

Gendered dimensions of remote working: A study of decent work indicators for IT-ITES workers in post-pandemic India

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**Gender
Perspectives
on the Digital
Economy**

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Research Summary

Remote working experience has had a significant gendered impact on IT-ITES employees in India.

- Cis-female employees have been able to take lesser timed breaks in between work compared to cis-male employees. Since the advent of remote work, leisure time for cis-female employees has reduced whereas the same has increased for cis-male employees.
- Time spent on childcare responsibilities have increased among employees in general. Cis-female employees spend 30% more time on child care compared to cis-male employees.
- The remote working experience has been more stressful for women and a moderate correlation exists between work related stress and their considerations to leave employment.
- Interviews indicated that most establishments have not modified their POSH policies in line with the requirements of a virtual workspace.
- Over 58 percent of respondents believed that their self-assessed productivity increased while working remotely.
- 26.51 percent of the respondents believed that the quality of work assigned to them has been affected since the onset of remote work.
- 33.48 percent of respondents believe that their activities are tracked by way of some form of surveillance measures while working remotely.
- Organizations in most cases do not have any policy preventing assignment of work outside regular work timings.
- 1 in 3 individuals experienced some form of flexibility stigma while working remotely.
- Social security benefits given have not drastically reduced because of remote work. However, access to such benefits conferred have been limited by remote work.

1. Introduction: Gender dimensions of remote work

The shift of work from physical offices to the confines of our homes have been one of the most distinctive outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. The supposed rise in productivity and economic savings on account of giving up office spaces, regular commuting, etc. have encouraged many companies to adopt remote work wherever feasible in the long run. This has resulted in a considerable shift in perspective about how, where, and when employees work.

While remote working has been credited to have leveled the playing field for many employees, various socio-economic factors and individual characteristics often pose specific challenges to people working remotely. This can create a detrimental impact on employee performance and productivity at work. For example, access to the internet is a crucial element in facilitating remote work. While India's internet infrastructure has improved over the years, remote work experiences continue to be hindered by the digital divide since internet connectivity remains problematic in many rural areas. Women experience a triple disadvantage wherein in addition to the rural-urban digital divide, there also exists an income-based digital divide and intra-household discrimination that can broaden the gender gap in access to the internet (Nikore & Uppadhayay, 2021).

Similarly, a household with an intergenerational family is likely to have more caregiving needs and domestic work compared to others. This may create unique challenges particularly for female employees working remotely as the traditional roles assigned to cis-women outside of work affect their opportunities for contribution in paid work. The issue of unpaid care work is one that affects women disproportionately as women are often also responsible for the 'second shift' (Hochschild, 2003). India also has one of the most unequal gender norms in terms of sharing household chores and care work (Deshpande, 2020). The 2019 Time Use Survey indicated that women in India spend 299 minutes on unpaid domestic services and 134 minutes on unpaid caregiving services every day as against men who spend 97 and 76 minutes respectively.

Remote working had always been considered as an option that provided sufficient flexibility in work. However, evidence indicates that four in ten Indian women face anxiety issues and 'double burden syndrome' owing to remote work (Pink Ladder, 2020). Women, especially

mothers, are also more likely to experience forms of flexibility stigma² and this can result in negative career outcomes (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). The effect of this is so grave that women are eleven times more likely to not return to work post the pandemic than men (Rosa, Basole & Kesar, 2021).

The focus of this study is on remote work in the IT-ITES sector in India. It is a sector with a substantial gender gap (Gupta, 2019) and where remote work has expanded the most in recent years. This paper hypothesizes that there exists a decent work deficit in remote working setup in India and the regulatory framework surrounding the same needs to be amended in a gender-sensitive manner.

2. Issue Of Decent Work Deficit While Working Remotely

Decent work refers to “productive work carried out in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.” Decent work agenda focuses not just on employment generation but also on the quality of the work that is generated. Decent work is a prerequisite for inclusive growth and it ensures greater living standards for employees. Gender equality is a fundamental principle underpinning the decent work agenda.

Issues like pay gap, unequal opportunities for career progression, work-life imbalance, etc. fall under different pillars of the decent work agenda. Certain issues may even be found as relating to more than one pillar. For example, the problem of unequal opportunities for promotion and career progression may fall under the first pillar, which is ‘full and productive employment’. However, it can also fall under ‘rights at work’ as issues of loss of promotion and disadvantage in career progression often entail a possibility of evaluating loss of opportunities because of discrimination at work (ITUC, 2009).

To identify, study and evaluate the impact of remote working on decent work for women within the IT-ITES sector in India, this paper focuses on three out of the four pillars of the decent work agenda - employment opportunities, standards and rights at work and social protection. The paper focuses on following eight substantive elements corresponding to these pillars.³

² Flexibility stigma is a penalty associated with seeking flexibility in work. It is based on the idea that those who avail flexible working arrangements are likely to contribute less at work.

³This study has excluded from its purview ‘social dialogue’ and ‘work that must be abolished’.

Employment Opportunities

Employment opportunities encompass both quantity and quality of labor in any economy. Labor force participation, informal employment, unemployment rate, etc. are some of the important statistical indicators of employment opportunities. The shift to remote working has opened up more opportunities that were previously limited by geographical limits. However, there may be more informalization of work in the services sector similar to what had happened in the manufacturing industry in the 1990s (Kakkad, 2020). This can also detrimentally affect the female labor force participation in the sector. Remote working provides ample opportunities for employees by enabling some degree of flexibility in work. However, the unique challenges faced by women employees on account of disproportionate care and domestic work may potentially force them to drop out of the labor force.

