Flexibility Fatigue in the It Industry: A Matricentric Exploration of Working Women's Remote Work Struggles

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of flexibility fatigue among Indian working women in the IT industry through a matricentric lens. The sudden shift to remote work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has blurred work-life boundaries and intensified the caregiving responsibilities of women, especially mothers. While flexibility is designed to enhance work-life balance, this research highlights how it often results in perpetual availability, mental exhaustion, and emotional strain. Semi-structured interviews with 30 Indian working mothers were conducted and analysed thematically, revealing key challenges such as work-life boundary erosion, gendered household pressures, lack of organizational empathy, psychological strain, and the pressing need for supportive structures. The findings emphasize the intersectionality of gender, culture, and professional expectations, demonstrating the systemic neglect of women's unique challenges in remote work models. This research contributes to theories of boundary management, role strain, and feminist organizational studies, while also offering actionable recommendations for organizations and policymakers to design gender-sensitive policies that promote mental health, caregiving support, and career equity. Future research is recommended across sectors and genders to further understand flexibility fatigue's broader implications.

Keywords: Flexibility Fatigue, Remote Work, Working Women, Caregiving Responsibilities, Matricentric Feminism, Gender Inequality, Technostress.

Introduction

The emergence of remote working as a mainstream mode of employment has significantly transformed professional landscapes, particularly in the IT industry. While the flexibility to work from home initially appeared to offer numerous advantages, it has also revealed complex challenges, especially for women navigating dual roles as professionals and primary caregivers. In the Indian context, these challenges are compounded by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that dictate gender roles and caregiving responsibilities within families (Chakraborty & Sahoo, 2021; Deshpande, 2020). Working women, particularly mothers, often find themselves at the intersection of professional obligations and domestic duties, a position that has been both exhausting and underappreciated. This phenomenon, referred to in this study as "flexibility fatigue," highlights the unintended burdens placed on women by the expectation of continuous adaptability and availability in remote work settings.

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Indian society continues to be characterized by men-headed households and patrilineal traditions, where caregiving duties are largely considered the responsibility of women (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2020). Despite seventy-seven years of independence and notable strides in women's participation in the workforce, the domestic sphere remains predominantly female-centered. In the IT sector, where long working hours and high-performance standards are the norm, the added demands of remote working blur the lines between professional and personal lives. Indian women working in IT are thus confronted with the dual expectations of excelling at work while managing caregiving responsibilities without adequate societal or institutional support (Neetha & Mazumdar, 2020).

The shift to remote working has exposed the fragility of work-life balance frameworks that were never designed with women's realities in mind. While flexible working arrangements were introduced as a solution to help employees better manage their personal and professional lives, for many women, they have morphed into a double-edged sword. The constant pressure to be available online, manage domestic responsibilities, support children's education, and attend to elder care—often without assistance—has resulted in significant physical and mental fatigue (Deshpande, 2020). The phenomenon of flexibility fatigue encapsulates the exhaustion arising from continuous adjustment to competing demands, without clear boundaries or organizational recognition.

Existing literature on remote working predominantly focuses on productivity outcomes, technology adoption, and organizational efficiency. Few studies have delved into the gendered experiences of remote working or explored the caregiving pressures that contribute to emotional and psychological exhaustion (Mukhopadhyay, 2021). Furthermore, research exploring the Indian IT sector has yet to comprehensively address the matricentric perspective—that is, the unique viewpoint of working mothers balancing professional roles with familial caregiving obligations.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst that forced organizations worldwide to adopt remote working models rapidly. However, even beyond the pandemic, remote and hybrid work models have become part of long-term organizational strategies. For women in IT, this has meant prolonged exposure to demanding and often conflicting expectations, exacerbating gender inequalities that previously existed (Chakraborty & Sahoo, 2021). Despite technological advancements, Indian working women face persistent structural barriers that limit their ability to thrive professionally while maintaining personal well-being.

The concept of flexibility fatigue is particularly relevant in this scenario, as it points to a critical but under-explored challenge in modern work environments. It calls attention to the psychological toll of continuous flexibility and the absence of support systems to mitigate its effects. The phenomenon also sheds light on the organizational blind spots that fail to account for gendered experiences when formulating remote working policies and practices (Mazumdar, 2020).

