

## **Career Decisions of Indian Female Talent: Implications for Gender-sensitive Talent Management \***

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Talent scarcity in emerging economies such as India poses challenges for companies, and limited labour market participation among well-educated women has been observed. The reasons that professionals decide not to pursue a further corporate career remain unclear. By investigating career decision making, this article aims to highlight (1) the contextual factors that impact those decisions, (2) individuals' agency to handle them, and (3) the implications for talent management (TM).

**Design/methodology/approach:** Following a qualitative research design, computer-aided analysis was conducted on interviews with 24 internationally experienced Indian business professionals. A novel application of neo-institutionalism in the Indian context was combined with the family-relatedness of work decisions (FRWD) model.

**Findings:** Career decisions indicate that rebellion against Indian societal and family expectations is essential to following a career path, especially for women. TM as part of the current institutional framework serves as a legitimising façade veiling traditional practices that hinder females' careers.

**Research limitations:** Interviewees adopted a retrospective perspective when describing their career decisions; therefore, different views might have existed at the moment of decision making.

**Practical implications:** Design and implementation of gender-sensitive TM adjusted to fit the specific Indian context can contribute to retaining female talent in companies and the labour market.

**Originality/value:** The importance of gender-sensitive TM can be concluded from an empirical study of the context-based career decision making of experienced business professionals from India. The synthesis of neo-institutionalism, the FRWD model and the research results provides assistance in mapping talent experiences and implications for overcoming the challenges of talent scarcity in India.

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## Introduction

Filling key positions in times of talent scarcity is a challenge for companies around the world (Festing *et al.*, 2013), and this challenge is enhanced in emerging economies by the rapidly increasing demand to sustain companies' growth. In India, there are at least two context-specific drivers of talent scarcity: poor talent production (Budhwar *et al.*, 2016), which causes limited availability of well-qualified talent and high attrition rates that exceed 30 percent in sectors such as information technology and business process outsourcing (Tymon *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, women's labour market participation is low (World Economic Forum, 2019). Thus, increasing the participation of women could enlarge the national talent pool in India. This conclusion raises the question of what is required for Indian female professionals not only to qualify for but also remain in the labour market. This article aims to explore the career decisions of successful Indian professionals with regard to societal, organisational and individual influences. A novel insight into individual approaches to overcome gender- and context-specific hurdles that keep women in the labour market is of particular relevance for companies to further develop talent management (TM) with special regard to suitable approaches to talent retention. With this exploration, this article contributes to understanding the experiences of talented employees that are currently under-researched (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016).

TM in Indian companies is influenced by successful Western multinational companies' best practices (Doh, Walter, and Stumpf, 2011). Due to the specific national context and the fast pace of economic development, appropriate human resources management (HRM) practices are necessary and might lead to a hybrid system combining Western and Indian traditional characteristics (Budhwar, Varma, and Hirekham, 2019): On the one hand, the paternalistic leadership style that is widespread in India includes (1) guiding employees who show little agency and (2) performance evaluations influenced by affinity (Veselova and Veselova, 2018). On the other hand, in Western TM, Makarem *et al.* state a masculinist logic

and rhetoric deriving from 'good old boy' elite networks (Makarem, Metcalfe, and Afiouni, 2019). Taking the impacts of both styles into account, the existence of gendered career conditions that disadvantage female talent can be assumed in India.

Consideration of Indian women's traditional private role as caretaker and wife underlines the relevance of the family-relatedness of work decisions (FRWD) for professionals and the high risk of work-family conflicts. The tripartite framework by Powell and Greenhaus amalgamates the importance of the individual, organisational, and societal contexts for work decisions (Greenhaus and Powell, 2012). Thus far, TM has mostly overlooked these contextual influences on work decisions, and it remains unknown how the focus of TM should be expanded to obtain a more realistic view of the decision framework for female talent. A theoretical framework is needed that includes the contextual embeddedness of organisations and career decisions along the life path (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2016). To avoid reducing choices made by talent to merely rational and economic decision making, a neo-institutionalist lens is applied. This theory recognises the constraints on individual decision making imposed by social obligation, illuminates how choices are influenced by institutional arrangements, and "emphasizes a multiplicity of social institutional influences on organizations" (Senge, 2013).

After offering insight into the Indian context and mapping the application of neo-institutionalism in the Indian context combined with the family-relatedness of work decisions (FRWD) model, this qualitative empirical research article provides insights into the career decisions and experiences of Indian professionals. In total, 24 interviews with internationally experienced Indian business professionals were conducted to determine how career decisions have been made throughout their careers. Previous research has mostly focused on expectations to fulfil traditional gender roles in the Indian society and paternalistic attitudes in the family and at the workplace (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017) or companies' TM tools and practice (Doh et al., 2011; Veselova and Veselova, 2018). In contrast to this approach, to overcome the status quo in which "Indian women are rarely asked how they define themselves or view their

lives” (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2017, p. 41), this research focuses on successful business professionals and understanding how female professionals, in particular, reflect on and manage their career paths. The results unfold these women’s context-based ways of overcoming hurdles in their private and professional lives. Subsequently, the findings are discussed. Context-specific deviations from mimicking Western TM best practices seem to be necessary when configuring gender-sensitive TM in indigenous companies and in multinational enterprises. Therefore, implications for TM are developed and future research avenues delineated in the final sections of this paper.