Adequate Earnings And Productive Work

Adequate earnings simply mean that any work undertaken must deliver a fair income. Productive work indicates employment yielding sufficient returns to labor to permit them a level of consumption above the poverty line (ILO, 2012). Low returns on labor (often associated with low productivity levels) and the lack of sufficient work are indicative of an absence of productive employment. The legal framework indicator corresponding to this is statutory minimum wage (ILO, 2013). However, that alone does not necessarily guarantee a satisfactory standard of living.

Upon shifting to remote work, some organizations have been following a location-based pay model resulting in an adjustment of employee salaries based on their cost of living. Apart from this, factors like organizational profits, employee performance, productivity, etc. typically determine the earnings for employees. Performance monitoring and productivity measurements have been a concern for organizations while dealing with work done outside offices. As per a SCIKY survey, 87% of the leaders feel that measuring employee performance in remote work is a crucial challenge. This could result in inadequate recognition of work.

Studies on the changes in productivity due to remote work has yielded different results.⁴ This may be attributed to the fact that employee productivity depends on numerous variables including the amount and quality of work assigned, individual characteristics, presence of children at home, etc. The effect of these factors on performance, productivity, earnings and their gendered dimensions is worth an analysis.

Decent Working Time

The main indicators corresponding to decent work timings are maximum number of hours and paid annual leave. Remote work experiences of employees over the past two years indicate a general trend of increased working time. A study based on over 60,000 Microsoft employees in 2020 discusses the effect of remote work on collaboration among workers and a general increase in unscheduled call hours (Yang et al., 2021). Undefined work timings can create an expectation on employees to be available for work round the clock. Women, who are mostly burdened by unpaid care and domestic work, are particularly affected by this.

Under the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 (IESO Act), establishments with more than a hundred workers must publish conditions of employment including work timings, holidays, wage rates, shift timings, etc. The standing orders are to be finalized after consultation with the representatives of the workers and are to be approved by the certifying officer. However, in some states like Karnataka, the IT-ITES sector has enjoyed a blanket exemption from the applicability of this law. Nevertheless, there was a need to establish uniform conditions of employment in IT-ITES sector. In 2020, a Model Standing Orders for Service Sector, 2020 (MSOSS) was introduced for establishments having more than three hundred workers. The IT Sector is within the purview of the MSOSS. Section 5(1) of the MSOSS notes that the working hours for the IT sector shall be as per agreement or conditions of appointment between employer and workers. While the MSOSS recognizes 'Work from Home', it does not look into the specific requirements of the new work model, nor does it provide for overtime work.

⁴While some studies indicated an increase in productivity, others showed different results. See, Barrero, J. M., Bloom, N., & Davis, S. J. (2021). *Why Working From Home Will Stick*. (Working Paper No. 28731) NBER; Gibbs, M., Mengel, F. & Siemroth, C. (2021). *Work from Home & Productivity: Evidence from Personnel & Analytics Data on IT Professionals*. (Working Paper No. 2021-56) Becker Friedman Institute.

Combining Work, Family, And Personal Life

As per the decent work agenda, availability of parental leave, including maternity leave, is a legal indicator to determine if the work adequately provides for the attainment of work-life balance. Asocial/unusual hours are also future indicators of this decent work element. Caregiving and other unpaid domestic work acts as a constant barrier in women's professional lives. While maternity and parental leaves are very important, exclusive focus on leaves alone may not be adequate to determine if employees are able to experience a work-life balance.

To sufficiently evaluate the impact of remote working on combining, work, family, and personal life, it would be useful to study other factors like time use, sources of stress, domestic and social support available to employees, etc. in addition to maternity protection and parental leave. While working remotely, these aspects are very important as it has a significant impact on a woman's ability to take additional responsibilities at work and climb up the professional ladder.

Stability And Security Of Work

Of all indicators corresponding to stability and security of work, 'termination from employment' and 'precarity of work' are two factors relevant in the context of remote working within the IT-ITES sector. Remote work is said to set off the globalization of work in technological services, which could potentially lead to an expansion of informal but insecure work in place of stable formal employment. While most of the job losses in the past two years can be attributed to the pandemic and to the economic downfall of the related lockdown, there are other factors like automation that pose a threat to employment within the sector. This may significantly reduce low-skilled roles globally. This transformation within the sector would call for upskilling or reskilling of individuals.

It would be therefore relevant to study if the shift to remote work has affected opportunities for upskilling or reskilling. It is hypothesized that due to the unique challenges faced by women while working remotely, their opportunities for upskilling or reskilling are negatively impacted.

Equal Opportunity And Treatment In Employment

‘Equal opportunity and treatment’, ‘occupational segregation by sex’ and ‘equal remuneration for work of equal value’ are some of the indicators corresponding to this decent work element.

Remote work has had a strong democratizing effect on work as it allowed many employees across organizational levels to work remotely, which was earlier possible only for certain employees (Williams et al., 2021). The shift to remote work has also made it possible to do away with (to some extent) the past stigma associated with allowing flexibility in work. As per the Women in Tech Report 2021, many working in the IT sector across the globe have noted that gender equality in their organizations has improved over the past two years and some strongly believe that gender equality has improved because of remote working (Kaspersky, 2021).

However, the adoption of hybrid and remote work models may also create an unconscious bias against those working remotely. This proximity bias is said to create a barrier, which is now called the ‘zoom ceiling’⁵. This can detrimentally affect the nature of work assigned, their performance evaluations, and, consequently, their career progression. While this burden is carried by all employees working away from the office, women are likely to be more susceptible to this bias since they often take up the traditional caregiving and domestic responsibilities at home, giving the impression that they are unavailable for work while they are working remotely (Perna, 2022). This may result in increased occupational stress for women (Subha et al., 2021). The 2021 McKinsey Report indicates that one in three women have considered leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers. Such downshifting by women employees can lead to increased vertical occupational segregation and can broaden the gender wage gap.

