

## **Working from Home and Work-Family Balance: A Study of Women Educators during Lockdown**

Swati Soni\*

*Jaipuria Institute of Management, India*

Tina Jain

*Jaipuria Institute of Management, India*

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### **Abstract**

Covid-19 has had an overwhelming effect on lives and livelihoods alike. We have all embraced the new normal, including working from home, although it has come as an abrupt change. While not all jobs lend themselves to be shifted online, teaching is one profession that could witness such a change with relative ease. Technology eased the process, but it was not easy for those who had to do so, especially for women educators who faced very demanding sets of circumstances for managing work and home with limited domestic support. This paper attempts to study the impact of the mandatory lockdown on women educators, their work-life balance, and their experiences. The study was conducted in two phases, quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative phase was composed of 150 responses from women educators teaching online during the lockdown in PostGraduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) programs in Jaipur, India. Thirty respondents volunteered to participate in the qualitative phase, which was conducted using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Five themes emerged from the qualitative phase: structuring the home environment for work, workplace social support, personal social support, household structure, and feelings of isolation. There was substantial evidence backing up all these themes in the existing literature and this has been discussed comprehensively in the findings section.

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### **Key words**

work from home, Covid-19, work-life balance, workplace social support, personal social support, household structure

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\* Corresponding author

## Introduction

Much time has passed since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic and it is one of the most unprecedented upheavals that has affected lives and livelihoods, beyond imagination, with massive lockdowns in place to check the virus. Masks, sanitizers, and social distancing are the new normal, and so is work from home. Working from home is an abrupt change for millions of people. There is still significant doubt over how we will live, work, and thrive in the future. Is this a transient change or a forever shift? Will we go to work again? If yes, how often? Will a “hybrid” way of working be the norm?

While millions were working from home, lockdown had different implications for men and women, with women feeling the heat more than their male counterparts. A recent McKinsey study (Madgavkar, White, & Krishnan, 2020) suggests that globally, women constitute 39% of the workforce, but account for a staggering 54 percent of pandemic-driven layoffs. A major reason for the more serious impact on women is that in the absence of domestic help, the lockdown significantly increased the burden of unpaid care, which is primarily carried by women. It was arduous for working women to manage the twin roles of immediate domestic work and an equally demanding remote office.

Pandemic-imposed lockdown is an exceptional and unprecedented circumstance that has major implications for work-life balance, though normal times pose an almost equal challenge for women who are part of the workforce, given the obvious need to integrate family and work (Sturges & Guest, 2004). Studies indicate that women’s employment rates are expected to surge as high as 361 per 1,000 women by 2026 (McNay, Unni, & Cassen, 2004). A rise in the numbers of single parents, dependent parents, and dual-career households, and an increasingly aging population has led to a consequent increase in research in the domain of work-life balance for women (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997).

The paper is organized in four parts. The first reviews the extant literature on work from home and the resultant work-life (im)balance. The second consists of a quantitative study of a sample of 150 women educators who were forced to work from home owing to the imposed lockdown. The third part is an exploratory study of 30 volunteers, chosen from the 150 respondents mentioned above. Using semi-structured interviews, the respondents were interviewed in depth regarding their experiences of work from home, work-life balance issues, challenges faced, and coping strategies adopted. The final section discusses the emerging themes obtained from the respondents’ narratives in light of the existing literature on

work-life balance. The paper will lead to an understanding of how women educators perceive and manage work-life balance during a pandemic-mandated lockdown.

### Literature Review

Covid-19 has made work from home ubiquitous. While more educated individuals and those working in technology-aided organizations could work from home, not all organizations were amenable to the working-from-home transition, and employees working with such organizations were forced to go jobless (Bick, Blandin, & Mertens, 2020). A recent Deloitte (2018) report indicated that the majority of millennials look for an opportunity to work from home. Finn and Donovan (2013) concluded the same in a global generational study of women. Singley and Hynes (2005) concluded that flexibility at work can be used as a “positive capability spanning resource” for women by helping them cope with work and family demands simultaneously. Chung and Van der Horst (2018) suggested that work from home permits mothers to pursue their careers even after childbirth. Women can retain their jobs and strike a good work-life balance by being able to take care of work and family (Erickson, Martinengo, & Hill, 2010). Work from home arrangements can thus be viewed as a tool to achieve gender equality in our society (Fuller & Hirsh, 2018).

