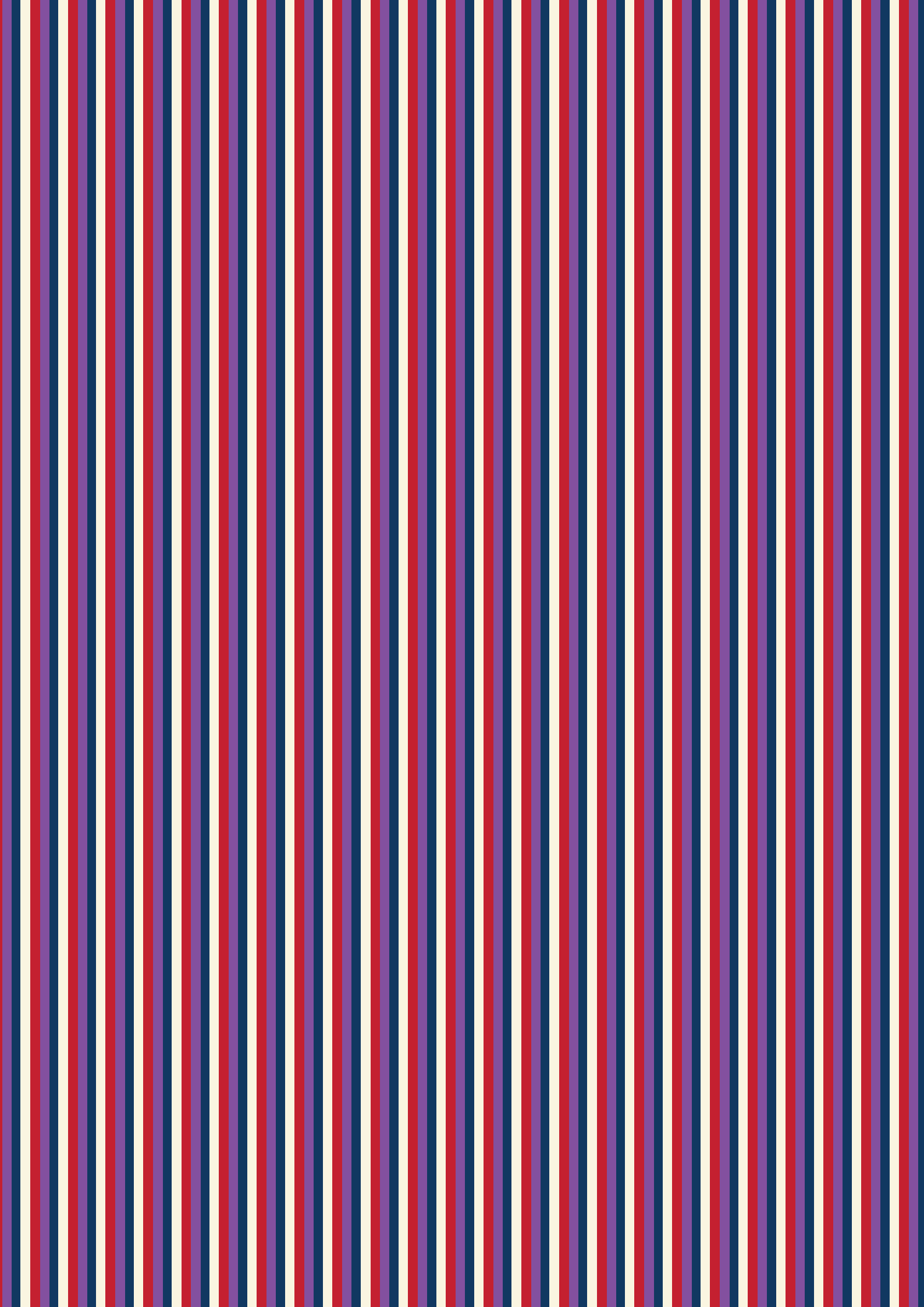




THE RETURNSHIP ROAD





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FOREWORD

Marriage and motherhood are happy milestones in the journey of life, but these (more often than not) come with costs only for women and not for men. Often, women have to take a break from their careers to cater to the demands of the new family. But when the kids are older, many are eager to get back to their careers. And then they are faced with a new set of challenges: how should they navigate the changed realities and uncertainties of the job market? They might have lost contact with their previous employers or co-workers. How do they find out about new job openings? How should they modify their resumes to make them more contemporary? How should they dress for the interview? Do they need to update their skills? The challenges seem daunting.

At the other side of the job market divide are the employers. For them, it would make excellent business sense to get these women back into the workforce. They have work experience, they are older and more mature, they are done with their child-bearing imperatives, and they are clearly highly self-motivated.

How can we make the two ends of this very important segment of the job market – returnee women looking to re-enter paid work and prospective employers – meet? What are the challenges and issues specific to this segment that companies need to be aware of? What works? What are the best practices to encourage returnee women?

This report aims to answer these questions by laying out the problem, drawing on case studies of returnee programmes, and examining evidence of what has worked in different contexts. Most importantly, it urges companies to focus on drawing older, returnee women as a key component in their recruitment strategy. This will solve three problems simultaneously: women who want to get back into paid work will achieve their goal, companies will get a reliable and mature workforce, and India's female labour force participation rate will rise. It's a win-win all around!

My thanks to Godrej DEI Lab for approaching CEDA to produce this report. A very big thank you to **Indulekha Aravind** for drafting this excellent and succinct report for CEDA. Thanks to Ashoka University student **Prisha Visveswaran** for research assistance, and to **Nithya Subramanian** for her thoughtful design and the striking cover design of the report. Finally, this report would not have been in its current shape without the meticulous and diligent supervision by **Akshi Chawla, Director, CEDA**, whose comments on previous drafts vastly improved the report. I hope you find this report as illuminating, insightful and useful as I did.

Ashwini Deshpande

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FOREWORD

From the world's early agriculturists to those driving global economic growth on tech assembly lines, women have been history's frontline workers. Bias and power differences consistently obscure this fact. This imbalance has, at best, contributed to how we undervalue women's work. At worst, as in recent Indian history, it has disengaged women from the labour force altogether.

Businesses don't escape their material realities. But they can be very good at innovating their way out of the constraints of those realities. One such innovation is the returnship programme, which encourages women to return to the workforce after career breaks for family and social obligations. This richly detailed report on returnship in corporate India shows us that creating enabling conditions for women to sustain and grow their careers is good for business. It lowers costs related to attrition, widens the talent pool, and shows significant returns in employee loyalty and productivity. Businesses that bet on returnship do so to diversify the pool for senior leadership, something any enterprise that hopes to serve large markets and societies considers key to its relevance.

We're also betting that returnship and related programmes can be a key factor in attracting talent beyond a business' own cohort of returning women: in fact, we hope that the insights in this report will encourage women in early careers to see strong frameworks for returnship as crucial investments in their own future careers. We invite them, as well as every reader of this report, to choose and advocate for businesses that prioritise these ideas.

More broadly, this report is an indirect reminder that we are in the middle of a drive to re-imagine work and the workplace, poised between the twin shocks of pandemic restrictions and technological sea change. Those of us in India's white-collar workplaces must not only join in this drive, but also see it as linked inextricably with the lessons of returnship. Flexibility, continuous learning, and mutual care and trust are crucial to all our working futures. Our success in creating that future is tied closely to our support for women returning to work, sometimes against great social odds. It moves all of us towards the frontlines of history.

At the Godrej DEI Lab, we work to advance inclusion at the Godrej Industries Group and across ecosystems in Indian workplaces. We are grateful to the expertise and insight of our brilliant collaborators at the Centre for Economic Data and Analysis, Ashoka University, in our efforts. We hope that readers of this work will find it as engaging and insightful as we do, and use it as a call to action at their own workplaces, and at the intersection of business and society, where we all stand together.

Supriya Nair

Head, Research & Media, Godrej DEI Lab

“It’s important that companies give women a [second] chance. A woman who takes a break of 10 years but is desperate to return and confident should also be given an opportunity”

- Engineer, 34 years, who joined IT firm Zoho after a break of nearly 8 years



WHY HIRE A “RETURNEE”?

When technology services company Wipro began exploring how to increase the representation of women in its workforce about two decades ago, it took a closer look at employee data. One trend became evident soon enough: while the gender split at the entry levels was more equitable, there was a sharp dip in the share of women in its workforce at the manager and team lead levels.

This was not an experience unique to Wipro nor is this a problem of the past for India Inc. As a 2024 report by LinkedIn¹ on women in leadership in corporate India highlights, overall female representation across different job levels in Indian industries increased from 23.9 percent in 2016 to 26.8 percent in 2024, but the percentage

1 Jha, Aditi and Aparajita Bharti. “Women in leadership in corporate India: Insights from the LinkedIn economic graph”, LinkedIn India and The Quantum Hub (TQH). (2024), https://thequantumhub.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Women-in-Leadership_Linkedin_Final_p1-32_31May.pdf

of women in senior leadership roles in the same period was lower and rose at a slower pace from 16.6 percent in 2016 to 18.3 percent in 2024.

On delving deeper into the observed trend, Wipro discovered that a primary reason for the trend was women employees not returning after maternity leave. In response, the company initiated a dedicated programme in 2018 to facilitate the return of these women, resulting in 99 percent of women employees returning to work post maternity leave. More recently, the company decided to expand this plank to engage with the larger

“Over the years, we’ve seen tremendous acceptance of this [returnship] programme.

Returnees have proven to be incredible team players, earning respect and admiration from their leaders and peers. Many have grown into senior roles, showcasing the immense value of providing the right opportunities and support.”

- Nomura India

community of women who left the workforce for various reasons, not limited to childcare, and desired to return. In 2021, the company launched “Begin Again,” a programme aimed at hiring women seeking to re-enter the workforce after an extended absence, joining the growing number of companies² across sectors in India running returnship programmes.

There is no definitive data on the number and type of companies³ that offer these in India from the 1.6 million registered and active companies in the country but broadly, it would appear that these are organisations employing at least 1,000 employees, many in the tech and IT, consulting and banking and finance sectors, especially the Indian branches of multinational companies. Government jobs usually do not have a provision of returnships, though they often allow long periods of leave, including two years of childcare leave⁴ in addition to the six-month maternity leave.

