

Challenges for Women's Decision to Return to the Workforce After Childbirth in the Banking Sector in Sri Lanka

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Abstract - Women's return to the workforce after childbirth remains a persistent challenge in Sri Lanka, where female labor force participation has stagnated at around 30–36% for over three decades, well below male participation rates. This study investigates the specific barriers faced by women in the banking sector, a field with comparatively high female representation yet one that reflects entrenched gender inequalities. Drawing on a positivist paradigm and quantitative methodology, survey data were collected from 384 banking employees who resumed work following maternity leave. The study examines five key factors: childcare facilities, flexible working arrangements, workplace bias, loss of professional networks, and societal expectations—and their influence on women's decision to return to work. Findings reveal that all five variables show statistically significant but weak correlations, suggesting that no single factor independently determines women's post-maternity employment decisions. Instead, the interplay of organizational, cultural, and societal elements collectively shapes workforce reintegration. Workplace discrimination, disrupted professional networks, and traditional gender expectations remain major obstacles to women's career continuity and advancement. The research highlights that organizational interventions such as on-site childcare, transparent and flexible leave policies, anti-bias training, and mentorship programs can meaningfully support women's return to work. Furthermore, societal awareness initiatives and inclusive government policies are essential to challenge cultural norms and promote equitable caregiving roles. By focusing on Sri Lanka's banking sector, this study underscores the need for holistic, family-friendly workplace practices and supportive policy frameworks to enhance female labor participation and contribute to sustainable organizational and economic development.

Keywords: Women's workforce participation, post-maternity employment, Banking sector Sri Lanka, Family-friendly policies

I. INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, women's labor force participation has remained below 35% for over three decades (Ratwatte, 2023), one of the lowest in South Asia despite strong female educational attainment. This stagnation reflects enduring cultural norms and limited institutional support for working mothers, particularly in formal sectors such as banking. As Megan Dalla-Camina aptly notes, 'Be a great mother, but work like you don't have children,' capturing the paradox faced by Sri Lankan's mothers balancing societal expectations with professional aspirations. These persistent gaps in women's formal employment are linked to gendered caregiving responsibilities, lack of workplace flexibility, and cultural expectations that reinforce unpaid care work (International Labor Organization, 2018). Research by the Institute of Policy Studies (David, 2024) indicates that the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) has stagnated between 30–36% since the late 1990s, compared to 75% among men, with childcare burdens and limited family-friendly workplace provisions acting as major barriers. The banking sector, despite its relatively high female representation, reflects similar challenges, where inadequate maternity benefits, inflexible work arrangements, and entrenched gender roles hinder women's re-entry after childbirth (Amarasuriya & Medawala, 2020).

Understanding these obstacles is critical to ensuring women's reintegration into the workforce is supported through policy reforms, inclusive organizational practices, and societal attitude shifts.

Despite legal frameworks such as the Maternity Benefits Ordinance No. 32 of 1939, inconsistencies in implementation and minimal paternity leave provisions limit practical support for parents. Most banks provide maternity benefits but lack standardized childcare or flexible-work schemes, creating barriers for women's workforce reintegration (State Duties, n.d.; World Bank, 2017). Women frequently encounter career stagnation, workplace discrimination, and insufficient childcare provisions, forcing many to remain in roles below their qualifications or exit formal employment altogether. Although the Women Friendly Workplace Awards (2023) recognize organizations adopting gender-inclusive practices, Prof. Adikaram (2023) stresses that workplace interventions remain insufficient to address systemic issues such as inflexible work schedules, lack of affordable childcare, and limited maternity support mechanisms. Even with legal frameworks like the Maternity Benefits Ordinance No. 32 of 1939, inconsistencies in implementation and minimal paternity leave provisions further restrict the creation of equitable parental support systems (State Duties, n.d.; World Bank, 2017).

While global and regional research has extensively examined women's post-maternity employment challenges, there remains a significant gap in empirical evidence specific to Sri Lanka's banking sector. Few studies have simultaneously examined the combined impact of childcare access, flexible work, workplace bias, loss of professional networks, and societal expectations on women's return-to-work decisions. Addressing this gap, the present study evaluates how these factors collectively influence mothers' reintegration into the Sri Lankan banking workforce.

