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**Soaring on wings of aspiration and support: A study of married Indian women professionals staying away from families to pursue higher studies**

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**ABSTRACT**

As the work environment is changing globally, newer trends of work and career mobility are emerging. 'Return to school' for the enhancement of career is considered as a means to career mobility. The present study explores what factors spur well-qualified married women professionals to take a break from their career so as to join a rigorous educational program which requires them to stay away from their families for a substantial time. This study is a part of a larger research on dual career couples. The research is grounded in the Indian context. The ten cases included in this study are of married Indian women professionals, who opted to stay away from their families (including, in some cases, babies and small children) in another city / country to pursue higher studies. This study is exploratory and qualitative in nature and is based on semi-structured interviews of the participants. In the backdrop of the traditional Indian society with stereotypical notions of gendered roles, the study focuses on the motives of professional women for such a decision, the facilitators, and the challenges faced by them during their academic pursuit. Dissatisfaction with work situation, need for skill enhancement, and an urge to develop one's own identity emerged as the main motives. Support and encouragement from spouse and other family members as well as age were reported as key facilitators. The main challenges faced were psychological turmoil, strain on significant relationships, and the financial stretch and stress.

**Keywords:** Career mobility, return to school, human capital, dual career couples, women professionals, stay away couples.

## INTRODUCTION

The changing work environment including technological advancements, increased global competition and increase in the availability of opportunities has brought a significant change in the professional demography internationally. Not only the developed countries, but also developing countries like India are witnessing a major shift at workplace as more and more women are joining the work-force at different levels and in different capacities. Over the years, in India as in most countries, the number of educated women has increased, resulting in their increased participation in urban, organized and industrial sector. As per the most recent data of [Indiastat.com](http://Indiastat.com), employment of women in organized sector went up from 58.59 lakh in 2010 to 59.54 lakh in 2011, registering an increase of 1.63 percent. The share of women in organized sector vis-à-vis men is reported to be 20.5 percent in 2011 as compared to 20.4 percent in 2010 (Source: [Indiastat.com](http://Indiastat.com), 2011). Today more and more Indian women, as compared to the past, are entering different professions.

Over the past three decades or so, Indian women have started entering all occupations and have branched out into diversified professions, which were earlier considered exclusive male domains. These include engineering, management, banking, marketing research, advertising, civil services, police and armed forces and many new emerging fields related to IT and communication (Nath, 2000). There are also reports that India's growing private sector is keen to introduce more gender diversity in the workplace. However, they are still struggling to find sufficient numbers of qualified women with business and engineering degrees (Source: [Chronicle.com](http://Chronicle.com), 2012). So there are ample opportunities ahead waiting to be leveraged by women. These changes are not only influencing the economies, industries and organizations at a macro level but their effects are also visible on families and individuals at the micro level. The increasing career-orientation in women is leading to growing number of educated women in technical, professional and managerial positions and is resulting in an increase in the dual career families in India (Buddhapriya, 2005). Balancing between two equally demanding domains namely the family and the professional domain becomes a Herculean task for career couples, especially for the women. The challenges get further exacerbated for aspirational couples, wherein there are small children or extended members in the family. In this process of accommodating the work and family demands, several new trends of mobility arrangements are emerging among these career couples.

## RETURN TO SCHOOL

The concept of *'return to school'* can be understood as an individual's going back to attaining more education after having a substantial work experience. This concept can be explained on the basis of some existing theories. The concepts of life course flexibility (Settersten, 1999) illustrate larger historical trends that have made returning to school a regular occurrence. Economists look at such educational choices as an investment decision where current income opportunities are renounced in exchange for better income prospects in future (Checchi, 2006). Education, for them, is an investment in human capital, which is defined as acquired human capabilities that are durable traits yielding some positive effects upon performance in socially valued activities (David, and Lopez, 2001). These capabilities can be acquired by education, experience, training or a combination of these. Human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1975) partially explains the motivations for and consequences of returning to school. According to this theory, acquisition of more knowledge and skills raises the value of a person's human capital, thereby increasing their employability, income potential and productivity. Hence, future returns of the education are seen as major motivation for return to school from work. Occupational Theory (Sicherman, and Galor, 1990; Sicherman, 1991), which is an extension of Human Capital Theory links investment in education with the occupational mobility. This theory suggests that overeducated individuals observe greater upward occupational mobility as compared to the undereducated individuals (Sicherman, and Galor, 1990; Sicherman, 1991; Rubb, 2006). Looking from a different dimension, Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, and Lofquist, 1984) explains such educational choice as one of the ways to combat any work-related dissatisfaction like dissatisfaction with the job, organization, or the supervisor.

Some researchers have also considered investment in education as a means to career mobility. Granqvist, and Persson (2005) defined career mobility as a move to better jobs either when the employer is the same (i.e. promotion) or when the employer changes. This move may also include occupational up-gradation which is regarded as mobility obtained by acquiring skills through education and on-the-job training. Hence, investment in education can be considered as a means to career mobility. Opting for a study leave during job or taking a career break for the sake of further studies is not a new phenomenon. However, going for a rigorous full-time course staying away from the family after a certain stage in life is not very common, especially among

women. In the existing literature, mostly personal preferences and motivations of men are explained for return to school transitions (Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen, 2007; Maynard, and Pearsall, 1994; Settersten, and Lovegreen, 1998). But in case of the return of women to school the same logics need not apply. A full time program is considered as a luxury especially in case of married women who have to keep a balance between their work and the family (Hostetler, 2008). Hence, a program in which geographical separation from the family is also involved becomes much more difficult for a married woman.

