



 **Ranjita Sharan Singh***

Welcome back to Office

The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world - William Rose Wallace

Poet William Ross Wallace called women powerful enough to shape and rule the world way back in 1865, yet he firmly placed them in the gender-defined role of child-rearing. Since then, a lot has changed in this ever-evolving world. Gender differences have increasingly got blurred. Humans have reached the moon and beyond, civilizations have developed from making wheels to making satellites, from manual days to Internet of Things. Yet the next generation of humans can only be created and nurtured by a woman. Till now, science has not developed enough to equip a man to bear a child other than in the film "Junior" where the character Dr. Alex Hesse played by Arnold Schwarzenegger successfully carries a pregnancy to full term. While we wait for science to achieve this feat one day, this article focuses on a working mother.

History is full of examples of women accomplishing extraordinary feats after giving birth to a child. Can we ever forget the image of the queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, who fought against the British army on a horse, all the while keeping her son tied to her back? Madam Curie was a mother when she was researching in laboratories and went on to win as big an accolade as Nobel Prize and that too twice! We have seen the likes of Margaret Thatcher to Indira Gandhi. We have numerous examples in the present-day too, from tennis player Serena Williams to track and field athlete Nia Ali to boxer Mary Kom, from Indira Nooyi to Arundhati Bhattacharya.

The list of successful women is indeed long, yet the statistics are heavily skewed when we take a 360-degree view. For example, the data available on the internet says that in the corporate world, the proportion of average female top executives is about 8% only, though women in senior management positions have now grown up to constitute 30%. The Internet is full of statistics and numerous research papers whose veracity needs to be checked but it requires no research to postulate that as we go up the corporate ladder, we see fewer women. Surely, this cannot be on account of women being any less than men. There is no scientific research or empirical evidence to suggest this theory. On the contrary, research suggests that the pain of childbirth is the ultimate pain, a 10 on a scale of 10, and going by the evolutionary theory of natural selection, nature found women stronger than men to handle this pain.

Having established the fact that women are no less than men, we need to delve deeper to find out why we find fewer women in our workforce and more importantly, what we as a society should do to bridge this gap. Despite the popularity of 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao', despite the fact that girls are doing better than boys in all categories of board examinations, we find less representation of females in the corporate workforce.

When we take a look at the banking industry, we find that the share of women employees is very less. As per the report published in "The Economic Times", the share of women employee was 24.94% in FY19, 25.28% in FY 20, and 25.92% in FY21. The

*Deputy General Manager (Academics), State Bank Institute of Leadership, Kolkata.

percentage at the entry level is high, ranging from 25 to 35 percent but at mid-managerial level, it reduces to 17 to 20 percent. As we go further high, we see fewer women but in the last decade, we have seen some noteworthy women CEOs and Directors in the banking industry. The banking is considered the one of the most preferred job of women employees. Banks have taken various initiatives to make their work environment women friendly. Equal opportunities are provided to women without discrimination. Banks have implemented the provisions of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and banking industry is treated as a safer workplace for women. Almost all banks conduct training programmes catering to specific needs of women employees. Other than these, banks have many special provisions for women. Along with the mandatory maternity leave of six months, many banks provide leave for adoption, abortion, and miscarriage too. Interestingly, Paternity leave has also been introduced recently, which is an essential step towards inclusion of men in child-care. Some banks also provide nutrition allowance to pregnant employees.

The percentage of women dropping out of job in banking sector is low but that must be reduced further. Research shows that around 48% of women drop out of the overall women workforce across all industries mid-career, most probably when they become mothers. These are disturbing statistics. A child is an equal responsibility of both parents, but childbirth does not affect men to that extent. Interestingly, research also indicates that women who chose to continue to work after childbirth have tough lives for the first few years but tended to be more satisfied with their decision in the long run. Encouraged by this research, in this article, we shall try to find out ways to resolve this universal issue troubling the women workforce.

What women must realize :

1. Guilt shrouds rationality

Our society has been a patriarchal society since the beginning. The socialization process is so natural and deeply rooted that not only other members of

family but also the women strongly feel they are primarily responsible for the upbringing of their child. This fills women with guilt when they start going to the office again leaving the baby at home. As with every extreme emotion, guilt also prohibits women from thinking rationally.

Any problem in life can be solved by thinking about it rationally. So, instead of feeling guilty and taking any irrational decision, just put the guilt away for some moment, write down what needs to be done for the child and discuss it with all the family members to find a solution.

2. Perfection is overrated

In today's world of super specialization, perfection is the ultimate goal. To add to the trauma, research indicates that women tend to have this tendency more than men. A woman wants to cook the best, wants to be the best mother to her kids, wants to keep her housekeeping at the best, wants to be the best employee in the office, etc.

We need to understand that we need not please everyone, that a little dust under the sofa is fine, that we all have bad hair days, and that even homemakers, who stay with their kids full time, have troubles with their teenagers. We need to realize and accept we cannot have it all. Learn to let go. Learn to prioritise and focus as per your priorities.

3. Anxiety is normal

Resuming office after a long gap is difficult. The transition from being a full-time mother to being a working mother is full of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear. Not being able to give the child enough time, troubles the woman, to add to the trouble, things change so fast in the corporate world that fear of being incompetent creeps up. This is normal for any human being. Success depends on the way one handles such a situation.

