

Emotional Distress of Sri Lankan Women Returning to Work Post Maternity Leave

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood involves dramatic physical and emotional changes, and in today's context, women often balance corporate roles with traditional responsibilities. Returning to work post-maternity leave is especially challenging, requiring women to juggle work and family while adapting to motherhood. Despite this, factors contributing to emotional distress among working mothers in South Asia have received limited academic attention. This qualitative study interviewed eight first-time manager-mothers in Sri Lankan private sector businesses, via semi-structured interviews, using snowball sampling. Thematic analysis identified key stressors: lack of emotional and physical family support, well-intentioned but counterproductive familial assistance, unsupportive work environments, and societal backlash. A significant finding was that extended family support for childcare often led to emotional distress, with family members making mothers feel guilty and embarrassed. This study fills a gap in the literature by focusing on Sri Lanka and emphasizes the need to educate extended families on the childcare expectations of working mothers.

Keywords: Emotional distress, post-maternity leave, managerial level working mothers, family support, work environment, backlash from society, Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

Motherhood, deeply embedded in stereotypical gender norms, is often considered the most treasured experience in a woman's life, akin to a second birth (Falletta et al., 2020). This new identity is physically and psychologically demanding, especially for contemporary working mothers facing biased evaluations of their performance at work and home (Fodor & Glass, 2018; Luhr, 2020; Freeney, van der Werff, & Collings, 2021; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). Unlike men, women often experience motherhood and work commitments as competing spheres. Prioritizing one leads to perceptions of being a misfit at work or a "bad mother" (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). New mothers are particularly vulnerable to mental issues post-childbirth due to the emotional demands of motherhood (Coates, Ayers, & de Visser, 2014; O'Hara & McCabe, 2013). This can threaten a woman's established identity, necessitating a reconstruction of self (Thoits, 1992). Success for many

women is often tied to their familial roles (Perera, Ganeshan, & Belitski, 2021). The juggling act between motherhood and work can lead to significant emotional distress, impacting both mother and newborn, potentially resulting in clinical depression. Simply increasing the number of working women does not guarantee gender equality if dual responsibilities cause substantial emotional distress. Therefore, understanding and addressing these distressing conditions is essential to creating a more supportive work environment for women.

Despite the negative psychological impact of maternity leave and related career disruption being a widely accepted notion, limited academic attention has been placed on the challenges for new mothers transiting back to work after maternity leave (Stack, McKinney, Spiekerman, & Best, 2018; Freeney et al., 2021; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). According to a study done in the Western context, pregnancy followed by maternity leave denotes a much more demanding interruption in career which can be extremely exhausting for women (Little, Major, Hinojosa, & Nelson, 2015). Furthermore, another study conducted by Gatrell (2011) related to the maternity of female employees established that working women's positions in an organization are "revised unfavourably" following their maternity leave. Similarly, female employees who return to work after maternity leave tend to experience unfavourable judgments from their workplace which may result in adverse consequences for their career progression (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). Thus, it is evident that commitments and trade-offs together with negative judgment and treatment tend to result in distress situations for women which need to be explored with much academic rigour. While the literature related to the area in general is scant, it is apparent that little research has been done on the difficulties of working women after giving birth in emerging Asian countries with peculiar socio-cultural conditions which make them a unique context compared to the Global North (Lucia-Casademunt, García-Cabrera, Padilla-Angulo, & Cuéllar-Molina, 2018). Sri Lanka is a part of the Global South which has unique sociocultural conditions; on the one hand, it shares strong patriarchal gender norms like the neighbouring South Asian countries, while on the other hand, it has attained better gender parity than other countries in South Asia. Thus, the unique cultural conditions in Sri Lanka make it a better candidate to explore the emotional distress experienced by women resuming work after maternity leave.

According to the Ministry of Labour in Sri Lanka (2021), 21.2 million people live on the island, with 93.8 men for every 100 women. In Sri Lanka, women make up 35% of the labour force on average, inclusive of mothers (International Labour Organization, 2021). According to the Sri Lankan Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act, (No. 15 of 2018) a working mother is allowed to have 84 days of full paid maternity leave after confinement (Department of Labour, 2018). According to the Maternity Benefits Ordinance, two nursing intervals are allowed for women to breastfeed their child twice a day, each at least 30 minutes' duration (International Labour Organization, 2015; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006). Despite such progressive initiatives, working women experience many challenges that negatively affect their psychological well-being. It has been revealed that due to the prevailing cultural conditions in Sri Lanka, women with high-responsibility jobs undergo very high levels of stress as they try to integrate motherhood with their work commitments (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). Based on previous literature, in the Sri Lankan context, occurrence of postpartum depression (PPD) is relatively high where the prevalence of PPD was 15.5% among women who had given birth 10 days previously; the situation is even more grim among working mothers (Fan & Potočnik, 2021). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the importance of exploring the phenomenon of work-family stress in a more comprehensive manner for working women in countries like Sri Lanka which have unique cultural conditions (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). Hence, bridging the gaps in the extant literature study will require the exploration of the factors causing emotional

difficulties for executive-level working mothers in their post-maternity careers in the Sri Lankan context.

The psychological impact of maternity leave, a more explicit form of career interruption for women in the workforce, needs to be explored in greater detail. Contextual conditions play a pivotal role in explaining women's experience after maternity leave. Conducting studies related to the phenomenon in an emerging economy in South Asia with strong patriarchal gender norms will strengthen the understanding related to maternity leave and the impact on returners (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010; Freeney et al., 2021). An in-depth exploration of maternity leave as a key component of corporate women's stressful life conditions will enable the harnessing of the full potential of working women by effectively addressing disruptions, which will further provide many economic benefits for an organization. The main aim, therefore, is to explore how the deeply rooted concept of gender continues to evolve and how it results in creating conditions that lead to emotional distress among new mothers resuming duties post maternity leave.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Women as Misfits in the Workforce

Because of deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and a strong association of nurturing and care with womanhood, women tend to experience direct or indirect marginalization in the corporate context where they may even be termed as "misfits for the role of employees". An agentic man who can meet the requirements of an "administrative man" has been recognized as the ideal organizational worker since the beginning of corporate organizations which are gendered institutions (Denhardt & Perkins, 1976). As the man is conceptualized as the ideal worker, women are automatically excluded despite numerous forward-thinking measures (Denhardt & Perkins, 1976; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016).

Despite the significant disadvantages that women face as a result of gendered workplace norms, many female employees of today have made courageous attempts to gain entry into traditionally male-dominated corporate careers. The incongruity between the social roles expected of a woman and an organizational employee result in placing corporate women in disadvantageous positions despite their significant presence in the corporate world (Rogers, Cook, & Guerrero, 2022). This is because they must carry their gender as a liability. Motherhood is a key milestone in a woman's life; for corporate women it is much more physically and mentally exhausting as the new role may require a significant career break. According to Perera et al. (2021), many corporate women had to embrace motherhood at a critical stage of their careers when they might get promotions and other career progression pathways. Due to this also women will be having much psychological turmoil infused by their maternity leave.