This report examines how returnships – dedicated programmes to enable experienced women professionals who quit to re-enter the workforce – are run at a few Indian companies, spanning different sectors and categories⁵. The observations are based on a series of interviews and conversations with Indian companies, DEI experts, as well as employees who have joined the workplace after a career break (**see section: Methodology** for more). But reading this,

² AvtarInc. “The 2024 Avtar & Seramount best companies for women in India”, AvtarInc, 2024, <https://www.avtarinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Avtar-Yearbook-2024-compressed.pdf>

³ Press Trust of India. “India sees incorporation of 1.85 lakh companies in 2023-24.” The Economic Times, 5 May 2024, economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/india-sees-incorporation-of-1-85-lakh-companies-in-2023-24/articleshow/109853309.cms?from=mdr

⁴ Economic Times Online. “Two-year childcare leave, along with maternity, a constitutional right for women employees that can’t be denied: SC”, The Economic Times, Apr 23, 2024. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/childcare-leave-along-with-maternity-a-constitutional-right-for-women-employees-that-cant-be-denied-sc/articleshow/109524412.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁵ While these were launched for women, companies also offer gender-agnostic returnships. This report, however, will focus on returnship programmes for women.

one may question why companies should specifically look at hiring women who have dropped out of the workforce in the first place. After all, it sounds easier to fill a role by laterally hiring someone with experience.

Returnee vs a lateral hire

The companies running returnship programmes for women interviewed for this report did speak about the challenges involved once they embarked on this path – among others, of having to create acceptance internally, of tackling biases, of convincing team leads and line managers that it would be worth their while to train this cohort, and of finding the right candidates for certain roles. But spokespersons also highlighted the unique advantages this group of professionals brings to the table – the fact that they were experienced and hence easier to train and quicker to settle in, the relatively lower levels of attrition among these women and the zeal to prove themselves that many candidates returning to the workforce display. This was reflected in the performance of these employees, making a business case for pursuing and expanding this talent acquisition channel (**see section: Observed outcomes**). As the founder of HerKey, a career engagement platform for women which also works on returnships, said, “This is an educated, experienced talent pool eager to prove themselves and who can join without a notice period.” Considering the competition in the market for good talent, some companies said this was also a way to widen the recruitment pool beyond conventional channels.

One could also take into account the factors that cause women to quit in the first place, creating that gap on their resumes. Academics and researchers have broadly maintained that the main reasons women fall behind in terms of labour market participation is due to the differential responsibility placed upon them for

care and domestic work, especially after marriage and having children. Factors such as patriarchal norms that hold women primarily responsible for domestic work⁶ and care duties, an increase in other household members’ income and travel restrictions (as well as the overall lack of gainful employment in India⁷) all have a role to play in women exiting the workforce (**see box: *Why Indian women take career breaks or drop out of the labour force altogether***).

Why have returnship programmes

One might ask why there should be a separate programme to hire women with a career gap - after all, they could just apply directly. They could, and they do apply, but that’s when they go up against the bias among recruiters. A 30-year-old electronics engineer interviewed for this report who took a break of three-and-a-half years applied for a role in her old team at the same IT company she was working with earlier. She met the requirements specified in the job description but she said she was not hired because of her career break. This experience was repeated several times till she was hired by software firm Zoho through its returnship programme. Other women interviewees had similar experiences to share. These are not isolated incidents. A 2024 paper⁸ by Kanika Mahajan and S Nandhini found through a correspondence study experiment (by sending fictitious resumes to companies) that women who had taken a career break received 49 percent lower call backs than other women with similar characteristics but who had not

taken a break. Additionally, women have to contend with the “motherhood / child penalty” – the costs they have to bear in the labour market after the birth of a child, explained in more detail later in this report.

More companies today are alive to these realities and are looking to enable women who took a career break to re-enter the workforce through returnships, return-to-work, or “second career” programmes. While women may leave primarily for maternity and childcare, it could also be for reasons such as other care work, additional family responsibilities, and medical reasons but the returnship programmes typically don’t make the reason for the break a filter. However, while this is progress compared to a decade ago, it is not a standard practice among organisations, irrespective of size. (The companies interviewed in this report were selected specifically because these run returnships and are not necessarily a representative sample of Indian corporates).

A dedicated returnship or “second career” programme makes managers understand that a skilling gap of a few years is not an insurmountable hurdle, said a corporate lawyer who advises companies on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). By creating a separate channel of recruitment, companies are also signalling to these women, who might either hesitate to apply or whose CVs may otherwise be relegated to the bottom of the pile⁹, that they have a chance. “This is not special treatment. It’s an equity measure to help them get their foot in the door,” said a consultant specialising in DEI previously with a Big Four accounting firm.

Some aspects of running a returnship, such as conducting separate training sessions or hiring returnee candidates via an external agency (should a company choose to do so) do require additional resources, but that

6 Deshpande, Ashwini and Naila Kabeer. “Norms that matter: exploring the distribution of women’s work between income generation, expenditure-saving and unpaid domestic responsibilities in India.” *World Development* 174 (2024): 106435, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X2300253X>

7 Deshpande, Ashwini and Jitendra Singh. The demand-side story: structural change and the decline in female labour force participation in India. No. 17368. IZA Discussion Papers, 2024, <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/17368/the-demand-side-story-structural-change-and-the-decline-in-female-labour-force-participation-in-india>

8 Mahajan, Kanika and S. Nandhini. “Restart: Women, career breaks and employer response.” (2024), <http://www.isid.ac.in/~acegd/acegd2024/papers/NandhiniS.pdf>

9 Mahajan, Kanika and S. Nandhini. “Restart: Women, career breaks and employer response.” (2024), <http://www.isid.ac.in/~acegd/acegd2024/papers/NandhiniS.pdf>

need not always be the case with exploring this route. If a company decides to hire returnees directly, for instance, that could be done with fewer new costs and tweaks. The first and most significant step, whichever the returnship model or size of the company,

remains the same: a change in mindset.



WHY INDIAN WOMEN TAKE CAREER BREAKS OR DROP OUT OF THE LABOUR FORCE ALTOGETHER

India's low female labour force participation has been a cause of concern and curiosity for years. Despite a growing economy, rising female education levels and a decline in fertility rates (factors typically associated positively with women entering the labour force), the participation of women in the labour force dipped by 25 percentage points between 2004 and 2018 in rural India while it remained almost stagnant in urban India at 20 percent in the same period, according to National Sample Survey (NSS) data¹.

This dip is attributed to various factors. The so-called supply-side factors, i.e., those that affect women's ability to supply their labour, get a lot of attention. Among them are norms placing the primary burden of domestic work such as cooking, child care and elder care almost exclusively on the shoulders of women, which lowers their probability of working, as Deshpande and Kabeer (2017)² have shown. Jayachandran (2020)³ discusses how gender norms mediate the relationship between economic development and female employment. She lays out certain social norms including caregiving responsibilities and differential domestic labour burden to be some of the reasons either forcing women to quit post marriage or completely restricting work for them based on societal contexts. The barriers to staying in the workplace could be either practical constraints—like travel restrictions—and other less tangible domesticity constraints—such as the expectation that a woman's role is confined to the house.

But supply-side constraints are not the only reasons that labour force participation of women is low. There are important demand-side constraints,

1 Deshpande, Ashwini and Jitendra Singh. "Dropping out, being pushed out or can't get in? Decoding declining labour force participation of Indian women." (2021), <https://docs.iza.org/dp14639.pdf>

2 Deshpande, Ashwini and Naila Kabeer. "Norms that matter: Exploring the distribution of women's work between income generation, expenditure-saving and unpaid domestic responsibilities in India." *World Development* 174 (2024): 106435, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X2300253X>

3 Jayachandran, Seema. "Social norms as a barrier to women's employment in developing countries". No. w27449. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27449/w27449.pdf

too. Women looking to re-enter the workforce also have to contend with bias, in the form of employers being less likely to hire women who have been on a career break, the ‘motherhood / child penalty’ mentioned earlier and even the possibility that their marital status may work against them. In a paper documenting hiring discrimination with respect to marital status using an online field experiment on job portal Naukri.com, Abu Afzal Tauheed⁴ found that single female applicants were more likely to secure an interview than their married counterparts. In separate in-depth interviews with HR consultants in hiring committees, the author found that they were instructed to segregate the candidates based on their marital status, particularly in the case of female applicants.

Finally, there is the lack of sufficient jobs. An analysis of transitions in women’s labour force status⁵ between 2016 and 2019 found that women were more likely to exit and less likely to enter the labour force than men, which suggests the unavailability of regular and steady employment opportunities for women. Agriculture and allied activities have the largest share of female employment. As the share of agriculture in total employment has declined, and that of services has increased, productive employment opportunities for women have not kept pace with their demand for work⁶. Put simply, there aren’t enough jobs that are close enough for women to access.

While India’s female labour force participation has increased in recent years⁷ from 22.9 percent in 2017–18 to 38.7 percent in 2023–24, a CEDA analysis by Chawla and Singh (2024) found that women between the ages of 20 and 24 years made up less than a quarter (23.4 percent) of the labour force, while the percentage is only somewhat higher for those between the ages of 25 and 29 (28.1 percent). This is even as overall labour force participation stood at 60.5 percent in 2023–24. There are also significant variations in LFPR by age. In their analysis⁸, Chawla and Singh (2024) found that women in the 40–44 years age group had the highest likelihood of being in the labour force, with 50.5 percent of women in this group being part of the labour force in 2022–23. As CEDA has observed in its analyses, the period when women make up only 25–28 percent of the labour force – when they are between the ages of 20 and 29 years – is also the time when women are most likely to get married and have their first child⁹.

