

**Redesigning the System for 'Gender Inclusivity' in the workforce with respect to the Life-Cycle of Women:**

**Sangita Soman**

Visiting Faculty

[SIMS; SIHS; SSSS; ISB&M]

**Abstract**

There is no doubt that most organizations have launched numerous, intense and genuine Diversity Initiatives in all sincerity. Yet, even today, the success rate for them is that, less than 24% organizations have less than 20% women in their senior management. This article attempts to examine the existing 50 hour week system which essentially does not promote a work-life balance and is neither friendly to the life cycle of the women in the workforce, resulting not only in a huge financial burden of non-productive hours but is also unsuccessful in gender inclusivity. This is an effort to suggest that more women of the 43% who take a break to start a family can be brought back into the workforce by redesigning this 50 hour work week which is inherently not gender neutral, keeping in mind the biological differences between the men and women in the workforce.

**Keywords:** gender inclusivity; gender neutrality; women; workforce; second careers; life cycle; diversity initiatives; productive work week; social roles; equality; development;

**Objective of the study:**

The objective of the study is to find a solution to the challenge of working women dropping out of the workforce and despite the best and the most earnest, 'Diversity and Gender Inclusivity' initiatives of the organizations, less than 40 % of women return to the workforce. The study attempts to examine if the current 9.45 hours/ day work schedule is unfriendly to the life cycle of women and therefore not gender neutral.

**Study Design:**

This is a conceptual presentation of the need to redesign the existing system of the 9.45 hours/day office routine. The concept is developed after a study of various articles and opinions expressed in the present day corporate set-up with respect to the poor gender ratio in the higher echelons of management.

### **Introduction:**

The current system of a 50 hours/week schedule has no scientific basis or is not a very well thought out system. It is purely a century old norm which finds its origin in the tidings of the Industrial Revolution for running factories more efficiently [1]. This paper attempts to examine this 50 hours/week system which does not promote a work life balance and is neither friendly to the women in the workforce. This arrangement is one of the most unchanged constituent of the corporate system. This results in not just a huge financial burden of non-productive man hours but is also unsuccessful in gender inclusivity.

### **Literature Review and Analysis:**

According to an article, **'Women Matter 2016': Reinventing the workplace to unlock the potential of gender diversity** by McKinsey and Company, although, companies launched numerous programs, policies and processes, results are far from satisfactory. There is no doubt that most organizations have launched numerous, intense and genuine Diversity Initiatives in all sincerity. Yet, even today, the success rate for them is that, less than 24% organizations have less than 20% women in their senior management [2].

Organizations today, follow the "anytime performance model". Both men and women believe an executive career demands "anytime" availability, [3] a work model that requires sacrificing personal and family life. According to the report, this model makes combining an executive career with family life more difficult for women

The organizations have initiated various programs for gender Inclusivity:

1. Government efforts to reinforce social infrastructure and addressing traditional mind-sets
2. Infrastructure for Child care and Elder Care at the workplace
3. Tax Incentives for working women
4. Initiatives to discredit gender stereotypes
5. Women Development Programs
6. Gender Neutral Performance Evaluation System
7. Women's Safety at the workplace and Secure Transportation Policy
8. Leadership Development for Women
9. Close-end project work [4]
10. Work from Home option ...and more.

According to Gender Equality Research of 2016 on Equality, Inclusivity and Well-being, efforts are being made by all stake holders of society to provide Flexible Work Opportunities, Initiatives on Social Role Change of Men, Paternity Benefits, Women Empowerment Government Legislation, and Improved Child Care Benefits and so on.

The organizations are making a genuine effort with their diversity initiatives and the society is transforming itself from a masculine society to a feminine society at a tremendously furious pace [5]. In feminine societies, the line dividing the social roles between men and women seems to be

blurring. Despite all this, 43% of the women who take a break from their professional careers when they start a family, never come back [6] into the workforce. The organizations are unable to attract, retain and grow talent nor create and sustain a culture of gender diversity.

These observations prompt us to examine the reasons for the exit of the women from the workforce after the break for starting a family: The bearing and rearing of a child.

**‘Don’t go back to work for two years – If you want a happy baby’ by Dr, Yehudi Gordon [7]**

At birth, humans are the least developed mammals on the planet and what happens to us in our early years when the brain begins to develop has a marked impact on us during childhood and on into our adult years. Babies who feel separated from their parents and who do not have an opportunity to attach securely to their mothers will suffer a range of problems in later life. The separation produces stress hormones and if separation continues for long, it establishes a stress pattern which can lead to psychological problems as an adult.

In a Pew Research Survey [11], 42% said that having a mother who works part time is ideal. 42% of mothers with some work experience reported in 2013 that they had reduced their work hours in order to care for a child at some point in their career. A majority of the respondents were highly qualified as most held a master's degree in various fields but cited conflict of priorities as the primary reason for them to quit their jobs. Women have a hard time balancing work and childcare in the present system especially if they do not get assistance from their support system of family and friends, which ultimately takes a toll on their career ambitions.

According to a survey by the Associated Chambers of Commerce (Assocham) [10], many women are quitting work after starting a family. “A growing number of highly-educated women in urban India are abandoning their professional lives to become full-time mothers as raising children while maintaining a serious career becomes complex,” said the findings of the Assocham survey.

The Social Development Foundation of Assocham interacted with some 400 new mothers, in the age group of 25-30, in 10 cities of Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Indore, Jaipur, Kolkata, Lucknow and Mumbai to know their employment decisions post-motherhood. About 30 per cent women in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Jaipur, Lucknow and Kolkata quit their jobs after their first child was born, it added.

