

Significance of careers to Indian Women Professionals: A socio economic study

Dr. Saundarya Rajesh, Ph.D, Karthik Ekambaram** and Anju Rakesh****

Abstract:

The 'career woman' avatars of Indian Women is a welcome phenomenon of the recent past, the last 20 years being witness to a greater economic participation of the country's women as a result. However the career drivers of men and women worldwide are diametrically different, more so in India in a context of existence of stricter gender roles. While linearly progressing careers that bring greater financial security is a definite possibility for Indian men, for women the traditional gender roles of caregivers and nurturers very often influence their career aspirations and the consequent career paths they take. In a global study conducted by LinkedIn in 2013, 63% women defined professional success as having the right balance between work and personal life (Moyes, 2013).

For the purpose of this study, the significance that careers hold for women professionals were assessed comprehensively on the following five measures, namely: 1. Creation of self identity 2. Achievement of intellectual satisfaction 3. Attainment of financial security 4. Satisfying social pressure and 5. Empowerment secured via careers. The impact that a woman's career has on her family's well being, on her confidence levels and on the societal respect she receives were also examined. The study examined the social and economic impacts of a career, on a highly diverse sample of Indian Women Professionals (IWPs) aged between 20 and 50, engaged in functional areas as different as Human Resources to marketing.

The results showed that it was 'Creation of self identities' that drove more than 70% women to the career front; attainment of financial security (57%) and achievement of intellectual satisfaction (55%) closely followed as career signifiers. To 73% of women surveyed, their incomes were important to their family's well being. It was disappointing to note that satisfying social pressure rarely inspired women to pursue careers (a meagre 4% felt so) indicating that the societal expectation of women to earn is practically inexistent in an average Indian mindset. The study helped establish the fact that for women to be more active participants of the economy and for the ailing economy to witness gender inclusive growth, it is important that women careers are attributed significance at par with their male counterparts.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Financial security, Gender Inclusive growth, Indian Women Professionals (IWPs), Intellectual satisfaction, Self identity*

INTRODUCTION

Careers are meaningful expressions of the skills one gains through educational attainment, will and ambition; however the path a career manoeuvres is more significantly influenced by circumstances in a woman's case than for that of a man. This is especially true in the Indian context which explains why less than a quarter (24%) of urban India's workforce is women (Inderfurth & Khambatta, 2012). More disturbing is the fact that 48% of these women abort their careers midway, 19% more than the Asian average, which is a significant and an almost 'irreversible' drain of the talent pipeline (Francesco & Mahtani, 2011). In the backdrop of these disappointing figures, it is important to examine the significance Indian women attribute to their careers, and how being formally employed impacts their social statuses, confidence levels and their family well beings. Insightful analyses of the outcomes of such a research can present pointers to Indian Women Professionals (IWP), in relation to the significance their careers hold, on sustaining and nurturing their careers as also to the employers of these women and their families as to how to enable their efforts for career sustenance.

This socio economic study dwells on the relationship between IWPs and careers – in a social context, a financial context and in an emotional context. How career redefines a woman's role in her family and her society and to what extent her individuality and economic participation is accentuated by virtue of being a career woman is something this research aims to unearth. It is a given that the gap between educational attainments of the two genders in India is fast closing especially in India's urban segments; 85% of this gap has been closed according to World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report (HAUSMANN, TYSON, BEKHOUCHE, & ZAHIDI, 2013). Socio cultural awakening has ensured that young Indian girls pursue their academic ambitions and stay as competent as boys their age. According to a 2011 study, 42% of university graduates in India are women as also 29% of entry level professionals in India Inc (Süssmuth-Dyckerhoff, Wang, & Chen, Women Matter: An Asian Perspective, 2011). However the number of women in the corporate hierarchy tapers as they climb up the ladder indicating that life events such as marriage, child

birth etc. more significantly impact their career choices than that of their spouses. To substantiate this is one key finding of a nationwide study conducted jointly by AVTAR Career Creators and Outlook Business in 2010 – almost 40% of women surveyed were contemplating resignation or taking a career break to manage their familial responsibilities better (Rajesh & Srinivasan, 2010).