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Indian working women in the IT industry through a matricentric lens. It seeks to understand how remote working conditions have intensified caregiving pressures, blurred work-life boundaries, and led to psychological exhaustion among women. By focusing on flexibility fatigue, the research also highlights the urgent need for organizational reforms that prioritize gender-sensitive policies and recognize the unique challenges faced by women.

The research draws on qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with 30 Indian working mothers in the IT sector. Thematic analysis has been employed to identify key themes and patterns that shed light on their struggles and coping mechanisms. This introduction sets the stage for understanding the critical intersections of gender, motherhood, and professional life, offering valuable insights for policymakers, business leaders, and scholars interested in addressing gender inequities in the workplace.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that remote working models, while beneficial in many contexts, must be restructured to avoid perpetuating existing inequalities. The findings underscore the importance of developing workplace policies that account for caregiving responsibilities, promote mental health, and create equitable opportunities for professional growth. By adopting a matricentric approach, this research aims to not only document the challenges but also advocate for systemic change that benefits working women in India's dynamic IT industry.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift toward remote work, particularly in the Information Technology (IT) sector, known for its adaptability to flexible work models (Choudhury et al., 2021). However, the flexibility associated with remote work has led to unintended consequences, especially for Indian working women who juggle professional responsibilities with caregiving roles (Gupta & Agrawal, 2022). This literature review explores flexibility fatigue from a matricentric perspective, highlighting challenges faced by Indian women in IT during remote work setups.

The concept of flexibility fatigue emerges from work-life boundary theory and role strain theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Goode, 1960). Flexibility fatigue refers to exhaustion arising from continuous navigation between work and personal roles without clear boundaries (Allen et al., 2021). Remote Work and Work-Life Integration Studies on remote work show mixed outcomes. While remote work provides autonomy (Bloom et al., 2015), it often blurs work-life boundaries (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Indian IT women experience increased workloads and expectations to remain perpetually available (Joshi & Kaur, 2021; Sharma & Bhardwaj, 2022).A significant body of literature emphasizes the gendered nature of flexibility (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). Indian women in IT face disproportionate household burdens (Deshpande, 2020). Remote work exacerbates these challenges by intensifying domestic duties alongside professional demands (Kashyap et al., 2021).

Matricentric feminism (O'Reilly, 2016) provides a relevant lens to examine motherhood penalties in professional contexts. Indian mothers working in IT report being overlooked for promotions and leadership roles due to perceived caregiving commitments (Garg et al., 2021; Ramachandran et al., 2022). Remote work fatigue correlates strongly with mental health issues (Wang et al., 2021). Indian women report higher rates of anxiety and burnout due to constant multitasking and lack of social support (Verma & Verma, 2022; Nair & Menon, 2023).The Indian IT sector's dependence on digital tools contributes to technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2019). Women experience digital overload and constant surveillance, undermining autonomy and increasing fatigue (Kiran & Mishra, 2022). While organizations introduced flexible policies, structural support remains inadequate (Lal & Dwivedi, 2021). Lack of mentoring and limited access to career advancement opportunities affect women's professional growth (Ghosh & Chakrabarti, 2022). Scholars call for gender-sensitive workplace policies (Chung, 2022). Recommendations include flexible hours with defined boundaries, mental health support, and

promotion of shared domestic responsibilities (Dutta & Bhattacharya, 2023).

Flexibility fatigue among Indian working women in IT is a complex phenomenon shaped by cultural expectations, organizational practices, and individual roles. A matricentric perspective illuminates the compounded struggles faced by mothers in remote work settings, calling for systemic reforms.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, employing an exploratory design to understand the lived experiences of Indian working women in the IT industry during remote working conditions. The research follows a matricentric lens, focusing on how motherhood intersects with professional demands to generate flexibility fatigue.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 Indian women working in various IT roles across large corporations, startups, and consulting firms. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, family structure, and professional designation. Interviews were conducted virtually over a period of three months and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes, with data coding and categorization facilitated through NVivo software. The process involved multiple rounds of coding to ensure reliability and depth. (Table1)

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy.