2.2 Motherhood and Paid Work in Conjunction

Women are increasingly joining the paid labour force across the board in most countries, not just in low-status positions (Holdsworth, 2007). As a result, the male-breadwinner model of gendered division of labour has lost importance, with women's social roles realigned to include

both work and caregiving. This means that while mothers are expected to give their full attention to their careers, they are also expected — by themselves and others — to maintain the same level of emotionally charged involvement in childcare (Duncan, 2005; Crompton, 2006; May, 2008). While it is expected that with the newly gained access to the corporate world, women will be able to improve their situation, in reality, working women have become major victims of a physically and psychologically daunting process as they are expected to prove themselves in dual roles as mothers and employees. Much of the extant literature substantiates that "motherhood" is a big barrier to career growth (Acker, 1990; Crompton, 1999; Wijayatilake, 2001; May, 2008) and in many instances, the literature tries to position motherhood and work front commitments in competing spheres which is not the case for male employees.

Recently, theories on the spillover between home and work have been used in occupational health research. Conflicting needs in the two domains may cause paid work to interfere with paid work, domestic work to interfere with domestic work, or paid and domestic work to interfere with one another (Väänänen et al., 2005). Men and women worked the same number of paid hours, according to a study of managers, but women put in twice as much time at home (Lundberg & Frankenhaeuser, 1999). Additionally, the load of accumulated obligations has been considered when discussing the concept of double burden. The most conventional domestic duties for women are said to require daily attention, frequently at a set time (such as cooking), but those for men seem to be less frequent and allow for more flexibility (Lundberg, Mardberg, & Frankenhaeuser, 1994; Dean, 1992). The traditionally dominant role of women in the family's social structure may pose health hazards, especially when their commitments to their families interfere with their professional lives (Väänänen et al., 2005). Among women, a rise in psychological discomfort was correlated with an accumulation of sole domestic tasks. Prior research suggests that the accumulation of sole responsibilities and deviations from perceived equity or fairness in the division of housework may indirectly indicate inequity and reflect the effects of a persistently difficult social role in the household (Bird, 1999).

2.3 Stress Related to Post-Maternity Leave

As more and more women enter the workforce, working mothers' life challenges and the way they navigate through these challenges has received much academic attention recently (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). According to Lu, Kao, Chang, Wu, and Cooper (2008), several researchers have explored the phenomenon of work-life conflicts and the resultant work-family stress. Research has substantiated that an individual who is expected to wear multiple hats based on their commitments at the work front and home front will experience adverse health conditions that result from work–family stresses and this situation is much more pronounced among working mothers with younger children (Scott, Crompton, & Lyonette, 2010; Chapman et al., 2004). Inevitably, motherhood is termed as the second birth of women (Stack et al., 2018) who experience a range of psychological dynamics and challenges about motherhood. Indeed, for working women who decide to resume work after childbirth, this phase is critical as it requires re-signifying their dual roles as mothers and workers while juxtaposing their career aspirations and childcare responsibilities (Franzoi, Sauta, De Luca, & Granieri, 2024). Among an array of initiatives taken to ensure uninterrupted careers for women after childbirth, the introduction of paid maternity leave can be considered as the most conducive initiative (Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017). While maternity leave is essential, the process of women reentering the workforce afterwards is a more critical aspect of their personal and professional development, frequently posing several challenges. Based on the extant literature, it has been substantiated that women reentering the workforce after a maternity break need to work simultaneously on their re-engagement with work, living up to the expectations from the new identity, and balancing

time for both childcare and work which results in a potential negative impact on mental health and severe dissatisfaction related to work and family (Cheng et al., 2016). Thus, it is clear that while motherhood itself is challenging, women resuming work after maternity leave inevitably face even greater emotional challenges.

Research substantiates that extended maternity leave benefits postpartum mental health, although findings on its impact on maternal health are mixed (Heshmati, Honkaniemi, & Juárez, 2023; Vamos et al., 2015; Favre et al., 2023). Paid maternity leave has been shown to improve employee health (Baker & Milligan, 2008; Zhang & Managi, 2020). New mothers often experience physical issues like fatigue, breast pain, backaches, and weight regulation difficulties in the first two months postpartum (Declercq, Sakala, Corry, Applebaum, & Herrlich, 2014). Mothers who underwent cesarean section surgery face additional issues like incision site itching and numbness (Brown & Lumley, 2000). Many women continue to experience health problems, such as exhaustion, urinary issues, sleep deprivation, and back and pelvic pain throughout the first year (Gjerdingen & Froberg, 1991; Gjerdingen, 1993; Thompson, Roberts, Currie, & Ellwood, 2002; Saurel-Cubizolles, Romito, Lelong, & Ancel, 2000). Those with pregnancy complications are at a higher risk for chronic diseases later in life (Liese et al., 2019). Adequate maternity leave is crucial for physical health and facilitates better mother-child bonding. However, Kim, Hwang, and Kim (2021) found no difference in maternal health between paid and unpaid leave. Extended maternity leave also lowers child mortality up to age five (Staehelin, Berteau, & Stutz, 2007). Notwithstanding these benefits, maternity leave can disrupt careers, making the post-childbirth phase more challenging for women.

From an organizational perspective, the challenges posed by employees returning from maternity leave are numerous and unavoidable. Most importantly, the largest costs of absenteeism and productivity losses for businesses are believed to be caused by pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum illness (Wickramasinghe et al., 2017). The American Society for Reproductive Medicine (2012) emphasized presenteeism or being present at work but unable to execute one's job as a condition that affects women returning to work after giving birth. Ultimately, when pregnancy-related expenses are taken out of total estimates for absenteeism and productivity loss, the total loss value for female employees is 9.8% higher than the total loss value for male employees (Wickramasinghe et al., 2017). Thus, the exploration of the experience of working women resuming duties after maternity leave requires a deep dive into how their emotional state is shaped by a myriad of factors, specifically, work environment and familial arrangements.

In Sri Lanka, there hasn't been much research exploring the experience of women returning to work following maternity leave, particularly the factors influencing emotional distress at the time of work reentry. The researchers were unable to locate any studies that looked at the experiences of women during the first months of this transition. Studies on women's reentry to work post-childbirth are yet an underexplored area that calls for more academic attention (Franzoi et al., 2024; Falletta et al., 2020). According to another study, it is evident that a sizable majority of women deal with considerable difficulties in juggling their requirements for personal care, employment, and family when resuming work after maternity leave (Falletta et al., 2020). While emotional trolling has adverse consequences for new mothers' health and well-being; from a household perspective, the emotional distress experienced by women resuming work after maternity leave significantly impacts the well-being of both the children and the couple (Cheng et al., 2016). The stress and anxiety faced by these women can lead to strained family dynamics, affecting the emotional climate of the household. Children may sense and react to their mothers' stress, potentially influencing their own emotional and psychological

development. Furthermore, couples' relationship may also suffer due to increased tension and reduced quality time together, as both partners navigate the complexities of balancing work and family responsibilities. Addressing these emotional challenges is crucial for fostering a supportive home environment that promotes the overall well-being of all family members. From an organizational perspective, these findings have significant ramifications for women's early postpartum job reentry health care expenditures and access. Additionally, these results imply that employers encounter recurring health issues of workers upon their return to the workplace. Employers have the opportunity to do more to assist workers who go through postpartum work reintegration (Hwang, Jung, Shaw, Mestad, and Lane, 2020). As such, a few studies have suitably presented the conflicting issues faced by working mothers from different perspectives. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, discussions on motherhood and work life need to revolve around new working mothers' emotional and physical experiences in terms of returning to work after maternity leave which is often overlooked area (Falletta et al., 2020; Bütikofer, Riise, & Skira, 2021; Kaur & Venkateswaran, 2020). Therefore, this study explores the factors that influence the emotional state of working mothers post-childbirth: three to six months after delivery.

