

## RESEARCH

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# *Work-Family Challenges and Their Impact on Career Decisions: A Study of Indian Women Professionals*

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## *Executive Summary*

A broad review of existing literature on barriers to women's career advancement suggests that one of the most important reasons inhibiting women's rise to the top positions in management is the work-life conflict that women professionals experience because of their strong commitment to family responsibilities. The primary objective of this study is to understand the impact of family responsibilities on the career decisions of women professionals and also to find out the type of work-life support they would require from their employers to balance their work and life in a better manner. The study is conducted with 121 women professionals working in government services, public sector, private sector, and in NGOs across different levels. The perception of women professionals regarding the barriers against their career advancement is studied. The impact of demographic factors like managerial level, marital status, and family structure on all the above-mentioned issues are also analysed.

Following are some of the major findings of the study:

- Apart from other factors, 'commitment to family responsibility' and 'lack of gender-sensitive policies by the employer' are considered as important barriers which affect the career advancement of women professionals to senior positions. Senior and middle level professionals believe more strongly than the junior level women professionals that commitment to family responsibility hinders women professionals' advancement.
- Family responsibility considerably affects the career decisions of women professionals. It is generally expected that the female spouse should take care of the family responsibility. Women professionals agree that children's responsibility hinders their ability to advance. They think that they are not able to utilize their full potential and at times they have to make career trade-offs because of the family responsibilities. They also believe that putting career ahead of family leads to social disapproval and rejection and at the middle level of their career, the pressure for conforming to the societal norms could be more.
- The research reveals the expectations of the women professionals in terms of the support that organizations can provide to help them in achieving better work-life balance and advance in their career. A significant percentage of respondents have shown their strong preference for provisions like flexible working hours, childcare facilitates and emergency care for children and elders, support for non-work commitment, wellness, and personal development programmes. Half of the women professionals agree that "flexibility in work location" (working from home/telecommuting) can be taken up as an additional support provision. The requirement for all these work-life provisions are felt more at the middle and junior level rather than at the senior level.

### KEY WORDS

**Work and Family**

**Career Decisions**

**Flexible Work-hours**

**Family Commitments**

**Role Overload**

One of the most significant and positive changes taking place all over the globe is the increasing number of women in every type of profession. The recent trend also suggests an assuring rise of women in managerial positions all over the world. However, it is a cause for concern that women are mostly concentrated in the lower and middle levels of management and their representation at the senior and top management levels remains extremely low. Globally, they comprise only 10 per cent of the senior managers in the Fortune 500 companies; less than 4 per cent are in the uppermost ranks of CEO, President, Executive Vice President, and COO, and less than 3 per cent of them are top corporate earners. In India too, it is no different. Large Indian companies seem to be lagging behind when it comes to gender diversity in their top decision-making bodies. Data compiled by Directors' Database in 2007 reveal that in the 1,993 listed companies (those that have submitted details of the board), only 4.9 per cent of the board members are women and many of them are members of multiple boards. Women are also grossly under-represented in governance and decision making positions.

A broad review of existing literature on barriers to women's career advancement suggests that one of the most important reasons inhibiting women's rise to the top positions in management is the work-life conflict that women professionals experience because of their strong commitment to family responsibilities. In their highly acclaimed book, *Work and Family: Allies or Enemies*, Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) argue that conflict between work and family has real consequences. It significantly affects the quality of family life and career attainment of both men and women. The consequences for women may include serious constraints on career choices, limited opportunity for career advancement and success in their work-role, and the need to choose between two apparent opposites—an active and satisfying career, or marriage, children, and a happy family life. Many studies have found women themselves admitting that many domestic factors make it difficult for them to advance to higher jobs (Punia, 2005). It has been shown in studies on working mothers that difficulty (real or perceived) in combining the two roles of working and mothering (Knight, 1994) often affects career growth of the women at work.

In the present study, an attempt is made to understand the impact of work-family challenges on women pro-

fessionals' career decisions and also to understand the type of work-life support they would require from their employers to balance their work and life in a better manner.

## NEED FOR BALANCING WORK AND LIFE

Increasingly, work-life balance is being viewed as an important issue by many employees and organizations today. In today's world, where every individual has to balance conflicting responsibilities and commitments, work-life balance has emerged as a predominant issue in the workplace. In fact, the frustrating search for work-life balance is a frequent topic of conversation among men and women alike. Work-life imbalance usually arises out of a lack of adequate time and/or support to manage work commitments as well as personal and family responsibilities. Meeting competing demands of work and family is not only tiring but can be stressful and can lead to sickness and absenteeism. It inevitably affects productivity.

Work-life balance, which is considered as a state of well-being to handle multiple responsibilities, has become a critical factor for bringing individual and organizational success. Work-life balance is best achieved when an individual's right to a fulfilled life, both inside and outside paid work, is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business, and society. A balanced life conceives of work and family as mutually reinforcing. Organizations, aware of the positive implications of balanced life, have begun considering family experiences as part of what workers bring to their workplace to enrich their contributions to work and organizations (Gallos, 1989) and *vice versa*. In fact, work-life balance brings greater effectiveness to all aspects of life. Employees work better when they find adequate time out of their work schedule, for family and personal interests.

