

Work-life balance during the pandemic: the case of women IT workers of Kolkata, West Bengal

Ms. Arunima Dhar*

*Assistant Professor, Social Work, Directorate of Distance Education, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

Abstract

With the outbreak of Covid-19, India along with other countries has been facing a situation that has restricted the life of individuals. Amongst all, the women IT industry workers have been forced to resume work-from-home. This has been a boon as well as a challenge for them. This paper is an exploratory study attempting to explore different directions of managing both the personal life and professional life of these women who have been working from home during this pandemic. A semi-structured interview schedule has been used to conduct the telephonic interview of 40 purposively selected women working for more than five years and have at least one child. The paper has been able to explore the advantages and disadvantages of work-from-home by exploring different categories and dimensions and has wrapped up with few recommendations from the HR team perspective.

Keywords: Pandemic, work-life balance, work-from-home, IT industry.

Introduction

India has been one of the leading countries that took the advantages of increasing demand for the Information Technology (IT) industry where women's role has been incredible. The changed outlook in the globalized world has given ample scope for a lot of women to be a significant part of this sector. Consequently, the changing role of women in our society reflects the change in the status of women while empowering them. Traditionally, women were expected to be part of the household work and weren't expected beyond that. In the present scenario, women have been playing significant and challenging roles in the workplace as well as at home. But juggling between professional life and personal life often becomes a challenge for most of the women. In the contemporary scenario, the situation changed with the World Health Organization (WHO)'s announcement in February 2020 where it reported that the outbreak of the COVID-19 as a pandemic. Along with the rest of the world, India too has been battling the COVID pandemic. As a result, the prolonged lockdown process has changed the overall work pattern, especially for women. Almost all the IT companies have rolled out mandatorily work from home policies amidst the pandemic to meaningful reductions in the spread of the virus (Jones et al., 2020). In general, the situation has pushed individuals to a condition where people do not need to go out of the house and have been able to maintain the norms of social distancing. This has resulted in the change in the daily routine, impacting the work-life balance of the women.

Review of Literature

The concept of work-life balance is a critical one with an in-depth meaning of being self-aware of one's wants (Simmons, 2012) and concerning one's personal and professional life. It has its origin in the late 1800s where the need of shortening the working hours for women and children was realized. Later in 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act established the working hours as 44 hours each week. By the 1980s, the Women's Liberation Movement brought the concept of work-life balance in the limelight to assist working women force. They introduced the benefits of flexible working schedules and maternity leaves for them. Initially, the concept was relevant to women but later expanded and became gender-neutral with special reference to the working group (Raja & Stein, 2014). Moreover, the relevance of work-life balance has been a concern for the researchers. According to Byrne, the achievement of better work-life balance can yield dividends for employers in terms of having a more motivated, productive and less stressed workforce and for employees, it turns to have increased productivity and reduced absenteeism; gaining the reputation of being an employer of choice, retaining valued employees, achieving reduced costs and maximizing available labour (Byrne, 2014). This

turns crucial when it considers women working in IT companies. A study by Bharathi and Mala has identified a few factors that strongly impact the work-life balance of women working in IT companies in India. The factors are related to the challenges and enhancers to the professional and personal lives of working women; 42 factors relating to WLB have been grouped into five constructs, namely, professional challenges, personal challenges, social media involvement, professional enhancers, and personal enhancers. The study further indicated that the personal enhancers of WLB, such as regular exercises and fitness schedule, yoga and meditation, balanced diet as well as good sleep and involvement in the hobbies, loaded the heaviest as the most impacting factors; working from home heavily impacts as a professional enhancer in the WLB of women. The second heavily loaded component was comprised of personal challenges, such as inadequate self-attention, insufficient time spent on elders and children, feeling depressed, or suffering from hypertension along with a professional challenge of extended or odd working time. Interestingly, it was found that irrespective of challenges or enhancers, personal factors were perceived to be more impacting than the professional ones. Moreover, the study showed that social media involvement has no significant impact on WLB. Social media has been neither considered as a challenge nor an enhancer to the WLB (Bharathi & Mala, 2016). In another comparative study on Indian women professionals, viz, BPO women professionals, and school teachers, both the segments of women were evaluated on six subscales, namely, job autonomy, the fairness of rewards, organizational commitment, work exhaustion, perceived work overload and work-family conflict. The result demonstrated that organizational commitment, job autonomy, and perceived work overload are strong contributors to a sense of balance for an employee. Indian professional has been looking for supportive workplaces that help them manage their multiple roles. The study concluded with the components that have resulted in the spill-over effect on the commitment and low attrition rate and at the same time enhances individual's Work-Life Balance (Chawla & Sondhi, 2011). Interestingly, a study by Valk and Srinivasan emphasized on the term 'work-family balance' and revealed that the insidious factors that impacted the work balance were the societal role expectations, women's career ambitions and the nature of the IT industry challenges the way they managed their professional and personal lives. While their self-identities primarily lied in their work, they are strongly influenced to perform the roles of homemaker and dependent care provider has given the societal expectations; this does require negotiation both at home and at work in terms of how and when work could be done. Furthermore, women who had taken a slow track in their career growth mentioned that this was a conscious choice as they felt their families needed them more. Another implication was that organizations were found not been effectively utilizing their talent; however, in recommendations, it came up that implementing Human Resource policies and practices would have been facilitated women in pursuing their career goals and looking after the care responsibilities. With an increasing number of women entering the workforce and the Indian IT industry facing a talent shortage, it has been found that understanding the role of work and family in the lives of women professionals has been an important HR concern (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011). The supportive workplace (Chawla & Sondhi, 2011), job satisfaction (Kanwar et al., 2009), and family-friendly policies (Feeney & Stritch, 2019) have been indicated as the prime factors for enhancing work-life balance.

