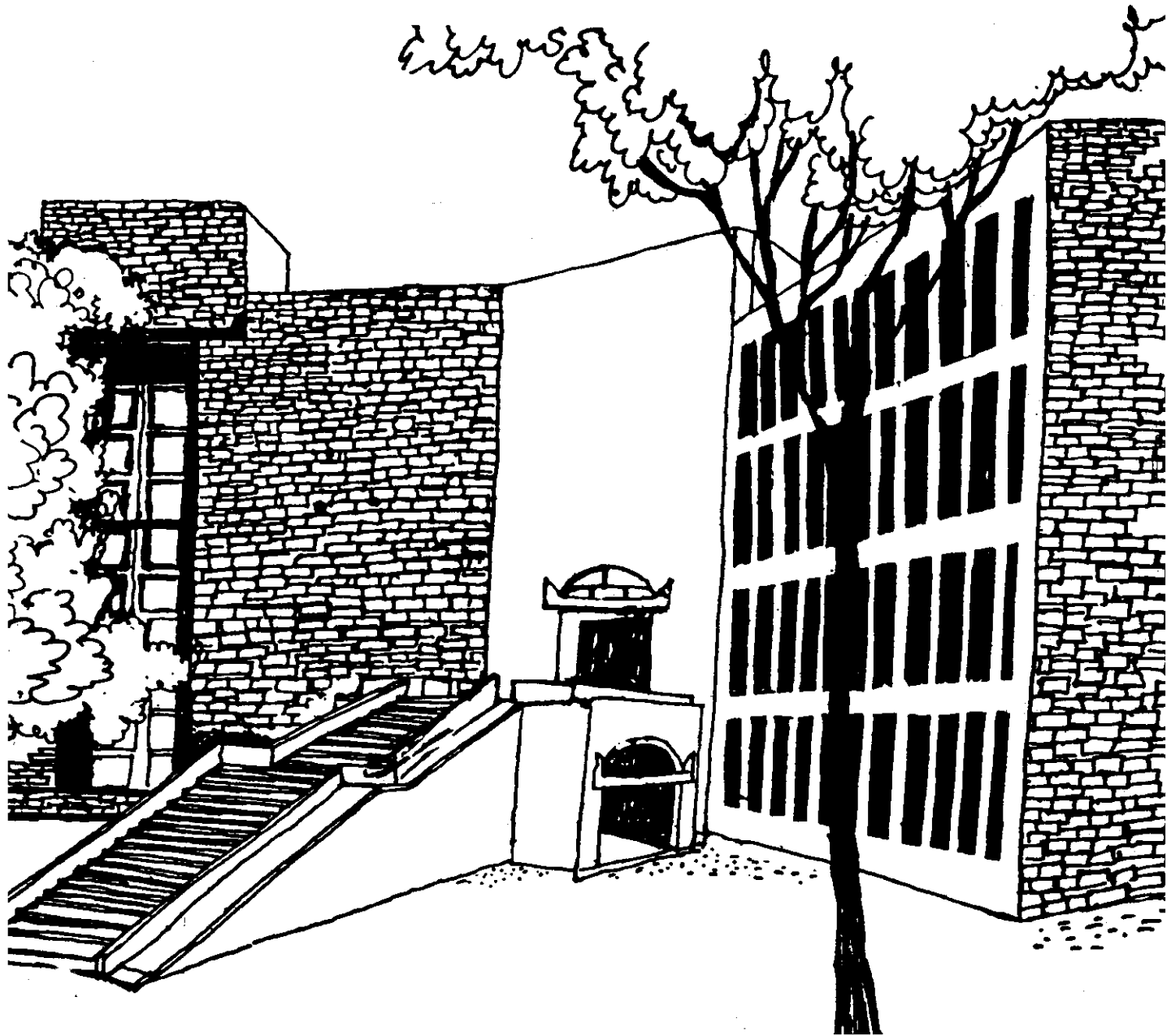




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Working Paper



**AUGMENTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN:
AGENDA FOR ORGANISATION AND INDIVIDUALS**

By

Deepti Bhatnagar
Ujvala Rajadhyaksha

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**AUGMENTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN: AGENDA FOR
ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS**

by

Deepti Bhatnagar¹ and Ujvala Rajadhyaksha²

1. Professor of Organisational Behaviour, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

2. Fellow Programme Participant, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

AUGMENTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN: AGENDA FOR ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

ABSTRACT

Women's career development in organisations is often different from that of men. Although competent women, like competent men aspire for top positions of leadership in organisations, such positions often elude them. This is because the dual role responsibility of women in the work and home sphere prevents them from adopting the traditional hierarchical (male) model of career progress.