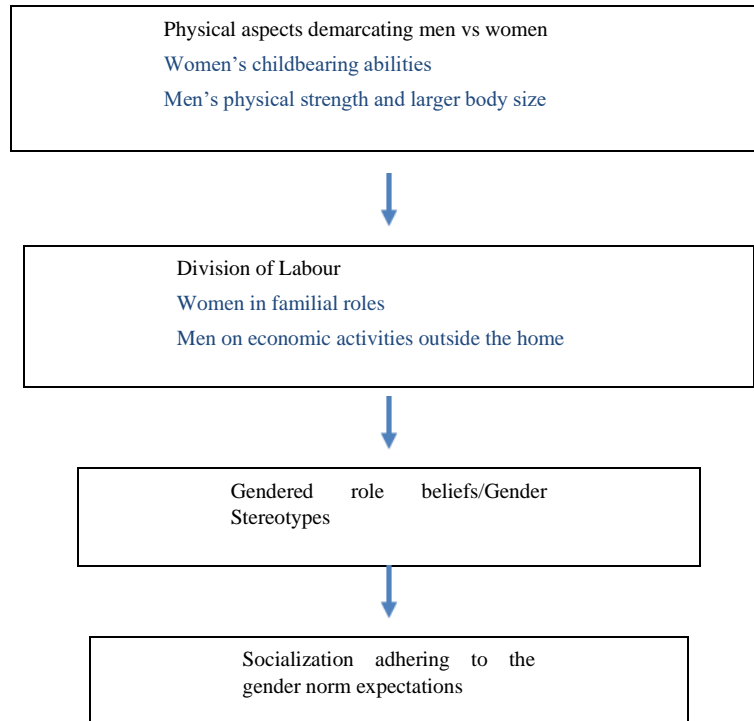
2.4 Social Role Theory

Many psychological theories have explored gender-related social norms and expectations and their influence on individuals' behaviours in a particular context (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012). The social role theory, introduced by Eagly & Wood (2012), tries to explain the impact of gender norms and role expectations from society towards individual behavioural choices in a much more holistic manner. According to the theory, many of the gender differences showcased by an individual can be mostly attributed to the division of labour in the conventional societies (Eagly & Wood, 2012). As the ancient society relied on hunting and farming, they tended to identify men as more suitable candidates to take up these duties due to their large body size. Similarly, women with childbearing and breast milk production abilities were recognized as more suitable for nurturing and household activities. Even though contemporary economies have transitioned significantly from the ancient way of human survival, stereotypical gender norms stemming from those conventional models still stubbornly persist (Hanek & Garcia, 2022; Eagly et al., 2020). Due to social role expectations from society, women are expected to be more involved with the upbringing and nurturing of children than their male counterparts. Expectations from a specific role are deeply ingrained in people's thoughts and are also held in common by others, resulting in social consensus from which social structure and culture evolve (Eagly & Wood, 2012). According to Leccardi (1996), women's time is controlled by emotions and affection, which sometimes results in them giving up work and devoting time to their familial duties. As these deeply rooted role expectations govern the behaviour of women, they tend to experience backlash, admonishment from society, whenever women behave counter-stereotypically (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). The ideology behind the social role theory is depicted in Figure 1 below.

Thus, even when women in the corporate sector make conscious decisions to act in a manner favourable towards their career, deviating from the normative gender expectations, they experience backlash from the society and sometimes due to the deeply rooted gender norms, they may feel emotionally distracted. The backlash effect is quite apparent at the point of women returning to work after maternity leave as it reflects leaving the child behind for their career. As motherhood and career are always placed in competing spheres (Ahl, 2006), prioritizing one aspect always indicates debilitating effects on the other.

Therefore, the patterns of work and devotion to career progression among women make it difficult for them to combine work and family responsibilities (Thorntwaite, 2004; Wayne, Butts, Casper, and Allen, 2016). As embracing motherhood calls for major changes in a woman's life physically as well as mentally, it can be a challenging period for women already navigating a challenging path of meeting the expectations of the corporate world which is more of a male domain.

FIGURE 1: DEPICTION OF SOCIAL ROLE THEORY



Source: Authors' own, based on the social role theory of Eagly & Wood (2012)

2.5 Sri Lanka as the Research Site

Extant literature favours exploring the psychological well-being of the women who return to work. The researchers consider Sri Lanka as a viable research site due to the insights expected to be gained on the impact of post maternity leave in contexts other than developed Western countries (Freeney et al., 2021). In terms of gendered ideologies, Sri Lanka is not an exception to many other developing Asian countries. Deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and societal expectations are entrenched in perceiving women as primary caretakers of the family and household activities while men perform the breadwinner role (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). Sri Lanka outperforms in terms of gender parity with respect to other South Asian countries. While this is a significant victory for women in terms of attaining education, engaging in the workforce, and women's health (Banu, 2016; International Labour Organization, 2021), professional women are still disadvantaged as they have to carry their womanhood as a liability (Kodagoda & Samaratunge, 2016). In particular, like other South Asian countries, cultural conditions ordain motherhood as the noblest role for a woman; women are groomed and expected to take the primary parenting responsibility of the child. Sri Lankan women who grew

up in such socio-cultural conditions appreciate motherhood to a greater extent, whereas their expectations in terms of emancipation have much to do with achieving a balance between their work sphere duties and home sphere responsibilities. As vividly explained by Mishra (2013) through the lens of postcolonial feminism in South Asian countries, women do not consider motherhood as a constrictive burden that they should completely leave aside, rather they want to strike a harmony between work and family aspects. Therefore, many working women find themselves in a constant battle of juggling between their motherhood responsibilities and work duties which may result in adverse consequences for their careers, families, and personal well-being. Thus, the experience of women resuming work after maternity leave in Sri Lanka will provide many unique insights into working mothers' emotional turmoil because with the deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and gendered ideologies, the empowerment expectations of these women do not call for completely leaving motherhood duties.

Sri Lanka's judiciary system creates a conducive environment for female employees. When it comes to childbirth, in the corporate sector a mother who gives birth to a live child is entitled to 84 days of paid maternity leave. The mother will be entitled to two feeding intervals of one hour each until the baby turns one (Department of Labour, 2018). However, a deep dive into the policies and practices that govern women in the workforce makes it evident that those policies were developed around deeply rooted gender ideologies, and favour patriarchy and male dominance, placing women in disadvantaged positions. For instance, a study of developed countries, that have achieved a lot in terms of gender parity, shows that their policies involve parenting leave which encourages changing the conservative ideology that childcare is primarily a responsibility of a mother, and tend to promote co-parenting. Furthermore, in these countries government-supported high-quality daycare facilities play a bigger role, signifying that childcare is beyond being a maternal responsibility (Brandth & Kvande, 2019).

