

The Digital Shift: Remote Work, Gender Inequalities, and the Transformation of Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic in India

Lakshita BHAGAT¹, Bidisha BANERJI²

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Centre for Women's Leadership

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread adoption of remote work, driven by lockdowns and social distancing. Digital technology played a crucial role in transitioning jobs from physical to virtual spaces. This study, based on an online survey, explores the transformation of work in India, focusing on gendered implications, work experiences, and work-family balance. Findings highlight the paradox of remote work, offering flexibility and autonomy while intensifying work-life tensions, especially for women, who juggled professional and domestic roles. Notably, men had dedicated workspaces, whereas women often worked in shared or less private areas, reinforcing existing gender inequalities. The study calls for structural interventions, including gender-sensitive workplace policies, equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities, and improved digital access. While digital work offers new possibilities, it also risks deepening gender disparities unless labour policies and societal attitudes evolve to address these challenges.

Keywords: Covid-19, digital transformation, gender, flexible work, India, remote work/WFH, work-family conflict

Introduction

For the world of work, these are indeed “exciting times,” marked by the emergence of new ways of working, technological innovations, and widespread disruptions. The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a natural catalyst in reshaping both the meaning and the nature of work. This ongoing transformation is monumental in its magnitude and impact on people, businesses, and society at large in the 21st century. Similar to previous industrial revolutions, such as the transition

¹ Dr Lakshita Bhagat (lakshitabhagat01@gmail.com) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University School of Liberal Arts (USLA), Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi, India.

² Dr Bidisha Banerji (banerjib@gmail.com) is Director, Research – Centre for Women's Leadership at Vedaica, India.



from agrarian to industrial economies, the rise of mass production under Fordism, and the digital age that reshaped communication and business, the present era is redefining labour markets and economic structures, with far-reaching social consequences. Crucially, the pandemic-induced reconfiguration of work has intersected with existing gendered divisions of labour in profound ways. Women's participation in the labour force has continued to coexist with their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore the reshaping of work, particularly the shift toward digital work during the pandemic period, from a gender perspective, given the embedded inequalities in gender roles.

While past industrial revolutions transformed economies over decades, current changes are occurring at an unprecedented scale and speed. On the one hand, the spectacular changes, and innovations in the digital technology, represented by the ongoing Fourth Industrial Revolution, present enormous potential in the form of increased efficiency, quality of work, productivity, safety, nature of work and overall economy (Schwab 2017; Ross/Maynard 2021). On the flipside, the technological upheavals have been flagged to cause jobs losses, increase workforce vulnerability, introduce cyber threats, and compromise privacy, among other concerns (Soh/Minwoo/Connolly 2020; Datta 2023). According to a World Economic Forum (WEF) report, while Artificial Intelligence (AI) may create more than 90 million new roles, around 85 million jobs will be lost to AI at present (Narayan 2023). India is a service- and manufacturing-led economy. The Indian Economic Survey 2024-25 thus underlines its labour force's vulnerability to AI and presents strategies to upskill its workforce (Barik 2025).

Moving beyond the chronological framework to assess the extent of changes in the world of work, a look at present global and country specific scenarios further reveals the spectrum and shades of change or lack thereof in labour markets. Illustratively, in many advanced industrial economies, there are active discussions and associated experiments happening with four-day work weeks. In 2022, Belgium became the first country worldwide to legalise the four-day work week, with the inbuilt caveat that the employees can choose to complete their weekly working hours within four instead of usual five days. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has also shortened its working days. Following suit, countries such as Spain, Germany, Portugal, and the UK, are dabbling with the four-day-work week concept by launching pilot programmes to test the waters, and other countries, such as Japan, are encouraging companies to shorten work days. Advocates of a shorter work week argue that it enhances productivity, promotes employee well-being, and improves work-life balance. In stark contrast, India is witnessing calls for extending weekly working hours, sparking intense debate. Proposals by two leading industrialists to raise working hours to 70-90 per week, supposedly to promote economic growth and enhance workforce efficiency, have ignited a fiery national discussion (The Economic Times 2025). Criticism of such endorsements have included adverse impact on mental wellbeing, physical health, and poor work-life balance. Meanwhile, as the debate rages on, there have been reports of death by alleged overwork of an employee in a multinational company that caught widespread attention (Mollan 2024). These divergences in discourse around work are shaped by various factors such as economic landscape, level of unemployment, development trajectory, demographic dynamics, workplace norms, culture, and individual level factors such as aspirations and orientation.

As countries navigate these discussions, the evolving nature of work continues to reflect broader societal and economic transformations.

While work is not only limited to remunerative activities, its understanding predominantly remains tied to direct financial aspects. Nevertheless, the understanding of work has evolved to recognise forms of unpaid labour such as domestic work and care work. A growing debate on the sexual division of labour and egalitarian distribution of work emphasises how the focus on paid labour has undervalued unpaid work, primarily performed by women, despite its crucial role in sustaining society (Folbre 1994; Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017). The overlooking of unpaid work carries profound implications for women in terms of economic security, and social status. These disparities were further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only disrupted traditional work patterns but also intensified the challenges associated with balancing paid and unpaid labour. The pandemic, along with lockdowns and social distancing measures, reshaped the world of work, accelerating digital transformation and expanding the digital economy through remote work.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused seismic changes in how individuals work, socialise, and maintain their everyday lives. In March 2020, the Indian government initiated the first of several lockdowns, requiring over a billion people to remain indoors. The intersection of work and family experienced unprecedented disruption, erasing the lines between paid and unpaid labour. This paper aims to examine the gendered effects of the pandemic by focusing on disruptions within the work domain. There has been a significant departure from traditional work patterns and styles, particularly during and after the COVID pandemic. Today, technology heavily influences what we define as work. Work relationships and structures have also been fundamentally transformed. The manner and environment in which people work have experienced deep changes and continue to evolve rapidly. Nonetheless, the impacts of digitisation and shifts in work have often been unequal and discriminatory. While some groups have borne the brunt of these substantial changes, others have reaped considerable benefits.

The process of digitisation has significantly influenced nearly every facet of our lives. Its impact on society is indeed remarkable. While technology has historically played a role in societal transformation, its evolution subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. The pandemic has initiated one of the most substantial economic, social, psychological, and humanitarian crises in recorded history. In contemporary society, technology has emerged as a dominant force in redefining the concept of work.

This article examines the impact of technological advancements on work experience with a gendered lens, and their consequences for the future work environment. It also investigates how both individuals and organisations can equip themselves for this future through upskilling. Following this introduction, the paper features a review of literature, and research methodology that highlights our survey. We then provide the results, and discussion of these findings, followed by policy implications. The final section provides the conclusion.

Review of Literature

This section provides an overview of the theoretical framework and extant empirical literature underpinning the study. The section covers the dynamics of gendered parenting during the

pandemic period, the impact on women's labour force participation, technology and work, and finally explores the digital inequalities.

Intensification of care work

The pandemic intensified existing gendered inequalities in parenting and household responsibilities. With schools, day-care centres, and domestic support services closed, care burdens were transferred entirely onto households, primarily on women. Research from India demonstrates that women were disproportionately affected by these additional responsibilities, exacerbating their "second shift" of unpaid domestic work (Hochschild/Machung 1989). While men's contributions to household work increased slightly during lockdowns, studies indicate that women continued to perform the lion's share of childcare and domestic labour (Agarwal 2021).

