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Invisible Barriers: Examining Post-Maternity Reintegration Challenges in the Urban Indian Workplace

Sinchana, Ananya Gupta, Ankit Roy, Parijat Ghosh and Chandrakanth MG,

Student, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Dr.Abhilasha R,

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Abstract: *This study examines post-maternity reintegration experiences of working women in urban India, focusing on workplace provisions, career opportunities, and performance recognition. Amid growing concerns over gender equity, returning to work after maternity leave remains a critical yet underexamined transition that shapes a woman's long-term career trajectory and sense of belonging within her organization. Using a quantitative survey-based design, 120 working women across urban centers responded to a structured 10-question MCQ survey. Findings reveal a significant gap between formal reinstatement and genuine professional reintegration. A notable proportion (34.5%) returned before completing three months of maternity leave. Nearly half (45.2%) reported no specific workplace provisions upon return, and 66.7% resumed the same role with unchanged responsibilities. Only 7.1% were promoted, while 40.5% received neither a performance bonus nor a salary hike in their first appraisal cycle. The study aligns with UN Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), arguing that post-maternity reintegration is a central indicator of an organization's true commitment to gender equity. The research concludes with evidence-based recommendations for structured reintegration protocols, manager sensitization, and policy reform to ensure that maternity leave does not quietly become a career penalty.*

Key Words: *Post-maternity reintegration, workplace gender equity, career progression, maternity leave return, project inclusion, organizational support, return-to-work experience, SDG 5, SDG 8, urban India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in the workforce is undergoing significant transformation globally, driven by growing awareness of gender equity, changing organizational cultures, and evolving legislative frameworks. While considerable progress has been made in increasing female representation across industries, one of the most consequential chapters in a woman's professional journey continues to receive insufficient attention: what happens when she returns to work after maternity leave. The weeks and months following this return are not simply a period of personal adjustment they are a professional turning point that determines whether a woman re-enters her career on equal footing or steps back into an environment that has quietly redistributed her opportunities and recalibrated expectations around her commitment and capability.

India, as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, has taken important legislative steps to support working mothers. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017 extended paid leave to 26 weeks for eligible employees a significant policy milestone that recognized the compounded pressures faced by women in the workforce. Yet legislation guarantees return, not reintegration. A woman may walk back into her office with her designation intact and find, within the first few weeks, that her name has been removed from project lists, that a colleague has been groomed for the promotion she was tracking, or that her workload has been restructured around assumptions about her availability and ambition rather than her actual capacity. These are not dramatic acts of discrimination they are incremental, often invisible, and cumulatively devastating to a career.

Urban India presents a particularly important context for this inquiry. Cities such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Delhi are home to large populations of professionally educated women working across technology, finance, healthcare, education, and management sectors where career continuity, visibility, and momentum are essential. For women in these environments, maternity leave is not a departure from professional identity but a temporary pause, after which they expect to resume as equals. The gap between that expectation and lived experience is what this study seeks to understand and document. With industries ranging from IT and banking to retail and education represented in this research, the findings reflect a cross-sectoral picture of reintegration in the Indian urban professional context.

The consequences of poor reintegration extend well beyond the individual woman. When organizations fail to genuinely reinstate women into the professional mainstream, they forfeit the accumulated expertise and leadership potential of experienced employees. Gender pay gaps deepen at senior levels as women are passed over for opportunities they were on track to receive. Team cultures adapt to lower expectations rather than challenge them. And the women themselves navigating the compounded demands of new motherhood and a workplace that has shifted in their absence carry a psychological burden that research consistently links to attrition, disengagement, and long-term career underperformance relative to their potential.

Despite these well-documented stakes, post-maternity reintegration as a focused area of inquiry remains notably sparse in Indian academic literature. Existing studies tend to examine gender equity in broad strokes representation ratios, pay gaps, work-life balance without isolating the post-maternity return as a distinct professional inflection point. Where reintegration is studied, it is often in Western organizational contexts with limited applicability to the cultural, structural, and managerial realities of Indian workplaces. This study seeks to address that gap by centering the specific experiences of urban Indian working mothers during and following their return from maternity leave, with attention to measurable patterns that can inform organizational practice and policy.

To explore these dynamics, this study administered a structured 10-question multiple-choice survey to working women in urban India. The study focused on working women aged 25 years and above, representing a key phase of career development, family formation, and post-maternity workplace reintegration.

Research Questions

RQ1. To what extent do workplace provisions support women returning from maternity leave?

RQ2. What career opportunities are available to women after returning from maternity leave?

RQ3. What additional organizational support do returning mothers expect?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the adequacy of workplace provisions for women returning from maternity leave in urban Indian workplaces.

2. To assess career opportunities and performance appraisals as part of post-maternity reintegration in urban Indian workplaces.

