

You

She strikes again

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In Pakistan there are a few organisations that are comfortable with rehiring females after a work break. This week You! takes a look at an initiative that encourages women to come back to work after a hiatus...



Although a number of women-oriented movements encourage gender equality; it is a fact that in Pakistan female labour participation remains one of the lowest in the world; hovering at around 10 per cent for over 20 years – ranking below the regional average of South Asia including countries like Nepal and Bangladesh.

The formal sector including corporate offices, government offices, banks, and other areas, have seen frequent dropout rates and some have faced difficulty retaining female employees for a long term. Many women opt for or are forced into taking career breaks for several possible reasons ranging from pregnancies, cultural and societal pressures, to unawareness towards career possibilities and lack of employment opportunities and biases.

“When I found out about my pregnancy, instead of excitement I was overcome by anxiety, because I was recently offered a great job in a new city. I was wondering if the offer would stay, if I would be able to perform, and if I would have to endure biases. My exhilaration transformed into a sense of burden,” shares *Israa from Islamabad.

The coronavirus pandemic was no help in this regard either – it harmed any progression and initiatives towards increasing female employment and has been a major setback for women across the globe. According to a study titled ‘Women in the Workplace’, conducted by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co., the effects of the pandemic have imposed a heavy toll on working women causing them to leave their jobs. Initially, one in four women considered leaving their jobs but over the past year one in three women had thought of leaving their jobs or downshifting their careers. “In the midst of my career, I chose to take a one-year long break due to a sudden move to another country, thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, that turned into a 3-year long gap,” says *Sadaf.

Additionally, with women in the workforce usually earning less than their male counterparts and domestic partners, the onus of taking a career break to settle back at home and oversee children usually falls on the females. The pandemic heightened this disparity, resulting in a larger number of females forced to opt out of work.

“I had been working at a company for three years and was next in line for the position of head of department. After spending countless nights away from my family whilst travelling for work, and missing important milestones in my children’s lives, I knew I deserved that position. When the pandemic hit, I thought I would be able to juggle my work and personal life at the same time, but with schools being remote, I was left with no choice and had to leave work. I had a detailed discussion with my husband on the matter, but with Covid spreading and no household staff, I was the one who had to manage the house, pick up children from school, and eventually give up my dream job,” narrates *Lubna.



Even though nearly half of Pakistan's population is women, the percentage of women representation in the workforce is a matter of concern. There is a dire need to increase women participation in the workforce – creating a work-friendly culture, introducing policies for childcare facilities, flexible timings, remote work provisions, paid family leaves, and awareness on gender sensitisation. To address these provisions, it is necessary to create acceptance towards working women. However, to achieve this requires a deep understanding of the cultural sensitivities and biases towards women. Organisations must impose formal gender sensitisation trainings at workplaces to assist leaders in understanding, empathising, and becoming enablers of a lower gender gap at workplaces. Easier back-to-work programmes need to be introduced across the corporate sector with mentorship and training provisions to help ease females back into the workspaces.

One such recent step was taken by Jazz with their 'She's Back – Women Returnship Program,' a comprehensive six-month programme that is aimed at providing employment opportunities to females who have taken a career break of over 1.5 years. The programme received hundreds of applications from across the country and the company shortlisted 12 female candidates after a rigorous recruitment process. "Women enrolled in this programme will gain an enriching experience through a number of development and engagement initiatives. The best part of all is that at the end of this programme these women will have an opportunity to join the company on a permanent basis based on exemplary performance and relevant openings," informs Wajida Leclerc, Chief People Officer, Jazz.



Women participants of the Returnship Program

While asking *Fatima about her experience with applying to jobs after her career break, she stated that her CV was one of the biggest hindrances to her employment process. Employers asked her why she had such a long gap, and how she would have ‘forgotten’ her work scope. Although Fatima disagreed with them, there was nothing she could do. After a few months of unsuccessful job hunts, she found out about the Returnship Program and tried her luck. “The entire process was smooth and transparent. People from Human Resources, as well as other departments were so co-operative and keen. Once hired, the on boarding journey was fun and full of learning. I was able to meet multiple people from different parts of the country under one roof, all sharing the same vision to re-build our careers. Every woman had positive energy and zeal,” comments Fatima.