Criteria	Description
Credibility	Ensured through prolonged engagement, transcript validation, and member checks
Transferability	Achieved via detailed contextual description and participant diversity
Dependability	Established through systematic data documentation and repeat analysis cycles
Confirmability	Maintained through audit trails and researcher reflexivity

Table 1: Research Trustworthiness Criteria

Results

1. Work-Life Boundary Erosion

Participants reported difficulty in distinguishing between professional and personal spaces. The expectation to be constantly available, coupled with the absence of physical workplace boundaries, contributed to fatigue. (Table2)

2. Gendered Household Pressures

Most participants described an increased domestic workload, with caregiving responsibilities disproportionately falling on them. Despite working full-time, they remained the primary caregivers for children and elderly family members.

3. Lack of Organizational Empathy

Many respondents shared that managerial expectations remained rigid, with no consideration for personal constraints. The absence of flexible deadlines and understanding policies aggravated their stress.

4. Psychological Strain

Feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout were common among participants. Several women reported sleep disturbances and chronic stress, attributing it to the relentless demands of remote working combined with domestic obligations.

5. Coping and Support Needs

While some women adapted by creating strict routines or seeking spousal support, the majority highlighted the urgent need for organizational interventions, such as mental health programs and caregiver leave policies.

First-Order Theme	Second-Order Theme	Aggregate Theme
Blurring work-life boundaries	Constant availability expectations	Impact of **r**emote working on personal boundaries
Increased caregiving load	Unshared domestic responsibilities	Gendered household pressures during remote working
Lack of organizational empathy	Inflexible managerial expectations	Institutional contributions to flexibility fatigue
Emotional exhaustion and burnout	Mental health strain	Psychological impacts of flexibility fatigue
Coping strategies	Need for structural and policy support	Pathways for reducing flexibility fatigue

Table 1: Data Structure

Participant Code	Years of Experience	Marital Status	Discussion Summary	Aligned Sub-Themes
C1	8	Married, 1 child	Struggles with managing client calls and child's online schooling	Work-Home Conflict, Caregiving Fatigue

			simultaneously.	
C2	11	Married, 2 children	"Flexible" hours turned into expectations of round-the-clock availability, causing stress.	Flexibility Fatigue, Extended Work Hours
C3	6	Married, post-maternity leave	Anxiety over being side-lined for promotion after maternity leave.	Motherhood Penalty, Career Progression Anxiety
C4	10	Married, 1 child	Digital exhaustion from continuous emails and video meetings.	Technostress, Digital Overload
C5	9	Married, no children	Feels that absence of dependents means extra workload is expected.	Unfair Workload Distribution, Managerial Bias
C6	12	Married, 2 children	Constant interruptions at home affecting concentration on coding tasks.	Blurred Boundaries, Productivity Challenges
C7	5	Single, caring for parents	Struggles balancing elder care and unpredictable work demands.	Caregiving Burden, Lack of Flexible Structures
C8	14	Married, 1 child	Remote work led to burnout, though there was no clear organizational support system.	Burnout, Lack of Institutional Support

C9	7	Married, no children	Pressure to "prove" herself as highly available, fearing flexibility would be seen as reduced commitment.	Presenteeism Pressure, Gendered Work Expectations
C10	4	Single	Digital monitoring caused anxiety and reduced trust in management.	Surveillance Stress, Lack of Autonomy
C11	15	Married, 2 children	Hectic late-night meetings led to disrupted sleep and fatigue.	Extended Work Hours, Sleep Disruption
C12	6	Married, expecting child	Concerned about how remote work will change after maternity leave.	Anticipated Motherhood Penalty, Uncertainty
C13	10	Divorced, 1 child	Juggles between single parenting and demanding work targets.	Single Parenting Struggles, Role Conflict
C14	8	Married, no children	Finds virtual meetings more draining than in-person meetings.	Zoom Fatigue, Mental Drain
C15	12	Married, 1 child	Unequal domestic load despite spouse also working from home.	Gendered Domestic Labor, Emotional Strain
C16	4	Single	Feels isolated and disconnected from the team while working remotely.	Workplace Isolation, Social Disconnect