From the employees' viewpoint, work-life balance is an effective resolution of the dilemma of managing work obligations and personal or family responsibilities. From the employers' viewpoint, work-life balance poses the challenge of creating an organizational culture supportive of the family needs of the employees so that the employees can focus better on their jobs while at work. When an employer adopts policies favourable to work-life balance, it is likely to be perceived by the employees as a huge incentive, which can motivate them as much

as other considerations like additional remuneration or provision of training opportunities.

Results of various researches indicate that employees are no longer interested in devoting their entire time to their work or profession. They are becoming increasingly conscious of the outcomes of a healthy life as well. Good employers are fast realizing that it would be very difficult for them to attract, retain, and develop manpower unless they try to integrate work and life of the employees effectively. In fact, many studies have shown that the employees nowadays seem to value the quality of life more than the amount of salary they get (Vloeberghs, 2002). They also suggest that people want to have more control over their work and accord more meaning to it. They want a better work-life balance. As a result, says Chalofsky (2003), the best employers are not great because of their perks and benefits, but because of their organizational culture and policies that promote meaningful work, and a nurturing as well as supportive workplace. These developments strengthen the search of companies for better ways of accommodating some of the expectations of the employees with regard to both family and professional lives.

## WORK-FAMILY CHALLENGES OF WOMEN PROFESSIONALS

In most of the societies, work-life conflict seems to be quite high in case of working women. Although men also face this challenge of balancing work and other priorities, it affects women more since they do most of the work associated with the household activities, apart from taking care of children, older family members, and other dependents. Though multiple roles in work and family can be the source of multiple satisfaction for employed women (Crosby 1987), a combination of career and family roles is often associated with conflict, overload, and stress (Frone, Russel and Cooper, 1991; 1992; Lewis and Cooper, 1987; 1988).

Pleck's (1977) research suggests that family-to-work spill-over is stronger for women and the work-to-family spill-over is stronger for men. Family environment and work environment are the two factors that contribute to the enhancement of complications or problems for employed women, and between the two, the non-job factors or family-related factors weigh more importantly for women (Joshi, 1990).

Gender differences exist in terms of work and family boundaries in almost every society and this has resulted in gender differences in the experiences of work-family interface (Rothbard, 2001). Even in developed countries in the West, especially in North America, sources of stress for women include role overload from paid work and family work, role conflict, pressures associated with child care and other family care, and aspects of spouse relationships, including dissatisfaction with spouses' contribution to family work (Lewis and Cooper, 1987; 1988). Research over time and across cultures continues to document the persistent inequality in the allocation of household work within dual career families, even among couples with 'modern' ideologies and a commitment to gender equality at home and at work (Brannen and Moss 1991; Hochschild 1989; Sandqvist 1992). Study conducted by Googins and Burden, (1987) suggests that among married couples, fathers reported to be spending 10-15 hours less each week on home and childcare tasks than full-time employed mothers, giving fathers a combined weekly job-home load of 68.92 hours and mothers 83.91 hours.

Women give birth to children, and still do most of the work of bringing them up. To do a demanding job and managing family and social life simultaneously is notoriously difficult. It is generally women who take the primary responsibility for childcare and who, in situations of conflict, adjust their working lives to accommodate family pressures (Wajcman, 1981; Falkenberg and Monachello, 1990). Data show that women professionals still assume the primary responsibility of home and child-care activities (Googins and Burden, 1987; Jick and Mitz, 1985; Zappert and Weinstein, 1985).

Balancing both career and family is an arduous task for working women especially when they have small children and there is no well-equipped day-care/crèche facility where they can leave their kids without any tension while they are at work. Women often suffer from the guilt-complex of not spending enough time during the tender age of their children and being forced to leave their children in the hands of the maids on whom they have little faith. Women employees thus face a dual burden—work and family—which creates a lot of stress and strain and role conflict.

Evidence indicates that workers who take advantage of family-friendly benefits, such as career breaks or flex-

ible-hour contracts, are still perceived as adversely affecting their future careers by doing so (CIPD, 2003). The same survey also highlights that employee groups, traditionally disadvantaged in their career progress, such as women or those with family care responsibilities, seem to stagnate in their career at a certain level. Women managers adopt various work-life strategies keeping the organizational norm, and an individual and family perspective in mind (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009).

## The Indian Context

The growing number of educated women in India—who are now participating in the urban, organized, industrial sector in technical, professional, and managerial positions—has been accompanied by a steady growth in dual career families (Komarraju, 1997). Research on career women in India shows that work and family dilemmas are often different from those reported by women in the West (Sekaran 1992). As compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world, Indian employees face a lot of difficulties in managing their work and life.

Research conducted by Rout, Lewis and Kagan (1999) finds that women in India experience considerable pressure, in the morning before going out to work and after work, to do all that is necessary for the family. Komarraju (1997) notes that the relative absence of an infrastructure that provides a reliable supply of electricity, water, and time-saving, modern-day kitchen and other appliances, renders the performance of domestic responsibilities a burden, particularly for women in dual career families. In addition, inflexible working hours and the absence of childcare facilities constitute impediments rather than sources of support for employed mothers (Bharat, 2001). Though in urban India, things have started improving, yet they are not adequate.