For the research that formed the background of this study, five significant measures of career significance for IWPs were identified. They are: 1. Creation of self identity 2. Achievement of intellectual satisfaction 3. Attainment of financial security 4. Satisfying social pressure and 5. Empowerment secured via careers. With the prevalence of gender stereotypes in our country, women had long been denied access to means of creating self identities. However, this scenario is changing and IWPs of today, empowered by education and social awakening, value the professional identities their careers create. Their professional roles also satisfy their intellectual appetite, a by-product of their educational attainments. Hence the extent of intellectual satisfaction their jobs bring, serve as reflectors of career significance. Financial security that a mainstream career provides is yet another significant measure of the relevance of an IWP's career. Greater autonomy over money she earns helps her chart plans for her financial future and drivers her to greater career success. The fourth measure is that of satisfying social pressure – with stricter gender roles being replaced by more egalitarian views, the societal expectation on an educated woman to work also propels her towards her career. Last but not the least, the extent of empowerment a career brings to an IWP, speaks of the significance her career spells. Employed women tend to be emboldened by their professional statuses and contribute more significantly to the gender inclusive growth of their society. Apart from these five measures, the significance of IWP's careers in relation to her self confidence, her family's well being and the societal respect and admiration she receives were also studied. The study sample was a heterogeneous set of women professionals, aged between 20 and 50, engaged in functional areas as different as Human Resources to marketing, from cities and towns across the country.

A holistic understanding of the significance of Indian women careers from socio-economic angles was achieved through analyses of the results of the study. The findings provide pointers to areas of improvement to IWPs, their employers and their families, as to how improving the significance of women careers can take India miles ahead on the road to gender inclusive growth. Also, the return on investment of a woman's effort and time in her education can be assured only via having intellectually satisfying careers that help her create identities of her own. This is the collective responsibility of a woman's professional and personal ecosystems consisting of herself, her employers (the corporates), her family and acquaintances.

To briefly provide an overview of the structure of this paper: The second section details how the measures used to gauge IWPs' career significance have relevance in a 'global corporate context'. This is followed by a business case for greater significance of women careers. The key findings of this study on women of varied socio, economic and educational profiles constitute the fourth section. Recommendations are attached with the notes of conclusion in the last section.

Business case for greater significance of women careers

A piece of alarming statistic: India's female Labour force participation rate declined by 6% in a span of five years, from 29.4% in 2004-2005 to 23.3% in 2009-2010 (Mahapatro, 2013). This definitely is not a positive trend and requires immediate attention from professional women and their employers, to be fixed for the better.

Research shows that investing time and effort in women's employment and enabling her efforts to keep alive her career significance, has a lot of pluses. An increased number of women in the workforce imply that India's GDP could go up by as much as 27%, per capita income could go up by as much as 20% by 2030 (Aguirre, Hoteit, Rupp, & Sabbagh, 2012). The skill diversity of the workforce is enhanced as also its productivity.

As women have a natural tendency to invest their incomes in children's education and health, the economy grows alongside a healthier and better educated younger

generation. Family's living conditions improve, stronger communities are forged and the journey to prosperity is set. More women in government could boost economic growth as women are more likely to spend money on improving health, education, infrastructure and poverty according to (Women in the workforce: The importance of sex, 2006). Research also shows that women and men have notably different preferences in household purchases. Numerous studies show that men spend more of their income on items for their own consumption, including alcohol, cigarettes and high-status consumer goods. Women are more likely to purchase goods for their household and specifically for their children, including food, healthcare, education, clothing and personal-care products (Lawson & Gilman, 2009).

Measures of career significance of IWPs: An overview

The significance that careers hold for women professionals (with varying relative importance) were assessed comprehensively on the following five measures, namely:

1. Creation of self identity
2. Achievement of intellectual satisfaction
3. Attainment of financial security
4. Satisfying social pressure
5. Empowerment secured via careers.

Creation of self identity is one of the most important drivers of Indian women careers. Generations of Indian women have lived under the shadow of men in their lives – spouses, fathers or brothers and were never accustomed to having an identity of their own. Things have changed for the better over the last few years and with liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation throwing open a variety of employment opportunities to women, they have wholeheartedly welcomed the identity baggage that a career brings along with it. Identities and careers are strongly linked as shown by a recent research that proved that self identity of a married professional woman is negatively affected when she decides on a career exit (Volpe & Murphy, 2011). Another

study showed that having a career increased the social acceptability of a woman by way of creating a unique social identity (Byrne, 2003).