Being a mother to an infant and running a household teach a woman a lot. A mother learns the fine art of time management, resource management, and budget management without even realizing it. The women who have gone through this anxious

period, have experienced that when they got back to work, once the cloud of anxiety and fear cleared, they felt as natural in the work environment as a fish in water. So, just have belief in yourself and go back to the office with confidence.

4. Self-pity is thy enemy

Difficulties and obstacles in life sometimes make people feel sad about themselves and their situation. Self-pity is the worst enemy anyone can have. Even the closest relative would not tolerate a depressing person full of self-pity for a long period, let alone colleagues and seniors. A study says self-pity can be as bad for the heart as smoking 20 cigarettes in a day.

Identify the moments when you have bouts of self-pity and come out of it by reminding yourself of the futility of it. Go out, meet friends, play with your child, indulge in your hobby, and excel in your job. Enlist your allies but never forget that we must build relations, not leverage them. Most important, do not expect to be treated differently just because you are a woman.

5. Asking for help is human

Seeking help is treated as a sign of weakness. Men are afflicted with this syndrome more than women, but women need help more than men need, to handle a seemingly endless number of things they need to do with a changed office scenario and a little child at home. We all must understand that asking for help is the smartest thing to do when one is juggling too many balls together unless one is performing in a circus.

Successful women CEOs have always emphasized the importance of seeking help. A woman should never try to do everything herself. In our society, help comes from all quarters, we just need to realize who can do what for us and develop a beautiful relation of mutual trust and help. India is the best place to be a working mother with loving grandparents, availability of maids, friendly neighbours, etc. Create a network of support, provide support to the ones in need, and seek support too.

6. Choice is always yours

We are what we are because of the choices we have made over the years. We must not blame anyone else for anything happening in our lives. We must not indulge in finding excuses. As per Stephen Covey, *"I am not a product of my circumstances. I am a product of my decisions"*, taking responsibility for one's own life results in peak performance.

Along with a 'To Do List' we must make a 'Don't do list' which should contain activities that take time, keep one trapped, and offer the minimal reward. It is easier to say 'No' with the list clearly in our minds. Saying 'No' to these low-priority tasks, leaves more time for accomplishing important tasks.

What organizations must realize :

1. Diversity of employees is valuable

Organizations must realize that diversity in the workforce brings varied perspectives and increases creativity. It helps in understanding needs and catering to a different segment of customers. Organizations must consciously work towards building a diverse set of employees and having women in workforce is diversity at its natural best.

2. Common room is uncommonly precious

The most difficult problem for a nursing mother after joining office is not being able to feed the child periodically, and on time. Organizations must provide solutions to this. Large corporate offices should invest in a creche in the office. The offices which are small should have a common room for ladies where designated feeding area should be there. The common room should be spacious enough to let the infant stay there with a nanny. The productivity of the mother will increase manifold by allowing her to keep her child with a nanny close to her vis-à-vis keeping the child with a nanny at home, away from the office.

3. Relief arrangement is the key

The Government has mandated maternity leave of 26 weeks in India. Since it is mandatory, organizations have to comply but there is no formal structure in most workplaces for a relief arrangement in case a woman employee goes on maternity leave. In the absence of a proper structure, there is reluctance on the part of the bosses to accept woman employees of a particular age bracket in their departments. Matters become worse when sometimes women have to take sudden leave due to some exigency at home. Employers should duly accept the universal requirement of childcare and establish a structure to grant leave to young mothers.

4. Role models are angels in disguise

Role models influence us and motivate us. We grow up amidst various role models, our parents, teachers, etc. Sadly, our women workforce have less opportunities for selecting a suitable role model because the percentage of women working at the senior management level is very low. Organizations should identify suitable role models from their own workforce or outside and arrange sessions or talks by them for groups of younger women who need inspiration and motivation to continue their jobs along with handling domestic issues.

5. Societies do not get built in a day

Societies progress with successive generations. If we leave the task of bringing up the next generation to women and simultaneously, drive a revolution in society for gender parity in our workforce, society will have to face a very unpredictable and chaotic situation when the next generation grows up with less than the required love, care, and nurturing. This can be resolved only if society realizes that each section of society should contribute to bringing up the next generation. After all, the whole society will be affected by the actions of

the grown-up next generation. Society needs a paradigm shift, which is not easy, but definitely not an impossible task.

6. Work-life integration is not a myth

Employers and employees, both need to understand that work and life are not two mutually exclusive things. Work is a part of life, and it eases our lives as well as poses challenges to us, exactly like all other components of life. We all know that nothing is free in life and there is always a relationship of 'give and take'. Having accepted this, both employers and employees should work towards a fruitful work-life integration. Organizations must have training sessions specially designed for working women, who join after long leave, especially maternity or sabbatical leave, to help them seamlessly integrate work into their daily lives.

Organizations may wonder why this article advocates preferential treatment to women in an era when demand for gender equality is the latest cry in society. Aristotle defined equality as "*equal treatment to similar people*," a direct corollary to this theory would define equality as "*different treatment to dissimilar people*."

Unlike the offspring of other animals, a human child is dependent on its parents even for its smallest need. So, all of us, as a society must take collective responsibility to take care of our next generation, instead of treating it to be predominantly a role of women. This revolution will take the human race to a different level altogether, ready to explore further unknown territories of our universe and beyond, with both genders walking side by side complementing and strengthening each other.

"No Country can truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contribution of half its citizens." - Michelle Obama

