

WORKING MOTHERS IN INDIA: WHY TOUGH?

Mrs. Sunita Bhagat

I started my journey as a mother about 3 years back, I've been on this QUEST. The quest on why is it so "TOUGH" for working mothers in India.

Over the last few years, I have read extensively on this subject, quizzed several working mothers, observed and analyzed several real-life scenarios and done a lot of thinking on this subject based on my own experiences and what I've seen in the lives of individuals around me. Specifically, on what are the multidimensional issues which most working mothers in India have to endure.

My first learning was this | As a working woman, you can't ignore the influence of your immediate living environment on the challenges you face, the choices and decisions you make. Every country has its own legacy, history, evolution, growth story, political scenario, policies, laws, educational framework, economic growth, culture, "ways of living" and employment guidelines which influence the mind-set of the "community at large"; and this creates unique set of country-specific-issues when it comes to the topic of "Working Mother and the issues they face". India is no exception.

My second discovery was this | The thoughts, opinions and views on the subject of whether mothers should work, and what kind of professions would be suitable / favorable is still very diverse and spreads across the spectrum.

The third comprehension was this | For the vast majority of the average working woman in India, there is no universal definition of what work life balance is.

The forth eye-opener was this | In many real-life situations, the REAL issues were not related to their individual competencies of a woman / mother, or the corporates they were a part of: but more deeply related to issues of the "self" and "upbringing"

In most instances, it was a combination of the below factors which made it tougher for a working mother in India

1. COMPLICATIONS RELATED TO THE "FAMILY"

(i) **Upbringing:** Interestingly, the first note-worthy observation I made was around how a woman's upbringing made all the difference in her own definition of what is expected of a "mother", her own self-worth and her role at home and in society. All of this determines whether or not she continues to work after becoming a mother. In many instances, the influence of your upbringing can drastically alter your career path once you become a mother. For e.g.: Many working mothers quit regular full-time corporate jobs due to pressures from family. In some cases, they opt for professional commitments which provide flexibility – and end up as freelancers or consultants or entrepreneurs. And in many cases, they accept their primary role and identity of a mother, and only a mother; and completely give up their professional identity. If your parents / family / friends / people in your immediate network continuously drive home the point (in words, actions and interactions) that "*The duty of a mother is only and only towards her children*", chances are that you'll end up giving your career the minute you become a mother.

Similarly, if your parents / family / friends / people in your immediate network continuously drive home the point that "*The primary responsibility of a man is to earn money, and be treated like royalty within the 4 walls. And that of a woman is to bear and raise children*", chances are once you become parents you will compel your spouse to give all her waking time and attention to the role of being a mother. And then the mother's career is just never an option or consideration

(ii) **Rise of "Nuclear Families":** The other reality of India today is the increasing rise of nuclear families. In such a set-up, it is imperative for one of the parent to play an active role during the early years of child-growth and development. In

majority of the cases, again it is the mother who takes a career break. And after the break, it definitely takes time for your career to build up and flourish. This comes at a price in terms of both career growth and financial earnings.

(iii) Unequal Partnerships at Home – Husband’s “Hands-Off” Approach: This is somewhat related to the point (i) above. One’s upbringing and conditioning determine how “hands-on” or “hands-off” the husband / father is within the four walls.

In several Indian homes, there are “UNEQUAL PARTNERSHIP”. After a long tiring day [even when the working mother works as hard / sometimes even harder as her husband], once she returns home – she is still expected to cook, clean and take care of home-work and attend to the other demands of the husband / children and maintain the house. Over a period of time – all this adds to the stress levels, and can exhaust working mothers that they start under-performing at work, or they re-calibrate their own expectations of them selves. I’ve heard a lot of the Indian urban men telling their wives in no uncertain terms that they will not contribute towards the domestic responsibilities. “*Hire staff, but don’t expect me to help out*” is the message loud and clear. And the latest trend I’ve heard is one in which the men say it’s OK even if they working mothers don’t do anything at home. That way they believe its equal partnership at home!?