Coming next is an equally important 'significance' of careers of IWPs - intellectual satisfaction. The years of toil behind attaining those degrees sharpens a woman's intellect and she views a career as an effective way to satiate this intellect. In fact, a recent report showed that intellectual stimulation trumped money in defining employee happiness and this was true for both the genders (Brooks, 2013). Having rewarding careers help put a woman's intellectual abilities to greater productive use, thereby making her career more appealing to her. It also enhances the gender diversity at the workplace with more women lured towards jobs, which can eventually bring greater good to the country.

Attainment of financial security is the third significance of women careers this study examines. In a time when the index, 'cost of living' is on a seemingly infinite upward spiral, the economic incentive that a career brings is significant to the quintessential Indian woman – young and old, married or unmarried. Dual earning couples have become a fairly common phenomenon in the urban segments of our country as it is imperative for woman to work and bring home pay packets as good as their spouses, to account for an average Indian urban lifestyle. In a survey, results of which were released in January 2014, 77% of women defined success as being financially secure (McLoughlin) and since having a career makes financial security a definite possibility, it may be followed that careers figure high up in the list of women's priorities to become and stay successful. The urban male-female wage gap in India is still a dismal Rs.70/day (NSSO, 2010), and there is a 44% gap in the economic participation of both the genders in India as per the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, 2013 (HAUSMANN, TYSON, BEKHOUCHE, & ZAHIDI, 2013). Having successful careers that bring greater financial security to IWPs can definitely alter these disappointing statistics in the years to come.

The fourth matrix this study used to assess significance of women careers is satisfying social pressure; the social pressure being the societal expectation on a woman to work

and earn. With gender stereotypes being quietly broken in societies across the world and Indian society also giving in to this trend, it is good news that 42% of university graduates in India are women (Süssmuth-Dyckerhoff, Wang, & Chen, Women matters: An Asian Perspective, 2011). This is a pointer to the fact that the need for educational attainments for women has been accepted by our society. However is the same social pressure significant enough to impact a woman's choice to pursue a career or not? Are IWPs expected to be professionally committed even when domesticities (child care, elder care, household duties that are considered their primary responsibilities) demand their attention? These were some aspects this research aimed to explore. A 2009 study found that the Indian family model is reinventing itself for the new circumstances of the global world; the three-generational family continues to exist and is often an asset when a woman's parents/ in-laws take on some of the housework and childrearing responsibilities, freeing women to concentrate more on their work (Karine Schomer, 2009). This serves as strong evidence to the strengthening of societal expectation on an IWP's capacity to work. However a 2011 study that analysed key employment-unemployment statistics for India remarked thus, "Social mores, especially in the lower middle class, give superior social status to households where women don't work. When a family with rising income decides to keep females at home, it literally buys social status with the income foregone." (Aiyar, 2011)

Last but not the least, the fifth measure of an IWP's career significance identified for study was the empowerment women secured via careers. When a woman contributes significantly to a household's income, it is natural that her bread earner status empowers her and makes her voice heard in matters concerning the household. The career label also elevates a woman's status in organised communities she is part of consequently rendering her participation in its activities more active. An IWP's empowerment is also directly influenced by her greater confidence in her abilities and the enhanced societal respect she gets by virtue of her career. The dependent lives that women have led since time immemorial and that our traditionally patriarchal society

approved of is slowly but steadily being rewritten by empowered, independent career women of India's present.

Apart from the five critical measures, IWP's careers were also studied in terms of the significance it holds for their family's well being, their self confidence and the societal respect they receive. It has been proven that women have a natural tendency to invest their incomes in children's education and health, the result being a healthier and better educated younger generation. The World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development (Revenga & Shetty, 2012) released by World Bank showed that a woman's income correlated positively with the number of years her children spent in school. Further, having a productive career significantly impacts the confidence levels of Indian Women, their career ambitions and aspirations gain momentum as a result. Moreover, women also tend to garner greater societal respect when they bring home pay packets; the urge to earn amongst women is no longer negatively perceived as their money-mindedness.