This paper focuses on ten such cases of married Indian women professionals at different stages in life who took the decision to pursue a rigorous, full-time, residential course in management which implied their having to stay away from their families. The interesting fact was that all these women were already highly qualified and skilled; having studied earlier in reputed institutions across the globe and were working in well-known organizations with important roles in hand. They had always been achievers in school as well as at the workplace.

### THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In India, there exists a vast gender gap as far as the participation of women in professional life is concerned. The gender gap begins right from school. While overall literacy levels in India are low (74% of the total adult population in India was literate in 2011), women fare worse than men: in 2011, only 65.46% of the women were literate compared to 82.14% of the men (Source: Census India, 2011). With the school dropout rate of girl students being higher than that of boys, this gap only gets accentuated in higher classes and professional courses and results in lower participation of women in employment at all levels. In managerial positions, the difference is much starker. If only globally women comprise around 10 percent of the total senior management positions, in India this figure ranges from as high as 5.8 percent to as low as 3 percent of all administrative positions (Budhwar, Saini, and Bhatnagar, 2005).

The tradition-bound Indian society plays an important role in increasing the gender rift. In general, Indian society has given women a lower status than men (Rajadhyaksha, and Bhatnagar, 2000). A woman is portrayed as self-sacrificing while performing the roles of a dutiful wife and a doting mother. She is always considered to be dependent on the males of the family- be it the father, brother, husband or son. Manu in 200 BC said about the conduct of a woman, 'be a young girl, be a young woman, or even be an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her house' (Budhwar, Saini, and Bhatnagar, 2005). A woman's role in

the traditional Indian society had been that of an enabler with an expectation of total focus and dedication towards her family. From her childhood she was socialized to be submissive. A woman considering her own career / development forsaking her duties towards her husband, children or other family members was not appreciated. But now this role stereotype is undergoing a change, at least in some segments of the urban India. Increasingly one comes across instances of families, including spouses and in-laws supporting the women in trying to carve their path and creating their own identity in society. However, the hold of traditional beliefs about her family being a woman's first priority continues to be strong. This often causes intense inner conflict and dilemma for professionally-trained women who feel torn between dual identities- having to combine the societal/familial expectations with a desire to realize their full potential (Patil, 2001; Budhwar, Saini, and Bhatnagar, 2005).

This paper explores of cases of Indian married women professionals who took a break in their career to pursue higher education. These women chose to take a break in their careers to pursue prestigious courses in management which were residential and very demanding in terms of rigor, efforts, time and financial resources. Due to the high academic pressure and group activities integral to the programs, they had to live on the school campus, away from their families including their husband, children (in some cases) and other family members. The spouses of these women were in other cities pursuing their own careers / business interests. Living away from their home city, unlike their married male colleagues most of whom could bring their families to the place where they were studying, these women and their family members had to bear the additional stress of separation and multiple costs of frequent commuting.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The research objective of this study is to explore the drivers for career break decisions taken by women professionals for the purpose of studying away from family, and the implications of this decision. To substantiate the fact of changing trend, we present ten cases of such married women who have taken a break from their careers and are pursuing / have pursued higher education in management field staying away from their families. They have done / are doing courses in management from some of the best business schools of India. The interesting point to note is that based on their age, experience level and presence / absence of kids, they

belonged to different stages of life cycle and none of them took the career break for higher education with money as the primary motive.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The cases given in *Appendix 1* are illustrations of the changing trends in Indian society. These cases are different from the stereotyped ‘tied mover’ and ‘tied stayer’ (Bielby, and Bielby, 1992; Rusconi, 2002) roles of women. The women in our study took a non-traditional decision to stay away from their family for the sake of their higher education. Interestingly, they did not go for easy options like part-time programs or correspondence programs, but selected full-time programs, which required a high investment of time, energy and in many cases, money. Given their academic rigor, the candidates pursuing such courses have to almost isolate themselves from their family and social circle most of the time. Hence, the decision taken by women professionals in our study becomes much more challenging and interesting from the point of view of research.

In the Indian context, though the attitude of society towards gender role is changing, yet the traditional notion of ‘*man as provider and woman as homemaker*’ continues to hold sway. Hence, these examples trigger the following research questions: *What spurs married women professionals to take a career break for further studies, even though it requires geographical separation from the family for a substantial time? How are their experiences during the period of study? What are the implications of such moves?*

### METHODOLOGY

The selection of the paradigm and the methodology are influenced by the nature of the investigated incident. Patton (2002) suggested that the paradigmatic and methodological decisions revolve around the aim of the research, the nature of research questions and the accessibility of research resources. Research methodologists strongly suggest the suitability of qualitative methods when the research is exploratory in nature and when the research questions are: ‘what is’, ‘how’ or ‘why’ (Yin, 1994). Recent literature on career transitions also emphasizes the use of interpretive phenomenological approach to the study of careers (Ornstein, and Isabella, 1993) but a review of the literature indicates that it has rarely been used in investigations of career transitions (Teixeira, and Gomes, 2000; Wise, and Millward, 2005). Scholars like Smith (1995) believe that qualitative methods are the most appropriate means to

obtain a deeper understanding of the holistic nature of the cognitions and behaviors involved in the career transition process. These methods consider life career action as an ongoing, ever-changing and holistic experience of contextual meaning making, involving a dynamic interaction between behavior, internal processes and social meaning (Wise and Millward, 2005). Wise and Millward (2005) suggested that career transitions should be understood in meaningful temporal as well as social context. Temporal context means the sequence of events prior to the transition and social context depicts the significant events and individuals influencing the change. Hence, looking at the nature of the research problem, for this study a qualitative study was found to be most appropriate.

