

Re-Negotiating Work-Family Boundaries: How Women Rebuild Careers in Collectivist Societies

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Abstract

Women in a collectivist society like India often make career decisions based on cultural values during career re-entry. However, these decisions depend on the type of collectivism they have experienced: vertical or horizontal. This study uses the kaleidoscope career model (KCM) to examine the impact of different types of collectivism on women's careers. Unstructured interviews of 30 Indian mothers revealed three major themes and their subthemes. The major themes are the practices experienced by women due to the culture, experiences of collectivism and the impact of these experiences on women's career orientation during re-entry. Results from this study reflect the influence of collectivist cultural experiences on KCM parameters.

Keywords: Women, career, collectivism, culture, Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), gendered roles.

1. Introduction

Women encounter both significant opportunities and challenges in managing their careers in today's dynamic and evolving work environment. Their career paths are often characterised by breaks; one of the prominent reasons for breaks is family responsibilities. Re-entry into the workforce represents a critical phase, and the decisions made during this transitional period can have lasting impacts on their earnings, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and prospects for career advancement (Ravindran & Baral, 2014). However, women's career choices and

progression are influenced during this phase not only by personal factors like preferences, interests, and skills but also by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and familial factors (Thompson et al., 2017). These complexities are often contingent on cultural influences. For example, in collectivist societies, group-oriented values precede individual aspirations (Hofstede, 2001).

Understanding how cultural values shape career decisions during re-entry is important for career entry theory and helping organisational decision-makers manage employees from different backgrounds. Awareness about the difficulties women encounter due to cultural influences when returning to the workforce after a career break will assist women in making a smooth transition. This will also help minimise the effects of their absence from the organisations on women's careers after re-entry. Organisations need to take steps to create more supportive environments that enable women to realise their full potential in both their personal and professional lives by better understanding the specific challenges and barriers that women encounter when re-entering the workforce. This understanding is important because existing literature on women's career re-entry choices is based largely on Western individualistic culture. Little is known about the career decisions of women during re-entry in collectivist cultural contexts, such as the experiences of Indian mothers.

In a collectivist society, strong family and community bonds significantly shape career decisions (Woodhams, 2015), particularly for women re-entering the workforce after childbirth (Gelfand et al., 2004). Its culture emphasises conformity to social norms, prioritising group goals over personal ambitions, which can manifest in the gendered roles and expectations placed upon women. For instance, women are often expected to prioritise caregiving and family responsibilities over professional aspirations, limiting their workforce participation and reducing career advancement opportunities (Eagly et al., 2009). Family members are often influenced by encouraging careers that align with collective goals, such as maintaining family

status or contributing to the household's financial needs, while discouraging professions that may disrupt traditional gender roles and not align with family preferences and status (Omar & Davidson, 2001). These cultures not only shape career choices but also reinforce the gendered roles within the household, with women expected to manage both domestic duties and professional work, often seeking flexible roles to balance these responsibilities (Raghuram, 2008). Despite these constraints, cultural values may also support women's careers, particularly when family members share responsibilities and provide assistance with caregiving. In such cases, women may be encouraged to pursue more challenging or fulfilling careers as their family unit collectively ensures that they meet the family's goals (Aycan, 2004). However, the level of support and its impact on women's career paths can vary depending on the experiences one faces. When a family emphasises hierarchy and authority within the family, it often reinforces traditional gender roles. In contrast, families that value equality among family members may allow for more flexibility in career decisions. This study seeks to understand how cultural values shape career decisions during women's re-entry in a collectivist society like India, specifically focusing on how family support, cultural norms, and societal expectations influence women's career choices post-childbirth.

Using the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) framework (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), this research examines how women navigate the parameters of authenticity, balance, and challenge (ABC) in their careers while fulfilling their roles as daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers.

By analysing the career trajectories of 30 mothers living in India who have worked earlier, this study contributes to the growing body of research on the contextual factors shaping women's careers. First, it adds to the understanding of Indian culture by illustrating how familial and societal expectations and support within this culture influence women's career decision-making. Second, it extends the KCM framework by examining how the parameters of

authenticity, balance, and challenge interact in a non-Western Indian cultural context, where cultural values often outweigh individual career aspirations.

This study also intends to add to the body of knowledge on women's career development by providing useful recommendations for organisations, policymakers, and individuals who want to create inclusive and encouraging work environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Orientation

Hofstede provided one of the most well-known frameworks describing the role of cultural values in shaping individuals' values, behaviour, identity, and organisational practices (Hofstede, 1980). It provided four cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism/individualism, and masculinity/femininity.

Individualism gives importance to personal goals and autonomy. Individuals believe in the right to make their own decisions without the influence of others. Collectivism refers to cultural values or social orientations that emphasise the importance of collective identity. Hence, individuals view the self with respect to the group, such as family, society, and friends, over their aspirations and ambitions. Individuals belonging to collectivist societies place more importance on family integrity, interdependence, common goals and society. Since individuals are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups (like extended families), they feel they need to be compelled to contribute to their groups. For example, individuals in collectivist societies need to fulfil family obligations or mould their aspirations according to societal expectations by compromising their goals. In relation to work behaviour and attitudes, the dimension of collectivism/individualism has been the most extensively studied, but its research on career attitudes and decisions is limited. There are some studies related to career attitudes and behaviour in individualistic contexts, but there are few studies of this in a collectivist society.

Most of this literature is on the career decision-making of individuals during their studies or the initial stages of their careers. However, few studies examine the role of culture at the re-entry stage.

2.2. Vertical and Horizontal Collectivism

In collectivist societies, the relationship between individual aspirations and collectivism is particularly intricate, as cultural norms and familial expectations shape personal goals. Collectivism emphasises group harmony, social obligations, and interdependence, which can significantly influence how individuals, especially women, pursue their career ambitions.

Vertical Collectivism

Vertical collectivism, characterised by hierarchical relationships, strongly emphasises fulfilling obligations to authority figures, including family (Singelis et al., 1995). In such cultures, individuals may prioritise familial needs over personal ambitions, leading to a heightened sense of duty and obligation (Singelis et al., 1995).

Horizontal Collectivism

In contrast, horizontal collectivism fosters a more egalitarian environment where individuals feel supported in expressing personal desires and pursuing their aspirations (Singelis et al., 1995).

2.3. Collectivism and Career Decisions

Cultural orientation plays a significant role in influencing individuals' career decisions; individuals often experience tension between their cultural backgrounds and the demands of their chosen professions. For instance, Haley et al. (2014) highlight that individuals frequently seek to balance their professional paths with their personal values, social contexts, and culture.

In a collectivist society, individuals often experience a strong influence from family members in their career choices. Individuals prioritise their family and community values over personal aspirations. For example, Agarwala (2008) found that parents, particularly father's support and expectations, are deeply valued in the decision-making process in collectivist societies. This highlights the importance of familial inputs in career decisions in a collectivist culture.

