

Make Return Careers Lucrative

Tell women returnees they're not second-grade citizens but much-needed talent

SAUNDARYA RAJESH

Her eyes brim with tears during our conversation. She smiles weakly as she recounts her attempts to get back to a job. A good college degree with requisite marks, a great job for a few years and then marriage — till then, things were under control. But when childbirth happened, it was as if all that she had been told about ambition, achievement, progress, success etc, suddenly did not apply any more.

Anita (name changed) is one among over 12 lakh urban and semi-urban Indian women who have in the past two decades given up a flourishing career at the altar of motherhood. Hers is not a saga of survival in penury and so does not make the headlines. She is a member of a decent single-income family and so people wonder, why should she grieve? But her need to re-enter the workplace and taste once again the heady feeling of economic freedom, of wanting to express herself in a way that is not 'mother of...' or 'wife of...' is a serious subject.

Consider the numbers. Year on year, India Inc loses 18% of its women to work-life issues, such as child-bearing, child-rearing, elder care and itinerant husbands. Not that India does not have a significantly gender diverse workforce. At entry levels, women's presence in the organised sector is close to even — around 44% — and compares favourably with several coun-



tries. What is of concern though, is the way in which the numbers shrink as the levels rise. Eight per cent of India's corner offices are occupied by women CXOs and Indian boards are lonely places for the woman, with just three in every 100 positions. Despite India boasting of one of the world's most cutting-edge knowledge economies that are supposed to be inherently women-friendly, the workforce participation rate of women, as per official records, is a dismal 28%.

Ever since the early 90s when the service industry became rampant in India, women have been encouraged to enter the workplace in large numbers. But the bigger problem of keeping them there and more importantly, giving them a second chance when they seek to return after a break is a topic largely relegated to the concluding plenary sessions of confer-

ences. Flexibility, a key requisite, often described as the oxygen of women's careers, is still a new fad in the agenda of early adopters. Innovative second career tracks for women returnees is being clubbed under the CSR checkbox. Sensitising managers to lead gender diverse teams is an annual half-day training ritual over tea and cookies.

It is surprising that when we debate hotly about the alarming skills-paucity that India is facing and the great missing middle management, we do not include a talent pool that can be the answer to both these issues. If left unattended, the problem of time lost by women in quickly re-engaging with the workplace in a sustainable manner, after a career break, will be a huge Achilles heel in India's ambitions for a better rating in the Human Development Index.

Communicating to returnee women that they are not second-grade citizens but much-needed talent should be a conscious organisational strategy. Devising ways in which this pool can be tapped should feature prominently in the KRAs of every talent scout. And it is a task that will not produce results today — it needs significant investment of time and effort, but it is one that will pay off when India needs to make that final cut to the world's best economies list.

The writer is founder-president, Avtar Career Creators & Flexi Careers India