### **Participants**

The present paper is a part of the larger study about career mobility decisions of dual career couples. We identified those women respondents for the study who have taken a break in career and have pursued further education staying away from their families. These participants were pursuing either of the three courses offered by the leading business schools of India: a) 2 year MBA program; b) 1 year Executive MBA program; or c) PhD program which on an average takes 5 years of time. All the three programs are acclaimed as tough to enter and tougher to survive due to the rigorous approach adopted. We used snowball sampling technique (Challiol, and Mignonac, 2005) to identify participants. *Table 1* presents a comparative profile of the cases, giving some details of the age and experience level of each participant. Each case has been given a pseudonym to conceal the identity of the participants and maintain the confidentiality of the personal information shared by them. Table 1 also highlights the presence / absence of kids in the family and the salient reason/s for pursuing higher education after taking career break. An important point to note is that in all the cases except for KD the participants were staying hundreds of miles away from their spouse, children (if there were any) and other family members to pursue their studies. In the case of KD, although the husband was living in the same city yet she had to stay on campus and could take out time to meet her husband only during the weekends.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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### **Data collection and analysis procedures**



We collected data with the help of semi-structured interviews. We approached the participants individually and conducted their interviews. Each interview lasted between 1 to 2 hours. We conducted these interviews either in the workplace or at homes of the participants- a place where they could sit comfortably and give the interview. We tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed each interview verbatim. We followed the '*principle of prior informed consent*'. We took their permission before-hand with an understanding that if needed we can approach them again at a mutually convenient time. This was done in order to ensure that if some more information is needed in future, we can have their accessibility.

We carried out thematic analysis to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We defined a theme as something which captured some important aspect about the data in relation to the research question and represented some patterned response within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process included initial identification of concepts within the data and then grouping them into themes, searching for relationships among these themes, and then further reducing these themes into aggregate dimensions (Gioia, and Thomas, 1996).

## FINDINGS

Based on our analysis, following key themes emerged from the data. All the themes were not necessarily present in all the cases, but each theme captured the essence in at least more than one case. As per the definition of 'keyness of theme' given by Braun and Clarke (2006), "it is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question." The themes are broadly divided into three categories: a) Motives; b) Facilitators; and c) Challenges faced.

### Motives

#### **Dissatisfaction with the current work situation**

In almost all cases, there was the dissatisfaction either with the existing job, career, supervisor or the prospects of future growth. As mentioned by DN, who was doing Research in Singapore but not liking the overall environment including the work and her supervisor, said:

*"...that time I was so unhappy with my career that I wanted to give priority to my career."*

JR1, who was serving an MNC in the USA, mentioned that:

*“I was not happy with the manager in the current job...I wanted a change. I wanted to switch from technical to different area, because the opportunities for growth in technical area are limited after certain point... I wanted to take a break from the job. I thought that “do it now or do not do it”.”*

SS, who was working as an Environmental Consultant in the USA opened up her heart by saying:

*“I was not satisfied with my job. I felt that I have more abilities and I can deliver. MBA, for me, was a way to detach from the technical job and do something else.”*

JR2, who worked in Indian Air Force and later joined an Indian telecom company, said that:

*“I was into core technical field during the job- operations per se. Then, I wanted a change.”*

DN also mentioned her feelings when she got an offer for the course:

*“...I was... like... so desperate to change my career (due to the overall dissatisfaction) and I was very excited that I was getting this break.”*

### **Need for skill enhancement**

Another major motive identified from these cases of women professionals was the willingness for skill enhancement in order to increase their future employability.

For example, BC, who was doing 2 years MBA while her husband was pursuing PhD in another city, mentioned that:

*“...if you want to change a job then anyone who has an MBA will have an edge. I knew if I had to change [my organization]... my profile and qualifications do not match.”*

Similar feelings were shared by DN also:

*“Job change would have been easier after an MBA.”*

### **Developing own identity**

Another important theme, identified from the data was the development of one's identity, to explore what one is capable of doing and to get recognition on the realized capabilities. SS, who took such a bold decision with a 10 months old baby, gave words to her feelings by saying:

*“The women of this generation do not want to go out and work for money, but they want to explore their capabilities – they want to find that ‘self’.”*

On the similar notes, when asked what ‘career’ actually means to her, JR2, who left her two small children behind for pursuing the 1 year Executive MBA program mentioned that:

*“For me career is to do something which gives me satisfaction, for which I feel that I have done something substantial. Loads of money is not my idea of a career. I want to be recognized- want to develop my own identity.”*

