Reimagining work but operating with a no off button: experiences of working mothers in India during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – This study focuses on the work from home experiences of professional, middle and upper middle class married women with children in India during the COVID-19-induced lockdowns. This study aims to examine the experiences of changing nature of work and gendered realities of work–life balance for working mothers while working from home during the pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight working mothers at three different time points during the lockdown in the city of Hyderabad in India.

Findings – A thematic analysis revealed changed work practices that required adapting, reinventing and reimagining new ways of working. This was time consuming albeit a satisfying experience for working mothers. At the same time, the blurring between home and work meant working mothers were operating without an off button.

Research limitations/implications – The findings show that the existing gender inequalities in sharing the domestic burden unravelled fast in the absence of support structures.

Originality/value – The authors give voice to the lived experiences of working mothers of managing both work and home and how they navigated challenges during the lockdown.

Keywords WFH, Lockdown, Working mothers, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In 2012, Ann-Marie Slaughter in her famous article on “Why women still can’t have it all” in the Atlantic stressed the importance of flexible timings and changing work culture where the office is base of operations more than the required locus of work (p. 94) to help increase participation of women in the workplace. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns resulted in accelerated trends towards work from home (WFH). However, previously, WFH was often in response to employees’ needs and preferences, COVID-19 has

The authors acknowledge the Indian Council for Social Science for the research grant COVID/645/39/2020–21/ICSSR needed to carry out the study. The would also like to express our thanks to the participants in Hyderabad who collaborated with us in the study and shared their valuable experiences of WFH during the lockdown.
forced many into mandatory WFH. Hence, insights from previous findings of WFH may not be generalizable to the current situation (Kniffin et al., 2021) requiring researchers to investigate various emergent challenges associated with WFH in these changing circumstances.

The pandemic caused disruptions in daily lives for people across the world, including in India, due to lockdowns and social distancing regulations. At the same time, many news and media reports spoke of the boon WFH was for Indian women opening up various opportunities to work that were previously not available for them. However, a growing body of researchers (Çoban, 2022; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Jasrotia and Meena, 2021; Wagner et al., 2021) have identified re-emergence of gender inequalities in families while working from home in diverse cultural contexts. In India, the strict lockdown initially also led to the absence of house helps (called “maids”), who were otherwise essential to reducing the burden of domestic work and enabling educated professional women to go to work.

This paper examines the WFH experiences of Indian women, specifically working mothers, during the COVID-19 pandemic. We trace emergent challenges in work practices faced and the ways in which women dealt with those challenges. Enforced WFH during the lockdown offered no choice or opportunities for autonomy (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020) and resulted in loss of social connections by curtailing social interactions essential for both mental and physical health (Kniffin et al., 2021). Older ways of working also changed, with reduced opportunities of feedback/learning, coordination and resulting in conflict. Thus, conditions during the lockdown and WFH can be described as thwarting basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence. Previous research (Bhumika, 2020; Jasrotia and Meena, 2021) examining experiences of Indian women during the lockdown have identified the critical role of personal life to work interference that increased work pressure and emotional exhaustion. But the role changed nature of work has in creating pressure or exhaustion and working mothers’ response to these changes remains unexamined. Hence, our study explores the experiences of working women over three different time points in the lockdown and aims to capture the emergent challenges related to work and work–life balance issues, support from spouses, managing professional and family roles. By examining solutions adopted by working mothers our findings would inform policies for long-term changes in job flexibility in the context of gendered realities in the Indian homes.

This paper begins with a review of relevant literature on feminist perspectives, challenges with working from home, gendered nature of responsibilities and expectations that women experience. The next section provides the methodology of study and sample details, followed by the findings of the thematic analysis. The final section discusses the findings in the light to the literature and practical implications for research and organizations are offered along with the limitations.