The pandemic had a more significant detrimental effect on women's job advancement than it had on men's, particularly in the aftermath of school closures and increasing childcare obligations (Lafkas/Christensen/Madsen 2023). This mixed-method survey conducted to understand the impact of the pandemic on women's careers found that many women who responded believed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their career advancement trajectories. The setbacks were employer-related, such as limiting promotions due to economic uncertainty. At the same time, the post-pandemic era saw a change in patterns and priorities of men of working age as well. For example, the study of Kasymova et al. (2019) showed that Croatia, India, and Mexico have made efforts to promote paternal involvement in childcare through national-level policy initiatives. The approaches and rationales for promoting paternal involvement varied across the three countries. While Croatia focused on redistributing childcare responsibilities within the family, India and Mexico emphasised work-family balance and women's labour force participation. Parental leave policies differed across countries, with some excluding mothers in the informal sector. The study recommends both parents to be entitled to leave and policies to be nontransferable, job-protecting, adequately paid, and flexible. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD1994) Programme of Action recommended increasing men's involvement in parenting over twenty years ago. However, women still spend more time on childcare than men globally.

Work-family boundary blurring: implications for gender roles and division of labour

With the public health measures like lockdown put in place to tackle the spread of virus, the Covid-19 pandemic collapsed the boundaries between the work and home domains. Historically, the separation between public and private spheres is relatively recent (Habermas, 1989). Before the advent of the industrialisation, and associated forces of modernisation in various parts of the world, the domestic sphere often functioned simultaneously as both a private and an economic space (Engels, 1884). As people, especially men, began migrating away from home in search of industrial jobs shifting from agrarian work, the distinction between the public and private spheres became sharp and acquired a visible gendered dimension (Pateman, 1989). Resultantly, as the mode of production shifted away from the household, women, who used to be part of the house-based economy, become exclusively responsible for unpaid domestic and care work while men expected to bring bread to the home (Oakley 1974; Hochschild/Machung

1989). This gender-based segregation of public and private spheres, involving the sexual division of labour, has been challenged by feminist activism calling for egalitarian gender roles. However, Covid-19 brought massive unprecedented changes in the organisation of life and work as the ostensibly neat division between work and home got distorted (Clark 2000). As a developing country with a mix of tradition and modernity, the impact of the Covid-19-mandated lockdowns in India was complex, and having been layered with direct implications for work and home carried gendered consequences.

When paid work entered the private household domain, the simultaneous spatial management of these two conflicting domains ruptured the assumptions regarding work and family. Digital remote work blurred the boundaries between unpaid care, household chores and paid work, which hitherto were carried out in separate spatial spaces. While the separation of private and public spheres was a relatively gradual socio-economic process, the merging of two domains in the wake of health emergency was profoundly abrupt. In such scenario, implications of the pandemic pertaining to work, gender and the sexual division of labour have long term consequences. The existing literature points towards a visible gendered nature of the pandemic in terms of the organisation of work. For instance, Craig and Churchill (2020) found that mothers working from home reported significantly higher time pressures and greater role conflict compared to fathers, a pattern echoed in Indian urban contexts. These blurred boundaries contributed to heightened stress and emotional exhaustion among female professionals balancing multiple responsibilities. While, on one hand, the pandemic reinforced conventional gender roles, on the flipside, such natural experiments also provide scope for renegotiation. Yerkes et al. (2020) argue that shared caregiving experiences during lockdowns may shift social norms in the long run. In India, however, evidence remains mixed, with structural and cultural barriers continuing to restrict fathers' deeper involvement in everyday parenting.

Women's participation in the workforce

India's labour force participation was lopsided with low female labour force participation rates even before the pandemic hit in 2020 (World Bank 2019). A host of factors are attributed to this imbalance including cultural norms, lack of employment opportunities, mobility restrictions, public safety, and transportation (Deshpande 2024). The pandemic disproportionately impacted women's employment in both the informal and formal sector, however, the effect being larger in the former.

Research in Delhi (India) in 2021 utilises the Multidimensional Artisan Survey (DMAS-T) to measure women's work, particularly their participation in household enterprises. The research shows that the lockdown significantly negatively impacted men's and women's employment. However, women experienced a more significant decline compared to men, with a reduction of 72% for women compared to 40% for men. This highlights the vulnerability of women wage workers and the need for employment protection and safety nets specifically designed to protect them. The specific nature of the lockdown, which restricted physical movement, had a differential impact on different occupations and industries. Urban employment was particularly affected, as most metropolitan areas in the sample fell under severe restrictions. In contrast, women in agriculture were less affected by the lockdown than men in small businesses (Desai/Deshmukh/Pramanik 2021).

Technology and work during and post Covid-19

The pandemic catalysed rapid digitalisation across workplaces, with organisations adopting tools such as Zoom and Teams to continue work (Brynjolfsson et al. 2020). This digital shift, while critical for business continuity, also redefined expectations of availability and productivity, negatively impacting those with restricted resources. A study conducted on COVID-19 and the digital revolution highlights that the pandemic has led to an increase in the use of digital solutions, such as data collection techniques and e-health treatments (Hantrais et al. 2021). The authors provide evidence from different areas of expertise about the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on digital society. It has also highlighted the ethical, political, and legal issues raised by using artificial intelligence, for example, in surveillance and the many risks associated with online opportunities, such as digital influencing and disinformation. The authors also note that families were unequally positioned when faced with the technological challenges of being locked down, and some families struggled more than others to find reliable health information or effective ways of working online.

Gendered digital inequalities

With economic and technological advancements, the meaning and operationalisation of work has undergone sweeping changes. Push towards digital/remote work is mediated by access to digital technology and information. In his seminal work, Castells (1996) conceptualised the 'network society' as one in which access to digital technologies is the determining factor in participation in economic, social, and political life. However, access to digital resources is not evenly distributed, instead it is shaped by existing social and economic structures. Women who are without digital devices and internet access get systematically excluded from the structure of opportunities, be it economic, political or others, built upon digital technology. The gap between digital haves and have nots is conceptualised by Norris (2001) as digital divide. She argues this digital rift is not merely about access to technology but it permeates as a broader gap in knowledge economies, political and civic participation. Refining the concept further, van Dijk (2005) frames digital inequality as stratified across four dimensions, i.e., access, skills, usage, and outcomes. In India, the digital divide is starkly gendered, with women facing lower levels of digital skills, literacy, access, and social restriction on technology use.

While remote work may provide for continued participation in paid work to women in formal sectors, however, for many other women, remote work can be a disempowering phenomenon. Remote work assumes access to reliable internet network, private digital device, and skills. However, women who lack access to the digital resources might face barriers and exclusion in paid work. Therefore, digital inequalities can play out as a cause and a consequence of women's marginalisation in labour market.

Gendered disparities in digital adoption have been evident in India. Studies reveal that in households with shared devices, men often retain priority access, restricting women's ability to participate in remote work. Women's lower levels of digital literacy and confidence further constrained their ability to adapt to new digital workplace demands (UNESCO 2022).