Although working from home translates into autonomy over when one works and where one works from (Kelly, Moen, & Tranby, 2011), the arrangement is viewed differently by different scholars. Rau and Hyland (2002) asserted that working from home reduces conflict, as it gives employees an opportunity to manage the mutually conflicting demands of home and work. Working from home relieves work-family conflict (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Kelly et al., 2014; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011). Delanoije and Verbruggen (2019) proposed that work-from-home arrangements would be more effective for women who have enormous pressures at home. They prefer integrated work-home boundaries for the simple reason that working from home enables them to address their home pressures with ease.

Kurland and Bailey (1999) opined that work from home leads to greater conflict, as being at home means proximity and accessibility to family and, thus, additional pressure to meet their random demands along with planned office responsibilities. Jasrotia and Meena (2021) in their study used Judith Butler’s “Standpoint Theory” and “Theory of Performative Action” to decode gender

roles and work-life balance in a family setting. The results revealed that although the spouses of these women shared some household responsibilities and took care of their children, the onus largely lay with the women. A majority of women educators reported that they had to devote a substantial share of their time to caretaking chores, thereby compromising job efficacy. Such compromises invariably lead to work-life conflict. Chung and van der Lippe (2018) also supported Kurland and Bailey (1999) by asserting that women working from home are expected to assume more responsibility for domestic work than men. This could prove detrimental to gender roles in an inflexible patriarchal culture like India, and fewer women would be able to continue as part of the workforce. This has much to do with our pre-existing learned behaviors regarding gender roles and gender-related norms for both genders and their consequent roles (Lott & Chung, 2016). Lott and Chung (2016) suggest that men use work from home to enhance their performance, committing more hours to work and eventually earning more income, while women working from home are expected to be more responsible toward the family by virtue of the fact that they are at home (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, 2008), leading to an increase in work-family conflict. Ten Brummelhuis and van der Lippe (2010) reported that household structure had a bearing on family-work conflict, as employees who were single enjoyed working from home, while employees with families and children to care for found it stressful.

The boundary between work and home becomes blurred when one works from home. This permeability and convergence of the two disparate environments (work and home) generally entails more multitasking and competing demands, leading to more conflict rather than achieving balance (Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Schieman & Young, 2010). Nuwer (2016) proposed that working from home has absolutely no effect on work-life balance, while Golden, Veiga, and Simsek (2006) reported that workplace autonomy, flexibility to schedule work, and household size moderated the relationship between working from home and conflict. Peters, Den Dulk, and van der Lippe (2009) confirmed that female workers achieved better work-family balance when they had more autonomy and control over their work schedules and scheduling of work.

Thus, paid work encroaches upon unpaid family chores and, consequently, family life as a whole (Glass & Noonan, 2016). This feeling of overt obligation toward employers and thus adhering to a “more than the ideal” worker culture is also a gendered feeling (Acker, 1990). To substantiate this, Knight and Brinton (2017) suggested that even after childbirth, men are expected to continue with breadwin-

ning roles, while women are expected to do household chores and be caregivers for family and relatives. Dotti Sani and Treas (2016) proposed that such normative views about the role of men and women and a gendered division of labor have a bearing on the outcomes of flexibility in working from home. A plethora of qualitative studies have confirmed that when women opt for flexible working, such as working from home, they are expected to perform domestic chores simultaneously by their spouses and other relatives around them (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, 2013; Shaw, Andrey, & Johnson, 2003; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001).

Clark (2000) argues that a woman working from home essentially operates between the two flexible borders of work and home. The boundaries between the two borders often become obscure, and one sphere often expands at the cost of the other. The strength of the domain that the individual identifies with and prioritizes the most helps her decide the course of action. If a woman values paid work over family chores, the flexibility will result in expansion of the work sphere, and if the woman values family over paid work, then an expansion of domestic chores is imminent.

