

Sociological perspectives on workforce reentry: examining structural and cultural support for women after child-rearing leave

Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of women reentering the workforce after extended child-rearing leave, focusing on how organizations, leaders, and society as a whole can better support their transition. Through qualitative interviews with women that reentered the workforce after a minimum one-year leave, the research identifies the multitude of challenges faced including imposter syndrome, identity integration, connection and belonging, and work-life balance. The findings highlight the critical role of organizational policies, leadership practices, and societal attitudes in facilitating successful workforce reentry. Supportive measures, including flexible work arrangements, targeted reskilling programs, and inclusive workplace cultures, are shown to significantly enhance women's reintegration and professional development. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of empathy and mentorship in fostering a supportive environment. Recommendations are provided for organizations and policymakers to create more equitable and supportive frameworks, ultimately contributing to greater gender equality in the workforce. This research contributes to the broader understanding of the interplay between individual experiences and societal factors in shaping women's workforce reentry.

Keywords: workforce reentry, women in the workforce, organizational support, societal support, gender equality, work-life balance, culture, imposter syndrome

Volume 8 Issue 4 - 2024

Jacquelyn I Eidson

School of Professional Studies, University of Kansas, USA

Correspondence: Jacquelyn I Eidson, School of Professional Studies, University of Kansas, USA, Tel 660-815-2443, Email jacquelyneidso@ku.edu

Received: June 24, 2024 | **Published:** July 10, 2024

Introduction

Working mothers play a crucial role in society, contributing significantly to both the economic and social fabric. Their participation in the workforce not only drives economic growth and innovation but also promotes gender diversity and equality in professional settings.¹ As role models, working mothers challenge traditional gender roles and inspire future generations to pursue both career and family aspirations.² Their dual responsibilities enhance the understanding and implementation of work-life balance policies, fostering more inclusive and flexible workplaces. Moreover, the involvement of mothers in the workforce positively impacts children's perceptions of gender roles, promoting a more equitable society. Thus, supporting working mothers is essential for the holistic development and progress of society.

The support of society and organizations for working mothers is imperative for fostering a balanced and equitable socioeconomic environment. Societal support, through inclusive policies and cultural attitudes, ensures that working mothers are not stigmatized but rather valued for their dual contributions to the home and the workforce.³ Organizations that implement supportive measures such as flexible working hours, comprehensive childcare services, and reskilling programs enable working mothers to thrive professionally without compromising their familial responsibilities. Such support systems not only enhance the productivity and morale of working mothers but also contribute to reducing gender disparities in the workplace.⁴ By prioritizing the needs of working mothers, both society and organizations cultivate a more diverse, resilient, and innovative workforce, ultimately driving sustainable economic growth and social progress.

Understanding the unique challenges and needs of mothers that reenter the workforce after an extended leave allows employers and

societies to be more equipped to provide the support that working mothers need. Better understanding a mother's personal experience is not only necessary for future women reentering but also critically important for organizations and societies that will benefit from their return.⁵ Despite dramatic changes in work and career environments for women since the second wave of feminism in the 1970s,⁶ successfully balancing work and personal life becomes more complicated when professional women begin having children.⁷ The experience of becoming a mother has received extensive research attention and it is well established that working mothers find the transition challenging.^{5,8-11} For mothers who wish to reenter the workforce and for employers who wish to retain this valuable talent pool, better understanding the experiences of mothers reentering the workforce is of great value for women, those that support them, and the organizations and societies that benefit from them.

Materials and methods

One-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten qualifying women and an extensive focus group discussion was conducted with three qualifying women. This study utilized a qualitative descriptive research methodology to capture detailed experiences and descriptions from each participant. All study participants were currently working full-time after an extended absence due to child-rearing. As noted in Figure 1, the range of time out of the workforce ranged from one year to greater than ten years, thus participants included those that left prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic and those that left during the pandemic. As noted in Figure 2, the range of number of children per participant ranged from one to four. As noted in Figure 3, participants represented five different states throughout the United States of America. These factors created a rich, diverse sample that resulted in saturation of data.