3. To identify the additional employer support needed to ease post-maternity reintegration in urban Indian workplaces.

This study is grounded in the conviction that post-maternity reintegration is not a soft HR issue but a hard measure of gender equity in practice. The data gathered through this survey, and the patterns it reveals, are intended to serve not only as academic contribution but as a practical resource for organizations, policymakers, and advocates working to ensure that the professional journey of working mothers in India is one of continuity, equity, and dignity, rather than quiet diminishment.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The reintegration of women into the workplace following maternity leave is a multifaceted issue that intersects gender equality, organizational policy, and psychological well-being. The studies reviewed below are arranged in reverse chronological order to reflect the most current evidence first, offering a progressive understanding of how scholarly attention to post-maternity reintegration has evolved over time.

Organizational policies and HR practices are critical in determining whether reintegration is equitable. Szabo-Cseszneki et al. (2025) highlight that inclusive workplace culture, strong supervisor support, and flexible work arrangements are the primary factors facilitating a positive return-to-work experience (Szabo-Cseszneki et al., 2025). The authors argue that supporting returning mothers not only benefits individuals but also contributes to long-term workforce sustainability and organizational productivity.

Franzoi et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 52 global studies, found that returning to work after maternity leave is commonly accompanied by emotional pressure, work-life conflict, and psychological stress. The review further highlights that while longer maternity leave improves health outcomes, it does not automatically ensure smooth reintegration, as many women face a sudden rise in workload and rigid schedules that fail to accommodate new childcare responsibilities (Franzoi et al., 2024). Supervisor and coworker support play a decisive role in whether mothers readjust successfully, yet organizations rarely prioritize the post-return phase.

Physical and psychological health during the initial reentry period is another area of concern. Falletta et al. (2019) found that work reentry in the first month after childbirth is associated with significant stress and reduced self-rated health, particularly among women balancing demanding work environments and postpartum recovery (Falletta et al., 2019). The authors identify work environment support and maternity leave length as key predictors of adjustment, arguing for better institutional support and reentry planning.

The availability of flexible work arrangements has emerged as a critical determinant of post-maternity employment continuity. Chung and Van der Horst (2017) demonstrate that without access to flexitime or teleworking, many women reduce their working hours or exit the workforce entirely (Chung & Van der Horst, 2017). The research finds that merely perceiving the availability of flexible options significantly improves mothers' confidence, making it as impactful as actually using such arrangements. Women

utilizing teleworking report lower stress levels and a stronger sense of work-life balance. However, workplace cultures that stigmatize requests for flexibility undermine these benefits, pushing mothers toward slower career paths.

The psychological dimension of reintegration extends to identity disruption and role re-entry challenges. Ladge and Greenberg (2015) examine the internal conflicts experienced by returning parents, particularly the tension between professional identity and parental identity (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). The research shows that returning mothers frequently question their own competence, leading to reduced engagement and productivity. The study emphasizes the need for organizational empathy and psychological support to help women successfully recalibrate their occupational identities post-maternity.

Research from the Irish context underscores the role of cultural beliefs in shaping post-maternity outcomes. O'Connor and Wright (2013) found that many returning mothers consciously scale back their career ambitions due to workplace pressures, exclusion from major projects, and a perceived loss of competitiveness with male colleagues (O'Connor & Wright, 2013). The study highlights that although flexible working policies may exist on paper, structural barriers continue to limit equal progression. Participants also reported a lack of senior female role models, which contributes to long-term career stagnation, emphasizing that reintegration challenges are deeply rooted in workplace culture and societal norms.

In summary, the literature reveals that women returning from maternity leave face a convergence of structural, cultural, psychological, and organizational barriers that impede equitable reintegration. From the motherhood penalty and flexible work gaps to identity disruption and inadequate HR policies, the evidence underscores the urgent need for organizations to move beyond policy formulation toward genuine implementation of supportive practices. This study builds on these findings to investigate the lived experiences of returning women and identify actionable recommendations for more inclusive workplaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Motherhood Penalty Theory, which explains the systemic disadvantages faced by women in the workplace after childbirth, including reduced career advancement opportunities and biased perceptions of commitment. It is further supported by the Work Family Conflict Theory, which highlights the tension between professional responsibilities and family roles, often leading to stress and decreased job satisfaction among returning mothers. The study also draws on Organizational Support Theory, which emphasizes the role of workplace policies, managerial support, and organizational culture in influencing employee well-being and successful reintegration. Additionally, Self-Efficacy Theory is used to understand how a woman's confidence in her ability to manage both work and family responsibilities impacts her performance and adjustment after returning to work. Together, these theories provide a structured framework to analyze the psychological, social, and organizational factors affecting women's post-maternity workplace experiences.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a quantitative descriptive survey research approach to examine how maternity leave reintegration shapes women's workplace experiences and career trajectories. It explores how women are navigating their return to work, what barriers they encounter such as exclusion from projects, workload imbalance, and lack of managerial support and what drives or discourages their continued career engagement post-maternity.

Research Design: A descriptive survey research approach was used to gather direct insights from working women aged 25 years and above, residing in urban India, who had returned to work after maternity leave within the past 1–3 years, across sectors including IT, corporate, media, hospitality, and education. The purpose of the study was to understand the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences associated with post-maternity reintegration.

Survey Instrument and Focus Areas: The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions focusing on workplace provisions, career opportunities after return, performance recognition, working conditions, and additional employer support needed for smoother reintegration.