According to World Bank data, Sri Lanka's female labor force accounted for only 33.18% of the total workforce in 2023 (tradingeconomics.com, n.d.), a figure further threatened by rising female migration and labor shortages (Thilina Walpola, 2024). Low female labor participation not only impacts gender equity but also imposes economic costs through productivity losses, absenteeism, and higher recruitment and training expenses when women leave employment due to childcare responsibilities (roanne.duranpascual@iwa.asia, 2024). Moreover, disparities in maternity legislation where white-collar employees receive longer leave than factory workers and the absence of comprehensive childcare subsidies exacerbate gender inequalities in employment opportunities (Amarasuriya & Medawala, 2020). With fathers entitled to only three days of paternity leave (www.ft.lk, 2024), caregiving burdens remain disproportionately on women, further restricting their career mobility. By centering on Sri Lanka's banking sector, a key employer of women, this study contributes context-specific insights that can inform inclusive workplace reforms and policy initiatives to strengthen female labor force participation and retention after childbirth.

A. Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to identify the challenges that women face when returning to workforce after a career break due to childbirth, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of the organizational policies such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, childcare support, and career development programs in encouraging women to return to workforce.

- To evaluate the relationship between flexible working arrangements and women returning to work after childbirth and to propose policies to optimize their return.

- To examine the impacts on women returning to work due to workplace bias and to develop strategies to promote inclusive work environment.
- To evaluate the relationship between loss of network and its impact on women returning to work and to introduce adequate support programs to encourage women to return to work
- To analyze the effectiveness of existing childcare facilities in Sri Lanka, identify limitations, and provide actionable recommendations to introduce support programs to ensure sustainable practices.
- To evaluate the impacts of societal expectations on women after childbirth and to develop strategies to promote awareness on the importance of women's contribution to the society and economy through employment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Industry / Sector Overview*

CBSL (2019) identifies Sri Lanka's banking sector, comprising Licensed Commercial Banks (LCBs) and Licensed Specialized Banks (LSBs), as the dominant component of the financial system, holding the largest asset share and ensuring financial stability through liquidity provision, payment services, and risk transformation. The sector's stability primarily depends on the six Systemically Important Banks (SIBs) due to their asset concentration (CBSL, 2019). Rupasinghe (2023) notes that Sri Lankan banks adopt a hierarchical employee structure encompassing top and middle management, operational staff, and specialized roles, with variations across state-owned, private, and international banks. CBSL serves as the primary regulatory body, enforcing compliance with capital adequacy, reserve requirements, and anti-money laundering laws (Rupasinghe, 2023).

Sri Lanka's 2021–2022 economic crisis escalated the Non-Performing Loan (NPL) ratio to 13.3% by mid-2023 from 7.6% in 2021, driven by sovereign debt defaults and macroeconomic instability (abmagazine.accaglobal.com, n.d.). Nevertheless, reforms, reduced impairment charges, and rupee appreciation contributed to improved profitability and credit growth in 2024 despite declining interest margins (CAL Research, 2024). CBSL's (2024) Financial Stability Review highlights improving financial soundness indicators, including liquidity and capital adequacy, amid falling market rates and rising private sector credit demand. However, elevated NPL ratios underscore persistent systemic challenges requiring long-term resilience strategies (CBSL, 2024).

1) *Competitors and Current Trends:* Weeraratne (2019) emphasizes the sector's transition from traditional banking to digitalization, with fintech innovations such as e-money, QR payments, and mobile banking reshaping customer expectations and regulatory frameworks. Liyanagamage (2021) notes that competition increasingly focuses on service quality, product innovation, and customer engagement rather than price, given government influence on interest rates. Globally, digital banks and fintech startups disrupt conventional banking models, compelling Sri Lankan banks to accelerate digital adoption, AI integration, and cybersecurity measures (Statista, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this digital shift, reducing reliance on physical banking channels (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

2) *Initiatives for Inclusivity and Career Advancement for Women:* Gunawardana (2017) reports female representation in Sri Lankan banks at 13% in managerial roles, while Gunasekara (2018) finds childcare and eldercare responsibilities exert minimal direct impact on career progression compared to spousal support. Sri-Lankan-Businesses-