This finding is supported by another study, which emphasises that individuals raised in collectivist societies tend to prioritise family goals over personal interests, thereby affecting their career aspirations (Qonitatin, 2023). In collectivist societies, perceived congruence with parental aspirations has been found to have positive relations with self-efficacy and aspirations (Sawitri & Creed, 2017). This also aligns with the findings of Yang et al. (2012), who argue that collectivist values can moderate the relationship between work demands and career satisfaction, indicating that individuals may derive satisfaction from fulfilling family and community expectations in their professional lives. This emphasis on interdependence and relational harmony in collectivist cultures often leads individuals to align their career paths with the expectations of their family and community, reinforcing the notion that career decisions are not solely personal but are influenced by broader cultural expectations. Collectivism, therefore, not only shapes initial career choices but also affects how individuals navigate their later professional choices. Research highlights that individuals in collectivist cultures often align their career aspirations with the expectations of their families and communities.

2.4. Collectivism and Women's Career

Traditionally, societal norms have always dictated that women, especially mothers, must meet the expectations of being a "good mother," which creates pressures and constraints (Hays, 1996). In modern societies, where emphasis is placed on choice and free will, there are high

expectations for balancing multiple roles (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). So, along with caregiving responsibilities, there are hidden expectations to contribute more than it. Despite the appearance of gender-neutral expectations, caregiving is still predominantly viewed as a mother's responsibility, which gives rise to women juggling between career and motherhood. In collectivist societies, both men and women face challenges when making decisions, as the group's interests are prioritised over personal ambitions. However, the gender roles, expectations and norms are more severe for women in collectivist societies, who often find themselves at a greater disadvantage than those in individualistic cultures. Thus, married women, in particular, are expected to prioritise caregiving and nurturing roles, even when it requires compromising their professional ambitions.

Collectivistic cultures value interdependence and group goals (Hofstede, 1983; Triandis, 1995) and hence typically expect women to sacrifice their aspirations for the well-being of the group—whether that group consists of family, community, or society (Cha, 1994).

Thus, family responsibilities are paramount, creating a sense of obligation for women to fulfil these duties. Studies have also shown that women in such cultures prefer work schedules that offer flexibility to balance family responsibilities.

Research on work-family conflict has shown that collectivistic values emphasise interdependence, family integrity, and social connectedness. In contrast, individualistic values are characterised by self-reliance, competition, and emotional distance from family or the in-group (Triandis, 1995). In collectivist culture, for instance, there is a strong focus on maintaining social connections and a deep sense of duty toward fulfilling family responsibilities. This often creates pressure to meet familial and social expectations, such as participating in family gatherings, religious functions, hosting meals, or regularly visiting relatives to strengthen social ties. As a result, many women prioritise family needs over their aspirations. Jaga and Bagraim (2016) found that women frequently develop a strong collective

identity related to their family, which adds additional demands on their time and energy. However, they also highlighted that family can be a source of support, helping with everyday tasks and child-rearing responsibilities, thereby reducing some work-family conflict.

Similarly, Kemp and Zhao (2016) noted that the interdependence between family values and practices significantly shapes Emirati women's career paths. Despite societal and organisational barriers, the family system, grounded in collectivist values, often supports women's career pursuits. Thus, it also acts as both enabling and hindering women's career decisions. This difference is due to two types of collectivism (vertical and horizontal), which influence women's careers differently.

Sawitri and Creed (2016) found that perceived congruence with parental expectations significantly impacts career aspirations in vertical collectivist contexts. Individuals may feel compelled to pursue careers that align with family traditions or societal roles, creating potential conflicts between personal desires and familial obligations. This hierarchical nature can particularly challenge women, who may face additional constraints imposed by traditional gender roles.

2.5. Kaleidoscope Career Model and Women's Career

Traditional career models focus on continuous employment and advancement, as they were primarily designed based on men's experiences. This often overlooks the specific barriers and opportunities women face and fails to recognise its impact on their careers (Gallos, 1989; O'Neil et al., 2008). Unlike linear models, KCM addresses the multifaceted nature of career development, making it suitable for diverse contexts (Futagami & Helms, 2009; O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019).

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) provides insight into how women make career decisions (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). The KCM theory proposes

that across women's lifespans, their priorities and career aspirations evolve as their requirements shift to Authenticity, Balance, and Challenge, abbreviated as the ABCs. Authenticity refers to one's desire to align one's personal values and work roles and prioritise one's own needs. Balance refers to the desire for a smooth work-life intersection, and challenge refers to the desire for stimulation, rewards, and growth (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). According to the KCM, the need for authenticity, balance, and challenge shifts and rearranges itself in response to life and career choices (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). This model has also been used to analyse women's choices to leave and re-enter the workforce (August 2011; Simmons et al., 2022). However, these studies focused on career decisions due to the shifts in their needs, expectations and priorities.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model suggest that women's focus on valuing authenticity, balance and challenge in their careers is due to their changing roles and responsibilities in life (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). During the early stages of their careers, women seek to attain challenges as there is less need for work-life balance or authentic careers for self-fulfilment. Women during the mid-career stage face childbirth, child-rearing, and elderly care; hence, they must focus on balancing their careers and family responsibilities. During the later stages of life, women seek authenticity in carrying out activities that give them the fulfilment of being true to themselves (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008).

However, recent researchers have challenged these career patterns. August (2011) conducted a qualitative study of women's careers and found that authenticity, balance, and challenge play important roles in understanding women's career experiences. He found that women can have any need across their stages; the desire to achieve any of these parameters is not stage-specific; other researchers support this (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). The KCM, which has proposed an understanding of women's career choices, was previously portrayed as an automatic process. Later, it was seen as a more deliberate and systematic step to align their life priorities (Ashraf

& Jepsen, 2022; O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). Some studies have highlighted that the lack of consensus on the understanding may be due to the missing involvement of contextual factors. Some studies have called for including the factors contributing to these shifts in research. Tomlinson et al. (2018) have also argued that the KCM emphasises individual life choices without acknowledging the impact of environmental factors; hence, it can be said that the KCM focuses on individual agency but does not acknowledge individual experiences.

2.6. Influence of Collectivism on Women's Career Re-entry Through the KCM

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) has primarily been applied in individualistic societies, such as the United States, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand, where career decisions are often driven by personal autonomy and self-driven (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). Individuals typically align their career paths with personal goals and achievements in these contexts. In contrast, KCM's application in collectivist countries may highlight the significant influence of family expectations and the obligation to maintain social harmony. It may shape career choices within cultural and relational frameworks.

Earlier studies have highlighted the influence of family expectations on women's career decisions. For example, a study on South Korean women highlights the critical role of family influence in shaping career aspirations (Kim et al., 2015). In these contexts, societal expectations emphasise women's caretaking responsibilities, particularly for children, which impacts their career choices. Therefore, it is proposed that the experiences of the contextual factors influence women's career decisions in a collectivist society. It may foster the KCM needs that differ from those found in the Western samples of KCM literature.

This study focuses on career decisions during re-entry because women face various identity conflicts and reduced self-efficacy while making career re-entry decisions (Ladge &

Greenberg, 2015). This difficulty may be heightened in a collectivist society; hence, understanding those experiences and their impact on career decisions is important.