Limitations of the Study: The study targets women across select sectors and results may not accurately represent all industries or geographic regions. Self-reported data may introduce recall or social desirability bias, and experiences may vary significantly based on company policy and organizational culture.

4. SAMPLING METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

• Total 120 responses received.

• Sampling Method:
To get meaningful insights about post-maternity reintegration, purposive non-probability sampling was used to focus on working women in urban India who have returned to work after maternity leave and have direct experience of workplace reintegration.

• Data Collection Tool: Google Forms

The sampling strategy focused on including women who are actively engaged in professional roles and have recently transitioned back to work after maternity leave, allowing the study to capture real experiences related to workplace support, career opportunities, and work-life balance.

DATA ANALYSIS

Responses were analyzed using basic statistics to identify key patterns, common experiences, and perceptions related to post-maternity reintegration. Microsoft Excel was used to create pie charts and graphs that visually represented the data. This approach helped in gaining a clear understanding of workplace reintegration experiences after maternity leave.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

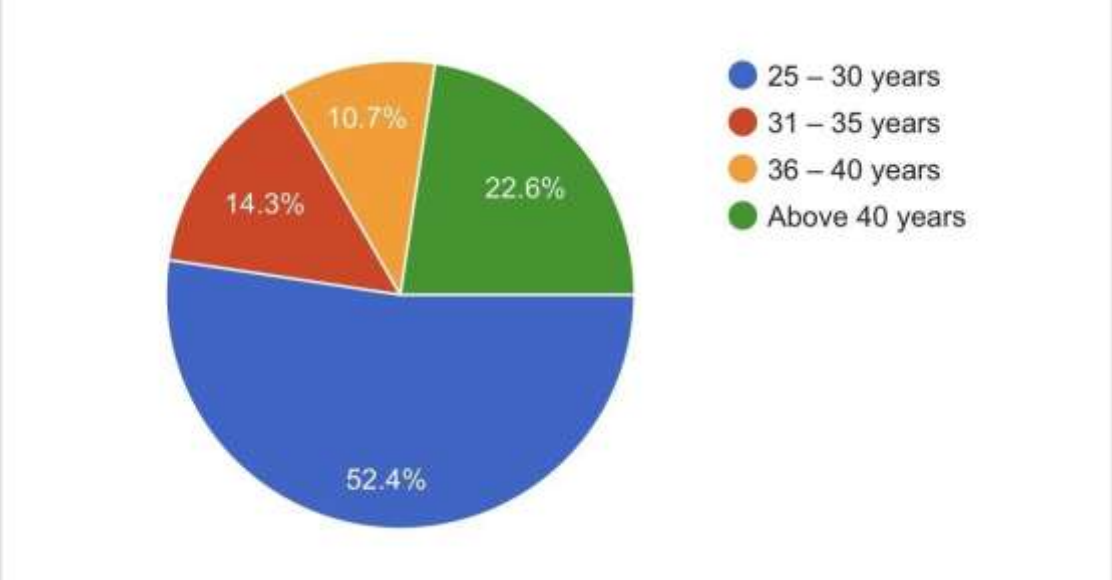
Limited Sample Size and Demographic Scope: Although the sample size was expanded to 120 respondents, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of all working mothers across industries and regions.

Geographical Restrictions: The study focuses primarily on urban Indian workplaces; therefore, findings may vary in rural and semi-urban contexts.

Absence of Qualitative Data: Since the study relies on a quantitative survey approach, deeper personal experiences and emotional nuances may not be fully captured.

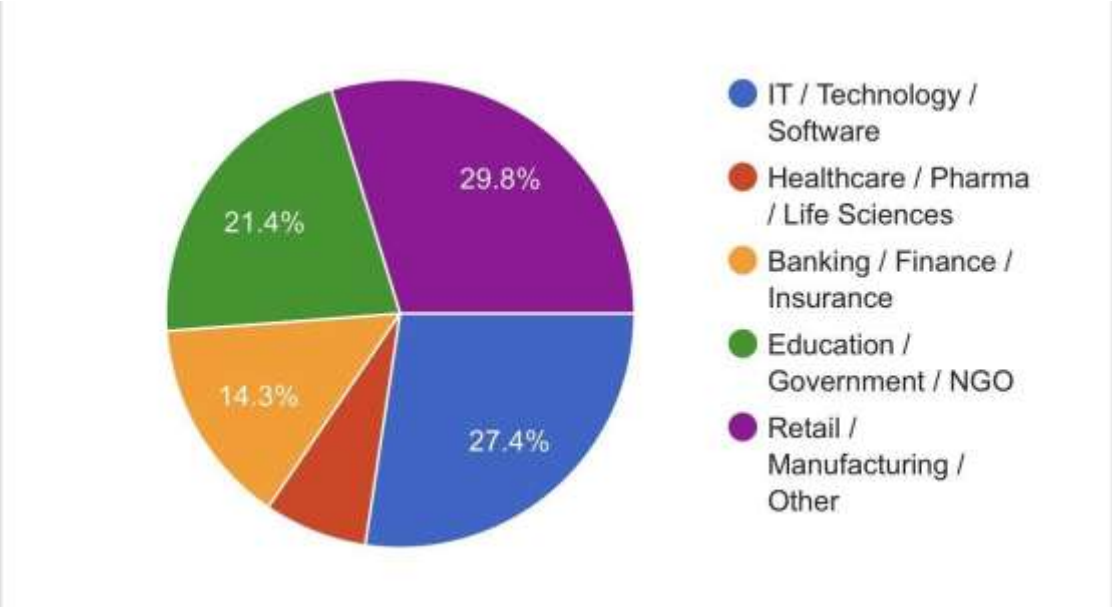
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Fig. 1 Age distribution of respondents



