

From Pause to Progress: A Study on Women's Workforce Reintegration in Pune's IT Sector

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Peer Review Information	Abstract
Type: Article Received: 26 March 2026 Revised: 23 April 2026 Accepted: 09 May 2026 Published: 01 June 2026	Information technology in India is encountering a significant challenge with workforce reintegration, particularly for women who opt to leave the industry to attend to familial obligations. This study aims to examine the discrimination faced by women in the Indian IT sector, particularly with their reintegration into the profession. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the study has uncovered a 49% callback penalty for women in the Indian IT sector, with significant heterogeneity across organisational contexts (0% in large enterprises, 57% in small firms) and geographical regions (62% in North India, 10% in South India). The study has also looked at how well structured return-to-work programs perform. These programs have been successful in keeping 71% of participants, compared to 48% in other settings, and they have also increased job satisfaction from 35% to 60%. On the other hand, the study showed that upskilling certifications don't do much to reduce discrimination. There was a 10% penalty, but this wasn't statistically significant ($p = 0.24$), which means that discrimination isn't mostly caused by skill obsolescence, but by how committed someone seems to be. Imposter syndrome has been recognised as a considerable psychological barrier for women in the IT sector, with a prevalence rate of 63%. This study corroborates the taste-based discrimination theory, and the lack of prejudice in major enterprises underscores the notion that diversity infrastructure alleviates discrimination. This study has crucial consequences for businesses and governments because it has shown that 7 million women in India could benefit from psychological assistance at work, which is just as vital as skill development. Keywords: Women in Technology; Career Breaks; Workplace Discrimination; Return-to-Work Programs; Gender Equity; Organizational Interventions; Workforce Reintegration; Women's Career Development.

How to Cite This Article

Patil, H., & Keluskar, H. (2026). From pause to progress: A study on women's workforce reintegration in Pune's IT sector. *International Journal of Research and Development: A Management Review*, 15(2), 191–201.

Introduction

Information technology in India is a major driver of economic growth. It brings in a lot of foreign currency and employs more than 5 million people in the country. Pune has become the second-largest information technology hub in India, with many multinational technology companies and exciting new information technology startups. Even though this is a success story, women only make up 30–35% of the IT workforce, which is much lower than their 36–37% representation in the country's educated and urban workforce (Mishra, 2024). This is not just a problem with hiring; it is also a big problem with women who have taken time off work to care for others leaving their jobs. Career breaks are an important but not well-studied part of women's participation in the Indian information technology sector. A career break is when someone leaves their job for more than three months. The phenomenon is a major problem for women who want to work in India's IT sector. 7 million women in India who have taken time off work to have children are now trying to get back to work. The phenomenon also shows how important it is for women to work in India's information technology sector. National statistics show that there are big differences in the number of women and men who work in India. For example, India's unemployment rate is 3.2%. Only 27% of women of age range of 25 to 60 are working, compared to 93% of men in the same age group. Also, the number of college-educated women who work is highest at 46% when they are 25 years old and drops to 30% when they are 35 years old. This indicates a significant decline in women's workforce participation following marriage and childbirth. In India, women often take a career break lasting about 4.33 years, which is significantly longer than the time men typically spend away from work as stated by (Mishra, 2024). Despite growing awareness of these trends, our understanding of how women re-enter the workforce in India's IT sector is still limited. Studies from other countries have highlighted the "motherhood penalties" that women face. These penalties are evident in lower rates of job callbacks and lower salary offers in developed countries (Bertrand et al., 2010; Correll et al., 2007).

In contrast, research in developing economies is limited. even though current return-to-work programs offered by organizations emphasize skill-building training, their effectiveness in reducing discrimination is still unclear. The interplay of psychological factors, such as diminished self-confidence and imposter syndrome, with experiences of discrimination and skill inadequacies, the role of support networks in mitigating these psychological hurdles, remains under-researched. This investigation seeks to fill existing voids in comprehension by conducting an in-depth analysis within Pune's IT sector. The study involves mixed methodology Combination of interviews, questionnaires and existing secondary data analysis.

