

Fear of Reintegration and Maternal Guilt in Working Women-Post Maternity Leave

CH Srikruthi¹, Dr. Deepthi Vijayan²

¹Student, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bengaluru, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bengaluru, India

Corresponding Author: CH Srikruthi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijhsr.20240551>

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate the fear of reintegration and maternal guilt in working women following their maternity leave. The study aimed to explore the emotional experiences that working mothers have, post maternity leave and the factors that contribute to these emotions. It also focused on various coping mechanisms and strategies employed by them to manage fear and guilt. Targeted number of participants were 12 women, working in IT, Medical, Public and Private sectors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a hybrid medium. Thematic analysis was incorporated in order to perform data analysis. The findings revealed that working mothers often experienced guilt over leaving their infants. Though they have fear of reintegration, they employ coping strategies and support systems to ease the process, emphasizing the need for understanding and support in achieving work-life balance.

Keywords: Fear, Maternal Guilt, Reintegration, Working mothers

INTRODUCTION

Working women have played a pivotal role in reshaping and enriching modern societies. Women hold positions in a variety of occupations, including those that have historically been dominated by men, including engineering, medicine, and finance, as well as positions in social services, healthcare, and education.

The Indian government has put measures into place recently to support gender equality and increase women's participation in the workforce. Efforts like the Maternity Benefit Act (the maternity benefit act, 1961 arrangement of sections, n.d.) and the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child, 2015) campaign have tried to raise the position of working women in the nation. (*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: Caring for the Girl Child | Prime*

Minister of India, n.d.). Though women have started careers of their own and have truly found their potential, they do not forget the most precious part of being a woman- Motherhood. The number of women working has increased, but with it come greater difficulties for them to manage and strike a balance between their roles in the home and at work. (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). The return to work after maternity leave is one of the crucial points in this delicate balance. Many working mothers in the US say that they feel guilty about their inability to live up to cultural ideals of the "good mother". (Collins, 2020)

Guilt is generally defined as an unpleasant emotion or feeling that is a result of having done something wrong or not having done something one should have (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008). Maternal guilt, often

referred to as "mom guilt," is a pervasive and deeply ingrained emotion that many mothers experience during their parenting journey. It is characterized by feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and a sense of failing as a mother. Mercer (1995) summarizes the research on maternal guilt as conceptualized as either "maternal separation anxiety" (Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992) related to maternal attachment to the child (Bowlby, 1969), or as a defence mechanism "in handling anxiety and as a method of achieving control over the uncontrollable" (Gardner, 1970).

Reintegration refers to a clear and measurable description of the process or outcome involved in bringing something or someone back into a particular state, group, system, or environment after a period of separation, exclusion, or change. (Oxford university press,2023). Reintegration into the workforce after maternity leave is a multifaceted process that extends beyond the mere adjustment to professional life, it encompasses intricate psychological, social, and familial dimensions. A study done by BOZKUR and ÇIĞ (2022) explores the relationship between motherhood, guilt, and work, with a special emphasis on the role that internalised sexist norms play in the guilt that working mothers of preschool-aged children experience. The notion of going back to work might be terrifying because of how this worry can seem as anxiety and self-doubt. Motherhood guilt is a heavy emotional burden that may be debilitating at the same time. The study by Brand and Barreiro-Lucas (2019) looks at South African female employees' experiences going back to work after maternity leave. The findings show that although most of the participants had a favourable opinion of their jobs, they found it difficult to go back to work after giving birth.

An effective HR policy might work to guarantee that female employees can fulfil their motherhood obligations without sacrificing their professional goals. However, the impact of these policies on the

workforce reintegration and maternal guilt experiences of working women is a topic that demands deeper exploration. Collins (2020) investigated the impact of public policies on working mothers' experiences of maternal guilt in the workplace across several national contexts. Working women around the world continue to experience maternal guilt despite differences in legislative contexts. According to Sundaresan (2014), 67% of working mothers who took part in the research said they faced difficulties with their kids' schoolwork, jobs, and social circles. Furthermore, the Working moms who balance job and family obligations often feel overworked and pressed for time to look after their own needs.

This dissertation aims to delve into the intricacies of the fear of reintegration and maternal guilt experienced by working women in India after maternity leave. It seeks to understand the multidimensional nature of these emotions, identify their underlying causes, and explore the ways in which societal, familial, and workplace factors shape these experiences, so as the study done by Ahmadifaraz et al. (2013) that underscores the pressure and stress experienced by working mothers due to conflicting role expectations from family, children, spouses, and society. This role conflict can have significant implications for the mental and physical health of working mothers, impacting their overall well-being. Collins (2020) investigated the impact of public policies on working mothers' experiences of maternal guilt in the workplace across several national contexts. Working women around the world continue to experience maternal guilt despite differences in legislative contexts. So, this study also aims to assess the effectiveness of maternity leave policies in India in facilitating the reintegration process and mitigating maternal guilt, thereby shedding light on whether these policies genuinely support the needs of working mothers.