Safe Work Environment

Decent work indicators corresponding to a safe work environment typically deal with employment injury and other aspects of occupational safety and health (OSH). ILO has adopted numerous instruments to safeguard the physical and mental health of workers. The remote working arrangement has raised renewed concerns about OSH. The term ‘health’ as dealt with under the OSH framework of the ILO is quite broad and entails within it mental as well as physical health.

⁵See, Schwantes, M. (2021, December 8). The Zoom Ceiling: A New Barrier Holding Remote Workers Back (and What Leaders Can Do to Stop It). *Inc.*

‘Violence and harassment’ as recognized under ILO Convention 190 covers a wide range of unacceptable behavior at work, including gender-based harassment. Article 3 of the Convention recognizes this as including behavior in the course of ‘work-related communications, including those enabled by information and communication technologies.’ The framework of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) in India is broad enough to include virtual workspaces. Individual organizations must ensure that POSH trainings are updated in the context of remote work. In the absence of a physical presence of the perpetrator, inappropriate conduct in the virtual workplace can present itself differently from other instances of sexual harassment seen in workplaces.

Psychosocial risk is also an OSH concern for individuals working remotely. Various studies have indicated that there are negative mental health issues like stress, anxiety, fatigue, depression, etc. associated with remote working (Oakman et al., 2020). However, the Indian laws on OSH do not explicitly indicate the inclusion of mental health and wellbeing within its scope. Women are especially prone to mental health risks associated with remote working since they are disproportionately burdened by the same. 5 in 10 Indian women working remotely face motivational challenges while working from home and about 40% of women experience high levels of anxiety and stress (Pink Ladder, 2020). Ergonomics can also have a long-term impact on employee wellbeing and health since physical, cognitive, and organizational characteristics are crucial in determining a person’s ability to work efficiently.

OSH in India is now governed under the Occupational Safety Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020. However, its application in the context of remote work is limited.

Social Security

Social security is the protection offered to individuals and their households under circumstances where their earnings may be affected due to various conditions like sickness, old age, pregnancy, etc. Pension, healthcare coverage, paid sick leave, maternity benefits, etc. are some of the important social security benefits widely available for employees in formal work.

It is crucial to define concepts of ‘workplace’ or ‘establishment’ under laws regulating social security to ensure these benefits are also extended to employees working remotely. The Code on Social Security, 2020 has defined establishments restrictively as “a place where

any...occupation is carried on.” When read in context, it is evident that ‘establishment’ as used in the Code includes only a physical place of employment like offices or commercial establishments.

Maternity benefit provisions should also be revisited in the context of remote work. The current law mandates employer organizations having more than fifty employees to set up creche facilities. Where employees work remotely, it may not be possible for them to avail creche facilities. Since childcare assistance is crucial for women employees working remotely, especially in the absence of a social support system, appropriate assistance may be provided by establishments instead. For example, some childcare allowance or full/partial reimbursement for daycare expenses can be provided (Jha & Bhattacharyya, 2021).

3. Methodology

The study focused on the IT-ITES sector in India since it is a sector that has undergone a massive transformation as a result of the new working model. It is regarded as a sector very amenable to remote work and is one of the sectors with the largest opportunities for remote working.

The data for the study has been collected through qualitative interviews and a survey. The study focused only on employees belonging to major IT-ITES companies in India, having a large number of employees and working in Product, Services, and BPO/BPM sectors.

Objectives And Line Of Enquiry

Gender is regarded as a cross-cutting issue in decent work agenda. The main objective of this paper is to study the gendered impact of remote working by identifying and evaluating the differences in some of the substantive elements corresponding to the pillars of the decent work agenda when applied to remote working, as against working at offices. The shift to remote work has impacted women in unique ways and led to a deficit of decent work. Recognizing this phenomenon, the study attempts a gender-responsive assessment of this issue within India’s IT-ITES sector. More specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- How has remote working impacted decent work for women employees in the IT-ITES sector in India, particularly with regards to three areas, namely, employment opportunities, rights at work and social security?

- As relevant stakeholders, what can the government and employer organizations do to accommodate the needs of women employees working remotely?

Data Collection

Survey

Employees within the IT-ITES industry is a heterogeneous category and generally follows an expansive description including freelancers, researchers, low-skilled teleworkers, etc. For the purpose of the study, responses were collected from employees of major IT-ITES companies in India working in product, services, and BPO/BPM sectors. This did not include employees of start-ups, freelancers, or in-house IT employees of companies prominent in the Non-IT-ITES sector. Employees of companies listed as members of NASSCOM have been included in the study.

Since the questionnaire was freshly prepared for the purpose of the study, a pilot was conducted to test the research tools used in the survey. The survey questions covered multiple themes (employment opportunities, rights at work, social security) as well as demographic questions (gender, age, marital status, etc). The survey, which was prepared on Google forms, was circulated among IT-ITES employees through employee groups, members of IT employee associations or unions, professional networking platforms, and social media.

The data collection through survey received 233 responses with an approximate response rate of 50-60%. For the purposes of the study, 215 responses have been considered. Some of the participants with whom the survey was shared did not respond to the survey. Based on the feedback received, the low response rate may be attributed to the length of the survey, organizational policies on data sharing, and privacy concerns, among other things.

Interview

The interviews were conducted over a period of one month. While the initial plan was to conduct all six interviews in person, the onset of the third wave COVID-19 forced the interviews to be conducted through virtual platforms. Therefore, only one interview was conducted in person whereas, the remaining five interviews were conducted online through Google Meet and WhatsApp. In two out of the six interviews, the principal investigator was assisted by the RAs on the study.