Advance-Gender-Equality (2020) highlights Standard Chartered Bank's pioneering initiatives, including extended maternity leave, subsidized childcare (Kidkare), and flexible work arrangements, leading to 100% maternity return rates. Similarly, NDB Bank's paternity leave policies improved post-maternity retention from 88% to 100% between 2018–2020 (Sri-Lanka-Businesses-Advance-Gender-Equality, 2020). Women-Friendly Workplace (WFWP) Awards recognize institutions such as Seylan Bank, HNB, and People's Bank for gender inclusivity through mentorship, leadership programs, and work-life balance measures (Perera, 2023; Sahan Weerasooriya, 2021). IFC (2024) further reports Sri Lanka leading South Asia in board-level gender diversity at 27%, though representation declines from 40% at entry level to 20% in senior management, reflecting a persistent leadership gap.

3) Challenges: Uduwella and Jayatilaka (2019) identify organizational culture, childcare, and gendered household roles as key barriers to women's career advancement in Sri Lanka's banking sector, despite high female participation rates. Lakmali et al. (2019) note limited research on individual and cultural constraints impacting women's post-maternity workforce re-entry. IFC (2024) stresses that biased evaluations, rigid workplace cultures, and limited leadership commitment hinder women's progression despite existing inclusivity programs. Over half of surveyed middle managers remain skeptical of female leadership's strategic importance, underscoring structural barriers requiring targeted interventions (IFC, 2024). Consequently, this research seeks to examine the multifaceted challenges confronting women returning to the workforce post-childbirth in Sri Lanka's banking sector.

B. Area of Business and Management Theory

Global research emphasizes the challenges women face when returning to work after childbirth, underscoring the need to balance work-life responsibilities with gender equity (Lucia-Casademunt et al., 2018). In Sri Lanka, Kodagoda (2014) explored childcare practices among professional and managerial mothers, revealing a reliance on diverse arrangements primarily grandmothers due to limited institutional childcare support. Despite existing studies on gender roles, work-life balance, and maternity leave policies, perceptions of women's commitment to work post-childbirth remain ambiguous, with flexible work arrangements often viewed as career drawbacks (Lucia-Casademunt et al., 2018).

International evidence highlights structural barriers: inadequate workplace breastfeeding facilities lead to early breastfeeding cessation when mothers return to work before six months (Burns & Triandafilidis, 2019), while studies in Finland identify childcare availability, organizational support, and spousal assistance as key enablers for mothers' workforce reintegration (Quynh, 2019). In Chile, motherhood significantly reduces employment rates, working hours, and earnings while increasing informal labor, especially among less-educated women (Berniell et al., 2021).

Research further links work–family conflicts to stalled career progression for women (Rathnayake, n.d.), with Abendroth (2022) noting heightened time-based conflicts post-parenthood. Recent surveys, such as the Return-to-Work study in the UAE (2024), reveal ongoing challenges despite significant improvements in female workforce participation and gender equality rankings, emphasizing the global relevance of supportive return-to-work policies.

1) Competitors and Current Trends: Eckerson et al. (2016) highlight that access to quality childcare significantly influences women's labor market participation, especially in regions lacking affordable external options. In Sri Lanka, however, research on workplace-based childcare remains limited despite traditional values emphasizing maternal care (Abeyasinghe et al., 2022). Globally, insufficient childcare services push women to reduce working hours or exit the labor force altogether (Golden, 2018), with affordability emerging as a key determinant of women's continued employment (Zaid & Amin, 2021).

Modestino et al. (2021) argue that childcare is a business issue impacting productivity, talent retention, and workforce participation. International perspectives, including India, stress workplace-provided childcare and family-friendly policies as essential for gender equality and post-pandemic recovery (Chanda, 2022). In Sri Lanka, studies by Madurawala (David, 2024) reveal limited formal childcare usage due to high costs, urban concentration, and inadequate regulation, forcing reliance on informal care by relatives. This research examines women lived experiences with childcare access, affordability, and career decisions in the banking sector.

2) Flexible Working Arrangements: Kossek et al. (2014) demonstrate that flexible work arrangements (FWAs) remote work, part-time roles, and flexible hours improve work-life balance for working mothers. Post-COVID-19, global adoption of FWAs increased, yet career penalties and perceptions of reduced commitment persist (Munsch, 2016). Scandinavian nations exemplify how supportive legislation and organizational cultures enhance female workforce participation (Berger et al., 2015), though access remains unequal across job levels and industries (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2018).