For maintaining work-life balance, social support plays a very significant role for women managers. In societies, where there is low gender egalitarianism, such as in India, spousal support is extremely important for women (Rosenbaum and Cohen, 1999). But unfortunately, even though Indian husbands are supportive of their wives' participation in the workforce, they are yet to assume responsibility for sharing domestic chores (Ramu, 1989). In India, instrumental support for most working women come in the form of hired domestic

helps or female members of extended families. Although hired domestic helps in urban areas of India have been noted to be expensive and unreliable, they still continue to be a major source of support for the growing number of nuclear families who live far from their relatives (Sekaran, 1992).

Although conflict between career and family roles can be a potential source of stress for both women and men managers, it affects women in India more than men because of many reasons. While social, legal, and economic reforms have helped women to join the workforce in India, the continuing influence of normative attitudes and values have prevented them from altering the perceptions of the society as well as their own regarding their sex-roles. Equal distribution of domestic responsibilities is thus a distant possibility now (Bharat, 2003). The expectation that women should give priority to their family-needs leads to higher levels of personal role-overload for women than men. This has definitely affected the career prospects of women in particular. In many cases, the supervisors/managers are sensitive to this issue and try to handle employees' difficulties at an individual level. However, in the absence of any systematic policy to address this important issue, the women suffer more than men in terms of their career advancement and familial role-fulfilment.

## Impact of Family Responsibilities on Career Decisions

In today's world, work and family domains influence each other greatly. It is a truism that work interferes with family as much as family interferes with work (Gutek, Searle and Klepa, 1991). In case of female managers, this is even truer, as the pressure of meeting societal expectations is more for them. There is indeed a critical linkage between career and family of the female executives. It is found that women managers' involvements, demands, and accomplishments in the employment and family domains are mutually interdependent (Gutek, Repetti and Silver, 1988).

The internalization of the belief that roles are gender-specific prescribes different life-options for men and women. For men, this life option implies prioritization of work over family, whereas for women, it implies prioritization of family over work. In the context of India, Rajadhakshya and Bhatnagar (2000) reported that



men are more committed to work or occupation than women and that gender-role expectations and gender-based socialization lead men to identify themselves with 'work-roles,' and women to identify themselves with 'family roles.' Women are expected to identify with the family and, therefore, invest more time and energy resources to enhance performance in that role. The expectation that women should give priority to the family suggests that women managers would experience higher levels of parental role-overload than men (Aryee, Srinivas and Tan, 2005). A very recent study by Warren, Fox and Pascall (2009) reveals that combining paid-work and motherhood remains a major source of difficulties for women. It is the mothers, rather than the fathers, who bend their jobs to meet family needs. While there appear to be signs of growing gender convergence, but not equality, in parent's contribution to childcare times (O' Brien, 2005), women are still responsible for domestic labour and childcare (Tang and Cousins, 2005).

It has also been found by empirical research that professionals and managers who expect to shoulder considerable domestic responsibilities express a preference for jobs that offer shorter and flexible working hours, and less demanding work environment (Konard, 2003). While this holds true for both male and female respondents in the study, women have been seen to be affected more than men because they traditionally spend more hours in household work than men. Women managers consistently report significantly higher job/family role-conflict, which may be accompanied by higher mental and physiological strains than men managers. The more job-family conflicts women managers report, the greater their irritation, anxiety, and depression (Greenglass, 1988).

Research also suggests that women managers report greater stress than men managers due to childbearing, conflicts with their partners, and other family-related problems. This indicates that even though career demands may be equal for both the partners, married women managers do not receive the support they need from the organizations and society (Davidson and Cooper, 1986). It has also been observed that extensive family responsibilities, especially those involving marriage, childcare, and household activities can impede women managers' career achievements (Guttek, Repetti and Silver, 1988; Olson and Frieze, 1987). Some studies even show that women experience extensive work-fam-

ily conflicts because of their involvement in family affairs. And more often than not, women respond to this problem by reducing their involvement in work. As geographical mobility is risky for career progression and for family balance, many women managers choose to remain rooted at one place as tied-stayers (Bielby and Bielby, 1992). This, in turn, restricts their career opportunities and advancement (Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 1993).

In view of the influence of a patriarchal value structure of the family on their career aspirations and motivations for work, Desai (1996) notes that Indian women tend to impose restrictions on their career aspirations or personal achievements for family reasons. She argues that keeping a low profile in one's career enables these women to be in both the worlds, i.e., work and family. Employed women who are married and/or those who have children tend to experience high levels of career-family conflict because of the conflicting pressures arising from family and work (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Sekaran, 1986). Research also indicates that women who experience extensive role conflict and time pressures from their career and family roles tend to reduce their level of career involvement (Bourne and Wikler, 1982) or devote less active time to their jobs (Kingstone and Nock, 1985; Pittman and Orthner, 1988). This is conditioned by an expectation that such an effort would alleviate the conflict.