(iv) Expectations in line with a “Full Time Mother” and “Full Time Working Professional”; No real-life role model for “Working Mother”: This is probably the most important issue, but less acknowledged. Typically, we all know what to expect from a “Full Time Mother”; and there are umpteen role models for how / what she should be and do. The best examples for a vast majority of people are our own mothers. And then there are umpteen examples of role models (men / women) for how / what a “Full Time Working Professional” should be and do. Again, the best examples for a vast majority of people are our own fathers.

The reality of today is that the working mothers is expected to live up to both these role models – That of a “Full Time Mother” and a “Full Time Working Professional” and is compared judged and rated with both these “role models”. The truth is that she will almost always fall short. And that only adds to her stress levels, guilt, expectations of herself – all of which does impact her professional growth and output, not to mention personal well-being.

(v) Expectations of family / extended family: Again, not much description required. But the “Indian family” is an important and integral part of our lives. As per Indian culture / traditions, women / mothers are expected to live up to some expectations from the family / extended family. Be it in terms of the kind of professions she can select and choose, the kind of work hours she can clock-in, the kind of things she has to do at home, etc etc. All these expectations don’t really make it easy for a working mother. After a point, I know so many working mothers who just give up these every day fights and just choose stay silent / ignore – for the sake of their children, their own mental peace, and their own well-being. Not every battle is worth fighting you see!

(vi) The Complex Indian Meal: Again, this was not in my original list till I spoke to working mothers from other parts of the world. And one thing which they all mentioned was how little time they spent in the kitchen dishing up their meals – especially once they become mothers – Eating left-overs, cooking over week-ends and storing food, getting take-aways were all perfectly fine. However, in many Indian homes these modern ways are not always OK – especially if there are children. The Indian meals have always been long drawn affairs taking hours in the kitchen. And in many homes, every meal is supposed to be cooked fresh and hot! Since many of us have grown up in homes where our mothers were home-makers, so our staple diet has been the traditional Indian meal invariably cooked and served hot just-in-time. These are eating habits which have been built over 20+ years. And it is tough to change habits overnight.

So with this generation of working mothers, it becomes a challenge to find that balance between old habits, the lifestyle of today and overall health & wellness.

(vii) Health Issues / Lifestyle Disorders in the Family: I have seen too many ambitious and successful working mothers who’ve had challenges in managing their professional and personal life because of health related issues / lifestyle disorders in the family (husband / children / their own). These range from obesity, to allergies (like Asthma), to depression and psychological issues. For e.g.: An acquaintance who is a Bollywood script-writer took a 2 year break because her son went into severe depression. I heard of another IT professional whose 4 year old son simply stopped talking one fine day. Medically, everything was normal. So the mother took a 6 month break from work to just be there for him. I know of several working mothers who have been diagnosed with anxiety related disorders, and again had to take a career break.

2. COMPLICATIONS RELATED TO THE “SELF”

(i) **Strong “Maternal Instinct”**: In a vast majority of the instances, what made is especially harder for a working mother in India is her own strong “maternal instinct”; which compels her to quit the workforce and be with her children full-time, or explore flexible work options which enable her to be the kind of mother she aspires to be. These choices or decisions obviously came with some trade-offs with respect to her professional growth and aspirations. And these very choices and decisions are the cause for feelings of uncertainty, guilt, dissatisfaction and a varying sense of self-esteem.

(ii) **Mental Conditioning of a Woman**: For many Indian working mothers, the everyday battles they had to fight were related to their own mental conditioning – which is deeply and directly influenced by the living environment one is a part of. So if you’re parents / spouse / in-laws / community you’re a part of continuously make the point that your first duty as a woman is that of a mother; and that the primary responsibility of a mother is towards your child; then at some point – the mother gives-in; mentally, emotionally and professionally.

(iii) **Passion to Work**: In many cases, a lot of women themselves did not have any desire / passion to work; or it is very low. The truth is that Indian women who have built meaningful long term careers had a burning desire / passion to work, and they found ways to make it work! Sure there were career brakes but over a period of time they did manage to build a successful career because of this passion, focus, hard-work, openness, flexibility and dedication.