### **Female Talent’s Conditions in the Indian Context**

While the high Indian economic growth is largely based on small and medium-sized enterprises, the impact of the large informal sector can only be estimated (Budhwar, Varma, and Hirekham, 2019). Regarding companies’ TM in the organised sector, the question arises of how organisational structures in indigenous and multinational companies, established to provide an equal flow of female and male talent into talent pools, and cultural factors impact the choices that professionals make. Even though the Indian society is comparably young, poor talent production and high attrition rates challenge companies. An increase in female graduates from tertiary education in India indicates that progress is being made at the macro level of TM (Khilji, Tarique, and Schuler, 2015). Obtaining higher qualification levels and the respective investment of families into their children’s education is traditionally meant to accomplish more than only to enable a successful professional career. Especially for women, attaining such qualifications also promises a good match in their (arranged) marriage. This connection increases the social status of the whole family, because marriage traditionally is a “sacrosanct union” that occurs “between two families, rather two individuals” (Sharma, Pandit, Pathak, and Sharma, 2013). This concept leads to comparably low divorce rates and the continued stigmatisation of divorce.

In recent years, the female workforce participation has declined in the Indian middle class. Reasons can be seen in the increasing household incomes through economic growth, which reduces the necessity of a second wage, and the lack of job opportunities that are considered decent (Sivasankar, 2019). One important issue for job decisions is the safety of women in the public sphere, which makes safe transportation channels between homes and work essential and limits women's agency (Soni, 2016). As a result, safety issues hinder women's access to jobs when the necessary arrangements are missing. Working overtime or at night, which is frequently expected in the Indian context to show commitment and thus is one condition for promotions, places pressure on women if safe transportation is not available. Only in recent years was the Factories Act, which has regulated safety, health, and well-being at the workplace since 1948, opened up; previously, women were not allowed to work on night shifts (Budhwar et al., 2019). Moreover, in the prevailing Hindu tradition, exposure to the public sphere may devalue the 'purity' of women. Therefore, appropriate work that protects women's family status is still vital (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017).

Even though nuclear families have increased in India, women still regularly move in with their husband's family after marriage. This decision not only brings additional obligations as a caretaker but also requires balancing different expectations concerning the woman's new roles. In the best case, the mother-in-law and husband appreciate her working outside the home and making use of her qualifications by contributing to the household income. The resulting family support includes childcare through the family and lowers the intention to quit work (Verma, Bhal, and Vrat, 2018). Overall, for many working women, traditional values, family obligations and safety issues lead to continuous family conflicts and a high level of stress.

Furthermore, the Indian labour market is currently male dominated and characterised by high work demands, such as extended face time, resulting in work-life imbalance (Budhwar et al., 2016). At the organisational level, women's opportunities for career advancement to higher hierarchical levels appear limited (Kundu and Mor, 2017). This limitation is rooted in paternalistic

attitudes, deeply engraved in Indian society, and potentially discourages women from accepting job opportunities that do not fit the dominant gender role stereotype of weakness and fragility (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017).

For decades, the Indian government has attempted to foster women's labour market participation through institutional changes such as legal changes to improve the childcare infrastructure, protecting the employment of women during pregnancy and early motherhood through paid maternity leave and the possibility to work from home afterwards (Government of India, 2017; Nikore, 2018). Recently, the Maternity Amendment Bill 2017 directed that companies with 50 employees or more provide crèche facilities close to their business. The legislation includes that mothers, not both parents, have the right to visit their children four times a day in these crèches (Government of India, 2017). Moreover, various initiatives have been taken by the Indian government to improve early childhood care and education, although the lack of infrastructure and competent teachers lead to highly diverse quality standards (Hamsa, 2010; Reetu, Renu, and Adarsh, 2017). On the one hand, these measures support a shift of the childcare infrastructure from the family to the employer to make it easier for mothers to remain in the labour force. On the other hand, the employers bearing the costs for crèches and paid maternity leave make female employees economically less attractive.

At the organisational level, the practice of so-called 'bio-leave' adds to this equation. This opportunity to stay at home during menstruation is frequently practised and is seen as part of a positive and generous employer attitude towards female employees (Bhalla, 2017). At first impression, this practice supports women's work-life balance. However, in addition to the higher labour costs for women, bio-leave implicitly strengthens the stereotype that women are fragile (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017) and less reliable with regard to business appointments and project deadlines. Therefore, bio-leave might pose a hindrance to women's careers while maintaining the façade of family-friendliness. This ambiguity reveals society's and employers' divergent sets of expectations regarding male and female employees: While women as primary

caretakers need work-life balance, work-life imbalance among males as main breadwinners is widely accepted.

### **Neo-Institutional Map of the Indian Context**

Neo-institutionalism provides a lens into how social choices, such as career decisions, are influenced by institutional arrangements (Busch-Heizmann *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, neo-institutionalism helps to map the partly ambiguous contextual dimensions in the former section and their impacts on decision making. Neo-institutionalism assumes that organisational structures such as TM programmes are developed not only to provide enough qualified employees to fill key positions but also to serve as a legitimising façade for divergent but established problem-solving practices. In the Indian context, the prevalence of cronyism might serve as an example of established practices that vary from official talent identification processes. Cronyism involves relationship-based favours given by a superior to a subordinate in exchange for the latter's personal loyalty. Due to this reciprocity, performance and competencies are de-emphasised as selection criteria, which leads to less impactful HRM practices (Budhwar *et al.*, 2016).