4 Tauheed, Abu Afzal. “(En)Gendering marital status in Indian job market: An experimental study”, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. (2023), <https://www.isid.ac.in/~acegd/acegd2023/papers/AbuAfzalTauheed.pdf>

5 Deshpande, Ashwini and Jitendra Singh. “Dropping out, being pushed out or can’t get in? Decoding declining labour force participation of Indian women.” (2021), <https://docs.iza.org/dp14639.pdf>

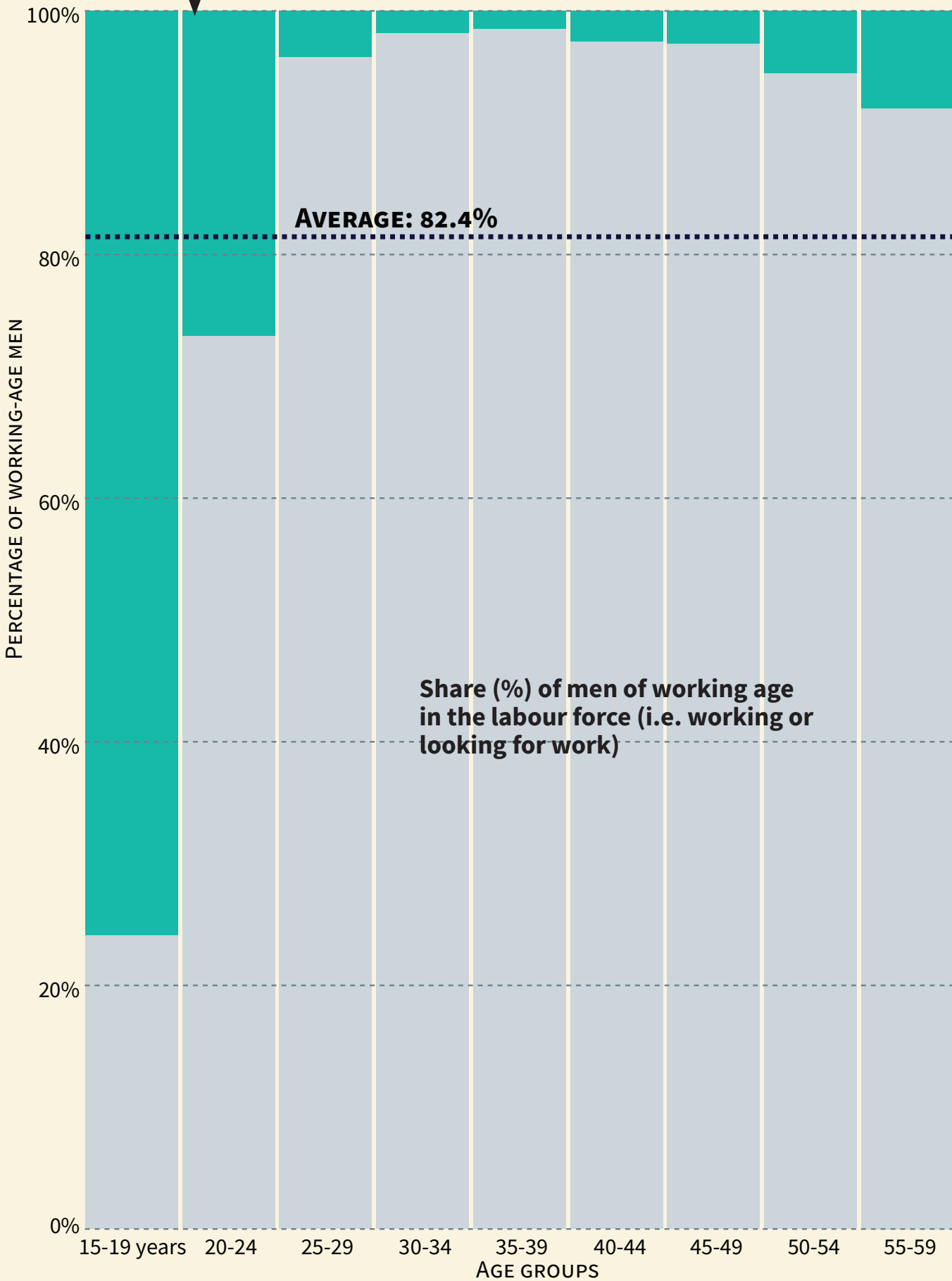
6 Deshpande, Ashwini and Jitendra Singh. “The demand-side story: structural change and the decline in female labour force participation in India”. No. 17368. IZA Discussion Papers, 2024, <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/17368/the-demand-side-story-structural-change-and-the-decline-in-female-labour-force-participation-in-india>

7 Deshpande, Ashwini. “Illusory or real? Unpacking the recent increase in women’s labour force participation in India” Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University (2023), <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/illusory-or-real-unpacking-the-recent-increase-in-womens-labour-force-participation-in-india/>

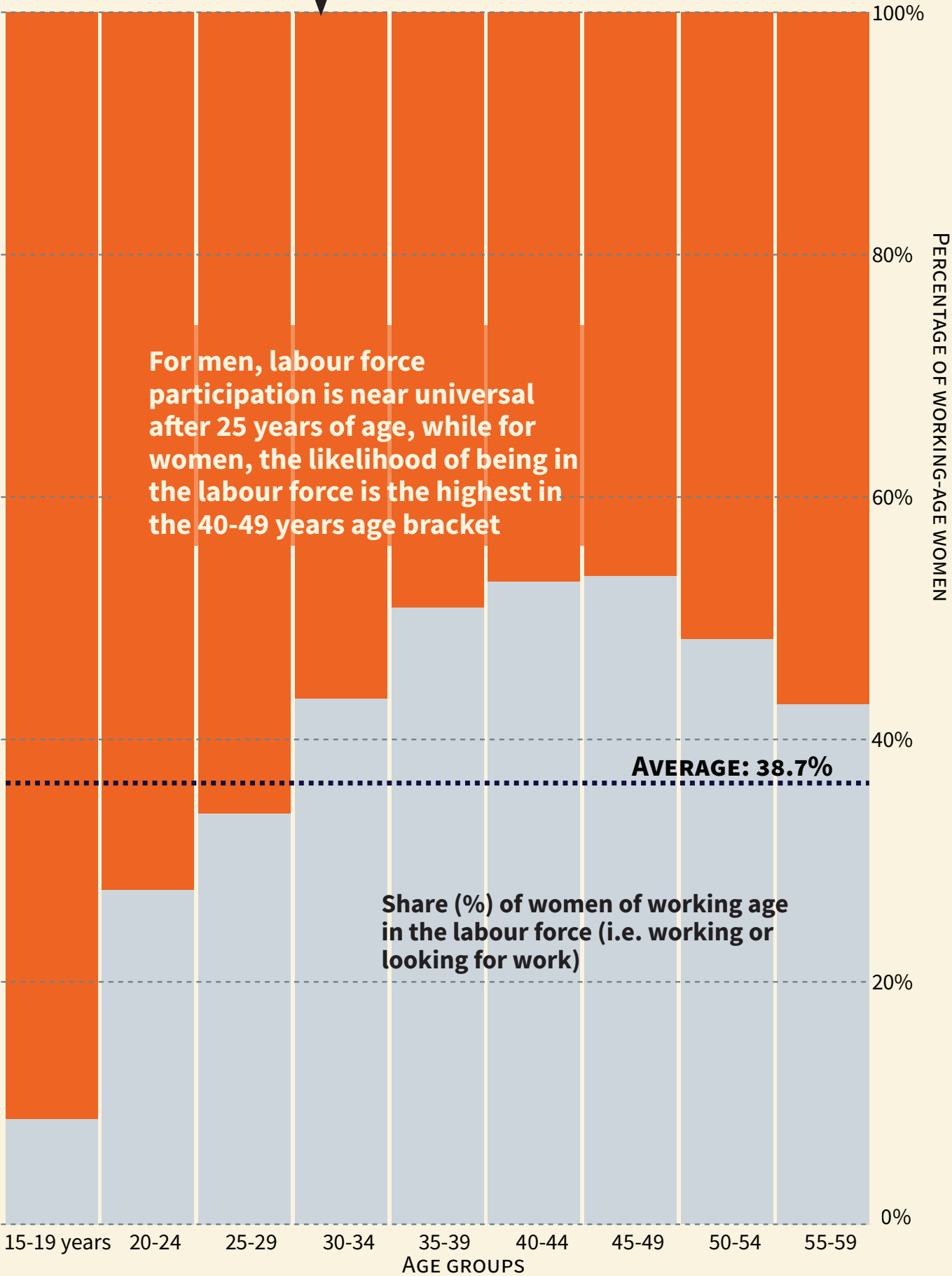
8 Chawla, Akshi and Kulvinder Singh. “How does labour force participation vary across age groups?” Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University (2024), <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/how-labour-force-participation-rates-in-india-vary-across-age-groups/#cite>

9 Chawla, Akshi and Kulvinder Singh. “How does labour force participation vary across age groups?” Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University (2024), <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/how-labour-force-participation-rates-in-india-vary-across-age-groups/#cite>

■ Share (%) of men of working age who are neither working nor looking for work



Share (%) of women of working age who are neither working nor looking for work



For men, labour force participation is near universal after 25 years of age, while for women, the likelihood of being in the labour force is the highest in the 40-49 years age bracket

AVERAGE: 38.7%

Share (%) of women of working age in the labour force (i.e. working or looking for work)

Working age refers to 15-59 years. Labour force participation by current weekly status. Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24)

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR WOMEN, BY SECTOR AND AGE, 2023-24