The work-life balance seems to be a common issue comprising of cultural, economic and institutional factors that influence employee perceptions of the work-life interface (Le et al., 2020) and a common phrase for women working in the IT sector (Hyrynsalmi, 2019) and also has manifold effects with the outbreak of the pandemic. It has become an opportunity for the women who craved to stay back with their families. On the other hand, handling office work and household chores at the same time have become a true challenge for many. To contextualize, the roles of different stakeholders have been mentioned in different studies (Guest, 2002). In this backdrop, the paper has been designed to explore and analyze the influencing factors affecting WLB for women working in the IT sector who has been mandatorily working-from-home during this pandemic. Thus, understanding the uses of time, allocating goals catered to an individual profession, and continual self-assessment may help balance time, and ideally would help prevent burn out at the individual level (Raja & Stein, 2014) directing towards a better work-life balance. In the end, the paper has proposed a few recommendations from the Human Resource (HR) Team's work-life balance policies and practices that contribute to work-life balance (Manasa & Showry, 2018) for women.

Methodology

The paper has been an exploratory study where it has attempted to explore different directions of managing both the personal and professional lives of women who have been working in the IT sector and also have been working-from-home (WFH) during the pandemic. A semi-structured interview schedule has been used to conduct the telephonic interview of 40 women who have been working for more than five years and have at least one child. These women have been selected through a purposive sampling method.

Findings

The findings of the interview led to an emergence of two broad themes, namely, the advantages of work-from-home and the disadvantages of the same. While WFH has been a well-established aspect of the corporate world, it has never been a mandate for anyone. The impact of two themes has been analyzed through the understanding of categories and dimensions that emerged through the interviews (refer table no.-1).

Table No.-1: Themes, categories and dimensions related to the work-life balance of women IT professional of Kolkata

Themes	Categories	Dimensions
Advantages of WFH	Craving for more family time	Spending time with immediate family members
		Opportunity for pregnant women or new mothers
	Saves time	Travel time
		The mandatory socialization
	Chances of lesser uncomfortable situations	The forced socialization
Minimum chances of sexual abuse		
Disadvantages of WFH	Multiple conflicting responsibilities	Lengthy work hours
		Child caring
		Household chores
	Communication gap	At the office level
		At household level

*Source-author

Advantages of WFH:

The pandemic has brought a new scope to women to WFH and spend time with their families.

“I have been waiting for vacations to spend time with my husband and daughter. Every Christmas time, I apply for the leave and we go out for at least a week's trip. When the lockdown started, I hardly had the insight into the problem, I was happy to get a chance to spend time with my family and came down to my in-law's place with the initial planning of 5 days”. (38 years old, IBM employee). It was also found while interviewing a new-mom, “Last December I had to join back my office after the long maternity leave. It was heartbreaking to leave my six months old son and join. This mandatory WFH has given me a golden opportunity to be with my Guddu” (32 years old CTS employee).

Another one added in the context of the advantages of WFH,

“I had to travel for an hour to my workplace. It was a horrible experience even though I drove my car. Especially while returning it used to take almost double-the-time of what used to be in the morning. This pandemic has been saving my travel time”. While discussing on saving time, she added, “There were a few times, I thought that I would wrap up soon and get back home to spend more time with my son. But I had to accompany my colleagues for tea, even

though at times didn't feel-like. The cha-adda usually used to get delayed and I had to rush back home and open my laptop again at home" (35 years old, TCS employee). This situation was supported by more than half of the women who felt that they had to socialize at times being a situation or as if being forced to do so. In this regard, it was stated-"The chances of being sexually abused have been quite low. That's a real blessing for a few women. I have heard of a situation where this type of incident has been handled quite seriously and the consequence was not good. But there are still situations where the newly joined girls do not have the guts and felt insecure to talk about it" (39 years old, TCS employee).

