economy and people. She has emphasized the importance of education, economic participation, and leadership opportunities for women¹². Italian novelist Elena Ferrante (2022) believes that women should have the power to express themselves without relying on men's sanction. She also said that women are immersed in male culture from birth, and everything they seek to express moves from within the male tradition¹³. Kennedy Odede (2024) highlights how empowering women through education and economic opportunities can uplift impoverished communities¹⁴. Basu, S. (2024, March 7) finds that 70% of Indian women identify work-life balance issues as the main hindrance to career progression¹⁵. A 2024 survey by Naukri.com reported that nearly half of women returning to work felt underprepared due to outdated skills PTI. (2024, August 24)¹⁶.

Literature Gap:-

Despite there being various well written articles focusing on the problem of women empowerment, there are very few to almost none prevalent in India. This is what spiked the authors' interest in this topic.

Research question:-

What are the challenges Women face while returning to the workforce?

Objectives:-

The basic objectives of this paper are to:-

1. Evaluate the issues faced by women returning to the workforce
2. Suggest possible measures to help them through their journey.

Methodology:-

The paper is based on a primary survey. Random sampling method is followed to conduct the survey. The respondents (women) were surveyed through a questionnaire floated by Google form and direct interrogation method. Survey is conducted in Mumbai. The survey consists of 123 respondents. The estimated survey period is from the month of January 2025 to February 2025. Simple charts and diagrams have been prepared to demonstrate the result. Some basic statistical tools have been used.

Result and Analysis:-

Objective 1:-

For the first objective, respondents were asked several questions based on their educational background, willingness to work, along with the issues they face while returning to the workforce. These are being described.

Brief details of the respondents:-

1. The educational qualifications of candidates :-

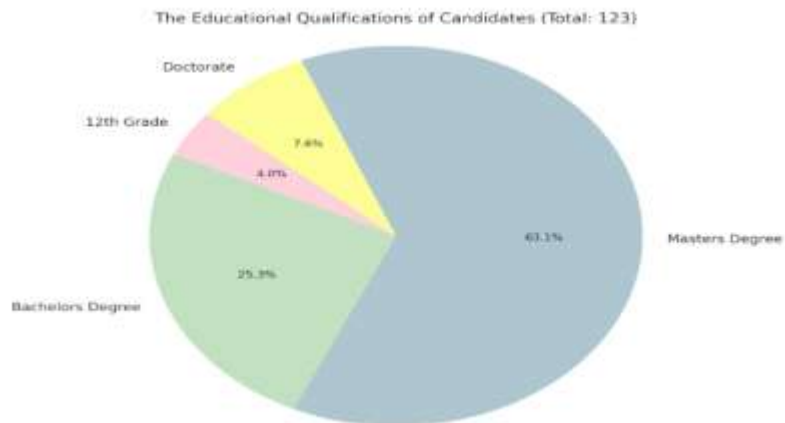


Figure A.1- Educational standard of the respondents

The given diagram shows that most of the respondents are highly educated individuals with about 63.1% of the respondents completing a Master's degree, making them highly eligible for jobs. 25.3% of the candidates acquired a Bachelor's degree, making them highly sought after candidates in their respective fields.

