



CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN THE IT SECTOR AFTER A CAREER BREAK, IN THE CONTEXT TO COIMBATORE CITY

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ABSTRACT

Education and Job opportunities play a transformative role in the empowerment and development of women globally by upscaling their lives in many ways. Education has given women the knowledge and skill set for critical thinking and decision making and on the other hand job opportunities have made women financially independent, stable and secure contributing to the social and economic growth of one country. Having said that, many women often face challenges in continuing their careers and reaching their highest potential, with one of the main reasons being career breaks. Career breaks may be due to many reasons like marriage, childbirth and child care, elder care, work-life balance, relocation for family reasons, personal and family health issues. These breaks can have long-lasting impacts on their professional lives, affecting their earning potential, career progression, and opportunities. This study focuses on the challenges women employees face after a career gap in the Information Technology sector, in context to Coimbatore city.

Keywords: Women employee, Career break, Career gap, Re-entry

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the Information Technology (IT) sector has become one of the fastest-growing industries, providing opportunities across the globe. However, despite its rapid growth, the IT industry still faces challenges when it comes to gender equality, particularly when women try to return to the workforce after a career break. Many women in the IT sector face significant hurdles in re-entering the profession, even after short breaks due to personal reasons, maternity leave, or family responsibilities.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

- To analyze the major reasons for career break of Women employee in IT sector
- To analyze the duration taken to find a job after a career break
- To analyze the various challenges faced by women returning to work after a career gap

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Cryshal C.M, Catherine Nirmala, Jais V Thomas (2023), in their study titled, "Challenges And Opportunities For Women Re-Entrants In IT Industry: A Case Study On Karnataka", explores the hurdles faced by women re-entering the IT workforce after a career break. Based on survey of 122 women, it identifies the main challenges as a lack of job opportunities at the same level, outdated skills, and lack of flexible hours. Key support factors include training in self-presentation, maintaining professional networks, and skill development programs. The study calls for policy interventions and company initiatives to enhance gender diversity and support re-entrants

H. Moore (2020), "Work-Life Balance and Women Returning to the Tech Industry", focuses on the challenges women face in managing work-life balance upon re-entering the IT workforce. Moore discusses how the high-demand nature of IT roles can clash with the caregiving responsibilities many women hold. The review also highlights the lack of flexible work policies in many tech companies, which makes it harder for women to reintegrate smoothly after a break. The paper advocates for the introduction of more flexible work environment, such as remote work, part-time opportunities, and job sharing, to help women balance their professional and personal responsibilities in the IT sector.

Rajeshwari Gwal, in her study "Working Women: Career Breaks and Re-entry in a Fast-changing Business Environment", highlights financial necessity as a key reason for women's re-entry, alongside psychological and social factors. It finds that longer career breaks negatively impact salary and career progression. Gwal also emphasizes the importance of supportive mechanisms like flexible work options, re-skilling programs, and networking to facilitate smoother transitions for women returning to work

Women in the IT Sector Job Force

In India, while there have been significant advancements in reducing gender disparities in education and healthcare, educated unemployment among women remains a critical issue. The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (2023) places India at 127th out of 146 countries, indicating that its economic participation and opportunities for women are considerably lagging behind other areas.

Women are underrepresented in the IT sector, despite being highly skilled and qualified. A report by the World Economic Forum in 2022 indicated that women comprise only about 28% of the global IT workforce. In developed nations such as the United States, the percentage of women in IT jobs is around 26%. In India, one of the largest IT hubs, women make up around 30% of the IT workforce, but only 9% occupy leadership positions.

Though few companies offer returnship programs to help professionals re-enter the workforce after a career break like Tata Group – "Second Career Internship Program (SCIP)" for women on a career break, IBM – "Tech Re-Entry Program" aimed at helping professionals restart careers in tech, Cognizant – "Cognizant Returnship Program" designed for tech professionals re-entering the workforce etc.

Many women entering the IT workforce find it challenging to uphold their careers due to societal expectations, caregiving roles, or the lack of supportive workplace policies. This becomes even more difficult when they decide to take a career break, making re-entry into the workforce a daunting task.

Common Reasons for Career Breaks

Several factors contribute to women taking career breaks, including:

- **Maternity leave and child-rearing responsibilities:** Women often take extended time off to care for newborns or children.