Remote work offered both promise and peril. For professional women in formal sectors, remote work allowed continued participation in paid employment, particularly where organisations adopted flexible arrangements (Bahn/Cohen/van der Meulen Rodgers 2020). However, for many others, the absence of digital access, limited home infrastructure, and employer biases reinforced barriers. Remote work often translated into an intensification of unpaid care work alongside professional duties, rather than a genuine opportunity for empowerment. Moreover, remote work comes with the risk of an “always-on” work culture that intensifies stress and surveillance (Chung/Seo/Forbes/Birkett 2020). Therefore, without appropriate policy measures, hybrid work may end up perpetuating the very inequalities it seeks to resolve.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the transformation of work during the Covid-19 pandemic from a gender perspective.
2. To investigate how work and family life were managed during the pandemic and the possibilities of reinforcement or negotiation of traditional gender roles.
3. The benefits and empowerment of digital/remote work for people.
4. To understand how the nature of work changed due to digital transformation.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic debate on the future of work and gendered consequences of digital transformation.

Research Methodology

Definitions and concepts

The aim of this research is to investigate the changing nature of work, understood here as work done digitally or online, and explore its impact on women and men during the Covid-19 pandemic in India. Before we proceed further, it is important to understand the terms ‘digitalisation of work’ and digital work. The former term refers to incorporation of data and digital technologies into the workplace for overall work and organisation optimisation, whereas digital work refers to any work that is executed using digital technologies and tools. The ever-shifting world of work has made it difficult to agree to one of its kind definitions of digital work- what counts as digital work. Such disagreements and confusions are bound to arise amidst the digital transformation penetrating each aspect of our lives (United Nations n. d.). To exemplify, digital technologies has given rise to new types of work that did not exist before like social media content creators and influencers. To set the focus of the study in terms of conceptual understanding and setting the boundaries as to what counts as digital work, the analytical framework offered by Baiyere, Schneider and Stein (2023) is utilised along with the above mentioned meaning of digital work. Building on prior research, they provide a typology of digital work through three perspectives: (i) digitally enabled work (the conduit perspective) (ii) digitally engaged work (the strategic perspectives) and (iii) digitally embedded work (the creator perspective). In simple

words, digitally enabled work relies on digital tools for the implementation of work but the outcome of that work is not digital such as online teaching or app-based driving. The second perspective, digitally engaged work, captures work that leads to some kind of digital product like digital hub managers. Finally, digitally embedded work refers to “work with processes requiring digital technologies and outcomes that are digital in nature”, for example, social media influencers. Since this study seeks to investigate the shifting dynamics of work during the Covid-19 pandemic, our focus is on the digital work done by people from home and explore its gender dynamics. Therefore, the terms digital work, work from home (WFH), remote work, and virtual work are used interchangeably. Notably, when governments around the world announced lockdown measures and mandated work from home to curb the spread of the coronavirus, digital technology was the pivot around which the push towards working from home revolved (Lund et al. 2021; Battisti/Alfiero/Leonidou 2022; Mukherjee/Narang 2023).

Data and Method

The data used in this study is based on an online questionnaire designed using google form and circulated to reach the targeted participants for the survey. Potential participants were people who had worked digitally/online/virtually from home/private sphere during the lockdown. The strategy involved, first, to utilise personal contacts with family, friends, and acquaintances, and, second, using professional networks and platforms like LinkedIn, social media, and emails. The first group of participants were further asked to circulate the survey among their co-workers, human resources departments, and anyone who fitted the study requirements. The sampling was conducted using the purposive snowball method for the following reasons. First, the pandemic was a tumultuous period for the labour market, with many people having shifted their jobs (Economic and Political Weekly 2020; Mehta 2020; The Economic Times 2021; Chatterjee and Dev 2023). Second, we lack accurate data or statistics on how many people worked digitally from home during pandemic. According to one study, less than 20 percent of non-farm workers of the Indian labour force are engaged in occupation that allow for WFH (Bhatt/Bahl/Sharma 2021). It is important to note that this estimate is an indication of workers who can potentially WFH. The study further reveals the occupations with high WFH, namely, Information & Communication (IT), Education, and Professional & Technical Services. Notably, women outnumber men in such occupations and are primarily concentrated in urban areas (Bhatt et al. 2021). Finally, one of the aims of this research is to enable participants to evaluate their experience of digital work more accurately now that the pandemic is over. During the height of the pandemic-induced lockdown, digital work was surrounded by various misconceptions and flawed understandings (Ritcher 2020).

Data collection for this study began in August 2023 and continued until late 2024. A total of 161 people participated in the survey. The questionnaire was primarily intended for individuals who had worked digitally during the COVID-19 lockdown. Accordingly, only respondents who selected the option “worked from home digitally” were able to access the section on digital work and its gendered aspects. However, the final section of the questionnaire included some general questions about digital work experience, which were open to anyone who had worked digitally at any time. This design allowed the survey to be shared more widely. As a result, we obtained

a subsample of 95 respondents who had worked digitally or worked from home during the lockdown period.

The questionnaire was divided into six sections. While section one asked basic demographic questions on age, gender, place of residence, education and so on, section two filtered the responses via questions on work status before and during the pandemic lockdown. Subsequently, thematic focus of section three, four and five was centred on conditions of work during the lockdown, management of work and family/life, and transformative potential and pitfalls of digital technology in work, respectively. To avoid self-bias, the questions design followed the close-ended or multiple-choice options, and scale format. However, the last part of the survey, section six, had only one optional question and it was kept open ended for respondents to freely share their thoughts and experiences on the topic. The responses to this question were analysed qualitatively and findings are reported in the results section separately.

Terms like ‘household responsibilities’ and ‘care responsibilities’ were defined within the questionnaire. For instance, household responsibilities meant cleaning, cooking, washing, grocery shopping, etc, and care responsibilities referred to childcare, elderly and/or care for disable. All the participants were informed about confidentiality of their responses and responses remain anonymous.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and above discussed factors, the participants have been selected through a non-random sampling method. Consequently, there is sample bias in the study. Although the digital survey was attempted to reach out to as many people as possible despite resource limitations, most participants live in big metro cities of India such as Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). Furthermore, our sample is biased towards professional, with many participants being IT professionals or working in the education/research sector. This could also be due to the reason that these professions were relatively easily moved to the home during lockdowns as they can utilise digital technology for work. The location and network of the authors might have further influenced the sample selection, being based in academia in an urban setting. To overcome selection bias professional networks were mobilised personally and by reaching out to people from different occupations via physical and digital platforms. However, the findings Bhatt et al. (2021) corroborate the occupational concentration of our sample, as they identify IT and teaching as two occupations with high WFH potential.

All four research objectives have been analysed using the quantitative survey research method, as outlined above. For the analysis of the final open-ended (optional) section of the survey, an exploratory qualitative approach has been employed. This qualitative analysis provides additional insights and adds nuance to the third and fourth research objectives, namely, the consequences and the nature of digital/remote work. The complementary use of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the study to present a broad and nuanced view of the topic.