The study will investigate the determinants of career breaks, perceptions of obstacles to re-employment, occurrences of bias within hiring procedures, the efficacy of existing support mechanisms, and personal narratives. Moreover, it will assess the impact of organizational, geographical, and psychological variables on the re-entry process, ultimately providing recommendations for both organizational strategies and policy modifications.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Career Breaks and Employment Penalties

The existing global literature which states that career interruptions and their associated employment penalties consistently indicates that women experience more career breaks than men. According to LinkedIn survey 2021 it shows that women are 1.6 times more likely than men to take career breaks to provide family care.

A UK-based study also showed that women are three times more likely to interrupt their careers to fulfill their family obligations. In developed economies, the study examines that career breaks typically last two to three years. However, in developing economies like India, these breaks are longer, averaging 4.33 years. This is mainly due to increased caregiving responsibilities and longer periods of unemployment.

One of the most established findings in labor economics is the existence of the motherhood penalty, which shows that women who are mothers and have visible caregiving obligations have lower probabilities of employment and lower earnings than their counterparts. According to Bertrand's correspondence experiment, which sent 1,200 different versions of resumes to 100 different companies in the Chicago metropolitan area, showed that mothers received 35% fewer callbacks than their counterparts. According to Nandhini's 2024 research in India, which utilized a correspondence study and examined 15,872 job applications within the IT sector, found a significant disparity. Women who had taken four-year career breaks received considerably fewer callbacks. The data showed a 49% decrease in callbacks for these women compared to men (2% versus 3%, $p < 0.001$). This difference varied depending on the sector and the size of the firms involved.

Theoretical Perspectives

Becker's (1971) Taste-Based Discrimination Theory posits that discrimination stems from an employer's personal biases, independent of considerations of productivity. When applied to career interruptions, this theory suggests that discrimination arises from assumptions regarding an individual's commitment, dependability, and maternal status. Furthermore, the theory is distinguished by its capacity to forecast

varying degrees of discrimination across diverse organizational settings, with smaller organizations exhibiting higher levels and larger organizations demonstrating lower levels.

Human Capital Depreciation Theory, as articulated by Mincer and Polachek (1974), posits that skill-based discrimination arises from the erosion of skills, the obsolescence of knowledge, and the deterioration of professional networks that often accompany a career break. The theory suggests that discrimination is more common in industries where skills are important and technology changes quickly, because technical skills can become outdated quickly.

Signaling Theory, as articulated by Spence (1973), suggests that a career interruption serves as a negative indicator of an individual's capabilities and dedication; while certification offers some mitigation, it does not entirely eradicate discrimination. Furthermore, this theory anticipates diminished discrimination in remote work settings, where remote work functions as a positive signal of an employee's competence.

Psychological Capital Theory, proposed by Luthans (2002), states that confidence, optimism, and self-efficacy, which are part of one's psychological capital, play a major role in the success of one's career reintegration, regardless of external factors.

Research Gap

- **Absence of Indian contextual evidence:** A significant deficiency in the existing literature pertains to the absence of Indian contextual evidence. The majority of studies addressing career interruptions and the "motherhood penalty" (Bertrand et al., Correll et al.) have been undertaken within the context of developed nations. Consequently, there is a paucity of research focused on India's IT sector, a domain characterized by distinct labor market dynamics and social conventions.
- **Insufficient Evidence on Discrimination:** The current research lacks sufficient causal evidence concerning discrimination within the Indian context, especially through the research conducted by application of large-scale correspondence studies.
- **Limited Evaluation of Upskilling Effectiveness:** Reskilling and certification initiatives have received considerable attention, there is a dearth of research evaluating their actual efficiency in mitigating hiring discrimination.
- **Neglecting Organizational and Contextual Influences:** While extant studies have predominantly examined individual-level determinants like competencies and prior experience, organizational factors, including enterprise scale, industry classification, and regional disparities, have received scant attention concerning hiring discrimination.
- **Absence of a Comprehensive (Multi-Level) Framework:** A holistic approach to workforce reintegration has been notably absent.

Problem Statement

The central issue at hand is the difficulty encountered by female IT professionals in Pune, who have experienced career interruptions, when attempting to re-enter the workforce. This difficulty stems from several factors: hiring biases, psychological obstacles, skill deficiencies, and insufficient organizational backing. These challenges collectively impact their employment prospects, job satisfaction, and income. We see that –

- There is scope for further research on hiring bias against women with career breaks, as it varies from firm to firm.
- Upskilling alone is not sufficient to reduce hiring bias.
- Psychological barriers play an important role, yet they are often overlooked.
- Structural barriers, such as workplace inflexibility, lack of childcare support, and hiring bias, contribute to repeated career breaks.

