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ASSESSING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MINDSET OF WOMEN DURING AND POST CAREER BREAK: CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

Career breaks, whether due to caregiving, personal health, or other life circumstances, can have profound psychological effects on women re-entering the workforce. This paper explores the emotional and mental health challenges women face after a career hiatus, including diminished self-confidence, imposter syndrome, anxiety, and workplace reintegration struggles. Social and structural barriers, such as skill obsolescence, gender bias, and work-life balance concerns, further exacerbate these challenges. However, support systems like mentorship, upskilling programs, and organizational flexibility play a crucial role in easing this transition. The study highlights the need for policies that promote inclusivity and mental well-being to ensure a smoother reintegration process.

One needs to understand that the role of primary caregiver has been entitled to the women which she plays significantly well without putting any conditions but at the end of the day and back of the mind it is essential to study the thought process and the key challenges that she faces post a career break which is essentially highlighted in the paper.

KEYWORDS: *Women, Career break, Psychological Impact*

INTRODUCTION

Career break, whether taken for maternity, caregiving, personal health, or further education, can have a profound impact on a woman's psychological well-being. While stepping away from work may provide necessary personal fulfillment or family support, but the idea of taking a break and leaving all the hard work behind can take a toll on women's mental health. The very idea of being recognized and appreciated while struggling to prove her worth takes a lot of time for a woman to establish herself in the professional world. Leaving everything even for a temporary period of time is a real task. Many women experience anxiety, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome, questioning their professional abilities after an extended hiatus. The fear of skill obsolescence, coupled with workplace reintegration challenges, can affect confidence levels and overall career progression.

Societal and organizational perceptions of career gaps further influence a woman's mindset, with some industries demonstrating reluctance to hire or promote individuals with employment interruptions. India as a Nation is evolving very rapidly but still the loopholes need to be acknowledged. The psychological impact varies based on factors such as the length of the break, industry demands, available support systems, and personal coping mechanisms. While some women successfully navigate the transition through up skilling and networking, others struggle with stress, lower self-esteem, and reduced job satisfaction. While we highlight the transition we also need to look at the phase where the break is still in continuation.

Understanding the psychological mindset of women during and post-career break is crucial for developing strategies that support smoother workforce reintegration. By identifying key challenges and coping mechanisms, organizations and policymakers can create more inclusive workplaces that value career breaks as part of a diverse professional journey. This study aims to explore these psychological effects, assess reintegration strategies, and propose solutions to enhance women's confidence and career growth after a break.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. "Career Interruptions, Work-Family Balance, and Women's Mental Health" (Cohen & Wills, 2016)

This study explores how career interruptions, such as maternity leave or caregiving responsibilities, affect women's mental health and career progression. The authors highlight that while a career break can lead to a reduction in work-related stress, it can also create feelings of isolation, anxiety about career advancement, and a sense of personal identity loss. They emphasize the importance of a balanced approach where women are supported emotionally and socially during their breaks to reduce psychological distress.

Key Findings

- Women often experience a loss of work-related identity and status during career breaks.
- Mental health impacts include anxiety, depression, and stress, particularly when returning to work.

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- Positive social support and access to mental health resources can mitigate negative psychological effects.

2. "The Psychological Consequences of Career Breaks for Women: A Review of Existing Research" (Jolly, 2018)
Jolly's review assesses the existing research on career breaks for women, focusing on how such breaks impact self-esteem, mental health, and professional identity. She finds that career breaks often lead to a significant drop in women's self-confidence, especially when they feel disconnected from the workforce. However, Jolly also highlights that some women experience personal growth during breaks, which can lead to greater life satisfaction and improved psychological well-being upon return to the workforce.

Key Findings

- Career breaks can result in a temporary dip in self-esteem and career confidence.
- Some women experience a renewal of purpose and personal development during breaks.
- The psychological effects vary depending on the length of the career break and the woman's personal circumstances.

3. "The Impact of Work Breaks on Women's Career Progression and Psychological Health: A Longitudinal Study" (Kaufman & Uhlmann, 2017)
This longitudinal study focuses on how career breaks affect women's long-term career trajectories and their psychological well-being. Kaufman and Uhlmann found that women who took career breaks, especially for caregiving, often faced challenges reentering the workforce due to skill gaps and age-related biases. Despite these challenges, women who had access to reentry programs and mentorship reported better psychological adjustment and were able to rebuild their careers more effectively.

Key Findings

- Career breaks are linked to slower career progression and wage stagnation.
- Women with reentry programs and mentorship opportunities experience better psychological well-being after a career break.
- Long-term psychological effects are mixed, with some women thriving and others struggling with the reentry process.

