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Citation: Bader, Katharina and Blenkinsopp, John (2020) Can we release the brake on the career re-entry of mothers? A UK perspective. In: Career dynamics in a global world: Indian and Western perspectives. New Horizons in Organization Studies . Edwin Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 136-147. ISBN 9781789901498, 9781789901504

Published by: Edwin Elgar

URL: <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/career-dynamics-i...> <<https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/career-dynamics-in-a-global-world-9781789901498.html>>

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Can we release the brake on the career re-entry of mothers? A UK perspective

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Abstract

While there are many reasons for career inequalities between men and women, becoming a mother is one of the most important life events affecting the career paths of women. In particular, decisions on whether, when and how mothers return to work have a significant influence on their later career development. Therefore, in this article, we review the literature regarding challenges and determinants of mothers' return to work after a child-related career break. Subsequently, we compare the context of returning mothers in the UK and India and present the legal, infrastructural and cultural specificities of both countries to better understand the influence of context on decision making of mothers. Building on this, we turn toward mechanisms to reduce barriers of re-entry and provide recommendations how to support the transition of mothers back to work.

Key Words: Return to work; career break, motherhood; context; UK; India

Introduction

Despite increases of workforce participation of mothers in the UK, only 65% of mothers whose youngest child is a toddler work (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2017) and many decide to leave (or feel forced to leave) after they return from a child-related career break (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) and Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) 2016). Furthermore, 93% of women think it is hard to combine a successful career and a family and therefore 61% of women returning from a career break come back on a part-time basis (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) 2016). The picture is even more dramatic in India, which has only about 27% participation rate; among G-20 countries this is only better than Saudi Arabia (Saha 2017). While there are many reasons for drop out and career disruptions experienced by women (for a review see (Kossek et al. 2017), there are specific factors that affect the return of mothers to the workplace and their later career after taking a break to give birth to and raise a child. The term “motherhood penalty” has been coined to describe the disadvantages women face in earnings and career when deciding to become a mother (England et al. 2016; Petersen et al. 2014), even though pregnancy and maternity are protected characteristics under the UK Equality Act 2010. Furthermore, taking demographic changes and the resulting reduction in available talent into account, retaining mothers in the workforce is of utmost importance, as a high dropout of mothers also means a great loss of competence and labour force potential.

In our chapter, we first review the main challenges mothers face when they want to return to work after a child-related break. We focus specifically on periods of pregnancy, maternity leave and immediate return and do not include challenges that may arise in the longer term. We then present research findings on factors on the individual, organisational and country level that influence whether, how and when mothers return and develop a conceptual model which highlights the relevance of contextual, country level factors. As a response to the chapter of Kaushiva and Joshi who have used India as their research context, we will then look at the specific situation of returning mothers in the context of the UK (with reference to available information and data in India). Specifically, we present the legal and infrastructural situation (i.e., the state of childcare) as well as cultural specificities in the UK in order to understand the challenges mothers face when returning to work there. Building on this, and mirroring the chapter by Kaushiva and Joshi, we then aim to identify mechanisms to reduce barriers of re-entry and provide recommendations how to support the transition of mothers back to work.

Returning to work after a child-related career break

Challenges of return

The challenges of being a working mother start long before the actual return, when women become pregnant. Research shows that while pregnant women receive much support in non-work roles, they are often penalized and discriminated in work situations (BIS and EHRC 2016; Hebl et al. 2007; Morgan et al. 2013) and many career oriented women try to hide or downplay their pregnancy (Little et al. 2015). The journey continues when mothers come to make decisions about their return, as they are still expected to take the main responsibility for the upbringing of children. For instance, in the UK the proportion of the population believing that children will suffer if mothers are working outside home for a pay are still 31% (OECD 2019a); in India it is even higher, at 76% (OECD 2019b). In consequence, mothers are likely to consider either staying at home or at least accepting breaks and drawbacks upon return as a price for their motherhood.

When returning to work, mothers face stereotyping and suffer from distinct discrimination. The chapter of Kaushiva and Joshi points towards mothers being associated with less knowledge, lower productivity and lower commitment to the job. Generally, mothers are considered less significant and competent in the workplace (Ridgeway and Correll 2004b). Furthermore, they are typically associated with higher work-life balance struggles than fathers, as they are still expected to hold main responsibility for family care (Kossek and Ozeki 1998; Van der Lippe et al. 2019). Kaushiva and Joshi take an interesting approach to explain the persistence of such stereotypes and the lack of support mothers receive by using neo-sexism as their theoretical lens. Neo-sexism relates to a more subtle form of sexism based on a negative view of women hidden in cultural norms and the belief that women have achieved gender equality and only claim unfair advantages (Swim and Cohen 1997). Kaushiva and Joshi argue that while blatant and open sexism and discrimination toward mothers have declined over the years, neo-sexism is on the rise. This creates a context which decreases the likelihood of managers and organisations seeing the challenges of being a working mother and which makes them less likely to offer support to mothers. Consequently, returning mothers often suffer from indirect and more subtle forms of discrimination.

