

Future of Work for Women in Post Pandemic Times: An Understanding

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Abstract:

There has been near-universal adoption of remote work options particularly work-from-home in light of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The rise of remote work has reshaped the traditional dynamics of the workplace. With more women managing careers simultaneously, the intersection of work and personal life has become increasingly complex. With the advent of remote work options, understanding how this mode of work affects the lives of working women specially in fields such as their professional roles, household responsibilities and personal well-being ,becomes crucial. Through survey method this paper aims to uncover the challenges and coping strategies employed by working women as they navigate remote work and its impact on their work-life balance. In this context, the present study seeks to explore the influences that remote work has in this modern work arrangement focusing mainly in the Indian context, but with references to international evidence.

Keywords: Paid-unpaid work, Pandemic, Remote work options, Work from home (WFH), Women, Work.

Introduction

The global spread of Corona-virus, the consequent lockdown in many countries and adherence to norms like social distancing and self -isolation have seen a large number of organizations move to a work-from-home (WFH) format. Remote work has emerged as a trans-formative force in the modern workplace, offering new possibilities for flexibility and work-life balance. However the implications of remote work are not uniform across all demographic groups. This study focuses specifically on the experiences of working women, examining how remote work(WFH) intersects with their daily routines, responsibilities and aspirations. Enabled by advancements in technology and shifting attitudes towards flexible work arrangements, remote work has become increasingly prevalent across various industries and sectors. While this shift has offered newfound flexibility and autonomy for many workers, its impact is not uniform across all demographic groups. In particular, understanding how remote work influences the daily lives of working women is of paramount importance, considering the intersection of gender dynamics, professional aspirations, and household responsibilities. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the widespread adoption of remote work, as organizations were compelled to adapt to social distancing measures and lockdown restrictions. Consequently, many companies transitioned to remote work models, allowing employees to carry out their responsibilities from the safety and comfort of their homes. While remote work was initially implemented as a temporary measure, its success and the realization of its benefits led to a more permanent embrace of flexible work arrangements by employers worldwide. In essence, the realm of work has long been

characterized by gender disparities and inequities, with women often facing systemic barriers to advancement and recognition. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations have shaped women's experiences in the workforce, influencing their career trajectories, opportunities for professional development, and access to leadership positions. Despite significant strides towards gender equality in recent decades, persistent challenges remain, particularly concerning the balance between work and personal life responsibilities.

It is to be noted here that women from diverse backgrounds and demographics may face distinct challenges and opportunities in navigating remote work arrangements. Factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, care giving responsibilities, and geographic location can profoundly shape women's experiences of remote work and its implications for their daily lives.

Significance of study

Understanding the impact of remote work on working women is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the growing body of literature on remote work and work-life balance, providing insights into the gendered dimensions of these phenomena. Secondly, it informs organizational policies and practices aimed at supporting the well-being and advancement of women in the workforce. Finally, it serves as a catalyst for broader conversations regarding gender aspect, care giving responsibilities, and the future of work in an increasingly digital and decentralized world. By exploring these themes in details, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how remote work shapes the lives and livelihoods of women in the contemporary workforce.

Objectives of study

1. To assess the prevalence of remote work among working women.
2. To identify the perceived benefits and challenges of remote work for working women.
3. To understand how remote work affects the balance between professional responsibilities and personal life for women.

Review of literature

In developed countries, the term “work” implicitly refers to paid work, in contrast to unpaid work, which comprises domestic chores (like cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes, laundry, house maintenance, shopping for everyday needs, caring for children and the elderly). Because the large set of activities that comprise unpaid work are tasks related to daily living, any suggestion that puts a monetary value to this work is seen as both outrageous and impractical. Yet, because these tasks (termed “reproductive labour” by feminist economists) disproportionately fall on women, the implications of engaging with unpaid work inside the home are vastly different for men and women. For women, these engagements invoke a labour market penalty in terms of hiring, lower wages and perceived competence, in contrast to men who are rewarded at similar stages of their lives. For example, married men earn more than unmarried men, or the birth of a child is found to increase male wages (Correll et al 2007). The motherhood penalty is estimated to cost American women \$16,000 per year in lost wages (Fox 2019).