### **Setting an example before the progeny**

MN, who left her 9 months old baby with her husband and in-laws to pursue her PhD in another city, explained the root for her decision as the quest for her own identity and setting a yardstick in front of her baby:

*“I am struggling so much because if I do not do this and I am frustrated, what kind of a mother I would be. I should be someone whom she looks up to. I would be able to do that only if I do something and I am happy with myself.”*

## **Facilitators**

### **Supporting spouse**

This has emerged as a major theme in almost all the cases. There is a mention of the support from the respective spouses in terms of sharing of the responsibility, encouraging for doing something in all the interviews. One thing very clearly emerged from all the cases that all of them took this decision in consultation with, and full support from their husbands. This becomes particularly important in case of dual career couples represented here by our respondents because in such couples the decisions of one partner are intertwined with his / her spouse's career movements. Mutual consent, acceptance and encouragement seem to be critical in order to balance work and family life. For example, SLV who has a three year old daughter who lives with her while she is pursuing her PhD owes her growth to her husband. Her husband stayed with them for about two years to take care of the small baby so that she could focus on her studies. Now he visits them frequently. In her own words:

*“In the whole process (of my studies), my husband suffered a lot- professionally as well as socially. He knew that he will suffer. After marriage, we are living separately. People talk all non-sense. His business is suffering. There was sarcasm from relatives and friends about him taking care of the baby. In our relationship, everything was against typical stereotypical husband and wife role...He did not have any social circle and friends here, only some casual acquaintances...In spite of all this, he used to know in detail about my work, what is going on etc... But he never shows that he has contributed so much to my success.”*

### Encouragement from other family members

Although almost all the cases are nuclear families, yet all of them mentioned that other family members (which mainly included the parents of both the spouses) encouraged them to make such moves. For example, in the case of KD, by the time she joined this course, her mother-in-law, who was very supportive to her, died, but she mentioned that earlier when she pursued other courses like LLB and Company Secretary, the respondent received a lot of encouragement from parents on both sides of the family. Similarly, SM mentioned that:

*“...my in-laws are more like my parents to me.”*

It was not necessary that the other family members were always happy with such decisions. Sometimes, their silence / not displaying their resistance helped the individuals in smoothly continuing their courses. SS mentioned that:

*“I feel gratitude towards my husband and other family members for supporting me...My parents are extremely supportive. Once my father asked that you are going to work in future also; but this model (of staying apart) is not very sustainable. My in-laws (also) did not like this arrangement very much, but they kept quiet. My mother’s presence here kept everything at ease. My husband is in a steady job, so he said that you go out and experiment.”*

It seemed that sometimes the family members felt proud of the aspirations and achievement of their daughters / daughters-in-law in securing admission to such competitive courses, but were not able to accept the modality of the operationalization. They would get stuck between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ of the social norms. JR1 explained the reactions of her family members as follows:

*“Parents and parents-in-law were not quite happy about the decision of doing MBA living apart from the husband. They think that there is no need to do that. Parents are quite concerned due to the stress related to the program and living alone. My mother-in-law, especially, is very proud of me getting into the [the institute’s name], but she is not happy with my decision of staying away from my husband for the studies.”*

### Age

For DN and BC, the freedom to pursue the desired course for career enhancement is to a great extent owed to the ‘young’ age of the participants. Like BC mentioned that:

*“We got married at twenty-two; we knew that we have a lot of time on hand.”*

But that was not applicable to other cases. The concept of a two-year MBA program is much older in India than a one-year MBA program. The one-year MBA program is targeted towards the executives who already have a substantial amount of work experience. The assumption behind this is that due to prior work experience, the understanding of individuals about business issues would strengthen and they can learn the things faster than a fresher student. In fact, KD started her career journey after finishing a two-year MBA course from another Indian university. Hence, the mere fact that the ‘not so young’ ladies chose an option which was comparatively very new, fast-paced and shorter in duration indicates that age of the participants played an important role in this decision. Amongst the chosen ten cases, the first four who are comparatively younger in age (in 20s or early 30s) invested in a long duration PhD program or a two year program, whereas the next five cases were comparatively older in age (30+) and opted to invest in a program which was shorter in duration (1 year). KM is an exception as she went for much longer Doctoral as well as a Post-Doctoral level program also.

### **Challenges Faced**

Everything comes with a price-tag, and this was echoed in the experiences of our respondents, too. Sometimes these women had to trudge alone during long, difficult phases without the supportive presence of their family members when they needed it the most. They had to bear emotional stress, loneliness and strained relationships due to their commitment to their work.

#### **Effect on the relationships**

KM saw rough patch in her relationship with her husband when she was doing the PhD. She was unable to give enough time to her husband due to her work commitments. Although being so supportive, husband started feeling the pinch and the situation led to divorce. Though after a brief period they reconciled and re-married, but they had to undergo the acute pain for some time.

*“Again when I was doing my PhD busy doing the assignments, I had no time to sit and chat with people. ... I could not give any time to him. We had very little time to spend together.”*

#### **Psychological turmoil**

Almost all the participants reported to have time and again experienced the feeling of loneliness. They expressed how they missed their spouse, kids and other family members

especially when they were stressed due to work pressure, feeling of inability to cope up or other such demands in the program.