In Sri Lanka, Gunawardane et al. (2023) found limited FWAs and childcare facilities in executive-level workplaces, despite evidence from European studies linking family-friendly policies to faster maternal workforce re-entry (Bächmann, Frodermann & Müller, 2020). This research explores how the absence of ad hoc FWAs affects Sri Lankan's mothers' reintegration into the banking sector after childbirth.

3) Workplace Bias: Maternal wall bias significantly impedes women's career progression. Andie & Al (2016) report that mothers face lower hiring rates, slower promotions, and wage penalties compared to women without children. In Sri Lanka, Edirisinghe (2016) and Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian (2017) attribute gender inequities to organizational cultures reinforcing stereotypes about women's commitment and availability.

International studies reveal subtle yet systemic discrimination, with mothers receiving fewer callbacks and harsher evaluations than other applicants (Cheung et al., 2022; Arena, Volpone & Jones, 2022). Conversely, mentorship programs and organizational investments in family-friendly arrangements improve women's career re-entry and retention (Uduwella & Jayatilaka, 2019; Bächmann, Frodermann & Müller, 2020). This research investigates how bias in hiring, promotions, and workplace culture shapes women's post-maternity career trajectories in Sri Lanka's banking sector.

4) Loss of Professional Network: Williams (2014) links maternity-related career breaks to diminished professional visibility and reduced access to leadership opportunities. Loss of networks during maternity leave limits access to high-profile assignments, promotions, and industry knowledge (Kricheli-Katz & Regev, 2021). Research shows that career interruptions reduce social capital, delaying promotions and advancement (Jáuregui & Olivos, 2018).

Strategies such as remote networking, mentorship programs, and organizational outreach during maternity leave mitigate career stagnation (Kossek et al., 2014; Tambe & Lublin, 2021). In Sri Lanka, prolonged maternity leave often isolates women from professional opportunities, intensifying challenges upon workforce re-entry. This study examines the extent to which disrupted networks affect women’s career progression in the banking sector.

5) Societal Expectations: Ansari (2016) notes that Asian cultural norms expect women to prioritize childcare and family over careers, influencing career sacrifices post-childbirth (Sharma & Kaur, 2019). In Sri Lanka, patriarchal expectations and perceptions of women as secondary income earners compound these barriers (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020).

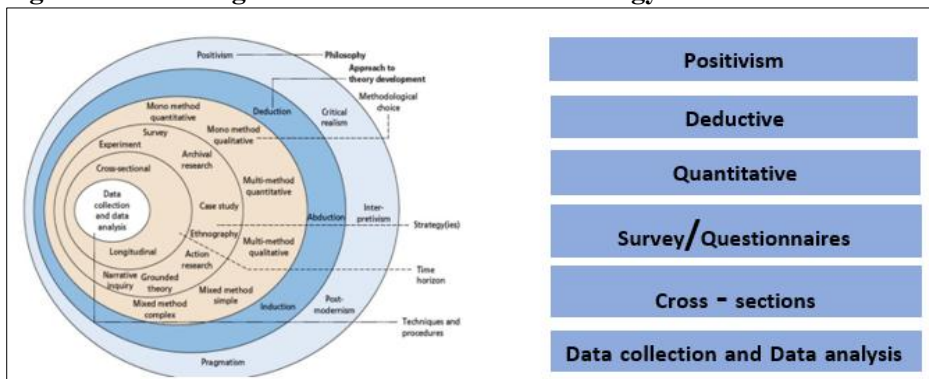
Internationally, research associates overwork cultures and rigid gender norms with negative work-family balance outcomes (Padavic et al., 2020; Akanji, Mordi & Ajonbadi, 2020). In Sri Lanka, studies reveal that family commitments, in-law expectations, and rural–urban differences further limit career advancement (Wijewardhana and M.M.M., 2021; David, 2024).