4. Work-Life Balance and Mental Health: The Role of Workplace Flexibility for Women Returning from Career Breaks" (Anderson & Williams, 2019)
Anderson and Williams examine how workplace flexibility—such as part-time work, remote options, and flexible hours—affects the mental health of women returning to work after a career break. Their study suggests that when organizations offer flexible work arrangements, women are better able to balance family responsibilities with professional duties, leading to reduced stress and improved overall well-being. The study highlights that women returning to full-time, inflexible work often experience greater anxiety and work-life conflict.

Key Findings

- Flexible work arrangements contribute to improved mental health and lower stress levels.
- Women returning to inflexible work environments report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout.
- The ability to balance work and personal life is critical for psychological well-being post-career break.

5. The Role of Organizational Support in the Psychological Well-Being of Women on Career Breaks" (Martin & Taylor, 2020)
This article explores how organizational support structures, such as career development programs and parental leave policies, affect the psychological well-being of women on career breaks. Martin and Taylor emphasize that organizations that foster inclusive environments and offer comprehensive career break policies contribute to positive mental health outcomes for women. They find that women who return to organizations with supportive reintegration programs report lower levels of anxiety, increased career satisfaction, and improved self-confidence.

Key Findings

- Organizational support is crucial for reducing the psychological stress experienced by women during career breaks.
- Women who have access to career development and reintegration programs report higher levels of satisfaction and well-being upon returning to work.
- Supportive work cultures can mitigate the negative psychological impacts of career breaks.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To study the emotional and psychological impact of a career break on a women
2. To examine the factors that influence mental well being
3. To explore challenges during the break and while initiating workforce re-entry
4. To understand coping mechanism and strategies.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Mental Wellness during Career Break and strategies to combat it.

Some of the challenges that returning mothers face that affect their mental health are; a sense of self-doubt, low confidence, and feeling out of place from the corporate culture because of their prolonged absence from work. Many of them might not have updated their skill sets. Several mothers also battle a feeling of guilt because they cannot give full-time attention to their children and family. Mental health issues can get aggravated during prolonged job searches and face possible rejections in interviews

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and career pivots, leading to professional identity crises. **Launching my career with a long career gap is definitely not easy; being a mother, one has a whole different set of priorities. It was a major challenge but it had to start somewhere.**

Mental health issues can be countered by preparing for the big move. Like Angelina, up skilling oneself and becoming abreast with the latest tools and technologies is crucial. Self-care through a good diet, regular exercise, systematic sleep patterns and learning to say **"no"** to certain tasks is essential. It is also important to not be bogged down by the expectations that are loaded on them. Returning women need to understand and accept their limitations in terms of their time, effort and energy without guilt. Most women end up taking on too much responsibility and in the process, feel overwhelmed. They need to start creating and nurturing their support system much ahead of the planned relaunch. The support system can be in the form of family members, paid help or one of the many professional services such as daycares, community centres and others. Establishing a healthy work-life balance by setting up clear boundaries and priorities, and practicing effective time management techniques goes a long way in ensuring positive mental health. Despite all these efforts, if women still feel overwhelmed and unable to handle their stress levels, they should seek professional counseling and guidance. By nurturing their mental and physical well-being, women can enhance productivity, make better decisions, and foster positive relationships in the workplace.

2. Benefits of Career Break for Mental Wellness

Taking a Career break is a task specially when one is at the peak of the career graph and leaving things midway would cost something significant to the Women but a break at times is necessary as one needs to understand that we are in the world of competitions where responsibilities are never ending and specially this breaks are more fruitful when they have started affecting not only the mental well being but also the productivity. Career breaks as a responsibility where else career break for sake of personal well being are two different perspectives on the same topics 'Career Break'.

The emotions changes when the story changes. When Calmness is an issue Career Break is necessary but not necessarily everyone would take the term sportingly.

The term Career Break is so controversial that there are chances that many would not take it seriously or the colleagues would not understand the emotional turbulence that a women candidate may go through. But however one needs to understand that Expressing is the key and also not letting anyone know would not solve the problem. Also there are a lot of supportive people in this journey that could make a big change.

There are many who may also ask you to justify your career break by probably going for higher education or going for a skill based activity. One needs to understand that a Career Break is break and time to re-wind and unwind one self. It is also the time to relax and it is not always necessary to justify the break. With the help of this article it would be apt to request all recruiters to look at career break with empathy. There might be a million reasons behind it and every reason is valid. No person willingly wants to stop something they have started with enthusiasm and passion. Sometimes, life throws you into situations that demand you to work against your will. In such situations, it is better to accept what is right and mould it to your benefit.