Their experience with different types of collectivism, i.e. vertical and horizontal, can result in different decision outcomes. For example, women who experience vertical collectivism may prefer careers that allow them to carry out their gender expectations along with career decisions and, hence, preference for the balance of work and life. Women experiencing horizontal collectivism may receive support for their careers and opt out of challenging careers. Women seeking authenticity may not have an influence on others' decisions on them. Including samples from various societies, countries, and stages of career development will enhance the generalizability of the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). This approach will yield valuable insights into how different cultural and contextual factors shape women's career trajectories during career reentry. This study explores the following research questions: 1) How do women in collectivist societies experience the influence of family and cultural factors on their career choices during career re-entry? 2) How do these experiences affect their ability to pursue authentic, balanced, or challenging careers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A qualitative approach was adopted to understand how collectivism influences women's career decisions. This approach helped us to understand the role of family responsibilities and support in their career decisions. In-depth interviews can help understand the role of culture in the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) career attitudes. In-depth interviews are considered the most appropriate technique to understand multifaceted and dynamic issues like the role of culture (Hatch, 1993). In-depth interviews were performed, and open-ended, unstructured questions allowed participants to openly express their experiences and viewpoints without

being constrained by pre-determined questions. New questions were posed to the participants in context with their responses. The exploratory nature of the interviews allowed for a free study of the participants' points of view and provided a plethora of qualitative data for analysis. Without asking any predetermined questions, the interviews were created to be adaptable and flexible. Participants could freely communicate their views and experiences regarding their roles and responsibilities. To cover pertinent issues and enable participants to express their viewpoints, the interviewer directed the discourse. Participants were interviewed until data saturation was achieved.

3.2. Sampling and participants:

Thirty mothers who had worked before childbirth were interviewed to explore their career decisions after childbirth. They had either resumed or continued a break. Forty-two women were contacted to participate in the study. Of these, 30 were interviewed, ranging in age group 30-54 years from various backgrounds, educational levels, occupations, professions, industries and career stages. The participants were carefully selected to ensure diversity in their career paths. Before the commencement of the interviews, women were briefed about the study through telephone conversation. During interviews, consent is taken to record the interview participants. The women interviewed were asked a single question: “Describe your career journey”. Based on their response, the next question was asked. The interview lasted for 43 minutes on average. Depending on the participants' preferences and accessibility, data were collected through 1-on-1 interviews in person or via video call. A summary of the participants' demographic data is provided in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

3.3. Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six thematic analysis steps were used to guide this study's data analytic process. First, the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then the data was read and re-read to increase familiarity with the data and formulate emerging ideas. In the next step, the text in the transcripts was coded through an iterative process. These codes were drawn from the literature on women's careers (e.g. Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007) and culture (e.g. Hofstede, 1983; Triandis, 1995). An example of code representing conditional parental support is inferred from the quote, "Parents like will extend a certain amount of support in my presence, but they refuse to be solely responsible for my child in my absence". In step 3, the codes generated in the previous steps are arranged into themes representing the cultural factors influencing women's career decisions during re-entry into a collectivist society. In step 4, the themes are refined considering the entire data set and the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In step 5, the themes were defined to closely explain the mothers' experiences about their career decisions during re-entry. The last step of the thematic analysis process is writing the report, including results and discussion in the following section (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Findings

Overarching themes related to women's careers and collectivism emerged:

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

1) *Practices experienced by women due to the culture*

This overarching theme includes three subthemes: Traditional gender roles, strong familial and community bonds, and career choices aligned with collective preferences. These themes further have subthemes.

a) Traditional gender roles

A central theme that emerged from the coding is traditional gender roles. In collectivist societies, individuals are often assigned distinct roles based on gender, with men and women expected to fulfil specific family and communal responsibilities (Eagly & Wood, 1999). These beliefs significantly impact decisions related to work hours, occupational choices, and the allocation of household duties (Jaga & Baghram, 2017).

Most participants mentioned that caregiving and household work are considered their primary responsibilities, even though all participants are well educated, and some are full-time employees. Work role is considered in addition to their family role and responsibilities. It is always expected and ingrained that for family bonds and caring, women should prefer family needs over their aspirations. These cultural values, like filial piety, family harmony, interdependence, and loyalty, impact women's choices. Even societal expectations make them believe they must sacrifice their career for family responsibilities (Smeaton, 2006). In a collectivist society, child rearing and taking care of the family are considered the primary duties of women. This frequently motivates them to prioritise familial responsibilities over personal career prospects.

In a collectivist society like India, there is a strong emphasis on prioritising child-rearing and family care, with women traditionally regarded as the primary caregivers. Given the significance placed on family ties, social connections, and meeting familial needs, women often prioritise their families' well-being. They consistently receive advice from various sources, including their mothers, in-laws, husbands, and friends, encouraging them to prioritise family needs over their careers.

My mother always advised me to take a career break and look after my family. She always said that looking after family should be a woman's priority (P2).

My mother-in-law's friend always advised me to take care of family first; there are always societal expectations to take care of family. (P1)

My job is considered as if I am doing something additional. My primary duty is to look after my child (P18).

People assume that when a woman is working, she is not doing any household chores, only her mother-in-law doing all household chores. And then she is not an ideal bahu (P29).

The exemplary quotes reveal significant insights into the cultural context and societal expectations surrounding women's roles in a collectivist society. Women have mentioned that they are advised by their relatives and neighbours that women's primary responsibility is to care for their families, especially children. This reflects a strong preference for traditional gender roles that prioritise domestic duties over professional aspirations.

Women face societal pressure to conform to expectations, leading to internalised beliefs about placing family above career. Recurring advice from mothers and mothers-in-law signifies the passing down of these norms across generations, reinforcing traditional values that regard caregiving as the primary role for women. This perpetuates a cycle where they feel compelled to prioritise family needs over personal ambitions or professional growth. The quotes below illustrate how women accept that when one parent needs to be available, it is typically the mother, indicating their readiness to take on this primary responsibility and sacrifice their careers. Many women view this role as natural and acceptable, reflecting how deeply ingrained these traditional gender roles are. This automatic acceptance further reinforces the gendered division of labour within the household, where women prioritise caregiving while men are not

expected to shoulder the same responsibilities. The exemplary quotes below highlight this dynamic.

I worked as a resident doctor and was very happy with my career. I worked after my first child was born, but when my second son was born, I needed to take a break as he missed developmental milestones; it was obvious I should have been there with him to look after him (P13).

My son was very ill when he was between 8-12 years old; I ran pillar to pillar and took him to so many places for treatment. One parent needed to stay with him, and being a mother, I needed to (P12).

Women's family responsibilities extend beyond traditional household tasks like cooking, cleaning, and childcare. They also entail overseeing their children's education, managing their extracurricular activities, preserving family traditions and cultural practices, and instilling cultural values in their children. Additionally, some women have cited reasons such as caring for children and other family members with physical or health issues as factors influencing their decisions to take breaks or change jobs.

My kids are doing well in studies and many extracurricular activities. I sacrificed my career to raise my kids and make them realise their potential. My kids are doing well. I am proud of that (P2).

But the entire burden of managing the kids, the homes, and their studies falls on a woman (P25).

One woman also noted that this gendered expectation extends beyond the family, with societal norms reinforcing the idea that a mother's care and warmth are crucial for a child's upbringing, health, and educational success.

It was difficult for me to work and simultaneously look after my ill son. I thought it was better to switch jobs. My doctor told me it is better you take care of the child. He said that once the mother starts caring for her child, the child will be fine (P12).