Profile Of Participants

Survey

Participants were those currently working in India across the product, services, and BPO companies. 96 participants, whose responses were considered for this study, identified as cis-female. 115 responses were from individuals who identified as cis-male and 4 participants preferred not to disclose their gender identity.

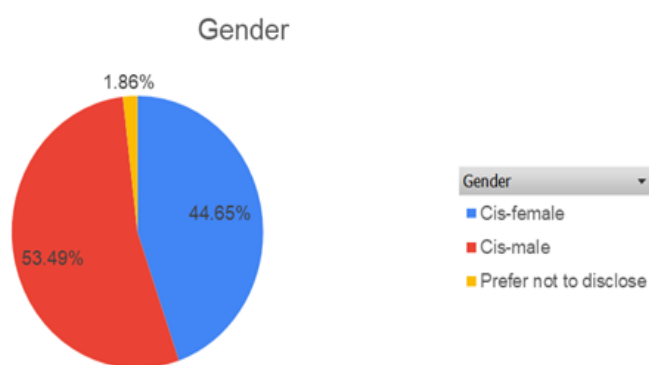


Figure 1: Gender breakup of participants.

72 responses came from those in a non-managerial cadre and 41 responses were from those in lower-level management. Individuals holding middle and higher-level management roles, typically having some degree of decision-making powers, together constituted the remaining responses i.e., 47.45% of the total responses. Of the respondents from the non-managerial cadre and lower-level management, 38.9% identified as cis-female and the remaining identified as cis-male. In the higher managerial roles (middle and higher-level management), 50.98% identified as cis-female as against 40% cis-male respondents. However, 76.74% of respondents directly reported to individuals who identified as cis-male.

72.91% of cis-female respondents were married. In total, 62.79% of respondents are married of which 51.85% identify as cis-female. 41.66% of cis-female respondents have children. In total, of the 34.88% respondents reported as having children, 53.33% identified as cis-female.

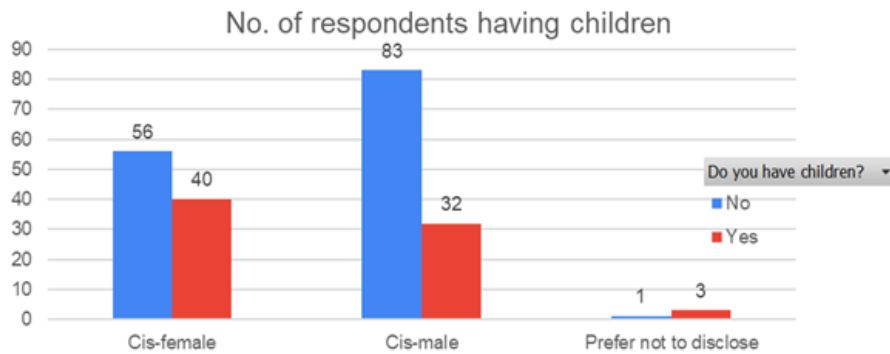


Figure 2: Gender breakup of participants with and without children.

Regarding regional breakup, 34 responses (15.81%) were from individuals currently living in rural areas whereas 181 responses (84.18%) were from those living in urban areas. 3.25% of the respondents were neurodivergent. 1.86% of the respondents confirmed having some form of disability.

Interview

For the embedded qualitative enquiry, six individuals working in the IT-ITES sector were selected based on their gender, work profile, years of professional experience and neurodiversity to ensure that they were representative of the segment being studied. All six interviewees were IT-ITES employees working in India and who have worked remotely at least in the past two years.

Three interviewees identified as male and others, female. Four of the interviewees were in a non-managerial cadre and two held managerial roles. Two of the interviewees (one male and one female) belonged to the neurodivergent spectrum. In terms of region, there were two participants from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The rest of the participants were based out of Bangalore.

Four of the participants were unmarried and two married. One of the married participants had children. All participants except one were living in joint family households, either with parents or with in-laws. All participants belonged to middle-class families. Five out of the six participants had college-level education, which enabled them to find jobs in the IT-ITES sector. One participant completed higher secondary through NIOS and took a basic job-oriented training (diploma).

Data Analysis

Survey

Of the responses received, 215 responses have been considered for analysis after excluding responses that were incomplete and those that did not fit the inclusion criteria of the study. The outliers were identified and removed. After data cleansing, the relationship between the various variables considered for the study was analyzed by way of cross-tabulation using pivot tables and charts. To facilitate the analysis, Excel and Jamovi were used.

Many of the questions in the survey offered a five-point scale response (E.g., “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). Unless specified otherwise, the analysis combined the top-two and bottom-two options of the five-point scale (E.g., “agree” and “strongly agree”). Where correlation is used, the scale considered is as follows: Low correlation (0-0.29), Moderate correlation (0.3-0.59), and High correlation (0.6-1).

Interviews

All interviews conducted were transcribed and coded for the purpose of analysis. Based on the nature of questions pursued in interviews and the responses received, 18 codes were developed. This was manually assigned to the data collected. Accordingly, the data was compared and grouped together under specific themes. This in turn led to an analysis of data under three broad headings namely – employment opportunities, standards and rights at work, and social protection.

4. Findings And Analysis

The findings from the survey and interviews can be categorized based on three parameters of decent work concept, namely – employment opportunities, standards and rights at work, and social protection. For the purpose of anonymity, the names of the interviewees have been changed.

Employment Opportunities

43.25% of the respondents to the survey agree that remote working has resulted in a loss of work-related opportunities in their workplace. The percentage of cis-female respondents who believed in the loss of work-related opportunities is higher (45.83%) than cis-male respondents (41.73%). Overall, 34.35% of the respondents believed that remote working stalled their career

advancement. The percentage of cis-female respondents (35.41%) who feel this way, is slightly greater than the cis-male respondents (34.78%).