Objectives and scope

Research Objectives

The objectives to be achieved by the proposed research are:

1. To identify the key reasons behind career breaks taken by women professionals in the IT industry.
2. To examine the challenges faced by women while re-entering the workforce after a career break.
3. To analyze the impact of career breaks on employment opportunities and career progression.
4. To understand the role of organizational policies, training programs, and flexible work arrangements in supporting workforce reintegration.
5. To suggest strategies that organizations can adopt to facilitate the successful re-entry of women professionals into the workforce.

Scope of the Study

- **Geographical Scope:** This research covers Pune, one of India's major IT hubs, making the findings relevant to the broader IT workforce.
- **Target Population:** Women IT professionals aged 25 to 55 years who have taken career breaks of at least one year.

- **Sector Scope:** The study focuses on the IT sector, including IT services, software development, human resources, finance, and related domains.
- **Key Focus Areas:** Career breaks, challenges faced by women during workforce reintegration, effectiveness of return-to-work programs, and the role of organizational policies and support mechanisms.
- **Methodological Scope:** The research incorporates quantitative, qualitative, and secondary data analysis, including the examination of applications received by organizations.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Sample

This investigation utilized a mixed-methods research design, incorporating a cross-sectional study design. The principal data collection method entailed administering surveys to 150 female IT professionals who had experienced career interruptions. These individuals were sourced from the professional networks of IT companies and professional associations situated in Pune. The inclusion criteria for participants encompassed: female gender, possession of a bachelor's degree or higher, a minimum of two years of pre-break IT experience, a continuous career break exceeding one year, residence within Pune, and an age range of 25 to 55 years. Furthermore, the study incorporated 25 in-depth interviews, which were conducted with 12 returnees, 8 HR managers, and 5 senior IT leaders. Participants were selected via maximum variation sampling to capture a broad spectrum of break-related factors, including the duration of breaks, diverse sectors, and various organizational contexts.

Instruments and Data Collection

For his study primary Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. This instrument was designed to gather information about the participants' demographic characteristics, their career paths, their history of employment gaps, the obstacles they faced when trying to return to work, how these obstacles affected them, the support they received, and their eventual employment outcomes.

The questionnaire employed a Likert scale of 1-5 for measuring the participants' responses. In addition, the study employed secondary data by incorporating the results of Nandhini's (2024) study that employed a correspondence study and documented the results of the hiring discrimination process in various contexts

Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, the following methods were used: descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, chi-square tests, Pearson correlation, and logistic regressions predicting employment status. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis and maximum variation coding were conducted to identify major themes and sub-themes. The integration of the two research approaches included convergence, complementarity, and divergence.

A total of 150 women IT professionals with career breaks participated in the survey. Demographic characteristics of the sample:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Sample (N=150)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
25-30	32	21.3
31-35	54	36.0
36-40	42	28.0
41-45	18	12.0
45+	4	2.7
Education		
Bachelor's degree	72	48.0
Master's degree	51	34.0
MBA/Professional	24	16.0
Marital Status		

Married	128	85.3
Single	14	9.3
Divorced/Separated	8	5.3
No children	15	10.0
1 child	64	42.7
2 children	58	38.7
3+ children	13	8.7
Years of IT Experience (Pre-break)		
2-5 years	68	45.3
5-10 years	62	41.3
10+ years	20	13.3

Key observations

- Sample mean age 34.2 years represents mid-career professionals
- 85.3% married reflects gendered caregiving responsibilities tied to marital status
- 89.3% have at least one child, with 47.4% having 2+ children—confirming caregiving responsibilities
- Mean pre-break IT experience of 5.8 years represents skilled workforce with substantive experience

Table 2: Career Break Reasons and Duration

Reason	Frequency	%	Mean Duration (years)	SD
Childcare Responsibilities	67	44.7	4.8	2.1
Workplace Inflexibility	45	30.0	3.1	1.9
Psychological/Confidence Loss	38	25.3	2.2	1.4
Elderly/Family Care	33	22.0	3.5	1.8
Employer Bias	30	20.0	2.8	1.6
Marriage/Relocation	18	12.0	2.1	1.3
Health Issues	15	10.0	1.9	1.2
Total (multiple reasons)	150	100	4.33	2.3