Many people still hold the perception that traditional gender roles place significant stress on women who attempt to balance both their careers and families. Family and community members with these traditional views often expect women to manage household duties alongside their professional responsibilities, adding more pressure.

Despite working outside the home, many women are still expected to cook and manage household chores after returning from work, while their husbands do not participate in these tasks.

The cooperation from my spouse was not that much, at least in my case. I do not know about others, but things could have been managed better. It felt like too much at times. Thankfully, my kids were in state board schools, so there was not too much pressure from school, and we managed. However, a bit of work distribution, such as cooking and looking after studies, could have helped if possible (P21).

b) Strong Familial and Community bonds

Sociability, an important aspect of a collectivist society, requires individuals to participate in social activities and maintain harmonious relationships with people around them (Triandis et al., 1986). Women in a collectivist society often assume the role of representing the family at cultural events and gatherings. They are expected to be present at various social functions, care for extended family members and friends, and actively participate in family events. This expectation further demands women's time and energy as they juggle multiple responsibilities within and outside the household.

We have a big extended family and must attend many family functions. My in-laws also come to stay with us in between balancing two kids; in-laws with extra commitment are difficult. My husband is having a hectic job. He will not be able to help me with daily chores. My in-laws and husband always advised me to care for the family, as managing everything together is difficult. I also realised that with a job, performing family responsibilities is difficult (P1).

Women in collectivist societies face numerous spoken and unspoken expectations from family, society, and culture to prioritise raising a family, attending to their needs, and preserving cultural traditions for future generations. The responsibilities of women within the household are as demanding as pursuing a career.

However, the analysis also highlights that the family and other members of society are crucial support systems for women. Women who have received support from family members, friends, and others can continue working or take up challenging work and balance both family and work responsibilities.

Despite the numerous expectations placed upon women by society and families to fulfil their family duties, the family in a collectivist society also serves as a support system during financial instability or pandemics. The strong familial bonds inherent in these societies enable families to handle such challenges collectively whenever needed.

Many women have reported that they can continue their careers due to the support they receive from their in-laws or parents. While cultural expectations may create burdens, the same culture promotes helping members during difficult times, sharing responsibilities in raising children and assisting women whenever their needs arise. This can be found in the quotes below.

Since my parents shifted close to me, I got support from them to re-enter; I have parents to care for my daughter, and I do not have to worry about her now (P20).

My in-laws do all the work; they do not burden me with any of the family responsibilities. I have focused on my career without worrying about other responsibilities after the break (P24).

I am a single parent; my parents and siblings looked after my children growing up, which helped me concentrate on my career and earn money for my children's better future. (P5).

My husband didn't have a stable job, but he encouraged me to grow in my career. He used to look after the kids and do all the household chores, and I looked after the finances (P19).

These accounts suggest that for many women, their in-laws, parents, husbands, and siblings served as a support system, either by completely taking up the responsibility of household chores or sharing the workload.

In a collectivist society, one side creates expectations that prioritise family care over career. It can also serve as a support system for some women, helping them maintain their careers and helping when needed. The sense of collective responsibility fosters a supportive environment, empowering women in their career journey.

The above theme explains the two sides of collectivist culture. Though there are societal and family expectations for women to be primary, the same family system in a collectivist society also acts as a support system for their careers.

c) Career decisions due to collective preferences:

Some women reported that while re-entering the workforce, when they wanted to switch careers, they faced resistance from their parents or in-laws when choosing certain careers. For instance, one woman wanted to pursue baking, another sought a medical writer role after being a doctor, and others aimed for corporate jobs. In-laws or parents disapprove of these career choices.

I started baking as a hobby, and then I noticed that people took on various scales as entrepreneurs, and I just talked about it with my parents. However, they do not like the idea of me being an entrepreneur. I had to drop that. So, my situation is such that my parents will extend a certain amount of support to look after my kid if I pursue a 9-5 job according to their preference (P8).

However, when the women aligned their career choices with their families' preferences, they received support. Families were more willing to offer encouragement once these women adjusted to roles considered acceptable within the family's cultural framework. The need for affiliation and nurturance often influences their decisions and the desire to meet familial expectations (Triandis et al., 1988), as these provide psychological security and social approval. This interdependence can manifest in a greater inclination to align one's career goals with family preferences, often at the cost of personal aspirations (Sawitri & Creed, 2017). This alignment stems from a cultural emphasis on hierarchy and family obligation. This familial support enhances career-related efficacy (Oettingen & Zosuls, 2006).

Initially, my mom was not very supportive of my work. After my first pregnancy, when I resumed my job, it was difficult to manage, especially since it was during the lockdown, and we did not have any household help. At that time, it was challenging to adjust to my mom. However, now, she has become much more supportive, especially since I started focusing on my clinic. She is really encouraging and tells me to go to the clinic without worrying. She says, 'Even if the kids are crying or they are upset because of your absence, do not stress about it; we are here to handle things. Just go to the clinic like you used to go to the office (P6).

2) Experiences of Collectivism:

The themes presented above show that practices experienced by women stem from different types of collectivist experiences of women. Women who experience vertical collectivism do not have the same rights and values as their male counterparts; fulfilling others' and societal obligations is more important than their own aspirations. Others, such as parents, in-laws, husbands, and other relatives, emphasise the woman's primary role in caring for children, overseeing their education, instilling values, and maintaining relationships. However, it has also been found that these roles often lack recognition or value.

As one participant expressed, "Being a homemaker does not give you any recognition" (P12).

Another woman shared that she feels unproductive, dependent on her husband, and desires to contribute to society. She noted:

I want to work again. Whenever I attend any social gathering with my husband, and I am introduced as a homemaker, it makes me feel unproductive and dependent. When I compare myself to other women my age who are working, I see they have contributed to organisations or society and experienced personal growth. I want to work on my growth and contribute to society as well (P14).

Although these women are expected to fulfil the role of caregivers, they reported that these responsibilities are still undervalued.

When you work, people view you differently. They think, 'she is doing something more than the ordinary role of a homemaker. But if you are just at home, you do not get that same respect (P16).

Women in vertical collectivist societies are expected to prioritise caregiving and familial duties. However, these roles are often perceived as undervalued and unrecognised due to the emphasis on hierarchical roles. This creates a complex challenge for women, as they face the dual pressures of societal acceptance in fulfilling their motherly duties while also experiencing guilt for not contributing economically or professionally. As a result, many women express the need to pursue careers that offer a sense of balance. The following quote highlights this:

When I was working, I was earning well those days; when I was earning well, I had a lot of respect outside. So is it like both cases, and women are blamed. Women should also work and take care of the family (P18).

In contrast, it is observed in families where women experience horizontal collectivism, where family members do not create any hierarchy of roles, and contributing to the family is not limited to gender. In such cases, it can be seen that women are encouraged to rejoin their work or take up challenging work, and family members take on the role of providing care to the young members and cooking. This can be found in the following quotes:

When I wanted to re-enter, my in-laws encouraged me to take the job. We were going through financial constraints at that time. So, my mother-in-law took early retirement to shift to our place and look after my daughter. Later, when she got old and could not care for the family much, we hired a maid to look after the household work (P7).

