

Ally or Adversary: Examining the Role Managers Play in Retaining Employees Who Are New To Motherhood

(Based on the experiences of three new mothers in their respective workplaces.)

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Abstract:

This case examines the career choices made by three new mothers; Sinchana Raghu, P. Mary and Anuradha B¹, as a response to the managerial support that they received from their organisations at a critical juncture of their lives. Sinchana worked as a design engineer in an engineering company. Mary was an R&D scientist in a speciality chemical manufacturing company and Anuradha was a systems architect in an IT Services organisation. They were all above average performers who had been employed in their workplaces for three to six years. Their managers described them as diligent team players who enjoyed their work, were attentive to detail and open to working long and odd hours.

However, the onset of motherhood with its incumbent role expectations, the challenges of a raging pandemic and the difficulties of working from home made all three women question their ability to remain in service. They reached out to their respective organisations to help them through this period of crisis but only one amongst the three organisations responded with a solution that worked for both the employee and the company. This paper explores each woman's journey and unique predicament in greater detail and tries to understand the role managers play in helping young mothers remain employed.

Key Words: Managers role; Motherhood onset, Organizational Support, Role Overload, Guilt, Corporate India,

Introduction:

The objective of this case study is to explore the direct impact that a manager and an organisation have on a new mother's career prospects. In this case we are introduced to three professionals Sinchana Raghu, P. Mary and Anuradha B who are new to motherhood and are forced to deal with this life changing event during pandemic times. All three women, despite being conscientious, hard-working, above average performers, decide to not re-join work after the completion of their maternity leaves. This decision was a result of multiple factors like the inability to find trustworthy childcare, juggling multiple roles, self-defined role expectations of what an ideal mother or professional should be, a constant guilt of being unfair to the companies they worked for and unsupportive managers and systems.

The goal of studying this case is two-fold. The first is to understand what young mothers are going through in the workplace. The second is to think through the changes which are required in organisational culture, policy and individual mind set of both men and women managers to support new mothers, retain talent, and create a win-win situation for both employee and employer.

SINCHANA'S JOURNEY:

1. **A pen portrait of Sinchana:** Sinchana re-read the email acceptance of her resignation letter and teared up. The brusque one-line response which she had received from her manager seemed to convey the relief that the organisation felt at her departure.

"Dear Sinchana," it said. "It is sad to see your resignation mail and your situation is understandable. Further your resignation is accepted. @ Satish Babu, Pls look into and comment on notice period. Regards Vinod."

Sinchana had been a campus hire, an exceptional performer, and this was not how she had expected her career with the prestigious engineering company to end. As she stared dully into her screen, Soumya her

¹ All names in the case have been changed to respect individual privacy.

11-month-old daughter woke up and demanded attention. Sinchana smiled, crossed the room, and picked her up from her crib. She did not regret her decision to leave her job. After all there were no other options available and her priority was to ensure that her daughter was healthy and safe.

As Sinchana fed Soumya she made a mental note to start researching new machines. Her Lenovo Thinkpad, her constant companion for the last six years would have to be returned to IT on her last day of work. She still remembered the day she had been placed with the hi-tech company which specialized in renewable energy. A lot of her classmates had been gunning for the same job, but she had made the cut. It had been one of the high points of her life and the six exciting years which followed had passed by quickly.

The company had been a fun place to work in and being a design engineer had had its own rewards. She had worked long hours and enjoyed being a team player. She had been happy to take up additional work and had even worked on the day before her delivery. She had never let social obligations impact her work and the company had rewarded her for it. She had been feted as an exceptional performer and had received reassuring feedback across all her appraisals. Her appraisal ratings between 2014 to 2019 were B, A, A, A, B and A. The baby and the pandemic however had changed everything.

- 2. Challenges faced by Sinchana:** Sinchana gave birth to her daughter Soumya in October 2019. Due to some complications during pregnancy the child was born underweight. The doctors advised Sinchana to breastfeed the infant for a period of 15 months and monitor her progress as strictly as possible. Sinchana's company allowed her to work from home from October 2019 to the 2nd of September 2020. Then they gave her an ultimatum to either physically return to office or separate from the company.