Respondent's willingness to work and earlier experiences:-

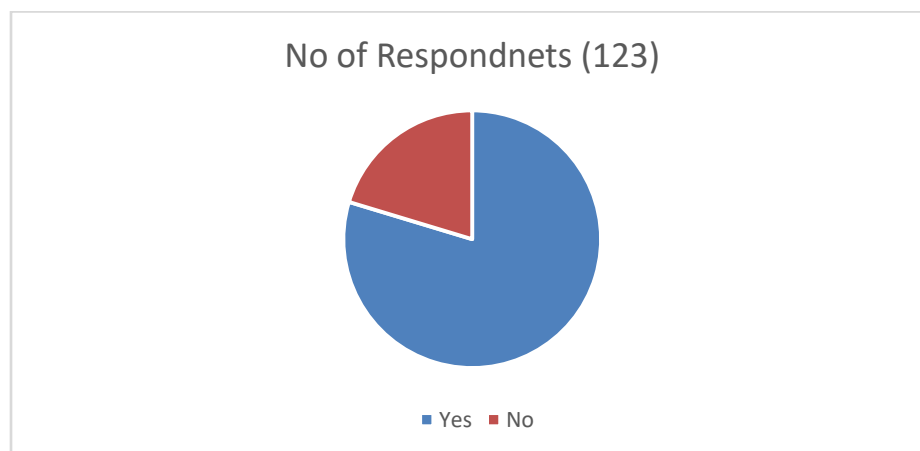


Figure A.2- Respondent's willingness to work and earlier experiences

Respondents were asked regarding their willingness to return to the workforce. About 80% of the respondents, after completing their education, planned to pursue a career in various diversified fields.

Problems in the work sector:-

This section deals about highlighting the problems of getting back to the workforce along with the reasons for leaving job.

Reasons for leaving job:-

Most of the respondents were forced to leave their jobs due to several reasons and faced many problems while making an attempt to return to the workforce.

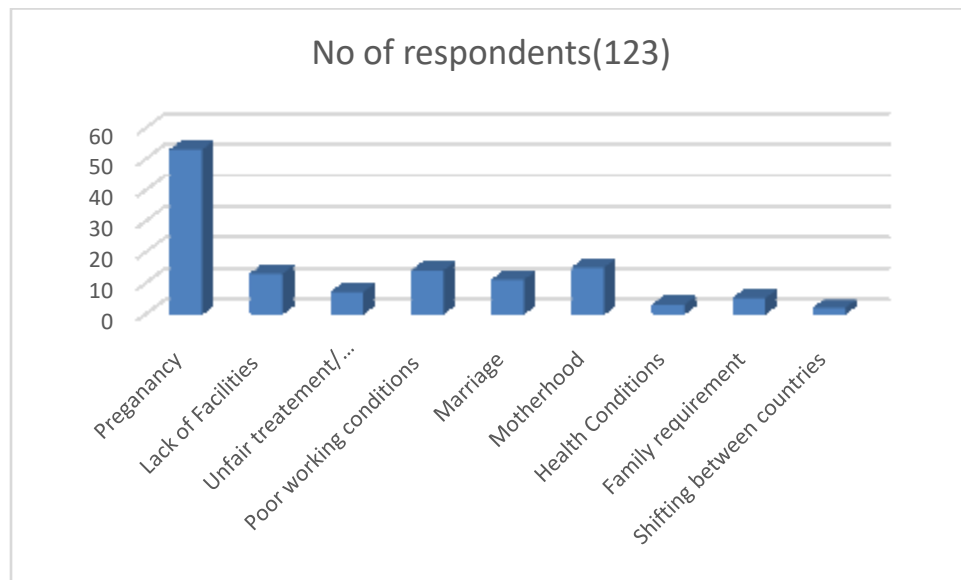


Fig B.1- Reasons for leaving job

While searching for the reasons, it is seen that the reasons of every respondent varied from lack of facilities to poor working conditions to gender discrimination. The major factor affecting their decision was pregnancy.. 43.08% of the respondents had to leave their jobs due to pregnancy and about 12.19% of the respondents left the workforce due to motherhood. About 10.56% left their jobs due to lack of facilities. This showed that even if women did not want to leave their jobs due to motherhood and child care, inadequate maternity benefits led them to do so.