Mental health was another aspect massively affected by Covid-19-imposed working from home. An online cross-sectional survey comprising 537 responses received from female professionals working from home revealed that mental health was severely and moderately affected in 27% and 27.5% of participants, respectively (Sharma & Vaish, 2020). Subha, Madhusudhanan, and Ajai Abraham (2021) investigated occupational stress in a remote work setting and identified enormous workloads, poorly designed work environments, job insecurity, personal problems, and absence of structure as major stressors for female employees in the IT industry in Bangalore while working from home (Singh, 2021).

Aczel, Kovacs, van der Lippe, and Szaszi (2021), in their study of 704 academics, noted that while 50% of the respondents reported being less efficient at work during the pandemic, 25% reported being more efficient. Feng and Savani (2020) reported that before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were “no gender differences in self-rated work productivity and job satisfaction.” However, women reported lower productivity and job satisfaction than men during the pandemic. Efficiency was compromised in tasks that required collaboration, discussion, interaction, and incorporation of diverse viewpoints, while tasks that could be done “in silos” were done more effectively when working from home.

Vyas and Butakhico (2021) suggest that the shift to working from home was abrupt and reactive. It was an unplanned move, and thus, organizational directives did not exist to guide employees in the situation. Most employees were largely un-

aware of what working from home entails and lacked the resources, information, guidelines, technology, and software to execute the change. This initially caused decreased efficiency, leading to stress and work-life conflict in the initial stages of mandated working from home.

### **Research Gap and Study Objective**

The pandemic has enforced a mandatory work-from-home regime. Although not all jobs can be performed remotely, some do lend themselves to remote performance. This is especially true for managers, professionals, and other white-collar workers. It has been established that employment does not mean working at a pre-designated location for pre-decided work. A technology interface enables working from wherever one is and at whatever time one finds appropriate (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). This shift augured well for knowledge workers, especially during the pandemic.

This study addresses gaps in the existing literature. First, although many studies have been conducted on working from home and work-life conflicts, the studies focus on voluntarily working from home. However, lockdown-mandated working from home is a relatively new and compulsory phenomenon. Covid-19-related anxiety and fears of being furloughed dominate the situation. More conscientiousness is needed in the workplace at a time when domestic help is conspicuous by its absence. This study is one of the first on the issue of imposed working from home and work-life conflicts among women educators.

Second, the working from home discussed in the extant literature is planned working from home, which, by virtue of being planned, does not need elaborate coping strategies. The current study addresses sudden, abrupt, and unexpected working from home, for which no organizational directives, mandates, training, and resources are available. Thus, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on imposed and unplanned working from home.

The present study examines how women educators adapted themselves to moving from brick-and-mortar to virtual classrooms under mandated work-from-home circumstances. The study seeks to make a unique contribution to our understanding by achieving the following objectives:

1. Understanding how mandatory working from home made women educators structure their domestic workspace in order to be able to work from home;
2. Understanding the impact of women educators' home environment on their work situation and vice versa;

3. Understanding the impact of mandated working from home on women educators' work-life balance and factors affecting work-life balance while women work from home; and
4. Understanding the experiences of women educators while they work from home.

## Methodology

Working from home mandated by a lockdown is a unique global event, making it an exclusive and unexplored issue. It provides a perfect opportunity for exploratory research to uncover the unique dimensions of women educators' experiences in managing family and work during the lockdown. The study was conducted in two phases:

**Phase 1:** Descriptive research based on primary data collected from women educators teaching online in B-schools in Rajasthan. The choice of respondents is apt, as B-schools were in the news for the quick response they demonstrated in moving all their teaching-learning processes online. The respondents had a reasonable experience of working online and hence were ideal for the study. Judgment sampling was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to locate respondents who qualified as work-from-home women educators since the lockdown was announced and had sufficient experience of doing this. Thus, only a sample size of 150 could be achieved, as not all institutes had shifted to online teaching and not many women educators had experience of working from home.

## Measurement Instrument

The measurement instrument was constructed based on a literature review. The research constructs were measured using a questionnaire that contained questions on demographic details and other related aspects. All questions were closed ended and the measurement instrument was vetted by two senior professors in the fields of psychology and organizational behavior.

## Pre-Testing the Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire was pretested with 30 women educators to test its validity and some questions were revised based on these results.

## Data Collection and Sampling

The pre-test phase was conducted offline, whereas the final data collection was conducted online using Google Docs. The questionnaire was administered to the 150 respondents between April and September 2020.