Here it is critical to note that The Maternity Amendment Bill of 2017 states that the duration of paid maternity leave available to women employees is 26 weeks/6 months and as Sinchana worked till the day before her delivery she was eligible for the entire period, which brings us to April 2020. The Act also enables women to "work from home" on mutually agreed terms with their employers after the expiry of the assured six months.

Meanwhile, on the 25th of March 2020, the first in a series of four lockdowns was announced in India to combat the Corona virus pandemic. While it can be argued that the company allowed Sinchana to work from home for a period of one year after childbirth, beyond what the law stipulates, it must be kept in mind that the pandemic enabled the same.

Due to her daughter's uncertain health and the difficulty of hiring help during the pandemic, Sinchana requested her managers to allow her to work from home till December 2020 or serve out her notice period from home. Despite her formidable work record her managers refused to make an exception and urged her to leave the company.

- 3. Organisational response to Sinchana's challenges:** Prior to receiving her final resignation the Human Resources (HR) department did try to work with both Sinchana and her managers to resolve the deadlock. Across several counselling sessions they tried to explain to Sinchana the importance of continuity and the long-term benefits of remaining with the company. In their negotiations with her managers human resources probed into her capability to deliver from home. They tried to assess if working from home was impacting performance or delivery timelines in any way. Her managers had no quibbles with either. They simply did not want to extend her work from home benefit fearing that it might set a wrong precedent among other employees. At one-point of the negotiations human resources even felt that they had made a breakthrough and Sinchana would remain with the company.

But strangely enough, during the course of the discussions Sinchana started to internalise the role expectations of her management team and decided that she was being unfair to the organisation. She felt that resigning was the best way forward and her relieved manager accepted her resignation within 40 minutes of receiving the email. It is to be noted that all three reporting managers were male as was the

CEO who supported the managers' decision. The HR resources who worked on the resolution were women.

4. Spark Notes:

- a. Why did Sinchana start believing that she could only be fair to the company by resigning from it?
- b. Why did she feel a sense of 'guilt' at not being physically present in the office even though project delivery was not impacted?
- c. Was Sinchana adequately prepared by the organisation to understand the challenges of becoming a working mother before she became one?
- d. What are the social roles and obligations which seem to be important to Sinchana?
- e. Did Sinchana feel overwhelmed by a sense of 'role overload' because she did not have 'help' with childcare or work and she was performing 100% at both fronts in the middle of a pandemic situation?
- f. What could the organisation have done better to retain Sinchana?

MARY'S JOURNEY:

1. **A pen portrait of Mary:** Mary looked at the ocean of cars in front of her and sighed. Now she was going to be late for the paediatrician's appointment. She hadn't meant to be tardy. Even though the clinic was only half an hour away from her house she had made sure that she and Baby Max had left the flat with plenty of time in hand. But who could predict the traffic patterns of this megacity? Baby Max surveyed the world outside their car and gurgled. Mary leaned towards him and adjusted his face mask. Max gurgled again. He was a sweet natured boy and Mary was glad that she had chosen to become a full-time mother. As the lights turned orange, she indicated left by force of habit and then quickly corrected herself. The road to the left led to Colette Pvt Ltd, where she had worked for four years. But she was now serving out her notice period.

Colette Pvt Ltd was a speciality chemical manufacturing company which had hired Mary from campus for their R&D Labs. Mary had been a distinction holder and being a diligent student had learnt the ropes quickly enough. Her managers described her as being quiet, focussed, and attentive to detail. An asset who uncomplainingly worked long and odd hours. Her experimental work was above par and her appraisal ratings between 2016 to 2019 were A, B, A, A. She did not take any breaks during this four-year period despite getting married in 2016. However, as soon as she became pregnant Mary felt that she could not do justice to her twin roles of mother and senior engineer and started discussing separation plans with the company.