Lekha is a 24-year-old unmarried employee of a prominent BPO company in India. She has been working with the organization for about 2.5 years as an associate in transaction processing. She lives with her parents and works on rotating shifts. Lekha has tried shifting jobs but she was not happy with the salary offers received. Since skill enhancement is crucial in enabling newer employment opportunities, Lekha was asked if she considered upskilling or doing additional certifications that would help her find better jobs, Lekha said –

“I did but I couldn’t. As a result of the extended hours, apart from work, we only get time to sleep. For the first one year since we started work from home, I used to work for 12-13 hours a day instead of 9 hours ... But now even that [sleep] is affected because of the rotating shifts.”

However, a good majority of the respondents believe that remote working increased their opportunities for upskilling (60.46%). While there is only a slight difference in the overall experience of male and female respondents in this regard, there are substantial gendered differences based on the level of organizational hierarchy they belonged to. While more cis-female respondents (63.63%) in the non-managerial/lower managerial cadre believe that their opportunities for upskilling have increased since the shift to remote work, considerably lesser cis-female respondents (53.84%) in the higher managerial roles (upper and middle management) believed the same. However, the trend is the opposite among the cis-male respondents, where most individuals in the higher managerial roles (67.39%) experienced an increase in such opportunities. While it was hypothesized that care and domestic responsibilities⁶ (indicated by a number of children, marital status, etc.) may have affected women’s opportunities for upskilling, survey showed little or no correlation between these variables.

The majority of the respondents also indicated a loss of opportunities for networking (67.9%) and socialization (80.9%) due to remote working. Remote working can create barriers in communication depending on the modes adopted for the same (Yang et al., 2021). This can

⁶44 out of 52 cis-female respondents in higher managerial roles were married and 28 out of 52 cis-female respondents had childcare responsibilities.

also impact mentorship at work. The loss of mentors was indicated more among the cis-male respondents.

Raju has been working with one of the prominent BPO companies in India for the past two years and has been working remotely since March 2020. Raju believes his rapport with his manager is greatly affected because of remote working and the language barrier makes it even more difficult to communicate.

“I am from proper Chennai and he is from Kerala. He never attends my calls and only through message I have contacted him and that too he won't respond properly...he takes more time to respond to my messages...He is somewhat, maybe, partial to the Kerala team. Maybe because of the language barrier, not sure.”

Such issues in communication and resultant loss of opportunities have been noted by others as well. Bharat, a neurodivergent IT employee, mentions that communication has been more difficult for him since the shift to remote work. Bharat is currently working as a developer associate with a Bangalore-based company and is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. It has considerably affected his work since he had difficulty learning new tasks during this period.

“I prefer communicating with people directly rather than online. I'm not at all good at online communication... for me, to understand a task properly, the communication has to happen directly rather than online.”

Employee experiences indicated that increasing reliance on asynchronous modes of communication and language barriers have resulted in loss of opportunities for those working remotely.

Standards And Rights At Work

Working hours

Survey indicated an overall increase in the number of hours worked. 74.88% of respondents noted that their working hours have substantially increased since the onset of remote working. More cis-female respondents (76.04%) said they experienced an increase in working hours compared to their cis-male counterparts (73.04%). 71.1% of the respondents reported that remote working has led to calls and meetings outside the regular office hours.

51.16% noted that their organization does not have any policy that prevents them from being contacted after office hours.

Survey also indicated considerable difference in employee experiences in taking timed breaks while working remotely. While 60% of the cis-male respondents noted that they were able to take regular timed breaks, only 38.54% of cis-female respondents felt the same.

Karthika manages a team of over a hundred employees and heads the consulting services for the Indian division of a leading IT services and consulting MNC. She has work experience of over two decades. Having childcare responsibilities and living with extended family, she explains that there is a constant juggling of home and professional lives.

“[Earlier] there was a kind of a time-bound role. But I think the biggest challenge was shuffling ...and at any point of time, you were wearing all the hats, even if you were on a call or in one of the most important meetings—you are always thinking what next you should do”

This is perhaps the reason why many women find it difficult to catch a break in between work. The survey results, however, did not indicate any correlation between one’s ability to take timed breaks in between work and the presence of domestic or childcare responsibilities. The absence of correlation could be due to the differences in the kind of support systems individuals have. However, this has not been verified in this study.

Adequate earnings and productive work

While the responses did not indicate any specific reduction in earnings or wages because of remote work, some of the respondents noted that remote working has helped in reducing their expenses and increasing savings. Lekha attributes this to a reduction in regular miscellaneous expenses like buying snacks, hanging out with colleagues, etc. while working from offices. Raju indicated that his savings were primarily because of the reduction in the daily commute that was previously required.

The manner in which employee productivity is gauged and used can also impact one’s earnings. 58.13% of the respondents believed that their productivity increased while working remotely and there is negligible difference in the experiences of male and female participants on this point. A very important factor that determines the level of productivity is the quality of work assigned. Lekha says *“I don’t think employees are less productive while working remotely. For me*

personally, productivity does not get affected unless the work assigned itself goes down and that has happened quite a bit recently.”

65% of female respondents with children indicated that remote working did not impact the quality of work assigned to them, which is promising. Overall, 26.51% of the total respondents believed that the quality of work assigned to them has been affected since the onset of remote work. The more pertinent question in this regard is how employers measure employee productivity while working remotely.