*Sarah, another beneficiary of ‘She’s Back - Women Returnship Program’ expresses her disdain at the lack of opportunities most corporate offices offer in response to career gaps. “Companies do not even consider you for a role if there is a career break in your CV, especially if it is longer than a few months. Therefore, these ‘back to work’ programmes are so important for all those struggling to rejoin the corporate sphere,” she states.

As part of the programme women receive guidance on how to navigate their careers with daily household responsibilities. The programme provides flexibility to all women returnees to ease their transition back to work. Through periodic connects, engagement activities, learning and development opportunities, and performance appraisals, the returnees will be provided with an opportunity to join the company as permanent employees at the end of the programme - based on performance and opportunities.

“The on boarding team ensured that the entire process of recruitment was as comfortable and informative as possible. You know that feeling of being a lost little duck on your first day of school that you dread the most? It just was not there, and that’s saying a lot,” elucidates Sadaf.



Such initiatives are instrumental in not just developing women in the workforce but encouraging them and providing commendable opportunities across the country. It is a form of empowerment for women, giving them a chance to reconnect to the workforce, developing their functional and technical skills, confidence, and providing them access to other learning opportunities.

Furthermore, such initiatives targeting an increase in female employment question the cultural and social norms that have historically reiterated that a woman's place is at home. Pre-conceived and deeply-rooted gender roles in Pakistani culture, often echoed by women themselves as well, limit women to household chores, feeding, childbearing and upbringing, care giving for elders, and general homemaking. More conservative mindsets restrict women from leaving home for employment to keep an eye on their demeanour and respect 'honour codes'. Many women in Pakistan do not even have the leniency to step out of the house for chores or social commitment without a chaperone alongside.

Another factor to consider when discussing major constraints for women entering the workforce is education. In accordance with the cultural conservative norms, education is often prioritised for male students in Pakistan, especially in rural regions, while education for women is mostly limited to being taught skills focused on home chores.



A study conducted by Duke University and the Center for Economic Research in Pakistan analysed the gender difference in job search processes in the country, and the study revealed that 41 per cent of men actively look for jobs using various search methods as compared to women, who stood at 29 per cent. This indicates a certain number of hurdles faced by women during job searches, including a lack of networking opportunities, low possibility of referrals, and difficulty finding safe transportation – limiting the scope of possible workplaces. According to statistics from World Bank, the female labour force participation could easily increase by 7 per cent with increased access to employment prospect information.

Another difficulty for women is the dearth of provisions and flexibility at work. Women in the workforce are often expected to provide for alternatives for their standardised domestic responsibilities if they desire to spend a significant part of their day at the workplace. There is also a lack of proper leaves for new mothers, provisions of flexible timings and not all mothers are offered hybrid work models for mothers of young children. Resultantly, many women find they have no other option but to take a career break or delay the launch of their careers until they have kids. Society encourages women to revolve their lives around marriage and child-bearing responsibilities. But these situations are never forever, and once their children have reached a school-going age mothers may choose to come back to the workforce after the career gap, where they face some of the obstacles mentioned above.

“When I joined the ‘She’s Back – Women Returnship Program’, I was very nervous about my children, leaving them at home all alone and worrying what I would do if they got sick? However, the flexibility provided in this programme eased all my concerns,” elucidates Fatima.

In a fast-paced world with frequent technological advancements, there are a few organisations that are comfortable with rehiring females after a work break, while it is perceived negatively as a lack of commitment towards the workplace. Many recruiters and managers shy away from on boarding women returnees, assuming they have limitations and have been out of the system for long.

Gender gaps hit women much harder than men, especially in a country like Pakistan that has a long way to go in attaining gender equality at workplaces. This is a cause of concern, especially when you talk about financial inclusion and independence for women, along with empowerment through equal opportunities. Corporates need to come together welcoming women into the workforce, and actively involving themselves in women empowerment and gender equality issues. Recently, Jazz onboarded Sabahat Bokhari as Head of Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) to ensure that they continue to uplift and empower all employees.

Progressive steps need to be taken by organisations to start conversations allowing for more friendly and inclusive work environments. In a 2018 paper, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that the country would see a 30 per cent annual boost in its GDP (Gross domestic product) if it closed the gender employment gap. Here is to hoping we get to see that day soon.