## Findings of the Descriptive Study

**Table 1**

*Age*

Age in years	Number	Percent
18–30	33	22.0
31–45	84	56.0
46–60	33	22.0
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Table 2**

*Marital Status*

Marital Status	Number	Percent
Unmarried	28	18.7
Married	118	78.7
Divorced	4	2.7
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Table 3**

*Income*

Income (In INR)	Number	Percent
Rs 20,000 or less	21	14.0
21,000–50,000	49	32.7
51,000–100,000	37	24.7
Above 100,000	43	28.7
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** It is evident from the data that 21 women (14%) earn less than Rs 20,000 per month, 49 (32.7%) have a monthly income between Rs 21,000 and Rs 50,000, and 37 (24.7%) had incomes greater than Rs 50,000, but less than Rs 1



lakh. Forty-three (28.7%) have a monthly income of more than one lakh (100,000 rupees).

**Table 4**  
*Education*

Years of Experience	Number	Percent
1-5	40	26.7
6-10	22	14.7
11-15	24	16.0
16 and above	64	42.7
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** Of the 150 respondents, 6 (4%) are graduates, 69 (46%) are post-graduates, 68 (45.3%) hold PhDs, and 7 (4.7%) have professional degrees.

**Table 5**  
*Experience*

Education	Number	Percent
Graduate	6	4.0
Post-Graduate	69	46.0
Valid PhD	68	45.3
Professional	7	4.7
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** Forty (26.7%) had 1-5 years' experience, 22 (14.7%) had 6-10 years, 24 (16%) had 11-15 years, and 64 (42.75%) more than 16 years.

**Table 6**  
*Household Support*

Who helped with household chores	Number	Percent
Husband	90	60.0
Parents-in laws	31	20.7
Children	15	10.0
Sibling	2	1.3
Domestic Help	4	2.7
No one	8	5.3
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** Before lockdown, 69% of women were supported by family members in household chores, but during lockdown, 91% of women said that help was extended by other family members. Women educators responded that during the lockdown, in the absence of any domestic help, family members also contributed to doing household chores. Ninety women (60%) said that major help came from their spouse, as he was also working remotely, while 31 women (20.7%) reported that parents and in-laws also served as helping hands. Fifteen women (10%) confirmed that children also helped them in household work. Two (1.3%) women reported help extended by the siblings, while 4 (2.7%) had help from domestic servants, which was mostly from maids staying with them even before the lockdown was imposed. Eight (5.3%) were largely unsupported and had no load sharing of any kind. Husbands were the major support in helping with household chores, followed by parents/in-laws. This shows the shifting equations in Indian households, where men also share responsibility for doing household chores.

**Table 7**  
*Work from Home Intentions*

	Number	Percent
Yes	81	54.0
No	69	46.0
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** Eighty-one women (54%) always wanted to work from home (even before the pandemic-mandated lockdown), while 69 (46%) never wanted to work from home even before the lockdown.

**Table 8**  
*Reasons for Work From Home*

Reasons for WFH	Number	Percent
Flexibility	43	28.7
Convenience	22	14.7
Taking care of family	36	24.0
Multitasking	49	32.6
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** Those having an inclination toward work from home cited reasons like multitasking (49; 32.6%), flexibility (43; 28.7%), taking care of family members (36; 24.0%) and convenience (22; 14.7%) as the perks of working from home.

**Table 9**  
*Work Hours during Work from Home*

Work Hours	Number	Percent
0-4 hrs	57	38.0
5-8 hrs	68	45.3
Above 8 hrs	25	16.7
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** In total, 38% of women reported doing around four hours of office-related work, 68 (45%) 5-8 hours, and 25 (17%) more than eight hours.

**Table 10**  
*Increase in workload during lockdown*

Workload Increase	Number	Percent
Yes	108	72.0
No	42	28.0
Total	150	100.0

*Source:* Primary Data

**Inference:** Of the 150 respondents, 108 (72%) felt that lockdown had increased their overall workload, while 42 (28%) did not find any change.

**Phase 2:** Exploratory research was based on the responses of Phase 1 respondents who volunteered to be part of the focus group discussions. The sample was compiled based on the willingness of the respondents to volunteer and a sample size of 30 was chosen for Phase 2. It was a heterogonous sample that included women of varying ages, experience, career life-cycle stage, marital status, parental status, family size, and household structure. This phase of the study was a semi-structured in-depth interview with each of the respondents.