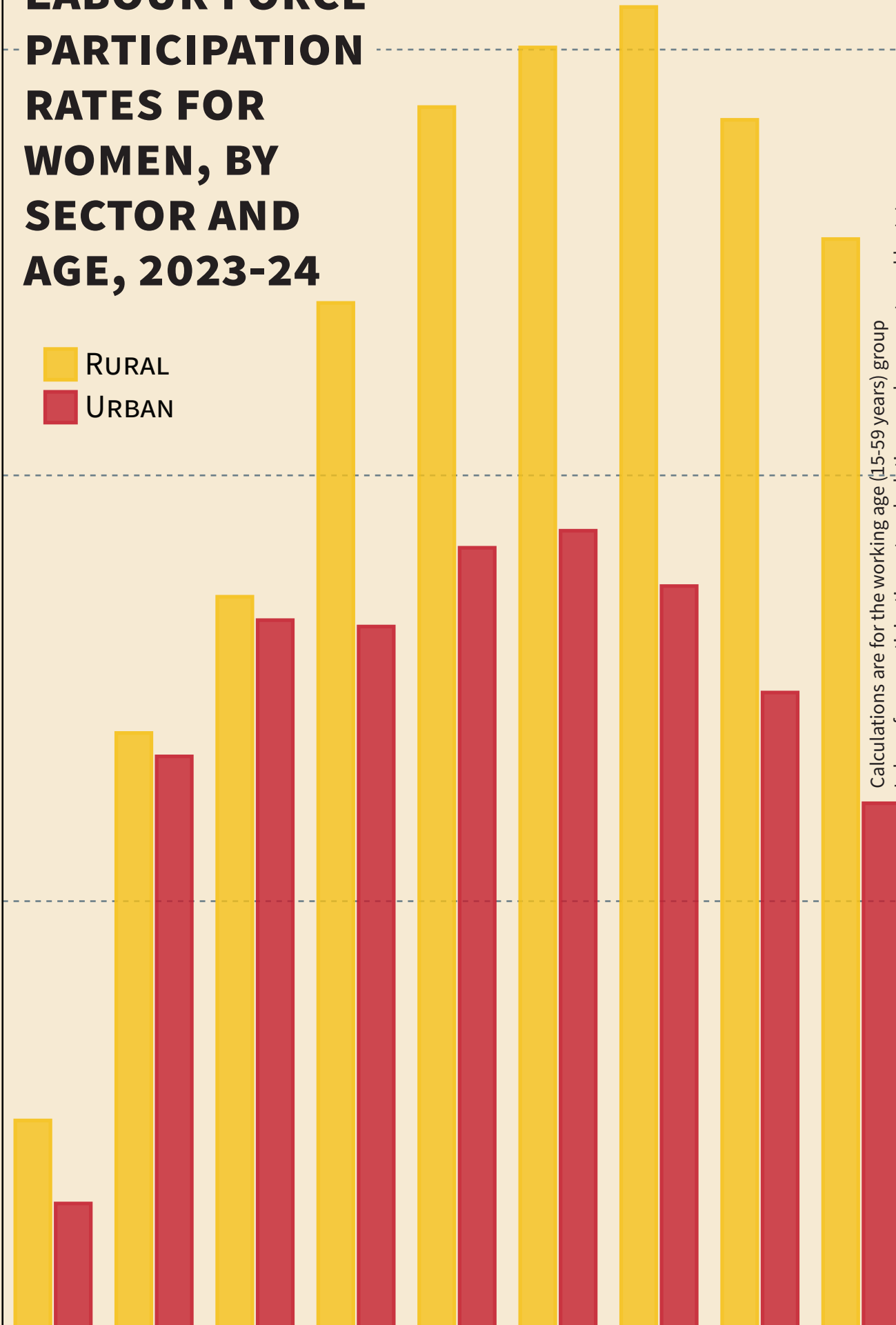
RURAL
URBAN

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

60%
40%
20%
0%

15-19 years 20-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-49 50-54 55-59
AGE GROUPS

Calculations are for the working age (15-59 years) group
Labour force participation rate calculations are by current weekly status
Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24



Returns are programmes to enable women who quit their job and had to take a career break for some time to get back to the workforce, usually through a paid, project-based “internship” or traineeship of a few months or via direct hiring of such candidates.



A SHORT HISTORY OF RETURNSHIPS

The leaky pipeline of female talent has long been an issue that economies across the world and companies have had to contend with and which some have tried addressing. Research on this tends to focus more on government interventions. For instance, Blau and Kahn (2013)¹ noted that the relative decline in female labour force participation in the United States of America (USA) compared to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries between the late 1990s and 2010 could be attributed to the fact that other OECD countries implemented family-friendly policies during that period, while the USA did not. Conversely, mandating paid maternity leave could discourage hiring of female workers and lead to a downward shift of the labour demand curve, depending on the sector. Bustamante et al (2015)² find evidence for this in a mandated maternity leave policy legislation in Colombia. In contrast, Zveglic and Rodgers (2003)³ find that legislation in Taiwan that restricted women's working hours and mandated employer-provided maternity benefits had more mixed effects. They found that mandating maternity benefits increased employment rates. This may be because women in the service sector (who benefitted from this legislation) were already de facto

taking leave.

Returnships are programmes to enable women*⁴ who quit their job and had to take a career break for some time to get back to the workforce, usually through a paid, project-based “internship” or traineeship of a few months or via direct hiring of such candidates⁵. Paid maternity leave in India is for six months and these programmes are often meant to support women who end up quitting their jobs to take breaks longer than that.

These programmes were pioneered by some of Wall Street's leading investment banks like Goldman Sachs in the mid-to-late 2000s, when these organisations took cognisance of the bleeding of female talent from its ranks, exacerbated at the mid-to-senior level, and realised that concrete action was needed to staunch this, as a 2021 Harvard Business Review article by Carol Fishman Cohen, herself a returnee who consults with companies on returnships, notes⁶. Over the years, more companies adopted these programmes. Cohen estimated about a third of Fortune 50 companies in the USA were running these programmes by 2021⁷.

In India, the Tata group is considered to have been the first to have a programme to bring back women who took a career break when

1 Blau, Francine D., and Lawrence M. Kahn. “Female labor supply: Why is the United States falling behind?” *American Economic Review* 103.3 (2013): 251-256, <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.103.3.251>

2 Bustamante, Ramírez, Natalia, Ana Maria Tribin Uribe, and Carmiña O. Vargas. “Maternity and labor markets: Impact of legislation in Colombia”. No. IDB-WP-583. IDB Working Paper Series, 2015, <https://publications.iadb.org/en/maternity-and-labor-markets-impact-legislation-colombia>

3 Zveglic, Jr, Joseph E., and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers. “The impact of protective measures for female workers.” *Journal of Labor Economics* 21.3 (2003): 533-555, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/374958>

4 While there are gender-neutral returnships, this report will be analysing those programmes that are aimed at getting women back into the workforce and fall in the ambit of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives

5 For the purpose of this report, both types of “return to work” programmes will be referred to as returnships

6 Fishman Cohen, Carol. “Return-to-Work Programs Come of Age.” *Harvard Business Review*, Aug. 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/09/return-to-work-programs-come-of-age>

7 Fishman Cohen, Carol. “Return-to-Work Programs Come of Age.” *Harvard Business Review*, Aug. 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/09/return-to-work-programs-come-of-age>

it launched Tata Second Careers, Inspiring Possibilities (SCIP)⁸ in 2008. The India outposts of multinational companies and a few “mature organisations” were the early movers in this space though the numbers were limited in the initial years, according to a 2021 report on returnships⁹ by global management consultancy Zinnov.

A recent catalyst

The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for more companies to pilot these programmes. While exact data on the extent of the uptake is hard to come by, one proxy could be DEI solutions firm Avtar group’s Best Companies for India listings, which features self-nominated companies with at least 500 employees in India across fast-moving consumer goods, information technology (IT), manufacturing, and banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI), among others: in 2016, a little less than a third of the 100 ‘Best’ companies in its rankings had a formal hiring programme to identify and recruit women on career breaks. By 2024¹⁰, this share had jumped to 83 percent. (However, since these are self-nominated companies, they are more likely to present a better-than-average picture of the overall landscape.) At a much smaller scale, this is also borne out in the universe of this report: majority of the companies interviewed launched returnships during or after 2020.

While the companies studied for this report did not directly link the launch to the impact of the pandemic, HerKey, the career engagement platform for women, lists a few reasons behind this shift. One, many women left the workforce during

the pandemic and lockdowns, due to the increased burden of care and domestic responsibilities and companies were keen to address this. This was also the period when more companies saw that offering greater flexibility in terms of allowing working from home did not affect productivity. “It’s not that all [returnee] women want jobs that are 100 percent work-from-home (WFH). What they sought was flexibility of mindset, such as being able to WFH for a day if their child is sick. Companies now know they have the tools and processes to enable this,” said the HerKey founder. Combined with the realisation that they needed to diversify the talent pool they were recruiting from, it led to increased adoption of returnship programmes among companies. The Avtar founder also credited remote / hybrid working options as well as childcare support as additional enablers of returnships.

Direct hiring versus the internship/training route

Returnships or return-to-work programmes for women largely fall into one of two categories. One model involves selecting a small cohort of women, who undergo training and are assigned projects / teams for a certain period, usually three to six months. This paid stint may or may not lead to a permanent role in the company, depending on the candidate’s performance and vacancies. In a year, a company could run a single or multiple cohorts.

The other route is to directly hire women who took a career break for full-time roles, with the “returnees” given some amount of support in the form of training material, assigned a “buddy” (a co-worker they can be in touch with) and given access to mentors, should they need it. Companies also run special recruitment drives for this and may enlist the services of specialist organisations working with women looking to return to work for this, depending on its resources.

8 Tata Group, “Second Careers, Inspiring Possibilities”, Tata Group, <https://www.tata.com/careers/programs/scip/overview>

9 Zinnov, “Returnship programs in India”, Zinnov Consulting, 2021, media.zinnov.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/returnship-programs-a-scalable-sustained-channel-for-hiring.pdf?report=returnship-programs-a-scalable-sustained-channel-for-hiring.pdf

10 AvtarInc, “The 2024 Avtar & Seramount Best Companies for Women in India”, Page 15, AvtarInc, 2024, <https://www.avtarinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Avtar-Yearbook-2024-compressed.pdf>

Each model has its distinct advantages and drawbacks. The first, run with cohorts who are imparted training and given projects, allows the company and the returnee a “trial period” during which both parties can evaluate compatibility and the returnee gets the opportunity for upskilling. Retail brand Titan launched its returnship programme, Sequel, through a six-month, paid, project-based structure in late 2023. The company felt this model gave both itself and the individual returning some time to evaluate each other and then reach a conclusion about whether this was the right place. Similarly, fintech startup Razorpay, which offers a six-month paid returnship involving a project to qualified women who have taken a break of at least six months, said this model provides for some amount of technical training, depending on the role.