- **Family care:** In many cultures, women are expected to be the primary caregivers for aging parents or relatives, which leads to career interruptions.
- **Personal health issues:** Sometimes, women take breaks for personal health reasons, which may include recovery from illness or mental health concerns.
- **Relocation:** Women may also take breaks when their families relocate, especially after marriage or transfer of spouse's job location if they move to regions where IT job opportunities are limited.

Although these reasons are valid, women often find it challenging to return to the IT sector after such breaks.

Major Challenges Faced by Women in the IT Sector after Career Break and Re-entry

Major Challenges faced by Women after Career Break and Re-entry can be categorized as following:

Technological Advancements:

One of the most significant challenges women face after a career break in the IT sector is keeping up with technological advancements. The IT industry is constantly evolving, with new programming languages, frameworks, tools, and trends emerging regularly. When women take time off, even for a short period, they may find themselves lagging behind in terms of technical skills. According to a 2021 study by the Society for Women in Technology (SWIT), 68% of women reported feeling less confident in their technical abilities after a career break. Employers often prioritize candidates with up-to-date knowledge and skills, leaving women at a disadvantage when they attempt to re-enter the workforce.

Bias in Hiring Processes

Women returning to the workforce after a career break may face bias during the hiring process. Some employers may perceive a gap in a resume as a red flag, assuming that the candidate's skills are outdated or that they lack commitment. Research from Harvard Business Review in 2020 found that women who took a career break were 33% less likely to get a call back from prospective employers compared to men with similar qualifications. This bias can discourage women from re-entering the workforce and may lead them to settle for lower-paying or less challenging positions.

Lack of Flexible Work Arrangements

Upon returning to the workforce, many women seek flexible work arrangements, like remote work or flexible hours, to balance their family responsibilities. Unfortunately, not all organizations offer such options, making it difficult for women to manage both work and home life. A survey by FlexJobs in 2022 revealed that 56% of women cited lack of flexibility as the primary reason for not returning to the workforce after a career break.

Rigid work schedules and expectations of long hours in the IT industry can make it nearly impossible for women to return, especially if they have caregiving responsibilities at home.

Lack of Supportive Re-entry Programs

Few companies offer formal programs to help women re-enter the workforce after a career break. While some organizations have begun to offer returnship programs—temporary job assignments designed to help people re-enter the workforce. According to a 2022 report by McKinsey, only 12% of companies in the IT sector offer dedicated returnship programs aimed at women re-entering the workforce. This lack of institutional support makes it harder for women to upskill.

Career Progression Setbacks:

Women who take career breaks often find themselves lagging behind their peers in terms of career progression. They may need to re-enter at a lower level or accept junior positions despite their experience. Research shows that women returning to IT often face pay reductions and slower career progression compared to male counterparts or women who did not take a break.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Purposive sampling technique with a sampling size of 60. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire through Google Forms from women working in the IT sector in Coimbatore and re-entered after a career break. Secondary data were collected from different articles, websites, books etc.

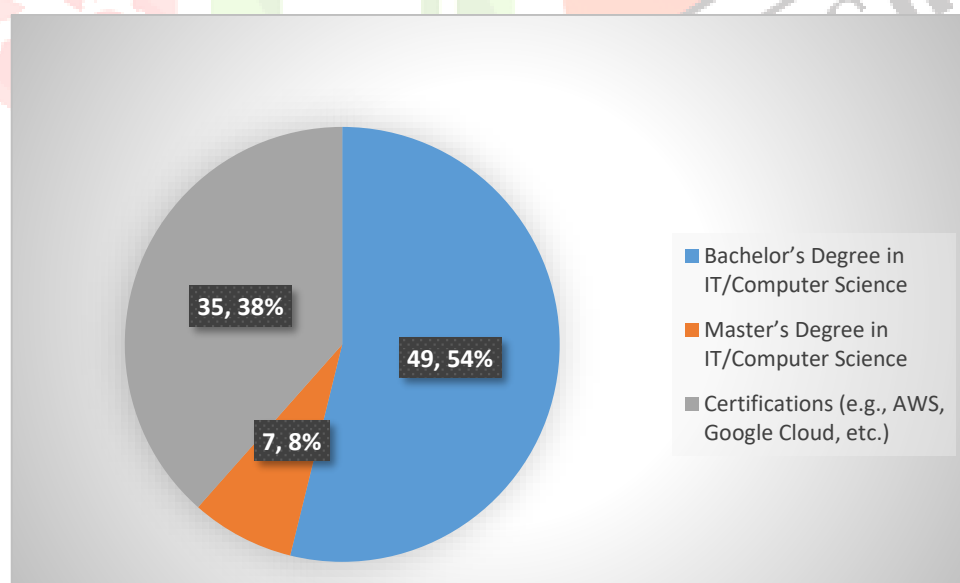
DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL

Table 1. Age category of the respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20 - 29	2	3.3
30 - 39	23	38.3
40 - 49	33	55.1
50 and above	2	3.3
Total	60	100

Inference: It is observed that 55.1% of the respondents are in the 40-49 age category, followed by 38.3% in the 30-39 age category, which highlights that most of the respondents are in the mid-career stage. This could suggest that many are dealing with critical professional and personal transitions, such as career growth, leadership opportunities, or balancing family and work responsibilities.

Figure 1: Education Qualification of Respondents



Inference: In the figure, it can be observed that 54% of respondents hold a Bachelor's Degree in IT/Computer Science, followed by Certifications (38%) such as AWS or Google Cloud, and 8% have a Master's Degree in IT/Computer Science. This distribution shows that while most respondents possess formal academic qualifications, a significant portion have also pursued additional certifications to reskill themselves, indicating a proactive effort to stay relevant and competitive in the job market as they re-enter their careers.

Table 2: Years of Experience before the Career Gap

Experience	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 5 years	5	8.3
5-10 years	34	56.7
11-15 years	18	30
More than 15 years	3	5
Total	60	100

Inferences: The table shows the distribution of respondents' work experience. A majority, 56.7%, have 5-10 years of experience, followed by 30% with 11-15 years of experience. Only 8.3% have less than 5 years of experience, and a small percentage, 5%, have more than 15 years. This indicates that most respondents are mid-career professionals, with significant work experience, potentially making them more equipped to handle the challenges of re-entering the workforce.

Table 3: Duration of Career Gap

Duration of Career Gap	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 year	2	3.4
1-2 years	6	10
3-5 years	16	26.6
5-10 years	20	33.4
More than 10 years	16	26.6
Total	60	100

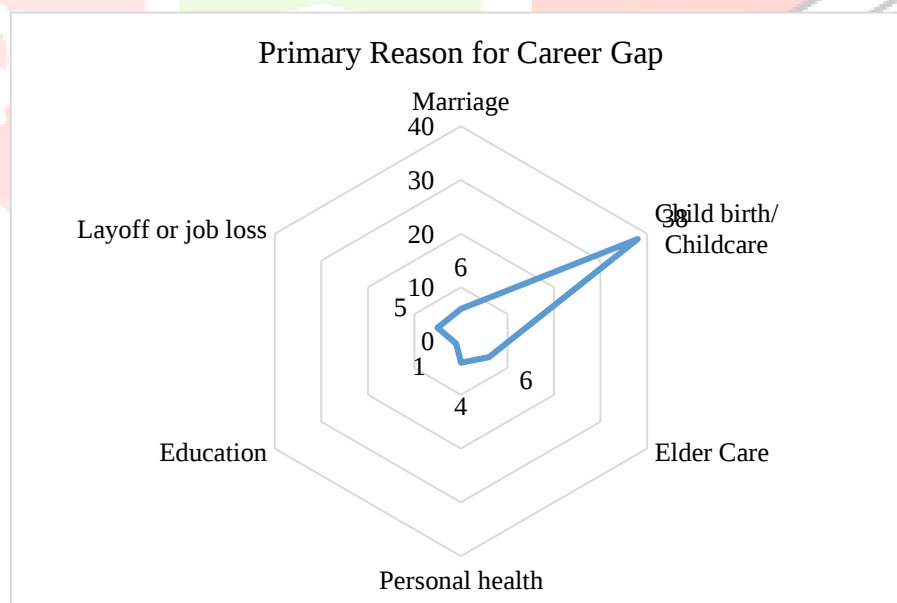


Figure 2: Primary Reason for Career Gap

Inferences: From Table 3 it can be observed that 33.4 % of them have a Career Gap of 5-10 years and the primary reason for the career gap is due to Childbirth/Child care and followed by other reasons like marriage and elder care.