SS was more vocal in giving words to her true feelings:

*“Sometimes the feeling of guilt hover on me that I am getting too selfish. I am compromising on my family. So many others (my family members) are also paying a price (for my higher studies) due to me; so I can not indulge myself in recreational activities. Sometimes I feel that I am not spending enough time with my family especially my kid. I am not able to take out enough time to play with him... My father is living alone in Lucknow (both the parents are Doctors), my husband is living with his parents in Noida. My mother has never been a house-wife and now she is doing all the chores here and also taking care of my young kid at this stage. So many people are suffering due to me. I think now I have become more sensible and mature.”*

The basis of such feelings is the social set-up in which one’s upbringing is done. In Indian culture, the ‘sacrificing’ image of the woman is deeply ingrained; hence any deviant action from them leaves women with a sense of guilt and unjust behavior towards their families.

In her own words SS mentioned that:

*“In India, I know if I would have given up this opportunity for my kid, I would have definitely been glorified. We put the women who make such sacrifices, on a pedestal and glorify them but we don’t understand that we rob them of their capabilities and their ‘selves’... There are women who are staying at home; they have been good for their families but for themselves probably they have done injustice. In my case, the growth, joy and learning I have achieved from my profession get reflected in my personal life as well.”*

### **Other challenges**

Apart from the above mentioned challenges, some of the participants also mentioned the pinching feeling of monetary handicap at the time of study. Earlier, they were working so did not ask for money from anyone, but now there was a partial dependence on the family members for the financial resources. However, almost all the participants reported to have borne the financial expenses of the program on their own.

Some of them mentioned stress and workload during the program as a major challenge. They had lost touch with studies many years ago, so now returning to academics and concentrating on studies was a challenge, particularly in the initial period. However, all of them

agreed that the process is / was a good learning for them. One of the participants mentioned physical pain due to Caesarian section when she continuously sat in the class-room for long hours. Another initial hitch for these participants was getting adapted to the unusual college routine which included long hours of group work and late night work. Before joining the study course, they had been leading a life style of reasonable comfort which in a normal Indian dual career family included a 10 pm-6 am personal/sleep time. Adapting to a college routine where intense group work often continued till early hours of the morning was uncomfortable. Also it was out of sync with the leisure pattern and timings followed by their families back home, making it difficult for them to connect with families through phone.

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to understand why married professional women take a break from their careers for pursuing higher education away from their families. Some of the themes evolving from the study can be linked to the existing theories in the literature. The triggers like need for skill enhancement can be understood on the basis of Human Capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1975), which suggests that acquisition of more knowledge and skills raises the value of a person's human capital, thereby increasing their employability, income potential and productivity. Similarly, the dissatisfaction with the superior, job or organization can be understood by Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, and Lofquist, 1984), which suggests that when there is dissatisfaction with the existing situation in the work context, individuals try either to change the environment or to change themselves by education or some other such intervention. Economists also link education with higher expected income in the course of time (Checchi, 2006). They consider education as an investment in human capital, which links this thought with the human capital theory.

The themes emerging from the study indicate that such triggers are situated at various levels. An important point to mention here is that for none of the cases illustrated here money was the key driver for such a decision. They were targeting different goals by pursuing higher education. They were in different stages of the life cycle, hence the ties and commitments for them would be different. Based on the data we can say that at the individual level the factors guiding their decisions were age and personal aspirations like future prospects of career. Almost all our respondents mentioned the study break as an opportunity to discover their untapped potential and to push themselves further to stretch their capabilities. While the promise of a

better-paid job at the end of the course did not emerge as a major reason for doing the course, the prospect of a 'more competent me', a more 'professionally satisfied me', and the possibility of enhanced personal fulfillment seemed to be an attractive pull. This can be well understood with the help of Human Capital Investment theory which predicts that people will demand education up to the point where the marginal benefit is equal to the marginal cost (Checchi, 2006). Marginal benefits will depend on the external market conditions, resources invested in education and individual ability, whereas marginal costs will depend on costs of education and the psychological cost of separation of women from their family members, particularly for mothers with young children. This probably explains why the participants in the age group of late 20s and above chose a one year program over a two-year program. As the duration of the program increased their costs in terms of the family disturbances, stress, finances were increasing but the returns were marginal. On the level of the couples, their mutual understanding and support to each other becomes one of the important facilitators for such decisions.

### LIMITATIONS

Like any research, our study, too, has limitations. The first limitation is the small number of cases included in the study which can be challenged as non-random, non-representative sample which prevents direct generalization of results to a broader population. Our justification is that the purpose of a qualitative study is not generalization but understanding a phenomenon. The second limitation is that the cases are limited to those couples who despite their geographical distance and separation have sustained a stable marital relationship. There might be the deviations, but the objective behind the purposive sampling was to explore the experiences of women and to understand the cases that have managed both the domains, career and family, successfully in the past and are pursuing higher studies despite geographical separation between the spouses. Another limitation of the study is that it includes only those participants who are staying in India, and we did not cover married professional women who have crossed international boundaries to pursue higher studies, leaving their families in India. Admittedly, in such cases, the stimulants as well as the challenges would be of a different order.

### CONCLUSION

Despite the above limitations, our study provides an interesting glimpse into paradoxical forces surrounding and shaping the lives of married professional women in contemporary India.



