

PROTECT YOUR CAREER TRAJECTORY

Motherhood goals and professional ambitions *can* coexist.
Kalwyna Rathod finds out how



Working moms seem to effortlessly balance two worlds and, while they're rarely applauded for this, they're often punished for their capabilities. Mumbai-based **Vineeta Dwivedi**, Associate Professor of Organisation and Leadership Studies – SP Jain Institute of Management & Research (SPJIMR), agrees that the 'motherhood penalty' is real, but she also believes that

women have the agency to counter it. "It is well known that women's careers suffer disproportionately after childbirth, not purely because of structural bias but because of deeply internal forces that quietly erode professional momentum. Centuries of gendered socialisation have positioned women as primary caregivers and secondary breadwinners."

Additionally, working mothers often feel they are



Vineeta Dwivedi

Shweta Kaushal

stealing time from their children when they invest in their own professional development. Kolkata-based **Shweta Kaushal**, Co-Founder – Creatorcult Media Private Limited, opines, "As women,

we constantly juggle multiple roles: family, children, and responsibilities. At times, we feel guilty about prioritising work over our loved ones. But what we often overlook is that our children are watching us closely. They see our resilience, our effort, and our commitment. This shapes them into stronger, more independent individuals who understand the value of hard work, money, and gratitude."

In extension, Vineeta cites psychologist Kristin Neff's (2011) foundational work on self-compassion, which argues that chronic, unexamined guilt does not make better mothers, but rather smaller professionals. She says, "Sheryl Sandberg popularised the concept of the 'confidence gap' in *Lean In*, and the academic evidence runs deeper. Researchers Kay and Shipman document how women systematically underestimate their competence and over-index on risk in their 2014 research. For working mothers, this doubt is amplified: every wobble in commitment, every early exit from a meeting, every skipped conference feels like evidence of diminishing capability. It rarely is."

Read on for tips on how you can protect your career trajectory as a working mom.

RETAIN YOUR ABILITY TO EARN

"No matter where you are in life or how much you earn, always retain your ability to earn," Shweta advises. "In today's world, opportunities are endless. Whether in the

corporate space or from the comfort of your home, there are multiple ways to build something meaningful without compromising your personal life. The key is to stay connected to your skills, keep learning, and never let go of your financial independence.”

Drawing from her own experiences, Shweta adds how, as a single parent, financial independence gave her the strength and confidence to make difficult decisions.

“It allowed me to walk away from a disrespectful marriage and raise my child on my own,” she reveals. “That courage came from knowing I could stand on my own feet.”

INVEST IN YOURSELF

Identify your signature strengths, then invest in them through courses, workshops, or mentors. In today’s competitive environment, it doesn’t pay to be a generalist. “Know what you are

good at,” Vineeta says. “This is the foundation of professional success, visibility, and growth, and it is also the basis of confident negotiation: you cannot sell what you have not named. Stay intellectually current – read newspapers, listen to podcasts, develop a point of view on your industry. Relevance is maintained by remaining active, and it has to be curated. The most compelling professionals, regardless of gender or parental status, are those who bring their own distinct perspective.”

STAY RELEVANT

Vineeta advocates building your profile with intention: “A strong LinkedIn presence, a published point of view, and a reputation for specific expertise create equity. Platforms today

allow women to establish authority independent of their employer’s endorsement. Use them.”

STAY NETWORKED

Also remember that networks go cold fast. So, stay in circulation – make deliberate, calendar-worthy commitments to professional communities such as industry bodies, alumni groups, and peer circles. “Visibility is important for professional survival,” Vineeta points out. “Sociologist Mark Granovetter’s landmark research, *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973), reminds us that opportunities travel through loose networks, not tight ones,” she adds.

EXPLORE OPTIONS

Today, there are numerous opportunities available

for women: freelancing, entrepreneurship, remote jobs, and more. “You can choose what aligns with your interests and lifestyle, but the important thing is to never lose your earning edge,” Shweta says. “Keep growing, keep learning. Your ability to earn is not just a skill, it is your strength.”

KNOW YOUR WORTH

Too many working mothers re-enter the workforce or absorb a lateral move in silence, grateful, just to have flexibility. “Professor Linda Babcock’s research shows that women who do not negotiate their starting salary lose over \$1 million in cumulative earnings across their careers (*Women Don’t Ask*, 2003),” Vineeta says. So, negotiate smarter, and frame your ask in terms of value delivered. “Negotiate beyond salary – flexible hours, remote days, development budgets, and a clear path to promotion are all on the table. Negotiate at performance reviews. Negotiate your visibility. And do not apologise for any of it.”

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PRIORITISE YOUR HAPPINESS

“Women in the caregiving years often stop being the protagonists of their own stories,” Vineeta shares. “They stop reading for pleasure, stop having opinions about things outside the home, and stop nurturing the intellectual identity that made them compelling professionals in the first place.” Recognise your patterns and don’t give in to the erosion of self-regard. **E**