

CONTINUING EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR WORKING WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract

In India, many working women view participation in continuing education as risk-filled and challenging. This is because continuing education is not seen as a priority that can contribute to the family role that tradition expects of them. Indian women have their roles strongly pre-defined within Indian culture, with those of the wife and mother taking precedence over all other roles, particularly those as being the principal or equal salary earner in the family. Yet, many women have distinct needs at a psychological and practical level that are not met by restrictive definitions of their roles as primarily caregivers to their family. However, meeting these needs outside of mainstream cultural mores requires a special effort on the part of family, educational system and society, and the women themselves. Participation in continuing education can also involve these women in uneasy and contested relations with their families and employers, because they may be required to distribute their time, efforts and energies away from their family and workplace. Understanding the context of the working woman's decision to return to school, may help understand the factors that serve to ease and support the transition and could be used to encourage these women to continue their studies.

Indian women and continuing education

This paper examines the experiences of four Indian working women attending a post graduate diploma in human resource management course in a large further education college. It seeks to promote a greater understanding of the factors that shape Indian working women's decision to take up continuing education. It focuses on the dual bases (Billett, 2001) comprising of individual intentionality and agency to engage in continuing education, on the one hand, and affordances encountered in their social world (i.e. family, educational system and work), on the other. Together, these dual bases for participation in continuing education, and the relations between them, are central to understanding the kinds of affordances that their social world are able to provide and how improving the quality of support for their successful participation in college education. The readiness of their social world to afford opportunities for working women to engage in continuing education and access direct and indirect support is a key determinant which could promote working women's engagement. However, this engagement remains dependent on the degree by which working women's wish to engage in continuing education.

The aim in presenting and analysing these women's experience of continuing education is twofold: first, to explore the challenges faced by Indian working women in continuing education and second, to show that much more needs to change than the women themselves: family and workplace norms need to be transformed. The challenges involved in making the transition to continuing education were evident in the women's narratives, and factors in their social world enabling and inhibiting their access to continuing education were examined. The desire to 'stand on their own feet' and 'have options' which motivated all these women's decision to engage in continuing education is discussed.

The women were balancing work schedules, childcare/eldercare and domestic responsibilities in addition to studying. The study found that the roles and responsibilities mandated by Indian tradition, culture and social structure sometimes created conflict for these four women. Each complained that they had no time for themselves because they were torn between their personal aspirations and societal expectations; of the dual demands of family and workplace.

This paper concludes with an exploration of changes required for widening access and participation in continuing education for Indian working women and suggests that, while currently it is the women's intentionality and agency which is responsible for the decision to engage in continuing education, the social world needs to change if they are to provide positive experiences for working women like the women in this study.

Women in the Indian context

Traditional Indian society has always been hierarchical. These hierarchies include those within the family (i.e. of age, sex, ordinal position) and within the community (i.e. of caste, lineage, wealth, learning, occupation) and they have been maintained by 'a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief' (Chitnis, 1988 pg 83). Indian society has been popularly described as a society where individuals live by their 'ascribed' rather than 'achieved' status (Rajadhyaksha & Bhatnagar, 2000). This means your birth determines your position in society rather than your achievements, the very opposite of what is claimed as the human capital premise of many western countries. Such a sentiment leads to resist the idea that individuals can improve their standing through personal achievement through education, for instance, women born in the Indian Marwadi community are expected to marry by the time they are eighteen and the men are expected to join their family business early. For both men and women education is not part of their cultural agenda. They actively discourage women from engaging in education as it would be difficult for them to find a life partner in their community as they become more educated than prospective male partners. Males may also fear loss of authority, and accordingly prefer a marital relationship which accords with the old pattern of unequal dependence (Lannoy, 1971). All of this is, of course, against the values of adult education that privileges the necessity and desirability for people to engage in continuing education across their life course, including outcomes which are personally and socially emancipatory.

A diachronic development of tradition (i.e. as it changes over a period of time), has given women a status lower than that of men. Indian culture has, through folklore, folk songs and legends, served to maintain such an inequality (Rajadhyaksha & Bhatnagar, 2000). In addition and through popular culture, it has idolized the image of the self-sacrificing, self-effacing, and pure image of the woman. This reinforces her role as devout and dutiful daughter, wife and doting mother. Though these traditional beliefs have their origins in Hinduism, the culture pervades to across Indians irrespective of families and communities' current religious faith. In sum, the societal context that influences the thinking on the role of Indian women transcends religion and geography. They stand as powerful conventions and norms that pervade human conduct in India, including participation in education and work. Yet they stand to enslave women in limited social and personal roles.