From the neo-institutional perspective, institutions consist 'of cultured-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements', resources, institutions, and activities, that 'provide stability and meaning to social life' (Scott, 2001, p. 48). Gender and the consequences of gender role stereotypes, e.g., gender-related work segregation, are relevant as the most universal social organising principle. Neo-institutionalism focuses on the interdependence of organisation and society and stresses the importance of context in organisations and, consequently, TM. To fulfil societal norms and expectations, organisations develop policies and rules, such as gender-neutral TM strategies and concepts, to establish a legitimate external appearance. However, in day-to-day business on all hierarchical levels, employees find informal ways to bypass these institutions. The generally low acceptance of females in key positions in Indian organisations

(Budhwar *et al.*, 2019) includes the perception that female talent will not attain the higher positions and will likely drop out after marriage or the first child. Consequently, sponsoring female talent is not attractive and is seen as a lost investment, even though TM may officially foster equal conditions. Seemingly gender-neutral TM can lead to career disadvantages for female talent on the 'backstage', such as the expected long working hours along with the accepted male devotion to work scheme (Williams *et al.*, 2013; Budhwar *et al.*, 2016) that mothers with childcare duties in the Indian context cannot perform.

Consequently, this dualism of institutions and practice implies that even if official programmes provide a framework for gender equality, traditional informal routines may pose a sustained impediment to the gender ratio in talent pools. Thus, this study adopts the following definition of not gender-neutral but gender-sensitive TM that "includes (1) all organizational activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions (Collings and Mellahi, 2009) and (2) the identification and development of talent across all career stages to fill positions through differentiated human resource architecture, and also (3) the establishment of policies and practices that strive to give equal opportunities to male and female talent alike and monitor their fulfilment to contribute to an organization's sustainable competitive advantage in diverse cultural settings" (Schinnenburg and Böhmer, 2018, p. 45).

The gap between the formal policies and the informal practices described above is often not perceived and may lead to a lack of awareness regarding its impacts on employees' individual decisions. To sum up, from a neo-institutional perspective, female talent in India is disadvantaged in climbing the hierarchical ladder because, in disregard of the significant gender pay gap (World Economic Forum, 2019), female knowledge workers are perceived (1) as expensive and (2) as a risky investment by managers and the organisation as a whole. The subsequent hurdles posed by these views impact female careers even for women with agency power. Additionally, women must consider their family roles in their decisions, which are



examined in the next section.

### **Family-relatedness of Career Decisions in the Indian Context**

Career decisions often include a trade-off between professional ambitions and private aspirations, leading to the question of whether employees are willing to sacrifice part of their professional lives to improve their private lives or vice versa. Research indicates that social, organisational and individual impact factors form a complex tripartite framework (Masterson and Hoobler, 2015) in which employees strive for balance and develop decision-making criteria. Given the traditionally strong family ties in India, the need to balance family and work is essential and highly sensitive for women (e.g., Verma *et al.*, 2018). On the one hand, Indian women's educational qualifications continue to increase, and they aspire to use their skills and to lead more autonomous lives than their mothers. On the other hand, Indian women have been groomed to be primary caregivers and dutiful wives. This situation reflects a dilemma: The career development of Indian talent takes place within a tradition–modernity dualism (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017) in which women catch a glimpse of individual achievement and independence while nonetheless being held back by conservative expectations and attitudes. These traditional expectations are deeply rooted in Indian culture and are therefore shared and honoured by most women as their natural role.

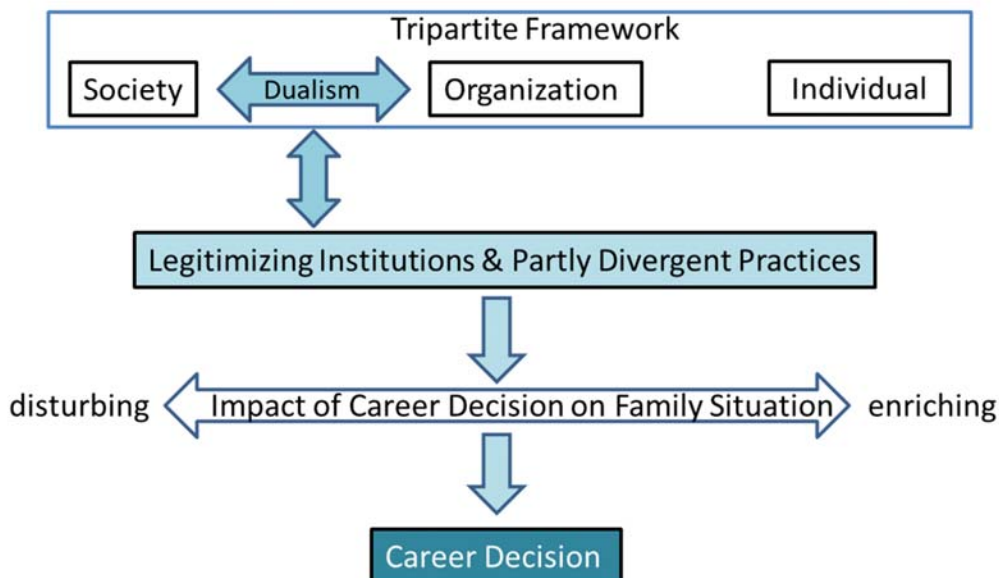
Consequently, the family-relatedness of work decisions (FRWD, Greenhaus and Powell, 2012) in India differs from that in most Western societies. Greenhaus and Powell (2012) show in their model the impact of the family situation on individual work-related decisions and choices regarding proceedings and actions in the workplace. Their model discusses that employees do not evaluate only the typical job-related aspects of career options. They additionally consider to what extent decisions lead to a positive and enriching or negative and disturbing outcome for their family situation (Greenhaus and Powell, 2012). However, regarding the importance that home and family obligations traditionally hold for Indian women (Ghosh and

Narendran, 2017), it might be assumed that the FRWD is much more complex and challenging for Indian women than for men (Böhmer and Schinnenburg, 2018).