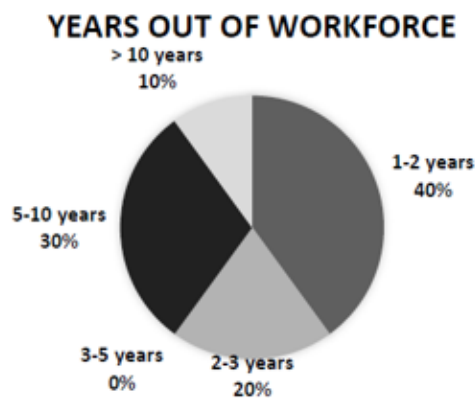


Figure 1 Interview informant's years out of the workforce due to child-rearing leave.

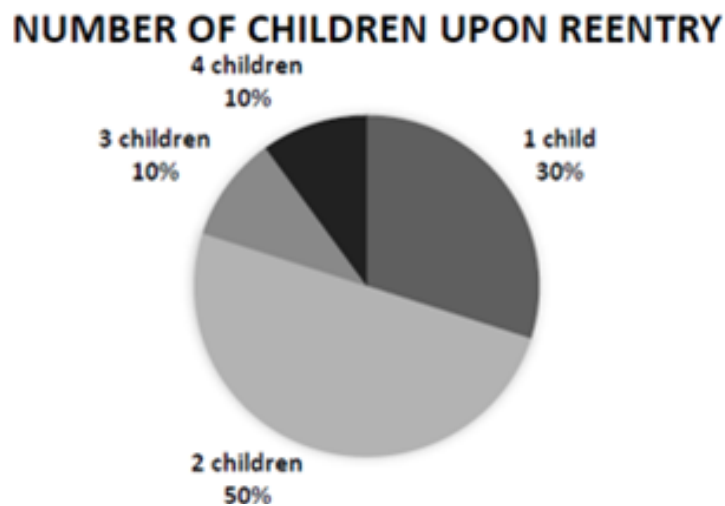


Figure 2 Interview Informant's number of children upon reentry.

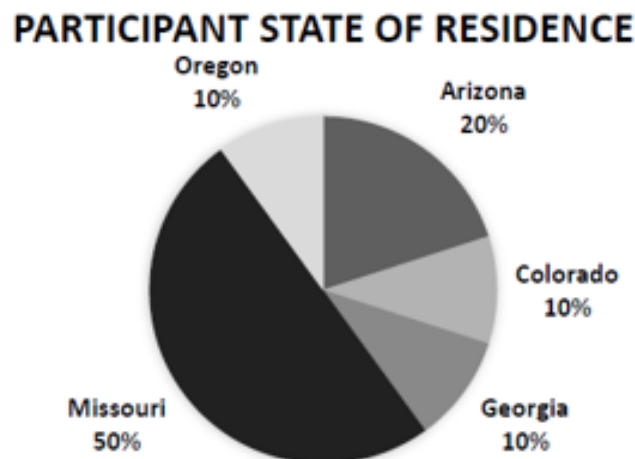


Figure 3 Interview informant's state of residence.

Braun and Clarke's,¹² six steps for thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the qualitative descriptive data derived from the one-on-one, semi structured interviews and focus group discussion. The six-step thematic analysis provided an accessible, systematic, and rigorous approach to coding and theme development,¹³ while allowing

meaning and patterns in the data to be identified. Using data from the semi-structured interviews and data from the focus group discussion, themes were identified to provide a rich and complex account of data,¹⁴ by utilizing the six-phase approach to thematic analysis.¹² Although the steps of thematic analysis seem linear, the inductive

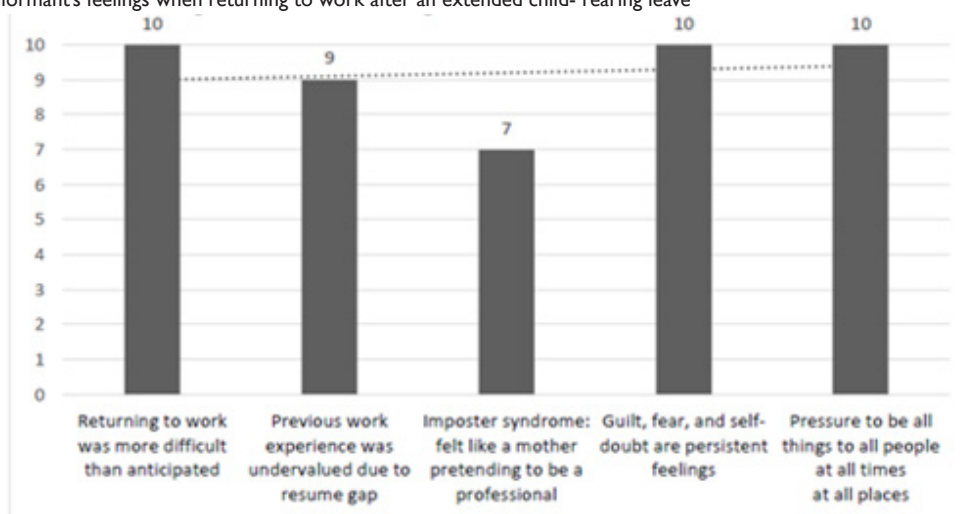
process was complex as data was reviewed multiple times, analyzed multiple times, coded, and themed. The initial codes generated through manual coding were reviewed numerous times to identify categories. Frequency was identified to confirm patterns that had emerged through manual-coding and ensure consistency. MAXQDA, a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, was used to reinforce the manual coding and refine the codes and categories.