However, the status of women in Indian society underwent some changes as a result of liberalism, social reforms and nationalism that emerged during the course of the British rule (Rajadhyaksha & Bhatnagar, 2000). Access to westernized education under British rule facilitated the entry of women (initially of the upper castes) into the world of paid work. Initially, the entry of women was mainly in fields of paid employment traditionally dominated by women, such as teaching, tailoring, nursing, etc. However, after independence of the country in the year 1947, and the subsequent introduction of women's education there has been a slow but growing representation of women into professions such as medicine, engineering and management (Rajadhyaksha & Bhatnagar, 2000). Currently, modern India can be said to be witnessing the growth of a body of middle-class and upper-middle-class educated women, living in large urban agglomerations, who tend to be relatively emancipated in Indian socio-economic terms (Menon, 1997). Their empowerment has been facilitated by the constitutional recognition, in some communities, of equal status of women, the acceptance of the need and spread of women's education, and progressive legal enactments that bestow them with constitutional equality (Chitnis, 1988). Thus, the modern Indian woman now faces the challenge of

balancing the dialectic of tradition and modernism, particularly when they cross cultural boundaries. However, the legacy of traditions and accepted practices are not so easily exhausted.

Individual engagement and Social affordances

In order to understand the factors that shape working women's decision to engage in continuing education it is necessary to account for both individual and social factors as they contribute to this decision. The intentionality of engagement depends on the direction, focus and scope of engagement (Searle, Billett, & Behrens, 2005) and social affordances that assist the individual to be motivated to engage intentionally and agentically in continuing education. That is, it can have low or high affordance: invitational qualities in their social world of family, educational system and workplace that either inhibits or supports engagement.

In the later quart of the last century and in this new century, Indian women have undergone a social revolution rather more far-reaching and radical than that of men, outside of the challenge for men to accept the changing roles of women. Women have proved themselves more than equal to their, as yet, only partially accomplished emancipation (Lannoy, 1971). Yet, a real and practical constraint for women to achieve high-level positions is the disproportionate responsibility they still have for raising children and performing household tasks (Wirth, 2001). So though more and more women are willing to participate in continuing education, they have not lost sight of all the responsibility for their primary roles as a daughter, wife and mother. One of their main tasks as a women included caring for dependent members of the family and the broader community (Wirth, 2001).

A major factor contributing to women's growing participation in professional and managerial work is the fact that they have availed themselves of the educational and training opportunities opened up to them in most countries in recent years (Wirth, 2001). They realise that education is about learning different ways of relating to and functioning in society (REPLAN, 1991). Though the woman is unlikely to sacrifice relationship for career nor will she envision long-term career goals as she has family obligations (Egan 1996 in Bierema, 2001), the extended family system and inexpensive domestic help provide crucial support for childcare and household maintenance, enabling women to devote more time to their careers (Wirth, 2001) and engage in continuing education.

It is well recognised that globally women have more limited access to education than men (Hyam, 2002). That is why McGivney (1993) states that, education providers now need to take women's practical constraints into consideration in the timetabling and organisation of some courses; more educational institutions now have some, albeit limited, childcare facilities; and there has been a steady growth in some curriculum areas such as targeted Access courses and courses for women returning to education. However, women wanting to return to education are likely to face a number of barriers, practically in terms of their domestic circumstances, and personally in terms of their own fears and concerns which the educational providers need to take into account (McGivney, 1993; REPLAN, 1991).

Cultural standards shape women's labour force participation worldwide. That is, women's participation in the workforce is influenced by cultural mores. In addition to being influenced by cultural norms and pressures, studies from many countries show that women than men are less likely to participate in the workforce because they tend to lack the education and training required to secure employment (Elder and Johnson in Bierema, 2001). Therefore, women's selection of the education opportunities are likely to be based on a realistic appraisal of the job opportunities and labour market realities (McGivney, 1993). Women have also benefited from their increased participation in education to secure more generously remunerated forms of work (Loutfi, 2001). One of the main obstacles perceived by women is that of gender stereotyping regarding their ability and willingness to accept positions of responsibility, especially if long hours, travel and relocation are involved (Wirth,

2001). Even in cases where willingness to promote women is present, the woman's ability may be suspect because of lack of educational qualifications. One of the options that would assist working women to continue education would be part-time work as one of the supposed virtues of part-time work is that it makes it easier to reconcile family responsibilities with employment, with the added advantage of maintaining a link with working life and thus avoiding a total break (Bolte, 2001).