**Table 11**  
**Demographic data of respondents of qualitative research (Phase 2)**

Name	Age (in yrs)	Designation	Experience (in years)	Educational Degree	Marital Status	Children	Household Structure
De	27	Assistant Professor	2	MBA	Unmarried	0	Nuclear
Ap	30	Assistant Professor	7	PhD	Married	1	Joint
Ma	33	Assistant Professor	12	Professional	Married	2	Joint
Pr	35	Assistant Professor	11	PhD	Unmarried	0	Nuclear
Li	40	Associate Professor	15	PhD	Married	2	Nuclear
Ma	45	Associate Professor	18	PhD	Married	2	Joint
Na	23	Lecturer	1	Graduate	Unmarried	0	Joint
Sa	24	Lecturer	3	MBA	Married	1	Nuclear
Pr	50	Professor	30	PhD	Married	2	Nuclear
Mo	48	Professor	25	PhD	Married	1	Joint
Ba	45	Associate Professor	20	PhD	Divorced	1	Nuclear
Ra	40	Associate Professor	15	PhD	Married	2	Joint
Su	25	Lecturer	2	MBA	Married	0	Nuclear
Ri	27	Lecturer	4	MBA	Unmarried	0	Joint
Ka	30	Sr. Lecturer	5	PhD	Married	1	Joint
Sr	30	Lecturer	5	PG	Married	1	Nuclear
Vi	32	Sr. Lecturer	6	PhD	Divorced	0	Nuclear
Ni	25	Lecturer	2	MBA	Single	0	With parents
Lo	42	Sr. Lecturer	13	MBA	Unmarried	0	With Parents
Va	55	Professor	30	PhD	Married	0	Nuclear
Sl	27	Lecturer	3	MBA	Married	1	Nuclear
Pi	29	Lecturer	5	MBA	Unmarried	0	Joint
Vb	36	Sr. Lecturer	7	PhD	Divorced	1	Nuclear
Dk	29	Assistant Professor	3	MBA	Unmarried	0	Nuclear
At	33	Assistant Professor	8	PhD	Married	2	Joint
Md	35	Assistant Professor	14	Professional	Married	2	Joint
Vs	59	Professor	32	PhD	Married	1	Nuclear
Vp	31	Assistant Professor	9	PhD	Married	1	Joint
Ta	34	Assistant Professor	13	Professional	Married	2	Joint
Dr	37	Assistant Professor	12	PhD	Unmarried	0	Nuclear

Source: Primary Data

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol. It covered topics such as educational background, years of experience at work, family size, number of dependents, workplace responsibilities, family responsibilities, social support received at work, social support received at home, and challenges faced during the forced work-from-home regime. The women were encouraged to express their feelings about the changes in working conditions and the coping strategies that helped them achieve work-life balance. Additional follow-up questions were asked to ensure adequate probing of the issues uncovered. The narratives were recorded as handwritten notes, which were transcribed immediately after the in-depth interview to ensure that every part of the discussion was incorporated into the findings. In any cases of uncertainty, clarification was sought through telephonic conversations. Themes were drawn from the respondents' narratives using Grounded Theory coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Inductive analysis (Janesick, 1994) was used to identify categories and emergent patterns.

The in-depth interviews focused on the following research questions:

1. How do women educators separate home from workplace while they work from home?
2. How has working online affected the feelings of women educators and their family?
3. How does their home environment affect their online work?
4. How has work from home affected their work-life balance?
5. How have they aligned themselves to the reality of the virtual workplace?