Results

As noted in Table 1 below, all participants described returning to work after an extended leave to be more difficult than they had anticipated. In addition, all ten informants felt an unrealistic pressure to be “all things to all people”, both at home and at work. Participant 1 noted that even after being back in the workforce for four years,

“everyone at home was used to me doing everything all the time and that hasn’t changed much”. Participant 4, when discussing the ability to balance the demands of work and the demands of parenthood, noted, “I was very confident about it when I first went back and then very quickly, I was not confident at all”. Also noted in Table 1 below, all ten of the study participants noted feelings of guilt, fear, and self-doubt upon their return to work. 27% of the participants reported guilt as the reason for their initial departure from the workforce. Feelings of guilt then grew to an alarming 91% upon returning to work after the extended leave. P1104 noted that she “felt guilty staying home and then simultaneously guilty for wanting to go back to work”. The same informant said later in the interview, “Not to bring up guilt again, but there were a lot of times I felt very selfish”. Then towards the end of the interview, the same informant said, “I feel like I just kind of have to live with this weird guilt all the time and I just have to learn how to deal with it”.

Table 1 Interview informant’s feelings when returning to work after an extended child-rearing leave



Self-doubt and fear were also persistent feelings deeply interwoven with all ten study participants. P1107 noted that “even if you know your kid is going to do great at daycare or if you’ve got the world’s best nanny, there’s still a part of you that has fear and doubt”. In addition to fear and doubt concerning the care of the children, participants noted fear and doubt regarding their own ability to successfully return to work. P110 described “not feeling like I was enough, feeling like I wasn’t smart anymore”. P105 described returning to work as “finding my footing again as I started to figure out who I was as a person and as an employee while also being a mom. I was worried I couldn’t do it”.

Contributing to the feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, nine of the ten informants noted that they felt that their past work experience was no longer relevant or valued. P1103 described her return to work as, “People viewed me as if I was just starting my career. My experience of six years as a financial advisor had no merit at all. They viewed me only as a mother, not a colleague”. P1102 described the “sophisticated volunteer activities” she did during the 15 years at home raising children but said when she returned to work, she felt like “It meant nothing to them. They didn’t value my time at home at all”. Participants noted that the perceived skepticism from their colleagues and others in society contributed to their own self-doubt.

Due to these feelings of self-doubt, seven of the ten informants described their experience as what would be classified as imposter syndrome, a psychological pattern rooted in individual doubts and fear of being exposed as a fraud. Coined by psychologists Pauline

Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978, Imposter Syndrome describes the experience of an individual who doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments and has a persistent internal fear of being exposed as undeserving.¹⁵ P1101 noted, “I had a little bit of imposter syndrome. I’m not sure what I’m doing. I felt intimidated by that.” P1105 noted that “I was questioning every move I made. Am I being a good mom by working? Am I being a good employee by being a mom?” P1109 described her experience as “Sometimes I felt like a mom pretending to be a professional”. Though feelings of inadequacy in small doses may prompt perseverance and the desire to enhance competency, imposter syndrome can lead to emotions that impact an individual’s ability to operate at the highest level.¹⁵ These psychological experiences can result in deteriorating motivation, performance, and engagement, all of which can exacerbate gender inequality in the workplace.¹⁶