Greenhaus and Powell found that employers' strict role expectations, e.g., regarding face time at work, lower the influence of the family sphere. Employees perceive that they do not have a buffer to consider non-work factors in a successful career. This effect can be assumed due to the Indian devotion to work scheme. In contrast, family-friendly work environments increase the perceived opportunities for including non-work factors in work decisions. This difference might be one reason that employers in India are increasingly becoming aware of the reconciliation of work and family when considering the potential of female talent (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017). Measures include sabbaticals, training after re-entry and working from a home office. The opportunity to work from home may serve as example of new rules of high social acceptance that retain women in the labour market and enrich the family situation. At the same time, it remains veiled that the lack of visibility in one's company and the assumption that childcare can be arranged parallel to working from home also bears the risk of re-assigning a traditional maternal role to working women. Moreover, this assumption fosters a double burden for female talent. The obvious gap between the institutional façade and common practice combined with the FRWD leads to the question of how professionals address these ambiguities and make career decisions.

Figure 1 visualises how the neo-institutionalist lens integrates with the tripartite framework of the FRWD. The figure indicates how the mutual impacts of societal and organisational institutions lead to an opaque work setting with legitimising façades and partly divergent practices that influence how talent perceives career decisions in terms of how enriching or disturbing they would be for their individual family situation.

Figure 1: Neo-Institutionalist View of Family-Related Career Decisions



Considering the aforementioned map of conflicting role expectations from society, organisations, and the individual herself, how do successful female managers manage their careers and overcome the hurdles in this overall setting? Insights into their experiences, decision criteria, supportive or disturbing institutions and diverging practices may help to discover means to retain female talent on career tracks and enlarge enterprises' talent pools.

## Empirical Method

### *Procedure and Sample*

Qualitative methods provide opportunities to explore under-researched phenomena such as Indian professionals' real-life career decisions and offer an effective way of gaining in-depth insights. One major feature of qualitative research is its context sensitivity. Due to the relevance of context for understanding the career paths of talent explained above, the following research design includes narrative interviews and a curriculum vitae (CV) analysis. This paper focuses on results for Indian professionals from a sample including German and Indian

knowledge workers. Due to the significant impacts of the contextual differences on the career decisions found in the first round of data analysis, the sample was ultimately narrowed to the Indian sample.

Purposeful homogenous sampling (Creswell, 2012) was applied to obtain professionals who had attained the career capital necessary to qualify for a talent pool during their career. The sample was deliberately not restricted to members or former members of talent pools. The sample included highly qualified, successful professionals who might fill key positions regardless of how professional TM was at their employer of choice. Male and female professionals were interviewed to explore gender differences. First, knowledge workers with an academic degree in business, management, or economics and a school degree in India were selected to ensure that all participants were socialised in the Indian context. Second, additional selection criteria included business experience of at least 10 years after graduation and international experience as a student, on the job abroad, or in a multinational enterprise working with international teams. Therefore, with mobility being one factor for talent identification, these knowledge workers had the opportunity to build up expertise attractive to both indigenous and foreign-owned companies (Jooss, McDonnell, and Burbach, 2019; Scullion and Collings, 2011). The sample was derived from the authors' personal network using snowball sampling. Because it was particularly difficult to contact Indian female professionals, this segment of the sample was enlarged by reaching out to potential participants via social media contacts and groups. A high quota of women in HR have roots in Indian labour market segregation. Caste was not considered in this study because the Indian participants mostly lived in (northern) urban areas, where caste is no longer of high importance (Shenoy-Packer, 2014). All participants agreed to anonymous data analysis using pseudonyms assigned to the companies and institutions named in the interviews.

The design of the interview guide consisted of open-ended questions with probes. The interview guide included open narrative statements: "Currently, you are in the middle of your

(professional) career—please tell me about your career path up to now. Take your time to explain it all, including connections and circumstances.” The guide also included questions about priorities in career decisions to generate in-depth information. These questions were a sub-set of a larger interview protocol designed to examine business professionals’ career paths in the 21st century.

The interviews were conducted by the authors personally or via (video) phone with 24 participants between March 2016 and September 2017. The interviews lasted 60 minutes on average, were held in English, and were transcribed. The participants had an average of 17 years of professional experience (9 to 35 years) in diverse industries (see Table 1). At the time of the interviews, participants worked in indigenous and foreign-owned companies or were self-employed. All participants spent at least one career step in the organised sector of the Indian economy. On average, the participants were 42 years old and mostly living in a (love or arranged) relationship. The interviewers spoke with 13 women and 11 men. All the participants shared international experiences they had had as students or/and professionals.

