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# THE GREAT INDIAN RETURN

## The State of India's Returning Women · 2026

*Millions of educated women are trying to come back to work. This is the story of what stands in their way — and what happens when the way opens.*

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**An Aspire For Her report, released with Shaadi.org**

#HerIndependence · Independence Day 2026

## Foreword

Every August, India measures its freedom in years. This report measures it differently — in careers paused and resumed, in incomes lost and reclaimed, in the distance between a woman's education and her economic independence.

Between the two of us, we see both ends of this story. One of us runs India's largest matchmaking platform, and watches, at scale, the life event around which most women's careers quietly pause. The other runs India's largest women's workforce movement, and watches what it takes to bring those careers back to life. This report puts numbers to what we see every day: the talent is not missing. It is locked out — and it is banging on the door.

The data that follows comes from India's official statistics, the best available independent research, and — for the first time in the public domain — the application funnels of Aspire For Her's own returnship programs, run with some of India's largest employers. We end with an agenda: five things employers, families and policymakers can do to turn the Great Indian Pause into the Great Indian Return.

**Anupam Mittal**, Founder & CEO, People Group · **Madhura DasGupta Sinha**, Founder & CEO, Aspire For Her

## Six findings at a glance

|                                                                                                  |                                                                          |                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>131 / 148</b><br>India's Global Gender Gap rank, 2025 — bottom five on economic participation | <b>50%</b><br>of working mothers quit their jobs by age 30               | <b>27%</b><br>of women who take a break ever return to work                    |
| <b>~7 million</b><br>women actively seeking to return right now                                  | <b>–24 pts</b><br>hiring penalty for an identical CV with a career break | <b>129 : 1</b><br>applications per seat in a single returnship AFH ran in 2025 |

1. India's female workforce participation is rising on paper — but the rise is rural and self-employment-driven. The urban, formal-sector pathway back to work remains broken.
2. The career break is a marriage-and-motherhood story: half of working mothers are gone by thirty, and barely a quarter of leavers ever return.
3. Demand from women is surging: AFH's own returnship funnels show applications more than doubling in three years, with application-to-seat ratios crossing 100:1.
4. The lock is on the employer's side: a career break costs a woman 24 percentage points of hire-ability, and only 35% of companies run any structured return program.
5. Returnships work: employers report returnee performance on par or better, with stronger retention than regular hires — when the first 90 days are supported.
6. The prize is macroeconomic: credible estimates of closing the gender participation gap run from \$700 billion to \$1.4 trillion of additional GDP.

## 1. The paradox: rising numbers, broken pathways

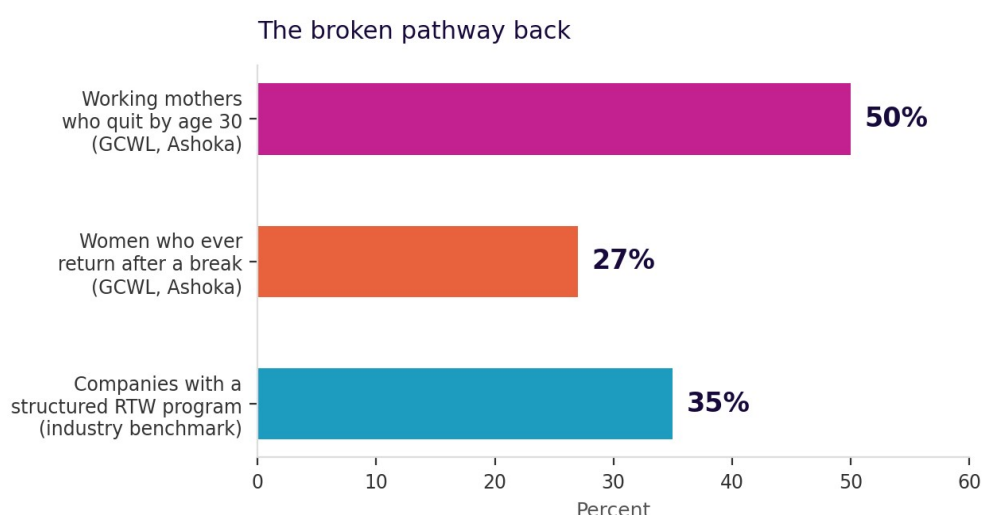
India's headline female labour force participation rate has climbed to 41.7% (PLFS 2023-24) — a number that, taken alone, suggests a problem solving itself. It is not. Researchers at CEDA (Ashoka University) and the EAC-PM have shown the rise is concentrated in rural India and driven substantially by self-employment and unpaid family work. In urban India — where the educated career woman lives, marries and pauses — participation remains stuck near 25%.