The significance of studying this population lies in its potential to inform policies,

workplace practices, and support systems that can enhance the experiences of working women during this pivotal life transition. An in-depth understanding of the fear of reintegration and maternal guilt can contribute to the creation of a more supportive, inclusive, and empathetic environment for working mothers in India. It can help these women navigate the complex terrain of dual roles more effectively, fostering their well-being and empowerment.

The significance of this study is to understand the factors contributing to the fear of reintegration and guilt and their impact on the emotional experience of mothers, who started working after their maternity leave. The study also signifies to provide practical recommendations and strategies for individuals to facilitate smoother reintegration, reduce fear and guilt, and promote overall well-being. It provides critical insights that can inform the development of more supportive workplace policies and interventions to assist working, and also in bring awareness about these in the community to enhance community support towards working mothers.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Objectives

1. To investigate and understand the experiences of fear of reintegration among working women returning to their jobs after maternity leave.
2. To examine and comprehend how working women articulate and experience feelings of maternal guilt in the context of returning to work.
3. To identify and analyze the underlying factors that contribute to the fear of reintegration and feelings of guilt experienced by working mothers.
4. To explore the various coping mechanisms and strategies employed by working women to manage fear of reintegration and maternal guilt during the transition back to work.

Operational Definition

"Reintegration" refers to a clear and measurable description of the process or outcome involved in bringing something or someone back into a particular state, group, system, or environment after a period of separation, exclusion, or change. (Oxford university press,2023)

"Maternal guilt" could be described as a measurable and observable emotional state experienced by a mother, characterized by feelings of responsibility, remorse, or self-blame for perceived inadequacies in fulfilling her maternal roles and responsibilities. (Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010)

Research problem

To understand and explore the fear of reintegration and guilt experienced by working mothers, following their maternity leave

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the concepts and their relationship with each other.

Participants

This study included the participants who were selected through purposive sampling. Eligibility requirements were working mothers from IT, Corporate, medical and government sectors. The women must have availed their maternity leave during their pregnancy and must have rejoined back in the same work place. Only women who had their first child were selected to get more accurate and recent experiences. 12 working mothers were interviewed who were from diverse ethnicity, work background and financial status.

PROCEDURE

Telephonic interview was conducted with 12 participants. Recruitment began by identifying suitable candidates who provided informed consent. A semi-structured interview guide was used,

addressing research questions. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times, with a focus on building rapport. Open-ended questions facilitated in-depth responses. Recordings, with participant consent, aided accurate transcription. Post-interview, field notes were taken, and thematic coding was applied to transcripts for analysis. The process adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring a comprehensive and rigorous qualitative research outcome.

Data Analysis

With the permission of the participants, audio recordings from telephonic interviews

were converted into transcripts and subjected to thematic coding method by Braun and Clarke 2006 was employed. Analysis and composition of the article were done. In order to address research problems, an inductive data-driven strategy was employed. The findings were divided into 4 main themes: (a) Emotional and Psychological Challenges (b) Maternal Guilt (c) Support Systems and coping strategies (d) Work Environment Dynamics. Even while other themes also surfaced, they did not fit in the focus of this article.

RESULT

Table 1: Showing themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Emotional and Psychological Challenges	1.1 Fear and Anxiety 1.2 overwhelming thoughts and emotions
Maternal guilt	Guilt regarding mothering 2.2 Absence
Support systems and Coping strategies	familial and external support system personal coping strategies supporting policies
Work environment dynamics	work related challenges transition struggle vs growth

1. Emotional and psychological challenges

Women face many emotional and psychological challenges after returning to work post maternity leave. Managing feelings and stress from taking care of child and job causes fluctuating emotions and challenges. This phase may result in extreme sadness, stress, and anxiety (Arif Wijayanto et al., 2022). The emotional challenges and psychological challenges were divided into 2 subthemes:

1.1 Fear and Anxiety

10 out of 12 women had fear of reintegration regarding going back to work after their maternity leave. This was either regarding work performance - NC: *“I really, I was scared. Because again when we go back right so it is not like directly, we will be going into the same project.”* or fear and anxiety regarding leaving their baby while going to work - A: *“I fear about the baby, if she has slept or eaten well like*

that.” Most of the women have also had fear of being separated from their baby due to work, as supported by research where it was found that women are uneasy being separated, and this shows in the way they talk about their missing babies (BUTT, 2017).