Research Methodology

The foundation for this research was a questionnaire that required women professionals to share their views on various aspects of their economic centeredness. The assortment of questions pertained to the three segments quantifying economic centeredness, that were identified. Women belonging to different age groups and based out of cities/towns all over India took the online survey. IWPs who handled vastly different quanta of money (with incomes less than a lakh to incomes over 20 lakhs) were amongst the respondents. There were women working full time, those on career breaks and self employed women too. Married women and single, those from nuclear families and joint were part of the survey. These IWPs also had remarkably different socio, economic and educational profiles which increased the study sample diversity. They were specialised in areas as diverse as IT, accounts, HR etc.

Respondent specifics

A total of 502 Indian women took this survey. 47% of them were aged 30-40 and another 35% were in the age group 20-

30. 65% of them were professional women, 10% were entrepreneurs and 27% were homemakers. Almost 50% of them held professional post graduate degrees. As for the type of employment – 50% were employed full time, another 13% in part time and flexi time arrangements, 17% were on career breaks. 69% were currently married, 23% were single and 8% previously married. 55% of women who took the survey hailed from South India; 23% from north, 15% and 6% from west and east respectively. Over 28% of IWPs were HR personnel, another 25% in IT, 22% were accountants and the rest were specialised in areas as diverse as marketing, sales, quality control etc. The following figure shows the distribution of IWPs who were surveyed, based on their personal incomes:

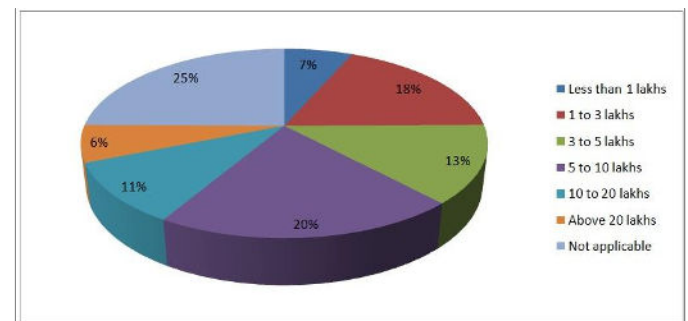


Figure 1: Distribution of women based on their personal incomes

Key Findings

As already discussed, Indian Women Professionals across different age bands, married and single, those who were in full time employment to part time employment to those on career breaks, underwent the survey. The significance of their careers was measured with regard to their marital statuses and their employment types. The general trend noticed along with results that is representative of the career relevance of IWPs of today is detailed in this section.

Career significance with respect to IWPs' marital statuses

Marriage brings along with it a baggage of responsibilities, more so for women than for men. Career aspirations undergo a significant shift with reorganised priorities as wifehood and motherhood demand more of their time and focus. The significance and meaning of careers are altered when dual responsibilities vie for attention and running routine domestic errands consume a significant proportion

of time as professional responsibilities of IWPs. In chart 2 is depicted the extent of significance of careers to single women, married women and those who were previously married.

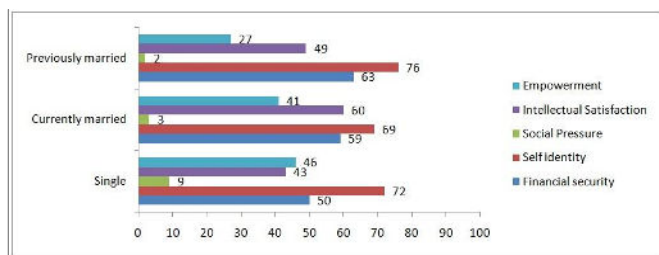


Figure 2: Significance of careers with respect to IWPs' marital statuses

According to the chart, creation of self identities is what IWPs view as the major significance of having a career (72% of single women, 69% of married women and 76% of previously married women felt so.). This could be because professional identities fetched IWPs hitherto unknown social importance. It is understandable that financial security was next in the list of measures of significance given an economy marred by inflation and soaring commodity prices. It is for women who are married or previously married that financial security matters more as against single women probably because with their earning statuses more married women are responsible for household expenditure than single women. Almost equally important is attainment of intellectual satisfaction, with 60% of married women agreeing with this. Empowerment figures next in the list, with a greater number of single women (46%) feeling empowered by careers. A disappointing revelation is that social pressure is not a significant career driver for women, especially married women. Even amongst single women, only 9% felt that societal expectation is what drove them to work.