2. **Challenges faced by Mary:** Mary was overwhelmed by the prospect of becoming a new mother. Being a diligent person who had worked difficult hours she obviously could not envision being able to balance the demands of motherhood with the time she spent in office. Instead of assuaging her doubts her managers fed into her fears. They agreed that separation from the company was the best route for a new mother. They did not consider the long-term contributions a stable resource like Mary could make to the organisation. Instead of redistributing Mary's workload and retaining her, their solution was to replace her as quickly as possible so that their project ecosystem would not require any readjustment. Though the human resources division of the company tried to work out a back-end role for Mary she put in her papers a day before she was required to join back from her maternity leave on the 29th of Oct 2020.
3. **Organisational response to Mary's challenges:** Mary started discussing her separation process with the organisation before she went on maternity leave. However, her managers did not seek to retain her. Despite her exceptional performance they believed that motherhood would impede her work delivery. The HR department intervened and worked with her managers to create a back-end support role for Mary. This was a research and analytics role which would allow her to continue working from home after the expiry of her official leave period. But Mary resigned from the company the day before she was supposed to rejoin work. The reason she gave human resources was that her colleagues and reporting managers would not "treat her well" in a back end role.

Mary may well have received some unofficial feedback from her colleagues or picked up on covert signals from management to arrive at this conclusion. She also believed that she had been trained as an R&D scientist and her place was in the lab. Despite several counselling sessions, like Sinchana, she, too, felt that she was doing the ‘right thing’ by resigning. She felt that she would be taking advantage of the system by working from home. Accepting the flexibility offered to her seemed to make her feel more guilty than relieved.

In her resignation letter Mary stated that inaccessibility to childcare and familial support during the pandemic made her believe that she could not re-join work. Attachment, success or over investment in her current role may also have deterred Mary from accepting her new role.

Mary’s managers were relieved with her decision and accepted her resignation within 11 minutes of receiving her email. Her immediate manager, Super Boss and HOD were all male while the HR Leader was a woman. The CEO seemed happy with the outcome and said, “Oh we can always replace her with a male employee who may be much more in need of a job!”

4. Spark Notes:

- a. Why did Mary start planning her separation from the company as soon as she realised that she was pregnant?
- b. Did Mary suffer personal inadequacy which made her feel that she could not balance her personal and work life? Would counselling have helped?
- c. Why did she feel that her managers would not “treat her well” if she worked from home or engaged in a back-end role?
- d. Did Mary feel isolated from the new role that was offered to her? Did she see herself only as an “active lab resource” not a backend resource?
- e. Since Mary worked long and odd hours could the organisation have streamlined her work instead of offering her another role?
- f. Could the organisation have coached Mary or supported her pregnancy better?

ANURADHA’S JOURNEY:

1. **A pen portrait of Anuradha:** Anuradha tore through the multiple layers of Amazon packaging to reach the 144-piece Pampers box she had ordered for Chinna. Diapers were expensive!! This box had cost her two thousand rupees and she wondered if it would last the full month! She was quite sure that a lot of people would think twice before planning to have children if they just knew the cost of diapers. She wondered how she would have managed such expenses if she was unemployed. Even though her husband had a steady job in a manufacturing plant, it would have been difficult for them to bring up a child on a single person’s salary.

She was so grateful to Sara Ma’am for fighting her corner and giving her a role which gave her flexible work hours and a work from home option. Wagging her finger at Chinna she giggled, “Otherwise there would be no diapers for you. Amma would have to spend her whole day stitching, washing, boiling, and drying flannel.” Chinna sucked her toes and agreed.

Anuradha was a Senior Systems Architect with Synergy Technologies. She had completed her MS programme with distinction and had an overall work experience of eight years. She had joined Synergy Technologies three years back and was reputed to be a thorough professional, a good leader and an understanding manager. Her appraisal ratings between 2017 to 2019 were B, A, B, and her managers felt that she was attentive to details and an above average performer. However, new motherhood coupled with the pandemic caught her completely off guard. Despite being given an unpaid three-month extension on her assured maternity leave and the benefit of working from home after this period, Anuradha had wanted to quit her job.