Theoretical background

**Feminist perspectives**

In writing about women’s status through human history, and in discussions on gender, feminist theories and theorists have occupied a central position. It is through the lens of “feminism” that we largely situate scholarship on women’s position in the world. However, several scholars have also pointed out the difference in various approaches to understanding the position of women, be it race, class, religion, ethnicity or, more recently, sexuality. Another vexing question in writing about women is this: from whose “standpoint” do we write (Hekman, 1997)? Given that all knowledge including that of women is “situated” (following Harraway, 1988) in their local worlds, whose voices are to be privileged and taken
for granted as applying to “all” women? Postcolonial writing has foregrounded many layers of subjugation of women (Mohanty, 1984). Feminist theories located largely in Western notions of rationality, ignoring the “web of relations” in which women are embedded, came in for a strong critique early on (Flax, 1987 p. 641). In fact, Flax (1987, p. 642) cautions against assuming “women” to be a monolithic category, “passive” and incapable of agency. Long before postmodern scholarship advocated heterogeneity, Flax encouraged looking at ambiguity and uncertainty present in women’s lives.

Judith Butler’s seminal work on gender distinguishes between agency and autonomy (Disch, 1999). Understanding how power works, she argues, is more essential. While the larger point of Butler’s work about how gender is performative rather than a priori is well known, in this article, Disch takes on Butler’s critics to show how Butler actually redefines agency. Her example of Rosa Parks expounds the point (Disch, 1999, pp. 556–557). While Parks (1999, p. 557) was certainly not the pioneer in civil resistance movement, her appearance, age and position allowed her to “oppose power within its own terms”. Agency is thus a “socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112).

Our study takes into account these debates in feminist theoretical writings over decades about how women’s voices are to be represented, by whom and from whose perspective. In this article, we document middle class, educated, urban women’s lives as employees and mothers, caught in a particular historical moment in India, the lockdown induced by COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, and trying to make sense of their worlds.

Challenges for work in work from home during the pandemic
One of the major changes the pandemic and the ensuing measures taken to mitigate its impact have brought in organizations (Yavorsky et al., 2021) is the unprecedented shifts in telecommuting. Prior to the pandemic online or remote work was often an outcome of employee preferences. However, the pandemic forced employees into mandatory WFH. Earlier, as remote work provided greater work–life balance and autonomy, it resulted in positive outcomes like well-being. However, as enforced remote working did not offer any such choices, employee outcomes would be different as well (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020).

Furthermore, emergence of remote work would create challenges for employees in maintaining boundaries between work and non-work (in the absence of the transition provided by the commute) when both domains unfold at home. Also, increased use of video conferencing, resulted in invasion of privacy, whereas presence of family members increased distractions in the shared space (Counch, 2021; Purwanto et al., 2020). Furthermore, diverse work arrangements and working with virtual teams can lead to problems of coordination and conflicts (Kniffin et al., 2021) and change the nature of work activities (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). Such changes would have thwarted the basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness of individuals that promote self-motivation.

Work flexibility has been argued as an important enabler of people's work–life balance (Le Barbanchon et al., 2019; Mas and Pallais, 2017), though, as the division between home and work blurs, work-related flexibility can have both pros and cons and be a source of stress (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2020). High level of integration between work and life brings out high levels of work-life conflicts as well (Nathani, 2010). Furthermore, a long-standing debate exists on whether remote work alleviates or exacerbates gender inequality; it is associated with higher employment rates of women by allowing them to balance home and work. Yet, it can also increase the burden of childcare and housework while working from home, thus posing productivity challenges, particularly for mothers in the absence of childcare support (Yavorsky et al., 2021). During the pandemic, working mothers:
• reduced their professional workload significantly more (Hipp and Büning, 2021; Petts et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2021);
• spent more time in caring for their children (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Miler, 2020); and
• were more likely than fathers to lose their job if they did not have a college degree (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020).

Thus, the pandemic and migration to mandatory WFH in many professions provides us with a unique opportunity to see the impact of remote work and changed nature of work on working mothers’ motivation, productivity and satisfaction.