During the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, maids were prohibited from entering our housing complex; my father-in-law used to do all household chores. During my online meeting calls, when my son used to cry, my father-in-law took care of him. My father-in-law encouraged me to continue my career after my son's birth. (P23).

3) Impact of Experiences on Career Orientation:

The findings reveal a central theme that women place high importance on career aspects like authenticity, balance, and challenges. These align with the Kaleidoscope Career Model's parameters. The findings indicate that, during career re-entry, women prioritise values based on cultural influences, specifically, their experiences within a collectivist culture, rather than their career stage (early, mid, or late).

a) Women Valuing Authenticity

Authenticity involves expressing one's true self and finding personal fulfilment. In collectivist societies, where the needs and expectations of groups or relations often shape individual expression, it becomes particularly interesting to understand how women pursue careers based on authenticity. In the study, many women shared that a career break offered a chance for self-reflection and exploration. Women who expressed authenticity did not mention cultural influence on their decisions much. Some women who express desires to work according to their wishes and make career decisions aligned with their true selves did mention that family members do not interfere much in their career decisions, nor do any societal expectations influence them.

The following quote highlights that the woman lives in a nuclear family and acknowledges that there are no direct family obligations that do not influence her ability to pursue her passion according to her own will. However, her statement about having “no restrictions or burdens” and being “free from family responsibilities” suggests that even when prioritising personal interests, women consider family responsibilities while making their career decisions.

During my career break, I realised I should pursue something that interests me. I wanted to do something on my own. Now, I am free from many family and financial responsibilities. I earned well in my previous job, and since I live in a nuclear family, I have no restrictions or burdens in pursuing what I want. Therefore, I could follow my entrepreneurial passion for career counselling (P2).

I learnt many activities during my break, such as cycling, violin playing, etc. I do not want to work too hard like I did in my previous job. I plan to rejoin work in a role that aligns with my interests and allows time for my other activities. My family does not have any say in this (P13).

In the quote above, although the woman makes career decisions based on her passions with no family interference, her mention of family in the context of career decisions indicates that she still takes her family into consideration when making such choices.

In general, it can be said that in a collectivist culture, even when women make career decisions while prioritising authenticity, women still take their family's support and needs into account. This notion of authenticity is inherently collective, as it involves balancing personal desires while considering family needs.

b) Women valuing Balance

Women who experienced vertical collectivism, where individuals see themselves as part of a group, but within that group, there is a clear hierarchy, and inequality between members is accepted and expected (e.g., parents, in-laws and husbands are seen as authoritative figures and

women are expected to respect their decisions over their career aspirations, even women roles are undervalued) they prefer low challenging and career which provide balance. Some women prefer to take up jobs that provide flexibility so they can work even while carrying out their primary responsibilities as caregivers and homemakers. Hence, they found themselves either changing their career or opting out. Women take up careers such as tutoring, part-time jobs, and employment, which help them balance both their family and career.

Women who experience a lack of support from family and women who feel their efforts as homemakers are not valued as a contribution prefer to have a career. However, since they lack support, they prefer a career that provides balance.

My part-time work allows me to attend family functions and care for my kids; I can take them to evening hobby classes. Whenever my relatives stay with us, my household responsibilities increase. Hence, during that time, I can reduce my workload due to the flexibility of my work timings. I have selected a job that is not burdening and can look after all my other roles while still working (P1).

The family was the first point of contact because it is the most immediate surroundings, so had I been able to get the warmth or support from my family members to take care of the kid, I would have continued with my previous job. However, I have now taken up a job that provides less pay but allows me to balance both work and family (P26).

I joined the same industry, but I was into teaching earlier. After kids, I went into the content field. This gave me a home opportunity because I needed to stay with my kids and care for them (P9).

The above quote suggests that women seeking balance adjust their careers based on their roles and responsibilities. Cultural expectations rooted in collectivism can sometimes burden their career decisions, leading them to prefer careers that allow for a balance between professional growth and family obligations.

c) Women Valuing Challenges

Women who experience horizontal collectivism perceive themselves as equally contributing members of their families, where roles are not strictly gendered. Women valuing challenges post-career break are found mostly in women who face financial responsibilities. In the case of single mothers or women whose families are facing financial constraints due to a lack of other earning members or husbands not earning sufficiently, women took on the responsibilities of breadwinners rather than solely caretakers. In such cases, a sense of interdependence and common goals, with family members supporting one another to provide for the household, regardless of gender. In these cases, women often feel encouraged to embrace challenging work opportunities, benefiting from the collective support and understanding of their family dynamics. Such support not only fosters a shared commitment to the family's success but also empowers women to pursue diverse roles. The exemplary quotes below highlight the support of family members who encouraged women to take up challenging tasks.

My husband did not have a stable job, but he encouraged me to grow in my career. He used to look after the kids and do all the household chores, and I looked after the finances. My husband and in-laws supported me in taking up challenging work to meet our family requirements (P19).

I am a single parent; I was encouraged by my parents and siblings to re-enter the workforce. They cared for my kids, allowing me to take on challenging projects, which helped me earn more for my children's future (P5).

The above quotes demonstrate that the support provided by family members has an enabling effect on their women's careers and helps them embrace challenges that contribute to their professional growth.

4) Impact of Cultural Experiences on Women's Career Decisions

a) Career Continuation

Women in this category chose to remain in their careers post-childbirth. Their decisions were influenced by supportive family structures, particularly parental proximity, and a strong sense of duty, such as financial responsibility to continue working.

In cultures where extended family living is everyday, grandparents often become secondary caregivers. This multi-generational caregiving structure allows women to share childcare duties without relying on costly external support systems.

This can be inferred from the following quotes:

Since my parents shifted close to me, I got support from them to re-enter; I have parents to care for my daughter, and I do not have to worry about her now (P15).

Thus, it can be said that in collectivist societies (like India), interdependence is valued over independence, and in times when needed, such support systems are socially normative and culturally sanctioned.

Although culture often positions women as caregivers, it may also expect them to contribute financially in nuclear or dual-income families. Mothers who are sole earners or share financial responsibility are encouraged by their family members to rejoin.

Taking care of my kids' needs was the only motivation for driving my career. I was the only earning member, which encouraged me to re-enter the industry, always grab opportunities and take up challenging work. My parents and siblings encouraged me to join work, my siblings took care of the kids, and they were raised by them (P27).

Thus, it can be said that interdependence is culturally valued, and extended family structures play a functional role in enabling work-life balance for mothers. The caregiving role is distributed across generations, reducing the career discontinuity typically experienced by women post-childbirth.

b) Career Cessation

This group consists of women who temporarily or permanently left the workforce, citing emotional, familial, and cultural barriers as primary reasons. Their decisions reflect internalised social expectations about motherhood and inadequate support systems.

Unlike women in the continuation group, these women faced a void in logistical and emotional support. When husbands, parents, or in-laws do not share childcare responsibilities, women bear the entire burden, making continuation untenable.

I didn't get support from my house at that time. It's really difficult to continue (P12).

I tried to return to the industry, but couldn't justify my work. I left that job in 8 days. My son didn't adjust to day care. My in-laws and mother always advised me to take care of the home and the kid first. I didn't have the energy to manage my home and work responsibilities (P11).