To facilitate women's career development, it is our contention that one needs to begin with a better understanding of the structure of career opportunities in organisations, along with an appreciation of the diversity of women employees and the career options that they select.

Our paper begins with a discussion of possible career movement opportunities in organisations, using the three-dimensional framework proposed by Schein (1971). The paper then looks at the career choices and consequent career paths that are actually adopted by career women in organisations. Based on an analysis of the above, the paper ends with specific suggestions for organisations and women so as to help facilitate the career development for women.

AUGMENTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN: AGENDA FOR ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

That women's career progression in organisations is often different from that of men is fairly well-known. This difference manifests itself in different conscious choices made by women in selecting a career and career pattern at the entry level as well as at subsequent career stages such as establishment, advancement, maintenance and withdrawal. These choices are often prompted by the dual set of roles played by women in fulfilling work and family responsibilities. In fact, if we want to understand the development of women's work careers, then we must understand their simultaneous involvement in the work and family spheres, for it is the dual role responsibility faced by women that is *the* differentiating factor between their career development, and that of men.

At the same time, understanding women's career development requires an appreciation of the fact that the category 'women' is not a homogeneous one. In the same organisation, it is possible to find women of differing potential and of differing orientations to work. There can be diversity among the women employees. Therefore, even if, in general, all women's career development is constrained by their ability to juggle their work and family roles, this very ability may differ among women depending upon their involvement in each of these roles, particularly in the work role.

This point needs a special mention because organisations often make an effort to develop the careers of their women employees. But they base their efforts on the assumption that all women employees have the same needs and potential or competency levels, only to be disappointed with partial success in their efforts. This often develops in organisations a once-bitten-twice-shy attitude, preventing them from taking any further interest in the career development of women because of their unhappy experiences with a few.

To ensure greater presence of women in positions of leadership in organisations, ideally a three-pronged approach as recommended by Martin, Harrison and Dinitto (1983) is desirable. In a study on the process of the advancement of women in hierarchical organisations, Martin, Harrison and Dinitto advocated a comprehensive initiative consisting of the following:

- 1) a simultaneous effort at the societal, institutional, organisational and individual level to bring about a change;
- 2) political action against ideological justifications for women's exclusion; and
- 3) a more equitable division of labour between men and women in family and work roles.

The fact that the passage of a decade has not dimmed the need for these changes even today suggests that due to their nature these changes are time-consuming and may need several decades of concerted effort before any variations or shifts become noticeable.

The thrust of our paper is that while working for radical changes from societal to family level, professional women in organisations need also to think and act strategically at the individual level to manage their careers effectively. As contributing members of organisations, professional women, like professional men, look for steady movement towards positions of power so that they can influence the destiny of their organisations while deriving satisfaction and other positive outcomes for themselves. However it is often found that because of their strong commitment to family responsibilities, women tend to place a damper on their own career development through the choices that they make. In addition, resistance to women's advancement emanates from organisational barriers that could be structural and/or attitudinal. It is our contention that a better understanding of the structure of career opportunities and influence processes in organisations, along with an understanding of the diversity of women employees and the career options that they select, can facilitate women's career development.

We begin with a discussion of possible organisational movement opportunities, using the three-dimensional framework proposed by Schein (1971). Then we look at the career choices and consequent career paths that are actually adopted by the diversity of career women that one normally finds in an organisation. Finally, we end with some recommendations for organisations and women themselves to facilitate women's career development.

Career movement: A three-dimensional approach

According to Schein, it is possible to think of the career movement of an individual in an organisation as in a three dimensional space: (1) The vertical movement meaning going up (or down) in rank; (2) The radial movement meaning moving from the outer core of the organisation to the central tasks, people or power (or, in reverse direction from the core); and (3) The circumferential movement meaning the movement from one function to another at the same level.