**Gendered realities in India**

In India, working women are observed to be constantly negotiating their multi-role responsibilities, demarcating their personal and professional identities, and navigating their family’s influence on their choices, often, at the cost of their psychological and physical health (Valk and Srinivasan, 2011). These experiences faced by working women are mainly due to the persistent and patriarchal discourse on femininity, especially the woman’s reproductive and caregiving duties (Mullaiti, 1995). A vast majority of Indian middle-class women suffer from the “superwoman” syndrome, internalizing impossible expectations to be perfect at home and at work. In the West, the superwoman syndrome is a by-product of feminism while in India it is concomitant with patriarchy (Bhowmick, 2022). For women in the West, the rhetoric is centred around “having it all” because the idea of working and having a family are not at odds in the same way as in India. Indian women face more severe problems with “having to do it all” and internalize the “double shift” as a payment for empowerment. This has tremendous cost on their physical and mental health, with Indian women being the most overworked in the world (Bhowmick, 2022). Studies in 1990s pointed towards a trend of husbands talking about contributing to household work if the wife was employed. However, the frequency or incidence of such conversations was not very high (Rajadhyaksha and Smita, 2004; Bhowmick, 2022), further argues that despite gaining economic empowerment, many middle-class Indian women are immune to social and emotional empowerment. Though Indian scholars have contributed a lot to post-colonial critique of feminist theories (Chaudhuri, 2012) and social movements have addressed women’s issues, patriarchal ideologies seem entrenched in dynamics within a household as much as outside of it.

Two studies among women in India show interesting contours to situate our study. A time-use survey showed that responsibilities for the household still remained largely with women in a small town in India (Lahiri-Dutt and Sil, 2014). A larger survey of 300 women segregated into three groups – home makers, working from home and office goers, showed that those working from home were the happiest (Desai et al., 2011). Our study confirms with Lahiri-Dutt and Sil’s (2014) work that urbanization has not gone hand in hand with change in household dynamics in India. Our study, however, differs from Desai’s in suggesting that WFH model comes with a lot of challenges for women.

The experience of changed nature of work along with the gendered realities in Indian homes needs to be examined together to fully document the struggles women faced as employees and mothers, caught in a particular historical moment. Despite various feminist arguments about whose “standpoint” and the situated nature of knowledge, we argue the need to begin by examining the lived experiences in all its fullness of some women. Drawing on these insights might offer possible solutions for larger number of women, and give women voice in policy recommendations to support them to pursue paid work and future of hybrid work.
Method
The study focused on the WFH experience of working mothers in the COVID-19 pandemic. We aimed to examine how they adapted to changes in work while working at home, the level of satisfaction and productivity achieved alongside managing the domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, we also explored the work–life balance issues when work unfolds in the home space. A qualitative method was used to understand the experiences of working mothers, using a longitudinal study focusing on emergent challenges and coping during three different time points. Eight working mothers were interviewed in the second week of the lockdown (March, 2020; T1). The second set of interviews held in the seventh and eighth week of the lockdown (June, 2020; T2) had participation from seven mothers due to the unavailability of one (WM2). The last set of interviews held in January of 2021 (T3) had participation from six participants, two were unavailable. The average duration of the interviews across the three time points per group were 43.85 minutes (SD = 7.49) for stay-at-home mothers and 52.07 min (SD = 10.00) for working mothers. Furthermore, as the lockdown restrictions varied in different parts of India at different time points, we focused on working mothers from one city in India only – Hyderabad, with similar economic backgrounds.

Using convenient sampling, potential participants were contacted through an advertisement about the study via social media platforms (i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp). Interested participants were contacted by the second author over a telephonic call where details of the study were shared and queries of the participants answered. Due to social distancing restrictions, all interviews were conducted telephonically and recorded. As all the participants were educated and comfortable with English, the interviews were conducted in English. At the start of the interview, the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of responses and their participation was completely voluntary. Verbal consent was collected at the start of each interview. Table 1 provides the details of each participant.