The global comparison is stark. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025 ranks India 131st of 148 economies, in the bottom five worldwide on economic participation and opportunity — only Egypt, Sudan, Iran and Pakistan fare worse. The average Indian woman's estimated earned income is roughly \$4,150 a year, against \$13,870 for a man.

**The paradox in one sentence:** India educates its daughters like never before, and employs them like almost nowhere else on earth.

## 2. The locked-out talent

The pause begins with marriage and deepens with motherhood. Research by the Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership at Ashoka University finds that 50% of working mothers in India quit their jobs by the age of thirty — and only 27% of women who take a career break ever return to the workforce. The World Bank (2021) estimates 31% of Indian women exit the formal workforce altogether.



Sources: Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership, Ashoka University; industry benchmarking data 2023-24 (via Udaiti Foundation, The Comeback Workforce, 2025)

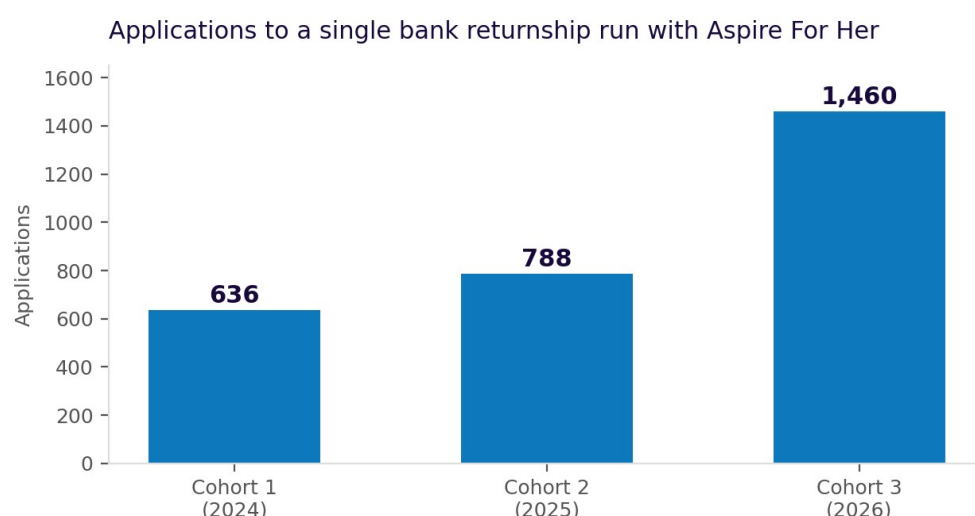
This is not a story of fading ambition. An estimated 7 million women are actively seeking to return to work right now (industry estimates). Globally, women are 43% more likely than men to carry a career break on their profiles (LinkedIn Economic Graph), and studies consistently find that the overwhelming majority of educated stay-at-home mothers intend to return.

What stands in their way is a hiring wall. A 2023 survey by The Udaiti Foundation (TUF WIIIn) found that a woman with a career break is 24 percentage points less likely to be hired than an identical

male candidate. And the penalty follows those who do get through: Aon's 2024 research found 75% of women report career setbacks for up to two years after maternity, with 40% experiencing pay cuts or role downgrades.

### 3. The demand signal — what our own data shows

Aspire For Her has delivered 25+ returnship and re-entry programs since 2022 with employers including DBS Bank, Myntra, HSBC, Google, Deutsche Bank, Morgan Stanley, AWS, NPCI, Capgemini, Nomura, NTT, Blue Yonder, Kotak, Yes Bank, Persistent and Adobe. The application funnels of these programs are, to our knowledge, the largest real-time measure of Indian women's demand to return — published here for the first time.