Conversely, the Sri Lankan judiciary system still positions childcare as a primary responsibility of the mother and the expectation, in case she is unable to provide it, is that she is accountable for taking the necessary initiatives to provide alternative care during her absence (Kodagoda & Samaratunge, 2016). The state has not taken sufficient initiatives to provide affordable and dependable childcare options which has left many mothers to rely on makeshift solutions that are not mostly sustainable. Due to the lack of policy-level support, women mostly rely on extended family support which cannot be considered as steadfast, as it is highly questionable whether the extended family (mostly maternal or paternal parents) is mentally and physically capable of providing the required care for a baby. Furthermore, organizational environments that are nurtured by the gender norms of the larger society tend to perceive women resuming work after maternity leave as lagging and that they are not in the best state to compete with their male counterparts. Therefore, even though women are eligible for three phases of maternity leave (state sector employees are eligible for phase 1 full paid leave, phase 2 half paid leave, and phase 3 no pay leave), the majority of them settle for phase 1 as they see extended maternity leave as a major threat for their career progression (Kodagoda & Samaratunge, 2016). Such insecurities in the minds of postpartum returners may result in them not utilizing their maternity entitlements, which clearly indicates that organizations are not sufficiently conducive for working mothers resuming work after maternity leave. Thus, exploring the sparsely researched area of emotional turmoil experienced by working mothers rejoining work after post-maternity leave in a unique context like Sri Lanka will provide nuanced insights related to the area.

3.0. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An interpretivist approach was utilized for this study. According to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019), an interpretive perspective is much more appropriate when exploring the complex and unique experiences of individuals, circumstances, and temporal conditions. As the researchers wanted to find the causes of emotional pain from the perspective of manager mothers returning from maternity leave whose experiences are highly heterogeneous, interpretivism was thought to be the best approach. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasize that when research efforts are driven toward giving a voice to women, an interpretative approach is much more suitable. The researcher-respondent interaction helps explore events in respondents' lives (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010), therefore, data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews of manager mothers in private sector organizations in Sri Lanka.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select the sample for the study. Initial contacts were obtained through HR managers of leading private companies by utilizing one of the researchers' contacts. Sampling criteria were determined as manager mothers employed in private sector organizations in Sri Lanka, between 25 to 45 years of age, who have no previous diagnosis of psychiatric problems, and who have given birth to their first child. At the time of the interview, the interviewee's child should be less than one (ideal if the baby is below 6 months). The population for the study comprised of a hard-to-reach audience, and according to extant literature, when dealing with such a population with no proper list or sampling frame, purposive and snowball sampling techniques are recognized as viable (Welsh, Kaciak, Memili, & Minialai, 2018; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). While both purposive (Tongco, 2007) and snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019) can be considered to be appropriate for the purpose, selection biases are inevitable. From the outset, the researchers were aware of the possible limitations of the sampling techniques and therefore, necessary initiatives were taken to alleviate researcher bias. Table 1 below shows the profile of the participants of the study. Pseudonyms were employed to protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

	Respondent's name	Age	Managerial Position	Highest Education Qualification
R1	Ama	33	Manager	Masters Level
R2	Binoli	37	Assistant Manager	Degree Level
R3	Charitha	31	Assistant Manager	Professional qualification
R4	Deesha	28	Assistant Manager	Professional qualification
R5	Eshani	29	Assistant Manager	Degree Level
R6	Piyumi	36	Manager	Degree Level
R7	Gayani	36	Manager	Professional qualification
R8	Himaya	35	Senior Manager	Masters Level

Source: Authors' own

Once the potential interviewees had been identified, consent forms (with detailed information provided about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study) were obtained from all participants before the commencement of interviews. Recognizing the sensitive nature of the discussions, participants were also reassured that their information would be handled with the utmost confidentiality which played a pivotal role in creating a more conducive environment for women to voice their opinions and experiences freely and openly. Furthermore, participants were also given the right to withdraw from the study at any point without giving any reasons for their decision. Online interviews of 60-90 minutes' duration were carried out according to interview guidelines. The interviews were semi-structured; participants were encouraged to discuss a common set of questions relating to their experience as working mothers resuming duties after maternity leave, while encouraging them to talk about specific issues they experienced which made the transition challenging (Table 2). All interviews were audio recorded upon the consent of the respondent and all the electronic recordings and transcripts drafted from the interviews were safely stored in encrypted folders.

Upon reflection, conducting interviews was challenging as some respondents did not appear for the scheduled interviews. Another notable concern is participant selection, because the use of non-random sampling techniques can result in an unconscious preference for selecting participants who appear more willing and open to discussing sensitive topics, potentially skewing the data. However, due to the unavailability of the sampling frame and the nature of the population, the use of non-random sampling is justified. The researchers also note that certain areas were discussed vaguely by participants, as they perceived familial issues to be inappropriate for discussion with outsiders. The silencing of women's voices on familial issues has a lot to do with sociocultural norms in Sri Lanka, where women are imbued with the ideology that a "good woman" does not talk about her family matters publicly (Ranmuthugala, 2020). By recognizing these biases and preconceptions, the researcher aims to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the findings and acknowledge the limitations inherent in the research process.

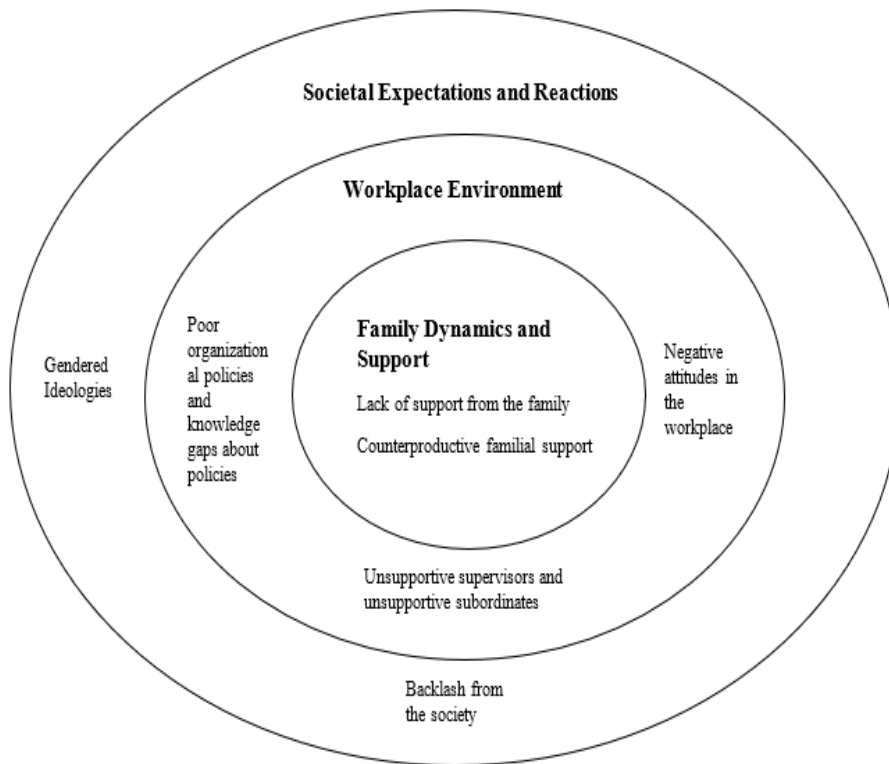
The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, in which, processed data can be displayed and categorized by its parallels and discrepancies. The process includes steps like coding, categorization, and noticing patterns to accomplish the goals (Miles & Huberman 1994). Therefore, the researchers analyzed the data to find codes and themes imperative to the research problem. Unlike statistical analysis in which data analysis takes place after the completion of the data collection, thematic analysis begins as the researcher notices and explores patterns of meaning during the process of data collection itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990). While thematic analysis is not strictly linear, Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a six-stage process that can be used as a guideline for thematic analysis. The researchers adopted these guidelines while conducting the thematic analysis related to the present study. To enhance the integrity and credibility of the process, reflective notes were written right after each interview to track how personal experiences and preconceptions might affect the analysis. Since both researchers have been working mothers, complete demarcation between the research and the researcher was not practical. However, in qualitative inquiry, it is expected that the researchers immerse themselves in the topic they are studying (Johnson, 2009). To further enhance transparency, a clear and systematic process was employed for data interpretation; the theoretical dimensions from the data were derived by adhering to the six stage process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4. FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