Semi-structured interview technique was used. Interview questions focused on the changes experienced by working mothers in handling WFH, child/home responsibilities and the different levels of support received (Table 2). The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). All the authors first familiarized themselves with the data by reading each manuscript closely. Following this, initial codes and themes were generated and reviewed by the authors independently. The authors discussed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s pseudonym</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>No. children and age</th>
<th>Level of education and economic status</th>
<th>Participation in the interviews</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WM1 (36)</td>
<td>Educationist</td>
<td>2 (D:8, S:5)</td>
<td>Post-graduation, Upper-middle</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM2 (34)</td>
<td>IT/project manager</td>
<td>2 (D:3, D:7)</td>
<td>Post-graduation, Middle class</td>
<td>T1, T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM3 (45)</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>2 (D:12, D:15)</td>
<td>Post-graduation, Upper-middle</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM4 (37)</td>
<td>IT/Project manager</td>
<td>1 (S:6)</td>
<td>Post-graduation, Upper-middle</td>
<td>T1, T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM5 (48)</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>1 (S:7)</td>
<td>Post-graduation, Upper middle</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM6 (43)</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>2 (D:10, D:12)</td>
<td>Post-graduation, Upper middle</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM7 (44)</td>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td>3 (D:12, D:9, D:7)</td>
<td>Graduation, Upper-middle class</td>
<td>T1, T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM8 (40)</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>1 (D:9)</td>
<td>Ph.D, Middle</td>
<td>T1, T2, T3</td>
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Notes: D = daughter; S = son
Source: Authors’ own work

Table 1. Participant details: age, profession, educational qualification, number of children and economic strata along with participation across the interviews is provided.
each theme before defining them with titles. Where there were disagreements, authors read and re-read the manuscripts and discussed their interpretations with one another before arriving at a conclusion. In this way, the four themes were generated by the authors.

Findings
Findings of the study revealed four themes on the challenges experienced switching to WFH from office work, the need to adapt and reimagine new ways to work, blurring of boundaries between home and work, gendered realities of work–life balance.

Challenging changed work practices and technology – At the start of the lockdown many participants spoke of facing varied challenges with virtual work. Concerns were about inability to conceive work virtually, like managing large teams, challenges of connectivity and using new technology for various aspects of work. This created a strain on working mothers and many hours of unproductive work. Organizations also ramped up their technology, as call drops, poor audio during calls resulted in repetitive unproductive work:

You are at home and doing what you are expected to do -concentrate on your work other than anything else so immediately reply if someone sends mail (otherwise) they are like waiting. Initially after a tough couple of months, people started fixing up their internet in terms of high-speed broadband network.

WM4, IT Manager, 37 yrs.

Adapting to new technology and re-orienting oneself did not happen automatically, and in some cases initially there was hesitation and a dominant belief that the work cannot be done online. As shared by a participant at the start of the lockdown, this is not work which can be done sitting at home. However, as time passed, she had to re-orient herself as the lockdown continued and she realized work could not be stopped indefinitely:

Now, my entire training project in the last two, three weeks, I am trying to figure out how to take it online. We’ve accepted that, the way we used to deliver training is not going to continue. So how do we now take it to an online model? That involves quite a lot of work.

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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Questions T1 and T2</th>
<th>Questions (T3)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Questions for working mothers</td>
<td>✓ Please describe any changes in work related tasks since the lockdown was initiated?</td>
<td>✓ Can you please reflect on any changes in your work related tasks since the lockdown to now?</td>
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<td>✓ How do you handle working from home and house/child work now?</td>
<td>✓ How do you handle work from home and house/child work lately?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓ How did you explain work from home to your children? How have they responded so far?</td>
<td>✓ How has your family (husband and kids) responded to you working from home lately?</td>
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<td>✓ As a working mother what do you feel about the continuing work from home trend in India? Would you want this to be the new normal? Please elaborate on your thoughts.</td>
<td>✓ How have you been able to get help with the household chores while you manage work?</td>
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Some women did find working from home challenging due to distractions or not experiencing the home space as the zone to take on work:

[...] I found it very difficult to work from home, for whatever work I did. Because there are a lot of distractions, I mean when you are at work, you are also distracted, it’s not like you are not checking your phone, you are not doing a lot of things. But you know you are in the zone.