## **Findings of Semi-structured In-depth Interviews**

### **Structuring the Home Environment for Work**

The respondents ( $n=30$ ) were asked the question "How do you separate home from workplace while you work from home?" While the answers varied, the most common response, given by 24 respondents (80%), was that they did not really have a dedicated place at home which they could call an "exclusive workspace" or "office." Three faculty members (10%) indicated having an exclusive work desk, but refrained from calling it an "office." Another three respondents (10%) indicated having neither a dedicated office nor a work desk and confirmed that they worked from any place, often the living room or even an unoccupied bedroom in the house. One respondent said:

*Not having a dedicated workspace is a cause of stress as it blurs the boundaries between work and home. While I am engaged in a session, I see my toddler trying to draw my attention by playing mischief. I can't blame him, as his caretaker is away, because domestic help is not allowed in the apartments in which I live. The very fact that I am present at home means I can be called upon for sundry jobs. I feel very bad when I have to excuse myself from the Zoom session to take care of my child for something that requires immediate attention. I find it unprofessional and feel guilty about it.*

### **Workplace Social Support**

Workplace social support is an important factor that has a positive impact on work-life balance. Workplace social support is a concept drawn from social support literature. Cobb (1976, p. 300) defined social support as “an individual’s belief that she is loved, valued, and her well-being is cared about as part of a social network of mutual obligation.” Extended to a workplace context, workplace social support is defined as the degree to which individuals perceive that their well-being is valued by workplace sources, such as supervisors and the broader organization in which they are embedded (Eisenberger, Singlhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007). Supervisors, co-workers, and employers constitute the social support system in a workplace context (Voydanoff, 2005). In-depth interviews with the respondents revealed an interesting finding, which was related to the respondents’ tenure with the organization. Ten of the women (33%) confirmed that the organization valued them and took care of their well-being while working from home. These were typically women in senior positions and those with a longer period of service at the organization. On the other hand, 20 women (67%) stated that the workplace social support they received was trivial and that they really did not feel taken care of by the organization they were a part of. One respondent said:

*My head of department failed to understand my family responsibilities that emerge out of the fact that I am a mother of a newborn, living in a nuclear family devoid of any social support system.*

Yet another respondent stated:

*I am stressed that my supervisor and the organization did not really lend me much support during these chaotic times. Also, I am aware of the fact that there are*

*some senior professors in the system that received extensive organizational support from supervisors, co-workers, and the organization as a whole. They enjoyed a lot of flexitime, job sharing, a shorter work week, and many more such arrangements. They enjoyed immense tech support in engaging classes over Zoom while I had to figure my way out in a virtual world. This biased behavior is painful. I accepted it with a pinch of salt each time by legitimizing that they have been with the organization for long and thus they are valued and more empathized with.*

This behavior finds its roots in the social exchange view of commitment (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The senior professionals with long service in the organization are the ones that share emotional ties with the organization and these ties are mutual (Hrebiniak, 1974). They find a kind of identification with the organization, which is defined as “employees’ sense of unity with the organization” (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). This affective attachment that the employees shared with the organization made the organization reciprocate by extending magnanimous organizational support when the employee needed it during difficult times (Shore & Wayne, 1993).

### **Personal Social Support**

“Social support external to the work domain is termed as personal social support” (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2007). It can come from a spouse, relative, friend, acquaintance, sibling, neighbor, parents, or extended family. Research has provided ample evidence that personal social support has a positive influence on work-life balance. The literature recognizes that support from a spouse is the most potent personal support, ranging from financial assistance to sharing family responsibilities (Hershey & Baron, 1987). The support could be instrumental (King, Willoughby, Specht, & Brown, 2006) wherein the spouse provides day-to-day assistance with household activities. This support relieves the woman of the household of responsibilities and helps her devote the same to work, hence leading to better functioning at work. The support may also be emotional (Erickson et al., 2010) wherein the spouse empathizes with the women and imparts a confidence of “being around when needed.”

The respondents in the in-depth interviews confirmed receiving sufficient emotional support from their spouses but inadequate instrumental support. They stated that there is practically no sharing of domestic work despite the fact that both husband and wife are working from home. Women have now had homeschooling

added to their existing list of childcare responsibilities and 70% indicated spending more time than their spouse on homeschooling children.