Feminists argue that while the gamut of reproductive tasks is needed for societies to function smoothly and for the next generation of the labour force to be born and nurtured, the costs of this social need are borne by women. It has been estimated that in 2019, the imputed value of this unpaid reproductive work by women was equivalent of \$10.9 trillion, which is more than the earnings of the top 50 firms in the

world in 2018 (Wezerek and Ghodsee 2020). The monetary imputation is useful to understand the sheer magnitude of unpaid work.

In developing countries, unpaid work consists of the full range of reproductive labour as above, but in addition, also of economic or “productive” work that is unpaid. Here, the meaning of economic or productive work needs to be understood. This is work which is counted in the production boundary of the System of National Accounts (SNA), or simply counted in the calculation of GDP, or even more simply, is counted as “work” when a man is doing it. Women who are engaged in unpaid productive work (that is, work routinely recognized as work, distinct from domestic chores and care responsibilities) are typically working on family enterprises: on family farms, in rearing livestock or poultry, in making commodities for sale in the market, in family-owned shops or workshops, on fruit orchards, and so forth. These are economic livelihood-generating activities for the family, which women participate in and contribute to, but are not paid or even recognized as workers. One useful way to think about this is if someone from outside the family was hired for this work, they would be paid.

The Traditional WFH Unpaid Workers

In developing countries like India, women engaged in unpaid economic work have always been “working from home” because, typically, family enterprises are either literally inside the home or very close to it. These women are workers, but with no pay, no benefits and very often not recognized as workers. When they are asked “in addition to your regular domestic work, do you work?” their answer is often a “no” because they see their economic work as an extension of their domestic chores, and they internalize the low worth that society and families place upon the contribution of their labour.

In 2019 Deshpande referred to them as workers in the “grey zone,” likely to not be counted, and therefore to remain outside the folds of the statistical system that counts workers, of governments and policymakers that formulate laws governing various aspects of work (wages/ compensation, hours, benefits, safety nets, insurance, maternity or sick leave, etc.) Also, these archetypal WFH women will continue to work from home even when the pandemic ends to ensure that their family enterprises continue to survive.

The Traditional WFH Paid Workers

In developing countries, there is another category of WFH workers who have been in existence for decades, underpaid, invisible, but often vital parts of domestic or global supply chains. These are the home-based workers. They are contracted by firms (multinational or domestic) or subcontractors on a piece-rate basis. In the garment industry, they are among the lowest category of workers, stitching sleeves, sewing buttons, trimming threads, and embroidering. Other examples of home-based work include food products (for example, rolling papads), bidi-making, assembling sticker bindi sheets, weaving, etc. It is estimated that their number is over 37 million (Dave 2017). These women work from home, often because it is easier for them to manage their domestic responsibilities with paid work, even with paltry payments and no other form of protection. Often, this is the only type of paid work available in rural or peri-urban areas.

Further, the effects of Pandemic on these workers needs to be taken into account. Given the severe reduction in economic activity, these workers will find it very hard to get work and maintain their meager earnings. Already, there are reports of how the two massive negative shocks of demonetization and a change in the goods and services tax (GST) regime impacted their work negatively, because of a

generalized lowering of gross domestic product (GDP) growth and a depression of demand (Dave 2017). The pandemic-induced recession will make it even harder for them to get work, especially if the larger firms they work for go under.

The New WFH Workers

Now it is time to turn to the pandemic and lockdown induced WFH workers particularly women. These are workers in the formal sector who work in corporate or government offices, in the media, in educational establishments, in retail, transport, financial sectors and so on. For many women, remote work blurs the boundaries between work and personal life, necessitating a more integrated approach to managing various roles and responsibilities. While this integration can enhance flexibility and facilitate better work-life balance, it may also lead to challenges in disconnecting from work and setting boundaries to protect personal time and well-being. Additionally, remote work can be isolating, particularly for women who thrive on interpersonal connections and social interactions in the workplace. The absence of in-person interactions may lead to feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and reduced morale. However, evidences from India of the actual gendered repercussions of shifting to WFH is yet to be seen. South Asia, India and Pakistan in particular, have a hand among the most unequal norms of sharing domestic chores and housework (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). Research suggests that women may face unique challenges in remote work environments, including reduced visibility and opportunities for advancement. The "virtual" nature of remote work can exacerbate existing gender biases, potentially disadvantaging women in terms of career progression and access to resources. Moreover, women are more likely to shoulder care giving responsibilities, which can be exacerbated by remote work arrangements that blur the boundaries between work and home life (<https://chat.openai.com/c/3bffa20c-5ca7-4e6b-9a72-631ea8f8f0a5>).