However, growing gender equality initiatives and family support structures positively influence women’s career mobility (Gunawardane et al., 2023). This research explores how societal norms and cultural expectations shape Sri Lankan’s mothers’ workforce participation after childbirth.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design grounded in a positivist paradigm and deductive reasoning. The design was chosen to enable statistical examination of relationships between key factors; childcare facilities, flexible working arrangements, workplace bias, loss of professional networks, and societal expectations, and women’s decisions to return to the workforce after childbirth in the banking sector, which was selected due to its significant female workforce representation. A quantitative approach was most suitable, as it allowed for hypothesis testing and generalization across a large sample of participants in the Sri Lankan banking sector.

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the research methodology.



Source: Authors’ compilation.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 21 items grouped under five independent variables and one dependent variable. Each item

was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was developed based on previously validated instruments from global return-to-work and gender diversity studies (e.g., Kossek et al., 2014; Golden, 2018) and was refined to align with the Sri Lankan context. A pilot test with 10 banking employees confirmed clarity, reliability, and internal consistency before full deployment. Validity was reinforced by equally addressing all hypotheses and restricting literature references to post-2014 publications.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting female employees who had returned to work within the past five years after childbirth in licensed commercial and specialized banks in Sri Lanka. The final sample size of 384 respondents was determined using Cochran's formula for large populations at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, ensuring sufficient statistical power. Participants were contacted through HR departments and professional banking networks, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha, ensuring internal consistency across all constructs ($\alpha = 0.908$). Descriptive statistics summarized key trends, while Pearson's correlation and Chi-square tests were used to examine relationships between independent and dependent variables. These techniques were selected for their suitability in analysing categorical and ordinal data within cross-sectional survey designs, ensuring rigorous statistical validation of the research hypotheses.

Participants were informed about the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study. Informed consent was obtained electronically before survey completion, and all responses were anonymized to protect participant identity. Defining its quantitative approach, sampling procedures, and analytical methods, the study ensures transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor in examining women's post-maternity employment challenges in Sri Lanka's banking sector.

A. Conceptual Framework

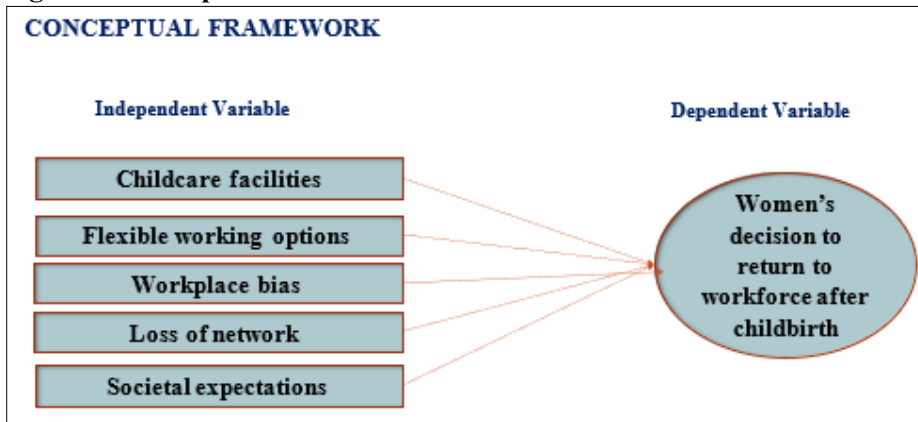
The literature review examined the societal and organizational contexts influencing Sri Lankan working mothers' return to employment after childbirth, highlighting both global and local perspectives (Vithanage & Hewapattu Arachchige, 2020; Bian & Wang, 2019; Chanda, 2022). The findings indicate that women's experiences are shaped by multifaceted challenges spanning professional, personal, and family spheres.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework developed from this review, emphasizing how societal ideologies, organizational support systems, and workplace cultures intersect to influence mothers' decisions and experiences when re-entering the workforce. Specifically, in the Sri Lankan banking sector, factors such as paid maternity leave, childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, managerial support, and prevailing gender norms play a critical role.

Literature consistently highlights the tension between traditional "good employee" ideologies often male-oriented and maternal responsibilities, which can lead to workplace discrimination. At the same time, societal and organizational support mechanisms have a mediating effect, enabling better work-family balance and contributing positively to both organizational outcomes and national economic development.

Based on these insights, the research questions for this study were formulated from the topics identified based on the literature review.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' compilation.