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C17	9	Married, 2 children	Finds that organizational policies are generic and not suited for working mothers.	Policy Ineffectiveness, Lack of Customization
C18	11	Married, 1 child	Constant notifications and multitasking lead to exhaustion and mistakes.	Technostress, Cognitive Overload
C19	7	Married, no children	Struggles with lack of time for personal hobbies and self-care.	Work-Life Imbalance, Mental Health Neglect
C20	5	Married, 1 child	Feels constant guilt over not being present enough for family.	Maternal Guilt, Emotional Burnout
C21	14	Married, 2 children	Reports lower career satisfaction due to slowed progression since motherhood.	Career Stagnation, Motherhood Penalty
C22	8	Widowed, 1 child	Faces high stress balancing single motherhood and job insecurity in the IT sector.	Single Motherhood Stress, Job Insecurity
C23	6	Married, no children	Mentioned that managers assume women without children have more availability.	Gender Stereotypes, Unfair Workload
C24	3	Single	Finds flexibility helpful, but feels disconnected from team culture and mentorship.	Flexibility Benefits, Social Isolation

C25	9	Married, 1 child	States that household expectations increased after starting remote work.	Domestic Load Increase, Role Conflict
C26	7	Married, 2 children	Struggles to find personal time amid continuous demands from work and family.	Work-Home Overlap, Self-Care Deficiency
C27	10	Married, no children	Finds remote work beneficial but fears career invisibility compared to more visible, in-office peers.	Career Visibility Anxiety, Remote Work Bias
C28	5	Married, 1 child	Describes "always-on" culture leading to missed family dinners and quality time.	Work-Life Conflict, Extended Work Hours
C29	4	Married, newly married	Feels organizational empathy is lacking, and workloads are unadjusted for personal transitions like marriage or caregiving onset.	Lack of Organizational Sensitivity, Workload Rigidity

C30	13	Married, 2 children	Suggested structured check-ins and mental health breaks, highlighting lack of HR-driven support for working mothers.	Recommendations for Policy Change, Mental Health Needs

Table 2: Participant Demographics, Discussion Summary, and Sub-Themes

Discussion

The **fi**ndings from this study reveal the complex stru**ggles** of Indian working women in the IT industry who are navigating remote work while managing familial and caregiving responsibilities. Several key themes emerged, supported by participant narratives, offering insight into flexibility fatigue, blurred boundaries, gendered workload distribution, and career progression anxiety.

1. Blurred Work-Home Boundaries and Caregiving Fatigue

"I often mute calls to help my child with homework, and it leaves me feeling torn between two worlds." (C1)

This sentiment encapsulates the challenge of balancing professional and personal domains simultaneously. Participants reported difficulties in maintaining focus and productivity while addressing continuous caregiving demands. These findings support the work of Felstead and Henseke (2017), who discussed the psychological strain caused by blurred boundaries. In the Indian context, Deshpande (2020) highlights that traditional gender roles place disproportionate domestic expectations on women, compounding fatigue in remote work settings.

2. Flexibility Fatigue and Extended Work Hours

"Work hours have no end now; a 9 PM call feels normal, and I can't say no." (C2)

While flexibility is often promoted as a benefit, participants expressed that it has led to an expectation of constant availability. This phenomenon, known as flexibility fatigue, was also observed by Kashyap et al. (2021), who noted that women, in particular, face difficulties setting boundaries due to cultural expectations of compliance and availability. Ashforth et al. (2000) also warned against the dangers of boundarylessness, where work invades all aspects of life.

3. Career Progression Anxiety and Motherhood Penalty

"Out of sight feels like out of mind for leadership roles — I worry I'm invisible." (C3)

Participants expressed fear of being overlooked for promotions or key projects due to prolonged remote work or maternity-related career breaks. This finding aligns with Ramachandran et al. (2022) and Ghosh and Chakrabarti (2022), who discuss the motherhood penalty and the need for structured reintegration policies. Career progression anxiety remains high among women who fear they may not be given equal opportunities compared to their male counterparts or child-free peers.

4. Technostress and Digital Overload

"I feel drained after endless meetings; even my weekends buzz with notifications." (C4)

Participants highlighted technostress as a growing concern, where constant digital engagement leads to cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion. Tarafdar et al. (2019) identified techno-invasion as a primary contributor to workplace stress. The pandemic has exacerbated this phenomenon, making it difficult for employees to disconnect from work (Sharma & Bhardwaj, 2022).