1.2 Overwhelming thoughts and emotions

Working mothers experienced mixed emotions, that they were unable to express, when they first considered returning back to work -SMC: *“when the point came that I have to attend the office, then it was really mixing emotions.”* They perceived these mixed emotions to be overwhelming and they also had various thoughts about how the baby will be able to cope up without them. CBV: *“who is going to take care of the baby? How is it going to be as the first thing and how secure will the baby be? And will she accept feeding?”* According to Miller (2002), this period of time corresponds the quick hormonal shifts that

are thought to increase susceptibility to depression. In the current study, working mothers had episodes of sadness, negative emotions and breakdowns during the reintegration process. It was found to be due to two main reasons - 1) Mothers are scared of separation 2) They would not be able to spend time with their baby and be there for them.

2. Maternal Guilt

As said by Fielding-Singh and Cooper (2022) in their research, mothers experienced guilt because they thought they weren't living up to the ideals of demanding mothering. According to the mothers in this study, they feel guilty about various reasons that includes aspects of self as well as the baby. This theme was divided into 2 subthemes:

2.1 Guilt regarding mothering

In research done in 2022, it was found that there is recurrent guilt that results from the demands and expectations around feeding babies (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022). In the current study we found that most of the mothers felt guilty about not being able to spend more time with their baby and not being able to take care of them. They also felt guilty as they were not able to breastfeed their infant anymore. SMC: *"I felt guilty about not returning back whenever I want or not able to feed the baby whenever I want. I mean, I'm not able to feed him like three times a day, right?"* They also had fear about the child's difficulty in getting adapted to formula milk or animal milk as a substitute to the mother's milk, which in turn increased their guilt of leaving their baby for going back to work.

2.2 Absence

One of the major guilt causing factors for the working mothers is that they were not being able to take care of their baby, even when the baby is in ill health. This was supported in the research by (Constantinou et. al., 2021) who found that mothers perceive their care to be superior than any others for their child which causes them guilt. The current study also found that the mothers felt guilty about missing their

child's developmental milestones and growth. – ST: *"I might miss out on so many things that, you know, that she, you know, every milestone that she comes across."*

3. Support systems and coping strategies

Support for working women is crucial in addressing the challenges they face in balancing work and personal life. Numerous research studies have emphasized the significance of diverse support systems, including as emotional, instrumental, and household assistance, in mitigating work-related stress and minimizing work-family discord among employed women (BOZKUR & ÇİĞ, 2022). Many women feel they are very fortunate to have a good support system they can rely on. This theme is further divided into 3 subthemes:

3.1 Familial and external support systems

According to a research (Alarifi & Basahal, 2023), most working mothers struggle to find a balance between their work and non-work-related life, and male partners have an essential role in helping their wives find that balance.

The participants in this research have emphasized the importance of the support from spouse, that helped them in smooth reintegration. - YP: *"My husband helps me a lot. And he works from home."* Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, many companies have been offering work-from-home option to many of its employees. In current times, companies have made their environment hybrid i.e. flexible work-from-home and work-from-office schedule. Many women feel that this flexibility have helped them to share responsibilities and the husband gets to take care of the child in the absence of the mother, YP further said- *"we try to talk to each other where he says that today, I might not be there not be available, you might have to stay at home and work."*

Along with this, support of the extended family members (parents and in-laws) and professional support services (day-care centres, nanny, maids) also play an important role. -SY: *"I was very fortunate my in-laws had come with me. And it stayed with us. And they helped us through the*

transition process.” These act as the factor that help women trust that their baby is in safe hands. It was also found that women prefer their family members over professional services as they trust their family more. -ST: “If I’m leaving my baby, at a caretaker, who I hire, I don’t think I would be that confident leaving her back and going. Outsiders are always outsiders.” Where as in contradicting research done by Tonmoy and Islam (2021) in Bangladesh, working parents who choose to leave their infants in daycare facilities can carry on with their jobs unworriedly.

3.2 Personal coping strategies

Coping is different for every individual. But when it comes to mothers maintaining work life balance, many of the participants employed similar strategies. Many research state that working mothers face obstacles like time management, difficulty carrying out their mothering duties, and handling problems at work, in simple words - work life imbalance (Alarifi & Basahal, 2023). 10 out of 12 mothers have used time management as their strategy to balance their role a mother and an employee. SG: “I try to do time management. This much time I should spend at the clinic and this much I have to spend with my baby.” According to them, time management not only helps them spend more time with their baby, but also would help them strike a balance between work and home.