Results

Sample characteristics/composition

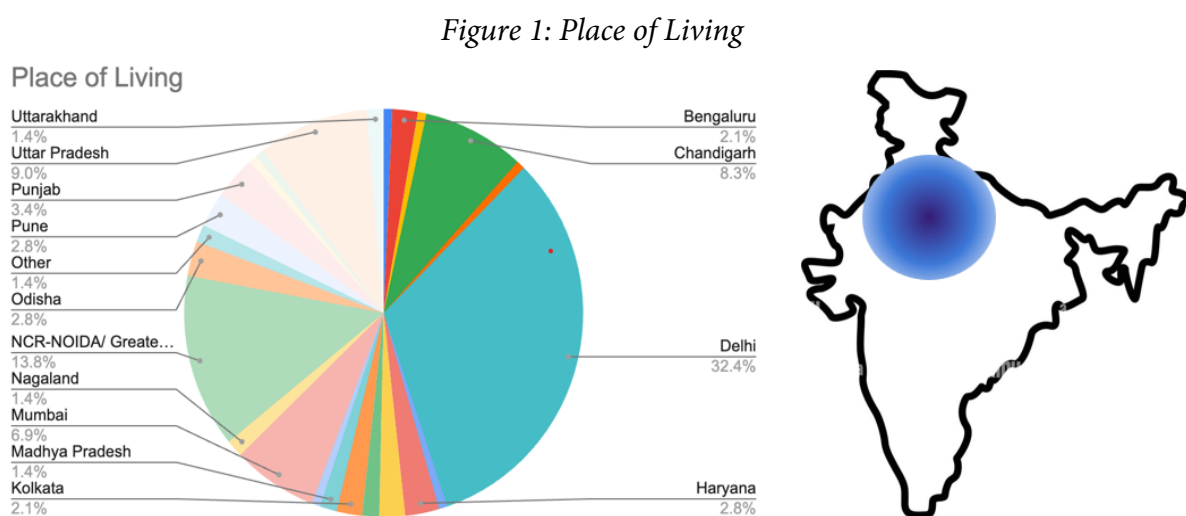
This section first presents the compositions of the entire sample, and the core sample with persons who worked digitally from home during the lockdown (see Table 1). The total sample

consisting of 161 participants has following characteristics. To begin with the socio-demographic composition, the sample comprise 53.8% males and 46.2% females (1 participant chose not to identify with gender binary). Out of the 161 participants, most are concentrated in the age group 18-30 years (47.8%), closely followed by 31-45 years (41%), with only 10% in 46-60 age group.

Table 1: Composition of Total and Core Sample

Characteristic	Total Sample (n = 161)	Core Sample (n = 95)
Gender	53.8% male, 46.2% female, 1 not binary	48 males, 47 females
Age Distribution	18–30 yrs: 47.8% 31–45 yrs: 41% 46–60 yrs: 10%	Females: 55% in 31–45 yrs Males: majority in 18–30 yrs
Marital Status	58% single, 41% married, small fraction other	Males: 65% single/Females: 50% single
Children	70% none, 30% with one or more	Females: 63% none Males: 75% none
Region	Majority from Northern India; concentrated in Delhi/NCR	Similar distribution
Education	Mostly bachelor's or master's degree	Similar distribution
Income	Majority in INR 31,000–90,000/month	Similar distribution
Occupation	IT and education/research dominant • Women: IT > education/research • Men: education/research > public sector	Similar distribution; trends reflect overall sample

Moreover, a majority of respondents are from northern part of the country, living and working in Delhi and the NCR (the adjoining parts of Delhi) (see Figure 1).



Most of the respondents are highly educated having either bachelors or master's degree. The income distribution reveals that the majority was in the middle-income bracket, earning between INR 31,000 and 90,000 per month (1 Euro is approximately 90 Indian Rupees or INR). Occupationally, most of the respondents work in the IT and education/research sector. Both men and women are found to be working in these sectors. However, women are primarily working in the IT sector followed by education/research. In contrast, men are predominantly working in the education/research and public sector services. Typically, men are found to outnumber women in the IT sector. That this trend does not hold in our sample may be due to the age composition, with females being more likely to be observed towards the mid-career range (48% women in 31-45 age) than males (33%). The core sample of 95 respondents reveals an almost equal gender composition (see Table 1 for further details on the demographic distribution). Unless otherwise mentioned, findings presented below are based on the core sample (N=95).

Findings

Work transformation during the pandemic induced lockdown: transition and facilitation

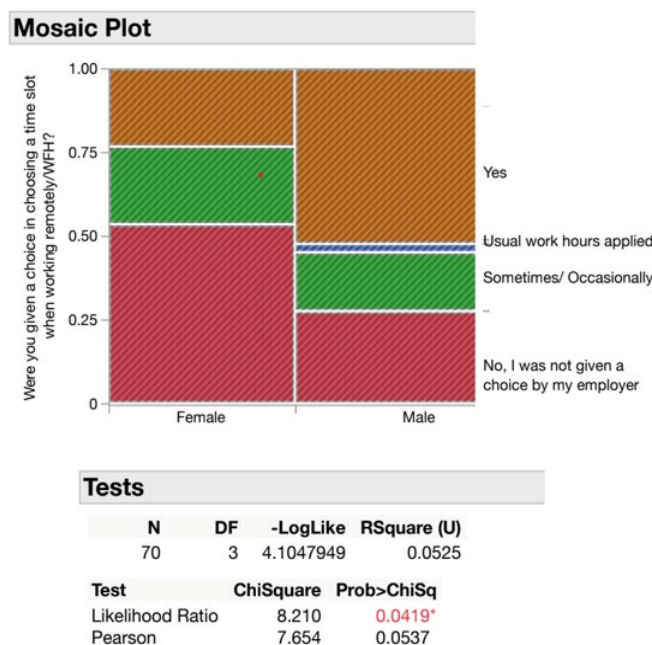
The abrupt transition to working from home through digital means produced mixed reactions and experiences. Although lockdowns were imposed by the government as a public health measure, and employers were required to comply, not all occupations could be fully shifted to virtual work. This raises important questions about whether employees were given any choice in this transition and how effectively it was facilitated. Considering the core sample, 75% of women reported having full or partial choice, compared to 80% of men. Notably, virtually all women with the option to work from home chose to do so, while 89% of men in a similar position followed opting for the same, leaving 11% of men not working from home despite having the option. Furthermore, among those with a choice, 97% of women worked from home full-time, versus 75% of men, indicating that a quarter of men opted to work from home part-time or not at all. There is a noticeably higher eagerness among women to work from home, as this arrangement provides greater flexibility for household responsibilities in the context of persistently uneven domestic labour distribution.

Regarding the flexibility in deciding about the time slot of working from home, around 30% of respondents expressed they had their say in the matter. Out of the 70 respondents whose work allowed flexibility, there are clear gendered differences. As Figure 2 demonstrates below, a higher number of women (59%) reported not being given any choice compared to men (41%). Conversely, men were more likely to have full choice in determining their working hours (61% of affirmative responses). The chi-square test suggests a statistically significant association between gender and flexibility ($\chi^2 = 8.21$, $p \approx 0.042$), although with caution due to small expected frequencies in some cells.