2. **Challenges faced by Anuradha:** Anuradha was overwhelmed by the pandemic and the challenges of becoming a new mother. Her husband Sudhir worked in a manufacturing set up and was required to go to the factory every day. The constant stress of managing household affairs while caring for a front-line worker and a new baby left Anuradha feeling angst-ridden, exhausted and irritable. Despite being given

a maternity leave of six months followed by an unpaid extension of three months and then a work-from home option, Anuradha felt unable to cope with the roles she had to perform at home and work.

Being a conscientious person, she believed that she was not delivering to her truest potential and the work allocated to her seemed lesser than what she had been given earlier. She was wracked with guilt and felt that she was being unfair to Synergy Technologies and their supportive systems. She deeply felt the lack of familial support to help her through her tough times and sent in her resignation on the 15th of September 2020.

3. **Organisational response to Anuradha’s challenges:** Unlike Sinchana and Mary who had male managers, Anuradha’s reporting manager was an empathetic lady called Sara who refused to let Anuradha give up on her career. After receiving the latter’s resignation, she set up several meetings with the employee to understand and provide a solution her concerns. Across the course of their discussions, she counselled Anuradha and helped her appreciate the importance of career continuity and the long-term benefits of staying with a company like Synergy Technologies. Despite her initial apprehensions Anuradha agreed to the revised role and employment contract offered by her Manager who then worked with the organisation to get the necessary approvals.

Unlike Mary and Sinchana’s managers, Sara replied to Anuradha’s resignation mail on the 30th of October, 45 days after receipt. Sara offered Anuradha a role which suited her changed status as a new mother and partner to a front-line worker. In the mail she rejected Anuradha’s resignation and laid out the new agreed upon terms and conditions. The employee was to now log in for only five hours a day for the next three months and the benefit would also be extended for another three months if required. Sara also ensured that the company was not short changed and proposed that Anuradha’s compensation was to be pro-rated according to her new timings. She also proposed to send descriptions of Anuradha’s new role and KRAs as soon as all the necessary approvals were in place.

Here one must note that the company in which Sara and Anuradha worked had a management which wanted to nurture women leaders. The CEO, Mr. Alok Agarwal, was appreciative of the hard work that Sara had put in to retain her direct report and said, “As an organisation we must support our employees through their tough times. This is important especially for people who are unwell or are transitioning into new roles. Being a diverse and inclusive organisation will not only attract unique talent but also help us differentiate ourselves in a crowded marketplace.”

5. Spark Notes:

- a. Why did Anuradha feel that she could not continue as a Senior Systems Architect even though she had been given the triple benefits of maternity leave +3 months leave without pay + work from home. Should companies run special programmes for expecting mothers to help them prepare better for the impending disruptions in their work life balance post motherhood?
- b. Could the company have helped Anuradha transition into a new role as soon as she became an expecting mother to minimise role disruptions?
- c. Why did Anuradha feel that she was gaming the system? Did she feel distanced from the role she was performing due to her many responsibilities? Or did she feel that her role was being eroded. Do conscientious people suffer more than others from a sense of role erosion and role isolation?
- d. Anuradha’s manager worked with the system to create a role with easier work hours and responsibilities while keeping her employed. However, is it feasible for a large corporation to do this for all employees who suffer from ill health or go through a life change.

TEACHING NOTE

Ally or Adversary:

Examining the role managers play in retaining employees who are new to motherhood

This teaching note is more as an aid to instructors in the classroom. This teaching note should not be used in any way that would prejudice the future use of the case.

SYNOPSIS: The objective of this case study is to explore the direct impact that a manager and an organisation have on a new mother's career prospects. In this case we are introduced to three professionals Sinchana Raghu, P. Mary and Anuradha B who are new to motherhood and are forced to deal with this life changing event during pandemic times. All three women, despite being conscientious, hard-working, above average performers, decide to not re-join work after the completion of their maternity leaves. This decision was a result of multiple factors like the inability to find trustworthy childcare, juggling multiple roles, self-defined role expectations of what an ideal mother or professional should be, a constant guilt of being unfair to the companies they worked for and unsupportive managers and systems.