3. Financial Stress during a career break

Financial loss is huge during a Career Break taken for the family. There are a lot of gaps and interruptions in the wealth accumulation of women as Career gaps, pay biasedness and lack of investment knowledge are some major factors that could cause trouble in financial paradise of women. Career gaps are just not limited to emotional breakdowns but eventually the worth of women is lowered down as there is a lot of financial insecurity which ultimately results in dependence on the opposite gender. Emotional roller coaster is something that a woman definitely feels during the break as there are moments of joy of being with family and children ultimately being a chain that changes bond of a family. While it may also being insecurities and the fear of missing out in this competitive world. The problem doesn't end here as along with the emotional instability comes the financial instability that a woman has to address. Either she is fine with the current situation or she has to take steps in managing the current money by doing financial planning that could just fill the void she might be facing.

4. Societal Challenges

Emotional journey of any women is definitely affected by the societal expectations that are anyways more inclined towards women. The responsibility and the task of dividing work have always been higher towards women. Women in our society are not only bounded by the role expectations but the pressure is immense to be perfect in each role that the women have been allocated. Women on a Career Break have a lot of emotional turbulence and naturally it is not easy to give up everything for the families at one go while being emotionally weak and at the same time also facing financial and family insecurities. Women are questioned at every decision that they take. Even if they are working questions are being raised on how efficiently they are managing the personal and professional life but luckily interrogation gets easier because they have a financial back up. The trouble starts when there is nobody at home to manage and they have to give up. Of course the society would come up with comparisons or may also question their decision of giving up on the career. Normally expectations and the need to do more makes life more challenging and women would always be in a dilemma whether what is correct and if not how to make it correct. Also the question still is the same, are emotions correct or the financial freedom? Some answers are better left unsaid. The only solution is everyone makes their own world beautiful.

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5. Personal and Professional Challenges

Work life balance and Role conflicts are some major issues that a women faces when it comes to personal life challenges. While skill obsolesces and Changes in the demand of an industry are some major professional challenges that a women may face during a career break. Both the phases Women during the break and Women after the break are very difficult for women. Women during the break have lost their confidence and continuity now gaining both of them during rejoining becomes a difficult task. Changes and fear of unknown during the break makes things more difficult for them. Also lack of networking and not getting perfect opportunities could make future scope for hard for them.

Strategies to Maintain Mental Wellness at all levels

1.Building a Support System

- **Social Support**: Research has shown that having a strong network of family, friends, and mentors can significantly alleviate the emotional and psychological burden during a career break (Nikolova & Schmid, 2019). Women who had access to emotional support were better able to transition back into the workforce after a career break.
- **Peer Groups**: Joining peer groups or communities of women who are also returning to work after a break can provide shared experiences, reduce feelings of isolation, and increase motivation.

2. Developing a Growth Mindset

- **Resilience and Self-Compassion**: Studies suggest that women who adopt a growth mindset—viewing challenges as opportunities for learning—have more success in overcoming the negative psychological effects of a career break (Dweck, 2006). Cultivating self-compassion can also ease self-criticism, often linked with career breaks.
- **Reframing the Break**: Instead of viewing the career break as a "gap" or a "setback," research encourages women to see it as a period of personal development, rest, or skill-building. This perspective shift helps reduce feelings of guilt or inadequacy (Stone, 2020).

3. Fostering Skill Development

- **Upskilling and Reskilling**: The gap between the break and reentry can be stressful due to rapid changes in the workforce. Engaging in online courses, workshops, or even volunteer work during the career break can help women maintain or enhance their skills. Studies indicate that actively investing in self-development during a break reduces feelings of "obsolescence" and improves confidence when re-entering the workforce (Kulik & Roberson, 2008).
- **Mentorship Programs**: Seeking mentorship or guidance from professionals in the same field can help build the necessary confidence to re-enter the job market (Lee & Hladik, 2020). Mentors provide valuable industry insights and may open doors to opportunities.

4. Managing Identity and Self-Esteem

- **Identity Reintegration**: A key challenge after a career break is re-establishing a professional identity. Research suggests that women can benefit from engaging in "identity work," such as reflecting on their career goals and how their experiences during the break have shaped them (Ibarra, 2003). This can help align their self-worth with their evolving career path.
- **Self-Esteem**: Building or restoring self-esteem is critical. Self-compassion practices, as mentioned earlier, are particularly useful in reducing the negative self-judgment associated with career breaks (Neff, 2003). Women who focus on personal strengths, rather than focusing on perceived gaps, are more likely to navigate the transition successfully.