Choosing between home and job is a tough one for most women. Working women have managed this tightrope walk by depending on several support systems. Day care for children; ready to eat meals, semi-processed food, easy to pick up grocery that makes it easy to put meals on the table; assistance in running the home with help for cleaning, cooking, laundry and other household chores; tutors, coaches and other support staff to help manage the children's studies, projects, sports and extra-curricular and friendly support in the form of group games, play dates, outings and sleepovers. All these ease the burden of running the home for a working mother. None of these now exist in the post pandemic world. Those who can work from home and keep their jobs, are also struggling to manage all these tasks that have now gone online for the kids too. The time and energy required to schedule and manage an entire household's demands for virtual learning and work also falls disproportionately on the woman. Many are tired from the excessive burdens of cooking, cleaning, coaching, cajoling, and caring for every detail at home. While some progressive households are coming to terms with the work from home dads taking on more responsibility, it is unknown if that much-needed seamlessness in the running of the household will become a permanent feature.

While there is no empirical evidence on the sharing of domestic work from India yet, there is some evidence from the United States (US). A survey of 2200 adults, conducted between 9 and 10 April 2020 in the US, finds that even though both fathers and mothers are doing more housework during lockdown than they did earlier, the burden is not shared equally. Interestingly, 70% women say that they are fully or primarily responsible for housework, and 66% women say that they are primarily responsible for childcare, and these proportions are similar to the proportions in normal times. In other words,

housework and childcare were disproportionately the woman's responsibility and that continues to be the case. This burden on women has not reduced because the father is also working from home.

In most societies, women take the primary responsibility for childcare and rearing. Evidence from other countries during earlier epidemics (H1N1, Ebola) reveals that school closures had differential effects on men and women. As their childcare burden increased, women's labour force participation fell, either in the form of reduced hours or withdrawal from paid labour altogether. School closure has other direct costs related to pandemic control that are gendered (Johnson 2020). Front-line health workers tend to be predominantly women, or as in the case of India, exclusively women. If they have to take time off from work due to school closures and the need to take care of their children, it deprives the healthcare system of vital personnel needed for pandemic control (Minardi et al 2020).

It is to be taken into account that the impact of remote work extends beyond individual experiences to shape organizational culture and communication dynamics. Remote work can influence organizational norms, practices, and communication patterns, requiring adjustments in how teams collaborate, communicate, and maintain cohesion. Research highlights the importance of fostering a supportive remote work culture, investing in technology infrastructure for remote collaboration, and implementing effective communication strategies to mitigate the challenges of remote work and maintain organizational connectivity.

Women's Work in India

India has been witnessing a decline in labor force participation rates of women much before the pandemic. The pandemic is most likely to make a bad situation worse, as far as women's work is concerned. Front-line health workers in India (Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers) are exclusively women. They are poorly paid with very exacting work requirements. In addition to the glaring lack of personal protective equipment, there are reports about attacks on them as they go on their daily household survey to assess the spread of the disease (Hindu 2020; Mohanty 2020). This makes their work extremely hazardous, with no compensatory payments or protection.

Overall, therefore, the scenario for women workers looks bleak in the medium term, whether they were the classic WFH workers, or are currently working from home due to the pandemic. Going forward, it is necessary to use this crisis to overhaul the current system that prevents women from entering the workforce and when they do, by not rewarding them enough. This can only be done by recognizing the myriad facets of women's work, the need for adequate compensation, putting support structures in place that allow for an equitable sharing of domestic chores and care work, and most importantly, creating favorable opportunities for work and livelihoods within a conscious anti-discriminatory policy framework. Hopefully, this will also pave the way for shifting gender norms within the home towards greater equality.