Disadvantages of WFH-

While discussing on WFH, the main disadvantageous part as indicated was-"I am working at least 2 to 3 hours extra every day. I had plans to use my travel time for hobbies or workout. It never happened the way I wanted. I am just not having any me-time. I am looking forward to joining the office and get to the regular routine life" (34 years old, Tech Mahindra employee). Additionally, "I have been logging in in late nights and even waking up late at times. This is impacting my son's schooling; he starts his online classes from 7:15 in the morning". (39 years old, CTS employee)

The conflict between the roles that have been a challenge for most of the women, "I have been flipping here and there to accommodate my daughter's school and assignments, household chores, and my office work. It's a challenging situation, especially in the morning, I feel too many things are going on at a time" (36 years old, IBM employee).

It has been reported that working remotely becomes a challenge to prove at work and arises a lot of false expectations for the family-"The continuous work pressure from my project manager, especially in this critical situation is becoming a burden for me. I am constantly proving myself as if someone is watching me constantly. The stereotype role day after day is becoming boredom. It is impacting my output. I am having frequent outbursts on my daughter and husband without any proper reason" (38 years old, Simens employee).

Discussions

Today technology has given the edge to face a critical situation. The innovative idea of WFH has been dynamic in nature. Few months into a nationwide lockdown and WFH provided a lot of opportunities to explore and women reported to be satisfied with that to an extent where they felt happy about being with their near and dear ones. In terms of the socialization process, women felt optimistic about spending time with whom they wanted to be. Additionally, unwanted situations have been avoided because of the effect of lockdown. The criticality aroused when women truly felt that the few months of lockdown and WFH have been the opportunity to realize the true need for work-life balance. Women with children had to juggle between the parenting responsibilities and her job responsibilities. It was a deep realization by the women that whatever boundaries remained work and personal life have almost entirely disappeared. The flexible work arrangement became quite informal at times and felt like a 'telecommuting' for most of the time. There was a mixed opinion regarding the productivity of these women; the lesser socialization has been saving time and increased the output within a stipulated time, whereas, work morale needed a boost, fatigue and boredom was a commonly reported problem for most of them. The difficulty is doubled when women whose husbands have been in any emergency duty have to take the whole responsibility instead of being shared. This situation has pushed women harder than normal.

Conclusions and recommendations

The themes that have emerged in the study present a qualitative perspective of the situation related to work-life balance. Even though these women have been working at par with their men counterparts, the challenge lies to the extent where the patriarchal society expects women more as a wife and mother first and then as a woman. The impact of the pandemic has reinforced a lot of changes where the constant role conflict of women amidst the pandemic has been experienced as a boon and even as a curse. Analyzing both the themes contributed towards the start of a 'new normal' situation that has to be accepted opportunity to radically rethink the way work and life are. From this perspective, the following recommendations can be provided from the company's perspective-

- The Human Resource (HR) team can schedule regular formal meetings to update the employees regularly. Encouraging social connections by maintaining through non-physical ways, for example, rising in the use of social media.
- Colleagues and subordinates can have virtual meetings with an informal tagline, 'chaye-pe-charcha' (just an example) to disseminate information regularly.
- The complaint mechanism can be made more stringent to be better able to handle the increased mental health issues, mainly the stress and anxiety issues related to the current situation and post COVID situation.
- Better and more provisions for tele-counseling for employees, especially the vulnerable ones (women, persons with disability etc.) at regular intervals.
- Senior managers or team leaders can play a vital role to accommodate women by assigning alternative jobs or better suitable jobs, for example, instead of working in the area of collaboration and coordination jobs, women can be assigned to an independent skill-driven job to work with more flexibility. This could provide a better scope for women to manage by focusing on accomplishment and not the time spent.
- Giving priority to women employee's choice based roles, in turn, would benefit the company to grow by their better output.
- Encouraging better implementations of motivational strategies, like, motivating employees by appreciating their contributions, developing award system (like-COVID warrior), or developing a mechanism to provide appreciation by clients, showcasing the achievements, etc.
- Moving the women work-force shifts in the afternoon (which usually starts in the morning) would be a possible enhancement for women to work and take care of morning household chores and children's education, a smooth shifting from care role to a professional role on a daily basis.
- Implementation of forced leaves and violations of the same would be penalized (in case of receiving office calls) would also provide a scope for better work output for women.
- Encouraging the opening of virtual hobby clubs and emphasizing on leisure activities, like virtual yoga classes or games could be a strategy to enhance work-life balance.
- Arranging more online trainings on new innovative technologies to assist women employees to be more competitive in the market and ensure WLB to some extent.

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