5. Setting Realistic Expectations

- **Gradual Transition**: Research shows that re-entering the workforce too quickly can increase stress and burnout. It is important to set realistic expectations and allow time for a gradual transition.
- Flexible work arrangements, part-time roles, or internships might be beneficial for women returning after a career break, as they help ease back into professional environments without overwhelming pressure (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018).
- **Setting Boundaries**: Setting boundaries and managing work-life balance is crucial. Women may experience added pressure to "prove themselves" after a break, but learning to manage expectations—both external and internal—is key to mental well-being.

6. Practicing Mindfulness and Stress Management

- **Mindfulness**: Mindfulness practices, including meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises, have been shown to reduce anxiety, improve emotional regulation, and increase focus and productivity (Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & David, 2010). These practices can be particularly helpful during the career break and the reentry period.
- **Cognitive Behavioral Strategies**: CBT-based strategies like cognitive restructuring and reframing negative thoughts can help manage anxiety and stress related to a career break. Women often internalize feelings of "failure" when they are unable to return to work immediately, and challenging these thoughts with CBT techniques has been shown to improve outcomes (Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012).

7. Embracing Flexibility

- **Work Flexibility**: Research consistently finds that flexible work arrangements, such as remote work,

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flexible hours, or job-sharing, significantly improve women's ability to successfully transition back into the workforce (Chung, 2019). Embracing these options can reduce the stress of re-entry by allowing women to balance family and work responsibilities more effectively.

- **Non-Linear Career Paths**: Accepting that career paths do not always follow a straight line can be an important mindset shift. The idea of having a "non-linear career" is becoming more accepted, and acknowledging this can reduce anxiety and offer women more freedom to embrace alternative career pathways (Schneider, 2013).

8. Reframing the Role of Caregiving and Other Life Priorities

- **Challenging Gender Norms**: Research shows that societal expectations about care giving and the "ideal worker" can create additional stress for women, particularly when they feel they need to choose between family and career. Advocating for more inclusive workplace policies, such as paid leave or parental leave, can help ease this burden and help women maintain a healthier balance (Baird, 2015).
- **Acceptance and Recalibration**: Instead of seeing career breaks as sacrifices or hindrances, women are encouraged to recalibrate their priorities and see the value in caregiving, personal development, and time spent away from work (Olavarria, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The psychological well-being of women during and after a career break is a multifaceted issue influenced by various internal and external factors. Assessing this well-being requires a comprehensive approach that accounts for personal, social, and professional contexts. Women may take career breaks for a variety of reasons, including maternity leave, caregiving responsibilities, personal health, or pursuing education. Each of these factors carries unique psychological challenges and experiences.

1. Mental Health During a Career Break: During a career break, women may experience a range of psychological challenges, including a sense of identity loss, decreased self-esteem, and anxiety about future career prospects. These issues can be exacerbated by societal pressures to balance family responsibilities with professional ambition. Some women might also face feelings of isolation or diminished social engagement, especially if their break is taken to care for children or family members. However, others may report improvements in psychological well-being due to reduced work-related stress, more time for personal growth, or better work-life balance.

2. Mental Health After a Career Break: Returning to the workforce after a career break often presents its own set of challenges. Women may experience "career break guilt," a sense of having fallen behind in their career trajectory, or fear of not being able to integrate seamlessly back into the workplace. The potential for age-related biases, skill gaps, or a lack of confidence in professional abilities can contribute to anxiety and stress. On the other hand, many women also experience a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction from returning to work, particularly if they are in an environment that supports their reentry, such as through flexible work policies, mentorship, or reskilling programs.

3. Social and Structural Influences: The psychological well-being of women during and after a career break is heavily influenced by societal norms, organizational cultures, and personal relationships. Women who face strong societal expectations regarding caregiving may feel conflicted about their roles as professionals and caregivers, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy. Additionally, supportive relationships with family, friends, and colleagues can buffer the psychological toll of a career break, while lack of support can exacerbate stress and anxiety. In organizations where career breaks are stigmatized or where there is a lack of reintegration programs, women may feel marginalized upon returning to work.

4. Coping Mechanisms and Resilience: Women exhibit varying levels of resilience in coping with career breaks. Some women thrive on the break, using it as an opportunity to reassess their life goals, develop new skills, or pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Others may struggle with the emotional challenges, requiring additional support to navigate the transition. Factors such as personal coping styles, prior work satisfaction, and the availability of external support (such as counseling or peer support groups) play critical roles in determining psychological outcomes.

5. Policy and Organizational Support: Workplace policies that offer flexible work options, career break programs, and clear pathways for career reentry can significantly improve the psychological well-being of women during and after a career break. Organizations that value diversity, provide mentoring, and support continuous learning can reduce feelings of alienation and skill obsolescence among women returning after a break. Furthermore, workplace cultures that foster open discussions around career breaks and encourage a non-judgmental approach to such pauses in employment can help mitigate the negative psychological impacts.

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