The quotes highlight that women face a double burden of home and work, without institutional (e.g., daycare) or familial support, which leads to burnout, influencing the decision to pause or stop working.

I am scared to re-join as I am too attached to my son and don't want to miss my kid's important events (P18).

This quote reflects the strong emotional bond and sense of responsibility that can develop between a mother and child in collectivist cultures, where family and caregiving are central values. The desire to be present for a child's important moments indicates a prioritisation of family involvement and presence. In such contexts, the decision to delay or avoid re-joining

the workforce may stem from a cultural emphasis on being closely involved in a child's upbringing, rather than from external constraints. This demonstrates how cultural norms that prioritise close family ties and involvement can influence career decisions after childbirth.

c) Career Change

In the context of collectivist cultures, where family responsibilities and group harmony often take precedence over individual ambitions, women may not necessarily exit the workforce but instead adapt their careers to meet changing family needs after childbirth.

Earlier, when I worked as a teacher. After having kids, I went into the content field. This provided me with a work-from-home opportunity because I need to stay with my kids and take care of them (P2).

When working under someone, work is often assigned after office hours. Self-employment gives autonomy. It helps to balance our time. I can give more time to my family and pursue my career. Hence, I opted for self-employment post my childbirth (P9).

In collectivist societies like India, family well-being is prioritised over individual career advancement. Women who become mothers often reorganise their professional paths to align with family expectations and caregiving responsibilities.

The decision to shift careers, such as moving from teaching to content writing, or from employment to self-employment, reflects a culturally driven need to remain physically and emotionally available for the family, particularly children. Rather than seeing career change as a loss, women in collectivist settings may view it as a strategic adjustment that allows them to fulfil both familial and professional roles in harmony. Autonomy and flexibility (e.g., working from home or being self-employed) are highly valued, as they help women maintain collective responsibilities without completely stepping away from personal or financial contributions to the household.

In short, in collectivist cultures, career changes post-childbirth are often motivated by the desire to maintain close family involvement while still contributing professionally. These decisions are not purely individual but are shaped by cultural values of family interdependence, adaptability, and shared responsibility. Women strategically shift to roles that allow them to balance both spheres, fulfilling social expectations while preserving a sense of career continuity.

5. Discussion

This study investigated women's career decisions during career re-entry using cultural context through the Collectivist culture and Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). The research question was explored in 30 interviews.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The findings suggest that women in a collectivist society are significantly influenced by cultural and societal norms when making career decisions during their re-entry into the workforce. This study specifically examined the impact of collectivist cultural values on women's career orientation during this period. In vertical collectivist cultures, which emphasise hierarchy within social groups, individuals accept authority and hierarchy while expressing their personal identity. Gender roles are distinctly defined, and individuals tend to conform to them as prescribed by their social groups and society. Group norms are prioritised over individual aspirations, and this is reflected in the analysis, where caregiving responsibilities are seen as the primary role for women by their families and society. These expectations shape the way women make career decisions during re-entry.

It is found that strong family and community bonds serve as barriers for some while sources of support for others. These bonds, for some, foster a sense of obligation and impose additional responsibilities that limit career options. As a result, women often seek flexible job opportunities that allow them to balance domestic responsibilities with professional aspirations, which may lead to narrowing their career choices.

While women embracing challenging career opportunities when re-entering the workforce are likely to receive support from in-laws, husbands, parents, or household help. In contrast, those lacking such support, whether due to societal values, limited physical assistance, or other constraints, tend to opt for jobs that offer the flexibility to balance work with family responsibilities.

While prior research has emphasised the dual enabling and constraining effects of culture on women's work outcomes (Jaga & Bagraim, 2017), this study extends these insights by focusing on career decision-making. This study also highlights the concept of conditional support, demonstrating that family support, though enabling, can simultaneously restrict career options, contributing to the literature on how support can have both facilitative and limiting effects.

This study also contributes to the literature on collectivism by revealing the existence of diverse family cultural systems within the same collectivist society, showing how these variations shape different career decision-making processes. It expands the understanding of collectivism by exploring both vertical and horizontal collectivism, illustrating how these types can lead to distinct outcomes.

Third, this study's findings reveal how women prioritise one of the three parameters of the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM): authenticity, balance, and challenge (ABC; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). An interesting finding of KCM in a collectivist society is that even though women often pursue careers that align with their personal values, emphasising authenticity and making choices independent of others' influence but there are

underlying considerations for family needs. This aligns with previous findings of Scharf & Mayseless (2010), who state that in a collectivist society, authenticity is not about complete detachment from others while making decisions but rather about balancing personal identity within the broader family and social framework. Women often use career breaks as an opportunity for self-discovery and to pursue their passions. However, even in nuclear families, where in-laws and extended relatives may not directly influence decisions, career choices often reflect an underlying consideration of family dynamics and responsibilities. This suggests that the pursuit of authenticity is closely tied to maintaining a connection with familial and communal expectations.

In this study, women who experience horizontal collectivism take up challenging careers to meet the family's financial needs while other family members share the caregiving responsibilities. In this scenario, all family members are considered equals, and women, rather than assuming traditional homemaker or caregiver roles, are encouraged to take on the breadwinner role while other members handle domestic duties. The collectivist characteristic of working towards common goals through interdependence remains central here. Women with such experiences of horizontal collectivism often seek challenging careers; this can be due to the need to overcome financial constraints or to pursue professional growth. In contrast, for women who lack familial support, in such cases, balancing personal relationships with professional ambitions becomes paramount as they prioritise building meaningful and healthy relationships.

While previous KCM studies (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008) suggest that authenticity is primarily a late-career concern and balance is a mid-career priority regardless of motherhood status, the findings of this study differ here. This study demonstrates that cultural factors significantly shape career attitudes, regardless of life or career stage. Based on the collectivist culture they experienced, women post-career break decide which career

attitude (authenticity, balance, or challenges) aligns with their circumstances. This aligns with previous studies, which found that contextual factors like experiences of patriarchy can impact career attitudes across all stages of professionals (Ahsraf & Jepsen, 2024).

KCM assumes that individuals typically foreground one core parameter (authenticity, balance, or challenge) at a time, the findings reveal that women often hold multiple priorities simultaneously. For instance, some women sought professional growth (challenge) while also striving to be present for their children (balance) and remaining true to personal or family values (authenticity). These overlapping motives reflect the complexity of decision-making in collectivist societies, where women continuously negotiate between their own aspirations and relational obligations. Therefore, rather than viewing ABC parameters as distinct or sequential, this study demonstrates their co-occurrence is an interplay of different contextual factors cultural and familial contexts.

Further, the findings highlight the three career decisions they make about their career during re-entry: career continuation, career cessation, and career change. Career continuation was often made possible through logistical and emotional support from extended family, reflecting the collectivist emphasis on shared caregiving and interdependence. Career cessation, on the other hand, was frequently associated with a lack of such support and a strong emotional attachment to the child, with women opting out due to the overwhelming burden of dual responsibilities. Career change, such as shifting to self-employment, part time work or remote roles, emerged as a strategic response to maintain professional engagement while prioritising family needs. These decisions show how women adapt career to fit within the collectivist framework that values family cohesion, shared roles, and intergenerational support.