In sum, the literature review reveals that there have been some changes in the Indian family, educational system and workplace practices which are now more encouraging of women to return to education. However, there are still practical barriers in terms of their circumstances and personal barriers in terms of their fears and concerns. But the greatest barriers are caused by negative attitudes and lack of knowledge and information, all of which can be remedied at no cost at all (REPLAN, 1991). Obviously, removing these barriers has resource implications which have to be acknowledged and addressed. Moreover, this will take time, as these values are more or less accepted across generations of Indians. It is to elaborate and explore in more detail and through specific instances that the research procedures and outcomes identified discussed below were directed.

Procedures and participants

This section describes the study's theoretical perspective, research questions, the procedures used to gather and analyse the data and the participants. It commences by summarising the theoretical orientation, and details the research question, participant profile, research design and research procedures. The key research question for this study:

What are the factors that shape Indian working women's decision to take up continuing education and their experience within it? This question focussed on the exploration of Indian culture, working women in the Indian context and working women and their continuing education. Specifically, the study addresses these questions:

What factors shape the working woman's intentionality and agency to engage in continuing education?

What are the affordances encountered in their social world (i.e. family, educational system and work)?

A qualitative approach to investigation based on the case study was adopted to achieve a rich understanding of working women's intents and agency to engage in continuing education and the kinds of affordances encountered that either supported or inhibited their participation in . A descriptive case study approach was used. Merriam (1988) describes case study research as particularistic, in that it investigates specific situations or phenomena; descriptive of the experiences of those being studied; and heuristic, meaning that it inductively offers insights into the phenomenon being studied. Data was collected by interviewing the participants and using these data for developing the case studies.

The study's participants were selected purposefully to include those most likely to inform the study (Patton, 1990); that is, working women engaged in continued education were specifically sought to share their experiences. Purposeful sampling seeks "information-rich cases" (Patton, 1990 pg. 127) for in-depth study. The selection criteria was for Indian women who: (i) hold a full time job, because the study seeks to explore and understand the factors that shape their intentionality and agency to engage in continuing education which required attending classes five days of the week after completing a full nine hour working day; (ii) are returning to study after a minimum gap of two years after graduation, because most women in India see graduation as their final educational destination; (iii) have a minimum of two years' full-time working experience to help understand why women would want to continue education when they have already secured employment.

The participants were as follows: Anu has a Masters degree and is working as a human resource executive for a realty and property management company. Maria is a science graduate and is working as a customer service representative with a cosmetics direct marketing company. Nandini is a postgraduate working as a primary school teacher at a private school. Sindhu is a science graduate working as administration assistant in a large information technology consulting firm.

The investigation reported here attempts to identify the bases by which four working women engaged in continuing education and the factors that shaped their decision to participate in continuing education. The principal method of data gathering comprised of a series of tape-recorded conversations with the participants in the form of semi-structured interviews. Patton (1990) explains that the purpose of interviewing “is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind” (p.278). In this way, interviews offer a rich source of data which provide access to how people account for both their circumstances and achievements (Silverman, 1985) and allow the researcher to understand and examine the participants’ attitudes, interests, feelings, concerns and values more easily than using observation (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Given that the study was to identify the participants’ construal of what opportunities were afforded them to participate in continuing education this is particularly relevant to this study.

The interview was semi-structured and an interview guide (Refer Table 2) was used to identify the list of questions or issues that were to be explored (Patton, 1990). The issues were not taken in any particular order and the actual wording of questions to elicit responses was not determined in advance. This was because the interview guide served as a basic checklist during the interview to assist that all relevant topics were addressed, ensured that the interviewer used the limited time well and made interviewing across a number of people more systematic and comprehensive (Patton, 1990). The interviews in this study were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The process was ongoing; that is, the researcher transcribed each interview before conducting the next one, to ensure that the context of the discussion was preserved. The researcher also recorded impressions and observations from the interviews. Together, these data helped develop the case studies. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the themes were modified intentionally to be most representative of the working women’s experience of participating in continuing education. Thus four themes emerged; these are introduced in the findings section below.