To gauge the level of support offered by employers to ease the transition to WFH, which required access to digital means like laptop, Wi-Fi, and furniture, among others, almost half of the respondents expressed full support. However, close to 36% of respondents said they did not receive any help from their employer. When it came to wages, close to 80% of the respondents said to have received their full salary/remuneration while engaged in remote work. Since the majority of respondents reported no job or pay loss during the pandemic, it indicates that those

engaged in digital work faced minimal employment challenges. The situation, however, was not equally pleasant for all as other participants reported income losses. While some received less than their full salary, others reported delays in receiving their financial dues. Notably, 91% of males were paid fully when they only did remote work compared with only 68% females. Interestingly, even though women were making more money, they were willing to take a pay cut to work from home (women in the sample earned more than men). This finding is particularly relevant as women had reported to take up the WFH option more often than men, signalling that women were ready to undergo some financial strain to work from home. Several reasons could account for this, such as most women working from home had childcare and other duties given their middle-aged demographics. Therefore, to ease the dual burden of work and domestic duties, working from home may appear as a feasible solution to many women. However, chimera of flexibility may come with consequences.

Figure 2: Contingency Analysis of Work Flexibility and Gender



Working from home: experience and realities from a gender lens

Work from home might not necessarily be from one's home but it may be from any private dwelling like a rented accommodation but not from a physical office space. Working from home relies on the assumption of having a private space to work, and having one is considered important by many people as it helps in being professionally productive and maintain physical work and life/family boundaries. However, do people had access to a private space when working from home? Out of the 95 respondents, 60% said they had a dedicated room to carry out professional work. On the other hand, more than a quarter of the respondents reported to either having a nook, table, or corner to work from or not having any dedicated private space at all. Interestingly, the proportion of respondent reporting to have their own room has a distinct gender composition. 76% of men working from home had a separate room in contrast to just 48% of women. Additionally, 38% of women utilised a table, nook, or corner for their home office during the lockdown, compared to only 10% of men. To check statistical robustness of

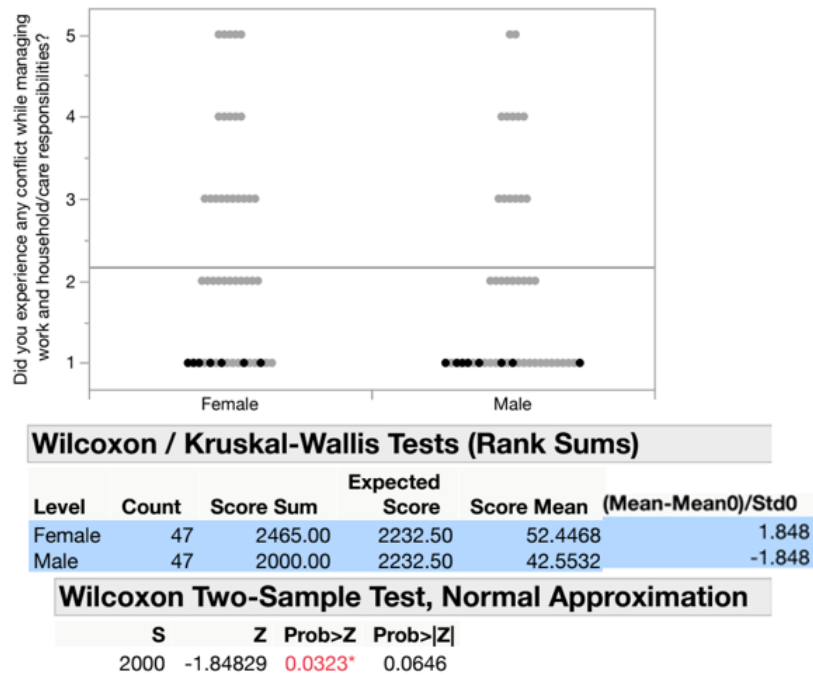
the gender differences, we carried out a contingency analysis which indicated a statistically significant association between gender and workspace type, Pearson $\chi^2(4, N = 94) = 9.67, p = .046$, Cramer's $V = .32$, suggesting small-to-moderate differences. Men were more likely to report having a room of their own, whereas women more often worked from shared spaces.

Almost all respondents working from home agreed to having some kind of household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning or laundry. With respect to shouldering care-work responsibilities, 65% of respondents indicated that they do so. While paid and/or unpaid work responsibilities are part of people's life, one of the objectives of this study has been to understand their management when the two spheres were merged unprecedentedly under the lockdown. When asked to rate how successfully one managed work and care responsibilities on a scale of 1-5 (1-it was very easy; 5- it was very tough), we observe a gendered pattern. While the gap (2.6 for females versus 2.4 for males) between the female and male average score is not huge, it is still noticeable. In other words, women found it harder to successfully combine work and care responsibilities than men. Going further, respondents were asked if any conflict was experienced while managing work and household/care responsibilities on a scale of 1-5 (1-there was no conflict; 5-yes, very frequently). Interestingly, the divergence between female and male scores is stark. with the average score for females being 2.4 against 1.9 of males. Clearly, women expressed to encounter higher levels of conflict between their work and domestic duties compared to men. Additionally, for those with 1 or more children, 75% of females with kids felt there was some conflict compared with only 53% of the males. Apparently, women perceived themselves as less successful in managing work and caregiving responsibilities, experiencing a higher level of conflict in balancing work with household and caregiving duties compared to men.

To check the statistical significance of gendered experience of conflict, Wilcoxon rank-sum test compared reported conflict levels between male and female respondents. Females (mean rank = 52.4) reported higher conflict than males (mean rank = 42.6), although the difference did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($Z = -1.85, p = .065$) (Figure 3). Nonetheless, this suggests a likely trend toward higher conflict among women, which may warrant further study in larger samples.

To gauge the sources from where the conflict between work and family work might be emanating, respondents were asked to identify the antecedents of conflict. Accordingly, for both women and men, work-related factors, such as heavy workload/meetings/deadlines/nature of work, were a top contributing factor to their experience of work and family conflict. While 45% of women respondents chose work-related sources as the top sources, 21% of male respondents picked the option. (To this question, 55% males said there was no conflict when asked about sources of conflict compared with only 30% of women). Regarding the sources associated with family/home, 34% females felt that household chores (dishes, laundry, etc.) were a reason of conflict when compared with only 21% of males.

Figure 3: Analysis of Work and Household/Care responsibilities by Gender



Going digital: potential and pitfalls

The world today stands at a significant juncture with immense changes in the world of work carrying potentials and pitfalls. The pandemic-led lockdown accelerated the direction of changes in the world of work with an enormous push towards digital enabled work (WFH/remote work/virtual work etc.). To examine the landscape of work transformation, we asked all the participants (161 respondents) questions pertaining to the impact of digital technology on work and family life. A significant majority of both females and males reported that digital technology was helpful or somewhat helpful in their work-related activities (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Role of Technology in Balancing Work and Family Life