Source: Aspire For Her returnship program records, 2024–2026

- **One bank's returnship:** applications grew 636 → 788 → 1,460 across three consecutive cohorts (2024–2026) — a 130% rise in three years — with 20 women placed in full-time roles across technology, risk, finance, wealth and data analytics.
- **One e-commerce returnship:** more than 11,000 applications in a single season for a handful of seats — an application-to-seat ratio above 100:1, repeated the following year (7,701 applications).
- **The community behind the funnel:** a 25,000+ strong Return-to-Work Network within Aspire For Her's 1.1 million-member community, supported by 500+ senior women mentors.

**Read those ratios the way an economist would:** when 11,000 qualified people apply for a handful of jobs, the market is not short of talent. It is short of doors. Women have not merely decided to return — they have already begun returning. The hiring system has not caught up.

### 4. The 90-day cliff

Getting hired is not the finish line. Program experience across the industry — and Aspire For Her's own cohorts — points to the first 90 days as the moment of maximum fragility, when childcare logistics, confidence dips, outdated-skill anxiety and unsupportive team environments converge.

Industry estimates suggest close to half of returners who drop out do so in this window; our program design treats it as the single highest-risk phase of the entire journey.

The countermeasures are unglamorous and effective: a named mentor through the first quarter, structured check-ins, manager sensitisation, flexible ramp-up, and a peer cohort so no woman returns alone. Where these exist, the cliff becomes a slope.

## 5. In her own words: what the community tells us

Why is coming back so hard? Writing in BusinessWorld (“Returning Women: The Unseen Economic Lever”, April 2024), one of this report’s authors described three compounding barriers. The **external**: batchmates and ex-colleagues have moved ahead, bosses may be years younger, and India’s hyper-consciousness of position and status makes that hard to digest. The **internal**: a confidence deficit that builds through years outside a corporate world which measures worth in economic terms — dated skills, and a woman too quick to read herself as a ‘failure’. And the **organisational**: ecosystems full of men whose wives run their homes, unsure how to treat a returning woman — “too harsh or too kind, both of which do not help.” Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin’s lens sits underneath all three: modern careers are ‘greedy’ — they disproportionately reward the person who can give overtime, evenings and weekends, and quietly price out the person who cannot.

The community’s feedback maps exactly onto that triad. Responses from Aspire For Her’s 25,000+ Return-to-Work Network surface five challenges again and again — a pattern consistent enough that we treat it as the returning woman’s obstacle course:

- **The stigma wall**: very few employers are genuine takers for returnee talent. Women report applications disappearing the moment the gap is visible — interviews that never come, or come with the gap as the only topic.
- **The pay-parity penalty**: returners are routinely offered less than colleagues who were at par with them before the break — a discount applied to the pause, not the person, and one that compounds over every subsequent appraisal.
- **Batchmates become bosses**: the returning woman often reports into people who were once her peers — a test of mental resilience that no returnship brochure mentions, and one of the most cited emotional hurdles in our community.
- **The sensitivity gap**: corporate environments often handle returners with less sensitivity than intended — managers untrained for the transition, teams that read the gap as rustiness, small daily signals that she is on probation in a way others are not.
- **The result — early attrition**: these four pressures converge in the first months back, and returns that took years of courage end within one appraisal cycle. Early attrition is not evidence that women cannot return; it is evidence of how they are returned.

### The pulse survey: early numbers

A rapid survey of the Return-to-Work Network, fielded for this report (August 2026; early responses, fieldwork continuing), puts numbers to these themes:

|                                                        |                                                             |                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>87%</b><br>took their break for marriage, maternity | <b>96%</b><br>believe their skills are still relevant today | <b>91%</b><br>feel the break has hurt their hiring |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|

|                                                                    |                                                                           |                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| or family care                                                     |                                                                           | chances                                                |
| <b>74%</b><br>say employers are not serious about hiring returnees | <b>1 in 23</b><br>rates employers as “very serious” about returnee hiring | <b>17%</b><br>believe returning women receive fair pay |

Career-gap bias is the single most-cited obstacle (48%), ahead of confidence and skills (30%) and family responsibilities (17%). Asked what would make them trust an employer’s commitment, respondents chose flexible work policies (35%), career development support (26%), structured returnship programs (26%) and equal pay (13%) — a ready-made blueprint for any employer serious about this talent pool.