In addition to interview transcripts, the researcher tape-recorded ideas and reflections and wrote memorandums detailing emerging themes and questions. Data was sorted, coded and interpreted in an ongoing process throughout the study. After the data were analysed, member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were done with the participants to verify the findings.

Four Indian women’s’ experience in continuing education

The following sections discuss the four women’s responses to factors that shaped their decision to engage in continuing education. The women in this study described their need to be independent, move ahead in life and have career options as primary motivators for continuing education. They expressed this as “stand on your legs” (Nandini), “have meaningful career options” (Anu), “to move in front” (Sindhu) and “move ahead” (Maria).

Individual engagement

All four women stated that their decision to engage in continuing education was largely the product of their personal effort and engagement. That is, their motivations largely lay within their own agency and intentionality. They used phrases like “It was my desire to study” (Sindhu), “I always wanted to do my post graduation ... my aim was to study in my own way” (Maria), “...finally I am planning to do my MBA” (Nandini). One of the women felt that “Ladies without education ... you become

dumb” (Anu) and, therefore, it was important to continue education. The motivation of the women was evident in the fact that all of them did not miss a class unless there were extenuating circumstances. One mentioned that if she were unwell she would rather take an aspirin (i.e. a patent medicine) than not attend class. Another woman who lived twenty five kilometres from the educational institution chose to use public transport on days that her spouse was travelling and she had no access to transport rather than miss her class. This meant that she would have to commute for two hours changing two buses and then using an auto rickshaw to get home at ten p.m. instead the forty five minutes it would take her if her husband picked her up from class and took her home. This commitment to attend classes provides some indications of the commitment of these women had to their continuing education.

While the women’s decision to engage in continuing education was largely the product of their personal effort and engagement, it was also influenced by their positive expectations of the outcome of education. That is, they have clear goals for their participation. All four believed that it would make a positive difference to their career progression which in turn would impact their future significantly. This was seen in their responses:

“Yes it will help my career development” (Sindhu)

“ .. I think it is good for me, if I want to make my career I must do (engage in continuing education)” (Nandini)

“My designation, my job, my pay, then my home front, my child’s future everything depends on it .. “ (Anu)

“Yes, probably I want to say my way of thinking, my way of seeing things now have been completely changed and I think I’ve been getting lots of additional responsibilities in me because I view things in a broader way, surely my responsibilities gets added up”(Maria)

While the women had the intentionality and agency to engage in continuing education, interestingly it was the endorsement by an external source that saw the agency and intentionality being translated into the actual enrolment. In each case, the affordance provided by a male friend or spouse provided the motivation and guidance for the women to participate in continuing education. The relationship between man and woman in Indian society needs some explanation. In a culture where the men still fear loss of authority, and instinctively prefer a marital relationship which accords them with the old pattern of unequal dependence (Lannoy, 1971), in each case the support and guidance provided by the male served as a catalyst to translate the women’s desire to engaging continued education into reality. This was evident in the women’s narratives:

“I was in a confused state but he supported me in taking the decision. He pushed me up.” (Sindhu)

“My husband wants to see me in a good position”(Nandini)

“I was thinking of studying ... he helped me make the decision”(Anu)

“He was studying so he said I will help you out and give you the information. That was just the one step ahead which made me to go” (Maria)

So, though all women attributed their decision to engage in continuing education to individual effort and the exercise of agency, influenced by the positive outcomes they envisaged for their careers, they needed an external endorsement in the form of a male’s endorsement to support their desire. In addition to their work responsibility, all four women had family responsibilities which included care for aged relatives, child, parents, spouse, and other relatives. However, all of them stated that without the support and guidance of the male friend or spouse they would not have been able to translate their decision to engage in continuing education into action. This was also evident in the fact that in each case there was a time lag of one to five years between taking the decision to continue education and the actual enrolment for the program and finally the enrolment took place because of the influence of the male friend or spouse. What this suggests is that there is a complex relationship between individual agency and intentionality and the social world and in the case of the women the primary factor in their social world was their male friend or spouse. This male not only endorsed the decision

to engage in continuing education, but likely provided support at home to counter other culture derived barriers.

Therefore, the findings suggest that even when the women stated that their own agency and intentionality as being the primary basis for their decision to engage in continuing education, they were influenced by career growth possibilities and in the Indian culture their efforts required the support and guidance from their male friend or spouse to translate their decision to action. That is, the decision to engage in continuing education requires not only the intentionality and agency on the part of the women, but also the endorsement of the male.