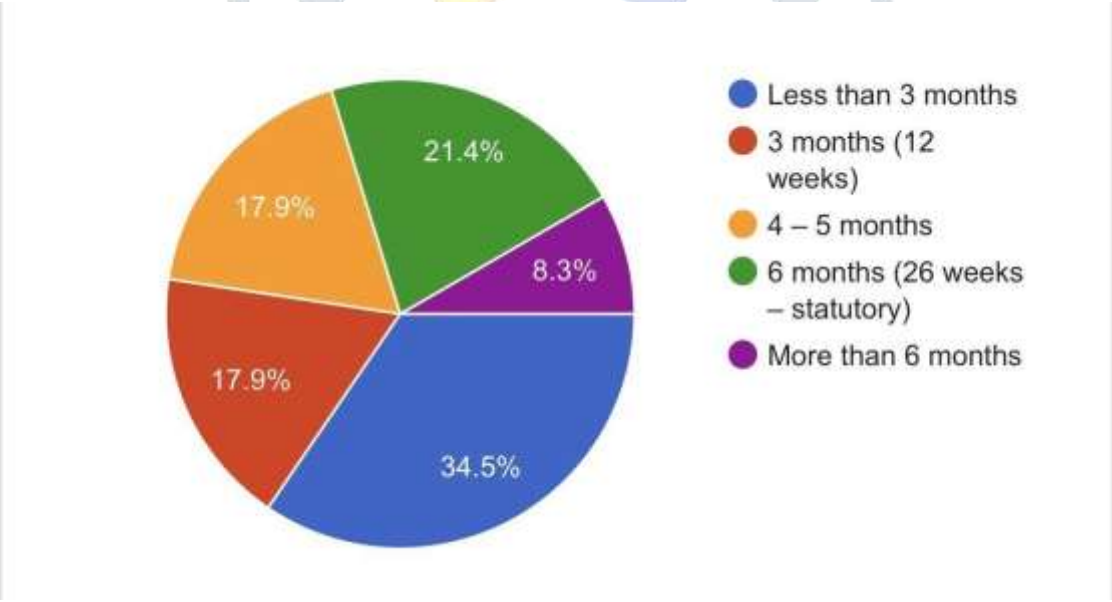
A majority of respondents (52.4%) fall within the 25–30 years age group, indicating that most participants are in the early stages of their careers. This is followed by 22.6% above 40 years, 14.3% aged 31–35 years, and 10.7% aged 36–40 years. This shows that the study mainly represents younger working mothers, with some representation from more experienced age groups.

Fig. 2 Industry-wise distribution of respondents



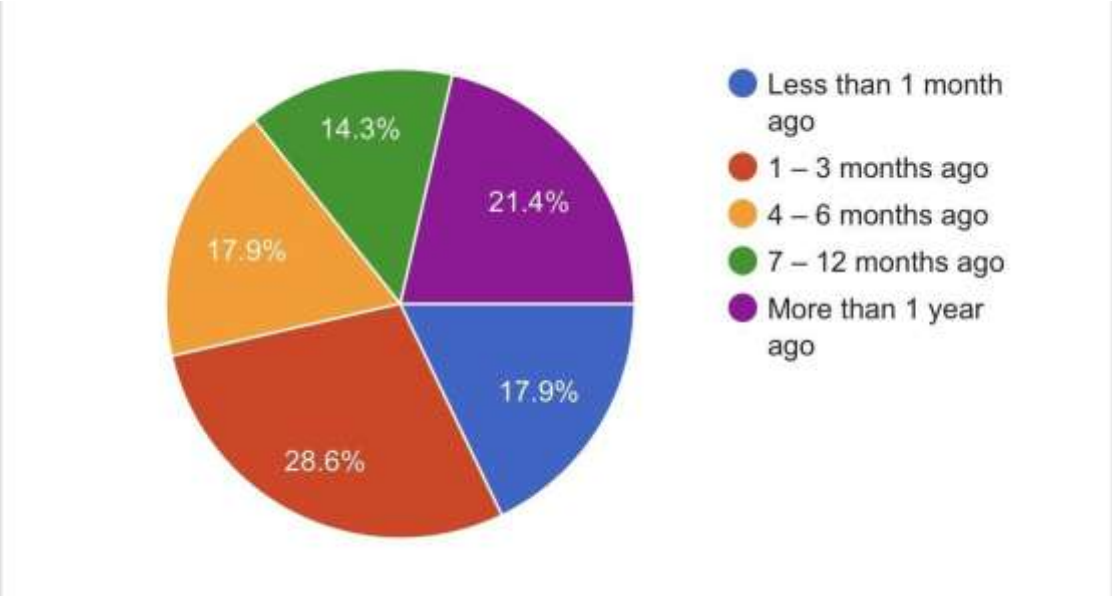
The largest proportion of respondents (29.8%) work in retail, manufacturing, or other sectors, followed closely by 27.4% in IT/Technology/Software. Education/Government/NGO accounts for 21.4%, while Banking/Finance/Insurance represents 14.3%. Healthcare/Pharma/Life Sciences has the smallest share. This indicates a diverse representation across industries, with a slight concentration in private sector roles.