Although a traditional concept of career growth implies only a vertical movement, yet in reality changes in any of the three movements described above can represent a movement in one's career. Figure 1 represents the three-dimensional structure of an organisation.

 Figure 1 around here

A career movement in an organisation means crossing one or more boundaries in the structure depicted above. The boundaries delineate and define the space for each organisational segment. Women desirous of moving across boundaries have to develop an appreciation of the nature of these boundaries and of the conditions that facilitate such a movement. Hierarchical boundaries delineate different hierarchical levels and determine a person's movement vertically. The inclusion boundaries indicate different degrees of centrality and determine a person's position radially. The functional boundaries separate different departments, groupings, sections or functions from one another. Functional boundaries have to be negotiated for a circumferential movement in the organisation.

As Schein proposes, the above boundaries can vary across industries, organisations and units in terms of their members, degree of permeability, and types of filtering properties. For example, in two organisations working in the same industry, the number of hierarchies for vertical movement may vary. One organisation may have a tall structure indicating a need to cross several levels if an individual wants to reach the top whereas another organisation may have a relatively flat structure denoting fewer hierarchical levels for aspirants for the top

position. Yet this does not imply that reaching the top may be easy in a flat structure. Though the number of hierarchical boundaries may be small in such an organisation, it may be hard to cross them; moreover the inclusion boundaries may be more in number so that the movement towards centrality may get severely curbed.

The permeability of boundaries can vary along the vertical, radial and circumferential dimensions. For example, in some organisations it may be easy to gain entry to the organisation but once having entered the organisation the boundaries for vertical movement may be fairly difficult to cross so that people are easily hired but are very closely screened for promotion. This is often the case with private sector organisations in India such as the advertising and market research agencies. Likewise for circumferential movement in some organisations the functional movement may be relatively easy whereas in some others it may be virtually impossible to cross the almost impermeable functional boundary. For example, it is extremely difficult to conceive of a professor of English moving to mathematics department in a university. For crossing functional boundaries often a change of specialisation is required and if an individual wants to move to a different function at the same level, he/she has to acquire relevant expertise before such a boundary can be crossed.

The boundaries also differ in terms of the filters or criteria used to demarcate the different boundaries. These filters can vary from the formal and specific as in the case of functional boundaries (for example, specification of formal qualifications and preparation required to enter a particular function) to subjective and nebulous criteria as in the case of centrality. Hierarchical boundaries are often characterised by a mix of formal filters like academic qualifications, seniority, work performance and informal filters like personality attributes, and attitudinal factors. It is our contention that women often acknowledge and work towards formal filters in organisations and thus try to acquire specific academic qualifications, skills, etc. But the important dimension of inclusion boundaries which uses as filters, non specific attributes such as personality, political finesse, and influence networks, gets completely overlooked by most women.

As a number of studies on women in organisations have shown, gender issues like discrimination often emanate, not from the hard facts of the adequacy or otherwise of

academic qualifications and work performance of women, but from soft and non-explicit reservations and opinions about the personality attributes of women, their aloofness, lack of involvement in and influence on the political underworld of organisational activity. Thus factors that often inhibit women's upward and inward movement are not related to task performance but to power performance. As Schein observes, "The inclusion boundaries are the hardest to identify and measure because to a considerable extent their very existence usually remains implicit" (Schein, 1971, p. 404).

To understand what can be done to enable women to better negotiate boundaries in the organisation, it is necessary to understand the diversity of women employees in an organisation, along with the compulsions that make them adopt certain career choices and consequent career paths, while attempting to meet their work and family responsibilities.

Job and Career Orientation: Challenges for Women

Women employees can broadly be classified into career-oriented and job-oriented employees. Career-oriented women intend to work continuously, get major satisfaction from working, and are committed to the idea of having a career, where a career implies taking a series of related jobs (either in the same organisation, or different jobs within companies) representing some progress- for example, up the hierarchy, increasing salary, increasing recognition and respect from one's colleagues, or more freedom to pursue one's own interest or select one's projects (Fogarty, Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971; Gutek and Larwood, 1987).

Job-oriented women on the other hand, are those who have intentions of working continuously and who could even get a high degree of satisfaction from working. However, they are not in general committed to the idea of having a career. Therefore, their departure from career-oriented women is in terms of their attitudes and behaviours associated with work-related activities and experiences. Largely, job-oriented women do not believe in investing heavily in their work role vis-a-vis their other roles, as they do not perceive their work role as developing across their life span.