While discussing the factors that shaped the women's decision to engage in continuing education, the four women referred to family affordances as being crucial to helping them move forward. In India, women carry a disproportionate share of household duties. The women in the study discussed how they put in a full day of work, attended class in the evening and still coped with their domestic responsibilities. Though all women talked of a supportive family, two women had a high degree of affordance in the home because that their parents did their share of the household duties thus giving the women time to pursue their studies. "My father and mother still does the entire house work" (Maria) and "I don't have to worry about house work, my mummy does everything" (Anu). In the case of the other two women, the family affordance was low. They still had to cope with their household duties and when questioned how they managed they responded with "Managing, I don't know somehow I am managing" (Sindhu) and "I am managing anyhow" (Nandini). That is, they believed that those were their duties and it had to be done and there were no expectations that other family members should help them.

One of woman's main tasks included caring for dependent members of the family and this was evident in the women's narratives. All four women were involved in either childcare or eldercare. Two of the women were responsible for their in-laws, one woman was responsible for her little child and the fourth woman was responsible for her grandmother and an old aunt. One woman also had to look after her invalid mother-in-law. This still did not deter her from engaging in continuing education. "... My mother-in-law, I have to make some arrangements because she is not well, like she cannot walk and then I have to make her go to the toilet so everything I have to do for her" (Nandini). She talked about how her sister and nephew who stayed with her helped her with looking after her mother-in-law. She also had high praise for her husband because he helped her with the housework. She felt that the sister, nephew and husband "...work together in a group like. We divide the work and we do" (Nandini). In the other case the woman had to look after her father-in-law. "father-in-law ... we have arranged a maid for him"(Sindhu). That is, inexpensive domestic help allowed the woman to make alternative arrangements for eldercare.

This ties in with what Wirth (2001) asserts that, a major factor contributing to women's growing participation in education is the fact that the extended family system and inexpensive domestic help provided crucial support for childcare or eldercare and household maintenance. The parents of the woman with a little child looked after the child. She felt that "You will be comfortable if your child is with your parents and they look after .. she takes care of my kid and lets me do my homework" (Anu). The fourth woman who was responsible for her grandmother and her old aunt took to waking up early so that she could visit them before she went to work. "I get up early and visit them (grandmother and aunt) before I go to work because it's difficult after class" (Maria).

So, again, this data elaborates the entwining of both family affordances and individual agency to continue education. Thus, individual agency was exercised but there also has been support in different degrees, which allowed for their capacities and agency to be exercised.

Individual engagement and workplace affordances

In contrast to the family affordances, all women claimed that the workplace provided major 'push' factors to engage in continuing education. Each of the women had a clear push factor at the workplace which strengthened their resolve to engage in continuing education. The reasons varied from:

Lack of knowledge - "... because of lack of knowledge, one of my colleague who was very junior to me, she was given much importance because she was from a recruitment background and though I was a senior there I did not get to do all the managerial kind of a job" (Anu)

Lack of attention - "...I was treated as low because of my low qualification. The MBA girl in the office, everybody recognises her and gives attention to her and it used to prick me" (Sindhu)

Lack of opportunity in current career - "The teaching (her present career) is interesting but I don't think so I have to go with this whole my life. I am thinking I should change" (Nandini)

Presence of a role model - "My colleague was also writing exams at that time which he was able to manage the office and the studies which influenced me, then said YES, when he can do it why not I? (Maria).

In sum, lack of knowledge, lack of opportunity in current career, lack of attention and the presence of a role model were seen by the women as reasons to participate and engage in continuing education. While exploring the workplace affordances in terms of flexibility of timings the woman with a child felt that a part-time work option would have afforded her more time with her child. This according to Bolle (2001), is one of the supposed virtues of part-time work. It makes it easier to reconcile family responsibilities with employment, with the added advantage of maintaining a link with working life and thus avoiding a total break. However, this woman further stated that in her company part-time work was treated as secondary employment and management considered people engaged in part-time work not as committed as full time workers and, hence, she would not be considered for quality work opportunities as they would be given to other full time workers. Also, she would not get any benefits and going forward it would impinge on her career prospects. The other three women also confirmed that working part-time was not an option available to them. One of them stated that "You cannot grow quickly if working part-time" (Maria) meaning that one could not advance rapidly in one's career working part-time expressing a sentiment echoed in her workplace.