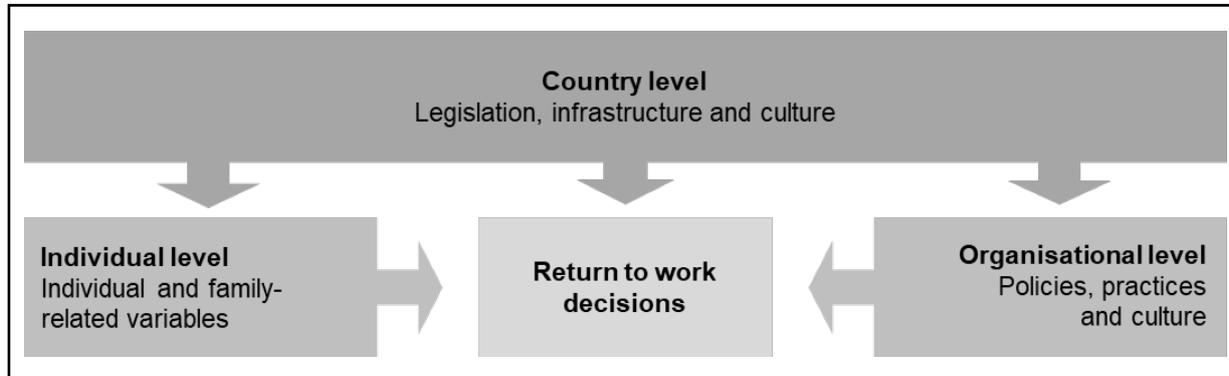
Factors influencing return to work decisions

Prior research highlights that various factors on different levels of analysis influence mothers' decisions about their return to work after a child-related career break (see Figure 1). First, on the individual level, personal characteristics such as high socio-economic status, income and education, full-time work and a lower number of children (Wallace et al. 2012) as well as readiness to return, high work orientation and confidence of the mother (Desai and Waite 1991; Hock et al. 1980; Ladge et al. 2018; Vujinović 2014) increase the likelihood of an early return. Additionally, family variables such as gender-role attitudes of the couple, gender egalitarianism and occupational level of the father (Katz-Wise et al. 2010; Sterz et al. 2017; Wallace et al. 2012) have an effect on whether, when and how mothers return. Second, on the organisational level, organisational policies and practices such as offers of financial support during maternity leave, flexible work options and other return to work support (Bright Horizons 2019) are supposed to help women to find the best way of returning. Furthermore, in terms of organisational culture, hostility or support in the workplace affect mothers' decision-making (Ladge et al. 2018; Little et al. 2018). Third, on the country level, national influence can be observed as well and research reveals differences in return decisions of mothers according to country context. Macro variables such as maternity legislation (Gangl and Ziefle 2015; Lalive et al. 2014) or care infrastructure and costs (Barrow 1999) seem to greatly shape how return to work is planned within a society. Furthermore, cultural assumptions about the value and status of motherhood frame and shape decisions to return (Ridgeway and Correll 2004a).

According to institutional theory, such country level variables are of crucial importance as they strongly influence behaviour of organisations. For instance, formal institutions such as legislation (North 1990), provide a legal framework for women returning to work that organisations need to adhere to and that they need to implement and complement (Javornik and Oliver 2019). Informal institutions such as shared cultural norms further affect organisational values which shape the behaviour in the organisation. Adding to this, they entail guidance on how much deviance from legal frameworks is tolerated in a society (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Oliver 1991), e.g., in terms of discrimination. It is also well established that institutions on the country level shape behaviour of individuals (North 1990) as e.g. societal values influence individual preferences toward gender roles (House et al.

2004). Therefore, acknowledging the importance of country level, contextual variables for individuals and organisations, we turn now to a specific examination of the UK context with a focus on legislation, infrastructure and culture affecting returning mothers there. In order to provide comprehensive insights, we compare the features in the UK with the Indian context and other contexts where appropriate.