As per the conceptual framework built in section, the following hypotheses were formulated based on the research questions discussed. When studying the challenges faced by Sri Lankan women returning to work after childbirth, hypotheses help in guiding the research and determining what relationships or effects the study aims to explore.

H1: There is a relationship between flexible work arrangements and women returning to work after childbirth.

H2: There is a relationship between workplace bias and women returning to work after childbirth.

H3: There is a relationship between loss of network and women returning to work after childbirth.

H4: There is a relationship between childcare facilities and women returning to work after childbirth.

H5: There is a relationship between societal expectations and women returning to work after childbirth.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary of Cronbach's Alpha (α) - Coefficient of Reliability

Type	Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items	Conclusion
Independent Variables	Childcare facilities	.839	4	Highly Reliable
	Flexible working options	.815	4	Highly Reliable
	Workplace bias	.787	4	Highly Reliable
	Loss of professional network	.827	4	Highly Reliable
	Societal expectations	.762	4	Highly Reliable
	All Five Independent Variables	.921	20	Highly Reliable
All Questions		.908	21	Highly Reliable

Source: Authors' compilation.

Cronbach's alpha for all five independent variables and dependant variable with twenty-one items is .908. The index is highly reliable and can be accepted as the Cronbach's alpha is greater than 0.6.

Table 1. Summary of key findings – Childcare facilities

Childcare Facilities	Safe Childcare	Onsite Childcare	Affordable Childcare	Childcare Policies
Mean	1.72	1.63	1.72	1.67
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Mode	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
SD	.707	.677	.685	.630
Availability of childcare facilities influence women to return to work after childbirth				
Pearson Correlation	-.049			
Chi-square value	.000			

Source: Authors' compilation.

The first objective examined the relationship between childcare facilities and women's decision to return to work after childbirth. Findings show that all four indicators; safe childcare, onsite childcare, affordability, and childcare policies, recorded low mean values ($M = 1.63-1.72$, $SD = 0.63-0.71$), indicating respondents largely disagreed that sufficient childcare support is available in their workplaces. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.049$) demonstrates a very weak negative association, suggesting that while inadequate childcare discourages women's return to work, it is not the only decisive

factor. The chi-square test ($p = 0.000$) confirms a statistically significant relationship, indicating that the presence or absence of childcare facilities does influence post-maternity employment decisions.

These results align with Golden (2018) and Zaid and Amin (2021), who note that the scarcity and high cost of childcare services are major deterrents to women's sustained labor participation. The weak correlation in this study supports the notion that childcare access alone cannot guarantee workforce re-entry; rather, it must be integrated with broader organizational supports such as flexible schedules and cultural acceptance. This finding fulfills the first research objective, emphasizing that enhancing childcare access remains a critical policy lever for improving women's post-maternity employment continuity in Sri Lanka's banking sector.

Table 2. Summary of Key Findings – Flexible Working Options

Flexible Working Options	Remote Working	Part-Time Positions	Leave Policies	Transparent Policies
Mean	1.58	1.65	1.62	1.69
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Mode	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
SD	.620	.616	.614	.626
Availability of flexible working options influence women to return to work after childbirth				
Chi-square value		.000		

Source: Authors' compilation.

The second objective investigated how flexible working options; remote work, part-time roles, leave policies, and transparent policy implementation, affect women's decisions to return to work. The results showed low mean values ($M = 1.58-1.69$, $SD = 0.61-0.63$), indicating limited availability of flexible work opportunities. The correlation coefficient ($r = -0.040$) suggests a very weak negative relationship, and the chi-square test ($p = 0.000$) confirms that flexible options have a statistically significant but modest influence.

This implies that although flexible arrangements are conceptually valued, they are insufficiently implemented in Sri Lanka's banking institutions. Prior studies by Kossek et al. (2014) and Berger et al. (2015) similarly found that flexible work policies, when not supported by workplace culture or management attitudes, have minimal practical effect on women's employment continuity. The findings also resonate with Bächmann et al. (2020), who highlight that flexibility must be genuinely accessible, not merely policy based. The results here address the second research objective by revealing that while flexibility matters, its limited operationalization weakens its potential to retain female talent after maternity leave.