All women claimed that flexibility of timings was a significant workplace affordance factor. Flexibility of timings had two dimensions, one was dependable work hours i.e. the certainty that they could leave at a fixed time each day so that they could attend class after work and the other dimension was flexibility to leave early, and/or take time off to study. Two of the women stated that their workplaces supported their decision to study and allowed them to leave fifteen minutes earlier so that they could get to class on time. One woman was allowed to leave consistently at closing time. If there was some work that needed to be done after work hours one of her co-workers agreed to do it for her.

In the case of the fourth woman who was working as a school teacher, the school timings were such that she finished much earlier than her class timings and never had to stay back after school and, hence, was able to continue education without the need for flexibility of timings. However, when this same woman needed study leave, it was granted with much reluctance on the part of the school principal. This was expressed as "I just asked for leave and all, she gave me the leave but still she's angry with me" (Nandini). This is in contrast to what the other three women felt about their workplace when they needed time off during exams

“...and last time during exams I got 15 days leave. They will not give leave actually but they gave me” (Sindhu)

“During my exams they (the workplace) came all the way and told me to leave at 4.00pm instead of 5.30pm as you might get stuck in the traffic and you can study for sometime” (Anu)

“because all my team actually helped me in studying .. my colleagues also, they understand .. OK .. my exams are happening ...” (Maria)

So, the high degree of workplace affordances in terms of flexibility of timings made it possible for three women to participate in continuing education whereas in the fourth case, in spite of a low degree of affordance, her individual agency and intentionality proved decisive.

The women offered mixed reactions to the possibility of career development due to continuing education at the current workplace. Though all agreed that continuing education would facilitate career development, they were unclear if their current workplace would offer them career progression. In response to “How will continuing education influence your career development”, their responses were varied. “...not in my office, because HR positions is full. I must search in another company.” (Sindhu), “I think it will get promotions, but I am not sure” (Maria), “Definitely, but I don’t know how it will be” (Anu), and “for her (the principal of her school) it (continuing education) is not important, better that I don’t take leave .. anyway I want to change (her career)” (Nandini). They shared that their workplace had no clear career progression based on qualification, however, two of the women were optimistic that when they completed their studies they would be able to secure career progression. One felt that career progression would happen outside of her current workplace and another woman viewed this as a stepping stone to be able to do a MBA program.

The women’s narratives indicate that the invitational quality of career progression was either not available or not clearly spelt out to the women. This did not deter the women from continuing education as they believed that it would aid career development if not in their current workplace, then in the next one. In sum, the workplace provided limited and different kinds of affordances to the women. What was seen is that some flexibility of timings was offered by the workplaces to the women to continue education, but there was no clarity or defined career progression available to them. Ultimately, the personal and professional goals would be realised through their own endeavours, and possibly outside the existing workplaces.

Individual and Educational system affordances

Replan (1991) argues that women wanting to return to education are likely to face a number of barriers, practically in terms of their circumstances, and personally in terms of their own fears and concerns, which providers of educational opportunities need to take into account. The narratives of the Indian working women substantiated both the practical and personal barriers.

None of the women got the information about the programs directly from the educational provider. That is because the educational institution neither advertised nor was there adequate information available electronically (i.e. on the World Wide Web). All of them secured the information about the programs from their friends, colleagues or their spouse. This was evident in their responses.

“One of my colleague who was working with me, he noticed what I was falling short with, he helped me out, he adjusted, he picked up the prospectus for me” (Anu)

“My husband has gone through internet and all, we have selected so many institutes for me to do as evening college ..” (Nandini)

“He was studying so he said I will help you out and give you the information. He brought me the article about the paper cut out, he gave me the information when the college starts and all ...” (Maria)

“Through friends” (Sindhu)

This indicates that the affordance of easy availability of information about the programs was low. In India, education has a captive market and most times there is an excess of demand over supply. That may be one reason why education providers do not see the necessity of going out of their way to market their educational courses, or be flexible in its provision. The women, however, did not see this as a low degree of affordance as the culture dictated that the onus of seeking information about the programs was on students who in turn get information through their network of friends.

For three of the women, the main reason for the selection of the education provider was proximity to their place of work so they could finish a full day's work and then attend classes. In one woman's case, though the place of work was distant from the educational institute, her husband worked close by and it was convenient for him to pick her up after class and take her home. One of the issues the women raised was the inflexibility of the class timings. Their classes started at six p.m. and the doors closed sharp at six. If they were late, they were asked to go to the dean's office and get a note from him to be allowed back in class. This entire process took more than twenty five minutes which meant that if they were fifteen minutes late they lost forty minutes of the two hour class. When this occurred, the women elected to miss class then go through the inconvenience.