Figure 1 – The meaning of country level influences for return to work decisions



The UK context

Rights during pregnancy

The legal rights of mothers in the UK are very established and various regulations exist that protect (soon to be) mothers at work and influence their return. During pregnancy, women have special rights in terms of health and safety as well as receive sick pay in case of any pregnancy-related issues and paid leaves for medical appointments (UK Government 2019c). More importantly in terms of returning to work, the Equality Act 2010 protect pregnant women from unfair treatment and pregnancy-related dismissal. Therefore, dismissing women because they are pregnant is penalized by law, which ensures the probability of having a job upon return. In India, similar rules apply (Civildaily 2016). However, looking at the lived experience of becoming mothers in the UK a recent study (BIS and EHRC 2016) reveals that they face significant discrimination at work. For instance, despite legal rights, it is estimated 10% of pregnant women are discouraged from attending medical appointments during work and 20% experience negative comments and harassment at the job. Such experiences are likely to reduce the probability of return.

Maternity leave

In the UK maternity leave is more generous compared to India. Mothers have the right to up to 39 weeks of Statutory Maternity Pay which they are entitled to if they have been in constant employment with the same company or organisation for 26 weeks prior to the 15 week of her pregnancy and earn on average at least £118 (UK Government 2019b) whereas in India, mothers are only entitled to 26 weeks of paid maternity leave (Ministry of Law and Justice 2017). Statutory Maternity Pay in the UK comprises of 90% of the average weekly earnings before tax for the first six weeks and is continued with £148.68 or 90% of the average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for subsequent 33 weeks. Compared to some countries, for example the 65% and more of the income (from €300 € 1,800 per month) for 12 (if only one parent takes parental leave) up to 14 months (if both partners take parental leave and both takes at least 2 months) offered in Germany (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth 2019), this is rather pressuring women into economic activity and represents a strong push to return to work early. Generally, mothers in the UK are entitled to 26 weeks of Ordinary Maternity Leave and 26 weeks of Additional

Maternity Leave which can partly be taken as Shared Parental Leave. Compared to Finland, where parents are given 161 weeks, this is rather restrictive; compared to the US as the only developed country without mandate paid leave, in turn, the UK is quite supportive (Misra 2018).

When analysing mothers' decisions on whether, when and how to return, the length of maternity leave policies is a critical and balancing act. On the one hand, time with small children is particularly valuable for mothers and they need a certain time to spend with their children before they are ready to return (Vujinovic 2014). Consequentially, if mothers are pressured to return earlier than they feel good about, this is likely to cause regret and resulting work-to life conflicts decrease mental health in the long run (Carlson et al. 2011). On the other hand, extended leave policies have shown to reduce mother's overall labour force commitment (Gangl and Ziefle 2015).

Rights upon return

Having made up their mind to return to their workplace, mothers have several rights that aim to support them balancing their work and family needs. First, if they decide to extend time at home, they are allowed to do so but must give at least 8 weeks' notice (UK Government 2019b). If more care is required parents are furthermore entitled to take up further unpaid parental leave later on. To ensure women can return to their career, women have the right to return to the same job and workplace after their maternity leave. However, many mothers experience job derailment or unwanted job changes and feel treated worse than before their pregnancy at the workplace (BIS and EHRC 2016; PwC 2016), even though this is explicitly outlawed.

In order to enable returning mothers to be able to continue breastfeeding employers must conduct a specific job assessment and provide suitable facilities (National Health Service 2019). However, the UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the industrialised world and often women prefer to stop before they return to work (Boyer 2012). To accommodate their preferences, returning mothers – as every other employee - have also the right to claim flexible or reduced working time in order to balance their work and family responsibilities (UK Government 2019a). Requiring returning mothers to work full-time is indirect discrimination as, despite progress towards equality, it remains the case that more women than men have childcare responsibilities. Yet, 38% do not request flexible working, as they anticipate it will not be approved and many others experience disadvantages because of their part-time status (BIS and EHRC 2016).

Child care in the UK

Availability of child care is one of the most important factors for working mothers. In the UK, the policy narrative has supported the return to work of mothers by increasing the amount and quality of child care places available (May 2011; Truss 2013). In that regard, the government has intensified and expanded child care policy, e.g., by providing the right to free child care to 30 hours a week. This has led to an almost 10% increase in return to full-time work by mothers with young children (ONS 2017). However, this policy only applies to children above the age of three, child care for younger children is only supported via tax reductions (Department for Education 2018). In India there is no system of public funded early years education, yet, family and social ties are quite strong and families privately organize child care. However, organizations with 50 or more employees are required to provide for day-care facilities and permits mothers to visit those four times a day (Ministry of Law and Justice 2017). In contrast, there is no such regulation in the UK. Furthermore, for example, in Germany, every child over 12 months has the legal right to child care (Heine

2013), in the UK, children only have the right (and obligation) to attend education from school age on.