If still willing to return to work & why:-

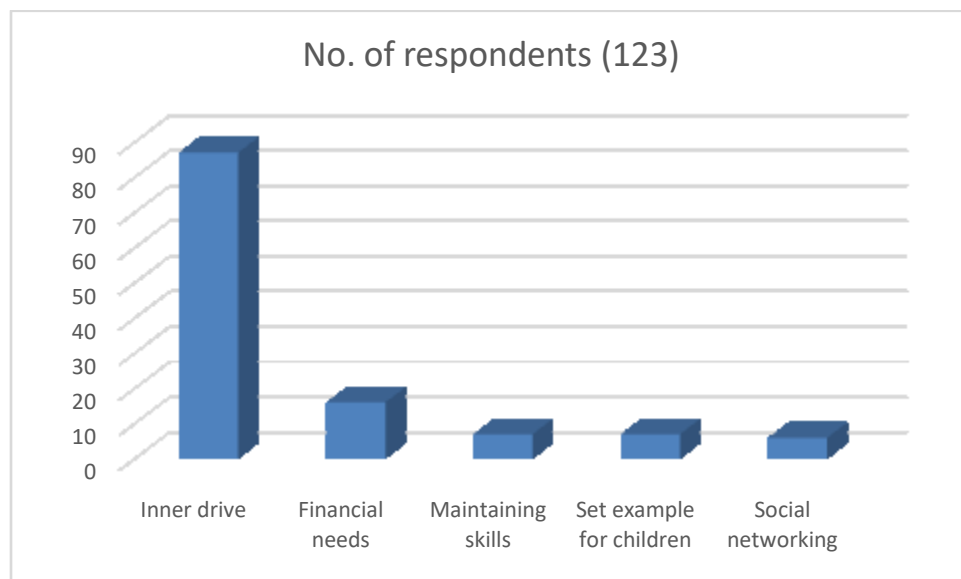


Fig B.2- Reasons for returning to workforce

85% of respondents, showed a desire to return back to work. Each one may be guided by different reasons but the one common reason for almost all of them was their inner drive that fuelled this decision. 70.73% of the women wanted to join the workforce fuelled by their inner drive. This shows the ambition and willingness to work that women carry. Financial needs of the women or their family also played a significant role in them working once again.

Any problems faced while returning to work:-

Even though wanting to join the workforce again, everyone faced various problems in doing so. Just their will power wasn't enough.

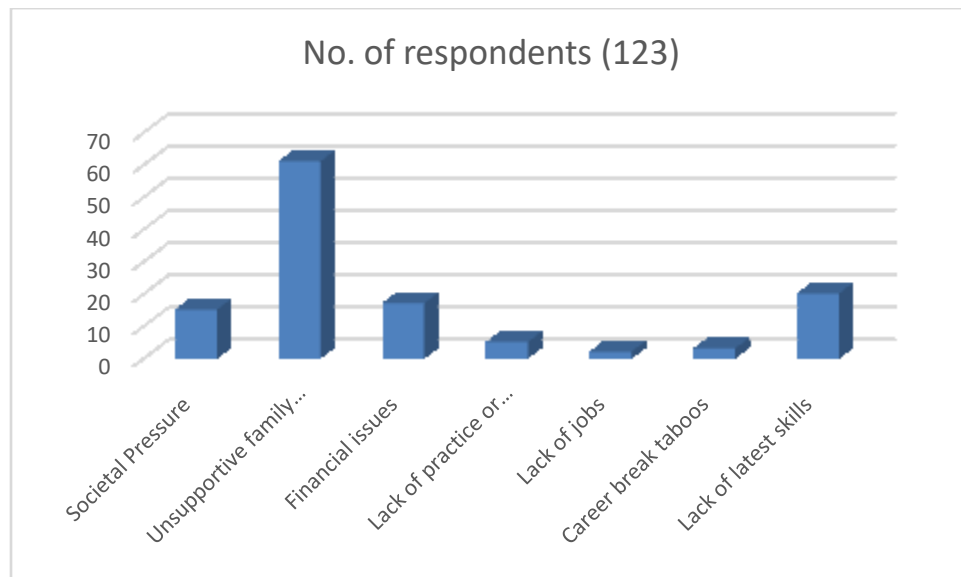


Figure B.3- Problems while returning to workforce

The section finds that the major obstacle in their path was not gaining enough support from their families. About 50% of the respondents' main issue was not gaining enough support from their families. The huge time gap between the present and the last time they worked led to lack of experience or practice which made it tougher for them to find jobs or enter the workforce once again. It also created a lack of confidence which constrained them, not letting them break the glass ceiling.

Objective 2:-

This section will find out the necessary measures to deal with the problems and will suggest to take the actions. Initially, it will evaluate which measures will help to get women back to the workforce. After conducting the survey, the respondents were asked what helped them to join back the workforce the most.

