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WORKING WOMEN TO WORKING MOTHER: A TRANSITION IN THE INDIAN SOCIETY

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One of the significant changes witnessed by the Indian societies is the status of working women and their excellent management skills. Gone are the days when the women were only a homemaker at the end of the day. The transition of women to successful working women took ages but finally they have come out with flying colors. With the advances in the norms of society, adaptability of the male members of the family, better education system, flexible work environment and the willingness of women to succeed has finally paved way for a better and secure career for the women of today's era. A woman has to play multiple roles. The present paper attempts to understand the management of roles between an expecting mother and an employee going on a maternity leave. The present paper is based on an exploratory qualitative study of 12 women from academic institutions in Mumbai, India. The outcome of the research reveals four themes: Clear communication; support from the family and coworkers; organizational policies and practices; balancing the role conflict

Keywords: working women, transition, society, role

1 Introduction

The Indian society is expecting women to shoulder the responsibility of caring within the family whilst at the same time increasingly accepting that they work outside the home. Without the corresponding support structures in place to facilitate this process it would not be possible. Thus there is a felt need to balance and integrate family needs and career requirements (Sturges & Guest, 2004) for women. In some cases without the income of the mother, the family may find themselves living at poverty level. With a dual income household, many women find themselves more able to make more choices for their families when it comes to nutrition and education (Essortment, 2002). According to a study in 1998, the improvement in living standards by working mothers offset any negatives (Carvel, 2001). Women find themselves entering the work force before they have children and then choosing to stay after they have children.

Others find that their families require two incomes or in some cases their income may be the sole source.

In a transitioning society like India, managing the roles of women becomes a challenge for the women and their employers. There has been a surge in the participation of women in the workforce, especially in the academic sector. The implementation of legislative norms in this sector has enabled women to successfully manage the challenge of going through the phases of being working women to a working mother.

2 Literature Review

Literature reviews that women has to play multiple roles. In some cases without the income of the mother, the family may find themselves living at poverty level. With a dual income household, many women find themselves more able to make more choices for their families when it comes to nutrition and education (Essortment, 2002). According to a study in 1998, the improvement in living standards by working mothers offset any negatives (Carvel, 2001). Kendler (2005) noted that it is a deep human need to be loved and cared for. Our mental health will not do well if we are in an environment where our needs are not filled. Many studies have

demonstrated that being integrated into social networks and receiving high levels of social support are important for mental health and well-being particularly for women (Kessler and Mcleod, 1995; Alarie, 1996). Aaronson (1989) found that perceived and received support contributes to a pregnant woman sustaining good health practice and recommended health behaviours.

Highlighting the importance of social support in the mental health of women, New York Reuters Health (2005) reported that "feeling loved and supported by family and friends appear to protect women, but not men, from major depression," Kendler (2005) noted that it is a deep human need to be loved and cared for. Our mental health will not do well if we are in an environment where our needs are not filled. Different researchers have differently defined social support. For example, Hagihara, Tarumi, and Miller (1998) defined social support as "the provision and receipt of tangible and intangible goals, services, and benefits (such as encouragement and reassurance) in the context of informational relationships (e.g., family, friends, co-worker and boss).

3 Limitations of Study

The limitations to the study were that the surveys were only completed by Women working in academic sector living in Mumbai. Another limitation was the participants in the study. Only women currently known by the researcher were chosen. Purposeful sampling was used.

4 Methodology

Looking at the importance of women in the society, the researcher felt that there was a need to capture the dynamic dimensions of the phase of maternity and resuming back to services. A semi-structured interview protocol was used, which used the following topics: communication pattern, reaction of family members & co-workers, role of family members in managing the change, maternity leave period, policies of the organization, cooperation from the colleagues, satisfaction level of the women etc. The respondents were encouraged to illustrate their experiences of managing the transition phase. The respondents described the challenges that they faced and they also made suggestions as to how it would be done in a better way. They spoke about the flexibility given by the family and the colleagues.

Telephonic interview and exchange of emails was also done in some cases for follow-up questions to clarify their point on the matter. Clarifications on unclear answers were made during and after the interview. Some of the telephonic conversation on

conflicting issues was recorded on the consent of the respondent. The response from the women were noted on paper in extensive manner and transcribed at the earliest possible time after the interviews. Judgment sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to locate information-rich key respondents and care was taken that the sample represents women with varying phases of maternity i.e. expecting working women; women on maternity leave; working mothers after availing maternity leave period. All the 12 women were from the academic sector. 6 women were from Navi Mumbai and 6 were from Mumbai region. Out of the 12 women; 2 respondents were 5 months pregnant and were successfully working in their organization; 1 respondent was about to go on maternity leave from the next week of the interview; 6 women were working mothers and had already gone through the transition phase; 3 women were on maternity leave and about to resume back to service in the next month.

Appendix 1 provides an overview of the themes as an outcome of this research. Majority of women in the sample were with their In-laws during pregnancy and the rest had some support from parents during the transition phase. Inductive analysis was used to identify the categories of the respondents, themes and the patterns that emerged from the data as this was an exploratory study (Janesick, 1994). Various tactics were used to draw meaning from the data, contrast and comparisons, noting of the patterns and themes, clustering and checking results with respondents. The entire procedure resulted in framing of the themes that emerged from the narratives and are presented in the section on findings.

5 Findings of the exploratory study

The analysis of the interviews led to the emergence of 4 broad themes during the transition phase of women going on maternity leave and resuming back on service. These themes were relevant to the understanding of the transition; clear communication; support from family & coworkers; organizational policies & practices and balancing the role conflict. Table 1 represents the themes, contribution and role of the family & the organization in managing the transition phase of women. Each theme is elaborated in details.