Karan is a Managing Director of a leading IT services and consulting company in India. He has around 20 years of experience in the field. Karan explains that the employee experiences working remotely in terms of productivity and contribution to work have not been uniform throughout the last two years. He explained that while people took time to settle in during the first few months of remote working, employees went into a period of hyperactivity at work after a point of time. Karan believes that productivity can be measured purely based on the outcome. He says –

“Tracking productivity is typically through outcomes...productivity is an issue more at the bottom layers of the working pyramid than in middle management...So, productivity is typically measured in terms of outcome and less so in terms of how many hours you log in or when you log in, or what you do. So, I think it has shifted more and more towards that particular model.”

Despite greater levels of overall productivity and an increase in working hours as indicated above, additional pay for overtime does not seem to be a practice still in many companies. Raju expresses that he has been often asked to work additional hours without being adequately compensated.

“We don't get any extra pay for that kind of extra work. I don't know why but I haven't asked about this to my manager also. They used to say my shift timing was from 7:30 to 4:30. But in a month, at least 10 days they have asked me to log in early. Before 1 hour, they will ask me to log in to complete work. So, I am doing more than what they are expecting. But I am not satisfied with what I am getting from them. The salary, I mean.”

Both Lekha and Raju feels strongly that organizations should consider providing night allowance while working remotely as well. Lekha confirms that she has not been getting any night allowance. Raju, working in the same organization as Lekha, says *“While in office, they gave night*

allowance as, per day Rs.100. While working from home, I am not sure if they are giving night allowance.”

Privacy and Surveillance

Remote surveillance and monitoring may be deemed necessary for data protection and security by various organizations and is believed to be fairly a common practice within the IT-ITES industry. 33.48% of respondents believe that their activities are tracked by way of some form of surveillance measures. More than 1 in 3 cis-female employees (37.5%) believe that their organization keeps track of employee productivity and performance through such measures. On an inquiry on the reasons for such remote-tracking or monitoring, it is found that there are at least two main motives for such practices—firstly, productivity monitoring and secondly, data security and protection.

Lekha informed that her organization uses a tool called ‘Prohance’, which is an employee monitoring software. This software is supposed to increase the productivity and efficiency of the employees. This is how Lekha explains its working.

“This software is used to monitor our work. So, if our system is idle say for more than 10 minutes, a pop up appears wherein we will be required to enter reasons as to why the system was idle...We do not get to set the break time in advance. But if you take more than 10 minutes, then you'd have to enter the reason for being away from the system. Prohance would keep the screen locked preventing access until you enter the reason...Weekly once we get a report about the average time we spend on the system indicating idle hours, productivity, etc.”

When asked how the organization uses this report, Lekha said *“Out of 9 hours in total, we have eight hours work and one hour break...If it goes below 8 hours, it will be considered as unplanned leave. For instance, if I work for six hours a day for any reason, then the manager should approve that it was for medical reasons. Only then I will get paid for the day. Otherwise, it will get reflected in our schedule adherence. Usually, they are okay with it as long as the weekly average is above 8 hours. If for any reason, it goes below 8 hours, then they may ask us to cite reasons. But that has not happened ever because we work extra hours on most days.”*

On the point of data security and protection, Karan notes that there was a lot of awareness training given to the employees on this point and a lot of investment in technology to ensure data loss does not happen from company devices. Regarding the general surveillance and monitoring

practices in the industry, Karan agrees “*There has to be a fair amount of monitoring in terms of how to protect client data, how to protect the company against a virus attack, etc...at least as far as our company is concerned, we have given such a big book of policies and there is a big policy around acceptable use of company assets and what you do. So, the onus is on the employee to actually familiarize himself or herself before joining.*”

While it is difficult to completely do away with monitoring and surveillance practices altogether because of industry requirements, the companies’ responsibilities should not end with them ‘informing’ employees about such practices. Companies must ideally ensure that there is good comprehension among employees about the nature of the data collected and how it will be handled (Mohandas & Srinivasa, 2020). Responses from interviewees indicated no specific privacy concern surrounding monitoring or surveillance but some of them mentioned that they are not very aware of the scope of these practices.

Combining work, family, and personal life

The absence of physical office spaces, coupled with technology-enabled connectedness round the clock blur work-life boundaries for most employees and it often increases the pressure to be available after office hours. Employees, mostly women, who are burdened by domestic and care work in addition to their paid jobs may have unique experiences. The survey indicated that remote working experience has been more stressful for women. 54.16% of the cis-female respondents noted that they have experienced increased stress since the advent of remote working as against 50.43 % of cis-male respondents. On the point of stress, Karthika makes a very relevant observation— “*It was always stressful. The nature of this stress was different... In a remote situation, the stress points are different because you are playing every single role at all times.*”

However, Karthika also believes that the shift to remote work during the pandemic has substantially transformed the general attitude towards flexible working. “*Looking to go out early because of personal work or request for working from home a couple of years ago was looked down upon actually. The pandemic broke all those stereotypes*”

An evaluation of time use among the respondents of the survey showed that since the advent of remote working, leisure time has increased among cis-male respondents—from 2.3 hours per day to 2.6 hours. On the other hand, the responses from cis-female employees indicate that their leisure time has reduced—from 1.9 hours per day to 1.7 hours. While child care and caregiving

responsibilities have increased in general, cis-female respondents still spend around 30% more time on child care compared to their male counterparts after shifting to remote work.

Since disproportionate unpaid care work burdens female employees more than their male counterparts, it is pertinent that establishments recognize this and adopt gender-sensitive transformative measures by contributing to quality child care, by restructuring workplace culture to focus on results over ‘number of hours’, etc.

Health and Safety

To determine the gendered impact on occupational safety at work, broadly three lines of enquiry were followed—sexual harassment, mental health, and physical health.