Our study shows that the same traditional society, which at times restrains the professional growth of women through its heavily gendered expectations to take care of the family first, also acts as a facilitator in the form of support from these women's spouse, children and members of extended family. Our study shows that family members (especially the husband) tend to pitch in, extend themselves, and lend whatever help is required to make her dreams of professional and personal growth come true. Our study showed that because of the vital emotional, psychological as well as at times logistical support provided by the proximate family members, married aspirational professional women could take the tough decision to live hundreds of miles away from their near and dear ones and pursue their chosen courses of study. There are definite disadvantages of living apart. In case of couples, many times distance increases the emotional insecurity among the spouses, which can result in some complex knots in the marital relationship later. However, to enable women to fulfill their dreams, according to our study, increasingly couples believe that such risks and hardships are worth the potential gain. Our cases indicate reason for hope for married professional women- if they believe in their dreams, it seems their husband and family members are eager to support them in their lonely journey.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Case 1

**MN** is a 27 years old engineer who has a work experience of about 3 years in industry. Now she has joined a full-time and residential PhD program in Management from one of the premier business schools of India, which is hundreds miles away from where her family stays. Her husband, who was his engineering batch-mate, works and lives with his parents in the city they live. They are married for two years and they have a one-year old daughter, who lives with MN's husband and his parents.

After marriage, as soon as MN joined the program, she realized that she was pregnant. Due to her pregnancy sickness she was not able to keep up the pace with the strenuous academic schedule of the program alongwith taking care of her own health. So, she took leave from the program and went back to her family to give birth to her baby. After spending about nine months with the baby, she had to resume her studies. She had to leave the baby with her husband and her in-laws because the rigor and the demanding schedule of studies would not have spared her time for the baby. Now she is continuing with her studies and visits her family in a fortnight / month. On one hand, she does not want to quit the program in between because she feels that if she does that she will not be happy with herself. Simultaneously, she also misses her family especially the little baby who stays in another city.

### Case 2

**SLV** is 30 years old PhD scholar in one of the premier business schools of India. She is married and has a three years old daughter. Her husband runs his own business and she stays with her daughter on college campus. They are married for four years now.

SLV joined the program, which is fully residential and is quite rigorous and demanding in terms of time and effort. After the first year of the program, she got married to her childhood friend. After that, she conceived her baby and had to take a break from the program. During this time, she stayed with her husband and in-laws. When her daughter was 3-4 months old, she resumed her studies. Her husband slowed down his own work and stayed with her to take care of their daughter while she was studying. They continued this arrangement for next two years, after which her husband went back to his place to take care of the business. Now, SLV takes care of

her daughter alongwith working on her dissertation. Her husband frequently visits them and provides the needed emotional support.

### Case 3

When DN was 25 years old, she finished the Bachelors of Computing degree from Singapore. At that time, she had a work experience of about four years in Bio-Technology research field. She did not see great future career prospects in the field without a PhD, which she did not intend to do. Her husband was a 30 years old engineer then with about eight years of work experience. He wanted to do a PhD in his field at some point in his life. They were married for four years and had no kids by that time.

Both of them were working in Singapore when she decided to pursue further studies. She was highly dissatisfied with her job and the boss. Moreover, she was finding research very dull as a field; so was looking for alternative options. Some of her friends were preparing for GMAT for higher studies. She joined them just for the sake of fun and ended up achieving a good score. She got a call for admission in 2-years full time MBA program from one of the premiere Business schools in India. The course was fully residential in nature and demanding in terms of time, efforts and finances.

On the other hand, her husband was working in a field of his interest and liking. However, he had a dream to pursue a PhD sometime in his life. So at some point of time, they were seeking for an option of further studies together- she for an MBA and he for a PhD. Initially, they were targeting the US universities, which were geographically close so that they could frequently meet also. But they could not get admission in the universities of their choice.

However, she got the offer of this esteemed institute in India. The couple decided to let her opt for this course with an understanding that later the husband would also find a suitable job in India and shift there, so that they remain in geographical proximity. She joined the course and after a few months the husband also left his job in Singapore and found a job in India but their co-ordinates were about 1200 kms apart in the country. Although it was tough to manage the geographical separation from her husband, yet DN felt quite happy, proud and satisfied with her professional accomplishment.

After completing her program she got a job offer from a reputed Consulting firm in the Silicon Valley of India. Her husband also quit his job and joined another job in the same city.

Now, she is 32 and has a work experience of close to a decade. They are living together and are proud parents of a 4 years old daughter.

#### Case 4

**BC** finished her B.Tech. and then entered into the corporate profession. After working for about three years in the industry she decided to quit her job for further studies. At that time, she was 24 years old. Her husband, who was her batch-mate during graduation, was 28 years old then also decided for the same. They were married for four year and were having no kids.

After finishing their graduation they joined different organizations in different cities through campus placement. They used to commute regularly for meeting during weekends. She was happy with her work but felt that her qualification was not sufficient for further growth in career. On the other hand, her husband was not happy with his organization. So they decided to look for other available options. Further studies seemed to be a good option. Her husband had an inclination towards academic profession. Hence, they wrote together one of the most esteemed entrance exams of India- she for admission in MBA and he for getting enrolled in PhD. This time they both got offers for study in two best institutes of India, but in the cities about 1500 kms apart. They thought that if they had to pursue higher studies then they should do it 'now' and from the elite colleges only. For them this was 'the' opportunity. They joined the respective programs.