The present Maternity Benefits Act’s amendment in India, provides for enough maternity leave. Certain countries have a Paternity leave too. Despite a generous ‘Parental leave’, at the time of bearing a child, mothers, are unable to return to the workforce.

The reason is the continuing demand on the mother’s time in the rearing of a healthy child, caring for the child’s safety and security, above all.

Almost 74% of the women [7] cite the reason of a dismal work- life balance with the existing system of a 9.45 hour/day and an ‘anytime performance model’.

**Disadvantages of the existing 50 hour/ work week for both Men and Women:**

1. Stress and poor mental health

2. Familial neglect: poor work-life balance
3. Lack of exercise
4. Unhappy workers- cost of unhappy workers- negativity at the workplace

According to a study published by John Pencavel of Stanford University, in 2014,[8] attempts to quantify the relationship between hours worked and productivity, found that employee output falls sharply after a 50-hour work-week, and falls off a cliff after 55 hours—so much so that someone who puts in 70 hours produces nothing more with those extra 15 hours, Longer hours have also been connected to absenteeism and employee turnover. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has an entire website devoted to the effects of long working hours.

The study also established that there are ancillary costs of long working hours such as the expenses of running complementary machinery and of providing light, heat, ventilation, and supervisory workforce. The direct and indirect costs of employee engagement programs to retain them productively also adds to the costs.

#### **Conclusion:**

It is established beyond doubt that the 50 hour work week, with the ever escalating travel time due to congestion and urbanization, is not only an unhealthy system for the men in the workforce but the primary reason for women not returning into the workforce after taking a break to start a family, despite the best 'gender inclusivity initiatives' by the organizations. This also does not encourage men to take on the social role of a caregiver thereby, preventing the society from metamorphosing from a Masculine to a Feminine Society as explained by Geerte Hoefstede; where the line dividing the social roles of men and women is rather blurred.

#### **Suggestions and Recommendations:**

Based on the Scandinavian study of productivity [9] which substantiates that the six hour work day has proved itself more than just humane. People were 20% happier and had 64% more time for activities. They get sick less, have lower stress and work harder. Yet, according to Dr, Pramila Rao, an associate professor of Human Resource Management, at Marymount University, the six hour work week may not be well accepted by organizations as they fear that their productivity may fall.

The system of Flexible Work Schedule (FWS) like a variable day, variable week, flexi-tour, Maxi flex, keeping in mind the core hours and flexible hours has been tried, and has not been successful in retaining the women in the workforce.

**The nearly 400 surveyed women who need child rearing time seem to be very willing to put in no more than a 'four hour work day'.**

The resolution to this may certainly be found in **apportioning the eight hour work day, into two parts of four hours each.** The employees can choose, two, four hour slots or one, four hour slot.

The men or women who want to work full time can choose two, four hour shifts. The remuneration may be pro-rated accordingly.

**Benefits to the organization:**

1. Organizations may keep valued employees who may quit to pursue work- family balance
2. Higher productivity due to shorter working day [Scandinavian study on productivity] [9]
3. Reduced absenteeism and lesser sick leave
4. Reduced stress on the employees: Better health: Lower Medical Claims
5. Gender Inclusivity: retention of women post 'parental breaks'
6. Gender sensitivity to life cycle of women
7. Reduced Break time: **Can exclude a long lunch break**

**Traditional Masculine Society view versus Feminine Society view:**

A traditional masculine society is where men work a full working day whereas women take care of children and home. A feminine society is where men and women share responsibilities equally. A redesigned system is where we focus on a four hour work scheduling pattern rather than an eight or a 9.45 hours workday pattern. **The choice of taking up two slots of four hours by one partner or one slot of four hours each, by both partners will truly bring the concept of sharing responsibility** into practice and still give a more productive work day based on the Scandinavian Study results as well as retain the 45% of women who leave the workforce into the mainstream workforce.

**Scope for future study:**

There is great scope for future study with the redesign of the entire system as follows.

1. How to design the compensation and benefits package for the new system
2. Study of productivity of a four hour work schedule to include or exclude lunch break.
3. Effect of the new design on the company's Transport Policy and Expenses
4. Study the link between reduced work hours and ancillary/overhead expenses

**It is time that we take a hard look at the existing system of a 50 hour work week and redesign it in a way that it does not remain 'men centric' as it is now. It must take into consideration the life cycle of women in the child bearing and rearing phase, and offer itself to a new design if it is to become gender neutral and inclusive. Where we stand today in the biological evolution, not men but women have the responsibility of bearing children, an act which unless science makes it possible in the near future, is unattainable to men. Yet, women are paying the price for it by dropping out of the workforce due to the existing long workday system. A new design will be a new beginning for gender parity and sharing of responsibilities in the true sense.**

**I would like to draw our attention to the fact that, currently, we have an 'Equality based**

**Development model'. We need to move to a 'Development based Equality concept' if women have to return to the workforce after experiencing motherhood.**

**References:**

- [1] The Origin of the 8-Hour work day and Why We Should rethink it: Ted Widrich, 11, June 2013
- [2]; [3] Exhibit 6 of '**Women Matter 2016': Reinventing the workplace to unlock the potential of gender diversity**' by McKinsey and Company
- [4]; [6] Article by Paulette Light; a co-founder of MomStamp, a website for product and service-provider recommendations.
- [5] Geert Hofstede's cultural Dimensions
- [7] Don't go back to work for two years – If you want a happy baby' by Dr, Yehudi Gordon, June 2009
- [8] A study published by John Pencavel of Stanford University, 2014
- [9] The six hour work day increases productivity; Rebecca Greenfield; June 2016
- [10] Survey by the Associated Chambers of Commerce (Assocham)
- [11] Pew Research Centre.