3.3 Supportive policies

According to the participants, there could be many changes done at the work. They preferred work from home as the best solution for the work-life conflict. Previous research has shown that women appreciated having the chance to work from home more than males did. (Ravindranath et. al., 2021). According to them, flexible work schedules may improve working mothers' intentions to stay in their jobs and their prospects for professional growth. But 9 out of 12 women felt that there are no such flexibilities at the work place. Childcare support in the form of on-site creche was highly desired since it would be the perfect strategy to assist

working mothers. One unique strategy suggested by NC was: “they should allot nanny or they should introduce nanny related reimbursement so that they will be able to work at least those hours dedicated.”

4. Work environment dynamics

Work environment dynamics refer to the various factors and interactions that shape the atmosphere, culture, and functioning of a workplace. They directly impact the performance and retention of employees. Empirical study done by Bieńkowska and Tworek (2020) shows that work dynamics has a significant impact on job performance, which is essential for organizations to achieve sustainable development. This theme is further divided into 2 subthemes:

4.1 Work related challenges

Mothers felt that rigid work policies and negative attitudes of coworkers/superiors effected their work performance in a negative way. In a past research the authors concluded that there are obstacles that prevent mothers from moving up in their careers, and moms are sometimes punished for trying to balance their duties as parents and employees (Albright, 1992).

10 out of 12 mothers doubted that they have forgotten their roles and job responsibilities after their maternity leave. This phenomenon can be understood by the study done by (Barda et. al., 2021), in which he mentioned that hormonal changes or lifestyle changes, postpartum period and sleep patterns, could be the cause of memory loss at such a crucial time in a woman's life. As mentioned, in the above study, even in the current study, women have said that distortions in sleep patterns due to child and work stress have affected their memory and work performance.

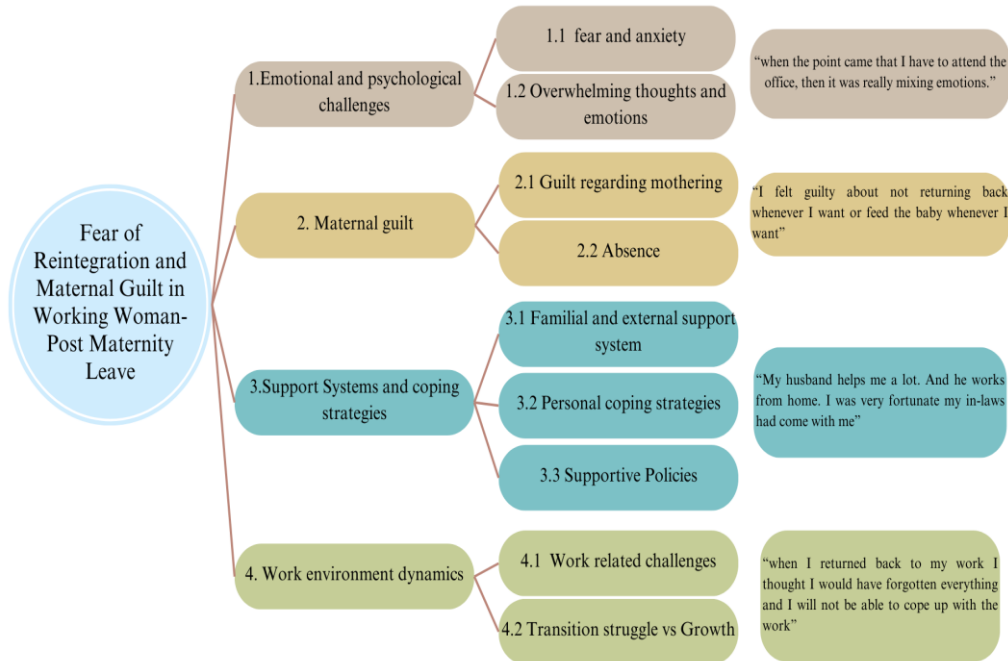
4.2 Transition struggle vs Growth

The transition of a women into a mother itself is an overwhelming change. By the time they process this, there comes the time they have to get back on track with life and work. However, the current study found few aspects that made women choose their work and career despite their transition struggle.

Identity and personal growth are one such aspect that keeps women motivated not to give up on their career. They show a sense of pride in not giving up both the roles. SY: *“I was so sleepy, my son is sick, I have to go to work and I almost felt like quitting, but I didn't quit because I worked so hard for this. So just holding up I think, is also a success.”* Professional yearning is another

aspect where women said they were passionate and dedicated towards their work, despite many problems they try to give their 100%. This is supported by (Anwar et. al.,2017) in the study which mentioned that for working mothers, positive self-challenge and personal development are crucial components of career well-being.