Table 1: Overview of the interviewed Indian Professionals

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of professional experience	Marital Status	Children	Industries of Professional experience
1	Tanya	female	43	21	divorced	0	Banking, Consulting, Education
2	Rahul	male	40	17	married	0	Military, IT, Telecommunication
3	Amit	male	46	20	married	0	Health, Medical Technology Pharma, Research,
4	Yasg	male	33	12	married	1	Telecommunication, Social Media
5	Raj	male	40	19	married	2	IT, Shipping, Real Estate
6	Ankur	male	37	13	married	1	Contingent Work, IT
7	Rohan	male	59	29	married	1	Hospitality
8	Kumal	male	42	16	divorced	2	Technology
9	Isha	female	30	9	engaged	0	Consumer Goods, Finance and Banking
10	Anusha	female	42	17	married	3	Education
11	Nikita	female	40	10	single	0	Education, Science
12	Parth	male	55	35	married	2	Technology, Lubricants, Logistics
13	Nitin	male	47	21	married	2	Technology
14	Krish	male	44	17	married	2	Automotive
15	Tisha	female	35	10	married	1	IT, Health, Sales
16	Rutuja	female	54	22	married	2	HR
17	Anil	male	40	18	married	1	Sales, Banking, Education
18	Aditi	female	41	15	divorced	0	Banking, Logistics, Automotive
19	Neelam	female	40	17	married	1	Consulting, IT
20	Mitali	female	29	9	married	1	IT
21	Anamika	female	35	10	married	2	Telecommunication, Hospitality IT, Automotive, Training and
22	Ria	female	42	16	married	2	Education, Finance Consulting/Accounting, Health,
23	Anusha	female	45	21	married	2	Training, Psychotherapy
24	Dawn	female	45	23	married	1	Technology, Power and Water Supply

## *Analysis*

The research design was developed to encourage the participants to tell their truths about their career paths retrospectively. The stories they told were influenced by the interdependence of facts, perception, and the process of living through, remembering, and telling the story. This process does not happen objectively but is influenced by how individuals remember themselves in the past and how they talk about their memory (Helfferich, 2011). In line with Lysova, Korotov, Khapova, and Jansen (2015), this paper contends that understanding can be “facilitated by employing a sense making perspective<sup>2</sup> or “family-related career sensemaking” in relation to the FRWD (Lysova *et al.*, 2015). Sensemaking assumes that in retrospection, people construct plausible images of their actions and “*rationalize*” what they were doing and why (Weick, 2001).

Several measures were used to control the reliability and validity of the analysis. In recognition of the retrospection and sensemaking processes in the participants’ narratives, two cycles of analysis were undertaken in this study. The first was exploratory, while the second was aligned with the theoretical framework above.

The first cycle of analysis, which involved both authors – who have extensive knowledge of the career and TM literature – reading the transcripts several times and analysing the full interviews without using a priori categories derived from theory. Additionally, the participants’ CVs were analysed to better understand the stories told and their chronology and to gain an overview of demographic data. This process resulted in a spreadsheet with the most important career facts, such as years of experience, job and industry changes as well as promotions, subjective and objective career success. Case summaries that consisted of a short overview of each career were also written. Themes and first categories for further analysis were obtained via computer-assisted analysis using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (Kuckartz, 2016). The unit of analysis was defined as a meaningful thought, which could be reflected by a phrase, a full sentence or set of sentences. In vivo categories were developed and

discussed. The tools Code-Matrix-Browser and Code-Segment-Matrixes contributed to a comprehensive data overview and to assessing the similarities and differences in the cases. The researchers discussed the spreadsheet, categories, matrixes, and summaries and concluded on major gender differences in career decisions.

At this point, the researchers turned to the literature to detect potential theoretical senses that could be used to apply to the emerging themes and for the final coding. The neo-institutionalist lens integrated with the tripartite framework of the FRWD within the Indian context-based challenges in gender-sensitive TM was finally agreed upon.

The second analyses built on the first. All categories were developed based on the data and structured in alignment with the theoretical framework described above. A codebook was developed in MAXQDA with coding rules and exemplary phrases from the transcripts. Before the coding process, the researchers tested the coding scheme on two randomly selected cases, which allowed the development of a revised coding scheme. Main categories were decisions (1) with disturbing impact on the family situation and (2) with enriching impact. The latter was differentiated in (2a) deciding on one main bread winner, (2b) reducing mobility, and (2c) partly withdrawing from the discriminatory labour market.

Both cycles of analysis required an iterative process, and the data were analysed independently by two researchers. Minor discrepancies were discussed and resolved by conjointly inspecting the transcripts to eliminate potential individual bias. Additionally, differences in narrative culture between the German interviewers and Indian interviewees had to be considered and reflected on.

### *Limitations*

All participants described and reflected on their career path retrospectively. This process included the addition of new insights obtained along the way and the effect of making sense of the path up to that point (Weick, 2001). Therefore, the description of decisions and experiences might have been different at the time the interviewees lived through them. Due to



the research design, the sample was not representative. Additionally, with regard to India's (regional) diversity, it is important to note that the Indian participants' experiences mostly derived from working in the organised sector, and participants were mainly from the North.

It is also important to note that both the interviewers and data analysts were from Germany. Therefore, despite several years of regular teaching and research in India, it was challenging to generate the necessary trust with the interviewees and to truly understand the contextual impacts on the stories told. Notwithstanding this limitation, the "outside perspective" of the interviewers and analysts also made it possible for them to further question decisions to gain a better understanding and to explore background information.