Fig. 3 Duration of maternity leave provided by employers



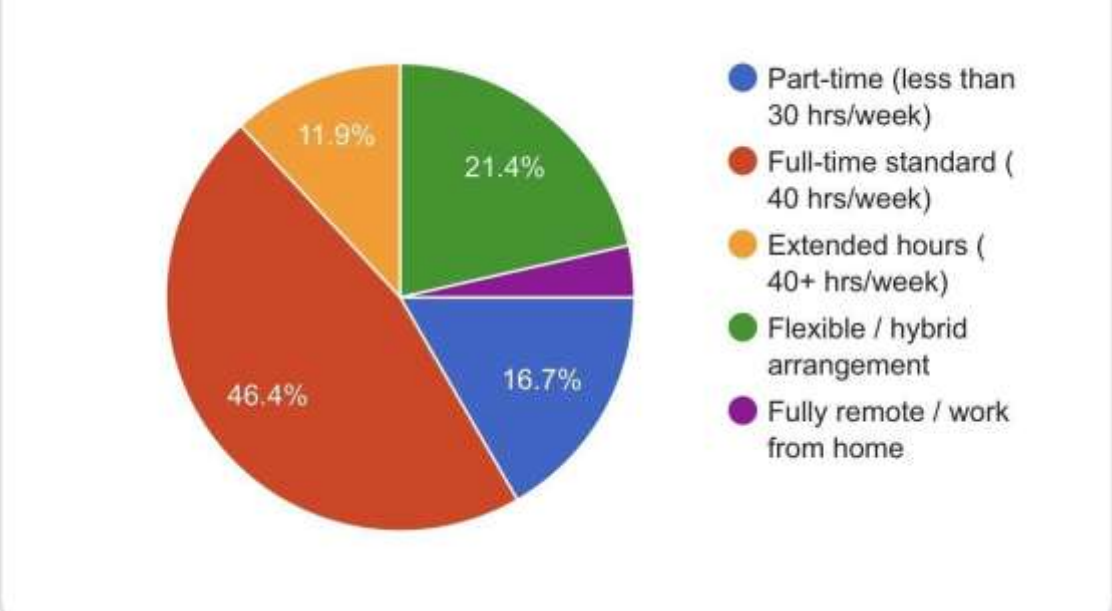
The highest percentage of respondents (34.5%) availed less than 3 months of maternity leave. Meanwhile, 21.4% took 6 months, and 17.9% each took 3 months or 4–5 months. Only 8.3% took more than 6 months. This suggests that many women return to work earlier than the recommended 6-month period, potentially affecting their reintegration experience.

Fig. 4 Time since return to work after maternity leave



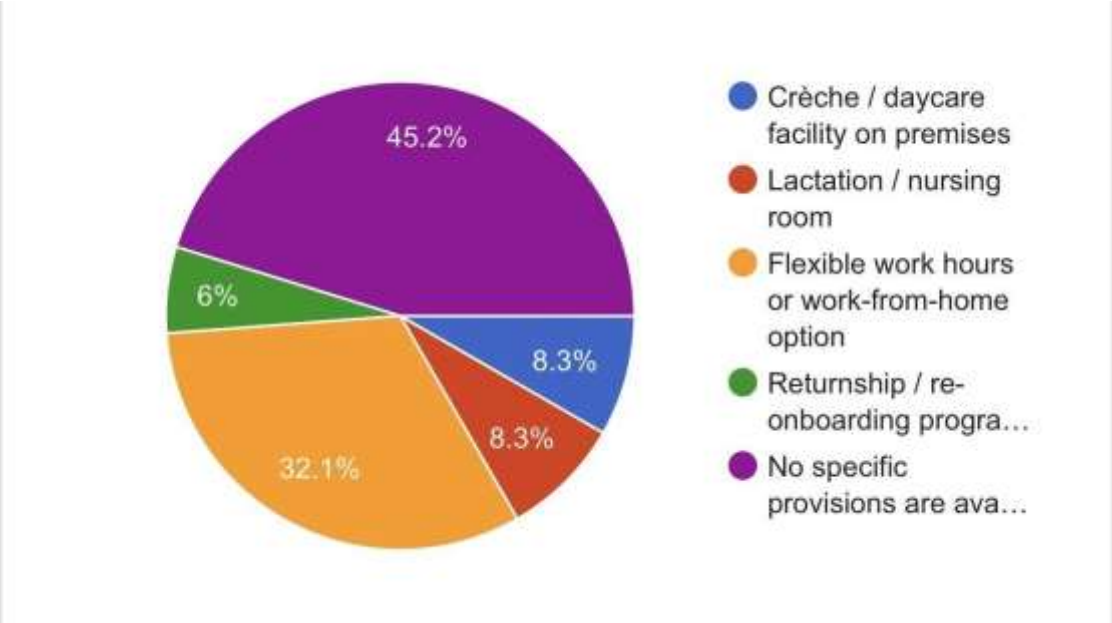
Most respondents (28.6%) returned to work 1–3 months ago, indicating relatively recent reintegration experiences. Additionally, 21.4% returned more than a year ago, while 17.9% returned less than a month ago and another 17.9% between 4–6 months ago. This reflects a mix of both recent and longer-term reintegration perspectives.