Additionally, the need for social and physical distancing implies that the traditional support structures that parents could bank on—neighbors, nannies, domestic help, and visits to grandparents—are unavailable, which intensifies the pressure on women. In the interviews, 70% said that they are exclusively or primarily responsible for housework, and 66% confirmed that they are primarily responsible for childcare, and these proportions are no different from the proportions in normal times. In other words, housework and childcare were largely the woman's responsibility and that continues to be the case. The fact that the father is also working from the home does not reduce the pressure on the woman. This is a clear indication of the low level of instrumental support from spouses. This is explained by pre-existing stereotypes regarding gender roles and the gender-normative views that most cultures have toward the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Work from home has further traditionalized gender roles in the labor market and the household (Lott & Chung, 2016). When men work from home, they work longer and more intensely as they are stereotypically the bread earners (Lott & Chung, 2016), while women (as they are expected to) increase their responsibility within the family when working from home (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). This is likely to impact the work-life balance negatively. One respondent reported, *"I am assumed to be at home for the kids while my husband thinks he is at home to do better at work. Not only does my husband think thus, the entire set of parents-in-law also think the same way."*

A very small percentage (2%) of women who earned more than their spouses and also women whose husbands lost their jobs during the pandemic reported a contrary finding, that spouses provided both instrumental and emotional support. This substantiates the findings of Hupkau and Petrongolo (2020) that parental childcare roles are likely to be reversed in households where the mother's role is critical, as the father is forced to stay at home due to social distancing measures, or because of being laid off. This may accelerate the evolution of gender norms towards equitable roles.

## Household Structure

An employee's household structure has a significant impact on work-life balance. Most studies have focused on nuclear families and not much research has been done on other household structures (Casper, Weltman, & Kwesiga, 2007).



While single-earner parents, cohabiting couples, and singles have emerged as common household structures, most organizations still introduce work-life policies aimed primarily at employees with a family (Young, 1999). Employees with different household structures have varied responsibilities and levels of personal support systems to support them in times of difficulty.

The study revealed that singles enjoyed working from home, as flexible work schedules helped them strike a work-life balance and work outcomes improved in the absence of family and childcare responsibilities. This is consistent with the findings of Ten Brummelhuis and van der Lippe (2010). One respondent reported,

*I am single and thus enjoy the work-from-home regime. It is a pleasure for me, as I do not have much to do at home other than my job. Being single and younger than the peer group I am working with, I often have requests from senior profs and mentors to help them with technology, Excel, data, and other things, which I do happily as I know that they have a difficult time in the absence of domestic support and a joint family to care for.*

Singles value working from home and reciprocate by increasing their investment in cooperative relationships at work (Eisenberger et al., 1986). However, singles are low on emotional support which otherwise may come from a partner or children (Casper et al., 2007) and hence they look for additional support from the workplace.

Employees with a partner and children reported having the most difficult time during working from home. While they had more resources at their disposal, emanating from the partner and the children, they had lesser instrumental support as the sharing of domestic chores was not equitable. However, they garnered more emotional support from the partners as against singles. Different household structures also differ in their responses to work-life balance while working from home (Ten Brummelhuis & van der Lippe, 2010). Based on in-depth interviews, it could be concluded that working from home has strong positive work-life balance outcomes for singles and the least so for parents, with couples without children falling in the middle.

### **Feelings of Isolation**

Most women reported feelings of isolation and disconnection from the workplace despite working more office hours than usual. The major reason cited was “role blurring.” There was an extreme convergence of the otherwise disparate

home and work environments. *“I loved the idea of working at home initially, but soon realized that having a workplace just a few inches from the bed was the worst thing one has to go through”* said a respondent. *“We are carrying far more load than what we can bear”* reported another women respondent.

The research indicates that women are disproportionately feeling overwhelmed. Women in every income band did more childcare and home schooling (a newly added childcare chore) than men earning similar amounts.

*“Though we are in a virtual office more often than needed, office life is largely missing. No office gossip and grapevine, no exchange of ideas has reduced innovation and creativity at work. The coffee and tea breaks, which were havens of peer learning, have come to a dismal halt with a virtual office life.”* Reduced co-worker communication, lack of supervisors’ trust and support, and inappropriate workspaces at home emerged as the most important challenges affecting work-from-home work outcomes. There is widespread evidence regarding the need for social bonding for a person to flourish in their life. Only when several minds come together at the workplace do we get a better, more efficient, and innovative solution to any problem (Schepers & van den Berg, 2007).