Table 3. Summary of Key Findings – Workplace Bias

Workplace Bias	Promotions Discrimination	Peer Attitudes	Lack of Support	Performance Evaluation
Mean	1.81	1.77	1.76	1.81
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Mode	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
SD	.661	.677	.644	.673
Workplace bias discourages women to return to work after childbirth				
Pearson Correlation	.078			
Chi-square value	.000			

Source: Authors' compilation.

The third objective assessed how workplace bias; promotion discrimination, peer attitudes, lack of support, and biased performance evaluations, affects women's return-to-work decisions. The analysis recorded mean values between 1.76 and 1.81 (SD = 0.64–0.68), indicating that respondents moderately disagreed with statements suggesting unbiased treatment at work. The Pearson correlation ($r = 0.078$) shows a weak positive relationship, and the chi-square test ($p = 0.000$) demonstrates that workplace bias significantly influences women's employment decisions.

Although the correlation strength is minimal, the consistent direction suggests that more supportive and inclusive environments can slightly improve women's re-entry experiences. The findings correspond with Ansari (2016), who observed that gendered assumptions about women's productivity after childbirth persist in South Asian workplaces, and Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian (2017), who described such bias as a subtle barrier to women's promotion. The results thus satisfy the third research objective, confirming that even weakly perceived bias can psychologically and professionally discourage women from returning to formal employment.

Table 4. Summary of Key Findings – Loss of Professional Network

Loss of Professional Network	Career Stagnation	Mentorship Access	Networking	Team Dynamics
Mean	1.91	1.93	1.97	1.92
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Mode	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
SD	.717	.724	.718	.743
Loss of professional network during maternity break discourage women to return to work after childbirth				
Pearson Correlation	-.033			
Chi-square value	.000			

Source: Authors' compilation.

The fourth objective examined whether losing professional connections during maternity leave affects women's return-to-work decisions. The mean values for career stagnation, mentorship access, networking, and team dynamics ranged between $M = 1.91$ – 1.97 (SD = 0.72–0.74). The Pearson correlation ($r = -0.033$) indicates a very weak negative relationship, though the chi-square test ($p = 0.000$) confirms significance.

Despite weak correlation strength, the findings point to a persistent perception that career breaks lead to professional isolation and slower career progression. This supports Williams (2014) and McIntosh et al. (2012), who found that prolonged absences reduce visibility and access to opportunities. Kricheli-Katz and Regev (2021) further note that women on maternity leave risk being excluded from networks that influence promotions. This study's results confirm that maintaining communication and mentorship opportunities during maternity breaks can help mitigate this disconnect, thereby addressing the fourth research objective.

The fifth objective analyzed how societal expectations; cultural influence, social pressure, organizational culture, and societal support, shape women's return-to-work decisions. The mean values ranged from $M = 1.57-1.92$ ($SD = 0.57-0.76$), demonstrating general agreement that societal and cultural expectations continue to shape women's employment behavior. The correlation coefficient ($r = -0.030$) reveals a very weak negative association, while the chi-square test ($p = 0.000$) establishes a statistically significant link.

Table 5. Summary of key findings – Societal expectations

Societal Expectations	Cultural Influence	Societal Pressure	Organizational Culture	Societal Support
Mean	1.92	1.90	1.70	1.57
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Mode	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
SD	.729	.756	.595	.574
Societal expectations influence women to return to work after childbirth				
Pearson Correlation			-0.030	
Chi-square value			.000	

Source: Authors' compilation.

These results reinforce literature highlighting the persistent impact of social norms and gender roles in South Asian contexts. Ansari (2016) and Krissetyanti (2018) observed that women often shoulder primary caregiving duties, leading to reduced participation in full-time work. Similarly, Wijewardhana and M.M.M (2021) found that organizational cultures reflect broader societal biases, making reintegration difficult. However, Gunawardane et al. (2023) emphasized that family and spousal support can counteract these effects. The findings meet the fifth research objective by demonstrating that societal expectations although statistically weak remain psychologically powerful barriers to women's post-childbirth employment in Sri Lanka.

Across all five variables, the statistical correlations were weak but significant, revealing that no single factor independently determines women's decision to return to work after childbirth. Instead, a *multifactorial interaction*—comprising organizational, structural, and cultural influences—shapes post-maternity employment outcomes. The low mean values indicate a systemic lack of enabling conditions within Sri Lanka's banking sector.