## Ready, experienced — and waiting on the last mile

A larger survey of the Return-to-Work community deepens the picture — and corrects two stereotypes. First, this is not predominantly junior talent waiting to be trained: **seven in ten respondents had already reached mid-level, senior-management or leadership positions before their break** — which makes the economic waste concrete. Second, the notion that returners only want reduced work does not survive contact with the data: **87% are open to full-time roles**. Flexibility is an openness, not a ceiling — it does not mean reduced ambition.

The skilling ask is strikingly current: 73% want capability in AI tools and 55% in digital skills. She is not asking “help me catch up.” She is asking **“help me re-enter the workforce that exists now.”** And a quarter of respondents are unsure which of today’s roles to target — a navigation need, not a capability gap.

**This is not a passive talent pool waiting to be motivated.** Most respondents are experienced, ready to return, actively applying and open to full-time work. Yet their strongest ask is not another résumé workshop: 96% want job opportunities, 82% want referrals and 75% want direct connections to hiring partners. The missing piece is the bridge between readiness and employment.

Read together, the surveys reframe the challenge. The return is a **matching problem across three interfaces — the woman, the skill-and-role transition, and the employer**. It takes nothing away from her capability to recognise that career breaks create genuine navigation and skills-transition needs. That bridge is precisely what Aspire For Her builds.

## 6. What works: the evidence for returnships

A decade ago, fewer than 5% of Indian companies ran any return-to-work program. Today that figure is 35% (industry benchmarking, 2023-24) — real progress, and still a 65% gap. The same research finds 61% of employers now view returnee programs as a key channel for quality talent, and 75% confirm that returning women perform on par with or better than their peers. Documented corporate programs report returnee retention exceeding that of regular hires.

Aspire For Her’s model —  $E^3 = MC^3$  — treats the return as a system, not an event: Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship outcomes, unlocked by Mentors & Role Models multiplied by Courses & Cohorts, Career Previews and Community Support. Six women from our community and

campaign show what the return looks like — through employment, entrepreneurship and every path in between:

- **Usha, Visakhapatnam** — telecom engineer, then banker; a 16-year break; restarted in 2022 after her husband's Parkinson's diagnosis; self-taught in cloud technology; today a Cloud FinOps Lead heading a 50-person team.
- **Priti, Dhule** — widowed during Covid with two children; began again on 10 January 2022 as an Abacus educator, teaching online and offline — the small-town comeback that never trends and always counts.
- **Ruchita, Mumbai** — engineering topper; a 22-year break; today Chief Growth Officer at Aspire For Her, running the returnship programs that bring thousands of women behind her back to work.
- **Pujarini, East Midnapore** — first graduate in her family; married at 21, a mother at 23; restarted with nothing but a phone and her own voice, building an audience of nearly a million as a creator — proof that the new economy's on-ramps reach rural Bengal.
- **Deepa, Tirupur** — left her corporate job for an arranged marriage; fought confinement and depression; turned a homemade health mix into Some More Foods and the First Spoon brand — today an exporting enterprise drawing acquisition offers, and an EntrepreneNaari creating livelihoods for other families.
- **Sangita, Mumbai** — endured an unsafe marriage for nine years; began part-time sales work in school hours and rose to Regional Sales Manager in under five years; walked away with her two daughters, then trained 1,000+ women as sales agents and built one of Mumbai's strongest communities for women professionals — authoring her first book at 55.