She completed the two year MBA course and joined one of the best consulting organizations. Her job required long hours of her time and a lot of travel in India and abroad. Her husband took almost six years to complete his PhD. During this whole period, they maintained staying apart and meeting frequently once or twice a month. After her husband also finished his PhD, he opted for an academic job in the city where BC was working. Now they are living together and are proud parents of a one year old baby.

#### Case 5

**JR1** is 34 years old and has done Post Graduation in Engineering from one of the reputed universities of the USA. She has almost a decade long work experience. Her husband is 37 years old, who also did Post Graduation in Engineering from a US university. He worked for about seven years, and then joined the MBA program in India. Now he is serving a Consulting firm in London after finishing the MBA. After her husband finished his MBA, JR1 also joined the same

program in India while her husband was in UK, because they planned that ‘one person should work when the other studies’. Now they are married for nine years and have a two years old baby.

Earlier when JR1 was working in US, she wanted to shift from the technical jobs to the managerial jobs. She did not see many growth opportunities in the technical jobs after a certain point. She was also not very happy with her manager and hence was looking for a change. This was when her husband, who was also working in the US, decided to join a one-year MBA program in an esteemed institute in India. After quitting their jobs, they left for India. JR1 served as a Research Assistant in the institute till the period her husband was doing the course. In the meantime, she also prepared and in the next batch she also joined the same course. They were childfree at that time. While JR1 was studying in India, her husband was working in London. After completion of her program, she also joined her husband in London.

### Case 6

SS is 36 years old and has done Post Graduation in Engineering from one of the esteemed US universities. After her MS, she worked for seven years in the US. Her husband is 40 years old and he also has done Post Graduation in Engineering from another US university. He has total seventeen years of work experience. When SS was working in the US, she was not happy with her then job. She considered herself for being capable of doing better in her professional life. She felt that she could not explore well as per her capabilities. So, she decided to go for higher studies. It was when she conceived her baby, and then she had to postpone her plans for some time. After their child was born, SS and her husband moved back to India due to family reasons. Her husband joined a job in National Capital Region (NCR) and she joined the one year MBA program in another city of India. Their marriage was about two years old then and they had a ten months old baby. She decided to take her young kid also with her, so that she could take good care of him alongwith the studies. Her mother, who was a practicing doctor, stayed with her to take care of the baby while she was busy with her studies. Her husband lived in the NCR with his parents. After completion of her program SS joined a job in NCR only and now they are living together as a family.



### Case 7

This is a unique case of international mobility. **SM** is 41 years old. She did her Masters in Bio-Technology and Computer Sciences and has an overall work experience of seventeen years. Her husband is a 41 years old engineer and was working in Dubai at the time of their marriage. He has now nineteen years of work experience. They have been married for sixteen years and have a teenager daughter.

After marriage, she left her job as Junior Scientist in one of the leading research labs in India and went to Dubai to join her husband. Her husband moved from Dubai to India and then he traveled to different countries like UK, Japan, Singapore, USA and Australia for assignments or change of jobs. She kept on following her husband and changing jobs. She tried her hands on different professions like trading, IT, database administration, entrepreneurship (opened her own restaurant in Japan), banking etc. During the process, several times they had to live at different places even different continents doing monthly / fortnightly commuting. Then, her husband decided to pursue one year long management program from one of the best management schools in India. He came back to India for studies, whereas she continued to work in Australia where they were settled just before that. Interestingly, most of the time their only daughter stayed with her husband because “*he can not live without her*”. When her husband’s course was towards completion, he suggested her also to join the same program so that she can have knowledge of all functional areas of business. After initial resistance, due to the encouragement from her husband as well as from her daughter she also joined the same course next year.

She pursued the one year management program, whereas her husband joined a job in another city after completing his course. Their daughter stayed with her husband and they kept commuting to see each other every weekend. After completing her one year program **SM** also joined back her family in the city they were living with a well-paying job in hand.

### Case 8

**JR2** is 42 years old and is an engineer by profession. She served the Indian Air Force for 12 years. Her husband is 44 years old and is also an Engineer by profession. He served the Indian Air Force for more than two decades. Their marriage is thirteen years old and they have two sons. The older one of them is twelve years old and the younger one is eight years old. When **JR2** was 37 years old, she decided to pursue higher studies for future professional growth. She joined a one year management program from one of the prestigious B-schools of India. It was a

rigorous and fully residential program so she had to stay away from the family in another city for about a year. Both the sons lived with the husband of JR2 and his parents took care of them.

JR2 calls herself as a 'career' person, who has taken breaks from her career due to family reasons. Her husband's job was transferable, so sometimes she relocated with him. But now, she felt that the kids are growing and it is '*the right time*' to revamp her career. Hence, she opted of enrolling herself in a one year MBA program. During her studies, at times she did not see her family for about five months at a stretch. But she kept herself continuously in touch with her sons, husband and other family members through telephone and other communication mediums. After completion of her program, she took up a corporate job in the city where her family was residing and now they are living together.

### Case 9

**KD** is 55 years old and she got married after completing her MBA during her youth. Her husband was a B.Tech., MBA at the time of their marriage. He is 59 years old now and is at a very senior position in a Pharmaceutical company. They have completed more than three decades of their marriage and have a 31 years old son, who is also married. She and her husband, both have more than two decades of work experience.