DISCUSSION



The study explores the various obstacles that women encounter when they return to work following a maternity leave, including emotional, psychological, and social factors. These difficulties, as demonstrated by the experiences of different participants, illustrate the complex interactions between motherhood and work responsibilities. The participants' predominant concerns were fear and anxiety related to returning to work, which reflected worries about their ability to perform their job and about leaving their child in the care of someone else. These fears were heightened by uncertainties about changes in the workplace and the emotional cost of being away from their child. Research by Arif Wijayanto et al. (2022) support these findings by highlighting the pervasiveness of maternal fear and its negative effects on

wellbeing. A contributing factor to the emotional strain experienced by working mothers is Maternal Guilt t for not living up to the expectations placed on them by society as mothers and for missing important events in their child's development. These feelings are supported by research conducted by Fielding-Singh and Cooper (2022), which emphasizes the widespread presence of maternal guilt and how it affects mothers' mental health. The study does, however, also identify a number of coping mechanisms and support networks that can be used to manage the difficult balancing act between job and family life. It emphasizes the value of flexible work schedules, childcare assistance services, and familial support, especially from partners and extended family members. Research by and Alarifi &

Basahal (2023) confirm the value of support networks in reducing work-related stress and encouraging work-life balance for working women. Working mothers face difficulties due to inflexible work rules and regulations, but they are also aware of how important personal growth and professional goals are. Research by Anwar et al. (2017) highlight how critical it is to remove obstacles to professional growth and create an inviting place to work for working mothers. By addressing these challenges and implementing supportive policies and practices, organizations can create a more inclusive and conducive environment for working mothers, ultimately promoting their well-being and professional success.

CONCLUSION

The study clarified the complex emotional experiences that working mothers had when they went back to work following maternity leave. It emphasized how crucial all-encompassing support networks and coping mechanisms are to reducing anxiety, fear, and maternal guilt. The study also emphasized the necessity of workplace initiatives and policies to address the difficulties experienced by working mothers and promote an inclusive and supportive work environment. The study also explores how important it is to ask for help from a variety of people, such as spouses, extended family, and professional networks. In order to reduce stress and promote a smoother reintegration process, mothers can gain by proactively interacting with support networks and making use of the services that are accessible. The study also emphasizes how critical it is to promote workplace policies and activities that promote working mothers' well-being. Mothers can help create a more inclusive and supportive work environment for themselves and their peers by actively participating in discussions about childcare support and workplace adjustments. Broadly, the study's implications enable working women to identify the particular difficulties they face, ask for help when they

do, and support laws and procedures that advance their wellbeing in both their personal and professional lives.

LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of working mothers during the transition back to the workplace after maternity leave, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. Firstly, the study's sample size might limit how far the results can be generalized. The study might not fully represent the range of experiences and viewpoints among working mothers due to its small sample size. Additionally, the study relies primarily on self-reported data collected through interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias and memory recall errors. Moreover, the study may be limited by its focus on a specific cultural or geographical context, which may not be representative of the experiences of working mothers in other contexts or regions. Finally, the study may not fully capture the long-term effects and outcomes of the transition back to work after maternity leave, as the data collection is limited to a specific time period.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, research may look into how the shift affected mother and child well-being in the long run, looking at things like professional progress, work satisfaction, and how children developed over time. Examining the efficiency of work-life balance and gender equality in the workplace programmers, childcare support services, and leadership development programmers are a few examples of how to do this. Research could explore the intersectionality of identity and social identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, in shaping the experiences of working mothers during the transition back to work after maternity leave. Understanding how multiple social identities intersect and influence the experiences of working mothers could inform more inclusive and equitable policies

and practices in the workplace. Future research in this area has the potential to contribute valuable insights into the challenges and support needs of working mothers during the transition back to work after maternity leave, informing the development of more effective interventions and policies to support working mothers in achieving work-life balance and career success.

Declaration by Authors

Acknowledgement: We extend our sincere appreciation to all those who have supported and encouraged us during our research endeavors. We are grateful for the unwavering support of our well-wishers and supporters, as well as the invaluable contributions of the participants who made this study possible. Additionally, we are deeply touched by the love and encouragement received from our family and friends throughout this journey.

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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How to cite this article: CH Srikruthi, Deepthi Vijayan. Fear of reintegration and maternal guilt- post maternity leave. *Int J Health Sci Res*. 2024; 14(5):385-395. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijhsr.20240551>