Fig. 5 Current working hours after maternity leave



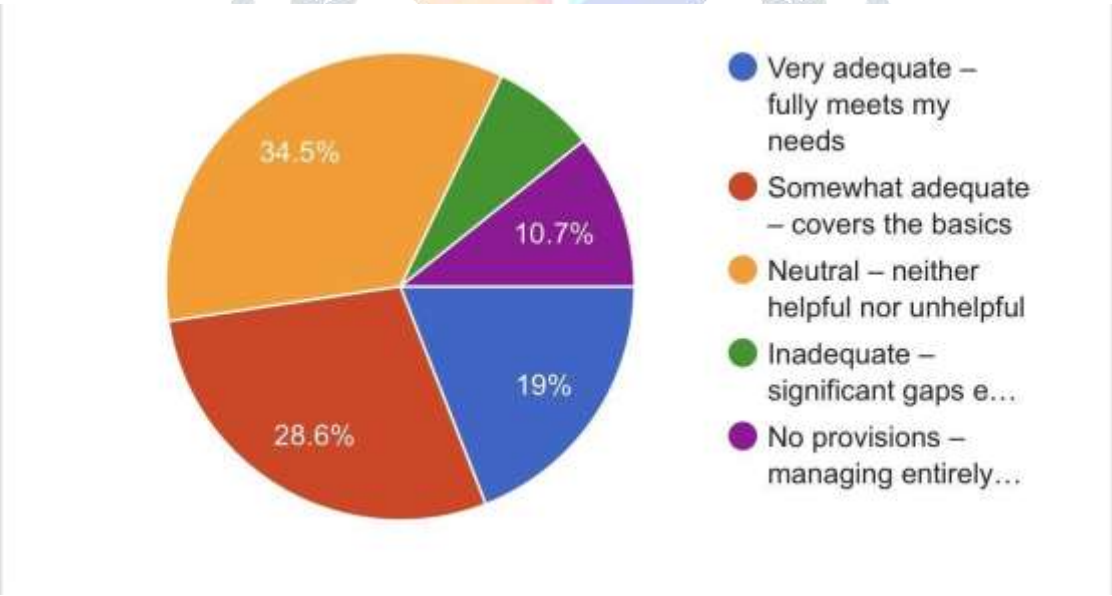
A majority (46.4%) are working full-time standard hours (40 hrs/week), indicating a return to regular work schedules. Meanwhile, 21.4% are in flexible or hybrid arrangements, and 16.7% are working part-time. This suggests that while flexibility exists, most women resume traditional full-time roles.

Fig. 6 Workplace provisions available for returning mothers



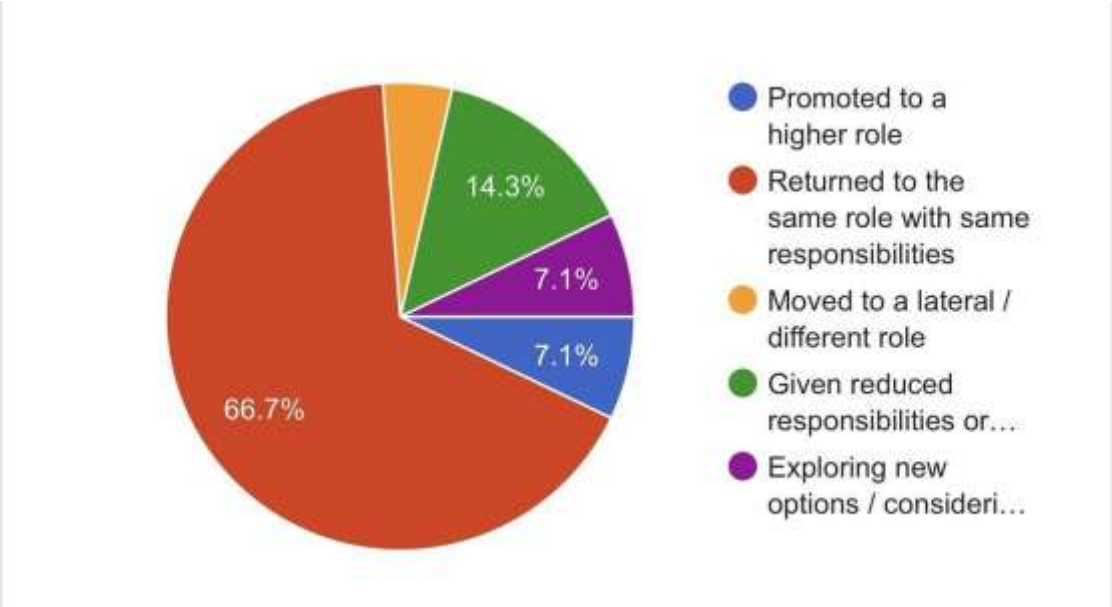
A significant portion (45.2%) reported that no specific provisions are available, highlighting a major gap in workplace support. Flexible working hours or work-from-home options were available to 32.1% of respondents. This indicates that structured support systems are still lacking in many workplaces.