3. COMPLICATIONS RELATED TO THE “ORGANIZATION”

(i) **Limited Organizational Support during transition phases**: Most working mother’s goes through a phase of transition when their children are small and yet to start formal education. During this phase, the most important factor that can make a difference is “flexibility at the work place”. While several organizations do provide some level of flexibility to women, and it is high on the priority list for several others – There is a considerable time lag between policy and action. So many working mothers have to make tough choices – which can come at the cost of their child’s upbringing or their own professional growth. These career breaks again come at a price in terms of a mothers professional success.

(ii) **Limited Mentorship / Guidance for working women during transition phases**: Having a “real mentor” can make an ocean of difference in the life and career of working mothers. However, the sad reality of today is that many working mothers have never really had mentors; and so they don’t know what it means to have one or what difference a mentor can make in your life. A mentor can provide the much needed ear, shoulder and perspective on how to handle career transitions, career breaks / brakes and also provide a long term career view on how to handle many of the critical career milestones. Working mothers who’ve handled these situations in the past can make an ocean of difference by just sharing their own personal journey and what worked for them. There are no universal mantras, but many times just knowing that you’re not in the boat alone can provide the well needed motivation to keep going – even with the going is rough!

4. COMPLICATIONS RELATED TO “SOCIETY”

(i) **The society and era we live in**: We call this era the “Kalyug”. There’s evil everywhere. Lies, Theft, Cheating, Kidnapping, Stealing, Child Sex Abuse, etc. all are part of everyday news: These are indeed not safe times. Simple things like travelling in an auto or any public transport (more so in some cities) is unsafe. Even if you hire staff, reliability is an issue; and many parents don’t want to leave children with custody of drivers / nannies – till you’re 100% confident. So what does that mean? One parent has to cut-down on work; and be with the child. In majority of the cases, its the mother who is expected to do this. And that does impact her career / professional growth

(ii) **This Well-Known Male “EGO”**: I don’t need to say anything here. Suffice to say, that the well-known male “EGO” is real and prevalent – at home, at the workforce, and in the world at large – This can many times make things difficult for a women, and more so for a working mother.

(iii) **Lack of affordable quality child-care**: Child-care costs are increasing with each passing day. And with the kind of salaries and hikes which people are getting year on year, many times it just does not make economic sense to enroll in child-care. So one parent has to again cut down on work commitments and be with the child till he / she starts formal school. Again, invariably it is the mother who ends up doing this! And this could translate to a break of 3 – 5 years, after which she has to re-build her career. It takes time, hard-work, lot of determination: which can be tough for many a

working mother – especially if she has limited family support. As a consequence – many women start their second careers – again either doing freelance work or take up other professions like teaching, writing, etc.

(iv) The rising boom of extra-marital affairs: Again, this is indeed a reality of modern India. One of the most vulnerable times for a man to get involved with other women is after they become parents. Most mother's give their 200% to the maternal duties and responsibilities. And at the same time, I've seen so many intelligent, smart men get involved into extra-marital affairs when they become fathers. Once a man is involved in an extra-marital affair and you already have kids, it simply complicates the family life equation. And for many women, the sheer emotional trauma, hurt and uncertainty of the future compel them to pursue full-time high pressure careers so that they can provide quality upbringing and life for their children.

(v) The Changing Face of Education and its Competitive Nature: Education has changed in the past few decades, and it has become really competitive today. Just keeping up with everyday home-work, assignments and school work can be a close to full-time job for parents, especially if you're the kind who is completely involved in your child's studies. Adding to this is the concept on "Continuous" assessments and evaluations in which kids have at least one – two tests every week along with 1 project at least in a fortnight. So you need to be on your toes almost all through the year.

5. CONCLUSION

It is tougher to work and raise kid all over the world as well as in India. so many working mothers who just give up these every day fights and just choose stay silent / ignore- for the sake of their children, their own mental peace, and their own well-being.

REFERENCES

- [1] John w. Santrock-Life span development 13th edition. Publisher: Mcgraw-hill education (India) Ltd.
- [2] Social Injustice's of women in India. Studymode.com. Retrieved 05, 2010, from <http://www.studymode.com/essays/social-Injustice%27s-Of-Women-In-India-323564.html>
- [3] Working mothers advantages and disadvantages -<http://parentingnation.over-blog.com/article-working-mothers-advantages-and-drawbacks-117240807.html>