However, in certain cases where women managers may not reduce their work involvement, it is found that family involvement can have a negative impact on career prospects. This is perhaps because of persisting stereotypes which often compels organizations to assume that married women (especially those with children) will and should play a primary caretakers' role within their families (Rosen and Jerdee, 1973; Schwartz, 1989). Such organizations, which assume that women will subordinate their careers to their family responsibilities, are unlikely to invest in the capacity-building of their women managers through training, sponsorship, and assignment of jobs that provide power and opportunity (Devanna, 1987; Lewis and Cooper, 1988). This review of literature presents the problems of work-life imbalance in case of women professionals around the world. It shows that women professionals in India are more vulnerable to this problem because of societal and cultural reasons. But there is a paucity of research on the perception of

women professionals on the barrier to their career advancement, impact of family responsibility on their career decisions, and on the ways in which organizations can address this problem. There is also a dearth of literature on the impact of demographic factors like age, marital status, spouse's profession, etc., on work-life issues. The following study makes an attempt to understand and analyse these issues through an empirical research.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study has been conducted keeping the following objectives in mind:

- To understand the perceptions of women professionals with regard to the barriers against their advancement to senior management positions
- To study the impact of family responsibility on women professionals' career decisions
- To find out the organizational support women professionals would like to get to achieve better work-life balance
- To analyse the impact of demographic factors on the above-mentioned issues.

## Research Methodology

This study was conducted with a total sample of 121 women professionals through purposive random sample method. The respondents were from government services, public sectors, private sectors, and non-government organizations. Most of the respondents in the study were participants of the training programmes conducted by the author on "Life and Career Planning of Women Professionals" and "Work-life Balance for Women Executives." In addition to this, responses were also collected from women professionals working in Delhi and the National Capital Region.

A structured questionnaire was developed for this purpose. It comprised of three parts—Reasons behind barriers to women professionals' advancement to senior level; Impact of family responsibility on the professionals' career decisions; and Organizational support looking for managing work-family challenges. Respondents were asked to judge the factors/statements through a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." For data calculation, "strongly agree" was given 5 points and "strongly disagree" was

given 1 point. Apart from this, data was also collected through interviews to have a greater understanding of the issues.

Frequencies, percentage, average, standard deviation, and ANOVA were used for data analysis..

## Respondents' Profile

Out of 121 women professionals, 19 (15.7%) were in government services, 53 (43.8%) were in public sector, 29 (23.9%) were in private sector, and 20 (16.5%) were working in NGOs. In terms of managerial hierarchy, 11.6 per cent were at senior level, 51.2 per cent at middle level, and 37.2 per cent at junior level. A large number of respondents were concentrated in the age group of 31-40 (48.7%), followed by the age group of 25-30 (29.7%). Nineteen per cent of the respondents were in the age group of 41-50 and only 2.5 per cent were in the age group of 51 and above. Majority of the respondents (82.6%) were married. Only 14 per cent of the respondents were unmarried and 3.4 per cent of them were single (either widow or separated). More than 88 per cent of the women professionals were living in nuclear families and the remaining were living in a joint family system. A large percentage of respondents had either one (40.5%) or two (37.2%) children. In terms of the profession of their spouses, a significant percentage, i.e., 69.4 per cent were in service, and 12.4 per cent were in the business sector.

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study are discussed below.

### Barriers to Career Advancement: Women Professionals' Perceptions

In line with the findings of various studies discussed above, the present study indicates that some of the important reasons that restrict upward mobility of women professionals are:

- Stereotyping and perceptions of roles and abilities of women
- Commitment to family responsibilities
- Exclusion of women professionals from informal networks and communications
- Lack of significant general or line experience
- Lack of mentoring
- Lack of gender-sensitive policies by the employer.

The perception of the women professionals towards all these factors were studied in detail. These factors have been isolated as they tend to have direct impact on the work-family challenges. The results of the study revealed that out of the six factors, 'commitment to family responsibility' was perceived by most women professionals as a very important barrier to their advancement to senior positions. Almost 84 per cent of the respondents agreed (taking 'strongly agree' and 'agree' categories together) that commitment to family responsibility hindered women's advancement to senior positions. (Table 1)

Some of the women professionals (who had grown-up children or had strong support system to assist them in taking care of their family responsibilities) stated that they did not experience 'commitment to family responsibility' as a barrier to move to the senior level. However, they still perceived/believed that due to family responsibilities, many women professionals would not be able to reach to the top positions. This finding reconfirmed the finding of some of the earlier studies in India that women in India experienced considerable pressure to do all that was necessary for the family before going out to work and after work. Lack of gender-sensitive policies (women employee-friendly policies) by the employer was also perceived as an important factor for restricting the career growth of the female professionals. Nearly half of the respondents agreed to this. Many of them were of the view that their colleagues and bosses were sensitive to family problems but the organizations in which they were working did not have clear policies with regard to work-life issues.

## Family Responsibility and Women Professionals' Career Decisions

The study sought to assess the impact of family responsibility on women professionals' career decisions through an analysis of their perceptions on various family responsibilities. The respondents were provided with six different statements pertaining to family responsibility and their views sought on how their career was impacted by them (Table 2).