Fig. 7 Perceived adequacy of workplace provisions



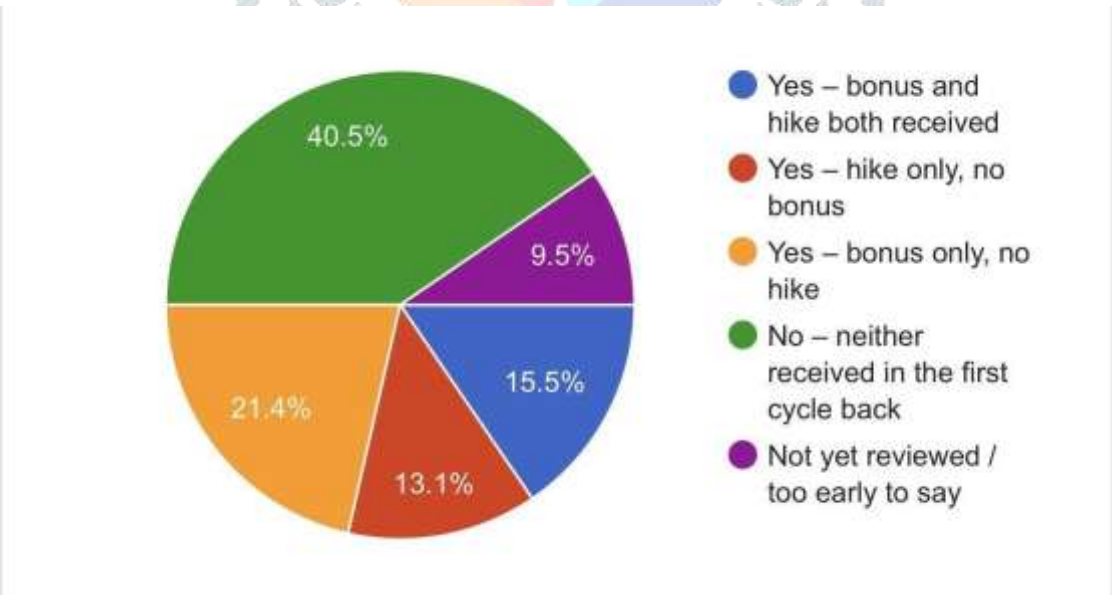
Most respondents (34.5%) felt neutral about the adequacy of workplace support, suggesting that provisions neither fully help nor hinder. While 28.6% found them somewhat adequate and 19% very adequate, this reflects moderate satisfaction but highlights room for improvement.

Fig. 8 Career opportunities available after returning to work



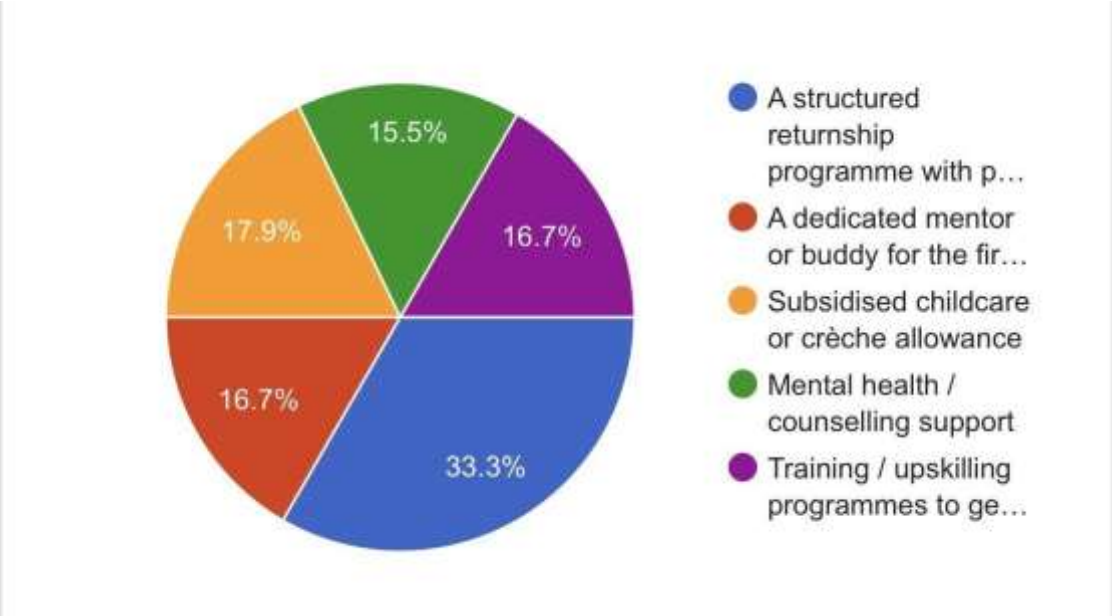
A majority (66.7%) returned to the same role with the same responsibilities, indicating limited career progression post-return. Only a small percentage experienced promotion or role change, highlighting stagnation in career growth after maternity leave.