Also, a participant spoke of the need to manage perceptions of co-workers while using technology by managing status updates on the system while working online:

So you have to ensure that you are online, you are not with your status (as) ‘away’, automatically the system shows the status ‘away’ when you are not logged in for 15 minutes or 20 minutes.

Furthermore, in the initial months, our participants approached work in the way they worked in an office with no interaction with their families while working. However, with time they came to accept that this would not be possible and they would acknowledge/involve their children on video calls:

So initially, it was all very confusing for them (children), they would still come and ask for things even now, they still come in, in the middle of my calls or they would just show their faces in my video calls, I would get very upset about this earlier; I would actually get very angry and tell them to just leave. Now I think I started involving them a bit.

At the same time, as women transitioned into the new ways of working, some also experienced greater freedom and an opportunity to be home and with their family physically the whole day:

I think once school starts I am going to have withdrawal symptoms, because I don’t know if I will be comfortable going to school. I will be okay with waking up at a certain time, doing things but leaving home, dropping everything and going suddenly, because I am home all the time I feel like I am in control. I will miss this whole phase of working from home, I loved it.

The experiences of our participants are mixed, starting out with unproductive long hours of work, difficulties in managing and coordinating virtually and as time passed, they adapted to new ways. Some appreciated the opportunity to be in control in managing the home by being home that WFH provided them, and was not present earlier:

Experiencing satisfaction and productivity through reimagining work
At the start of the pandemic all our participants did experience difficulties while pursuing their profession. However, as time passed most participants began working on surmounting challenges like connectivity issues, adapting to new technology, or trying innovative ways to do work. Slowly they began overcoming challenges and were able to meet deadlines and work pressure became manageable.

In fact, for one participant the resilience shown by young children whom she was teaching was inspiring and motivating in the face of challenges:

I take my cues from them (children). I see how they are, like the lockdown didn’t make much difference to them. They are experiencing the impact of it actually, because school and everything
stopped but they were not cribbing about it. So that gives me a lot of energy. I see that they have taken this so beautifully. I think that’s motivating me, and that’s keeping me afloat.

WM1, Educationist, 36 yrs.
Furthermore, we also found that those mothers who were able to innovate and work out new ways to do their work actually experienced positive emotions like enjoyment and satisfaction from their work:

And when I say work from home, we are re-strategizing now. We’re working a lot on proposals and, and we’re doing those workshops. I’m creating workshops. It’s not that there’s necessarily a demand. But now we are working more for interconnections which is taking a lot of time, whereas before when we were going to work we weren’t doing as much of that. Now, there’s a lot more of the marketing aspect, I am enjoying it. That’s why I’m getting so engrossed in it.

WM7, Counsellor, 44 yrs.
For another participant, the very idea to sustain her business in these challenging circumstances was satisfying:

It’s been satisfying that we’ve been somehow able to sustain the unit. And I’ve paid salaries to people over the last two months. And so that’s been personally satisfying.

WM3, Entrepreneur 45 yrs.
Overall, while the nature and the extent to which the working mothers could re-start working varied, however, we do see that being able to re-invent, reimagine new ways of doing work, sustaining despite challenges, led to positive emotional experiences and satisfaction with their work.

No off button: blurring of lines between work and home
All the participants spoke of blurring of boundaries between home and work and demands to manage both were high. Most participants experienced a lot of stress at the start of the lockdown due to domestic work like cooking, cleaning, taking care of family and demands of paid work. Families experienced a complete and drastic shift in their family structures with spouses, children being home the whole day, all of which meant more work at home. At the same time, changes due to new ways of working meant more paid work as well. This left our participants very tired, stressed and frustrated.