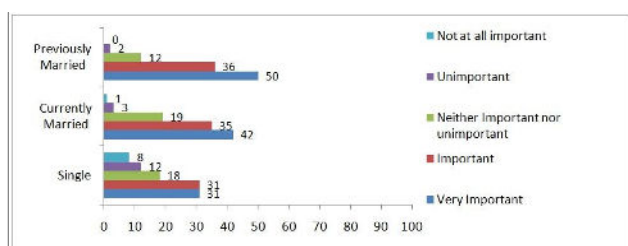


Figure 3: Significance of careers for family well being of IWPs, based on marital statuses

With research having established the fact that a greater share of a woman's income tend to be devoted to her family's well being, fig.3 shows the varying importance of an IWP's career for this, with regard to her marital status. It is most significant for previously married women's families (86%) and least for single women (62%). This could be because previously married women are singularly responsible for their household, especially if they have children. The fig. also shows that 8% of single women opined that their careers are not at all important to their family's well being showing that many young IWPs of today are independent and have complete autonomy over their earnings and are not really expected to contribute to their family income.

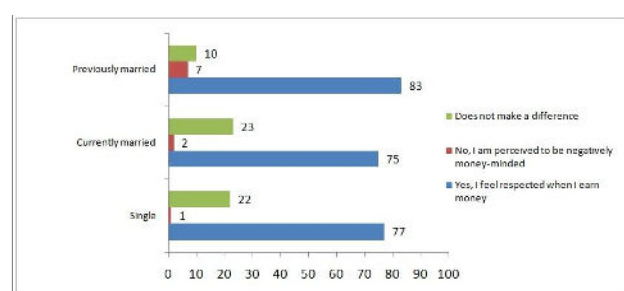


Figure 4: Significance of careers in terms of societal respect IWPs get, with respect to marital statuses

As can be seen from figure 4, the impact of a career on the societal respect a woman gets is significant. More than three quarters of women, married or single, agreed with this. To 23% of currently married women, the respect is not significantly altered by their professional statuses; but 7% of previously married women confessed that they are perceived to be negatively money minded if they work. These figures indicate that patches of our society are still reluctant to admit and accept the professional competence of women and if more women are to leave home for work tomorrow an attitudinal change is required.

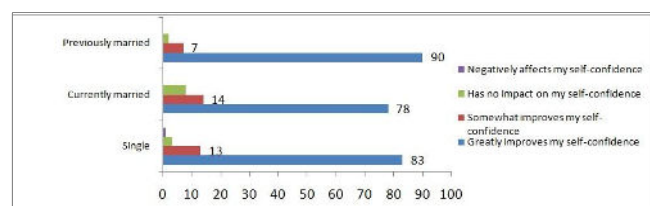


Figure 5: Significance of careers in terms of IWPs' confidence levels, with respect to marital statuses

For most women who were surveyed, careers boosted their confidence levels significantly as can be seen from fig.5; the

impact was greatest on previously married women than on currently married women. (90% as against 78%). The reason for this could be attributed to the ‘more independent’ role that previously married women play in the society when compared to women who are currently married.

Career significance with respect to IWPs' employment types

Women tend to be engaged in different forms of employment from full time employment to project based part time assignments to flexi time arrangements. Around half of the women surveyed were employed full time, another 13% in part time and flexi time arrangements. 17% were on career breaks/sabbaticals in pursuit of family's interests or educational interests; 18% were currently not working.