This section presents the illuminating findings gleaned from the in-depth interviews with

women who have navigated the complex terrain of returning to work following maternity leave. Based on the analysis, a wealth of valuable information on the multifaceted challenges and obstacles faced by these women as they reenter the workforce was unearthed. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perceptions of mothers in the professional sphere in South Asian contexts like Sri Lanka, offering a deeper insight into the factors that shape their career journey and influence their reintegration into the workplace. The key themes derived from the thematic analysis include lack of emotional and physical support from the family, well-intentioned yet counterproductive familial support for new mothers, a less conducive work environment for new mothers, and backlash from society. Integrating the findings of the study with extant literature, the researchers grouped the identified themes into macro-level factors, namely, family dynamics and support, workplace environment, and societal expectations and reactions. These factors are not mutually exclusive, rather they are intricately intertwined, collectively contributing to the distress experienced by working mothers after maternity leave. The interplay between family dynamics, workplace environment, and societal expectations creates a complex web of influences that exacerbate the challenges faced by these mothers. A thorough examination of the phenomenon reveals that these factors are fundamentally rooted in societal gender ideologies, which are deeply intertwined with the social role theory (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AMONG WOMEN RESUMING WORK AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE



Source: Authors' own

4.1 Family Dynamics and Support

Balancing multiple roles effectively, particularly in the workplace and family, demands a high level of capabilities and resources, a challenging endeavour that necessitates a significant investment of both personal and external resources (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006). While family support plays a pivotal role as an immensely valuable resource for new mothers to continue their careers after childbirth, it is much more important in countries like Sri Lanka where the formal infrastructure is not conducive towards working women. In Asian contexts, grandparents and other non-working family members are the major suppliers of the demand for childcare, taking over the home front responsibilities of working mothers (Poduval & Poduval, 2009).

When it comes to family support, respondents emphasized two aspects of family support. One cohort emphasized the lack of family support while the others emphasized the unexpected adverse consequences of extended family support.

4.2 Lack of Emotional and Physical Support from the Family

The absence of sufficient physical and mental support from the family unit has been widely acknowledged as a substantial impediment faced by women as they seek to reenter the workforce following maternity leave. It has been substantiated from extant literature that when working mothers have strong social support from their immediate families, they are able to continue breastfeeding which has many emotional and physical health-related benefits (Johnston & Esposito, 2007). Emphasizing the importance of family support for women's engagement in economic activities, much of the previous research substantiated that lack of family support is the foremost reason for women leaving the workforce prematurely (Kang, 2017; Poduval & Poduval, 2009). Evidencing the lack of family support, Gayani said, *"Sometimes I feel like I am in a continuous struggle. There are days I don't sleep at all. It was a joint decision that we made as mature adults to have kids. Now the baby is totally mine because I am the mother and house chores are all on my head as I am the wife. I don't expect anything from anyone now cause even my husband is not happy to share the burden so how can I expect any support from anyone?"*

This dearth of support places additional strain on their endeavours to navigate the intricacies of the demands of their new role as working mothers, ultimately resulting in heightened levels of exhaustion. The insufficiency of both physical and emotional support in managing these multifaceted roles often necessitates women investing extra hours, leading to both physical and mental burnout. Consequently, this may engender deceleration in their work performance upon their reintegration into the workforce, a development that is perceived to carry adverse implications for their career progression.

4.3 Well-Intentioned yet Counterproductive Familial Support for New Mothers

The general conception is that the traditional extended family structure in South Asia provides working women with young kids a unique support system, enabling them to address challenges, but sometimes it could be more daunting for working women (Meegaswatta, 2021). The role of households in women's economic empowerment has been well-discussed. The findings from this study, however, are mainly related to either receiving or not receiving (lack

of) family support towards women's economic engagement (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Sabri et al., 2023). The most striking result from the data was how extended family involvement can create unexpected challenges for working mothers. Because of the unique cultural conditions in South Asia, great value is placed on extended familial relationships, and the undertaking of childcare duties by the grandparents, especially, is more of a cultural expectation (Hoang & Kirby, 2020). Thus, many grandparents willingly step into childcare responsibilities to help working parents, but the consequences are not very productive. This view of counterproductive familial support was echoed by many respondents, thus providing a nuanced insight into the challenges faced by Sri Lankan working mothers.

An intriguing aspect that emerged from the research was the influence of family members, particularly those who supporting working mothers during their post-maternity leave phase. While these family members mostly have good intentions and aim to assist, their stereotypical gendered remarks can inadvertently contribute to feelings of guilt in working mothers. Participants in our study recounted instances where well-meaning comments from relatives such as "continuous breastfeeding is the best thing you can give for your child" left them grappling with emotions of guilt and self-doubt. Furthermore, grandparents may not be in the best of physical and psychological health to engage in the caretaking of a small child. These observations underscore the significance of understanding the broader social context and support systems that impact the experiences of working mothers, shedding light on the intricate interplay between familial expectations and women's professional pursuits. Unveiling her personal experience, Ama emphasized that,

"My parents were from a faraway village, so I had to rely on my in-laws who really went above and beyond to help me with my newborn. But my mother in law's continuous emphasis on how nicely she managed to breastfeed all her three kids until they turned 3 years old made me a bit uncomfortable."