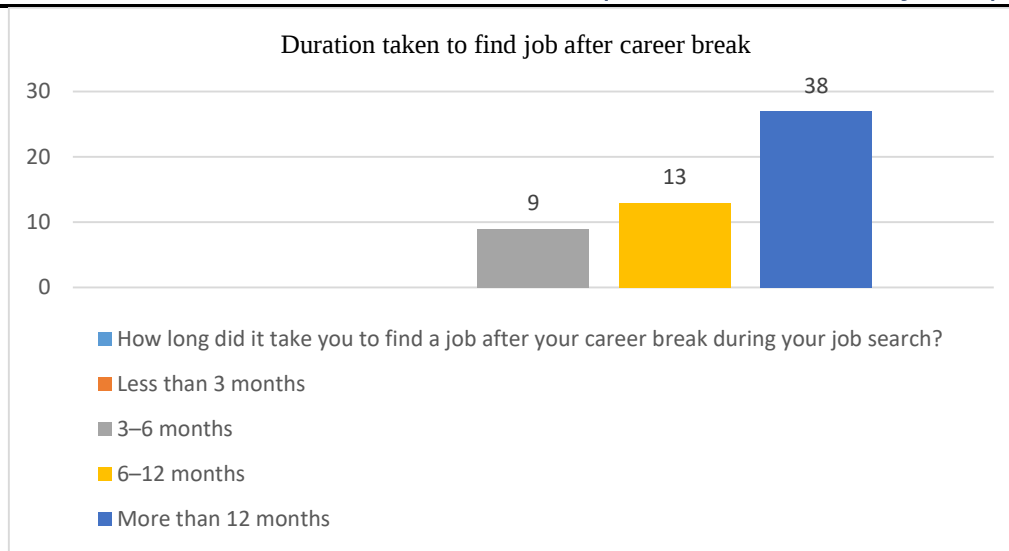


Figure 3: Duration taken to find job after career break

Inferences: From the above figure it can be observed that majority of them have taken a time period of more than 12 months to find a job after a career break

Descriptive Statistics:

Table 4: Challenges faced by women returning to work after a career gap:

Challenges	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Outdated Technical Skill	1.783	0.922	19
Investment of time and money in reskilling	2.083	0.889	13
Employers value career break.	3.017	1.186	6
No value for previous work experience	1.683	0.676	21
Lack of resources to reskill	2.917	1.197	7
Employers view career gaps negatively during hiring	2.267	1.039	11
Lack of Mentorship	1.75	0.895	20
Offered Lower salary	1.8	1.005	17
Gender bias	3.167	1.264	5
Flexible work arrangements	2.45	1.395	9
Offered Lower-level position	3.333	0.951	3
Lack of returnship programs and re-entry initiatives	3.833	0.994	1
Work – Life Balance	3.517	0.965	2
Workplace culture support career gap	1.7	0.988	18
Lack of facilities like childcare	3.233	1.5	4
The feeling of Burnout after rejoining	2.667	1.469	8
Flexible working arrangement	1.933	1.103	15
Slower career progression	2.3	1.225	10
Harder to catch up with peer	2.167	1.224	12
Limited opportunity for promotion	1.95	1.096	14
Impact on Long term earning potential	1.9	0.915	16

Inferences: Table 4 depicts the challenges faced by women returning to work after a career gap in which ‘Lack of returnship programs and re-entry initiatives’ has been the most prominent challenge with a highest mean value of (M=3.833) followed by ‘Work – Life Balance’ with a mean value of (M=3.517), followed by ‘Offered Lower-level position’ with a mean value of (M=3.333), followed by ‘Lack of facilities like childcare’ with a mean of (M=3.233), it can also be seen as a major reason behind career break, then followed by ‘Gender Bias’ with a mean value of (M=3.167), the reason could be male employees do not tend to take long career break unlike women employee.

Factor Validity Analysis

KMO and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity for challenges faced by women in IT sector after a career break were performed for the scale items.

Table 5: KMO and Bartlett’s Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.924	
Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity	Appro.Chi-Square	1081.389
	df	189
	Sig.	.000

Inferences: As shown in the table, Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity is significant as the ‘p’ value is less than 0.01 and the test value is 1081.389 and KMO value of **0.924** indicates that the data is highly suitable for factor analysis, this means that the variables in have strong correlations.