Table 1: Themes, Family and organization balance of married women during the transition phase

Themes	Family	Organization
Clear Communication	At the earliest	4 th month of pregnancy

Support from Family & Coworkers	Family/Spouse & Domestic Help	Flexible working Hours
Organizational policies & practices	Satisfaction	3 months/ Six months maternity leave period
Balancing the role conflict	Spouse/ Mother-in-law	Immediate Boss/ Colleagues

5.1 Clear Communication

Communication plays a major role in managing the activities in the present as well as future activities. Thus it is important to communicate in the right way in the right time. In India many women still follow the old custom of hiding the news of pregnancy till the time they can. Few respondents agreed to the fact of not revealing this news to anyone other than immediate family (spouse) but on medical grounds. All the women strongly agreed to the fact of communicating the news of pregnancy only after three months were completed and immediately to their spouse on confirmation. One respondent found it beneficial to communicate it at the earliest. She said

"I used to walk to my office earlier but when I was pregnant my husband arranged for a car and I requested my boss for a fixed parking space. On discussing the news of pregnancy, I was immediately allowed to have a fixed parking space in my office campus"

Most of the respondents disclosed about their pregnancy in the organization in the fourth month. The respondents found it easier to plan for maternity leave on communicating the news to their immediate boss. None of the women were shy or felt like hiding the news due to insecurity.

5.2 Support from family and coworkers

The support from husband is crucial for the mental stability of the expecting employees. They also want their wives to continue their services in the organization for the secure and smooth working of their household. The interview reveals that mother-in-law proves to be biggest support in case of joint families. They provide flexibility in household work and domestic help in some cases. In the organization the colleagues become more concerned at the lunch table and provide flexibility in run around work to some of the respondents. Various interviewees

pointed out the importance of exercise during the entire phase and one of them said:

"I am an HR executive and believed in doing my work by my own. It not only kept me healthy through little workouts of taking documents from one place to another but also gave me satisfaction of doing justice to my job. But I would never recommend heavy and stressful work to be undertaken by the expecting employees"

Both male and female colleagues helped the expecting employees to reduce their workload related challenges. This support from family members and the coworkers in turn helped the women in maintaining a balance between the upcoming new role and the existing one.

5.3 Organizational policies and practices

Respondents reported the existence of friendly policies and practices within the organization. The maternity leave period for four respondents was 3 months and for the rest it was 6months. There was provision for proper documentation and fair option to resume back to service after the leave period. Two of the respondents left their job after working for six months during pregnancy and joined another organization after their child was 8 months old. They believed that the maternity leave period of six months in India was not enough as compared on International grounds. As mentioned by one respondent:

"My cousin lives in USA and she has availed maternity leave period of 12 months and recently resumed back to her job and is very happy about it. I would certainly like to have an extended maternity leave provisions in our legislation."

The work-family friendly policies have helped the women to take the challenging task of becoming a working mother. Some respondents were so attached to their work and organization that they were worried about losing contacts for six months. One of the respondents was insecure about the fact that organization would hire someone as replacement and it would be challenging to get back to the same position as it was earlier. She said:

"People start looking at you as a compromising resource. All the major responsibilities are given to the next best employee despite of knowing that I could do it better even during pregnancy."

Seven respondents felt that the flexibility in working hours played a vital role in managing the work assigned to them. Most of them were satisfied by the policies followed by their organization.

5.4 Balancing the role conflict

Women in the Indian society play multiple roles. Many respondents lived in joint families and

have parents or parents-in-law who depend on them for care. "Joint Family" refers to a social unit two or three generations of paternally related males and their dependents who share a common residence, eating facility and property. Many respondents felt that the role conflict arises when people at home are not understanding and caring towards the women. The outcome of the interview pointed towards the fact that the support of mother-in law helps in keeping clarity between the roles of women at home and gives her the confidence to work efficiently at the office. Doing justice to work after becoming a mother also largely depends upon the support from the spouse and the family members. Two of the respondents have contrasting experience on resuming back to job after maternity leave.

"I was able to manage my baby, my family and my job but I was not able to do justice to myself and gradually I started losing importance in the organization. Time management was the most important factor for me to manage this new role. My husband brought a domestic help and then I was able to manage the time"

Another respondent said:

"I had a warm welcome in my organization after the leave period. The happiness of becoming a mother of a healthy baby motivated me to work properly. My husband was my biggest support to help me manage this role conflict."

Support from the family brought clarity in the roles of a working mother.

6 Conclusions

In conclusion the themes that emerged from this exploratory research highlight the factors that help to manage the transition phase in the life of married women. Since a long time women was thought to be inferior to men at workplace because most of them left the job during pregnancy. But today the society in India has accepted the fact that the women now can manage to work even after having kids and in no ways lesser than their male colleagues. The clear communication pattern in the organization and family has helped them to plan the transition in a much better way than in early times. The family members are well educated now and they understand the importance of having more than one earning member in the family. Now the elder women in the family encourages the female employee to continue working rather than leaving their prestigious job due to pregnancy. Family and spouse provide the desired support to enable women to work efficiently. The organizations have provided flexible working hours and better leave policies than it was available earlier.

Indian women academic professionals can achieve better role management during and after the transition phase of maternity through the active participation of family members and Organizational

policies. This in turn would enable better commitment towards the organization and would help to brighten the economy and society of our country.

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