One respondent reported, *“Work is not fun anymore. Feelings of isolation, loneliness and being unable to ‘switch off,’ as well as the lack of social support.”* A lack of feedback from authorities and senior colleagues gives no benchmark to judge progress, leading to increased feelings of anxiety and a concern as to whether they were up to standard. Oakman, Kinsman, Stuckey, Graham, and Weale (2020) suggested that regular communication between managers and teams and between colleagues can help reduce feelings of isolation associated with work from home. Similarly, Arora and Chauhan (2021) in their study proposed that difficulties in maintaining the personal connection with students possible in offline teaching, being unable to decode body language and distinguish their tones while answering questions, led to a feeling of losing control over students and this amplified negative feelings regarding isolation in the workplace and the meaning of the job.

### Research Implications

The research addresses the issues faced by women educators during a forced, unplanned, and uncertain period of working from home imposed by a pandemic. The study has far-reaching implication for workplaces. Academic administrators need to focus on training their faculty by organizing networked live training programs on how to use various platforms and their benefits for students and faculty

alike. The study has multiple instances of women educators reporting feeling of isolation. Workplaces need to devise ways of addressing these feelings by virtual meetings to instill feelings of unity and belonging. Kaduk, Genadek, Kelly, and Moen (2019) suggested that these are troubled times, leading to abrupt changes in work practices. This creates uncertainty for employees, making it necessary to have consistent communication about roles, expectations, performance, workloads, and access to human resources support. Fílarđí, de Castro, and Zaníní (2020) suggest that organizations need to train managers to supervise work-from-home employees.

Shareena and Shahid (2020) suggest empathy and workplace social support need to be extended to one and all, irrespective of household structure. Most workplaces have work-life policies aimed primarily at employees with a family, and singles generally fall outside the scope of such policies (Young, 1999) but these policies need to be all-encompassing. Most importantly, workplaces need to evolve and embrace long-term changes to enable female employees to achieve a good work-life balance.

This study also has several social implications. The findings suggest that society should lend additional cooperation to women working from home, taking care of dependents and children during lockdowns and when schools and daycare centers are closed.

## Conclusion

The objective of the current research was to understand how women educators coped in response to the shift from brick to click classrooms. The questions that followed were about organizing work and home simultaneously, the impact on work-life balance, and eventually the entire gamut of experiences during mandatory work from home. Phase I was essentially quantitative and Phase II was qualitative, and narratives led to the emergence of five themes: *structuring the home environment for work, workplace social support, personal social support, household structure, and feeling of isolation*. All the themes that emerged found plausible support from theory and the extant literature. While some women educators valued “flexibility,” others disliked the blurring of the boundary between home and office. While there were mixed reactions, the overall experience of most women educators was not one of excitement. Exciting initially as it may have been, drudgery crept in after a few months in the absence of a separate work environment and a family not ready for a sudden, mandatory, and unplanned work-from-home regime. The study findings have serious implications, for modern workplaces and for society.

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**Biographical Note:** Swati Soni is an Associate Professor in the area of Marketing at Jaipuria Institute of Management, Jaipur. She holds a Ph. D in Management from RA Poddar Institute of Management, Rajasthan University Jaipur, and MBA from Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur and a Bachelors from Sophia Girls' College, Ajmer. Dr. Soni is a passionate faculty with 22 years of rich teaching experience. Her love lies in teaching Brand Management and Services Marketing. She has an impressive number of research papers and articles to her credit. Besides being a passionate faculty, Dr. Soni has also been an astute academic administrator and served many positions of academic responsibility viz. Program Director, Dean (Academics), Chairperson Admissions. Training is her forte and her training modules on Services Marketing, Brand Management and Customer Engagement and Student Engagement have received an overwhelming response from the participants. Dr. Soni has a passion for writing cases and her cases have been published/registered with The Case Centre, Ivey Publishing, Sage Journals. She has also consulted for Airport Authority of India and worked on projects for Indian Council for Philosophical Research (ICPR).

Email: Swati.soni@jaipuria.ac.in

**Biographical Note:** Tina Jain is a Trainer and Consultant at Jaipuria Institute of Management. She teaches Retail Management courses. She is a Research Scholar at IIS University and has completed her executive education from IIM, Calcutta. She has wide experience as a banker, trainer and teacher. She is a certified NLP Practitioner and Life Coach. Her research interests are banking, digital marketing and consumer behavior.

Email: tina.jain@jaipuria.ac.in