It also allows the woman candidate to ramp up gradually after the break. “A six-month trial period helps both sides, especially if the woman had quit work for caregiving responsibilities. The return to work will be a drastic shift and a transition period will help give an accurate picture of what a full 8-10 hours in the office can feel like,” said the DEI consultant formerly with a Big Four accounting firm.

One drawback of this model is the limited number of women a company will be able to take on board at a time. However, some companies who are just embarking on the returnship journey said they were comfortable with starting small, before expanding. “We are taking baby steps,” said the Razorpay representative, while expressing the hope that they would gradually ramp up to double digits in the second year of the programme.

The volume question is less of a challenge with the direct hiring model since companies can recruit as many candidates at a time as it requires. HDFC Bank, which recruits former women employees who quit to take a career break through its “Bank Again” programme, has been able to hire around 1,600 women returnees. The programme was launched in 2020.

Software major Wipro, which also follows this model, has onboarded over 500 women returnees since the launch of its “Begin Again” programme in 2021. The programme is open year-round and spans multiple divisions. “Women take breaks for various reasons. While maternity is a significant factor, reasons also include elder care, children preparing for board exams, accidents or individuals opting for a sabbatical to pursue higher studies. We aim to provide anybody who has taken a break with another opportunity,” said a Wipro representative.

In the direct hiring model, returnee women will be competing for an opening

with counterparts who have not been on a break. However, the companies hiring returnees directly say the talent acquisition and diversity teams ensure these candidate profiles are prioritised. There is also no separate traineeship period with this model and the candidate will have to be prepared for the new schedule from Day 1.

“It’s not that all [returnee] women want jobs that are 100 percent work-from-home (WFH). What they sought was flexibility of mindset such as being able to WFH for a day if their child is sick. Companies now know they have the tools and processes to enable this”

-HerKey founder

“We have observed a strong sense of loyalty in this group of joiners (returnees) because they have come back after a break and truly appreciate the work they are engaged in. They demonstrate high levels of involvement. Seeing these positive outcomes, there is a heightened interest from the business side as well.”

-Wipro spokesperson



OBSERVED OUTCOMES

Better retention

When asked why they launched returnship programmes, companies gave responses ranging from using it to increase the representation of women in their workforce, as a way to redress the fact that women drop out, as an opportunity to tap into a pool of talent that is often overlooked and even “to do the right thing”. Irrespective of the rationale for trying it out, a common observation among companies was that women returnees were often more likely to stay on in the company and less inclined to jump ship at the first opportunity. According to a Wipro spokesperson, loyalty was a significant attribute of this group of employees because they have come back after a break and they “value the kind of work they are doing”. The company reported a retention rate of approximately 80 percent for returnees over the past three years. Zoho said the candidates who joined via its “Marupadi” route (a Tamil word meaning “again”, as its returnship is titled) were typically not looking to switch for the next lucrative offer. Since these are women with work experience, they are also “faster to settle in and drop anchor”.

Others, too, echo the last sentiment,

about the advantage of candidates with experience. While the programme at Titan is recent, the spokesperson said managers who have worked with returnees were happy to realise that working with women back from a career break meant that you need not start with the basics, as is the case with freshers. The 2021 report by consultancy Zinnov on returnship programmes in India¹ similarly found that returnees not only stayed with the company for longer, they also often promoted the organisation to others.

An engaged cohort

Another common observation was that many returnees displayed a zeal to prove themselves. Zoho said candidates from Marupadi usually show a hunger to prove themselves and a sense of responsibility. At Wipro, the company said over 20 percent of the returnees are among the top performers and are highly engaged. This has significantly increased the business side’s interest in hiring from this pool.

¹ Zinnov. “Returnship programs in India”, Zinnov Consulting, 2021. media.zinnov.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/returnship-programs-a-scalable-sustained-channel-for-hiring.pdf?report=returnship-programs-a-scalable-sustained-channel-for-hiring.pdf.

When a campaign like this is launched, it makes current and former women

employees feel that if they have to take a break for some reason, the bank would be encouraging of their return and rejoining, said HDFC Bank. “It makes us a desirable employer for women looking to return to work.”

The companies interviewed said there is a steady supply of applications, with demand usually outstripping supply, even when there is no guarantee of a job at the end of the programme. When Razorpay announced it was looking for the first cohort for its “Resume with Razorpay” programme, the company received an overwhelming 27,000 applications, which had to be whittled down to five. This could, of course, also speak to the larger crisis of unemployment in the country with men, too, applying even though the job description was evidently for women. However, the Titan spokesperson mentioned that getting the right returnee candidates in its retail and manufacturing sector, which calls for 12-hour, six-day work, was not easy.

For some women, being able to return to the workforce through this opportunity was an emotional moment. A Wipro returnee spoke about the joy of being able to draw a salary again, after her break of one year. Others talked about how it gave them back their self-esteem. A 32-year-old engineer with two young children who joined Zoho via the returnship route said going back to work had made her feel empowered. “During my engineering [degree], I used to stay up all night studying and did very well, academically. When I quit, I used to ask myself why I had put in all that effort for all those years. There has to be some meaning to all that – that’s what made me think of rejoining the workforce.” Uniformly, they all felt more companies needed to have returnship programmes and to be sincere about running these.

Yet, despite the recognition from companies that hiring back women who were on a career break is beneficial and the evidence of demand from women for a pathway to return, there are several challenges in the successful introduction and process of rolling out returnships.

“It’s very easy for a manager to say, ‘I won’t hire a maternity returnee because she hasn’t worked for five years’. It’s very easy for them to just reject that CV. For managers, that skill gap becomes an insurmountable hurdle.”

- Corporate lawyer specialising in diversity and inclusion



CHALLENGES

The bias hurdle

During conversations with women candidates, experts in diversity and inclusion and company representatives, it was evident almost uniformly that the biggest impediment to hiring women on a career break was the bias against them among recruiters and managers. This typically takes the form of a deeply held belief that because there was a gap in their career journey, these women would not be sufficiently qualified and up-to-date with market requirements, particularly if the break was for childcare and maternity.

While it may be fair to think that someone who has not worked for an extended period may not necessarily be up-to-date with the latest skills required for a role, particularly in domains like technology, it becomes unfair when this extends to subsequently deciding that it is not worth hiring and training such candidates despite their years of experience. In fact, returnships have shown the contrary, with the right training and skilling even enabling women to switch roles (**see subsection: *When skilling isn't enough***). “Managers in companies including large, listed companies – and we interview thousands of them -- have a lot of biases around hiring maternity returnees. It’s very easy for a manager to say I won’t hire a returnee because she hasn’t worked for five years. For them, that skill gap becomes an insurmountable hurdle,” said the corporate lawyer who advises companies on diversity and inclusion. Thus, the fact that women are

not able to come back to work is not just a supply-side problem.

In the course of reporting, one executive admitted that given a choice between hiring a candidate who was on a break and one who was not, the tendency would be to reject the former. Even when women are hired after a career break, they might be put on less high-profile projects or given less important assignments, relegating their career to a slow track.

Women across the world have to contend with the “motherhood / child penalty”, defined as the costs women bear due to the birth of a child and childcare such as a lower employment rate, lower wages and / or entry to a lower position or a lower skilled job if they are re-entering the job market, compared to men.

In a 2007 USA-based study looking into the wage penalty mothers suffer Shelley Correll, Stephen Benard and In Paik from Cornell University conducted a laboratory experiment to find the mechanism through which the motherhood penalty manifests in hiring decisions. They found that mothers were penalised on a host of measures, including perceived competence and recommended starting salary though men were not. Another study conducted by the same authors in 2008¹ found further evidence of the motherhood penalty in hiring scenarios that extend beyond the

¹ Benard, Stephen, In Paik, and Shelley J. Correll. “Cognitive bias and the motherhood penalty.” *Hastings LJ* 59 (2007): 1359, https://repository.uclawsf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3703&context=hastings_law_journal

wage gap . They found that traditional stereotypes of less commitment toward work, less dependability but more warmth and emotion were attached to mothers who applied for the same job as men, deeming them less qualified, regardless of equality of skills and work experience. This leads employers to relegate these women to low paying jobs– applicants presented as women with children are viewed as less competent and less committed to work, will need to present evidence that they are more qualified for the job, will be rated as less promotable, and will be offered lower starting salaries compared with otherwise similar applicants presented as women without children.

Wang and Chen (2023)² also found evidence for this via a field experiment in China. They found that women without children received fewer callbacks than their counterparts with children even at the young age of 28 years, indicating a female fertility penalty. In contrast, men of the same age and who did not have children experienced no difference in callback rates compared to their counterparts with children, indicating no male fertility effect. Li et. al. (2024)³ sent 35,713 fabricated CVs to genuine job advertisements in the IT, accounting, and HR sectors across four major cities in China, accurately simulating real job-seeking conditions. Their findings reveal that women of prime childbearing age face disadvantages in the job search process, even when their maternal and marital status is not disclosed. Through a field experiment using fictitious CVs in India, Bedi, Majilla

and Reiger (2021)⁴ found that mothers were 57 percent less likely to receive callbacks than those who did not have children. However, they did not find gender differences in callback rates for male and female applicants without children. A simple indication that the woman had access to childcare support offset the motherhood penalty by 20 percent, they found further.

A separate returnship programme is supposed to help address these systemic issues, starting with enabling women to get their foot in a door which is all too often slammed shut. However, tackling bias, across the organisation and at every stage of the process, is still fundamental to the success of the programme. One part of building acceptance is to get leadership buy-in, right at the outset. Companies running returnships said that, without this, it would be impossible to execute these programmes consistently and successfully.