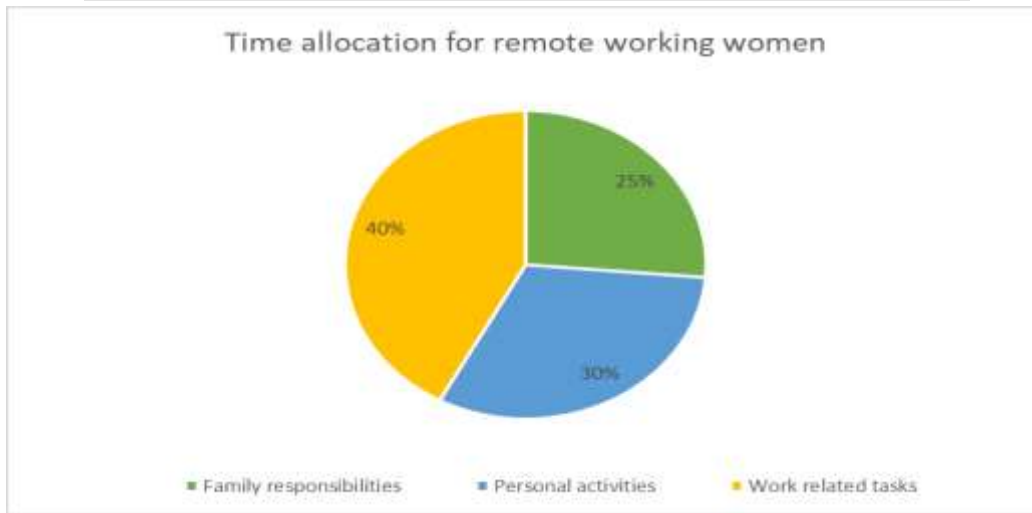
Methodology

The present research has been carried out with the help of survey research which analyses the work-from-home implications in everyday life, especially for women in post-pandemic times. The survey targets a diverse sample of working women across different industries, professions, and demographic backgrounds. The survey includes a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data on participants' experiences of remote work. The survey also

administers online via email invitations, social media platforms, and professional networks. Participation has been voluntary and anonymous to encourage candid responses. Descriptive statistics and inferential analyses was conducted to analyze the survey data and identify trends, patterns, and correlations. Qualitative responses were thematically analyzed to extract key themes and insights.

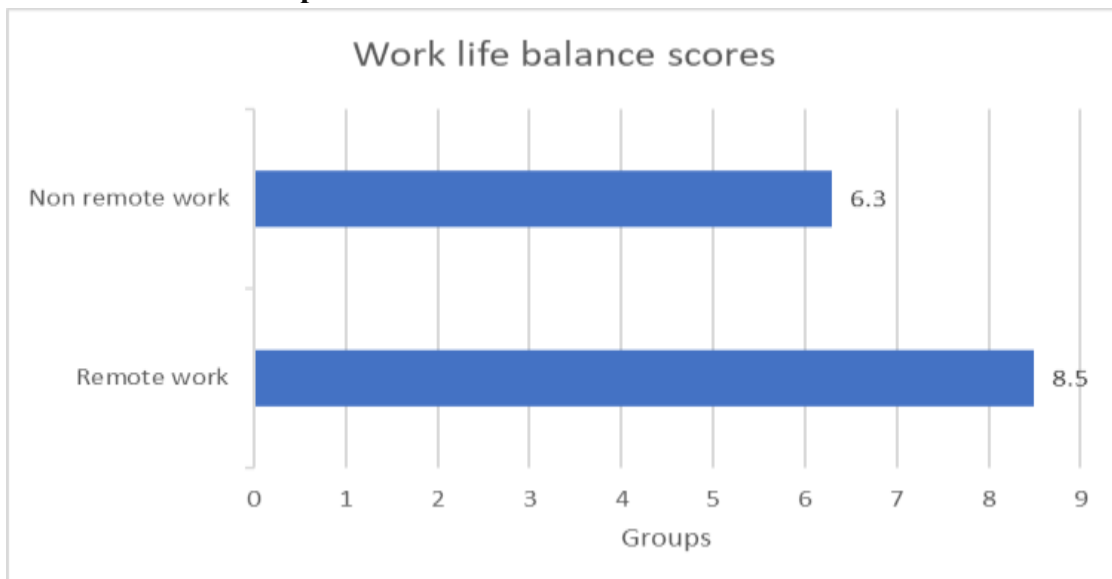
Data analysis

Table-1 Time allocation for remote working women in daily lives



The above Pie chart represents a category of time allocation: Work-related tasks (40%), personal activities(30%), and family responsibilities(25%). This chart visually shows how remote working women allocate their time across different aspects of their daily lives, highlighting the proportion of time spent on work, personal activities, and family responsibilities; the highest being on work related tasks.