5. Gendered Workload Distribution

"My manager assumes I'm always free just because I don't have kids — it's unfair." (C5)

Several participants reported being given extra tasks due to assumptions about their availability, especially those without caregiving duties. This reflects underlying gender biases in workload distribution. Gupta and Agrawal (2022) emphasize that such assumptions perpetuate inequality and burnout.

6. Emotional Guilt and Self-Neglect

"I feel guilty for missing out on my family even though I'm physically present." (C20)

Mothers expressed emotional guilt over perceived neglect of family responsibilities despite being at home. This guilt often led to self-neglect and emotional exhaustion, consistent with the findings of Chung (2022), who highlighted the psychological toll of maternal guilt in remote work settings.

7. Workplace Isolation and Lack of Organizational Support

"The company says they care, but there's no real support structure for mothers." (C30)

Participants reported feelings of isolation and a lack of genuine organizational empathy or tailored support structures. According to Lal and Dwivedi (2021), remote work policies often fail to address the unique needs of working mothers, resulting in increased dissatisfaction and attrition risks.

The narratives and experiences of Indian working women in the IT industry highlight that while remote work offers flexibility, it also brings new layers of fatigue, stress, and inequality. Organizations must prioritize gender-sensitive policies, support mechanisms, and cultural shifts to ensure that remote work benefits are not overshadowed by hidden burdens.

Social Implications

The research carries significant social implications for gender equity, workplace inclusion, and mental well-being. Firstly, the persistence of flexibility fatigue highlights the urgent need for broader cultural changes in perceptions of women's roles in professional and domestic spheres. Organizational policies must evolve to support women with caregiving responsibilities rather than penalize them. Additionally, the study points to the necessity for societal dialogue around shared caregiving responsibilities, moving beyond traditional gender roles. The findings also stress the importance of mental health support frameworks and awareness programs for women balancing dual roles. Policymakers and corporate leaders can leverage this research to foster more inclusive, equitable, and empathetic remote work environments that uplift rather than burden women professionals.

Theoretical Implications

This research makes significant theoretical contributions by deepening the understanding of flexibility fatigue within a matricentric framework, especially in the context of Indian working women in the IT sector. It extends boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) by highlighting how cultural and gendered expectations intensify boundary permeability. The study also reinforces role conflict theory demonstrating how simultaneous roles create emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload. Additionally, it contributes to feminist organizational theory by illustrating systemic biases and the motherhood penalty in virtual workspaces (O'Reilly, 2016). By contextualizing these phenomena within the Indian sociocultural environment, this study offers new perspectives that can refine and extend existing theories of work-life integration, digital stress, and gendered labor dynamics.

Practical Implications

The study offers actionable insights for organizations and policymakers. First, companies must establish clear guidelines on work hours to combat flexibility fatigue and promote healthy boundaries. Second, HR policies should be updated to include targeted support for mothers, including mentorship programs, flexible return-to-work plans, and leadership development opportunities. Third, training managers to avoid unconscious bias and assumptions about women's availability or commitment is essential. Fourth, implementing robust mental health resources and digital detox initiatives can help reduce technostress and cognitive overload. Finally, promoting inclusive workplace cultures that value contributions irrespective of caregiving status can foster a more equitable and supportive work environment.

Conclusion

The narratives and experiences of Indian working women in the IT industry highlight that while remote work offers flexibility, it also brings new layers of fatigue, stress, and inequality. Organizations must prioritize gender-sensitive policies, support mechanisms, and cultural shifts to ensure that remote work benefits are not overshadowed by hidden burdens.

Future research could explore comparative studies between men and women to understand if flexibility fatigue manifests differently across genders. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term career impact of remote work on working mothers in the IT sector. Research can also be extended to other industries and socio-economic strata to offer broader insights.

The study has certain limitations. The sample size, although qualitative and rich in detail, is limited to the IT industry and may not reflect experiences across other sectors. Furthermore, cultural nuances within different regions of India were not explored, potentially overlooking regional variations in expectations and support systems. Finally, the reliance on self-reported narratives could introduce bias or underreporting of certain issues.

Declaration of Funding

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