When skilling isn't enough

Women interviewed for this report also spoke about how any skilling or part-time experience they undertook during the break was often overlooked when they applied for jobs (not necessarily via returnship channels). “I quit my job when I got married because of the [long] distance between my then office and my in-laws’ residence and took a break of over seven years for my two children. When my younger child started to go to school, I wanted to get back to work and I did several online courses and reskilling sessions for close to a year. But I still faced many rejections,” said a returnee, now working with Zoho. Her colleague, who took a break of five years, said that when she was ready to return to work, she applied at the IT company she was earlier with as well as several multinational companies.

2 Peijie Wang, and Jing Chen. “Fertility-based employment discrimination and family policy: Evidence from a field experiment.” *Social Policy & Administration* 57.7 (2023): 1135-1149, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/spol.12935>

3 King King Li, et al. “Childbearing age and the shadow mommy effect on hiring: A large-scale field experiment.” (2024), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lunzheng-Li/publication/362955562_Childbearing_Age_and_the_Shadow_Mommy_Effect_on_Hiring_A_Large-Scale_Field_Experiment/links/6759b9cb72215358fe28504e/Childbearing-Age-and-the-Shadow-Mommy-Effect-on-Hiring-A-Large-Scale-Field-Experiment.pdf

4 Bedi, Arjun, Tanmoy Majilla, and Matthias Rieger. “Does signaling childcare support on job applications reduce the motherhood penalty?” *Review of Economics of the Household* (2021): 1-15, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11150-021-09574-7.pdf>

But she felt that none of them took into consideration the certifications or online courses she did during her break. “They only look at whether we had prior work experience in a specific domain / technology. If we learnt something new during the break, that was not taken into consideration. So, a career break becomes a big barrier.”⁵ It is not only a disregard for skilling programmes – even actual experience, if not full-time, is often dismissed. A woman professional in her 40s, with a master’s degree from the USA, had quit after nine years of working and had subsequently worked part-time. However, when she began re-applying for full-time jobs, she said prospective employers were not willing to take her part-time experience into account.

The findings of Mahajan and Nandhini on the penalty faced by women after a career break (2024)⁶ were similar. Even though the “motherhood gap” could be because employers think that the time spent away from work led to a “skill-erosion” for these women, including certifications indicative of upskilling gained during the career-break period did not seem to increase their chances of a callback, they found. This is indicative of the fact that the employer discrimination is less due to the belief that skills have been lost during the break period, and more due to the presence of inherent discrimination against married women returning post care-related break, Mahajan and Nandhini note. Still, some experts do advise that women continue to upskill while they are on a break because it would benefit them and help them stay up-to-date.

Additionally, women appreciate the training and skilling companies give during returnships, which even enable some of

them to switch to new roles. Take the case of a Zoho returnee with a degree in electronics and communication engineering, who used to work in manual testing. When she began looking for a job after a five-year gap, companies only wanted candidates with automation testing due to changes in the sector. In contrast, Zoho, she said, selected her on the basis of her returnship entrance test results and then trained her in automation testing. “Now, I work in both automation and manual testing.” Similarly, other colleagues mentioned being able to transition to a technical writing role despite having no experience in this at other firms because the returnship trained them for this. (The Zoho returnship provides training in three streams: software testing, software development and technical writing)

A considerate and effective hiring process

The next step to amend is the hiring process. Talent acquisition teams and interviewers need to be sensitised to the fact that these are women returning after varying periods of absence and frame questions accordingly. A woman returnee mentioned that at one of the interviews she attended while looking to return to work after an extended gap, a young interviewer insisted on asking her details about the last project she had been on. “I had been on a break for more than seven years - I couldn’t recall the details of the project but all his questions were around that.”

If the role allows, job descriptions could mention transferable skills that could have been picked up during the break, to take just one example of a small tweak in the hiring process that could potentially improve re-entry of women after a career break.

Razorpay said the company had invested in interviewer calibration keeping in mind the fact that candidates would be returning after a gap. At Wipro, where women returnees are

⁵ The candidate was previously working in manual testing and by the time she was returning to work, companies were only interested in automation testing experience. She said Zoho gave her the necessary training and she now works in both manual and automation testing.

⁶ Mahajan, Kanika and S. Nandhini. “Restart: Women, career breaks and employer response.” (2024). <https://www.isid.ac.in/~acegd/acegd2024/papers/NandhiniS.pdf>



directly hired for full-time roles, company representatives mentioned that a dedicated team from the talent

acquisition division works to ensure there are consistent opportunities for “Begin Again” candidates. However, they noted that this was more feasible during the pandemic. With business operations returning to normal and managers urgently seeking candidates, it has become increasingly challenging to persuade them to set roles

THE CASE FOR SKILL-BASED RETURNEE HIRING

To select candidates for its returnship programme, software company Zoho uses an entrance exam testing basic technical skills as the first filter instead of CVs and credentials. Successful returnee women at Zoho interviewed for this report uniformly appreciated the fact that this gave them a level playing field. They felt this was a meritocratic approach which did not call into question their background, duration and reasons for their break right.

Companies could consider adopting this skill-based approach in hiring for returnships. Research has shown the broader benefits of this approach¹, such as greater diversity and better retention. A report by Boston Consulting Group (Dec 2023)² which analysed over 20 million job postings across five countries found that candidates hired on the basis of skills get promoted at a rate comparable to that of traditional hires and that skills-based hires have a 9% lengthier tenure at their organisations than traditional hires. Another analysis by Sigelman, Fuller and Martin (2024)³ at Harvard Business School and Burning Glass Institute using a sample of 11,300 roles at large firms and career histories of 65 million US workers found skills-based hiring to be a win-win for employers and employees. They found that non-degreed candidates hired into roles that dropped degree requirements have a 10-percentage point higher two-year retention rate vs. their college-educated coworkers (58% vs. 48%) while workers without a BA who step into a role that previously required a degree, experience on average an approximately 25% increase in salary.

1 Santhosh, Gopika Maya. “Why skills-based hiring starts with your job descriptions”, LinkedIn, 2021, www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-strategy/why-skills-based-hiring-starts-with-job-descriptions?src=re-other&veh=docs.google.com

2 Goel, Sagar, Orsolya Kovács-Ondrejko, Rucha Vankudre, Scott Bingham, and Julia Nitschke, “Competence over credentials: The rise of skills-based hiring”, Boston Consulting Group, 2023, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/rise-of-skills-based-hiring>

3 Sigelman, Matt, Joseph Fuller and Alex Martin. “Skills-based hiring: The long road from pronouncements to practice.” Burning Glass Institute, Feb. 2024, <https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/Skills-Based%20Hiring.pdf>

aside. To tackle this issue, the company is contemplating the idea of having a pool of returnee candidates ready to join whenever there is an opening.

A skill-based hiring process, such as that adopted by Zoho, is another strategy that companies can consider adopting as it can eliminate bias at the initial stage, by shifting the focus to testing an applicant's skills instead of evaluating their resume. The Zoho returnees who were interviewed were appreciative of the fact that the first filter at the company for a returnship was an entrance exam which tested their basic knowledge for technical roles - this, they felt, was a more meritocratic method of evaluation especially since it did not involve questions about their background, years of break, etc. Selected candidates then go through three months of training (**see box: The case for skill-based hiring**).

It is equally important that there is acceptance across the organisation, particularly among line managers the returnees would be reporting to. A diversity consultant pointed out that the success of a returnship depends significantly on the ecosystem and how

“HR executives would tell me, ‘You don’t fall in the fresher category nor do you fall into the recently employed category. So we want you to start with a basic stipend’. They were offering me a job without taking into consideration my previous experience or my qualifications – that wouldn’t empower me”

- Engineer, 34 years, who took a break after childbirth

willing a line manager is to support a returnee. “The head of a department might embrace the programme, but where the rubber hits the road is with the line manager, who might not share the same enthusiasm.” When one of the companies interviewed for this report launched its returnship, applicants were initially accepted only in the department of the C-suite executive whose brainchild the programme was. An executive with the diversity and inclusion team of another company said telling managers to spend time training returnees can be seen as a huge ask to them.

One way to address this is through training and strong, consistent messaging, which several companies said they undertake. However, the external diversity consultant quoted above suggested that there needs to be some incentivisation for line managers so that they feel it is worth their while to invest in the time and effort to train and work with returnees.

What has also proven effective in changing mindsets is seeing role models in action – a “proof-of-concept”. HerKey said it has seen that once companies see successful candidates, they tend to ramp up returnee hires, an experience borne out by those interviewed for this report, too. At Zoho, executives running the Marupadi programme said they were initially apprehensive about how managers in the tech company, who are often young, would react to returnee women. But they said returnee candidates performed so well that not only are managers keen to hire more women from this pool, the company has also got

requests for these candidates from partner companies. At Titan, where the gig-based returnship programme is only a year old, successful candidates are gradually helping to change mindsets. “Managers have realised that working with women back from a career break is far more advantageous than working with freshers. You don’t have to begin from ABCD -- you begin with sentences right away.”

Salary and career progression

When hiring returnee women, companies need to factor in that biases may play out in different ways. Compensation is another critical area that might be adversely affected.

An engineer, who is also a single mother, said that when she began applying for jobs after a break, recruiters would tell her that she would be compensated at a level similar to fresh recruits, despite her years of experience. “In India, once someone quits, the previous salary becomes the benchmark. For a returnee, this can become a downward spiral,” said the corporate lawyer who advises companies on DEI. Other studies have shown that this is a universal issue. A white paper by recruitment consultancy Robert Walters⁷ based on a survey conducted across companies in Asia found that close to half of returning women identified unequal salaries as the most common type of discrimination, while almost 40 percent mentioned facing a lack of career advancement.

It’s a complex issue and companies need to have a standardised formula taking into account existing salary bands and the candidate’s qualifications and years of experience.

Nomura Services India, the global capability

centre of Nomura in Mumbai, which launched its returnship programme in 2018, said the company analysed both organisational and industry benchmarks while structuring a traineeship stipend which would also reflect the candidate’s potential for growth, and factored in opportunities for increments if they transitioned to full-time roles.

While hiring back former women employees who have been on a break of six

months to five years, HDFC Bank considers their compensation and grade before

they had quit. The period for which they are away does not negatively impact their compensation, grade and growth, said the bank.