## **Key Findings**

The interviews showed a broad range of career trajectories with associated decision criteria and triggers. The FRWD was important for both the male and female interviewees throughout different career stages; however, the quality of impact altered as their experience grew. Moreover, most decisions were influenced by one dominant personal role at the time the decision was made, such as child, spouse or parent. Interviewees illustrated gender differences in the workplace in the current tradition–modernity dualism by explaining the combination of traditional female roles and professional roles:

*'Professionalism is about whatever task you are given or responsibility you take, you do a good job about it. So, being a mother was a voluntary exercise that I took up, and now I had to give my 100 percent to it. Being a wife is a commitment. Being a daughter-in-law is, also is an equally important.'* (Dawn, head of CSR, 103)

*'I would love women to come up, you know, and take some responsibilities apart from having a family, you know, raising kids and stuff like that, which is also an important job, right?'* (Kumal, senior consultant, 109)

These citations underline that while a double burden appears to be natural for female professionals in Western contexts, it can be assumed that in the Indian context, these burdens multiply. As the researchers categorised the data in the inductive–deductive manner described above, several major focal points crystallised along the framework displayed in Figure 1. Many interviewees explained major career decisions that added to the categories (1) disturbing the family situation by rebellious decisions and (2) enhancing the family situation.

#### (1) Disturbing the family situation by rebellious decisions

Nine of thirteen Indian female professionals, compared to three out of eleven men, clarified that at one point in their career they stopped bowing to their families' expectations when making a career decision.

*'I was a subdued housewife. I think that inherent rebel, which was caged; I think it broke open the cage.'* (Rutuja, Head of HR, 20)

Overall, the female participants described themselves as turning into rebels in different career stages, while males mostly broke with family expectations at an early point. Women in particular used the façade of physical mobility to gain more freedom:

*'So, I just realized I didn't want to be in anybody's shadow, and I wanted to stand on my own, and so, that's why I went to [Indian city with more than 3 million inhabitants].'* (Dawn, 11)

At an early career stage, women avoided marriage through prolonged education:

*'But my parents were like, "Okay, you need to get married soon". And I said, "I do not want to get married". So, the best way to not get married is to study further.'* (Tanya, university professor and program coordinator, 32)

At this point, Tanya's otherwise progressive parents confronted her with a traditional set of societal expectations. With her decision to study further (and abroad) at a prestigious university, she avoided (1) an open conflict and (2) an arranged marriage. To achieve her freedom, she accepted the private disturbance of living far away from her family and friends. Later, she

married and divorced a (loved) man, which also disturbed her relationship with her parents. She tried to remedy this conflict by deciding to move back temporarily to work in a prestigious industry in India that her parents considered as safer. This example shows the family-relatedness of career decisions and how closely private and professional decisions are linked. Rebelling against the traditional daughter role imposed by societal expectations triggered career decisions; later, the family conflict of living abroad without a safe-guarding husband led to reduced mobility. As reflected in this narrative, the women try to keep the level of disturbance to family life as low as possible. Even though they make disturbing career decisions at a certain point, they are subsequently willing to make enriching ones.

Other women tried to obey expectations in their early career and changed at a point marked by (a) preventing poverty or putting (b) authenticity and (c) their professional life first. (1a) Preventing poverty was triggered by an unfortunate match in (arranged) marriage with a husband or in-law family that no longer provided a decent living. Instead of accepting poverty and risking their children's lives becoming full of privations, women (re-)entered the labour market. Their career decisions did not accord with family and societal expectations, although such decisions allowed these women to develop their professional career and a decent standard of living.

(1b) Other women made their first career decisions according to their parents' expectations of prestige, safety, and suitability for girls.

*'The decision markers were really because one was good at it and your family expected it of you. So you automatically expected it of yourself. But now I was older. (...) And I said I didn't want to work with books and accounting, but I wanted to work with people, (...) So that was really where my heart was.'* (Anul, self-employed, 26)

Even though these women were successful in their first profession, they decided to develop into a new profession that they liked and in which they could act authentically.

(1c) With this conscious decision to pursue a professional career and act against the traditionally assigned caretaker role, an interviewee characterised her behaviour as rebellion after a year-long pattern of postponing the well-known societal and family expectations. Again, this behaviour was combined with the physical distance of living outside India.

*'I always thought that yes, this is the time, I should have a family and I should settle down, but some way, there was an inner voice inside me which always said that, no, if you get some opportunity, I mean professionally, I should not miss that chance.'* (Nikita, project manager, 27)

Consequently, rebellion started at different career stages and was triggered by different experiences. However, the agency it takes to rebel against open and veiled expectations from family or society appears to be an essential characteristic of successful female professionals, as it was described by women from all different age groups in the sample.

(2a) Enhancing the family situation by deciding on one main bread winner

As their experience increased and they developed stronger bonds with a partner and/or children, the female participants in particular increasingly emphasised balance and career decisions geared to enrich the family situation. They reflected on the growing importance of balance due to health issues or their experience of imbalance. With respect to the key point of marriage, decisions changed.

*'So then after you're married, then it becomes a little difficult to manage all the time for everything because you are more responsible towards household roles and probably the family and all that.'* (Mitali, HR manager: 22)

Following this key point in time, the participants seldom had an equal dual-career partnership, at least until their children had attained some independence:

*'I was 50 years old, and I haven't ever in my world, in my life thought that I would leave my home, my family, my children, and step out, but I did that. I did that because I realized my children were going to get married.'* (Rutuja, 90)

After leading a dual-career relationship abroad, one participant pointed out that his wife withdrew from the labour market when they returned to India.