Practical Implications

Organisations must develop HR strategies to recognise women's diverse needs and circumstances during career re-entry. Offering flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, part-time positions, or adjustable hours, can significantly reduce the strain on women balancing career demands with personal responsibilities. These options can make it easier for women to re-enter the workforce and maintain a healthy work-life balance, thus increasing their job satisfaction and performance.

Organisations could help enhance support systems that can address the unique challenges faced by working mothers. This could include providing on-site childcare facilities, partnerships with local daycares, or offering subsidies for childcare services. Such support systems can alleviate the pressure on women and enable them to focus more effectively on their careers.

Implementing career development programs that include skill training, mentorship, networking, and emotional management can help women navigate the complexities of career re-entry. These programs should focus on building self-efficacy, enhancing work identity, and providing tools to manage conflicts during this transition period.

Limitations

Though the study included a sample of 30 women from diverse backgrounds, the small sample size might not accurately reflect the various perspectives and life experiences held by all Indian women. The factors impacting career decisions in various circumstances and backgrounds could have been better understood with a more extensive and diversified sample. While the exploratory nature of the study offers insights into participants' lived experiences, caution is required while generalising these narratives as conclusions applicable to all participants (Shah & Corley, 2006). The findings' applicability to other cultural or geographic contexts may be limited because of the focus on Indian women. In different locations, nations, and cultural

contexts, considerable differences can exist in the dynamics influencing women's career decisions. Future studies could explore cross-cultural comparisons to investigate the influence of culture on women's career decisions. Future research can employ longitudinal studies examining women's careers over time and provide significant insight into the trends, changes, and difficulties women experience at various stages of their careers. Support programmes such as mentorship, coaching, opportunities for professional advancement or government initiatives can also be considered a type of job/career resource that supports, prepares, and motivates women for career commitment (Colarelli & Bishop, 1990). This resource can be considered for future studies. Studies have shown that changes in technology and economic development have impacted women's careers (Budhwar et al., 2011). The study did not investigate economic factors impacting women's career decisions resulting from India's economic growth and technological change. An in-depth study of the economic factors impacting women's employment choices, such as the changing income patterns within homes, may shed light on how changing economic conditions impact women's roles and financial independence. Understanding the interactions between sociocultural norms and economic conditions that affect women's employment can give a deeper understanding.

6. Conclusion

This study is the first to apply the Kaleidoscope Career Model to women's experiences during career re-entry in a collectivist society like India. Interviews with 30 Indian mothers are used to present the impact of experiences of different types of collectivism, Vertical and horizontal, on women's careers. The study revealed that women's career orientations during re-entry are significantly shaped by their experiences within a collectivist cultural context. Three key themes emerged: (1) the practices women encounter as a result of cultural expectations, (2) their lived experiences of collectivist values, and (3) the influence of these experiences on their

preferences for the career parameters: authenticity, balance, and challenge, as outlined in the Kaleidoscope Career Model.

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8. Appendix

Table 1

Participant Overview

Participant No.	Age	Education	Experience	Industry
P1	37	BSc, PGDCA, B.Ed	5 years	Education
P2	41	MBA, B.Ed	11 years	Service
P3	40	MBA, Trainer certification	7 years	Automobiles
P4	50	M.Com, B.Ed	3 years	Banking, Education
P5	49	Bsc, certifications	17 Years	Service
P6	34	BHMS, PGDEMS, ADCR	10 Years	Medical
P7	46	B.Com, professional degree in HRM	17 Years	IT
P8	35	Msc, Diploma of german language	4 Years	Service
P9	38	MBA, B.Ed	11 years	Education
P10	35	M.Sc, B.Ed	5 years	Education
P11	35	Msc, JRF, Science journalism	12 years	Pharma
P12	43	M.Com	13 years	Banking
P13	39	MBBS, DA, DNB	13 years	Medical
P14	34	MBA	6 years	Finance
P15	40	B.Com	6 years	Telecom
P16	52	MA, certifications	28 years	Media

Participant No.	Age	Education	Experience	Industry
P18	35	Msc, certifications	7 years	IT
P19	36	B.E.	13 years	IT
P20	44	B.Com, CA, LLB	7 years	Finance
P21	45	M.E.	20 years	IT
P22	37	B.Com, LLB	5 years	Law
P23	44	B.E.	16 years	IT
P24	48	MSc, M.Ed	17 years	Education
P25	35	MSc	7 years	Banking
P26	34	Msc	3 years	IT
P27	42	B.E, MBA	15 years	IT
P28	40	B.Com	12 years	Media
P29	33	BSc	9 years	IT
P30	31	M.Com, B.Ed	10 years	Banking, Education

Table 2

Data supporting the influence of collectivism on women's career decisions.

Interview Quotes	First order Concepts	Second Order theme	Aggregate dimensions
My mother always advised me to take a career break and look after my family. She always said that looking after family should be a woman's priority (P2). My mother-in-law's friend always advised me to take care of family first; there are always societal expectations to take care of the family. (P1) My job is considered as if I am doing something additional. My primary duty is to look after my child (P18). People assume that when a woman is working, she is not doing any household chores, only her mother-in-law does all the household chores. And then she is not an ideal bahu (P29). I worked as a resident doctor and was very happy with my career. I worked after my first child was born, but when my second son was born, I needed to take a break as he missed developmental milestones; it was obvious I should have been there with him to look after him (P13). My son was very ill when he was between 8-12 years old; I ran pillar to pillar and took him to so many places for treatment. One parent needed to stay with him, and being a mother, I needed to (P12). My kids are doing well in studies and many extracurricular activities. I sacrificed my career to raise my kids and make them realise their potential. My kids are doing well. I am proud of that (P2). But the entire burden of managing the kids, the homes, and their studies falls on a woman (P25). It was difficult for me to work and simultaneously look after my ill son. I thought it was better to switch my job. My doctor told me it is better you take care of the child. He said that once the mother starts caring for her child, the child will be fine (P12). The cooperation from my spouse was not that much, at least in my case. I do not know about others, but things could have been managed better. It felt like too much at times. Thankfully, my kids were in state board schools, so there was not too much pressure from school, and we managed. However, a bit of work distribution, such as cooking and looking after studies, could have helped if possible (P21).	Women are advised to prioritize family responsibilities by their family members and others in their surroundings (P2, P1, P13). The primary duty of women is considered to be taking care of children, while a job is regarded as secondary (P18). There is a common assumption that women neglect their household duties, which is viewed as defying cultural norms of being an ideal bahu (P29). Women are often the first to sacrifice their careers when there is a need to take on family responsibilities. Even after work, women are expected to carry out household responsibilities, as male partners' cooperation in household tasks is limited (P21).	Traditional gender roles (Societal and Familial Expectations Shaping Women's Roles and Careers)	Cultural Practices Shaping Women's Career