Job-oriented women are generally found in the staff functions of an organisation, and their work is often of a kind that does not involve a high degree of training. Career-oriented

women are generally found among the line or managerial or administrative functions in an organisation. Their work involves a high educational qualifications, training and commitment. Most of the problems of career development, by definition, apply to the career-oriented women because the nature of their work is such that it warrants a movement in their activities in the organisation along a hierarchy of prestige. This paper is focused on career-oriented women, primarily those in managerial and administrative careers.

Amongst career-oriented women we find single career-oriented women and married career-oriented women. Married career-oriented women may have job-oriented spouses or career-oriented spouses (who form what are generally referred to as dual career couples). One finds more career-oriented women belonging to the latter category as it has been observed that professional women select life partners from similar, if not higher status professions (Parker, et.al, 1985; Rice, 1979).

The issues that single career-oriented women, particularly those in management and administration, have to contend with regarding their career development are very often those that most minority groups in organisations have to face. These include lack of access to informal information networks, lack of development opportunities, difficulty in getting a mentor, inadequate feedback on the job (Burke and Mckeen, 1992). However, multiple family roles often do not strongly compete with work roles for their attention and energy.

Coping with Multiple Role Demands: Options and Responses

Married career-oriented women, in addition to grappling with the above issues, have to learn to combine effectively their work and family roles, while trying to make a headway in their careers. Amongst the married career-oriented women, those coming from dual career families face the toughest challenges in balancing work and family roles: not only do they have to deal with the above mentioned problems, but they also have to juggle their own careers with their spouse's careers.

To complicate matters further, married career-oriented women do not maintain the same degree of involvement and commitment to their careers at all phases of their lives. For a couple of years following child-birth, most women including those who consider themselves

'die-hard careerists' experience a change in career involvement. They become less career-oriented and more job-oriented. Such a change in attitude towards work results from shifting priorities that come with the onset of motherhood and attendant responsibilities. Sometimes the changes in priorities result from changes in the salience of different life roles to the women themselves. In other cases, change in career involvement is enforced on young mothers by external factors such as lack of a support structure from spouse, parents and parents-in-law in the family sphere and the absence of institutional and informal support structures in the work sphere.

In any case, it means that taking up the cause of women's career development implies being sensitive not only to the differences in the attitude towards work that exist among women, as mentioned earlier, but also to the fact that the same woman may experience a change in her attitude towards work over her lifetime.

Further, it must be noted that this change in work involvement need not be permanent. In most cases, career-oriented women aspire to return to work with full commitment at a later stage when the child-rearing responsibilities have diminished. Therefore, instead of coming to the conclusion that such women are opting out altogether, it would be more realistic for organisations to believe that women are simply slowing down or putting their careers on the hold for a while - in other words opting for the 'interrupted career' pattern (Fogarty, Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971).

Reduced involvement in work may occur differently for different women. Some women respond to increased demands on their energy and time as young mothers by taking on fewer assignments at work, or by taking up activities at work that are less central or crucial and more peripheral to the organisation. For instance, women working in client-run organisations such as advertising agencies, consultancy organisations and market research agencies, take up charge for the servicing of fewer number of clients. Alternatively, they take up responsibility for routine activities like the monitoring of on-going projects, instead of seeking more important activities such as developing new business and attracting new clients to the organisation. As shown in Figure 2, such career moves by women result in an outward

Figure 2 around here

movement, away from the centre and towards the periphery, along Schein's (1971) radial dimension. Some other women move from one department to another along the circumferential dimension, in a bid to take up lesser demanding work assignments. For example, one comes across instances of women officers in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) who take up less attractive government portfolios where the work is less challenging and demanding, during their child-bearing and childrearing years. Similarly, many women marketing managers tend to take up charge of product lines that are less important to the organisation.

Lateral moves or temporary slow-down are career options that are by and large available to women in large bureaucratic organisations such as government departments and nationalised banks. In such organisations ample resource buffer exists to let women to decelerate. However, in smaller, or more efficiency-oriented organisations, competitive pressures compel women to either maintain the earlier tempo or to drop out of work. For safeguarding their careers in such organisations women need to plan strategically. This implies concerted efforts to prove their competence and commitment at the entry and early stages of their careers, and focused development of expertise during the establishment phase. Proving high competence and working towards developing indispensability in their special capabilities can enhance organisational willingness to accommodate them during the years of their career interruption.