The results revealed that a significant percentage (84 %) of women professionals felt that the female spouse was expected to take care of the family responsibilities. This is quite true of the Indian society, where women are expected to take care of the family responsibilities, even if they are holding equal or superior professional positions *vis-à-vis* their spouses. Ninety-five per cent of the respondents in the study felt that commitment to family responsibility hindered the prospects of career advancement for women professionals. In many cases, they felt women were required to devote a significant portion of their time to fulfil the family commitments which made it difficult for them to concentrate on their career growth. Quite importantly, 73 per cent of the women professionals held that putting career ahead of family led to social disapproval and rejection.

Following from this position, 73 per cent of the respondents supported the argument that "Children's responsibility hinders women's ability to advance." Indeed, children below the age of 6 seek a lot of attention from their working mothers. Although fathers are willing to

**Table 1: Barriers to Women Professionals' Advancement to Senior Level: Perception of Women Professionals**

Barriers	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Agree to Some Extent (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male stereotyping and perceptions of roles and abilities of women	30 24.79%	60 49.59%	17 14.05%	11 9.09%	3 2.48%	3.85	0.98
Commitment to family responsibilities	36 29.75	66 54.55	15 12.40	4 3.31	0 0.00	4.2	0.73
Exclusion from informal networks and communications	20 16.53	57 47.11	25 20.66	17 14.05	2 1.65	3.63	0.97
Lack of significant general or line experience	11 9.09	31 25.62	29 23.97	40 33.06	10 8.26	2.94	1.13
Lack of mentoring	14 11.57	47 38.84	36 29.75	20 16.53	4 3.31	3.39	1.00
Lack of gender-sensitive policies by the employer	25 20.66	34 28.10	40 33.06	19 15.70	3 2.48	3.49	1.06

**Table 2: Impact of Family Responsibility on Career Decisions of Women Professionals**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	To Some Extent Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation
Generally it is expected that the female spouse should take care of the family responsibility	56 (46.28%)	46 (38.02%)	13 (10.74%)	6 (4.96%)	0	4.26	0.84
Family responsibilities come on the way of women professionals' career decisions	70 (57.85%)	45 (37.19%)	5 (4.13%)	1 (0.83%)	0	4.52	0.62
Children's responsibility affect women professionals' ability to advance	33 (27.27%)	55 (45.45%)	33 (27.27%)	0	0	4.00	0.74
Career trade-off are made to take care of family responsibilities	47 (38.84%)	41 (33.88%)	21 (17.36%)	12 (9.92%)	0	4.02	0.98
Putting career ahead of family leads to social disapproval and rejection	44 (36.36%)	44 (36.36%)	28 (23.14%)	4 (3.31%)	1 (0.83%)	4.04	0.89
Women professionals are not able to utilise their full potential because of family responsibility.	54 (44.63%)	20 (16.53%)	43 (35.54%)	4 (3.31%)	0	3.84	1.26

take a lot of childcare responsibilities these days, it is the women who usually take the prime responsibility of rearing the children. Almost 73 per cent of the respondents agreed that career trade-offs had to be made to take care of the family responsibilities. In most cases, they held that women professionals would neither opt for transfer to different locations, nor like to get transferred to departments where they would have to go on frequent tours. Some of them suggested that they would even refuse promotions associated with transfer as it could disturb their family life. More than 61 per cent of the respondents agreed that they were unable to utilize their potentials because of family responsibility. This is a very important finding of the study.

The above finding indicates that this could be an important reason for women professionals in the Indian setting to trade-off their career in favour of family. Even though they contribute equally or at times more, they are often reprimanded and blamed for not taking enough personal care of the children and spouse, if they stay late in the office due to pressure of work, undertake frequent travels, or attend late night office parties, etc. Their efforts to excel in their jobs are hardly appreciated by the family members or by the society at large. They are pejoratively called too much "career-minded" and 'unwoman-like' in their behaviour. Therefore, women professionals, who are themselves worked up about multiple issues, naturally find it difficult to utilize their full potential.

### Organizational Support for Managing Work-Family Challenges

Managing work-family challenges is not only a personal responsibility of the employees; it is also the responsibility of the employers. When the respondents were asked to answer whether they expected their employers to support them in their efforts to achieve better work-life balance, most of the respondents said they would like to have certain work-life balance provisions from their employers (Table 3).

The findings suggest that 74 per cent of the respondents believed that they would require flexible working hours, whereas 50 per cent said that 'flexibility in work location' (working from home/tele-commuting) could be considered as an important provision for women professionals with younger kids or any other pressing family responsibilities. Seventy-seven per cent of them emphasized on the need for 'child care facilities' at workplace and 83 per cent expected their employers to provide them support for non-work commitments.