100% of the one-on-one interview participants and 100% of the focus group participants reported that mentorship had positively impacted their return to the workforce. This includes both formal and informal mentorship, both female and male mentors, and both workplace mentors and mentors outside of the workplace. The term mentor has become synonymous with one who helps another make significant transitions in knowledge, work, or thinking.¹⁷ A formal mentorship program includes a starting date, a definite end date, a process for matching mentors with mentees, and frameworks regarding mentoring parameters. An informal mentorship refers to mentoring relationships that grow organically, where individuals themselves take the initiative for development and where they have no

fixed timeframe or parameters. Both formal and informal mentorship can provide valuable support and development opportunity, both on a vocational level and a psychosocial level.^{18,19} Participants in a study focused on the financial services sector were deeply aware that their professional and personal identities were intertwined and reported that working with a mentor made them better at not only their jobs but their lives as a whole.¹⁷ It is a woman's support network, both at home and at work, which provide her the confidence to differentiate, develop, and successfully manage multiple identities.²⁰ Working women note support from both professional and personal mentors as valuable resources in navigating the work-life balance.²¹ In a study of mothers who were working full-time as school counselors, participants reported a critical need to find support from multiple sources.²²

work, and society as a whole. It is through this connection that returning mothers feel truly supported at home, at work, and in society.

Per Table 2 below, 100% of the study participants reported that it is vital for mentors to acknowledge that getting off and on the corporate ladder is challenging as well as recognize the unique value that women and mothers bring to organizations. These results indicate that it is the personal connection, understanding, and respect that are most important for returning mothers not just to survive, but thrive. Also noted in Table 1 below, trust and confidence are also critical for returning women to feel safe and supported, both at home and at work. The unmatched value of relatedness and shared experiences were a consistent theme throughout the data. Through shared experiences, participants felt empowered to have important conversations regarding expectations, goals, balance, and an intentional path. The importance of relatedness and shared experiences were noted, over and over again, as valuable connectors with friends and family, colleagues at



Table 2 Interview informant's feelings of self- efficacy when returning to work after an extended child- rearing leave and the influence of mentorship

Discussion and conclusion

Ensuring that women are empowered and have equal opportunities to pursue their ambitions and participate fully in all aspects of society is crucial for the realization of human rights. In a globalized world, countries that empower women to leverage their full potential are more competitive. Societies that fail to do so risk falling behind in terms of innovation, economic performance, and social development.²³ When women are empowered, they are more likely to invest in their families, communities, and businesses, leading to increased productivity and growth. Additionally, when women are empowered, they are more likely to participate in decision-making processes, leading to more equitable and inclusive societies.

Working mothers are integral to the socioeconomic foundation of societies. Their contributions extend beyond their immediate families by influencing economic growth, promoting gender equality, enriching workplace diversity, and advocating for policies that benefit the broader community. In addition, women who leave the workforce due to motherhood and then want to return to work may be one of the world's greatest untapped resources.¹⁰ Therefore, it is critical that societies and organizations support working mothers, including those returning from an extended leave, in order to foster economically productive, equitable, and balanced communities.

This study underscores the vital importance of providing robust support for working mothers, particularly those reentering the workforce after extended leave. The findings reveal that mentorship, both formal and informal, plays a critical role in facilitating their successful transition back into professional roles. Mentorship offers not only vocational guidance but also psychosocial support, helping to mitigate feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome that many mothers experience. Trust, confidence, and relatedness through shared experiences were identified as essential for returning mothers to feel safe, supported, and empowered. These connections enable meaningful conversations about expectations, goals, and balance, ensuring that returning mothers thrive both at home and in the workplace. By acknowledging the unique challenges and contributions of working mothers, mentors, both in the workplace and in society as a whole, can help these women navigate the complexities of balancing career and family, fostering a sense of belonging and competence both at home and in the workplace.

Society plays a crucial role in supporting working mothers through various means that collectively enhance their ability to balance work and family responsibilities. The implications of this research extend beyond individual experiences to highlight the broader societal and organizational benefits of supporting working mothers. This includes policy development and implementation, accessible childcare services, flexible work arrangements, reskilling programs, community support networks, a culture of understanding and respect, workplace

inclusion and equality, health and wellness services, and economic support systems. These measures not only enhance the productivity and morale of working mothers but also contribute to a more diverse, innovative, and resilient workforce. By addressing these areas, society can create an environment where working mothers are supported, valued, and able to contribute fully to both their families and their professional fields. This holistic support not only benefits working mothers but also promotes a more equitable, productive, and inclusive society.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflicts of interests

The author declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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