Fig. 9 Performance bonus or salary hike after return



A large proportion (40.5%) reported receiving neither a bonus nor a hike, indicating limited financial recognition post-return. This suggests that many women may face financial stagnation after returning to work.

Fig. 10 Additional organizational support valued by returning mothers



The most preferred support (33.3%) was a structured returnship program with phased workload, indicating a need for smoother transitions. Childcare support, mentorship, training, and mental health support were also valued, showing strong demand for both professional and personal support systems.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study make it evident that post-maternity reintegration is a critical yet often overlooked phase in a woman's professional journey. While maternity leave policies are increasingly being formalized across organizations, the transition back to work remains complex and insufficiently supported. Reintegration is not just about resuming duties; it involves rebuilding professional confidence, re-establishing workplace relationships, and regaining career momentum.

A key conclusion drawn from the research is the disconnect between organizational policies and actual workplace practices. Many organizations present themselves as inclusive and supportive; however, the lived experiences of returning mothers reveal gaps in implementation. Women often face subtle forms of exclusion, such as being left out of important projects, not being considered for leadership roles, or receiving fewer growth opportunities. These experiences contribute to a sense of reduced professional relevance and may negatively impact long-term career progression.

Another important insight relates to workload imbalance. Some women experience excessive pressure to quickly "catch up," leading to stress and burnout, while others are given minimal responsibilities, resulting in feelings of underutilization and stagnation. Both scenarios highlight the lack of structured reintegration planning and the absence of individualized support.

The study also emphasizes the emotional and psychological challenges associated with returning to work after maternity leave. Feelings of guilt, anxiety, and difficulty in balancing personal and professional responsibilities are common. Without adequate organizational support, these factors can reduce job satisfaction and increase the likelihood of attrition.

However, the research also identifies that organizations that adopt supportive practices-such as flexible work arrangements, phased return plans, and empathetic leadership-are more successful in ensuring smoother transitions. These practices not only benefit employees but also contribute to higher retention rates, improved productivity, and a stronger employer brand.

In conclusion, post-maternity reintegration plays a significant role in shaping women's career trajectories and overall workplace equality. Addressing the challenges identified in this study is essential for organizations aiming to promote gender inclusivity and sustainable growth. Bridging the gap between policy and practice, along with fostering a supportive work culture, is crucial to ensuring that maternity does not become a barrier to professional advancement.

Recommendations

- Introduce structured reintegration programs
  Organizations should formalize the return-to-work process with clear policies and timelines. A structured program ensures consistency and prevents employees from feeling unsupported or uncertain about expectations.

- Implement phased return-to-work plans
Instead of expecting employees to resume full responsibilities immediately, a gradual increase in workload allows them to adjust physically, emotionally, and professionally, leading to better performance and well-being.

- Provide flexible work arrangements
Flexibility in terms of work hours, remote work, or hybrid models helps employees manage childcare and personal responsibilities more effectively, reducing stress and improving productivity.

- Ensure equal career opportunities post-return
Organizations must actively prevent bias in promotions, appraisals, and project assignments. Women should not face career setbacks due to maternity leave, and equal participation in growth opportunities should be guaranteed.

- Conduct managerial training and sensitization
Managers should be trained to understand the challenges faced by returning mothers. This helps in fair decision-making, better communication, and creating a more supportive team environment.

- Encourage open and transparent communication
Regular discussions between employees and supervisors can help address concerns related to workload, expectations, and performance, making the transition smoother and more comfortable.

- Establish mentorship or buddy systems
Assigning a mentor or peer support system can help returning employees navigate challenges, rebuild confidence, and feel more connected to the workplace.

- Offer childcare support facilities
Providing on-site daycare, partnerships with childcare centers, or financial support can significantly reduce stress and help employees focus better on their work.

- Maintain balanced workload distribution
Organizations should ensure that returning employees are neither overburdened nor underutilized. Proper workload allocation helps maintain engagement and job satisfaction.

- Collect and act on employee feedback
Regular surveys and feedback mechanisms allow organizations to identify gaps in policies and improve them based on real employee experiences.

- Promote an inclusive workplace culture
Reintegration should be normalized as part of the employee lifecycle. A culture of empathy and inclusivity reduces stigma and supports long-term gender equality.

- Ensure effective policy implementation
HR policies should not remain theoretical. Organizations must ensure that these policies are consistently applied across all departments and teams.

- Provide mental health and wellness support
Counseling services, wellness programs, and stress management initiatives can help employees cope with emotional challenges during the transition period.

Track retention and career growth metrics by monitoring promotion rates, performance evaluations, and long-term retention of returning mothers to assess policy effectiveness.

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