That week was difficult because everything, my home had changed. My husband is working all the time, even on Sundays. I suddenly have him at home all the time. That was a big shift in our entire family structure. Plus with my children being home all the time which they are not used to. For me, the difficult part was to manage my work. And yet make sure that my presence is equally felt at home:

WM1, Educationist, 36 yrs.
Honestly. I am working 12 to 13 hours a day. And trying to squeeze in one hour in the morning, one hour in the afternoon and a couple of hours in the evening for home activities. Then if I have done something tiring and I have just come to relax for 2 minutes, and exactly at that time someone comes like, “I want this, I want this” whatever it is, it irritates me. Come on man! Give me a break. Because these days it’s so hectic and you just can’t count on me for everything. First the work and then the home activities. My whole frustration is that I am tired.

WM2, IT manager, 34 yrs.
Women working 12–14 h a day and then doing the house work late into the night raises a question – when and how much rest do the women really get. The blurring of boundaries
between home and office have also meant blurring of boundaries between when the day begins and when the day ends:

The negative thing is that the whole day they’re working, office work and house work so they are working the whole day. Previously they (women) were working in the office they know that from 9 to 5 they would go and when they come back they have to do house work, they are not mixing these two. Now there is no off button essentially.

WM8, Academic, 40 yrs.

The lack of cut off from work that happened with the lockdown, and blurring of boundaries between work space and home space has meant more work for working mothers:

I was just saying that it just means more work, right? As it is obviously more work in the office, because of a lot of things which are changing, on a daily basis. There is obviously more work at home, because earlier I had to cook only one meal, which was dinner. But now I have to cook three. Also when you are working from home, obviously there is no cut-off in between, unlike when you go to the office? Now a ping comes from the phone then you are back to work, so it feels like a continuous monotonous day.

WM4, IT Manager, 37 yrs.

Gradually, as time passed many participants shared different strategies by which they attempted to demarcate some boundaries between work and home. This meant voicing their inability to attend work meetings after a specific time, learning to delegate work to others, teaching and counselling children to respect their work space by not disturbing in the middle of meetings, planning home work in advance and trying various pre-cooked options to make cooking easier, to separate work spaces (desks) for everyone in the house:

Initially people were not sincere; they were keeping meetings sometimes in the night, sometimes in the afternoon. I told them that meetings after 5:00, I will not be able to come for, that also reduced the pressure a lot

WM8, Academic, 40 yrs.

I also started learning to delegate work so that was the biggest, way I unloaded much of my tasks this was not there before, and even now, if I see it, I can do it in two minutes but if I delegate it, the guy will do it maybe in two hours, but now I don’t care as well.

WM8, Academic, 40 yrs.

After a week I started telling my children that okay from 10 to 2, I have a call and you guys can’t come into the room. Even if you do, you will be very, very silent. Then I started scheduling everything, scheduling my calls, scheduling the work at home. So you know, demarcating work at home.

WM1, Educationist, 36 yrs.

Some participants realized this as an opportunity to teach children greater independence as an important life lesson as mothers cannot be present everywhere all the time. They also started involving children and other family members like mothers-in-law and husbands to help with the workload to some extent:

They’re a little bitter about it, but they’re learning. Yeah, the circumstances suck. But they’re learning. They’re going to have to learn [. . .] I think once I started, we started realising I can’t be everywhere at the same time.