Throughout the interview, Piyumi emphasized the mentally challenging period she experienced during her maternity leave, primarily due to her parents' involvement in caring for her newborn baby. This highlights the significant role extended family support plays in South Asian societies, particularly in the absence of a well-developed, formal, social infrastructure for childcare. Paradoxically, this support system sometimes results in challenging experiences for new mothers, potentially having adverse effects on their transition to this new life phase. It is evident that extended family support could have unintended consequences for working mothers. In many cases, this support seems to create doubts about their parenting abilities, further complicating working mothers' journey into the new role. This intricate interplay between familial assistance, societal expectations, and individual experiences underscores the complexity of the transition to motherhood in this context.

"When reminiscing back my mother was the first to say that I am far lesser than a good mother. She never said it explicitly but when I was going through breast milk supply issues, she continuously said how her breasts got engorged with excessive milk supply and according to her demanding job that I did until I gave birth to my child was the main reason for me to have low milk supply. I cried, cursed, and blamed myself for prioritizing my job".

It is worth noting the unsustainable nature of extended family support, because in most instances grandparents' support for newborn care comes with an extra burden of care for working women. Participants mentioned that grandparents willingly stepped into caregiving responsibilities for their newborn grandchildren, demonstrating their support and commitment.

However, due to age-related ailments, they found it increasingly challenging to sustain these responsibilities. Their declining health and frequent illnesses not only exacerbated their physical strain but also added to the burdens of working mothers. This dual caregiving dynamic, where the mothers had to care for both their children and their aging parents, intensified the difficulties they faced in balancing work and family life. Himaya voiced with a heavy heart how her mother ailed day by day as she struggled with an energetic and attention-seeking baby who wanted someone to carry her all day long. *“She was physically fit and hardly took Panadol (over-the-counter pain relief medicine) when she was back in her village. Taking care of Kaya (baby) was tough for her age and I witnessed how her body pains increased day by day. Now she is struggling with terrible back pain that doesn’t go away with prescribed pain killers and I feel like I am the culprit”* Consequently, the additional stress and increased caregiving demands contributed significantly to the emotional and physical distress experienced by these working mothers.

4.4 Workplace Environment

Unpredictable working hours, negative attitude towards new mothers, lack of awareness of post-maternity-leave requirements, and heavy workloads are the identified codes for the theme. In addition, unsupportive supervisors and subordinates were also mentioned under the theme Inflexible Work Culture/Work Environment. It has been observed that unpredictable working hours and heavy workloads cause stress in mothers after maternity leave. Rajan (2017) contends that employees working six- to eight-hour days tend to be more productive as they can balance their work and personal lives effectively, whereas extended working hours may lead to job dissatisfaction, reduced productivity, physical discomfort, and eventual attrition. Breastfeeding mothers found that delayed return may disrupt established breastfeeding schedules, potentially causing physical discomfort and affecting the mother’s emotional well-being (Johnston & Esposito, 2007). On the other hand, the infant, reliant on breast milk for nourishment and comfort, may experience physical and emotional distress due to the delay in feeding.

Workplace environments often manifest adverse attitudes and biases directed toward mothers returning to work after maternity leave, reflecting a notable concern within organizational dynamics. The persistence of a strong patriarchy, coupled with deeply ingrained stereotypical gender norms that place women in a disadvantaged position, presents a formidable challenge for countries like Sri Lanka in their pursuit of achieving gender parity in the workforce. While the popular norm favours women in the roles of “dutiful wife” and “good mother” (Surangi, 2022), the workplace has always been framed as a man’s arena where the “administrative man” is a male employee who is free from all sorts of responsibilities (Denhardt & Perkins, 1976). Juxtaposing employees with males results in the “othering” of women such that a mother with the huge responsibility of taking care of a newborn baby is not supported in most organizations. While the Sri Lankan legal system governing the labour force adopted quite a pro-employee stance, especially providing protected maternity leave to new mothers (Goonetilleke, 2016), it is questionable whether providing the maternity leave can, in the first place, make the workplace more conducive for working mothers. With the additional responsibilities that often accompany motherhood, there exists a prevailing perception that women returning to work after maternity leave may not sustain the same level of productivity or pace they exhibited before their absence. This perception is rooted in societal expectations and gender norms that place the onus of caregiving disproportionately on women, potentially hindering their career progression and contributing to gender disparity in the workplace. Many mothers returning to work after maternity leave tend to experience that their job status and recognition have deteriorated when they return to work (Houston & Marks, 2003; Freeney et al., 2021). Binoli furiously recalled a

rude remark from her male colleague on the first day back to work after maternity leave. *“I can still feel the sarcasm of that whole conversation, He went on bragging about how he had to shoulder so many responsibilities during my absence. Can you believe that he said “oh you seem to have a great break. Keep the big projects aside, can you at least remember the password of your machine.”*

A notable stress-inducing factor for working mothers in Sri Lanka is the limited awareness of post-maternity requirements within the workplace. It has become evident that this lack of awareness among organizational members including policies related to maternity leave, options for flexible work arrangements, facilities for breastfeeding or expressing milk, childcare support, and general expectations upon returning to work after maternity leave create uncertainty and anxiety for working mothers as they navigate the transition back to their professional roles while also fulfilling their responsibilities as new mothers (Jaafar, Ho, & Lee, 2016). The absence of a clear understanding of the post-maternity requirements of a working mother can lead to a feeling of being unsupported, contributing to the overall stress experienced by these individuals. It is noteworthy that not only the immediate departmental managers but also the human resources departments, often perceived as possessing a comprehensive understanding of post-maternity requirements and legal provisions, appear to exhibit a relatively rudimentary comprehension of the specific needs and regulations pertaining to working mothers during the post-maternity phase. As reported by respondents, while there is a general awareness of the mandated 84 days of maternity leave, there is a limited understanding of the comprehensive spectrum of post-maternity requisites. These include legislation concerning breastfeeding intervals, provisions for alternative work arrangements, and health-related prerequisites, such as the necessity for regular breast milk extraction to facilitate continued breastfeeding. Reflecting on the lack of awareness among the human resources departments related to maternity leave, Charitha started unveiling her bad experiences, *“it was my third baby and when I returned back to work after maternity leave one of the senior executives from the HR was telling me she was not sure whether I am eligible for two hours of breastfeeding as this is my third child.”* This knowledge gap underscores a critical area which requires further clarity and education to support working mothers effectively.

4.5 Backlash from the Society

Returning to work after giving birth can be a challenging decision for many mothers, and unfortunately, societal backlash is a phenomenon that some encounter. Due to the prescriptive nature of gender stereotypes, it is not unexpected that individuals who deviate from deeply rooted gender norms may face negative reactions (Donnelly et al., 2016; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Despite advancements in gender equality and changing perceptions, there still exists a prevailing stigma around working mothers (Donnelly et al., 2016). While society expects women to embrace the roles of “dutiful wife” and “a caring mother” the mothers who choose to reenter the workforce after childbirth are perceived as deviating from these expectations, resulting in backlash from society. Backlash towards these women can manifest in various forms, from subtle judgments to overt criticism. Society's expectations and traditional gender roles often contribute to this negative response, placing undue pressure on mothers to conform to conventional ideas about parenting. Numerous interviewees underscored the imperative of respecting the choices made by working mothers, thereby acknowledging their commitment to the dual responsibilities of family and career. Despite this commendable aspiration, the prevailing reality manifests in a disheartening discrepancy, as individuals in this demographic frequently encounter censure and disparaging remarks from society. This incongruity underscores the persistent challenges faced by working mothers in garnering genuine

acknowledgment and societal support, illustrating a discernible discord between aspirational ideals and the prevailing social milieu.