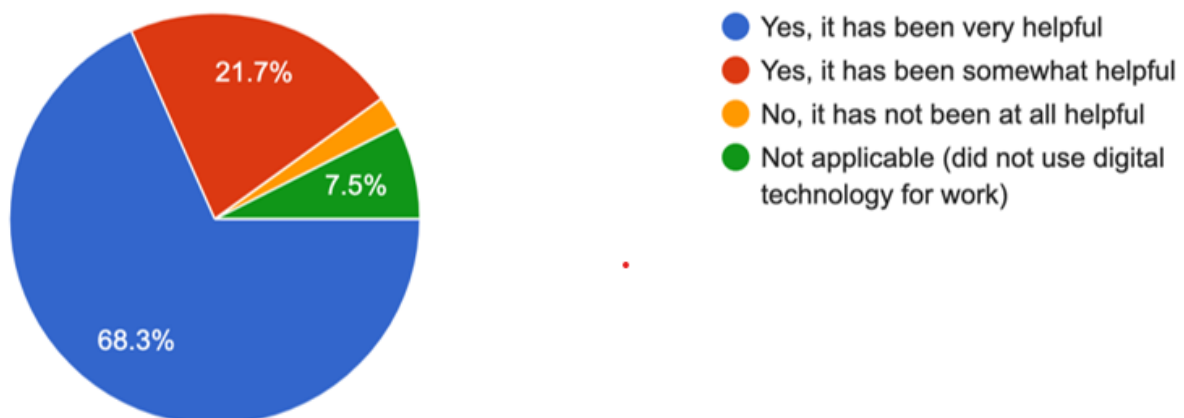
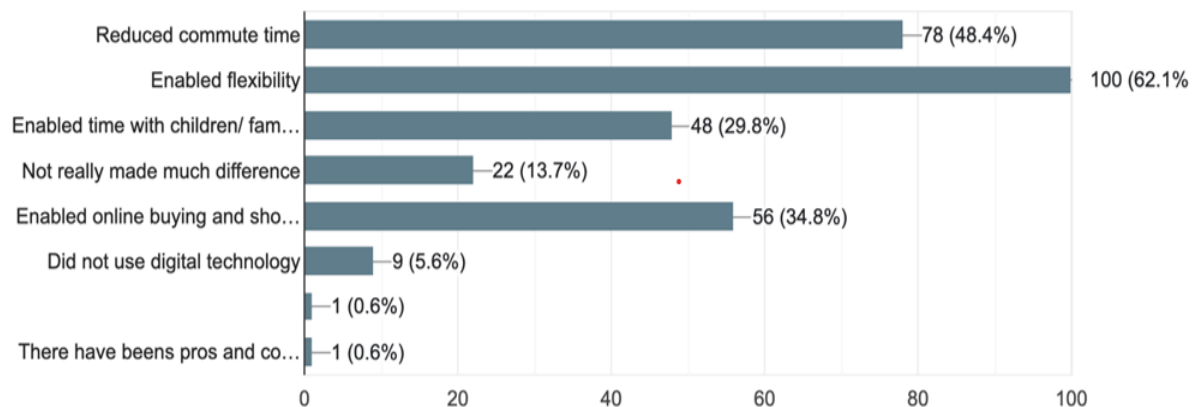


Figure 5: Distribution of responses to the question, “Do you think digital technology has been a boon for you, work wise?”



Overall, cutting across gender lines the respondents expressed that digital working from home has been most beneficial in enabling flexibility and reducing their commute time (see Figure 5). Yet, when exploring how digital technology supported the balance between work and family/personal life, a distinct gender difference emerged in the primary responses. For 43% of females, digital technology-based work enabled more time to spend with family compared to 18% of males. Apparently, for women, technology clearly matters so that they can have flexibility and devote time to family.

An analysis of the qualitative responses to an optional open-ended question reveals three key themes in the transformation of work: (i) digital work as a disruptor (ii) future of work: digital and flexible (iii) negative implications/the other side of the coin. In the following paragraphs, we analyse these themes using direct excerpts from respondents to illustrate their experiences and perspectives. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the qualitative narrative is based on manual review of open-ended responses and iterative discussions among the authors. This qualitative component of the study is added to complement the survey data and constitutes a preliminary thematic exploration.

‘Digital work as a disruptor’

Among the respondents who answered the open-ended question, many reflected on the disruptive nature of the digital work from home arrangements and their impact on professional and personal life. One respondent underlined that while the sudden transition to digital work was not easy, the opportunity to work from home fostered a deeper appreciation for family connections:

Work during the pandemic was really tough. But then as they say, when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Thus, making it a new realization by itself. The immediate family was much closer, responsibilities were shared, and I saw and understood for myself what an awesome extended family I have.

Another respondent described the shift to digital operations at their workplace:

To be very precise about the circumstances witnessed at workplace at the time of COVID-19 pandemic includes the fact that our working environment changed entirely from physical files to digital files through e-office platform.

Beyond individual-level disruptions, the shift to digital work was also transformative at the level of organisations. One respondent reflected:

The pandemic has been a difficult time for many working professionals and it has encouraged organisations to develop and use various platforms to do work.

Overall, these comments illustrate how moving work to the digital domain serves as a profound disruptor, reshaping professional and organisational dynamics. While digital work has been disruptive, it has also introduced new opportunities, particularly in terms of flexibility and hybrid work models. This is consistent with previous research on Digital Taylorism, which highlights how digitalization can simultaneously boost productivity while introducing new mechanisms of worker control (The Economist 2015; Kirchner/Meyer/Tisch 2023).

'Future of work: Digital+ flexible'

A significant number of respondents viewed the shift to digital and hybrid work arrangements as beneficial, particularly in balancing work and family responsibilities. One respondent acknowledged the dual nature of digital work and found hybrid work arrangement valuable:

Digital tech did help continue working during pandemic but blurred the lines between personal and professional timings, increased digital exposure and lessened physical interaction. The hybrid or the flexi model which churned out as an arrangement after the pandemic worked the best for me.

In a similar vein, yet another respondent noted broader shift in work culture:

There is a permanent shift in terms of the working sector, people are now looking for more sustainable and flexible options.

Flexible work or hybrid work which combines physical and WFH emerged as preferred model among the respondents as also noted above in the descriptive findings. One of the key reasons for this preference happens to be perceived enhancement of work-life balance, as articulated by one participant:

Work culture has changed forever during and after the pandemic. Technology has enabled remote functioning at various levels and facilitated work/life balance.

As people adjust to the post-pandemic work landscape, flexible working, with digital technology playing a profound role in this reshaping, have emerged as a preferred modus operandi for many workers. Organisations must adapt to evolving work dynamics to remain competitive. In words of one respondent:

Embracing WFH will be a requirement for the organizations in future. It will help the company get and retain best talents and quality employees from national as well as international locations. Goal of the organizations should be to get the work done within deadlines and not monitoring every minute that employees spend physically on campus.

As it appears from these narratives, the future of work is going to be defined not just by the incorporation of digital technology into work regimes and organisations, but also by offering

flexible working arrangement to employees. The blend of digital and flexibility offers employees' greater autonomy and reshapes traditional work culture.

'Negative implications: the other side of the coin'

One set of the respondents found the new working arrangements liberating particularly in terms of flexibility, opportunity to work from the comfort of their private space and not being bothered by showing up at physical offices. However, the post-pandemic work arrangement has not been a pleasant experience for all. Below two respondents recount their negative work experiences:

Work from home resulted in increase in work hours in the range of 12-16 hrs.

My employers were not at all understanding. But the salary-cut followed by the covid ailments of my family caused mental agony in me. I realised later on that I suffer from a feeling of insecurity. It mostly arose during the Covid.

Clearly, the heightened workload and extension beyond standard working hours can be linked to the erosion of work–life boundaries, reflecting both the encroachment of work into the personal domain and the implicit expectation of workers' continuous availability. The absence of employer support and income loss can severely impact employees' well-being. Some respondents, further, emphasised on what working from home might entail. The erosion of boundaries between work and personal life appears to be a major concern, as some respondents described difficulties in managing professional responsibilities alongside household duties:

Working from home requires a greater amount of discipline, conviction, self-control and resources (both tangible and intangible, such as mental strength etc.) as compared to the usual in-office work.