The vast majority of the survey participants indicated that they have not experienced any form of sexual harassment while working remotely. 76.74% of respondents felt safe working remotely. Findings through interviews indicated that the occurrences of sexual harassment have gone down considerably compared to those in physical workplaces. However, none of the respondents were aware of any specific POSH policy change within the organization pertaining to remote work. 19.53% of respondents to the survey noted that they have been mandated to keep their videos on during virtual meetings, which itself may be deemed invasive.

On the point of mental health, many respondents indicated experiencing increased stress since shifting to remote work. While most individuals do not take institutional support (77.21%) or professional help from a therapist (80.93%) to deal with such issues, cis-female employees are marginally more likely to seek such help compared to their male counterparts. The survey indicated a moderate correlation between the experience of stress and the decision to leave employment. More cis-female employees have considered leaving employment while working remotely for reasons of stress. Karan discussed how challenging this issue is –*“I think the issues around recognizing mental wellness amongst employees is important. By mental wellness, I also put certain elements of fatigue ... A lot of people are not forthcoming. They are even less forthcoming now because the trust factor is not established [while working remotely]...that's been the biggest challenge.”*

For many, remote work and extended hours have taken a toll on their physical health as well. Lekha explains that the rotating night shifts every few months have had a significant negative impact on her health.

“I get only 4-5 hours of sleep in a day. Even when I am on leave, I am unable to sleep...For women particularly, all of this has disrupted their menstrual cycle as well. Some people also experience backache. I have a disc bulge. It is fairly common now. In office, you may walk around a bit in between work to pick up something or to drink water. But at home, you tend to sit and work for 2-3 hours at a stretch. As a result, a lot of my colleagues are also now experiencing disc-related problems.” Lekha adds that these issues have created a financial burden as well *“Currently, my entire salary is almost used up for my medical expenses—mentally and physically it has been draining.”*

Karthika mentioned that her organization provides employees with specific training on ergonomics. In addition to providing necessary infrastructure to undertake remote work, it is essential that organizations conduct due diligence on occupational health risks arising out of remote work and sensitise employees on good practices.

Non-discrimination and equal treatment at work

56.27% of employees believed there is sufficient and equal recognition of work done while working remotely. However, some issues of bias and flexibility stigma still persist.

Many individuals believed that in a hybrid setup, employees working from office would get a more favorable treatment compared to those working from home. Since a moderate correlation was found between experiences of flexibility stigma and the feeling of potential proximity bias, this feeling could be attributed to the experiencing of flexibility stigma from employers.

The survey indicated that more than one in three IT-ITES employees have experienced some form of flexibility stigma. Some interviewees felt that this has been quite evident from the conversations with their immediate reporting managers. Raju shared that his manager often refused to believe any excuse that disrupted work. *“Usually, [when]we have some power cut issues, we tell them about these issues. But they think we are faking it.”* Such issues of bias and stigma may detrimentally impact performance evaluations. It can also have an effect on employee psyche.

53.06% of employees noted that their organizations have recognized specific needs of disabled persons and have provided them with the necessary support and infrastructure required to perform their work remotely. Another group of individuals that require some reasonable

accommodation but is often overlooked is the employees in the neurodivergent spectrum. More neurodivergent individuals have been joining the technological sector in India in recent years. While the requirements of reasonable accommodation and organizational support would differ in accordance with individual needs, the work from home experiences and their gendered impact presents differently amongst neurodivergent individuals.

Sunita, who was diagnosed with autism at a very young age, is currently working as a quality associate with one of the leading software product companies in Bangalore. She has been working with the organization since 2016. She is an autism advocate and has shared her experience with remote working over the past two years. *“The challenge I faced during the transition [to remote work] was adjusting to work from home environment and routine... My personal experience has been very good. The workers and managers are very supporting, encouraging, helpful, friendly, and very understanding.”* Sunita also mentioned that while she experienced longer working hours and had trouble adjusting to the new routine, this did not negatively impact her stress levels, mental health, or productivity at all.

However, the remote working experience for Bharat was quite different. Bharat mentioned that remote working helped with his sensory needs initially and that helped him work more efficiently. However, over the period of time, he found it harder to cope with remote work, and the same affected his mental health. He shared that his remote working experience was not conducive to productivity. *“The social interaction is not the same as it used to be while working in the office. There was a time when I did not do any work for around a week”*

Reasonable accommodation and organizational assistance for individuals in the spectrum largely depend on the needs of each person. For individuals having greater sensory needs, remote working may be the preferred option. However, for others, social interaction and relationships may be very important. Sunita notes that she is more comfortable working from the office as it makes interacting with her colleagues easier.

Neurodivergent conditions manifest differently in cis-men compared to cis-women. There can be sex-based differences in characteristics that may impact the kind of organizational assistance offered. For example, Autism presents differently in women and their symptoms are often camouflaged. As a result, many female autistic individuals are misdiagnosed and often miss out on the support they should get. While deciding on reasonable accommodation for remote

work and other policies that impact neurodivergent individuals, it is therefore important to follow an intersectional approach.

Social Protection

The third prong to the study on decent work deficit is social protection. 13.5% of respondents to the survey experienced a reduction in social security benefits provided by the organization while working remotely. It is, however, unclear what aspect of social security benefits has been cut. On an average, the following is the number of leaves available for employees in the IT-ITES industry in a year.

Casual Leave	15.86 days
Sick Leave	9.35 days
Maternity Leave	163.57 days
Paternity Leave	17.32 days

Table 1: Average number of leaves available

20.86% of respondents indicated that maternity benefits available in their organization while working remotely are much below the legally mandated number of days. Some organizations do not have a prefixed number of maternity leave but allow maternity leave depending on individual needs.