Gayani explained the backlash from the society over her decision to reenter the workforce where she said, “From the PickMe driver to the neighbor aunty, everyone seems to never miss a chance to tell me what a bad mother I am for going to work and leaving my little baby at home.” Similarly, Himaya shared her reasons for avoiding participation in social networking groups for working mothers. She feels that most conversations on these platforms tend to include subtle comments that intensify the feelings of guilt that working mothers go through rather than providing the necessary emotional support. She emphasized that a particular incident still resonates in her mind, where a fellow mother used emotionally heavy language in a post “අම්මලා වැඩට යන කිරිසප්පයන්ට අනුකම්පා කරන්න ඕනේ”- “ammala wadata yana kirisappayanta anukampa karnna oney”, suggesting that everyone should sympathize for those babies whose mothers are working. Researchers emphasize the perpetual tension between motherhood and engaging in economic activities, with societal perceptions often castigating women participating in economic pursuits as making a deliberate choice for employment at the expense of their maternal responsibilities (Ahl, 2006). Being victims of constant societal backlash makes the position of new working mothers particularly vulnerable. They feel overwhelmed when taking on new maternal duties and simultaneously dealing with societal criticism.

5. DISCUSSION

The reintegration of Sri Lankan new mothers into the workforce after maternity leave is marked by a complex interplay of gender dynamics, stereotypical gender norms, and job commitment. This convergence creates a nuanced and interrelated set of challenges for these individuals. The assimilation of women after returning from maternity leave is challenging due to a multitude of factors. Various individual, organizational, and societal conditions contribute to the shaping of this experience, rendering the process of reintegration a psychologically challenging endeavour (Freeney et al., 2021). Women who re-enter the workforce experience emotional distress when confronted with inadequate support from their families. This distress is compounded by non-conducive work environments, cognitive considerations, and societal perceptions, norms, and beliefs. A deep dive into the absence of a supportive framework that contributes significantly to the emotional challenges experienced by mothers resuming work post maternity leave can be traced back to the root cause of women being assigned nurturer roles and men provider roles as posited in social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Even though the advancement of women’s participation in the labour force is marked in the modern-day context, there have been no major changes in historically developed occupational segregation that places women in nurturer roles. The current investigation found that conventional gendered ideologies that shape familial expectations, work environment, and social expectations are unsuccessful in creating a more conducive environment for new mothers to strike a balance between their work and family after returning to work. The findings from the study are consistent with previous research which demonstrates that women engaged in economic activities in the shadow of deeply entrenched patriarchal gender norms face increased burdens of multitasking and unrealistic expectations which exacerbates their workload beyond their capacity, leading to significant emotional distress (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010; Hanek & Garcia, 2022).

The significance of family support for working women has been much substantiated in the extant scholarly literature (Gupta & Srivastava, 2020; Johnston & Esposito, 2007; Kochhar,

Jain-Chandra, & Newiak, 2017). This becomes particularly imperative in developing countries such as Sri Lanka, where there is minimal formal institutional support for childcare initiatives. Working parents often rely on immediate family members for childcare responsibilities. While the existing literature places significant emphasis on family support as a pivotal factor influencing women's successful reintegration into the workforce post-maternity leave, there remains a notable gap in the discussion regarding the potential negative consequences associated with family support. The most significant nuances of the study are related to the counterproductive familial support for new mothers. Based on the findings, counterproductive family support can be divided into two parts; on the one hand, it is about the suboptimal physical and mental fitness of grandparents, and on the other, it is related to the exacerbation of the emotional burden of new mothers due to the comments and remarks from the extended family. The finding that the psychological strain experienced by new mothers due to the ailments of grandparents whom they are using as a makeshift solution to childcare responsibilities corroborates the findings from a study by Warnasuriya (2020). Batool and Azam (2016) confirm the finding related to familial pressure through comments and remarks by the extended family. The study, conducted in Pakistan, found that women's bereavement after miscarriage is aggravated by the emotionally damaging remarks and blame inflicted by the in-laws. In the present study, the sources of interpersonal stress are not just confined to the in-laws, but also include the new mothers' own parents and family. Moreover, it is not solely negative remarks that contribute to this stress; even well-intentioned comments and claims inadvertently exacerbate the frustration and exhaustion experienced by these mothers. The current study has not thoroughly explored the adverse outcomes or challenges that may arise as a result of the very family support that is conventionally regarded as essential for women's successful return to work. Addressing this gap is imperative for a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dynamics surrounding women's reintegration experiences after maternity leave.

Profound transformation in the family and workforce, exemplified by the prevalence of dual-career couples and the participation of working mothers with young children, underscore the imperative of establishing an environment conducive for the effective balancing of work and family responsibilities of individuals shouldering dual roles. The need for a conducive work environment, underscored by the consensus among interviewees in the present study, finds corroboration in extant literature. Numerous previous studies have acknowledged that the retention of working mothers with young children within the workforce is intricately linked to how conducive the work environment. The challenging lifestyle of these mothers, who often assume multiple roles in a single day, underscores the significance of fostering a workplace that accommodates and supports their diverse responsibilities (Allen, 2001; Gupta & Srivastava, 2020). While creating a supportive work environment is critical, the findings from the study particularly emphasize the role of immediate managers and supervisors in creating such a culture. It has become apparent that, notwithstanding the existence of clearly delineated policies within formal documents, there is a pressing need for a substantial transformation in individuals' attitudes towards the reintegration of women following maternity leave. This imperative arises from the observed phenomenon wherein negative remarks and treatment meted out by managers contribute significantly to an emotionally exhausting phase for women. This underscores the necessity for a shift in organizational attitudes and behaviours to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for women returning to the workforce post-maternity leave. Thomas and Ganster (1995) postulated that family-supportive work environments consist of two pivotal components: family-supportive policies and family-supportive supervisors. The efficacy of policy initiatives, despite their progressiveness, remains contingent upon the alignment of the individuals tasked with implementing the policies. Should the attitudes of these individuals not align with a positive disposition towards women returning to work after maternity leave, the intended objectives of the policies may not be realized. This underscores the critical interplay

between policy formulation and the attitudes of key actors in achieving the desired outcomes of supporting women during their post-maternity reintegration into the workforce.