For women with toddlers or little kids sometimes managing work from home gets difficult.

As I am taking classes of students who chosen distance learning and they mostly belongs to economically not very good background so for them it was very difficult to manage online classes and submitting assignments and appear in online exam. Some students did not even have their personal cell phone so they were mainly dependent on parents mobile as one household has only one mobile. Because of this many students cannot appear for the classes.

Respondent's narratives unravel a dichotomy in the post pandemic world of work. The digital transformation of work presents a dual reality—enhancing flexibility while simultaneously exacerbating work-life conflicts. Building on these insights and descriptive results, the next section contextualises these findings within broader theoretical frameworks and discusses their implications for businesses, policymakers, and society, with a specific focus on India.

Discussion

The fallouts of the pandemic have been noted for their uneven gender implications from morbidity to employment patterns. This study indicates that while shift to digital work was necessitated on a rapid scale as part of emergency measures, the transformation of work had clear gendered markers in terms of flexibility to management of work and home responsibilities. Another objective of the study was to investigate the benefits of digital/remote work. It shows that while digital/remote work allowed people to keep their job and income, it was not beneficial for all. Especially women were caught between dispensing work and care responsibilities, a finding echoed in other contexts such as the U.S., where mothers disproportionately absorbed caregiving and viewed unequal divisions of labour as the 'default' arrangement (Calarco et al. 2021).

The findings of this study point towards an overwhelming preference towards the idea and practice of working from home in an emerging digital economy. That the majority of the respondents were willing to engage in virtual work underscores the acceptance and level of comfort with digital technologies and tools. While India remains a land of contrast where high levels of digital penetration coexisting with a digital divide based on gender and location, a segment of the workforce especially in urban areas has found a new model in WFH/remote work. Although the notion of physical space pertaining to work infrastructure like physical office, spaces and commuting continues to be important, a rising sense of digitality seems to be emerging where people do not mind working remotely. Simultaneously, claims of most respondents to have received sufficient support from their employer for dispensing the work digitally indicate a smooth transition to the new working arrangements. These reconfigurations regarding work underline an ongoing penetration and acceptance of digital technology as primary mode of organisation as conceptualised by Castells as 'network society' (Castells 1996, 1997). Furthermore, in line with this finding, recent research has highlighted the keen uptake and interest in continuing with the model of work from home (Mukherjee/Narang 2023). However, the transition to the digital era as theorised by many scholars like Negroponte (1995) and van Dijk (2017), will not be without challenges. These manifest in a 'digital divide', which, in simple terms, refers to the gap between the have and have-nots in access to technology and Internet, producing new kinds of inequalities. For instance, while for majority of respondents the shift to new work was relatively smooth, other respondents faced problems in receiving adequate support from employers, access to digital technology, financial loss and/or a decent space to work.

Several findings of this research highlight the gendered nature of work transformation. To begin with, the relocation of work into the home has been marked by unequal space allocation along gender lines. As professional activities—such as video calls, meetings, lectures, and conferences—shifted to domestic settings, the need for dedicated workspace became evident. However, as the findings suggest, men were more likely to have a designated room for work, whereas women were often relegated to nooks, corners, or a single table rather than having a room of their own. This unequal access to private workspace reflects and reinforces existing gender-based socio-economic inequalities and norms (Kandiyoti 1988). The prevalence of a traditional family model, with men being designated as primary bread winners and women as homemakers or supplementary earners (Folbre 2001), might help us understand the inequality in domestic

spaces. Moreover, women have been denied privacy at home as their activities are often monitored before and after marriage (traditionally, a woman moves to her husband's place upon marriage in India) to safeguard honour of the home and morality. Furthermore, in a climate of rising housing and living costs, sharing of household spaces rests on bargaining power, and women with lack of resources and decision-making power may not be able to get the best of deal (Agarwal 1997). Notably, while substantial research exists on gender and public spaces (Phadke/Ranade/Khan 2011; Kern 2020), there is an urgent need to examine the gendered dynamics of the domestic space, particularly in the light of the growing preference for hybrid work models. If businesses and employees are increasingly favouring a combination of office-based and remote work, having a dedicated workspace at home is no longer a luxury but a necessity. Recognizing this issue and developing solutions is crucial before implementing new WFH policies. For example, a state government in southern India recently announced plans to expand WFH on a large scale, with a special focus on women (Janyala 2025). It is no surprise, then, that Virginia Woolf (1929) famously emphasized the importance for a woman to have "a room of one's own." Her insight remains relevant today, underscoring the need to address spatial inequalities in domestic work environments.

According to the Indian Time Use Survey (TUS) data (2019), women devoted three times more amount of time in domestic work than men. At the same time, men in the working-age group spent roughly 150 minutes more per day on paid work than women. Not surprisingly, women continued to shoulder major responsibilities for household chores and care work during the pandemic-induced lockdown when work was moved into home. This brings up the question about the experiences of combining work and family life. The findings of this study showed that women were, on average, less satisfied with the management of work and responsibilities for unpaid domestic tasks, and felt a heightened sense of work-family/life conflict than men. Since women in the core sample were working digitally/remotely during the lockdown, the double burden of work and family life responsibilities that society thrusts on women based on gender roles results in women indulging in the 'second shift' (Hochschild/Machung 1989). Notably, staying at home during lockdown period meant additional duties with the home being transformed into a workplace, and additional work in case of children enrolled in school or ageing parents. Therefore, for many, the unpaid labour could mean not just a second shift but continuing or never-ending shifts.

Beyond that, the gendered gap between work and family life conflict was quite stark with women expressing it more than men as per this research's finding. According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), "Work-Family Conflict (WFC), is a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect". At the heart of WFC is the inter-role conflict, embedded in scarcity theory (Goode 1960), which posits that each person's time, energy, and resources are limited. Therefore, devoting more time, energy, or resources to one domain deprives the other and can lead to conflict between roles (role strain theory). Therefore, when women put in more time and efforts in one domain, in this case domestic work since men are clearly not sharing the load, they are left with less time and energy to give to other domain or vice versa, which might lead to feelings of not doing enough to manage both the domains and feel a heightened sense of work-family/life conflict.