WM7, Counsellor, 44 yrs.
Managing home primarily the mothers’/wives’ domain, husband’s play assisting role

All our participants shared that managing the home—making sure everyone was fed, the house was clean, and things were in their place, children attended school, etc., are still primarily the wives/mothers’ responsibility. While family members, older children, and spouses have helped, the key responsibility is largely the wives. Reasons for men not doing much around the house were varied—being busy with work, not knowing how to do certain chores, or a traditional division of labour between the spouses. However, responses of our participants clearly bring out a common perception in Indian homes that the responsibility of keeping the homes running is the wife’s job. Husbands may help in tasks that they find interesting or when specifically asked by the wife to do a certain chore. Some did the work willingly and some may do it a few times and then lose interest to continue doing the chores over a period of time. But of their own accord men rarely identified chores in the house that they would take on and complete. During the lockdown, older children also did pitch in doing chores mothers assigned them. But as time passed or schools started, the chores again fell back on the mothers who had to repeatedly ask the child to do the assigned chores. Many mothers felt they did not get the appreciation from their spouses for the work they did around the house which sometimes rankled. They also questioned the assumption that managing the house is only the woman’s responsibility and not the entire family’s responsibility:

[…] we started off with nicely distributed tasks. The kids started taking it easy. I have to tell the kids when to clean up, when to help. They’re not volunteering, which is frustrating. And I think it’s easy because they have schoolwork so they can easily be in their own little worlds. I feel like it’s my problem. All of this is my problem and everybody is helping me solve my problem rather than thinking it’s a household problem, they live in the household. So it’s their problem as well. That continues to bug me.

This placing of responsibility squarely on the wives’ shoulders seems to result in the women constantly carrying a mental burden of house chores that have to be completed, instructions to be given to maids, planning along with their work responsibilities. This results in high stress and frustration among the participants with many staying up late into the night to finish work, while the rest of the family slept:

When you wake up in the morning the first thing which you are thinking is what to make for breakfast if this person has had this or not, then what to make for lunch right and then if you have a meeting that is also running in your head because there is no start and stop. There is nothing like okay at this point of time your cab is going to come, at 8 o’clock you have to leave, so there is nothing like that. Sometimes even small things become big and that obviously puts a lot of stress. It’s like multitasking all the time, which is running in your head all the time.

The statements of our participants point out that among the urban middle and upper middle classes in India, in the absence of paid help, most families did revert to traditional gender roles in managing the domestic chores (Figure 1).

Discussion

Changes in work practices

The pandemic abruptly upended normal work routines and accelerated the trend towards WFH. However, while previously WFH allowed for greater autonomy, during the pandemic remote working was enforced. Also working virtually challenged coordination amongst teams, reduced opportunities of getting feedback for subordinates, and loss of social connections amongst co-workers occurred (Kniffin et al., 2021). Our findings show that working mothers in India faced similar challenges with
new ways of doing work online and adopting new technologies. While WFH allowed them to continue with their jobs, the initial few weeks were quite difficult as they had to adopt new technology while managing the home. Also, sometimes the willingness to adapt to new technology or to examine new and innovative ways of work was not present immediately. As the lockdown continued, our participants accepted the situation and adapted. They reimagined and re-strategized their work, whether it was conducting trainings online or educating children, or communicating with team members or meeting client demands. Furthermore, those working mothers who were able to reimagine/innovate/re-strategize work experienced satisfaction with their work and positive emotions. Thus, the ability to adapt in the face of unprecedented challenges was an important source of satisfaction from work. These outcomes of the pandemic enforced WFH, reduced social interactions and challenged previously successful ways of working, hence undermining self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000) in our participants. The re-imagining and adapting that we see in our participants reflects an attempt to re-establish self-determination through new ways of doing work. Hence, as organizations move towards hybrid or a changed nature of work post the pandemic, they should ensure conditions to – support women’s participation in the workforce by being truly flexible (for example, not using the “away” button if an employee is away from the computer for 15 min or more), determining meeting times in consultation with an employee. Organizations should consider the role of mothers in the family structure in India, and not pretend to be oblivious to social realities, reducing urgency of work demands and allowing mothers (and perhaps fathers too in the future) to respond to clients’ requirements at their own pace.
In our study, we identified various instances of conflicts arising because of great degree of flexibility in spatial and temporal boundaries separating work and home. The blurring of boundaries resulted in working mothers operating without an off button.