Support Structures: Role of Family and Work Organisation

Of course, one comes across instances of professional women in both large as well as small organisations, who do not reduce their work involvement after marriage and children. Such women usually have dependable support mechanisms in the form of institutional child-care facilities or help from parents and in-laws, which enable them to move along the traditional linear career path. Support from the family and the organisation undoubtedly go a long way in developing women's careers.

In the Indian context, since social support from the family has often been strong, organisations have been slow to provide their own support systems to their women employees in the form of day care facilities and creches. It appears as though organisations have taken the support systems provided by the Indian family for granted. However, such an attitude cannot continue indefinitely. In the first place, the support structure provided by the family is not available to every one. It depends, for instance, on the number of siblings who have to share the support structure provided by parents and in-laws, the health of these ageing individuals, and whether they are located in the same city as their married children seeking their help. Moreover, given the trend towards nuclear families, late marriages and late children, and other demographic changes, the family support has started dwindling and may not be available to future cohorts of married working women. Therefore as part of their strategic planning about their human resources, organisations need to explicitly and expeditiously work towards providing defensible institutional support for child care.

Amongst the small number of organisations that have taken an initiative in this direction, one finds predominantly the manufacturing organisations, where day-care facilities and creches are provided on the plant sites. Such facilities if maintained well on an ongoing basis are a welcome step. They are a major help to working parents with small children, and are particularly useful for working mothers who have regular timings and a fixed place of work.

However, such facilities have limited usefulness for women managers and consultants whose jobs involve considerable travelling even during the course of the day. In cities and metros where most career-oriented women are likely to be employed, organisations find it difficult to provide day-care facilities because of space constraints. Moreover, creches at the place of work means exposing children to rush hour commuting everyday - an undesirable prospect indeed! Alternatively, organisations can let working mothers make their own day-care arrangements, and provide them child-care allowance; or organisations can provide full-time help or *ayahs* to working mothers as a part of their perquisites, just as they are provided accommodation and travel facilities. In case of dual career couples, or single parents, such facilities can be extended to either parent, so long as only one parent claims the benefit.

A Re-entry into the Profession

Women who decide to take a break from their careers during the child-rearing period are most often eager to resume their professional pursuits as soon as their child/ren join/s school.

The first major barrier at this stage is finding a suitable point for re-entry. Given the paucity of jobs even in professional fields, such openings are not easily available, particularly at locations of women's choice. Assuming that this difficult barrier is somehow surmounted, and there are suitable job openings, the second barrier is invisible and therefore that much more difficult to overcome. Organisations like to be doubly convinced that these women aspirants would not again quit jobs and interrupt their careers for personal reasons. We believe that organisations need to acquire an open and progressive outlook to deal with the issue of re-entry of women. They need to create appropriate space for these women who took a break from their careers to perform the societally valuable and personally fulfilling responsibilities of child-bearing and rearing. In fact, because work organisations are primarily designed around the basic assumption of male employees, they need to develop new approaches to respond to the new realities of gender restructuring. These approaches include new training inputs and different career paths to facilitate the re-entry and assimilation of career-oriented women.

Thus, women making a full-fledged re-entry into their careers need to be given supportive training inputs such as crash courses that re-familiarise them with their jobs, apprise them with the latest developments in the profession and equip them with the ability to work with colleagues who were perhaps junior to them before the interruption in their career. Such inputs need to be intense so as to enable women to make up for lost time, and catch up with their colleagues. While designing such a re-entry package, organisations need to think through to the acceptable duration of career interruption by their women employees beyond which their re-entry at the same level would become dysfunctional.

The re-entry of women into their careers marks a trying time for the organisation as well as for the woman concerned. Not only does she have to now put in extra effort to make up for lost time, but this demand for additional effort comes at a time when remaining out

of touch with her profession may have somewhat dulled her earlier spark. However determined effort can soon put her back on the rails. It has been found that after an initially trying period on the job for one or two years, career-oriented women settle down in their jobs and re-commit themselves fully to their work. What is more, they demonstrate strong motivation and willingness to make the most of their remaining productive years at work (Gallos, 1993).