## Proof from the programs

The individual stories are backed by program-level results from Aspire For Her's Return-to-Work operations:

- **The skilling-to-job pipeline:** 300+ women on career breaks upskilled in cloud technology through a global technology partner, within a tech community where 26,000+ women have been skilled in cloud — and 300+ women placed from the community to date.
- **A national returnee job fair, held with a UN agency:** 3,500+ registrations and 3,000+ job applications from returning women; 200+ interviews; marquee employers across consulting, banking, technology and media hiring at the event — and every attendee leaving with an updated profile, interview practice and renewed confidence.
- **One woman's pathway — the full journey in one case:** a 3-year gap and no callbacks; a cloud reskilling cohort on the AFH platform; job-readiness and returnee-success sessions; three interview calls through the job fair, mentored through each — and a full-time HR leadership role at a global customer-experience firm. Skilling, community, opportunity, mentorship: the E<sup>3</sup> = MC<sup>3</sup> system, end to end.
- **Comebacks across employers:** community members have completed successful returns into global technology, consulting and banking majors — stories shared through our "SheDares to Return" series, because if she can see it, she can be it.
- **Employer engagement that converts:** a single multinational bank's returnee program drew 579 applications, with online panels and a final-interview event at the bank's offices; 89% of webinar attendees reported feeling confident enough to apply.

And employers are learning what works on their side of the table: paid internships and ‘trial periods’ that de-risk the return for both parties, sensitisation of hiring managers and business leaders, day-in-the-life office visits, and a ‘talent-first, role-later’ strategy that crafts the best possible role around the woman rather than filtering her against an old job description. The reward is real: returning women are talented, eager to prove themselves, and fiercely loyal to the organisations that took the risk on them. All they need is a gentle slope back — and a family that encourages them every day.

## 7. The agenda: from pause to return

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### For employers — five specific moves:

- **Open the door.** Treat returnee hiring as a genuine talent channel — and publish roles specifically accessible to career-break candidates.
- **Map before you filter.** A quarter of returning women are unsure which of today’s roles to target. Help translate pre-break experience into your current role architecture rather than forcing them to self-select perfectly.
- **Bridge, don’t restart.** Seven in ten were mid-level or above before the break — do not automatically reset experienced women to entry-level roles.
- **Make flexibility compatible with ambition.** 87% are open to full-time work; remote and hybrid options matter enormously. Then engineer the first 90 days — named mentors, flexible ramp-up, manager training, peer cohorts.
- **Build re-entry around today’s workplace.** AI tools are the single most-requested capability area — focused bridge-skilling beats generic training.

### For families:

- Treat her income as essential, not optional — economic independence is protection, dignity and partnership.

### For policy and ecosystem:

- Measure the return: publish re-entry and retention data by sector, and recognise employers who close the gap. The prize — per CSEP and McKinsey estimates — runs from \$700 billion to \$1.4 trillion in additional GDP.

*“India already has an experienced, prepared and actively searching returner workforce. The failure is in the last mile — translating experience into current roles, updating skills where needed, creating flexible pathways and, above all, connecting ready women to employers willing to hire them.”*

**A pause is not a full stop. It’s a chapter break.** This Independence Day, Shaadi.org and Aspire For Her invite every employer and every family to help a woman resume her dream.  
#HerIndependence

## Methodology

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This report combines (a) official statistics and peer-published research, cited below; (b) proprietary program data from Aspire For Her's returnship and community operations, 2022–2026, anonymised and aggregated; and (c) findings from the AFH R2W pulse survey (August 2026), an earlier structured survey of the Return-to-Work community (seniority, work preferences, skilling and support asks), and community feedback across the Return-to-Work Network (Section 5) — pulse figures reflect early responses with fieldwork continuing, and percentages are indicative of the community, not the national population. Partner-specific figures are published with reference to program category rather than client name except where already public. Figures flagged as industry estimates (the 90-day drop-out pattern) reflect program experience and are presented as directional, not census-grade. Community figures are as of mid-2026.

## Sources

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2. World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2025 — India country profile; economic participation and opportunity sub-index; estimated earned income.
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10. LinkedIn Economic Graph — career-break prevalence by gender.
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## About

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**Aspire For Her** is a mission-led movement founded by Madhura DasGupta Sinha which brought a million women to the economy and is striding towards 10 million by 2030 — through 30+ communities, 550,000+ members skilled, 19,550+ placements and 100+ corporate partners. [aspireforher.com](https://aspireforher.com)



**Shaadi.org** is the social initiative of Shaadi.com, challenging the ills that surround marriage in India — from dowry to the pressures on women’s ambition — through storytelling, digital tools and campaigns at national scale.

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