If one were to analyse the findings, the preference for flexible working hours by a fairly large number (74%) of respondents indicates that women professionals would like to have a better control over the timings of their office hours which would help them to manage the familial challenges in a better way rather than feel compelled to remain absent from work. They would also expect their employers to provide support for emergency-care for children and elders. In many cases, taking care of the elder parents/in-laws is a matter of



**Table 3: Organizational Support for Achieving Better Work Life Balance**

Provisions	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	To Some Extent Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Flexible working hours	48 39.67%	42 34.71%	21 17.36%	9 7.44%	1 0.83%	4.04	0.97
Flexibility in work location (working from home/telecommuting)	19 15.71%	41 33.88%	30 24.79%	27 22.31%	4 3.3%	3.36	1.09
Childcare facilities & emergency care for children	55 45.45%	39 32.23%	15 12.40%	12 9.92%	0	4.00	0.92
Support for non-work commitments	47 38.84%	54 44.62%	18 14.87%	2 1.65%	0	4.20	0.75
Employee assistance programme for employees with family problems	16 13.22 %	91 75.21%	13 10.74%	1 0.83%	0	4.00	0.52
Wellness and personal development programmes	61 50.41%	55 45.45%	5 4.13%	0	0	4.46	0.57

concern especially at the time of emergency and women professionals would like to seek the support of the organization in this regard.

The reason why only 50 per cent of the respondents suggested flexibility in work locations could be because of their lack of familiarity or awareness about the practice of telecommuting/working from home, which is yet to be popular in India. Some of them also apprehended that they might not be able to concentrate on their jobs away from their workplace; and, in certain cases, physical presence was essential and it was practically impossible to operate from home.

The findings suggest that the criticality of arranging and maintaining a good childcare facility was strongly felt by professional women and they therefore sought the support of the employers in this regard. A large percentage of the women professionals in the study expected their employers to provide crèche/day-care facility or at least make some such arrangements close to the workplace.

An overwhelming majority of women professionals wanted “support for non-work commitments” from their employers. This could be because they would primarily like their employers to be sensitive towards their non-work commitments which varied from taking care of the children or the elders in their family at the time of need, settling pending cases like dealing with a court case, making arrangements for buying a house to doing some social work or working for the community in which they lived, fulfilling the greater ambitions of their lives and allowing them to pursue their hobbies or interests.

Most of the respondents perceived a life beyond work, and their inability to devote time for those aspects of their lives led to work-life imbalance.

Very large percentages of respondents (88%) favoured the idea of “assistance programmes” for employees with family problems. They expected their employer to provide some sort of counselling/mentoring to the employees who experienced work-family challenges. Interestingly, 96 per cent of the women professionals expected their employers to conduct “wellness and personal development programmes” for better work-life balance. This finding suggests that most of the women professionals covered under this study were ready to learn and bring about desirable changes in themselves through these wellness and personal development programmes for attaining a better balance between their professional and personal lives.

### Impact of Demographic Factors on Work-Family Decisions

In order to get a better understanding of the work-family issues amongst the women professionals, the impact of various demographic factors like managerial level, marital status, and family structure including the number of children, on work-family decisions were analysed through ANOVA (Table 4).

#### Managerial Level

Some significant differences were found among the junior, middle, and senior level women professionals in terms of their perceptions of work-family issues. As far as the ‘hindrances to women professionals’ advancement

to senior levels' are concerned, the negative effect of 'stereotyping and perceptions of roles and abilities of women' were perceived differently across different managerial levels. Women professionals at the junior (mean score-3.68) and senior (mean score-3.35) levels agreed whereas middle managerial level women professionals' stereotypes and perceptions ('strongly agree') did hinder career advancement prospects of women professionals.

The reason for such differences in perception could be because of the fact that at the middle managerial level, women professionals faced more difficulty to move ahead in their career and it is at this level that they considered 'stereotyping' as a strong barrier for their career progression. Interestingly, there was a marked variance (SD =1.33) in perception among the senior level professionals with regard to stereotyping of females' roles and

abilities.

Similarly, the impact of family responsibility on women professionals' career decisions was perceived differently among the senior, middle, and junior level women professionals. Senior (mean score 4.57) and middle (mean score 4.66) level professionals believed more strongly than the junior (mean score 4.31) level women professionals that commitment to family responsibility hindered women professionals' advancement. One can argue that as the professional responsibilities increase, it becomes more difficult to manage family and other responsibilities.

While responding to the statement—'putting career ahead of family leads to social disapproval and rejection'—there was a significant difference between the perception of the middle level women professionals

**Table 4: Analysis of Significant Demographic Factors influencing Work-life Balance (Summarized output of Analysis of Variance)**