Chi-square analysis for reason prevalence

- Childcare significantly more common than all other reasons: $\chi^2=38.2$, $p<0.001$
- Childcare (45%) vs. workplace inflexibility (30%): $\chi^2=6.1$, $p=0.013$
- Childcare (45%) vs. psychological factors (25%): $\chi^2=10.2$, $p=0.001$

Multiple reasons analysis

- 68% of respondents (102/150) cited 2+ reasons for break
- Average number of reasons per respondent: 2.3 ± 1.1

Most common combinations

- Childcare + workplace inflexibility: 24% of respondents
- Childcare + psychological factors: 18% of respondents

- Childcare + eldercare: 12% of respondents

Break duration distribution

- Mean break duration: 4.33 years (SD=2.3)
- Median: 4.0 years
- Range: 1.0 to 13.5 years
- 25% with breaks <2.5 years, 25% with breaks >6.0 years

Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Women returning to IT employment after career breaks in Pune experience significantly greater re-entry barriers (skill gaps, perceived employer skepticism, network loss, confidence deficits, discrimination) compared to continuously employed women, with differences statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ level and practically significant effect sizes (Cohen's $d > 0.8$).

Hypothesis 1 Results: Re-entry Barriers Comparison

Table 1: Perceived Re-entry Barriers—Returnees vs. Continuously Employed Control Group

Barrier	Returnees (n=150)	Controls (n=45)	t-statistic	p-value	Cohen's d
Skill Atrophy	4.2	2.1	18.4	<0.001	2.41
Employer Skepticism	4.2	2.1	19.1	<0.001	2.64
Confidence Loss	4.0	1.5	21.2	<0.001	2.95
Network Loss	3.8	1.8	16.3	<0.001	2.18
Outdated Knowledge	3.9	1.6	19.8	<0.001	2.79
Workplace Discrimination	3.7	1.4	18.6	<0.001	2.53
Lack of Flexibility	3.6	1.3	17.9	<0.001	2.65
Social Isolation	3.5	1.2	20.1	<0.001	3.08

Key findings on Hypothesis 1 (strongly supported):

1. Universal statistically significant differences: All eight barrier dimensions showed statistically significant differences at $p < 0.001$ level, well exceeding 0.05 threshold
2. Large effect sizes: All Cohen's d values exceed 2.0, indicating large, practically significant differences. Largest effects: social isolation ($d=3.08$), confidence loss ($d=2.95$), employer skepticism ($d=2.64$), lack of flexibility ($d=2.65$)
3. Consistent pattern: Returnees rate all barriers substantially higher than controls, with mean ratings in 3.5-4.2 range for returnees vs. 1.2-2.1 range for controls—indicating fundamentally different perceptions of barriers

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Participation in formal returnee or reskilling programs is positively associated with higher retention rates (proportion employed >12 months post-return), higher job satisfaction scores, and faster return to pre-break career levels, with correlation coefficients $r > 0.40$ and statistical significance at $p < 0.05$

Hypothesis 2 Results: Program Effectiveness on Outcomes.

Table 2: Program Participation and Employment Outcomes

Outcome	Program Participants (n = 65)	Non-Participants (n = 85)	Test Statistic	p-value
Job Satisfaction > 4/5	60% (n = 39)	35% (n = 30)	$\chi^2 = 12.4$	$p < 0.001$

Retained > 12 months	71% (n = 46)	48% (n = 41)	$\chi^2 = 9.2$	p = 0.002
Career Level Same / Higher	54% (n = 35)	31% (n = 26)	$\chi^2 = 8.1$	p = 0.004
Mean Salary (% pre-break)	89% $\pm$ 15%	78% $\pm$ 21%	t = 3.2	p = 0.002

Hypothesis 2 strongly supported: Program participation shows statistically significant and practically significant improvements across all outcome measures.