When exploring the challenging contexts navigated by the new mothers who try to return to the workforce after maternity leave, it becomes evident that this phenomenon is largely rooted in a socio-cultural context. Despite the physical and mental exhaustion that they go through to balance work and family, working women tend to become victims of backlash from society which involves negative social and economic repercussions for disconfirming prescriptive stereotypes (Donnelly et al., 2016; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Traditionally, societal expectations have perpetuated a stereotype wherein women are presumed to embody warmth but exhibit incompetence in comparison to men within the realm of paid employment, reserving competence exclusively for the domain of homemaking (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). The celebration of women aligning with these gender role expectations stands in stark contrast to the punitive measures taken against those women who deviate from these norms. The backlash directed at working mothers who challenge the conventional expectations by navigating the dual roles of an ideal worker and an ideal mother has been substantiated in previous literature (Barnett, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Hanek & Garcia, 2022). This nuanced exploration underscores the persistent challenges faced by women who dare to navigate the intricate balance between professional and maternal roles in contemporary society. Working mothers returning to work after maternity leave experience several forms of backlash such as increased scrutiny, work-life balance and social stigmatization. Women returning from maternity leave often find their work performance and time management being more closely monitored and judged than their peers', with any perceived shortcomings attributed to their parental responsibilities. While the literature emphasizes that women in higher management positions experience more stringent scrutiny and victimization than their male counterparts (Ryan et al., 2016), the findings from this study focus on the exacerbated scrutiny of mothers returning to work after maternity leave. Furthermore, amid a transformative shift in workforce dynamics, working women, particularly mothers of children under six, are burdened with a disproportionate share of responsibilities and accountabilities, in line with the social role theory (Christnacht & Sullivan, 2020). This phenomenon acquires heightened significance in the context of patriarchal South Asian countries, where entrenched gender norms and patriarchy wield considerable influence. As a result, women returning from maternity leave encounter societal judgment and criticism about their ability to juggle work and motherhood, with societal expectations often pressuring them in subtle and overt ways to prioritize family over career (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). Thus, the findings from this study illuminate a poignant reality: new mothers returning to work face several challenges which take their toll on their physical and psychological well-being.

The journey of new mothers returning to work after maternity leave is fraught with a myriad of challenges. Navigating the delicate balance between professional responsibilities and the demands of nurturing a newborn requires considerable adjustment. For new mothers resuming their jobs, the logistical intricacies of childcare arrangements, coupled with the emotional toll of leaving one's child in the care of others, can create a profound sense of unease. The workplace itself may present hurdles, as mothers grapple with potential biases, reduced flexibility, isolation, and the need to reestablish professional connections. Emphasizing the importance of a conducive work environment for women returning to work after maternity leave, extant literature shows that the difficulties experienced by women returning to work stem from a lack of flexibility in the workplace, non-family-friendly occupational culture, unsupportive coworkers and superiors, and suboptimal occupational policies towards breastfeeding (Franzoi et al., 2024; Gebrekidan, Hall, Plummer, & Fooladi, 2022). A possible explanation for this

phenomenon lies in the persistence of gendered ideologies regarding the roles of men and women. These ideologies reinforce the perception of the corporate sector as a male-dominated domain, where the ideal worker is envisioned as a man who is the primary breadwinner (Denhardt & Perkins, 1976). This prevailing mindset contributes to the lack of organizational support for women who embrace motherhood, as workplace structures and expectations are often not designed to accommodate the professional and familial obligations typically shouldered by women. Consequently, the organizational environment remains unsupportive and unaccommodating towards working mothers. Thus, the findings from this study corroborate the earlier findings related to women returning to work after maternity leave. The pervasive societal expectations from women, often influenced by traditional gender roles, can further compound the difficulties faced by these returning mothers. This intricate interplay of personal, professional, and societal factors underscores the diverse challenges encountered by new mothers as they embark on the complex journey of reintegration into the workforce after maternity leave.

CONCLUSION

According to the findings from the study, working mothers with young children require support from their family, workplace, and broader society. Both nuclear and extended families must adapt to the needs of working mothers as they also contribute to family incomes, same as the fathers. In the Sri Lankan context, as young families predominantly lean on extended family networks for childcare support, it becomes imperative to implement awareness programs that specifically target extended families. These initiatives should aim at fostering understanding and support within the extended family structure, emphasizing the importance of shared childcare responsibilities. Specifically, it is imperative to make the extended family members aware of the importance of recognizing the needs of new mothers and providing support specifically targeted towards those needs. According to Eshani, *“I don’t want two mothers for my baby, all I want is my mother to help me to raise my baby the way I want.”* This echoes the incongruity between what is expected from a young mother from her extended family and what she receives which may result in many adverse consequences. A new working mother often has to pay a huge price, physically and psychologically. Furthermore, policy-level support for affordable and reliable childcare facilities is imperative. The makeshift solutions currently employed by working mothers are not sustainable, leading to constant adjustments that contribute significantly to their emotional distress. Implementing robust childcare policies would alleviate the burden on working mothers by ensuring consistent and dependable childcare arrangements, thereby reducing the stress associated with frequent changes and uncertainties. This support is crucial for promoting the well-being of working mothers and enabling them to balance their professional and personal responsibilities effectively. Moreover, the efficacy of the policies designed to establish a conducive work environment for working mothers hinges significantly on the commitment and proactiveness of senior managers and supervisors, who play pivotal roles in shaping organizational culture. Mere policies may not yield desired outcomes if leadership is not genuinely inclined towards fostering a supportive organizational culture for working mothers. Therefore, organizational commitment and dedicated efforts to influence the mindset of managers become imperative. Initiatives aimed at cultivating a supportive ethos must extend beyond policy formulation, encompassing strategic interventions focused on instilling a sense of commitment and dedication among managers. This recognition underscores the crucial interplay between leadership attitudes, organizational culture, and the successful implementation of policies designed to enhance the work environment for working mothers. The stories of working mothers who successfully navigate the challenges of balancing career aspirations with the demands of newborn children indeed constitute an essential narrative within the broader

discourse on women in the workforce. These stories not only exemplify individual triumphs but also serve as powerful illustrations of the possibilities and achievements that can arise when supportive work environments and policies are in place.

While this study focused on first-time mothers, the complexities experienced by second-/third-time mothers, who may have different experiences, would also be worthwhile to investigate. Furthermore, research should also explore the intersectionality of gender with other social categories such as class, ethnicity, and education levels. Investigating how these intersecting identities shape the experiences of returning mothers could provide a more holistic understanding of their challenges. This analysis would offer deeper insights into the diverse and multifaceted factors influencing the experiences of working mothers post-maternity leave.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background Information	Name Age Designation Educational attainment Industry Duration of the maternity leave
Preparation and planning before resuming work	Can you describe how you prepared for your return to work after maternity leave? Were there any policies or support systems in place at your workplace to facilitate your transition back?
Experience in the first weeks after rejoining	How would you describe your first days or weeks back at work?
Significant challenges faced during this period	What aspects of your job contributed to emotional distress upon your return? How did workload, work hours, and job responsibilities impact your emotional well-being?

	<p>How did managing childcare and work responsibilities affect your stress levels?</p> <p>Did you experience any conflict between your work and family roles? Can you provide examples?</p>
<p>Perceived support</p>	<p>Did you feel supported by your colleagues and supervisors during your transition back to work?</p> <p>How did your family and friends support you during this period?</p> <p>What kind of support did your employer offer to help ease your transition back to work?</p> <p>Were there any policies, programs, or resources that were particularly helpful?</p>
<p>Reflections based on personal experiences</p>	<p>Based on your experience, what changes or improvements would you recommend to better support working mothers returning from maternity leave?</p> <p>What advice would you give to other mothers preparing to return to work after maternity leave?</p>