Table-2 Impact of remote work on women’s work life balance



The above bars represent the average work-life balance scores for each group. The "Remote Work" group has a significantly higher average work-life balance score of 8.5 compared to the "Non-Remote Work" group of score 6.3, indicating that remote work may have a positive impact on women's work-life

balance. This visualization provides a clear comparison between the impact of remote work and traditional office work on women's work-life balance, demonstrating the potential benefits of remote work in this aspect.

Summary of main findings

1. Work-life balance has emerged as a critical concern for employees, particularly working women who juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. Remote work has the potential to enhance work-life balance by providing greater flexibility and autonomy. Research has shown that remote work can lead to improved work-life balance by reducing commuting time, allowing for more flexible scheduling, and facilitating better integration of work and personal life domains. However, remote work also presents challenges, such as difficulty establishing boundaries between work and personal life, feelings of isolation, and blurred lines between professional and domestic responsibilities.
2. The impact of remote work on productivity and performance has been a subject of considerable debate and investigation. While some studies suggest that remote work can increase productivity by minimizing workplace distractions, enhancing focus, and promoting a conducive work environment, others raise concerns about potential drawbacks, such as decreased collaboration, communication challenges, and reduced visibility within the organization.
3. The experiences of working women in remote work settings are shaped by factors such as socioeconomic status, and care giving responsibilities. Women from marginalized backgrounds may face compounded challenges in balancing work and family obligations, navigating remote work technologies, and accessing support networks. Inter-sectional perspectives highlight the need for inclusive policies and practices that recognize and address the diverse needs and experiences of women in remote work environments.
4. Organizations play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and supportive remote work culture for women. Research suggests that implementing flexible work policies, providing resources for childcare and eldercare, and offering mentor-ship and career development opportunities can enhance the experiences of women in remote work settings. Additionally, organizations can combat gender biases and stereotypes through diversity training, unconscious bias mitigation strategies, and inclusive leadership practices.

Conclusion: Recommendations and future directions

In examining the impact of remote work on working women's daily lives, it is evident that this mode of work brings about both opportunities and challenges. Remote work offers flexibility, autonomy, and the potential to better balance professional and personal responsibilities. However, it also presents unique obstacles, including difficulties in setting boundaries between work and personal life, feelings of isolation, and potential implications for career advancement. Work from home put working women in a unique situation. With lack of domestic help at the time of lock down, and gender norms still deeply entrenched in the society, many working women felt the personal and professional boundaries blurring, and as a result felt stretched and stressed. Additionally, they have had to grapple with possible biases in the organization and managers that lean towards a belief that during WFH, women would be less productive. The findings of this exploration underscore the importance of understanding the nuanced experiences of working women in remote work environments. It is crucial for organizations,

policymakers, and society as a whole to recognize and address the gendered dimensions of remote work, ensuring that women have equitable access to opportunities, resources, and support networks.

Suggestions

- **Flexible Policies:** Organizations should adopt flexible remote work policies that accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of working women. This includes offering options for hybrid work arrangements, providing access to resources and technology to support remote work, and implementing flexible scheduling practices.
- **Support Networks:** Creating supportive networks and communities for women in remote work environments can foster connections, provide mentor-ship opportunities, and offer a sense of belonging. Organizations can facilitate the formation of employee resource groups or affinity networks specifically for women in remote work roles.
- **Training and Development:** Offering training and development programs tailored to the needs of working women in remote work settings can enhance skills, build confidence, and support career advancement. Topics may include remote communication skills, time management strategies, and navigating remote work technologies.
- **Work-Life Integration:** Encouraging a culture of work-life integration rather than strict separation can help mitigate the challenges of remote work for working women. This involves promoting self-care practices, encouraging regular breaks, and fostering a supportive work environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their needs and boundaries.
- **Advocacy and Policy Change:** Advocating for policy changes at the organizational and governmental levels can address systemic barriers and inequities faced by working women in remote work environments. This may include advocating for paid parental leave, affordable childcare options, and initiatives to close the gender pay gap.

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