Sometimes, career interruption can create stresses in family relationships as a woman's career gets 'out of sync' with that of her husband (Sekaran and Hall, 1993). For instance, following a woman's re-entry, her career advancement can coincide with her husband's timing of easing involvement in the work sphere (as he moves towards higher levels in the organisation following the uninterrupted traditional career track. While the wife may be enjoying the excitement of advancement, the husband's career may have moved to the placid 'maintenance' stage. There could occur a scenario where the husband is going through a disturbing 'mid-life crisis' while the wife is rearing to make a second go at her career. Such disparate experiences between husband and wife could well create their own set of tensions for the career-oriented woman.

However, after the initially stressful period of re-adjusting, the years following the re-entry turn out to be years during which career-oriented women perhaps experience a great sense of well-being. This is because not only do they have the satisfaction of having met their child care responsibilities, but they have a second opportunity to apply their competence and channel their energies into their work. This renewed commitment to their work and careers often results in a delayed blossoming of women's careers. Probably because of interruptions, career women peak later in their professions than do men (Gallos, 1993).

The discussion so far indicates several points that organisations should note in the interests of the career development of their women employees. These are:

1. Although reaching the top echelons of the organisation is desirable, there are different ways of getting there. The career path followed by women in their journey towards the top could be different from the path pursued traditionally by men. But this difference does not in any way make them less suitable for top management positions.

If women are provided with the right inputs at the right times, organisations can find themselves with adequate availability of equally qualified and competent men and women.

2. Developing women's careers means being aware of the differences in the needs and potential of different women employees, and of the same employees over their life cycle.
3. Developing women's careers means tolerating as well as facilitating lateral, non-traditional career moves of women employees. To do this organisations need to make available appropriate support systems and alternative work opportunities during the child-rearing phase for women employees. They also need to readjust and rationalise organisational reward and compensation structures so that the remuneration given to women employees during their reduced involvement phase does not generate resentment and hostility among other employees. Finally, organisations need to provide their women employees who are ready to make a full-fledged re-entry into their career, with appropriate and adequate training inputs including counselling for women and their spouses.

There are certain steps that career-oriented women need to take to enhance their own career opportunities within the organisation. These are:

1. During the establishment phase of their careers, women should make a mark professionally. They should also try to develop specialisation in a specific area in which the organisation has relatively few in-house experts. Such focused expertise can enhance organisation's appreciation of the unique contribution of women. Mutual dependence can make organisations respond positively when career oriented women as young mothers seek flexible options. Women need to become aware of the formal and informal structural barriers to career development that they are likely to face within the organisation and prepare themselves professionally and emotionally to overcome them. They may also, as some studies have suggested (e.g. Bhatnagar and Swamy, 1995), have to learn to conform to the task related expectations of their

superiors in order to make superiors' attitudes towards women as manages more positive.

2. To combine the demands of family roles with their work roles, women have to be prepared to make linear, radial as well as circumferential career moves to get to the top echelons of the organisation. To be able to do this there will be great pressure on women to be flexible in their attitudes, behaviours and skills at work.

Conclusion

Our suggestions seem to indicate that women may have to put in a great deal of effort to make it to the top, perhaps even more effort during certain career stages than men need to put in. Such suggestions may seem to alarm those who are wont to take up a more active feminist stance towards women's issues.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that given the current economic pressures forcing Indian organisations to down-size and develop leaner structures, women, especially career-oriented women who are still the minority in a large number of organisations, may be placed in an even more vulnerable position than before. In such a scenario then women may just have to take the longer, harder route to the top.

The above may be a slightly pessimistic, though realistic picture of women in organisations. But just as every cloud has a silver lining, there is a more positive flip side to the issue. Given the emerging scenario where the pressures on organisations to attract and retain only the best employees is high, once an organisation spots competent and committed employees, there will be greater organisational willingness to invest in them, whether they be men or women, married or unmarried, young or old. In the future then indiscriminate prejudices against women in organisations might in fact reduce, which, in the ultimate analysis, is the best thing to happen for the career development of women.

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Figure 2:
Depiction of Traditional and
Non-Traditional Career Paths.
Adapted from Schein (1971)