These findings substantiate prior work by Amarasuriya & Medawala (2020) and David (2024), confirming that women's labor force participation challenges arise less from individual choice and more from structural and societal constraints. By empirically testing these relationships, this study fills the previously identified gap in Sri Lankan

research on post-maternity employment behavior. The results contribute valuable insight for HR policymakers, indicating that childcare access, flexible work, and inclusive cultures must operate together not separately to meaningfully improve female labor retention.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the challenges influencing women's decisions to return to work after childbirth within Sri Lanka's banking sector, addressing the interplay of organizational, social, and cultural factors. Quantitative findings confirmed that although the statistical relationships between the five variables were weak, all were significant, revealing that a combination of inadequate organizational support and societal expectations continues to constrain women's post-maternity employment.

The study contributes to the literature by empirically validating five interrelated dimensions, childcare facilities, flexible working options, workplace bias, loss of professional networks, and societal expectations, as critical contextual barriers to female labor force reintegration in Sri Lanka. These findings highlight the need for coordinated institutional and policy-level action to enhance women's workforce participation.

Childcare Facilities- Low mean values ($M = 1.63-1.72$) indicate a lack of accessible childcare support in the banking sector. This deficiency directly limits women's ability to resume work after maternity leave. Banks should invest in affordable, safe, and accessible childcare facilities, including on-site centers or partnerships with certified childcare providers. Implementing comprehensive childcare policies, such as lactation rooms, extended parental leave, and emergency childcare assistance, would demonstrate institutional commitment to work-family balance. Strengthening childcare infrastructure is likely to reduce attrition, enhance loyalty, and build a family-supportive workplace culture.

Flexible Working Options- The study revealed limited availability of flexible work models ($M = 1.58-1.69$), underscoring the gap between policy and practice. To address this, banks should expand flexible work modalities—including remote or hybrid work, staggered hours, part-time options, and phased re-entry programs. Equipping managers with training to handle flexible teams and promoting equitable parental leave, including paternity leave, will improve gender balance in caregiving responsibilities. These initiatives can enhance productivity and retention without compromising service standards.

Workplace Bias- Although the correlation between workplace bias and return-to-work decisions was weak ($r = 0.078$), qualitative interpretation shows that perceived discrimination and lack of managerial support discourage women from rejoining the workforce. Banks should implement transparent performance evaluations and promotion systems, alongside anti-bias and sensitivity training for supervisors and HR personnel. Encouraging female representation in decision-making roles and fostering peer mentoring can further dismantle stereotypes and build inclusive cultures where working mothers are valued equally.

Loss of Professional Network- Respondents indicated that maternity-related career breaks weaken professional connections and hinder re-entry ($M = 1.91-1.97$). Banks should introduce structured return-to-work programs—including skills refreshers, reorientation sessions, and internal mentorship platforms—to help returning mothers reintegrate smoothly. Maintaining contact through digital networks or virtual events during maternity leave can prevent isolation and sustain engagement. Such measures will ensure that maternity leave becomes a temporary pause, not a professional setback.

Societal Expectations- Societal and cultural norms (M = 1.57–1.92) continue to reinforce women’s caregiving roles, indirectly shaping employment outcomes. Banks, policymakers, and advocacy organizations should collaborate to challenge gender stereotypes through awareness campaigns and community engagement. Promoting shared parental responsibilities and offering cultural sensitivity training for managers can help mitigate these pressures. Strengthening national frameworks—such as childcare subsidies and inclusive parental leave will create an enabling ecosystem for women’s sustainable workforce participation.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study provides empirical evidence from Sri Lanka’s banking sector, offering practical insights for both policymakers and HR professionals on designing gender-inclusive work environments. However, its focus on one industry limits the generalizability of findings. Future research could employ mixed-methods or comparative designs across other service sectors to capture deeper socio-cultural nuances influencing women’s return-to-work decisions.

In conclusion, although statistical relationships among the variables were weak, the patterns consistently point to systemic and cultural constraints rather than individual choice as the main barriers to women’s post-maternity workforce re-entry. By addressing childcare gaps, expanding flexibility, reducing bias, rebuilding professional networks, and reshaping societal expectations, Sri Lanka’s banking sector can play a transformative role in promoting gender equality and sustainable economic growth.

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