The goal of studying this case is two-fold. The first is to understand what young mothers are going through in the workplace. The second is to think through the changes which are required in organisational culture, policy and individual mind set of both men and women managers to support new mothers, retain talent, and create a win-win situation for both employee and employer.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. To appreciate the unique challenges faced by young mothers at the workplace.
2. To identify the support that organizations can provide to employees and managers at a policy and programme/practice level so that women can continue to work while caring for a young child, without feeling guilty.
3. To understand the impact a manager with intent can have in retaining good women performers and building a pipeline of senior women leaders.
4. To understand that mindset shift, which is required in both men and women managers, to ensure that women do not fall off the grid.
5. Discerning the real business challenges, if any, of absence from the physical workplace for 1-2 years and steps a company can take to solve them.

POSITION IN COURSE:

The case can be used for post-graduate level and graduate level management program. The case is suitable for discussion on topics of Leadership, Gender Diversity and Change management, Organizational Culture in courses such as Organizational Behaviour, Human Resource Management, Diversity and Inclusion.

RELEVANT READINGS:

ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS:

1. Wear the manager's hat and list the specific concerns you would have if your key employee needed extended WFH support, post childbirth?
2. Now, wear the HR Head's hat and provide specific policy guidelines that can address both managers' productivity concerns and support new mothers.
3. What is the role that the manager needs to play beyond compliance to policy, to ensure good women employees do not fall off the grid post childbirth?
4. Draft a counselling guidance note for the manager of a new mother who wants to quit working voluntarily, to be able to look after the child.
5. Both male and female managers are hesitating to hire women in their teams – after the six-month maternity leave was introduced. Detail out a policy which can be introduced to remedy this situation.
6. What are the policy controls that can be built to prevent misuse of generous policies?

TEACHING PLAN

Topic	Duration
Introduction – Context Setting	
• Responsibility and Accountability of Managers / Leaders	15 mins
• Appreciate the need for organizational values and codes of conduct.	15 mins

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for training and dissemination of the right culture and values across the organization. 	10 minutes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand that mindset shift, which is required in both men and women managers, to ensure that women do not fall off the grid. 	5 minutes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges for Women 	15 minutes

ANALYSIS:

1. **ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 1:** Wear the manager’s hat and list the specific concerns you would have if your key employee needed extended WFH support, post childbirth?
 - a. My first concern is that **productivity** will be affected because of distractions at home, nobody to hold the employee accountable, lack of collaboration and communication with other team members.
 - b. My second concern would be around **ethical issues**, for example sharing sensitive information or the way work devices are used, or the way expense reports are submitted.
 - c. My third concern would be **time theft and sick leave fraud**. How do I track work hours that they spend doing something else? What if they constantly ask for sick leave because the employee or their child is unwell, or they have paediatrician’s appointments?
 - d. My fourth concern would be **poor team dynamics**. When employees work remotely, they miss out on the small interactions that turn a group of workers into a team. This disconnect might lead to conflict and the managers will have to make extra effort to keep remote employees connected with the team.
 - e. My last concern is that **overnight deliverables** with tight deadlines will always have to be serviced by the onsite team because in times of high stress there is a tendency to forget about the remote employee or not ask for their help because of their home constraints.