We have a big extended family and must attend many family functions. My in-laws also come to stay with us in between balancing two kids; in-laws with extra commitment are difficult. My husband is having a hectic job. He will not be able to help me with daily chores. My in-laws and husband always advised me to care for the family, as managing everything together is difficult. I also realised that with a job, performing family responsibilities is difficult (P1). Since my parents shifted close to me, I got support from them to re-enter; I have parents to care for my daughter, and I do not have to worry about her now (P20). My in-laws do all the work; they do not burden me with any of the family responsibilities. I have focused on my career without worrying about other responsibilities after the break (P24). I am a single parent; my parents and siblings looked after my children growing up, which helped me concentrate on my career and earn money for my children's better future. (P5). My husband didn't have a stable job, but he encouraged me to grow in my career. He used to look after the kids and do all the household chores, and I looked after the finances (P19).	Challenges of balancing work and family due to extended family responsibilities (P1). Lack of spousal support in managing daily chores (P1). Advice from family to prioritize caregiving over career (P1). Parental support enabling career reentry (P20). In-laws relieving family responsibilities to support career (P24). Support from family (parents, siblings) in managing childcare (P5). Shared responsibilities with spouse leading to career focus (P19).	Strong Familial and Community bonds (Variability in Family Dynamics)	
I started baking as a hobby, and then I noticed that people took up taking on various scales as entrepreneurs and just talked about it with my parents. However, they do not like the idea of me being an entrepreneur. I had to drop that. So, my situation is such that my parents will extend a certain amount of support to look after my kid if I pursue a 9-5 job according to their preference (P8). Initially, my mom was not very supportive of my work. After my first pregnancy, when I resumed my job, it was difficult to manage, especially since it was during the lockdown, and we did not have any household help. At that time, it was challenging to adjust to my mom. However, now, she has become much more supportive, especially since I started focusing on my clinic. She is really encouraging and tells me to go to the clinic without worrying. She says, 'Even if the kids are crying or they are upset because of your absence, do not stress about it; we are here to handle things. Just go to the clinic like you used to go to the office (P6).	Conditional support from parents based on career alignment with their preferences (P8). Encouragement from parents for professional growth in specific roles (P6).	Career decisions due to collective preferences: (Conditional Parental Support in Shaping Career Choices	

Being a homemaker does not give you any recognition (P12). I want to work again. Whenever I attend any social gathering with my husband, and I am introduced as a homemaker, it makes me feel unproductive and dependent. When I compare myself to other women my age who are working, I see they have contributed to organisations or society and experienced personal growth. I want to work on my growth and contribute to society as well (P14). When you work, people view you differently. They think, 'she is doing something more than the ordinary role of a homemaker. But if you are just at home, you do not get that same respect (P16). When I was working, I was earning well those days; when I was earning well, I had a lot of respect outside. So is it like both cases, and women are blamed. Women should also work and take care of the family (P18).	Lack of recognition for homemakers (P12). Feelings of unproductivity and dependence as a homemaker (P14). Social respect and perception based on employment status (P16). Economic contributions linked to respect and societal value (P18).	The Role of Vertical Collectivism in Women's Career Decisions	Experiences of Collectivism
When I wanted to re-enter, my in-laws encouraged me to take the job. We were going through financial constraints at that time. So, my mother-in-law took early retirement to shift to our place and look after my daughter. Later, when she got old and could not care for the family much, we hired a maid to look after household work (P7). During COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, maids were prohibited from entering our housing complex; my father-in-law used to do all household chores. During my online meeting calls, when my son used to cry, my father-in-law took care of him. My father-in-law encouraged me to continue my career after my son's birth. (P23).	Family encouragement for career reentry during financial constraints (P7, P23). Family members (father-in-law) stepping in to support when required (P7, P23).	The Role of Horizontal Collectivism in Women's Career Decisions	

During my career break, I realised I should pursue something that interests me. I wanted to do something on my own. I earned well in my previous job, kids are grown up, now, I am free from many family and financial responsibilities. I live in a nuclear family, I have no restrictions or burdens in pursuing what I want. Therefore, I could follow my entrepreneurial passion for career counselling (P2). I learnt many activities during my break, such as cycling, violin playing, etc. I realised there should be a balance between work and life. I do not want to work too hard like I did in my previous job. My family members are supportive of my decision (P13).	Absence of familial restrictions and reduced financial and family responsibilities enabling authentic career choices like entrepreneurial pursuits(P2) Supportive family culture encouraging individual career decisions and exploration of Personal Growth (P13)	Women Valuing Authenticity	Impact of Cultural Experiences on Women's Career Orientation
My part-time work allows me to attend family functions and care for my kids; I can take them to evening hobby classes. Whenever my relatives stay with us, my household responsibilities increase. Hence, during that time, I can reduce my workload due to the flexibility of my work timings. I have selected a job that is not burdening and can look after all my other roles while still working (P1). The family was the first point of contact because it is the most immediate surroundings, so had I been able to get the warmth or support from my family members to take care of the kid, I would have continued with my previous job. However, I have now taken up a job that provides less pay but allows me to balance both work and family (P26). I joined the same industry, but I was into teaching earlier. After kids, I went into the content field. This gave me a home opportunity because I needed to stay with my kids and care for them (P9).	Due to kids and household responsibilities preferred part time work as it provides flexibility and Work-Life Balance (P1) Lack of support from family members women trade-off Between Career and Family Responsibilities (P26) Adjustment of Career Choices Based on Family Needs (P9)	Women valuing Balance	
My husband did not have a stable job, but he encouraged me to grow in my career. He used to look after the kids and do all the household chores, and I looked after the finances. My husband and in-laws supported me in taking up challenging work to meet our family requirements (P19). I am a single parent; I was encouraged by my parents and siblings to re-enter the workforce. They cared for my kids, allowing me to take on challenging projects, which helped me earn more for my children's future (P5).	Pursuing a challenging Career for family financial responsibilities (P19) Family Cooperation in Taking Up Challenging Work to Meet the Needs of the Family (P5)	Women Valuing Challenges	

Since my parents shifted close to me, I got support from them to re-enter; I have parents to care for my daughter, and I do not have to worry about her now (P15). Taking care of my kids' needs was the only motivation for driving my career. I was the only earning member, which encouraged me to re-enter the industry, always grab opportunities and take up challenging work (P27).	Parents' proximity providing childcare support (P15). Financial responsibility encouraging career re-entry (P27)	Career Continuation	Impact of Cultural Experiences on Women's Career Decisions
I didn't get support from my house at that time. It's really difficult to continue (P12) . I am scared to re-join as I am too attached to my son and don't want to miss my kid's important events (P11). I tried to return to the industry, but couldn't justify my work. I left that job in 8 days; my son didn't adjust to daycare, and the whole day, I was thinking about him and didn't have the energy to manage my home and work (P18).	Lack of support from family members makes women to discontinue careers (P12) Cultural norms and societal expectations prioritize mothers' roles as primary caregivers, reinforce need to stay close to kids (P11) Women face the burden of balancing work and home leading to a lack of energy to manage both (P18)	Career Cessation	
Earlier, when I worked as a teacher. After having kids, I went into the content field. This provided me work from home opportunity because I need to stay with my kids and take care of them (P9). When working under someone, work is often assigned after office hours. Self-employment gives autonomy. It helps to balance our time. I can give more time to my family and pursue my career. Hence, I opted for self-employment post my childbirth (P2).	Change in career due to increased responsibility of taking care of kids (P9). Finding a career which provides autonomy to work as well as look after family (P2).	Career Change	

Figure 1

Model of experiences due to collectivism influencing women's career decisions during career re-entry