After marriage she joined a Market Research firm. After the birth of her child she switched over from full-time to part-time working. She re-joined the same organization once her son was 6 years old. She constructively used her early-motherhood career break by doing additional degree courses like Law and Company Secretary (CS). After about three years, she started her own practice as a CS. She continued doing that for about 17 years. Then due to the illness of her mother-in-law they had to relocate to their native place. She lost her mother-in-law after some time. In the meantime their son also finished his studies and started working abroad. She now had not many family responsibilities. She scaled down the business of her own office also. Having lot of time on hand, she decided to join the one year management program from one of the best business schools in India. Although she did not have to relocate for studies in terms of city, yet due to the demanding systems and residential nature of the program, most of the times she had to stay away from home. She commuted to her house on weekends. Some times her husband visited her to the campus. Her husband kept continuing his corporate career at Senior Management level. Decades ago, he did MBA from the same institute. He encouraged his wife to

take up the course and at this juncture of life he was willing to take the back-seat on the career front.

After completion of her program, she joined a corporate job at a very senior position but in a different city than where her husband was working. She used to fly every weekend to visit her husband. They continued this system for about 2 years. In the meantime, her husband was diagnosed some health problems. At that point of time, she left the well-paying job and came back to her husband. She joined another job in the same city.

### Case 10

**KM** is a 57 years old lady. She finished Graduation in Mathematics and then Post-Graduation in Rural Management. After that she pursued the Doctorate from the leading business school of India and took the Post-Doctorate from abroad. She got married after her Graduation and pursued Post-Graduation and other studies after marriage. She has now more than two decades of work experience. Her husband is 57 years old, and has worked with one of the most esteemed public sector national banks of India. After serving for almost two decades, he took a voluntary retirement from the bank and went to Stockholm University to pursue Post Graduation in Management. They have completed 35 years of marriage. They are a childfree couple.

When KM was pursuing her PhD, her husband got himself posted in the branch closest to the place she was studying. That would have ensured some contact time for them as a couple. However, the nature of the program she joined was quite rigorous and it was fully residential. She had to invest a lot of time to prepare for her classes and found herself time-pressed to oblige her husband for his social commitments. Due to the paucity of time they spent together for a substantial period, their relationship also saw rough patches. But later on, they could maintain their relationship in a mature way.

In the whole process, KM's husband tried to be as accommodative as possible. During the period of her study and also during job, KM had to live at different places across the country as well as abroad, away from the family most of the time. Due to the transferable nature of his job, her husband tried to calibrate by getting stationed to the same place or the place nearest to the one she was located. But still, for almost eight years, they had to live apart- frequently commuting, in order to pursue their respective careers.

Later, her husband also quit his job and pursued Post Graduation course abroad for his skills enhancement. After finishing his course, for some time he explored different avenues

which would give him satisfaction and meaningfulness. He had an inclination towards being a corporate coach; hence he pursued his interest, whereas KM continued serving several academic institutes as a Faculty.

TABLE1

## Cross-case comparison chart

	MN	SLV	DN	BC	JR1	SS	SM	JR2	KD	KM
<b>Respondent:</b>										
Age at which joined the course (in yrs)	25	25	25	24	29	31	35	37	50	42
Prior Educational Qualification	BE	M Phil	Bachelor of Computing	B Tech	BE, ME	B Tech, MS	MSc (Bio-Tech), MSc	BE	MBA, CS, LLB	B.Sc. PGPRM, FPM, Post Doc
Work experience when joined the course (in yrs)	3	None	4	3	6	7	11	12	20	19
Educational Course joined and its duration (in yrs)	PhD (5)	PhD (5)	MBA (2)	MBA (2)	Executive MBA (1)	Executive MBA (1)	Executive MBA (1)	Executive MBA (1)	Executive MBA (1)	PhD (7), Post Doc (1)
Reason / trigger for further education	In quest of the identity of self	Always wanted to pursue academics	Dissatisfaction with the monotony of the past job	Skill upgradation for future growth	Need for more challenging role	Need for more challenging role	Encouraged by husband & daughter	Urge to revamp the career	Urge to re-discover her potential	Self-development & growth
Length of marriage at the time of joining the course (in yrs)	2	4	4	4	4	1.5	11	8	28	30
<b>Husband:</b>										
Age when wife joined the course (in yrs)	25	30	30	28	32	35	35	39	54	52
Educational Qualification	BE, MBA	MCom	B Tech, MS	B Tech	B Tech, MS, MBA	B Tech, MS	B Tech, MBA	B Tech	B Tech, MBA	B.A. (Eco), MBA
Profession	Engineer	Self-employed	IT Engineer	PhD Student	Consultant	Engineer	Manager	Engineer	Senior Executive	Banker

<b>Children:</b>										
Number of children when the mother joined the course	One	One	None	None	None	One	One	Two	One	None
Age of children when the mother joined the course (in yrs)	Born during the program	Born during the program	NA	NA	NA	10 months	7	7, 3	26	NA
Child rearing arrangement when the mother joined the course	Stayed with father and grand-parents	Stayed with mother with occasional support from father	NA	NA	NA	Stayed with mother with support from maternal grand-mother	Stayed with father	Stayed with father and grand-parents	Working abroad	NA