Therefore, the notion of flexible work, made possible because of remote work options, might ironically only give a false sense of balance. Flexibility may lead to overexploitation, referred to 'flexibility paradox' by Chung (2022). In line with findings of this study, Mendonca, Redkar and Ranganathan (2023), analysing motherhood in the Covid pandemic in the Indian context, revealed the paradoxical impact of remote work on mothers and called for critically examining WFH arrangements beyond the claims of enhanced flexibility given the traditional gendered socio-cultural expectations. Chung (2022) and Hipp (2023) call flexible/remote work as a double-edged sword where flexible work arrangement ostensibly offer control over work but on the contrary, it leads to self-exploitation. The chimera of flexibility makes it challenging for employees to maintain boundaries between family and work, which Clark (2000) points out as essential for navigating these two distinct domains and balance them effectively. For instance, one of the respondents claimed that remote work results in overwork of 12-16 hours. Goldin's (2021) concept of "greedy jobs" offers further critical insights into these gender-based inequalities in the division of labour. Accordingly, greedy jobs are those occupations that require long, inflexible, and unpredictable hours and reward those who perform this work. Women due to their unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities usually avoid such work and rather prefer flexible work schedules. Consequently, such jobs usually disadvantage women because of societal expectations and norms built around their social roles. Thus, in India, where gender relations were already uneven and women shouldered a disproportionate burden of unpaid work, the COVID-19 induced work-from-home arrangements intensified rather than eased these inequalities. Thus, remote work while giving a sense of flexibility, in practice it reinforced traditional sexual division of labour.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing field of research examining post-pandemic work transformations, digital shift, and their gendered implications (Mukherjee/Narang 2023; Mendonca et al. 2023). In line with previous research, the study demonstrates the intensification of work-family tensions due to boundary management and negotiations becoming an onerous task with women facing substantial disadvantages due to their social role, gendered expectations, and patriarchal structures. While the sources of conflict for both women and men were primarily work-related, however, more women than men expressed family-related sources such as unpaid work as a factor leading to sense of conflict. In this scenario, remote work instead of liberating women may end up strengthening existing gender-based socio-economic inequalities

The study contributes to theoretical frameworks in three interrelated ways. First, it extends the concept of double burden or second shift by demonstrating that remote/digital work while in theory giving some flexibility, women's sense of work-family conflict and care burdens intensified and remained higher compared to men. Second, the research adds to the ongoing debates on the world and future of work by analysing shifting terrains of work in the Indian context where patriarchal domestic structures, and weak public infrastructure shape the experience of flexibility in ways that is not fully captured in literature focused on context of developed countries. Third, it adds to the work-family interface framework by showing that merging work and home boundaries did not resolve the gendered imbalance in division of work and its management, rather reinscribed them in new ways, with digital technology working both as an enabler and a source of strain.

The study is limited by sample bias. Virtually all participants are drawn from urban areas and are concentrated in particular professions, which may limit the diversity of perspectives. Nonetheless, the key findings, such as the gendered nature of flexibility, work–family conflict, and the role of physical space, indicate areas that warrant further investigation through studies with larger and more representative samples. Despite these limitations, this study offers a valuable starting point and identifies several directions for future research. First, future studies could examine the gendered impact of return-to-office mandates, especially regarding their consequences for the sexual division of paid and unpaid work. Conversely, given that work-from-home arrangements are increasingly promoted through policy measures to enhance women’s labour force participation, future research could critically assess the feasibility and underlying rationale of such measures. For example, why is remote work being encouraged primarily for women (like in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh)? Is it intended to support their empowerment through integration into paid labour, or to enable the simultaneous performance of paid work and domestic responsibilities under the guise of flexibility? Further, research could investigate the conditions of such engagement, particularly in contexts of weak digital inclusion and domestic spatial inequalities. Upcoming studies might also explore how women negotiate and construct work identities within space-constrained homes, and how this affects gender roles and expectations. Finally, in the light of the shifting nature of work and the expansion of digital work, future research could explore non-urban contexts and atypical professions, and conduct comparative studies of disruptions in the government and corporate sectors, particularly within the Indian context.

Policy Implications

Given high interest or excitement among respondents pertaining to remote/digital work options with a particular emphasis on flexible/hybrid model of work, organisations must focus on adapting to new work behaviour and aspirations of employees. Business and organisations can look into the introduction of shorter work weeks along the lines of the Belgium model. Alternatively, a combination of physical and remote working days should be facilitated that reduces excessive commuting time and stress given the hectic traffic and congestion in metro cities. Therefore, there is pressing need for transportation and infrastructure to be upgraded as commute has been a significant reason for preferring WFH. As workers experienced conflict in balancing work and family life, organisations should seek to examine how to reduce work-related stress among their employees to improve productivity and well-being and especially offer support to parents with young children. Since conflict produced due to incompatibility of work and family roles has clear gendered pattern with women facing higher burnt, measures are required to ensure an equitable sharing of the load, which involves redesigning parental leave policies, workplace norms, culture, and gender sensitization. Further, the neoliberal discourse surrounding the ideal worker project a male spending substantial amount of time at work. The discussion around raising weekly hours reinforce the male worker idea and ignores the structural barriers faced by a majority of women in the labour force due to their dual burden of earning and rearing. The disproportionate burden of domestic work on women has been a major factor in dwindling female force participation in the country.

Importantly, while the female labour force participation rate is picking up in India, more women must be included in the workforce. In this direction, firms should see WFH and flexibility as a way to retain the female workforce. However, incentives and aid for adequate remote working must be provided to them. Furthermore, childcare, and elderly care facilities need to be widened and improved if labour force participation of women in India is expected to increase. Importantly, gender neutral parental leave policies are essential to promote an active role of men in discharging their fatherhood duties and providing a nudge to change traditional gender roles. At society level, gender sensitization and expectations need to be managed, especially among women who might assess the discharge of their roles and responsibilities more stringently. Importantly, gender responsibilities need to be distributed fairly in a household. Work should not be an escape from household responsibilities for men. Without structural shifts in workplace policies and gender norms around domestic labour, flexible work arrangements will continue to exacerbate gender disparities rather than alleviate them.

The study carries implications for recent development where companies have been mandating employees to work from the office, at least for a specific number of days per week. The same has been observed in India with many big firms such as Wipro, TCS and Infosys among others. While remote work allowed women to continue in the labour force and removed burdens of commuting to work, it exacerbated care work and blurred work-family boundaries. A return to physical office has the potential of undoing these small gains even though they might not be highly empowering but they tend to provide a sense of ease and control to people in their day-to-day life, for instance dispensing office work at home and carrying of household chores and care work. Return to office, for some, may resolve the space poverty and privacy issues at home, but without organisational support for childcare and flexible arrangements, the move back to the office is likely to exacerbate gendered inequalities in time, work and the sexual division of labour.

Conclusion

The relocation of the physical office work to home during the Covid-19-pandemic-led lockdown accelerated the rise of work from home with digital technology playing a critical role in the shift. This study aimed to examine the impact of this natural experiment on the broader transformation of work, its transition and facilitation and its gendered impact. Broadly, the findings reveal that the redefinition of work in the digital age has paradoxical aspects—serving as both an enabler and disruptor. Flexible working arrangements are preferred as they unlock new opportunities for autonomy, work-life balance, and employee retention. On the flipside, disadvantages and challenges arise as work and life partitions are hard to maintain with blurring of personal-professional boundaries, longer working hours, and mental strain. Women continued to experience a higher burden of expectation of managing work and family and felt its consequences more strongly than men in the form of higher levels of work and family conflict. As long as the flexible working is marred with existing inequalities of skewed sexual division of labour, absence of institutional support for women especially with caregiving responsibilities, the potential of hybrid work will remain partially realised. It is essential to ensure that flexibility

should not end up as a new face of precarity and exploitation in the name of perceived accessibility and convenience. Organisations must strike a balance by leveraging digital transformation while fostering a work culture that prioritises employee well-being and sustainable work practices. Finally, the need is to rethink the idea of workplace especially from a gendered perspective as the future of work is going to be a blend of digital technology and flexible arrangements, offering employees greater autonomy while reshaping traditional workplace norms.

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