2. **ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 2:** Now, wear the HR Head’s hat and provide specific policy guidelines that can address both managers’ productivity concerns and support new mothers.
 - a. To tackle **productivity** concerns managers, need to check in with remote employees frequently on progress and make sure that they are connected to the system and their team members through video conferencing technology, instant messaging platforms and collaborative online tools.
 - b. To tackle **ethical issues** all employees must commit to online training programmes about information sharing and sign off on the policy once a year. Guidance must be provided to remote employees on how to separate work and personal expenses. Monitoring software must be installed on remote devices so that they adhere to company guidelines.
 - c. To prevent **time theft and sick leave fraud** monitoring software can be deployed to ensure that employees are working during their logged in work hours. Doctor’s notes for sick leave longer than three days in a row must be insisted upon unless there are extenuating circumstances. Sick leave and anti-fraud and theft policies should be communicated to all employees annually.
 - d. To encourage **team bonding** with the remote worker, managers can organise daily video team meetings, team outings which include remote workers and conduct virtual team bonding activities.
 - e. The key is communication and collaborative online tools. If an **overnight deliverable** does come in, then the remote worker should be asked if she can pitch in while stating that there is no pressure to do so. An opportunity must be given to the remote worker to share the team load. If she is agreeable to sharing the load, she can use the collaborative online tool to do her bit.

3. **ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 3:** What is the role that managers needs to play beyond compliance to policy, to ensure good women employees do not fall off the grid post childbirth?

- a. Have a generous maternity leave policy which assures flexibility to the employee after the government mandated leave period finishes and reduces the manager's discretion.
- b. Help with childcare options, like a creche.
- c. Be understanding in the transition and work with the employee to ease her back into the system.
- d. Offer career opportunity incentives instead of derailing her career growth. Do not exempt her from appraisals and variables while on leave.
- e. Negotiate flexible working terms without reducing salaries. This is when the employee needs the additional income the most. The costs of retaining a good woman employee will always be lesser than hiring and training a new person.

4. ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 4: Draft a counselling guidance note for the manager of a new mother who wants to quit working voluntarily, to be able to look after the child.

The note could contain the following pointers:

- a. Is a temporary crisis like not having adequate childcare making you quit? It's dangerous to make a big decision, like quitting your job, while something else big is happening in your life. Give yourself a few weeks to see if things simmer down.
- b. Would quitting hurt your family's security?
- c. How easy would it be to re-enter the workforce in x years' time?
- d. Would you consider exploring another role or cutting back on hours before quitting?
- e. As a millennial who is used to a certain level of financial independence would you enjoy being a stay-at-home mom?

5. ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 5: Both male and female managers are hesitating to hire women in their teams – after the six-month maternity leave was introduced. Detail out a policy which can be introduced to remedy this situation.

The policy can include the following points:

- a. Education of the need for paid maternity leave: Maternity benefits help a woman give quality time to her child without having to worry about whether she will lose her job and her source of income. By not hiring a woman for a role because she may become a mother in the future the manager not only deprives the organisation of a possible good resource but also indulges in discriminatory practices frowned on by corporate and Indian law.
- b. The corporation/company will provide childcare: The Maternity Benefit Amendment Act mandates that creche facility must be provided by all establishments employing 50 or more employees. Managers need not be afraid that employees will just drop off the grid once they become pregnant.
- c. Work from home: The Maternity Benefit Amendment Act allows women to work from home after the expiry of the 26 weeks leave period. Since working from home has become the new norm in the pandemic world the work from home model should no longer be suspect and new mothers can be given this facility without doubts on their ability to deliver.
- d. Shadow workers: Internal or external shadow workers/freelancers can be hired by the organisation for the six-month period to fill in for the employee who is on maternity leave.
- e. Job sharing: Since most new mothers are in their early thirties and in middle management roles job sharing of the role between two people can be initiated in the early months of pregnancy so that a ready back up is available when the employee goes on leave.

6. ASSIGNMENT QUESTION 6: What are the policy controls that can be built to prevent misuse of generous leave policies?

- a. It is mandated by the Government of India that women can take three months leave without pay after their maternity leave expires. This flexibility must be given by the company.
- b. However, if the employee is proven to be abusing a policy there should be zero tolerance of the same and very visible action should be taken by the company to warn off other employees who may want to indulge in the same practice.

- c. Noticeably clear communication on policy abuse should be sent to employees at quarterly intervals. This communication can be accompanied by online tutorials which coach employees on the policy and its limitations.

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