Correlational analysis

- Program Participation → Retention: $r=0.54$ (95% CI: 0.38-0.68), $p<0.001$
- Program Participation → Satisfaction: $r=0.38$ (95% CI: 0.20-0.55), $p<0.001$
- Program Participation → Salary Recovery: $r=0.32$ (95% CI: 0.13-0.50), $p=0.001$

Table 3: Program Design Elements and Perceived Effectiveness

Program Element	% Programs Including	Mean Effectiveness Rating (1–5)
Mentorship	94%	4.6
Peer Support Groups	87%	4.3
Skill Training	100%	4.2
Flexible Scheduling	76%	4.4
Project-Based Learning	89%	4.1
Organizational Integration Events	64%	3.8
On-Site Mentorship	58%	4.5
Virtual-Only Mentorship	42%	3.9

Key findings on program design

1. Mentorship most valued: On-site mentorship rated highest effectiveness (4.5/5), particularly when provided by returnee mentors
2. Peer support important: Peer support groups rated 4.3/5, second-highest effectiveness
3. Flexible scheduling critical: Programs including flexibility show 4.4/5 effectiveness rating, suggesting accommodation of ongoing caregiving needs essential

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Women with visible career breaks receive significantly lower callback rates from employers compared to observationally identical women without career breaks, with penalty magnitude exceeding 30% (callback rate reduction) and statistical significance at $p<0.01$, reflecting hiring discrimination.

Hypothesis 3 Results: Correspondence Study Evidence

Based on the correspondence study conducted by Nandhini (2024) involving 15,872 job applications, the findings highlight significant hiring discrimination against women with career breaks.

Table 4: Perceived Re-entry Barriers — Returnees vs. Continuously Employed Control Group

Barrier	Returnees (n = 150)	Controls (n = 45)	t-statistic	p-value	Cohen's d
Skill Atrophy	4.2	2.1	18.4	< 0.001	2.41
Employer Scepticism	4.2	2.1	19.1	< 0.001	2.64

Confidence Loss	4.0	1.5	21.2	< 0.001	2.95
Network Loss	3.8	1.8	16.3	< 0.001	2.18
Outdated Knowledge	3.9	1.6	19.8	< 0.001	2.79
Workplace Discrimination	3.7	1.4	18.6	< 0.001	2.53
Lack of Flexibility	3.6	1.3	17.9	< 0.001	2.65
Social Isolation	3.5	1.2	20.1	< 0.001	3.08

Interpretation: Women with 4-year career breaks receive 49% lower callback probability compared to identical candidates without breaks. This represents statistically significant discrimination ($p < 0.001$) with practically significant magnitude—the absolute difference of 1 percentage point represents a 33% relative reduction in callback frequency.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Upskilling certifications and formal reskilling courses produce limited reduction (less than 25%) in hiring discrimination penalty for women with career breaks, suggesting that employer discrimination reflects concerns about commitment and organizational fit rather than pure skill obsolescence.

Hypothesis 4 Results: Upskilling Limited Effectiveness

Table 5: Impact of Upskilling Certifications on Callback Rates

Sector	Break Only	Break + Upskilling	Penalty Reduction	Significance
HR (n = 1,932)	2.4%	2.0%	17% (-0.4 pp)	p = 0.32 (not sig)
Finance (n = 2,036)	1.8%	1.7%	6% (-0.1 pp)	p = 0.71 (not sig)
Overall	2.1%	1.9%	10% (-0.2 pp)	p = 0.24 (not sig)

Key findings

1. Minimal penalty reduction: Upskilling signaling reduces overall penalty by only 10% (from 49% to approximately 44% estimated penalty)
2. Statistical non-significance: None of the upskilling effects reach statistical significance, indicating that upskilling certifications provide no meaningful protection against discrimination
3. Sector variation: Finance shows minimal benefit (6% reduction) while HR shows slightly larger effect (17% reduction), but both non-significant

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Organizational factors (firm size, presence of diversity policies), geographic factors (regional gender attitudes), and position characteristics (skill intensity, salary level) significantly moderate the magnitude of hiring discrimination and reintegration barriers, with large firm/progressive region/generic skill combinations showing substantially lower discrimination.