The UK child care infrastructure is well established. The Department for Education (2018) estimated in spring 2018 that there were more than 80,000 providers offering more than 2.8 million child care places. Most providers had spare capacity, indicating that most parents who need to arrange child care would be able to find a spot. However, child care is quite expensive and the government has to support low-income families for them to be able to afford it. The policy context seems to send mixed signals. While there is a strong push for mothers to return there is neither a right nor full financial support for child care and “the rhetoric of parental choice is linked to social class, access and affordability.” (Page, 2013: 550). Furthermore, mothers often challenge the suitability of the child care approach in such facilities and struggle with guilt of not being there for their kids (Page 2013). Thus despite genuine progress the availability, cost and quality of child care in the UK is still an important factor affecting decisions to stay at home.

The value of motherhood in the UK

Generally, the UK has a more egalitarian approach to gender than India. The GLOBE study indicates that gender egalitarianism, i.e., the degree to which societies try to minimize gender differences is higher in the UK than in India (House et al. 2004). Similar, the Social Institutions and Gender Equality Index indicates that gender inequalities are very low in the UK, compared to medium in India (OECD 2019b, 2019a). With specific reference to being a mother in the UK, there seem, however, to be a paradoxical tension between a political push for women to work and the negative image of working mothers. Being a working mother is often linked to being a ‘bad’ mother and a risk for the children by more than 30 percent of the UK population (OECD 2019a). It is regularly perceived as indicating a egoistic “wanting to have it all” mentality (Page 2013) whereas staying at home has become a valued, personal choice of middleclass women (even) in the post-feminist era (Orgad and De Benedictis 2015).

Fathers are still perceived as connected to the breadwinner role and are expected to work long hours in the UK and in consequence, their use of parental leave is still quite low (Kaufman 2018) which reproduces traditional gender roles. Yet, contemporary research also shows that those traditional images are challenged. A study analysing social media entries about definitions of “good” motherhood shows that many entries highlight that ‘good’ mothers need interests outside their care responsibility and become role models for their kids. Yet, nurturing and ‘being always there’ for children is still seen as an important determinant of being a ‘good’ mother (Pedersen 2016). Facing these ambivalent messages might be one explanation why still many women do not return to work, or return only part-time in order to comply with such requirements.

Summary and implications for organisational return to work support

In the UK there has been much discussion on the policy level about how women can be supported in their journey back to work. Our chapter has highlighted the meaning of antidiscrimination laws as well as maternity leave, return, breastfeeding and flexible-working regulations and showed that in the UK the legal setting supports an early return. However, low maternity pay and the lack of free child care for early year care often put conflicting pressures on mothers as they are pushed to return early, but do not receive sufficient financial support for child care. Furthermore, many mothers experience discrimination at work, report

about worse treatment than before their pregnancy, and encounter social tensions between their will or need to work and the role a good mother is expected to take.

In order to improve the experience of working mothers, legislation, but also organisations are of particular importance. This is for two reasons. On the one hand, they are among the main actors responsible for implementing policy and legislation and have to ensure that e.g. anti-discrimination and health legislation are respected. On the other hand, they are of high relevance as they strongly shape the experience of mothers through their policies, practices and culture before and after return. Interestingly, about 30% of employers still do not offer any further support to returning mothers beyond financial support of maternity leave and the offer of flexible work and phased return (Bright Horizons 2019). Offering flexible work and part-time working options are thus among the most frequently implemented practices. Other form of support include return support programmes as suggested by Kaushiva and Joshi, support of finding child care or individual keep in touch and coaching offers (Bright Horizons 2019; PwC 2016). Furthermore, de-stigmatizing part-time (leadership) roles and reducing bias within organizations is of importance (PwC 2016). Unfortunately, there is a lack of academic research, identifying and assessing the effectiveness of return to work support policies and practices on actual return rates. Therefore, we conclude that more research such as Kaushiva and Joshi's is necessary that identifies avenues to better understand the needs of returning mothers and offering effective support.

Conclusion

Mothers face distinct challenges when returning back to work after a career break. In the UK context, mothers face ambivalent pressures as on the one hand politics support early return, while the general public still seem to support traditional mothering roles. Furthermore, discrimination and job derailments are a common experience of returning mothers. In consequence, beyond improving regulations on the policy level, organisations have a great responsibility to create environments that enable mothers continue their careers, as smoothing the return to work is a crucial first step to reducing the “motherhood penalty.”

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