All our participants spoke of working longer hours. As Kniffin et al. (2021) state without the regular commute the separation and transition between work and home domains was absent resulting in work demands extending longer hours. At the same time, unique to the Indian context, due to lockdown restrictions maids (integral to most middle class homes) were absent, requiring women to manage all the household chores as well. The blurring of boundaries between work and home seems to also mean the blurring of boundaries between day and night for working mothers with hardly any rest available for them. The increase in the domestic load can be seen as the centralization of the domestic role of woman which is an outcome of the traditional gender roles experienced by women (Çoban, 2022; Collins et al., 2021; Jasrotia and Meena, 2021). The “home environment” is perceived as the female domain, with the final responsibility of chores resting on women (Çoban, 2022). Our findings also highlight the overwhelming expectations Indian women experience, having to do it all, being perfect at home and at work, and do it all alone. It is hard to believe that these demands would not have an impact on their physical and mental health and their lives. Being responsible for everything at home along with meeting demands of paid work created a mental burden for women leading to their feeling stressed, frustrated, unappreciated and tired (Hjálmisdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2020).

A few studies on women and work during the pandemic (Çoban, 2022; Collins et al., 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2020) have shown alienation of women from work due to centralization of domestic chores. However, our findings present a contrast: the working mother in India experienced the same paid workload as her male colleagues and also had the final responsibility for domestic chores. While working, she had to attend to demands of distance schooling for young children. Work meetings extended late eating into her family time due to which most working mothers worked endless hours with no boundaries between work and rest. This highlights the internalization of impossible expectations by Indian women of being “a superwoman”, which is seen as a payment for their empowerment, or a way to “neutralize” their “deviance” from traditional gender roles (Bhowmick, 2022). This also highlights how unprepared organizations were during the pandemic to the demands of “double shift” on women employees.

Examining how mothers dealt with blurring of boundaries between paid and unpaid work and the gendered role distribution in the home, shows women used strategies like delegation, setting boundaries at work and actively engaging family members. Furthermore, supportive solutions at work, need to encourage women’s voice and allow setting boundaries and sensitive work–life balance. Our education system itself should target teaching young children about equality amongst genders at home and in the work front. Also, in the home front women can be change agents themselves, actively initiating changes in gender roles in families which would make way for changes in the acceptable social norms. By engaging children and spouses, women can be positive role models for the coming generations to break away from traditional gender roles.

Conclusions
The pandemic has accelerated trends towards WFH and flexible working has often been considered a solution to work–life balance, especially for working mothers. Our findings however stress on the need to consider difficulties of blurred boundaries and gendered realities in the domestic setting while planning the next normal. Our findings also show
the importance of reimagining, re-inventing, adapting and re-strategizing work practices on the satisfaction and positive effect of working mothers. These are attempts at re-establishing self-determination that was thwarted due to various restrictions and enforced ways of doing things during the pandemic. Similar to research in other countries (Craig and Churchill, 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2020, among others), our findings also show that the pandemic brought to the forefront the gendered social structures that lead to gendered division of labour in India. Thus, while the push towards gender equality has brought women into the workplace, but it has also given women impossible expectations of having to do it all. We need more focus on the immense burden Indian women are carrying and its cost on their physical and mental well-being. We need to encourage changes in society where domestic responsibilities are equally shared by both partners. Women can be active change agents by initiating changes within their families and work.

Limitations and suggestions for future research
Our study only focused on the subjective experiences of working mothers, the fathers’ perspectives were not incorporated. However, future research can be designed to incorporate experiences of both the partners to gain deeper insights about their perspectives and how the negotiation of roles unfolds in the domestic front. Also extending our study to include a follow up with our participants post the pandemic and women from different social classes can give a more comprehensive perspective of the impact of the pandemic on women. Finally, a cross sectional study can be designed to objectively measure changes in work practices and consequent job satisfaction and productivity of working women.

References
Bhowmick, N. (2022), The Lies That Our Mothers Have Told us, Rupa Publications.


**Further reading**


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