Razorpay said each level at the company has a certain range and the candidate’s compensation would be within that, depending on their evaluation and the role they were applying for. “We pay a fixed sum for the internship period but after that, if you are joining as a marketing manager, for instance, then you will be positioned within the compensation ranges we have for marketing,” said the startup.

The companies interviewed for this report said that while a returnee’s previous salary is taken into consideration while calculating compensation, it was never the sole benchmark.

The need for support

For women returning to the workforce after an extended absence, a support system can help ease their transition. Returning to an office and having a completely different schedule after a year or several years may be daunting, especially if one still has care responsibilities. They may grapple with issues of confidence and imposter syndrome, particularly if they faced multiple rejections earlier.

⁷ Robert Walters. “Understanding employers’ attitudes towards women returning to work”, Robert Walters, August 2023, <http://www.robertwalters.com/content/dam/robert-walters/corporate/news-and-pr/files/whitepapers/robert-walters-employing-women-returning-to-work.pdf>

Most participating companies said there is already a “buddy system” in place for all new joiners, including returnees, where they are paired with existing employees to help them settle in. Some companies also offer special orientation sessions, soft-skills training and mentorship. Zoho’s returnship “bootcamp” includes sessions with counsellors while Nomura said returnship candidates are provided “mentoring and developmental experiences” in addition to other training. At Wipro, the human resources and talent acquisition team oversees the journey of returnees and organises leadership connect sessions, particularly with women leaders. Additionally, returnees are provided with a pre-joining kit to support their transition back into the workforce.

One critique of project-based / traineeship-based returnships of a few months has been that these programmes leave the women who are not recruited in limbo at the end of the training period - this is an aspect some companies have begun to address. Nomura said that its returnship was initially designed so that women had to complete a 16-week traineeship before being considered for a full-time role. However, over the years, looking at industry trends, the company has improvised and begun offering full-time roles before the end of the traineeship, when they are confident about a candidate. “Additionally, for cases where full-time roles aren’t immediately available, we consider contractual positions giving them the opportunity to continue working with us,” Nomura said. The applicants who complete Zoho’s bootcamp and interviews are contacted for full-time opportunities once a suitable vacancy is there, even if it might take several months.

Should returnships be gender-neutral?

The returnship programmes analysed for this report are specifically for women. But

there are companies that run gender-neutral programmes, too, open to anyone who has taken a break.

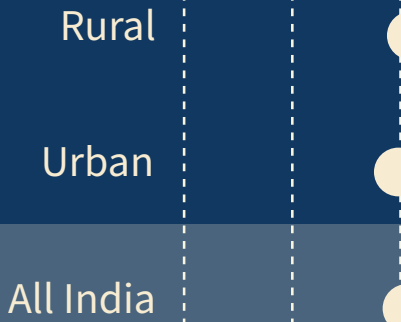
While it’s true that employees, including men, may take an extended career break for a variety of legitimate reasons and anyone who does so could benefit from a returnship pathway, but one cannot ignore the realities that make a programme specifically for women necessary, either by itself or in addition to one that’s gender-neutral. For one, there’s the problem of the leaky pipeline mentioned in this report at the outset resulting in, among other things, far fewer women in middle and senior management. Then there is the fact that women end up spending a disproportionate amount of time on housework and care work compared to men. According to the 2019 Time Use survey⁸, women spend close to 40 hours a week on housework/ care activities while men spend only a fifth of that time (eight hours).

Thus, some DEI experts feel that from an equity perspective, there is a strong case for prioritising returnee women. “When you have limited vacancies, you should give it to those who need it the most and that would be women because they are the ones who usually drop out of the workforce because of primary caregiving responsibilities,” said the DEI consultant formerly with a Big Four accounting firm. The Avtar founder said women need special enablers such as flexibility and sponsorship programmes because of the unique challenges they face. “We must keep in mind that equitable measures (providing customised resources based on the specific needs of each recipient) are necessary to create an equal platform and to achieve equal outcomes.”

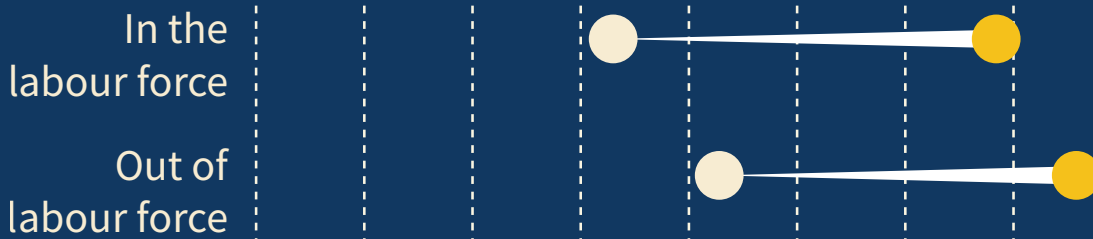
⁸ “Report of the Time Use Survey”, Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, Government of India, 2019, https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Report%20of%20the%20Time%20Use%20Survey-Final.pdf

DAILY AVERAGE TIME SPENT ON HOUSEWORK/CARE ACTIVITIES BY ● MEN AND ● WOMEN (2019)

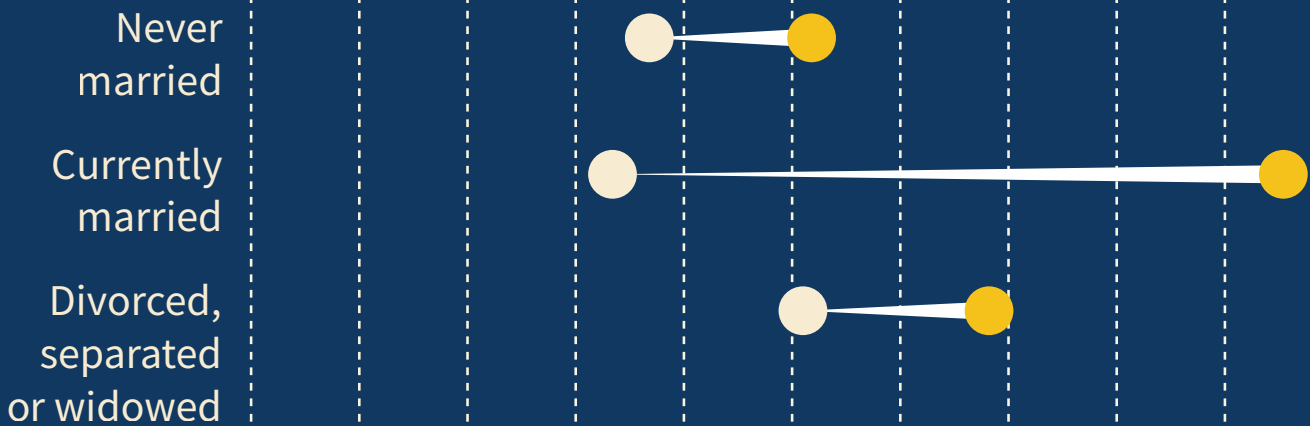
BY AREA



BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS (USUAL STATUS)



BY MARITAL STATUS



Classification of activities as per the System of National Accounts
Source: Time Use Survey, 2019

0 mins 50 100 150 200 250 300 350 400 450 500

Daily average time (in minutes) spent in unpaid household and care work

“I think programmes like these act as catalysts at an ecosystem level. Will there be tremendous change in one year? I don’t think so. But if you do this consistently, I think it will bring about a mindset shift in the industry.”

- Razorpay spokesperson



LEARNINGS

While each returnship experience may be unique to companies, there are also several learnings which crystallised in the course of running these programmes.

To start with, companies need to have institutional clarity about their returnship programme, what form it will be in and, crucially, to commit to it, so that it does not remain a flash in the pan or a one-off for DEI visibility. It should tie in with the company's broader business plans and would depend on the sector it is in and the kind of roles it has. Returnee women have mentioned that, unfortunately, there are companies that announce returnship programmes mainly for marketing purposes and are not interested in actually hiring them. The programme should be run regularly and become part of ongoing efforts, said diversity experts. "Just like every company has a very structured way to hire freshers via internships etc, they need to have a similar, consistent approach to recruit returnee women," said HerKey's spokesperson. Companies with long-running returnship programmes are able to develop a healthy talent pipeline.

There is consensus among companies that leadership buy-in, as mentioned earlier, is extremely important to ensuring the adoption and continuance of the programme. Equally, efforts must be made to sensitise the larger ecosystem of managers and peers so that employees also understand the need for a returnship policy.

Flexibility in approach

At the same time, regular monitoring, evaluation and seeking feedback enables companies to ensure the programmes evolve suitably. This way, programmes can also adapt to the needs of the candidate. For instance, to accommodate the varying readiness stages of women, Nomura Services shifted its model from one with a fixed time of the year for applications to one that accepts applications around the year. "This ensured that women could join when they were ready—not just when we were," said the company. It has also made the criterion that applicants must have taken a break of at least two years more flexible, which it says has allowed the company to hire a more diverse set of candidates. "This openness allows us to accommodate a diverse range of women who have been away from corporate roles," said the company.

The lawyer advising companies on DEI said organisations should ideally be able to accommodate varying preferences, for full-time roles or for flexible arrangements. "Avoid a zero-sum approach of all or nothing," she suggested. While offering flexibility in the hours of work and location, this should ideally be done after discussions with the candidate and understanding what her needs are, said the DEI consultant previously with the accounting multinational. "Don't automatically assume they need flexibility and may want to work

from home. I've also heard from a lot of women that they want to be part of the workplace environment. They are deciding to come back to the workplace - trust that they know what they are doing."

The data speaks for itself

Once a programme is launched, companies should track the rollout and results. For this, companies should define its criteria for success – whether it's returnees' retention rate or performance ratings – and track the metrics. In case business units need to be convinced to invest more or to expand the programme, this is the data that would be needed to make that case. Analysing the data can also inform decisions around modifications and tweaks that may be needed.