Safety for the women at the college was not a huge consideration as the college is considered a safe place in India. However, it is the travelling late in the night which is considered unsafe. Two of the women were escorted home by their husbands (it allowed the husbands to work late with no complaints from the wife), one woman had her own transportation and the other had acceptable public transport. Not all women have their own transport, so places where education is provided need to be accessible by public transport or on foot.

In India, most educational institutions are held with respect and have an environment which is generally deemed safe because it is a restricted site (only bonafide students, faculty and support staff are allowed on campus) and there is complete prohibition of smoking, drinking, drugs, etc. The women in the study felt safe in the college and were surprised that they were asked about it because for them it was not an issue. They knew the identity and phone number of a responsible staff member who could be called upon in an emergency, but also stated that they had never ever had a reason to use it.

While all women stated that the entry qualifications were valid as they were all graduates themselves (requirement for the program was a graduation certificate), they did think that educational providers must consider women's experience and skills. Currently, educational provider had no process to recognise experience and skills. The fees were not considered a major barrier for women. One of the women did state that a provision to pay in instalments would definitely have helped her as she had to wait for "one year of the working period where I knew where I was falling short and I started accumulating money and after that I joined" (Anu).

According to McGivney (1993), women are expected to 'fit in' with existing education provision and certainly from these women's experience there had been no attempt to adapt further and higher education to women's requirements. These views were supported by those expressed by the women in the study who stated that there was no advice or guidance provided by the educational provider. In sum, the study findings revealed that the most important component of any provision for women was availability of individual information, advice and guidance. The women expressed the need for information to be available before, during and the end of the course. This would allow them to make informed choices about their current and future plans. They also added that just a little flexibility in timings would enable them to attend class even on days when they were delayed by work or traffic.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this small study, it is proposed that it is the woman's agency and intentionality which is the primary factor for their decision to engage and persist in continuing education. That is, without the woman's agency and intentionality it would be highly improbable for the Indian woman to pursue continuing education. A high degree of affordances from the family, workplace and the educational system would help develop the capacities to engage effectively, however, this engagement would be a function of their intentionality and agency.

All women complained of time poverty as one of trade-offs of continuing education.

"I used to be updated with movies, books, now I am not. I hardly get to go for dinner or maybe some movie or something, because Sunday I am concentrating on house work and Saturday afternoon I am with my kid and the other days do with the homework and all this. I have to neglect my sleep. Look at my eyes" (Anu)

However, they all strongly believed that women must engage in continuing education as the effort taken to obtain a degree would help them progress in their career, make them more confident and allow them to be independent. "Just do it because you will be more confident"(Sindhu) and "You can stand on your legs, that much capacity a woman must have and studying can make it happen" (Nandini).

Clearly furthering education is possible for Indian working women. What is required is the woman's intentionality and agency to engage in continuing education and the man's support and guidance to empower the woman to translate the agency to action. In addition to the male endorsement, the woman could be greatly encouraged if: (i) they had a supportive family who understood their need to continue education and they could avail of domestic help to provide crucial support for childcare and household maintenance.

(ii) workplaces allowed for flexibility which would include dependable hours, leave early, study leave, shorter work week etc. and opportunities for promotion and reimbursement/subsidy of fees. (iii) education providers designed the provision so that it encouraged the development of confidence and enhanced self esteem, paid close attention to the quality of the learning experiences and outcomes and improved the range and quality of education and training options available to women (REPLAN, 1991).

While education has the potential to provide both access and flexibility required to enable women to obtain qualifications needed to participate effectively in the new knowledge economies (Hyam, 2002), according to REPLAN (1991) education providers must keep in the mind the following while designing education options for women. (i) Women would benefit from active not passive learning, because when they engage in active learning they will be committed to their own learning and take responsibility for completing the course. (ii) Learning methods should be interactive and shared. Experience has shown that women prefer co-operative ways of working, enabling them to share ideas and experiences, to support each other through learning together. (iii) The importance of group learning, as well as support and encouragement. The position of the tutor as a member of that group and as a learner also, rather than an expert or teacher, is another key characteristic which has relevance to the methods used. (iv) Learning should be experiential whenever possible. This involves not only practising and doing but also pausing and reflecting, that is, from the experience. The opportunity to talk about experience is another important part of learning. (v) Learning methods should encourage and allow for affective (that is feelings) as well as cognitive (that is knowing and thinking) processes to be acknowledged and used. (vi) Learning methods that value and use prior knowledge and skills enable women to recognise their strengths and to (re)gain confidence in their abilities. This seems particularly important for women such as those in India who may feel that their knowledge and skills is inherently less value than others (i.e. males). (vii) Learning which sets challenges and allows women to assess their progress is important, so long as it takes place in a