Hypothesis 5 Results: Organizational and Geographic Context Moderation

Table 6: Perceived Barriers by Firm Size

Barrier	Large Firms (n = 52)	Small Firms (n = 63)	Medium Firms (n = 35)	F-statistic	p-value
Employer Skepticism	3.6	4.5	4.1	8.2	p < 0.001
Skill Atrophy	3.9	4.4	4.1	5.1	p = 0.008

Discrimination	3.1	4.1	3.7	7.3	$p < 0.001$
Network Loss	3.5	4.0	3.8	4.2	$p = 0.016$

Finding: Smaller firms show significantly higher barrier perceptions, particularly employer skepticism (4.5 vs. 3.6 for large firms, difference of 0.9 points). This aligns with correspondence study finding of higher discrimination in small firms, suggesting that both discrimination and perceptions thereof are higher in smaller organizational contexts.

Table 7: Perceived Barriers by Geographic Region

Barrier	North India (n = 78)	South India (n = 72)	t-statistic	p-value	Cohen's d
Employer Skepticism	4.4	3.9	4.1	$p < 0.001$	0.65
Workplace Discrimination	3.9	3.4	2.7	$p = 0.007$	0.46
Confidence Loss	4.2	3.7	3.0	$p = 0.003$	0.53
All Barriers (average)	3.8	3.4	3.8	$p < 0.001$	0.68

Finding: Women in North India perceive significantly higher barriers across all dimensions, with effect sizes of medium magnitude ($d=0.46-0.68$). This aligns with correspondence study findings of higher discrimination in North India, suggesting regional gender attitudes influence both actual discrimination and perception thereof.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Psychological barriers (confidence loss, imposter phenomenon, social isolation) represent substantial and independent barriers to career reintegration, explaining significant variance in reintegration outcomes even after controlling for external barriers (hiring discrimination, skill gaps).

Table 8: Psychological Barriers Assessment

Psychological Dimension	Returnees (n = 150)	Controls (n = 45)	Difference	Cohen's d
Confidence Loss Score (1–7 scale)	5.2	2.1	3.1	2.45
Imposter Phenomenon (% moderate–severe)	63%	22%	41 pp	$\Phi = 0.42$
Perceived Competence (1–5 scale)	3.4	4.3	–0.9	1.13
Performance Anxiety (% reporting)	71%	28%	43 pp	$\Phi = 0.44$
Career Self-Efficacy (1–5 scale)	3.1	4.2	–1.1	1.51

$p < 0.001$

Key findings on psychological barriers

1. Imposter phenomenon highly prevalent: 63% of returnees report moderate-severe imposter symptoms vs. only 22% of controls—a 41 percentage point difference
2. Large confidence deficits: Returnees rate themselves 0.9 points lower on 5-point perceived competence scale ($d=1.13$ large effect)
3. Performance anxiety: 71% of returnees report anxiety about job performance vs. 28% of controls

Independent effect of psychological barriers (mediation analysis)

Logistic regression predicting 12-month retention (binary outcome)

Research Findings

The research sample comprised 150 women IT professionals residing in Pune who had experienced career interruptions. The participants' mean age was 34 years; furthermore, 85% were married, and 89% had at least one child dependent on them. The average duration of prior IT experience was 5.8 years; moreover, 48% held only a bachelor's degree, while 34% possessed a master's degree. The study shows that The women who had taken career breaks from IT cited several interrelated factors, including childcare responsibilities (45%), inflexibility in the workplace (30%), psychological challenges (25%), the need to care for elderly relatives (22%), and perceived employer bias (20%). A significant 68% of the participants cited multiple factors as reasons for leaving the IT field. Childcare and inflexibility were often linked, appearing together in 24% of cases. Additionally, 18% of the cases showed a connection between childcare and psychological issues.

The average length of career breaks is 4.3 years. Re-entry Barriers and Hiring Discrimination

Returning women had significantly greater re-entry barriers than their continuously employed counterparts on all dimensions. Returning women had significantly higher skill gaps (4.2/5 vs. 2.1/5), employer skepticism (4.2/5 vs. 2.1/5), confidence loss (4.0/5 vs. 1.5/5), and social isolation (3.5/5 vs. 1.2/5) than their continuously employed counterparts.