Providing support to returnee candidates need not wait till they actually come on board, Razorpay has concluded in the year since the programme's rollout. The company now introduces cohort members to their "buddies" in the organisation a few days in advance, while preparatory material is sent two weeks ahead, to ease the transition. Regular check-ins with the candidate can help them feel supported, an external DEI consultant quoted earlier, mentioned, a sentiment that was echoed by one of the Zoho returnees. Returnees may struggle with imposter syndrome, self-doubt and a dip in confidence due to their time away from the workplace, which is where a support system helps.

On their part, the women returnees interviewed wanted companies to publicise returnship programmes as they felt there was not sufficient awareness around these. They were appreciative of interviews and entry processes which did not dwell on the duration and reasons for the breaks they took and the training, upskilling and mentoring which companies offered. "Having such programmes gives women the

confidence that in case they do have to take a break, there is now a way for them to get back," said an engineer who joined Wipro after a career break and found the hybrid work format enabling. They also appreciated the training that companies gave, which helps not just to update skills but also, in some cases, to help women find new roles and departments.

EACH COMPANY MUST DECIDE THE RETURNSHIP MODEL THAT WOULD BEST SUIT ITS REQUIREMENTS AND ACCORDING TO THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO IT. BUT HERE ARE SOME RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONSIDER THAT COULD INCREASE THE CHANCES OF THE PROGRAMME'S SUCCESS



SECURE LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

For a returnship programme to succeed, it's critical to secure company-wide leadership support right at the outset. It should not remain an HR-only initiative.



SENSITISE THE ENTIRE ORGANISATION

The acceptance of returnships by managers and supervisors is equally important. Team leads, interviewers and others must be sensitised to returnee profiles. Training, workshops and conversations can help iron out concerns.



HAVE INSTITUTIONAL CLARITY

The organisation must be clear why it's launching a returnship and the types of jobs that will be available to returnees.



OFFER FULL-TIME ROLES

Don't confine the returnship to only consultant / ad hoc roles. Offering full-time roles, if available, to returnees will also signal the company's trust in them.



CONSIDER SKILL-BASED HIRING

A hiring process that tests returnees' skills instead of filtering them based on their resumes will widen your talent pool and give a fairer chance to candidates.



ACKNOWLEDGING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Career breaks don't necessarily mean a loss of skills. In fact, those on breaks may pick up several transferable skills in addition to the technical skills that may help them thrive in the workplace. Depending on what the role calls for, recognising these can help widen the pool of potential candidates.

Key Takeaways

FLEXIBILITY IS YOUR FRIEND



Offering all employees flexibility to the extent possible is always a good approach. Additionally, offering flexibility when working with returnee candidates - this could be in terms of relaxing entry criteria such as duration of the break or making other tweaks to the programme based on feedback - can widen the pool of talent available, and improve retention rates.

DEFINE AND TRACK THE METRICS



Define your metrics for success and make sure these are regularly tracked. Data-driven insights such as retention rates and performance of returnee hires can be useful to convince the business side to invest in and sustain the programme.

DO IT CONSISTENTLY



Run returnships regularly, not as a one-off effort. Adopt a structured and consistent approach to hiring returnees, just like regular hiring of freshers. This can create a talent pipeline for the company. Combine this with regular evaluation and seek feedback, so that iterations and improvements can be made.

HAVE A FAIR PAY FORMULA



Establish clear guidelines on remuneration and career progression. Have a formula for remuneration that does not place the returnee at a disadvantage (i.e. benchmarking it solely against last drawn salary) – if their skills and qualifications meet the job description, the returnee's salary should not be below the salary band for that role.

SUPPORT THE RETURNEES



While returnees are experienced professionals, they would also be coming back to the office after a gap. A thoughtful onboarding / orientation session, a buddy programme, mentorship and regular check-ins can all help ease the transition in addition to training sessions in both “hard” and “soft” skills.

CHAMPION THE CHANNEL



The performance of returnee candidates helps overcome internal bias within the organisation. The more companies champion and support them, the more accepted this channel of talent acquisition will become.

ENDNOTE

In 2024, India was ranked 129 out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. It had slipped two places from the previous year and had closed 64 percent of its gender gap. India's female labour force participation rate continues to be one area the country could do much better in, an improvement that would also go some way to bridge the gender gap.

For this, a comprehensive approach with enablers at multiple levels would be needed and one prong of this could be wider adoption of returnship programmes across industry, if implemented the right way. The fact that a swathe of educated, experienced and eager women are unable to re-enter the workforce, all too often for reasons outside their control, has social and economic impact. Among Indian companies, it's still relatively early days but more organisations seem to be trying out this route. In January, auto major Mahindra group became the latest conglomerate to announce a "second career" programme for women. Change will be slow but as more companies embark on this route, there will be wider acceptability and mainstreaming of hiring from this

section of experienced professionals.

As the Razorpay spokesperson remarked, "I think programmes like these act as catalysts at an ecosystem level. Will there be tremendous change in one year? I don't think so. But if you do this consistently, I think it will bring about a mindset shift in the industry."

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a series of interviews and conversations with Indian companies, DEI experts, as well as employees who have joined the workplace after a career break. The reportage is supported with findings from academic and policy studies from around the world.

HR representatives of seven companies were interviewed, spanning IT, consulting, retail and manufacturing, banking and financial services and fintech startup sectors. Two interviews were conducted in person, four over video calls and one over email. Questions included type of returnship, the reason to launch one, and observed outcomes that were qualitative and quantitative.

Additionally, fourteen individuals were also interviewed. These included seven women returnees and one woman applying for returnships. They were all interviewed over the phone or via video calls. A corporate lawyer and two external diversity consultants were interviewed over the phone; the founders of two companies that focus on DEI initiatives as well as one executive search and talent advisory firm were interviewed over video call and email.

The interviews were conducted during December 2024 and January 2025.

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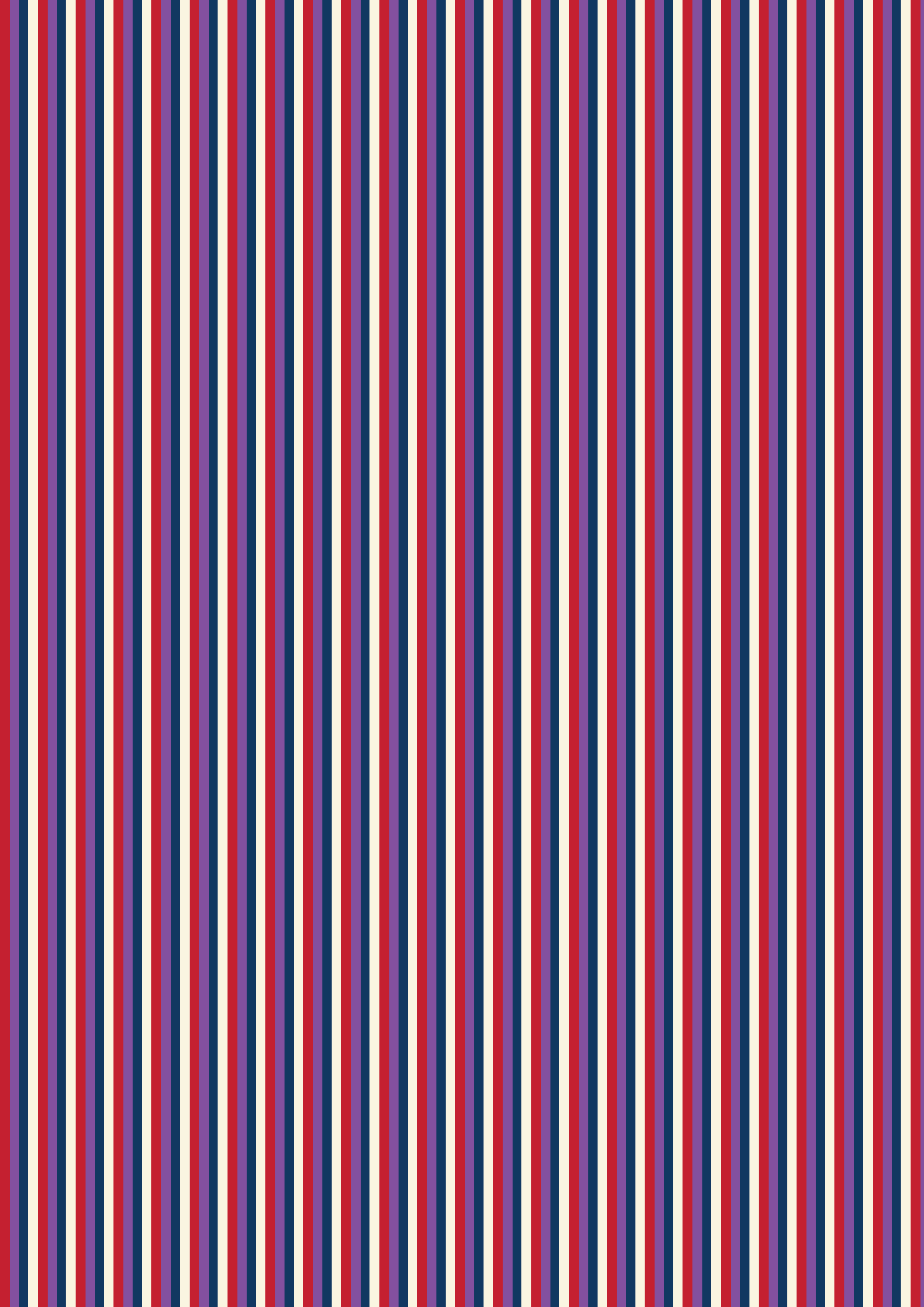
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The **Centre for Economic Data and Analysis** – CEDA – was founded in 2020 by the Economics Department at Ashoka University. Our primary goal is to enable wider access to socio-economic data and to facilitate informed discourse about key economic and social developments in India. The Centre is currently working on an ambitious research-and-advocacy project to understand the demand-side barriers that keep women out of India’s workforce and to identify strategies and measures that can address them.

The **Godrej DEI Lab** is part of the Godrej Industries Group. Its mission is to advance inclusion within the Group, and help build ecosystems of change across corporate India, and beyond.

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The Returnship Road