supportive environment. Women want to know how well they are doing and how far they have improved. Self-assessment, peer-assessment, as well as externally imposed and validated assessment, can all be used, but the process must be sensitive and supportive. (viii) Learning which can be broken down into manageable pieces-by dividing a long course into a series of modules, for example- also allow for flexibility.

Women's lives can be fragmented and unpredictable; unforeseen events or accidents can interrupt study patterns. Having the flexibility of modules of learning can help women whose progress is unavoidably interrupted.

Workplaces could allow for flexibility of timings to enable women to continue education. They should ensure that there is no gender stereotyping regarding their ability and willingness to accept positions of responsibility, especially if long hours, travel and relocation are involved (Wirth, 2001). Instead, decisions regarding accepting positions of responsibilities must be based on competence, qualification and attitude.

In India, the primary role of the women remains that of a wife and mother. In such a social context for a woman to have a career is in itself a breaking the traditional mores; continuing with education, therefore, is pushing the boundaries even further. However, based on the small study it seems possible for Indian women to avail themselves of the educational opportunities opened up to them in recent years and reap the benefits of increased self-esteem, enhanced professional credibility and career opportunities. There is a prevalence of gender and category (racial) discrimination in Indian organizations where male employees rated female employees less qualified, less competent, and less productive than females rated themselves (Kundu, 2003).

Therefore, continuing education has the potential to increase the woman's professional credibility, reduce gender discrimination and allow for women to be considered for quality work based on their competence and qualification. As technology continues to evolve, continuing education would show their employers that they are interested in improving themselves and are not content to just do their job without taking any initiative (Thomas, 2000), secure more generously remunerated forms of work (Loutfi, 2001) and help break through the "glass ceiling" – the invisible barriers created by attitudinal and organisational prejudices that bar women from top executive jobs (Wirth, 2001).

Conclusion

The analysis of the narratives of the four women shows clearly that it is their individual intentionality and agency which shaped their decision to engage in continuing education. However, in addition to their intentionality and agency, their families, the educational institution and the workplace provided them with affordances to engage in their pursuit.

In Indian society, there are multiple barriers that stem from deep-rooted cultural attitudes and expectations underpinned by social and economic structures and policies that deter women from participating in continuing education. Since women's perceptions of themselves are largely shaped by society's attitudes to women, education needs to encourage a change in women's perceptions as a means of changing cultural attitudes to women.

In conclusion, the outcomes of this small study are twofold. Firstly, different arrangements must be made for women to participate in continuing education. These arrangements need to be understood in the socio cultural context that women find themselves in and not based on assumptions from the West. Education provisions need to take into account the circumstances in which they occur and must be organised to best meet the needs of local women. Educational institutions should develop and expand opportunities for targeted promotion campaigns using women as role models and promoting

the opportunities for women and at the same time make education accessible, flexible, of high quality, gender sensitive, and seriously emphasise girls' education in order to provide the foundation for life-long learning (Hyam, 2002).

Workplace should allow for less stressful work schedules, dependable work hours, along with the availability and acceptability of flexible working time arrangements and part-time work to enable women to engage in continuing education. In a tradition bound society like India, this may help balance their careers and their family responsibilities. The family system must extend emotional support and domestic support to enable women to devote time to education and career. Obviously, removing some of these barriers has resource implications which have to be acknowledged and addressed. But the greatest barriers are caused by negative attitudes and lack of knowledge and information, all of which can be remedied at no cost at all (REPLAN, 1991).

Secondly, it is not a matter of whether women have the ability or time to continue their education; it is whether they choose to do it. That is, they could have family, educational system and workplace affordances but it is finally their intentionality and agency which will shape their decision to engage in continuing education. Their intentionality and agency will allow them to engage with the affordances in cases where the degree of affordance is low. When working women look back a couple of years from now, their hands could be empty, or they could be holding a new diploma which in turn make them a strong confident women and help them connect to a changing workplace and show their employers they care about updating their skills.

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