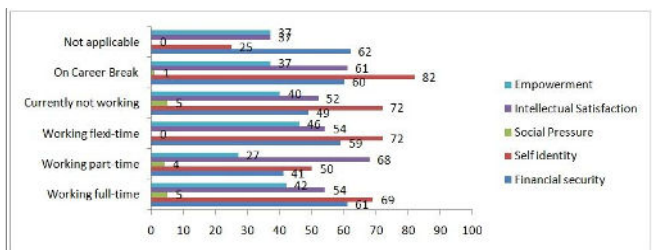


Figure 6: Significance of careers with respect to IWPs' employment types (Please note that the 'Not Applicable' category refers to the set of students (2% of the respondents) who did not have an employment type and were part of this survey)

From fig.6, it may be followed that the greatest significance of having a career for women on career breaks is the identity that comes along with a career – 82% women said so. Many such women would have opted for breaks (some are forced to quit work) because of the juggling pressure that domestic and professional commitments thrust on them. They would have suffered a loss of identity in the process, something that they previously enjoyed and often feel guilty about this. Consequently they long for career returns to resurrect their forgotten identities and also to satiate their intellect. Feeling financially secure also drives them to careers. To women who were working full time creation of identities, attainment of financial security and achievement of intellectual satisfaction were important in that order.

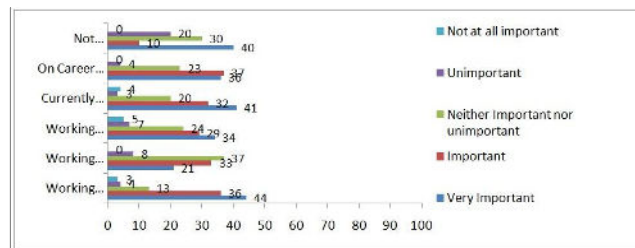


Figure 7: Significance of careers for family well being of IWPs, based on employment types (Please note that the 'Not Applicable' category refers to the set of students (2% of the respondents) who did not have an employment type and were part of this survey)

As for significance of careers for family well beings, majority of IWPs employed full time said their careers and earnings thereof were important to ensure their family's well being (80%). To 73% women on career breaks and to 73% women who were currently not working, their earnings were important to their family's well beings. This could be because such women while on breaks suffer a loss of income; they are unable to contribute to their family's well being as they once did.

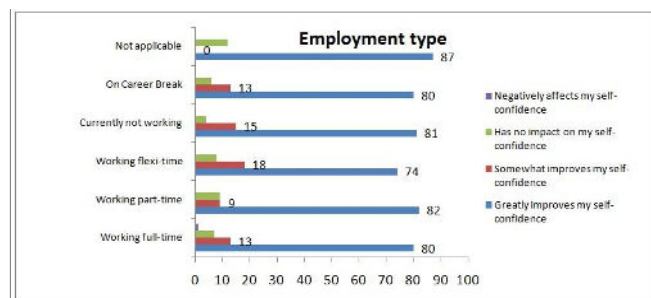


Figure 8: Significance of careers in terms of IWPs' confidence levels, with respect to employment types (Please note that the 'Not Applicable' category refers to the set of students (2% of the respondents) who did not have an employment type and were part of this survey)

Irrespective of the nature of employment, women's confidence levels were positively impacted by their careers; an almost uniform pattern of around 80% favour was found amongst all women.

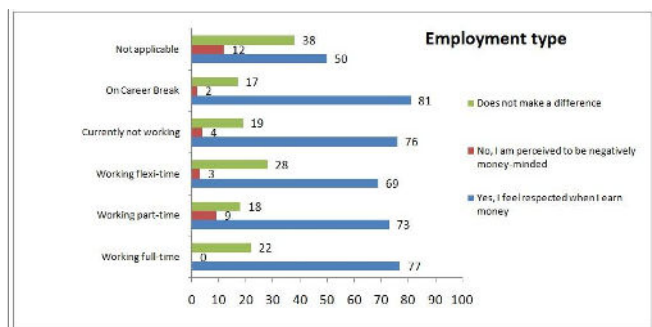


Figure 9: Significance of careers in terms of societal respect IWP's get, with respect to employment types (Please note that the 'Not Applicable' category refers to the set of students (2% of the respondents) who did not have an employment type and were part of this survey)

In terms of the extent of respect a woman receives when she has a career, it is women who are on breaks or are currently not working and those in full time employment who are most positively impacted (81%, 76% and 77% respectively). To around 28% of women working flexi time, careers did not make a difference to the societal respect they receive showing that flexible ways of working are yet to gain popularity and favour in the Indian mindset.