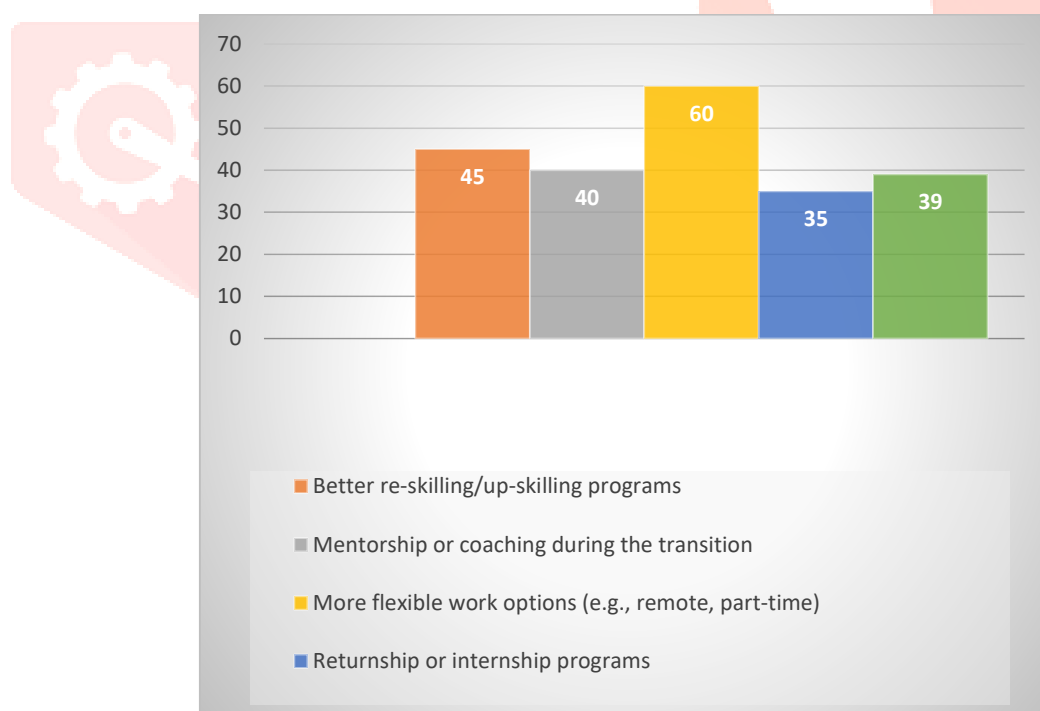


Figure 4: Support factors for easier Re-entry after career break

Inferences: From the above Figure 4 it can be concluded that 60% of them feel that ‘More Flexible work options’ would have made re-entry much more easier after a career break

FINDINGS

The study reveals that women face significant challenges when re-entering the workforce after a career break. Major obstacles include the lack of structured returnship programs, difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, and being offered lower-level positions despite prior experience. Gender bias and lack of access to childcare also emerge as key issues. The data indicates that most women invest in reskilling through certifications, yet takes them a long duration to get a job and a slower career progression followed by reduced long-term earning potential.

CONCLUSION:

The IT revolution in India has created significant opportunities for women, transforming their participation in the workforce. The tech industry offers flexible working conditions like remote work and part-time roles, which have attracted more women. Though women happens to take a career break due to various reasons. This study shows that most women take a career break for childbirth and childcare for around 5-10 years depending on the number of children and demand of responsibilities.

Women who have taken career breaks often encounter fewer opportunities for career advancement compared to peers who remained continuously employed. They lag in every sense like salary, hierarchy, technical skill etc. Despite being a degree holder and holding addition certification they struggle to reintegrate the workforce. One major barrier is the lack of returnship programs in companies, which provide structured opportunities for skill development and career transition. Without these programs, many qualified women find it difficult to bridge the gap after a career break, hindering their professional growth and opportunities.

Companies should establish HR policies where career breaks are not viewed negatively. Instead, these gaps should be recognized as opportunities for personal growth, skill development, or caregiving responsibilities. Organizations can offer structured returnship programs and mentorship to support smooth transitions back into the workforce. Additionally, promoting flexibility, such as part-time or remote work options, and providing continuous learning opportunities will help career returnees bridge any skill gaps and contribute meaningfully. A more inclusive approach will foster diversity and create a supportive workplace culture.

Raising a family is as important as pursuing a career, as both contribute significantly to personal fulfillment and societal development. Balancing family responsibilities with professional ambitions fosters a more well-rounded life, supporting emotional well-being, personal growth, and the building of strong relationships. Recognizing that both roles are valuable ensures that individuals can achieve a healthy work-life balance while contributing meaningfully to both their families and their professional environments.

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