*'She's from India. She has done engineering with me. She was my classmate, (...) In the U.S., she was working (...), but when she moved back to India, she decided not to work.'* (Krish, senior manager, 41)

Thus, married participants mostly agreed upon one main bread winner, and all the interviewed men held this position. Even though at first glance a woman's expensive education no longer pays off in terms of a professional career and income after such a decision, the interviews indicate that sacrificing one's own career in exchange for a well-to-do family livelihood fulfils societal and family expectations in a traditional way. Female participants assumed the position of the main breadwinner only if they had to:

*'I got a job with two children as a receptionist. My husband used to do jobs here and there, because he was not qualified enough. And that is how I began my new life.'* (Rutuja, 9)

(2b) Enhancing the family situation by reduced mobility

The participants emphasised restrictions on their mobility due to their family situations. Indian women frequently related that they had followed their husbands and had accepted the consequences of that decision for their professional career. These women partly adhered to the tradition of moving into their in-laws' or husband's household when they married.

*'I got married, and my husband was working here in [Indian city with 1 million inhabitants], so I moved base to [Indian city with 1 million inhabitants] after that.'* (Neelam, head of HR, 30)

She used to live and work in the capital but could not commute and had to find a new job during a time in life when she was also expected to become pregnant. Another interviewee declined an international career step because her mother-in-law did not support it:

*'And I remember calling up my mother-in-law and telling her, "You know what, I have to go away for a year, is it okay?" She told me, "Just say no to it. You can't leave your son." And you know, I knew she's like an Indian mother-in-law (...) and I went in and told "no" to my boss.'* (Dawn, 31)

Consequently, enriching the family situation by filling the traditional private roles influenced women's labour market position and personal inclination to work abroad.

Another important factor influencing the FRWD was elderly parents. Participants who had parents in need of support often decided to reduce their mobility. Closeness to their families of origin is one of the reasons that brought participants back to their home country after a successful career abroad. These participants accepted lateral career moves or risked self-employment. Overall, the possibility of locating near the family of origin gained importance as the participants' careers progressed. In dual-career couples, repatriation even led to the wife's withdrawal from the labour market.

(2c) Enhancing the family situation by partly withdrawing from discriminatory labour market conditions

During the interviews, some gender-specific barriers were mentioned, and some women described experiencing bullying and discrimination. Comparing the cases revealed that a supportive boss, safe-guarding husband or father saved women from these negative experiences.

*'I constantly have a feeling that it's also about being a single woman in job. You're not respected that much. (...) However, if you're a lady and your husband is in a very strong position in some other job: (...) "Oh, her husband is in a strong position. We can't say anything to her because she has a support." (...) So, again there is a diversification whether you're a single lady or whether you're a working lady with a husband.'* (Aditi, HR specialist, 69)

The findings underline how important it is for female talent to avoid discouraging these mentors and to walk a thin line between agency and rebellion, on the one hand, and meeting expectations, on the other hand.

*'You also have to be equally loyal. You have to tell them that you are there and then you do the most. And the similarly kind, they also reciprocate when you need them. So, in my case, my performance, my abilities, I have always proven myself that I'm there standing for you. And that is how my bosses have reciprocated.'* (Tisha, HR manager, 16)

Additionally, some of the men stressed that they needed to invest extra effort to provide appropriate conditions for female employees, while women were unwilling to make a true effort:

*'most females would try to take advantage of the fact that they are females, so they won't do the evening jobs. (...) they would do the comfort zone jobs, (...) if you want to be treated as equals, rise as equals and work as equals, then do not give excuses. And that has to be a policy.'*

(Rohan, owner and manager hospitality chain, 125)

These aspects mentioned by interviewees exemplify the belief that females are deficient. The practical challenges as caregivers with reconciliation issues and safety problems for women, such as on public transport, remain frequently unseen. Treating all employees in an equal way seems socially accepted, which veils that formal equality may be a farce, if one group faces multiple constraints in the societal context.

Decisions to take a career break or work part time illustrate this challenge. Ironically, one female head of corporate social responsibility described being asked to leave after taking a sabbatical for family reasons:

*'I actually have taken a sabbatical (...) because my son had a breakdown (...) He was writing his SATS. (...) I'm on a parting point with [Multinational Company 1] because they couldn't, you know, wait for six months for me to take the break and come back.'* (Dawn, 121)

The opportunity to work part time in a qualified position was not seen as an option by most Indian women. To maintain their positions, they needed to work full time after parental leave. If they took longer leaves, they often needed to change employers. Thus, the legal

institution of maternity leave in early motherhood veils the fact that reconciliation issues remain until children are grown.

The interviews indicated that when company conditions led to an imbalance in private and professional life, women found exit solutions. One such solution was self-employment, which represents a form of withdrawal from the labour market:

*'And one of the reasons I also quit was because, whatever role I was working on before, I went on my maternity leave, when I went back, that role had been given to somebody else. And I was given something else to do which was not that exciting and not as rewarding, I guess.'* (Anamika, owner and manager of hospitality chain, 50)

Thus, companies must be aware that misalignment between options and personal situations leads to an increasingly leaky talent pipeline.