Conclusions & Recommendations

One amongst the most significant findings of this study was that satisfying social pressure rarely drove women to their careers – married or unmarried, employed full time or part time. This indicates that an average Indian mindset does not necessarily require women to work. The social pressure is practically inexistent once women are married establishing that the stereotype that their primary responsibility revolves around the 3 C's (cooking, cleaning and caring) still exists (If 9% of single women felt satisfying social pressure was one of the major significance of their careers, it was so only for 3% of married women). It may also be noted that women voted achievement of intellectual satisfaction and creation of self identity as important career motivators, many a times more significant than financial security. About 82% of women currently on career break associated careers with self identities showing that a career hiatus deeply affected a woman's societal identity. It was to previously married women that the earnings from their careers most important to their family well beings (86% of previously married women said so as against 77% of currently married

women.). It was women on career breaks who most strongly felt that being employed brought them greater societal respect (81%).

The findings are most important to Indian Women who harbour intentions of making significant career strides and become active participants of the economy. If all socio economic dimensions of career significance of a woman are to be positively impacted and women careers are to be sustained, it is imperative that women recognise the importance of their careers and work towards bettering it. It is equally important that the employers, families and acquaintances of IWP's and the government enable their efforts in this direction which could result in gender balanced organisations across the country, in the near future.

References

- [1] Aguirre, D., Hoteit, L., Rupp, C., & Sabbagh, K. (2012). *Empowering the third billion women and the world of work in 2012*. Booz & Co.
- [2] Aiyar, S. S. (2011). *Leftists rightly screaming "Jobless Growth"*. Retrieved from http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-07-03/news/29733159_1_sonalde-desai-higher-education-jobless-growth
- [3] Brooks, C. (2013). *Intellectual Stimulation Trumps Money For Employee Happiness, Survey Finds*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/18/employee-happiness-intellectual-stimulation-money_n_3948466.html
- [4] Byrne, A. (2003). *Developing a Sociological Model for Researching Women's Self and Social Identities*. *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10(4), 443-464.

- [5] Francesco, A. M., & Mahtani, S. (2011). *Gender Diversity Benchmark or Asia 2011*. Community Business Org.
- [6] HAUSMANN, R., TYSON, L. D., BEKHOUCHE, Y., & ZAHIDI, S. (2013). *The Global Gender Gap Index 2013*. World Economic Forum.
- [7] Inderfurth, A. K., & Khambatta, P. (2012). *India's economy: The other half*. CSIS.
- [8] Karine Schomer, P. (2009). *Professional Women in India: Changing social expectations and best practices in global corporations*. Working Mothers India.
- [9] Lawson, S., & Gilman, D. B. (2009). *The Power of the Purse: Gender Equality and Middle Class spending*. Goldman Sachs.
- [10] Mahapatro, S. R. (2013). *Declining Trends in Female Labour Force Participation in India: Evidence from NSSO*. Munich Personal RePEc Archive.
- [11] McLoughlin, R. (n.d.). *77% of Women See Financial Security as Indicator of Success*. Retrieved from <http://insights.popsugar.com/77-Women-See-Financial-Security-Indicator-Success-33552382>
- [12] Moyes, N. (2013, 2 28). *What do women want? At work that is...* Retrieved from <http://blog.linkedin.com/2013/02/28/linkedin-what-women-want-study/>
- [13] NSSO. (2010). *Key Indicators of employment and unemployment in India 2009-2010, NSSO Reports*. NSSO. Retrieved from http://mospi.nic.in/Mospi_New/upload/Key_Indicators_Emp_&_Unemp_66th_round.pdf
- [14] Rajesh, D. S., & Srinivasan, S. (2010, January 9). *Why Life Matters*. Retrieved from http://www.outlookbusiness.com/article_v3.aspx?artid=263467
- [15] Revenga, A., & Shetty, S. (2012). *World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development*. World Bank.
- [16] Süßmuth-Dyckerhoff, C., Wang, J., & Chen, J. (2011). *Women Matter: An Asian Perspective*. McKinsey&Company.
- [17] Volpe, E. H., & Murphy, W. M. (2011). *Married professional women's career exit: integrating identity and social networks*. *Gender in Management*, 26(1), 57-83.
- [18] *Women in the workforce: The importance of sex*. (2006, April 12). Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/6800723>