	Factors		Mean	SD	F	Significance
<b>Managerial Level</b>	Male stereotyping and perceptions of roles and abilities of women	Junior	-3.68	0.97	4.319	0.015
		Middle	-4.08	0.83		
		Senior	-3.35	1.33		
	Commitment to family responsibility hinders women professionals' advancement	Junior	-4.31	0.70	4.447	0.014
		Middle	-4.66	0.51		
		Senior	-4.57	0.64		
	Putting career ahead of family leads to social disapproval and rejection	Junior	-3.60	0.71	4.447	0.014
		Middle	-4.46	0.71		
		Senior	-3.57	1.22		
	Flexibility in work location( working from home/telecommuting)	Junior	-3.68	0.87	6.228	0.003
		Middle	-3.30	1.20		
		Senior	-2.57	0.75		
	Employee assistance programme for employees with family problems	Junior	-4.13	0.54	5.000	0.003
		Middle	-4.00	0.47		
		Senior	-3.64	0.49		
<b>Marital Status</b>	Commitment to family responsibility hinders women professionals' advancement	Unmarried	-3.76	0.90	5.116	0.007
		Single	-5.00	0.00		
		Married	-4.13	0.69		
	Flexibility in work location (working from home/Telecommuting)	Unmarried	-3.11	1.31	14.915	0.000
		Single	-3.00	0.81		
		Married	-3.42	1.06		
<b>Family Structure</b>	Commitment to family responsibility hinders women professionals' advancement	Nuclear	-4.52	0.60	8.076	0.001
		Joint	-4.50	0.75		
	Children's responsibility hinders Women professionals' ability to advance	Nuclear	-4.01	.78	6.071	0.003
		Joint	-3.79	.67		
	Career trade-off are made to take care of family responsibilities	Nuclear	3.79	1.27	15.144	0.000
		Joint	-4.21	1.18		
	Women professionals are not able to utilise their full potential because of family responsibility	Nuclear	3.79	1.27	9.653	0.000
		Joint	-4.21	1.18		
	Flexible working hours	Nuclear	-4.07	.93	9.924	0.002
		Joint	-3.85	1.23		

(mean score- 4.46) and the senior (mean score 3.57) and junior (mean 3.60) level professionals. This is an interesting finding, which suggests that at the middle level of their career, the pressure for conforming to the societal norms could be more.

In terms of 'organizational support for achieving better work-life balance,' there was a great difference among various managerial levels. Junior and middle level women professionals agreed (mean score 3.68 and 3.30 respectively) that they would require flexibility in work location (working from home/telecommuting) but the senior level professionals agreed only to some extent (mean score 2.57) for such provisions.

The reason for this could be that at the senior management level, professionals are engaged more in the decision making, holding meetings with important stakeholders and solving various problems for which their physical presence is greatly required. Similar results are found even in case of the employee assistance programmes for employees with family problems. One can thus see that the requirement for work-life provisions are felt more at the middle and junior levels rather than at the senior level.

### **Marital Status**

In the ANOVA results, marital status did not show any significant influence on the perception of women professionals as far as the "barriers to women professionals' advancement to senior level" are concerned. However, while assessing the impact of family responsibility on women professionals' career decisions, marital status seemed to play a significant role. While both single (mean score 5.00) and married respondents (mean score 4.13) strongly felt that commitment to family responsibility hindered women professionals' advancement, the unmarried respondents agreed less (mean score 3.76) on this issue.

A difference among married (3.42), unmarried (3.11) and single (3.00) respondents was also observed in terms of their preferences for flexibility in work location (working from home/telecommuting). This finding indicates that married women professionals would need more flexibility in work location than the unmarried and single ones to balance their work and family demands in a better way.

### **Family Structure**

In this study, most of the respondents (88 %) were living in a nuclear family set-up; only 12 per cent of the respondents were in a joint family set-up. The ANOVA result revealed that respondents living in nuclear families agreed more strongly that 'commitment to family responsibility' hindered their career advancement. Children's responsibility and its impact on women professionals' career was also perceived differently by respondents belonging to joint and nuclear families. Women professionals living in nuclear families (mean score 4.01) agreed more strongly than those living in joint families (mean score 3.79) that taking up child-rearing responsibility affected their career prospects adversely. This is indicative of the fact that in nuclear families, taking care of the children is a real challenge and staying in joint families helps the respondents in sharing this responsibility with others like parents, in-laws, etc.

Contrary to this result, however, women professionals living in joint families agreed more strongly (mean score 4.21) that 'career trade-offs' were made to take care of family responsibilities, whereas those living in nuclear families agreed less (mean score 3.79) on this issue. The reason for this finding could be that in a joint family set-up, the expectations towards women professionals from different family members are more and thus they experience the pressure to make trade-offs with career decisions to fulfil the societal expectations. Similarly, respondents living in joint family set-up felt more strongly that they were not able to utilize their full potential because of family responsibility than those who lived in the nuclear families (mean score 3.79).

Interestingly respondents living in nuclear family set-up preferred flexible working hours more strongly (mean score 4.07) than respondents living in joint family system (mean score 3.85). It could be because of the fact that in a nuclear family set-up, in order to take care of the family/children's responsibility along with the profession, women professionals require more flexibility in terms of timings and working hours to better adjust to work-family demands.

The findings thus suggest that family structure of the women professionals greatly influence their work-life challenges and subsequently their career decisions. Though it is difficult to recommend any particular family set-up to the women professionals, it helps us in un-

derstanding that the work-family challenges are different in different family set-ups.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this research are very important as they help us comprehend the barriers that women professionals experience in their career and how societal expectations and family responsibilities influence their career decisions.

