

## Economic Times, Family Matters

Matter of choice

By

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Ruchi Narendran, a senior Manager at Tata Tea quit her job three months ago so that she could spend more time with her nine-year-old daughter, Nicky. She intends to get back to work after perhaps a two-year break. Vinita Jabbar, a Public Relations Manager at the Taj Bengal three years ago, is now back in business as a "fusion consultant" in the field of fashion, as also a consultant to educational institutions. Sunita Thawani, a legal professional, is now the head of the legal division of Tata Steel in Calcutta. She came back into the profession after a 12-year break to take care of her responsibilities as mother and homemaker.

These are women who are attempting to "have it all", a career as well as a family. But they are doing it sequentially, rather than at the same time. Ruchi, a senior manager at Tata Tea when she decided that it was time for a break, admits, " though it had always been difficult juggling responsibilities at home and at the work place, of late, I had begun to feel like a zombie. I was tired of trying to co-ordinate touring so that my husband and I weren't out of town at the same time, of helping with Hindi home work, long distance from Chennai, of coming home tired to work on a crafts project. I felt my daughter was questioning my priorities, and then I began to do so myself. I felt that I had just a window of about two to three years when my daughter still needed my presence, and I wanted to be there for her." Not surprisingly, Ruchi's decision was met with shock and disbelief. Friend's wanted to know why she didn't just admit her daughter to a hostel, but Ruchi chose to follow her heart. Sunita Thawani also followed a sequential progression for family and career, but she followed a different pattern, working with a senior advocate in Delhi for just a year at the beginning of her profession, before taking a break that was to last all of twelve years. Today, Sunita is in a job that is fulfilling and she has the satisfaction of knowing that she was there for her children, now 23 and 21, when they needed her. She believes that she has sacrificed on the job front, but is philosophical about it. Vinita Jabbar has worked as when circumstances allowed, shifting her field from Teaching to Public Relations to Fashion, seizing whatever opportunity that came her way.

What are the prospects like for a highly qualified professional like Ruchi who decides to take a break? Anand Nayak, Executive Vice President, Human Resources, ITC, says that in his opinion, a company would be willing to make adjustments if such a person would add value. It is not a part of normal company policy to accommodate such requests. Leena Chatterjee, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the IIMC, Calcutta, is supportive of a person's decision to take a break to fulfil responsibilities in the home, or even to pursue a special interest as it would allow "for greater commitment to whatever you are doing." However she cautions that anyone who attempts such a gamble should recognise that when such a person wishes to re-join an organisation, fitment may be a problem. Loss of seniority and consequent difficulties in reporting patterns have to be dealt with. When planning a

sequential order for career and family, Chatterjee would recommend taking a break to rear children, for instance, after working for a few years in an organisation and establishing a reputation. In any case, she would recommend going back into some kind of part time work as soon as possible to remain visible. She does believe that on the flip side, people who dare to take a break may bring a fresh approach and a degree of introspection that should add value to their jobs. In any case, for many women, there are few options. There is considerable data to show that it is difficult for women officers even in government service to marry and have families.

It is interesting that experts believe that as security levels in jobs drop due to lay offs and job satisfaction dips for whatever reason, people are more likely to introspect and take a fresh look at what they do. As Ruchi Narendran, says, " I realized that on the work front, I was putting in so much effort, was sacrificing so much, and I really didn't think that the rewards and the recognition were commensurate." And when they do re-assess this, they are likely to take another look not just at their jobs but also at their lives. This could mean leaving a career at midstream, to launch into another. Special schools for the handicapped have in their midst, highly qualified people like chartered accountants turning their backs on the salary and perks of the corporate world, for a career they find more fulfilling.

As we move into an era when jobs are less likely to follow the linear pattern of the past, where an individual joined an organisation and then worked till he retired, to one where jobs are more likely to be skill based contractual assignments, such women have a better chance than ever before.