83.25% of the respondents showed that their organization extended insurance benefits while working remotely. Lekha tells us that her organization also subscribed for all employees an app called Medibuddy through which they can get free doctor service and other medical assistance. However, it could be availed only by those employees working in urban areas. In the current context, it is imperative for organizations to ensure that benefits made available for employees are accessible to all.

Lekha mentions that her organization provides Rs.1000 per month as ‘work from home’ allowance. However, she mentions that it is not sufficient to cover the internet costs, increased electricity bills, etc. 80.93% of respondents to the survey confirmed that their organization has provided necessary infrastructure to undertake remote work.

5. Recommendations

Overall, the study indicated significant gender-based differences in how remote working impacted IT-ITES employees in India. However, the current legal and regulatory frameworks do not sufficiently address the decent work deficit arising from remote work or its gendered impact. It is essential that the relevant stakeholders adopt gender transformative remedies to address this issue and secure gender parity in the future of work. To this end, this study makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations For The Government

- Implementation of a law regulating work timings:

In addition to setting maximum working hours, which is supposedly regulated under MSOSS and Shops and Establishment Acts of various states, the state may also consider implementing a law recognizing the Right to Disconnect as is done in other jurisdictions like France, Spain, Italy, Belgium etc after assessing its practicality.

- Address the regulatory gap in current labor laws:

While the labor laws in the country are comprehensive, some improvements are still required in the context of remote work. For example, the law does not specifically delineate between ‘remote work’, ‘telework’, etc.

Occupational diseases for which the OSH Code applies are limited to those mentioned in the third schedule of the Code. Occupational diseases can be defined more widely. ILO follows a broader definition and it can include the kind of health issues commonly found in employees working remotely (E.g., PCOS, Disc bulge, etc.) wherever a direct causal link can be established with the conditions of work. Mental health may also be brought within its scope.

The concept of ‘establishment’ and the scope of a workspace also need to be well-defined to include remote working under the OSH and Social Security Codes.

- Overtime compensation:

Pay for overtime work, while provided by some organizations, is largely non-existent. It is only fair labor practice to mandate overtime pay for work over 40 hours in a week. The rate of such pay needs to be determined by the State for establishments.

- Shift allowance:

Payment of shift allowances is not mandatory under the current laws. Taking into account physical and mental health impact on employees working unsociable hours, it is necessary that employees be adequately compensated. This is specifically important for employees working night shift as they tend to get less rest during the day. This is especially true for women having domestic and child care responsibilities.

- Child care assistance:

For employees working remotely, creche facilities as provided under the Maternity Benefit law may not be accessible. Instead, the employer may be instructed to provide some assistance in terms of child care allowance or partial/full reimbursement for day-care.

There also exists no universal paid paternity leave in India. Mandatory paternity leave is vital in enabling workplace equality and to advance work-life balance for individuals. To some extent, it helps to do away with the notion that women are 'expensive' employees. For non-binary parents, parental leave must be given.

- Improved regulation of virtual monitoring and surveillance in the context of work:

While the companies may have a right to monitor the use of company assets, the employees have to be adequately informed about the nature of monitoring and how the data will be handled. IT Act, 2000 and the related rules and amendments, which currently deal with such issues, specify that consent and knowledge of the person whose data is collected is required. However, it does not insist on their complete comprehension of the use of this data.

Recommendations For IT-ITES Companies Implementing Remote Work Or Hybrid Work

- Organizations to have after-hours communication policy:

Companies must create a robust after-hours work-related communication policy. Those in managerial roles must be advised on the circumstances where employees can be reached after stipulated working hours, including through asynchronous modes of communication like emails.

- Organizations to update their POSH policies:

It is important that the employer's POSH policy aligns with the peculiar requirements of the new work model. POSH training modules must include information on acceptable online behavior. Organizations must provide reasonable assistance to submit complaints virtually, where necessary. For example, an option can be provided to submit the complaint through an email or a portal on the official website where that is not the current practice.

- Sensitization and awareness training for employees:

Like in the case of POSH, companies must provide periodic sensitization and awareness training on other aspects that have a direct impact on employee well-being while working, like ergonomics, data protection, etc. While providing training on data protection and security, organizations must focus on making employees aware of the various monitoring practices deployed by the organizations and obtain renewed consent from employees.

- Adequate allowance for remote work should be provided:

Employers must adequately compensate employees with expenses incurred for setting up the home office and the regular increased expenses on internet, electricity bills, etc.

- Organizations must develop remote-first approach policies, wherever feasible:

Hybrid and remote work models across organizations are not uniform. Organizational policies should ensure that people and information are equally accessible to all employees and that the organizational design is decentralized to enable such access. This could have a significant impact on the inclusion of women employees who are more likely to continue working remotely if given a choice.

- Organizations must develop policies that help reduce care burden on employees:

Organizations must consider adopting family friendly working arrangements and gender-neutral parental leave policies. Organizations may also provide monetary assistance on care services like early childhood care.

6. Conclusion

The study indicated that there is a significant gendered impact of remote working on the work experiences of IT-ITES employees in India. However, the current law and policy regulatory framework does not sufficiently address the decent work deficit arising from remote work or its gendered impact. It is essential that the relevant stakeholders adopt gender transformative remedies to address this issue. This is imperative in securing gender parity in the future of work.

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8. List Of Abbreviations

BPM	Business Process Management
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
IESO	Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946
ILO	International Labor Organization
IT	Information Technology
ITES	Information Technology Enabled Services
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
MSOSS	Model Standing Orders for Service Sector, 2020
NASSCOM	National Association of Software and Service Companies
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
POSH	Prevention of Sexual Harassment
POSH Act	Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013

9. List Of Tables and Figures

Figure 1

Gender breakup of participants

Figure 2

Gender breakup of participants with
and without children

Table 1

Average number of leaves available