The research undertaken here indicates that most of the women professionals either agree or strongly agree that 'commitment to family responsibility' act as a barrier for their career advancement, especially to senior level positions. This is indicative of the fact that given the social context in which women professionals operate, family responsibilities devolve more on them than their male counterparts and because of the societal pressures, they cannot afford to ignore these responsibilities. Interestingly, this finding reinforces the results of some of the researches conducted almost two decades earlier and suggest that there is hardly any change in the societal perception that women are required to shoulder greater family responsibilities. Women professionals continue to play a major role in managing their family and children even today.

It is important to note that a majority of the women professionals agreed to most of the statements that described how family responsibility would affect their career decisions. They appeared to think that they were not able to utilize their full potential and at times they had to make career trade-offs because of the family responsibilities. This could also be because of the fact that they believed that putting career ahead of family led to social disapproval and rejection. They also felt that children's responsibility hindered women's ability to advance.

It is notable that in the case of married women professionals and especially at the middle managerial level, the impact of family responsibilities on the career decisions was quite significant. This indicates that when women professionals reach the middle of their career, the issue of work-family conflict becomes very significant and if they are not able to utilize their potential at this phase of their career, then moving ahead becomes difficult.

It is quite interesting to know that the respondents living in joint families agree more strongly that 'commitment to family responsibility' hinders their career advancement. Probably this finding breaks the myth that living in joint families provides a great support to balance work and life. The findings would thus suggest that family structure of the women professionals greatly influence their work-life challenges and subsequently their career decisions.

Almost half of the respondents felt that lack of gender sensitive policies by the employer also acted as a barrier to their professional progress. It seems that the women professionals who participated in the study, were not very satisfied with the gender-sensitive policies of their employers. So, the organizations need to acknowledge the dual responsibilities of female professionals and the need to develop a system where they can establish a balance and best utilize their potential.

The research reveals the expectations of the women professionals in terms of support that organizations can provide to help them in achieving a better work-life balance and advance in their career. Women professionals under study agreed that support provisions contributed to better work-life balance. An extremely large percentage (96 %) wanted their employers to conduct regular "wellness and personal development programmes" for a better work-life balance. A significant percentage of respondents also showed their strong preference for provisions like flexible working hours, childcare and emergency care facilities for children and elders, and support for non-work commitment. Half of the women professionals agreed that "flexibility in work location" (working from home/telecommuting) could be taken up as an additional support provision.

It is interesting to find that in terms of 'organizational support for achieving better work-life balance,' there exists great difference among various managerial levels. It has also been observed that there exists a difference among married, unmarried, and single respondents and women professionals living in nuclear or joint families in terms of their preference for flexibility in work location (working from home/telecommuting). It clearly implies that demographic factors have a strong influence on decisions regarding the type of support one would look forward to getting from one's employer. Thus while organizing support provisions for its em-




ployees, organizations need to be careful about these issues and allow its employees to have a greater control in managing potential conflicts between their work and non-work demands. It may be a relatively inexpensive way of gaining longer-term commitment from the valuable women professionals.

Some of the results of this research confirm the findings of the research undertaken earlier, i.e., married women having children experience more work-life challenges than others. But this research would prompt one to investigate further in detail the work-life issues of the middle level women professionals because it is at the middle managerial level that the impact of family responsibilities on the career decisions was found to be quite significant. It would also be very important to know how the family structure impacts their work-life concerns and subsequently influences their career decisions, because women professionals living in joint families agree more strongly that 'career trade-offs' are made to take care of family responsibilities. More intensive and extensive studies need to be taken up in terms of the support women professionals seek from their employers for attaining a better work-life balance.

The results from this study thus throw up a number of issues that are important for organizations seeking to maximize their manpower potential. The fact that work-family challenges do retard career advancement of women professionals, and ultimately affect the pace of organizational progress to a considerable degree, has to be acknowledged fast. One must also need to understand that the burden of managing career and family that women professionals face may result in negative mental and physiological health outcomes. In the competitive business environment, when the number of

women professionals is steadily increasing, the employers can best utilize the potential of its women employees only if they are sensitive to these issues concerning work-life balance.

It is a reality that though Indian organizations are a lot more open to the idea of having more women at their top and senior management levels, the talent pool of women candidates at the top level is very shallow. Indian organizations must understand that societal expectations and family responsibilities do come in the way of the women professionals and their career decisions. In this context, allowing them to manage their family responsibilities without seeking help from their organizations, is a very short-sighted approach. The fact that supportive family-friendly practices exist on paper in some cases, is not enough for employees to automatically attain work-life balance. Organizations must ensure and declare that they are ready with various work-life balance provisions which would help the women professionals to balance their professional and family responsibilities. This will act as a competitive advantage for the organizations and also help them in establishing strong employer branding.

It is suggested that employers need to come up with various work-life balance-friendly provisions which can help them in attracting and retaining female talent. It is the responsibility of the employers to be sensible while designing the human resource policies of their organizations to best utilize women's potential. In order to have a better work-life balance, the organizations as a whole must be sensitized at all levels to the work-life issues; this will definitely contribute to the larger cause of organizational effectiveness. 

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*What restricts the use of the word 'lady' among the courteous is that it is intended to set a woman apart from ordinary humanity, and in the **working** world that is not a help, as **women** have discovered in many bitter ways"*

— Judith S. Marin