### **Concluding Discussion of Key Findings and Practical Implications**

This study provides insights into Indian female talent's career decision making and their strategies to overcome hurdles. Courage and agency to rebel against societal and family expectations is currently essential to following a career path, although such choices disturb the family situation. Families' provision of equally good education opportunities for both genders does not necessarily provide equal support for successful professional careers. Developing a professional identity in the current Indian labour market leads to role conflicts with the traditional upbringing of being tame and submissive, and gender inequality is still apparent in organisational practices and institutions. Professionals, regardless of gender, experience a challenging balance of tradition–modernity dualism (Ghosh and Narendran, 2017). Thus, the first contribution of this study is that most female professionals rebelled and made career decisions that disturbed their family situation at one point in their career. Even though, from the Western perspective, these women live with multiple burdens, the majority of these successful women by



no means report feeling burdened. Instead, they have consciously decided upon a professional career and continue to find their way in their current contextual environment.

*'(...) here in India, having worked with a lot of women's rights right from my college days, I personally believe that there is nothing like challenges for women. (...) The challenges women face are different from that that men face. (...) So, it's all about how you take up those challenges, what you see from / in those challenges, and how you decide to either give into those challenges or overcome those challenges. It's all about that, in life as well as your careers.'* (Ria, solo-entrepreneur, 78)

The requirements of professionalism perceived in Indian organisations widely impede a high degree of family-relatedness of career decisions. In comparison to many Western contexts, where a first child frequently changes decision making, in the Indian context, marriage marks a decision point at an early stage. Marriage frequently entails the decision to have one main (generally, male) bread winner and to reduce mobility due to family demands. The interviews indicate that from the talent's point of view, many companies lack a supportive company culture that allows a sufficient buffer for non-work factors in Indian female careers. Consequently, female professionals often accept conflicts with their families and find ways to navigate through situations that are sometimes paradoxical and opaque, such as working abroad and away from family constraints as long as possible to maintain a corporate career. One reason for these choices is the current institutional framework of society and organisations that serves as a legitimising façade veiling traditional practices that hinder females' careers and foster drop out. Female talent is expected to accept the same conditions as male talent at work, while care responsibilities without a suitable support infrastructure may place pressure on females when they decide to marry or have children.

A further contribution is that professionals will develop their own solutions to achieve work-life balance, which might include finding a less (time-) demanding job, pursuing self-employment or completely dropping out of the labour force. Most of these decisions enrich the

family situation while fuelling talent scarcity. In addition to these elements, in a company career, the chance to achieve work-life balance for female talent depends on one's personal network and primarily male support. The patterns of cronyism become apparent. Mutual trust, reciprocity, and personal support are supporting career pillars rather than official rules and guidelines. Moreover, the reciprocal arrangements underline the importance of networks in which women may not be included as often or as extensively as men.

Consequently, the design and implementation of current TM may appear gender-neutral, although it does not appear to be sufficiently gender-sensitive to match the specific context in which professionals make career decisions in India. The reason behind this mismatch is rooted in the equal treatment of employees with different capabilities, such as gendered role expectations. In a first step, both indigenous companies and multinational enterprises can help to overcome this mismatch by filling obvious gaps, such as providing means for safe commuting and reconcilable face time. Safety measures in this understanding would not appear as personal favours for specific women but a necessary condition provided by companies for all women. Critics might argue about the costs involved. Therefore, second, with a gender-sensitive TM comes the challenge of proving women to be an economic asset while simultaneously unveiling discriminating practices. Third, if it were to become normal on all hierarchical levels to discuss promotional decisions, cronyism might decline. Different capabilities could be discussed more openly, veiled discrimination against single or divorced women might decline, and more fairness in promotional decisions and talent identification could be reached, thereby fostering talent retention in the company and the labour market.

### **Further Research Avenues**

Although these conclusions and implications were derived from only one qualitative study, they provide ample possibilities for further exploration. The rebellion described in many of the interviews raises the question of whether rebellion might prove to be a relevant pattern (a) in

other countries and professional fields and (b) in a larger sample. To further study the impacts of rebellion, quantitative and cross-cultural research would contribute to developing further implications for theory and practice. Based on the empirical results of Hall and Yip about career cultures and this study, the scholarly discussion would benefit from further context-related investigation (Hall and Yip, 2016). Thus, multilayered empirical studies might take in the company context and talent's experiences as a further contribution.

Based on the empirical results, several future research avenues seem promising. First, professionals from other cultural spheres in Asia might add to the information needed by multinational enterprises to develop context- and gender-sensitive global TM. Second, based on the present qualitative research, a further quantitative study including a larger sample could add aspects to the main findings of this first exploration and provide more generalisability. Third, to reduce the effects of sensemaking, a longitudinal study questioning participants periodically throughout their professional lives would offer more differentiated insights into the decision making of talent during different career phases. Moreover, for a more evidence-based development of gender equality in organisations, the long-term economic success of Indian companies with different gender quotas at higher levels might clarify whether women are cost drivers or economic assets.

## **Conclusion**

This empirical study contributes to understanding the experiences and decision making of internationally experienced business professionals from India and offers insight into an under-researched field of TM. The findings underline the importance of context- and gender-sensitive TM. New perspectives on the reasons underlying talent scarcity are provided by a synthesis of neo-institutionalism with the FRWD model and the research results. This paper reveals the challenges of talent regarding the current tradition–modernity dualism in Indian society, especially for women. The personal perception of rebellion against family values, the

difficulties associated with an equal dual-career relationship in the Indian context, mobility restrictions and partly discriminating organisational cultures are major drivers of female professionals' decisions to withdraw from the labour market or to start their own business. Legislation, TM programmes, and practices can develop context-specific gender sensitivity to retain more talented, educated women in the labour market while simultaneously lightening the devotion to work scheme for men.

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