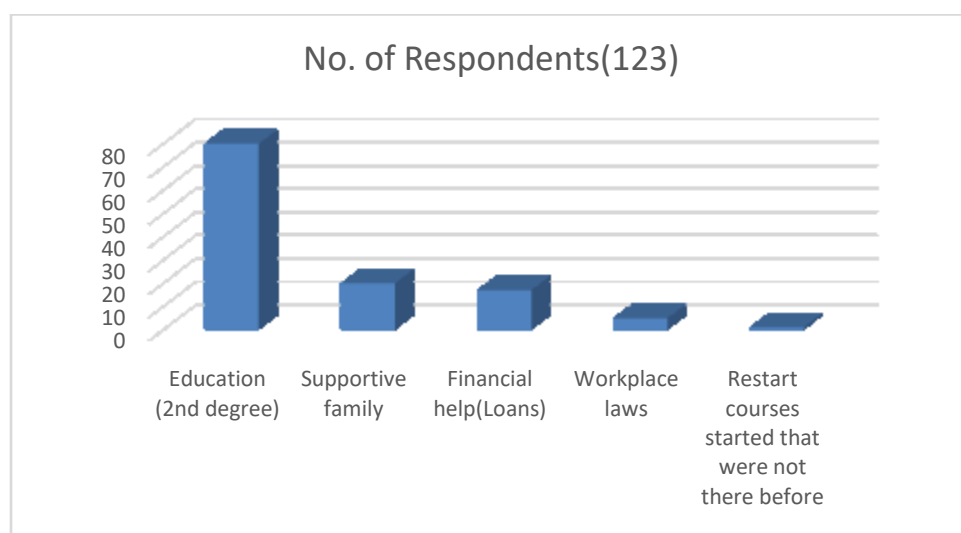


Figure 2.1- factors for overcoming the challenges

It was found that programmes that offered a second degree to them helped them tremendously in getting back to work. 65.04% of the respondents went through a course that benefited women who took a long break from their career and helped them get back in the workforce. It enhanced their knowledge and increased their hiring opportunities. About 16.26% of the respondents said that receiving adequate support from their family was one of the biggest factors that enabled their return to the workforce. Family members' support, especially the respondents' husband and in-laws, gave them much-needed help which enabled them to focus on and thrive in their career.

Suggested Government measurements:-

The government promotes women taking part in the labor force of our country. They have provided various services for the betterment and relief of women such as paid maternity leaves and various companies provide childcare facilities such as crèches in the workplaces. They also offer initiatives such as returnship programmes to ease reintegration into the workforce after a long break. Prominent business conglomerates such as the Mahindra Group have adopted these practices and are all set to launch a "second career" program for women looking to rejoin the workforce after a long break. Our government has passed laws such as the "Maternity Benefit Act (1961)" which is an Indian law that regulates the employment of women in certain establishments before and after childbirth, guaranteeing them maternity benefits like paid leave during pregnancy and post-delivery period, ensuring protection for working mothers. It applies to factories, mines, plantations, shops with 10 or more employees, and the circus industry.

Conclusion:-

This paper focuses on the importance of women in the workforce as it is not only beneficial for society but also for our economy. Even in today's modern times, women face various issues which result in them taking a long break from their career or leaving the workforce altogether. The major reasons women leave the workforce is due to pregnancy and going on a maternity break. They face various challenges while trying to get back to work such as discrimination, unfair treatment, societal pressure and unsupportive family conditions. This paper not only identifies these problems but also provides solutions for them based on a survey conducted primarily to find out the best possible solutions to these problems. One of the most effective solutions has been getting a second degree or joining return ship program specifically designed for such women. Supportive families are also vital for this cause. However, the respondents of this paper are all based in a metropolitan city and hence the results may differ for women in rural areas. The situation in rural areas is different in the sense that they lack facilities such as second degrees or crèches that would help the mother get back to work without constantly worrying about her child. Also, social norms or orthodox mentality are other crucial factors. Rural areas still battle from beliefs such as women are only meant to look after their families especially after motherhood, making it almost impossible to gain social support. Hence social awareness should be generated on a large scale to overcome these problems.

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