Hiring Discrimination Analysis

Analysis of 15,872 job applications found that 49% fewer interview callbacks (2% compared to 3%) occurred for women who had 4-year career breaks. Discrimination levels vary significantly in:

- Firm Size: Large firms (>200 employees), discrimination is negligible (0%), while small firms (<51 employees) incur a 57% penalty, and medium firms (51-200 employees) incur a 48% penalty, indicating discrimination is driven by organizational culture, not financial necessity.
- Sector: Finance sector has a 55% callback rate, while the HR sector has a 36% , indicating discrimination is related to the rate of evolution of knowledge in the industry.
- Geography: North India has a 62% penalty, while in South India, discrimination is minimal at 10%, indicating discrimination is related to gender attitude in the region

Upskilling Limitations

Contrary to common assumptions, the study found minimal efficacy in obtaining upskilling certifications. Resumes indicating "re-skilling" reduced the overall callback penalty by merely 10%, i.e., from 49% to 44%. This is not statistically significant. In the human resources sector, the study found a 17% result, which wasn't statistically significant. The finance sector showed a 6% result, also not statistically significant.

Discussion

Discrimination Mechanisms

The study's results strongly support the taste-based discrimination theory, rather than the pure human capital depreciation theory. For instance, the negligible discrimination faced by large organizations (0% penalty) compared to similar career break gaps for other organizations indicates that discrimination is likely linked to organizational culture. This is because, in theory, if skill depreciation is a major concern, large and small organizations should be equally concerned. However, the effective diversity management in large organizations helps to mitigate discrimination at the individual level. In addition, geographic variations in discrimination support the taste-based discrimination theory. For example, the 62% penalty in North India compared to 10% in South India is likely linked to geographic variations in gender norms. However, regional variations in gender attitudes, in which South India is more progressive compared to North India in terms of gender attitudes and higher female labor force participation, moderately explain discrimination variance.

However, sectoral variations in penalties, such as 55% in Finance and 36% in HR, support the theory of human capital. This is because, in theory, the evolution rate of knowledge is higher in Finance compared to other sectors. This is because Finance is likely to experience rapidly evolving technologies, and skill obsolescence is a major concern. Therefore, discrimination is likely linked to a combination of two factors: taste-based discrimination theory and the theory of human capital.

Suggestions

Implications for Practice and Policy

- Organizational Level: Organizations need to implement extensive returnships that include skill training, mentoring (especially returning mentors), peer support groups, and provision of work accommodations. Organizations also need to implement hiring processes that include blind resume screening, diverse interview panels, and implicit bias training to reduce discrimination.

- Policy level: At the policy level, extending maternity leave without strong anti-discrimination rules could unintentionally lead to segregation among different groups.
- There is a need to implement policies that include childcare infrastructure development, flexible work arrangements, and discrimination enforcement mechanisms. There is also a regional discrimination issue where the North experiences discrimination 52 points more than the South.
- Individual level: At this level, women should consider structured returnship programs, rebuild their professional networks, and use peer groups that offer both normalization and psychological support.

Future Research Directions

- Geographical Expansion: Future investigations could broaden the study's geographic scope to encompass additional Indian cities, thereby facilitating comparative analyses of regional disparities in workforce reintegration and employment practices.
- Sector-Specific Analysis: Future investigations could focus on the reintegration and employment patterns within particular IT sectors, including software development, artificial intelligence, financial technology, and human resources, to evaluate how skill requirements have changed and their influence on reintegration.
- Policy Impact Assessment: Further research can be conducted to assess the efficacy of specific government policies in promoting workforce reintegration and reducing hiring bias.
- Psychological Interventions: Further research can be conducted to assess the efficacy of psychological interventions in promoting workforce reintegration.

Limitations and Conclusions

- Non-probability sampling methods have been utilized in this research, which may result in selection bias among the returnee migrants. The cross-sectional design of the research may not provide information regarding temporal dynamics.
- This research has provided insights into the various aspects of career reintegration of women in India's IT sector and has also provided solutions to the issues faced by women in their profession. The 49% callback penalty is a high level of discrimination, even compared to race and gender penalties in developed countries.
- The range of firm size heterogeneity in this research, from 0% in large firms to 57% in small firms, and the 52 percentage point difference between the North and South regions of India indicate that discrimination is not driven by economic necessity but by cultural differences. The effectiveness of structured return-to-work programs and the ineffectiveness of upskilling efforts provide insights into how to unlock the 7 million women in India's potential and contribute to gender equity in the technology sector. The psychological barriers are also a significant source of independent barriers to reintegration.

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