Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently announced special incentives to bring women scientists back to the work force. Faced with a huge resource crunch in science and technology, the government is belatedly trying the tap the huge potential lying unused in educated women. Realising that qualified women scientists give up careers in order to raise families, take care of them or even follow their husband to a new place of work where she consequently becomes unemployed, these incentives and packages aim to bring qualified women back to science. This is an important step taken by the government although it remains to be seen what specific forms these incentives will be and whether they will be sufficient to motivate the women. At this point, media reports state the government has suggested contractual positions specifically designated for women in public-funded institutions as well as transferable fellowships. The new initiatives alert us to several other issues which we need to reflect on.

Firstly, in its obsession with S&T, the government has forgotten about the existence of women in other fields who are equally well-educated and sacrificing their careers. Since Independence, India has been taken up by the bogey of science, and in the past two decades there have been several voices demanding accountability regarding the funds poured into S&T. Isn't it time we made government funds a little more inclusive of other disciplines?

Secondly, assuming many women take this opportunity to get their careers back on track, low re-entry salaries are to be expected and may even be justifiable to some extent. Although salary for re-entry into the work force cannot be equal to what the woman would have got with a continuous career, it is untenable that she be doomed forever to a salary trajectory determined by a lower re-entry salary, provided she meets the job expectations. Organisational structures and human resource practices must be sensitive to this issue so that returning women's intellectual capital is not overly and endlessly exploited. We can't penalise women for having left the work force to do something that is important to us as a society; and we certainly mustn't penalise her forever. Focusing on 'deliverables' or 'output', to use corporate jargon, will help narrow this salary gap before it becomes a chasm.

Although it remains to be seen how the government incentives work, and whether their scope can be broadened, the announcement also reminds us of the sorry situation of educated women giving up jobs and careers for their family which continues unabated. While the situation has changed to some extent in select strata in our country, it is still common to see women give up careers as soon as their marriage is 'fixed' or soon after getting married. There are myriad reasons put forth for this such as the desire to start a family, the lack of financial necessity to work since the husband is earning 'enough' etc.

While there is nothing wrong with doing this if the woman herself wants to do so, it is debatable whether many of them are actually doing it out of their own free will. Once women have been bitten by the bug of education and work, they, like men, find it hard to let go of their jobs simply because there is no financial need to work. This is shown by younger women entering the work force in recent times who are unwilling to let go of jobs so easily even when they start a family. Some corporates have become attuned to this and provide 'paternity leave' whereby fathers can stay at home to take care of the newborn, as well as crèche facilities.

These are small steps and what needs to be done is to change the culture of organisations by factoring the role played by women in family and society. Since the dominant ethos is formed by the IT sector now and is biased towards the young, the belief that a younger person can do the job of an experienced person (and at a cheaper salary) is hard to eradicate. Yet, repeatedly organisations which are not driven by the IT mentality find that older women who return to work are more focused, work harder and deliver better quality work. If they then want to retain such high-quality labour, organisations need to dynamically address the salary gap, in addition to providing more supportive work environments.

The kind of women these incentives target also remains to be seen. In and out of science, there are a substantial number of single women, in addition to the married ones, who have stayed at home to take care of sick or ageing parents. Their contribution to society is seldom recognised — perhaps because taking care of the old is not nurturing a new labour force as younger women are doing with their own children. Yet, without this being included, the notion of 'family' as a reason to remain out of the workforce is incomplete. Prospective employers rarely are able to accept staying at home to take care of elderly or otherwise needy family members as a valid reason for having dropped out of the work force.

Given the current labour situation everywhere in India, not just in the metros, it is increasingly difficult to find reliable household help to perform these tasks and women end up bearing this too. As usual, the women who continue to sacrifice for the sake of the 'family' remain unsung heroines, even as they get repeatedly rejected for jobs when they return to work, or face an insurmountable salary gap or even patronising attitudes from their male colleagues. Society benefits from having the elderly taken care of, but doesn't value the time and energy sacrificed by the person doing it.

While it is commendable that women scientists are being given a second chance at a career, it is equally important that other sectors catch up and create spaces for educated and experienced women to return to work. More employers need to start factoring the sacrifices that women make for families and society. In addition, organisations must create supportive environments and policies to enable women (and men) to assume their share of family responsibilities. Flexible timings and output-related evaluations must find a place. If we value the family as a society, organisational culture has to change in order to proactively create a new work culture for women with family responsibilities, even as we wait for the men to do their share of work for the 'family'.

(Views expressed in the column are the author's own)