



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

# The Policy Lab

## Report

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Understanding flexible work  
arrangement and its need in India:  
Policy intervention as a step towards  
holistic work life balance

2020

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## Executive Summary

This report attempts to understand the flexible work arrangement in the workplace as a derivative of potential success for women in India. There is a lack of relevant study and academic literature around flexible work practice in this area; especially concerning women. The scope of this paper is to identify the best practices of flexible work from existing literature, identify gaps and the importance of creating flexible work opportunities in different industries catering to the needs of employees. The objective is to understand the role of organizational culture and human resource managers in implementing flexible work. It will explore the widely practiced flexible work arrangements across the world. The present report is directed towards the Government, Ministries, women, academics, policymakers and the general public. It will further explore various practices executed by employers all around the world and attempt to state which would be suitable in the Indian context. It will try to understand the gaps which place India at a disadvantage when compared against the work structure adopted in developed countries. The report will implicate to which extent a legal structure for flexible work practices can be implemented in India. It would also include some policy suggestions which could be implemented in India.

**Abbreviations :**

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

IT – Information Technology

IMF - International Monetary Fund

ILO - International Labour Organisation

UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund

NSSO - National Sample Survey Office

## KEY FINDINGS

The findings from the study has been enlisted below:

### ACADEMIC

- There is a lack of academic literature around flexible work in India.
- There is a need for evidence from high quality research which can provide information on increasing labour force participation in urban India.
- Academics need to address policy solutions which can involve a greater number of women in the job market

### BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY WOMEN

- There is an alarming difference in the percentage of men at 48.47% and women at 26.27% in the labour force participation in 2018 in India as per World Bank data (Anon n.d.).
- Post liberalization, there have not been enough jobs in the country. There is a need for a policy which could create more jobs which could also include women.
- Most women work in the IT or software sector apart from which they are underrepresented most of the industries in India.
- Family contrasts and societal expectations such as marriage and childbirth force women to drop out of their jobs in their mid-career.
- Female employees can bring in innovative ideas and diversity to the workplace.
- Lack of childcare facilities in dual households pours the entire burden of women and it becomes complicated for working women to take care of the family and household especially when the partner is away.

### FOR EMPLOYERS

- Improves trust and loyalty towards the company.
- Increases employee engagement and employee retention rate.
- The brand name of the company creates a good reputation which attracts a wider talent pool.

### FOR EMPLOYEES

- Research has shown that flexible work balance can be beneficial in improving work life balance, reduce stress and anxiety (Halpern 2005)
- Studies have proven that flexible work arrangements have improved health outcomes in sleep quality, maintaining blood sugar level. Less fatigue and mental well-being (Anon 2018b)
- Act as a positive reinforcement which increases motivation and productivity.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Legislative** – To create a uniform work policy in India with the provision to request for flexibility as and when needed by employees.
- **Academic** – Greater number of funded researchers to understand the ways to foster female labour force participation.
- **Organizational** – HR policies to be inclusive, family friendly, supportive role of managers, no bias for recruitment.
- A nation and state level adoption for flexible policy at the workplace in urban India.



## Introduction

The present report attempts to understand the flexible work arrangement for women in urban India. Despite being a developing country India ranked fifth in the world's largest economy in 2019 (Anon n.d.). However, it still lacks equal labour force representation between men and women in the country. There were only 27% of adult Indian women who were employed compared to 79% of men in 2012 as stated by the World Bank (Dixon n.d.). There has been a sharp decrease in the female labour force participation over the decade. A survey conducted by NSSO revealed the female Worker Population Ratio to be at a decline from 26.6% in 2009-10 to 23.7% in 2011-12 (Anon n.d.). This seems to be a pressing problem and the report raises the question when there is economic growth then why is there a decline in the female labour force participation?

In India, women still encounter a number of challenges which hinder their employment. There is a lack of jobs and a greater number of educated women in the country. The socio-cultural norms around which a woman is supposed to function in India also forces them to leave their job. Although a larger number of women work in the formal sector in urban India, they are seen to turn down managerial positions due to child care, family commitments and care of elderly parents. Factors such as inadequate support from the organizations, working terms, safety, hiring practices can be attributed for them to drop out of their job (Goyal 2020). The IT industry attracts a higher number of women compared to the other sectors. The societal approval for IT related jobs is also considered favourable due to physically less demanding work, better salary, knowledge centric work and safe work environment. However, women are seen to leave within five years of their employment due to gender pay gap, stagnation of work at entry and mid-level career, more number of career breaks and less representation in the senior level (Gupta 2020).

Approximately as low as 14% of women make it to the executive position in the corporate sector. A global research group's <sup>1</sup> overview of India revealed 50% of Indian women leave corporate jobs at a faster pace in the executive positions. The main challenges have been identified to be gender stereotypes towards women, lack of significant representation of women in leadership and managerial position. There is an absence of mentorship and sponsors at the senior level who could guide and support them. There is a need for women to be included in the workforce and encourage their participation to overcome the widespread gap as compared to men.

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<sup>1</sup> Catalyst is a global non-profit founded in 1962 which drives change with pioneering research, practical tools, and proven solutions to accelerate and advance women into leadership

The report consists of the methodology followed by the first part which will explore the concept of flexible work, the types of flexible work, most common practices found in the world with their distinct benefits and challenges. The second part of the report will consist of a literature review and a contrast between developed and developing countries with reference to the practice of flexibility at work. The third section will include the interviews of friends who are working currently in India in different industries. The fourth part of the report will include the analysis and discussion from the interviews. The conclusion will articulate how flexible work can be beneficial in India, if flexible work can reduce the stereotypes towards women and help in augmenting gender equality in the workplace, followed by the policy recommendation of its implementation as a mandatory structure in the formal workplace as a response to the problem.

## Methodology

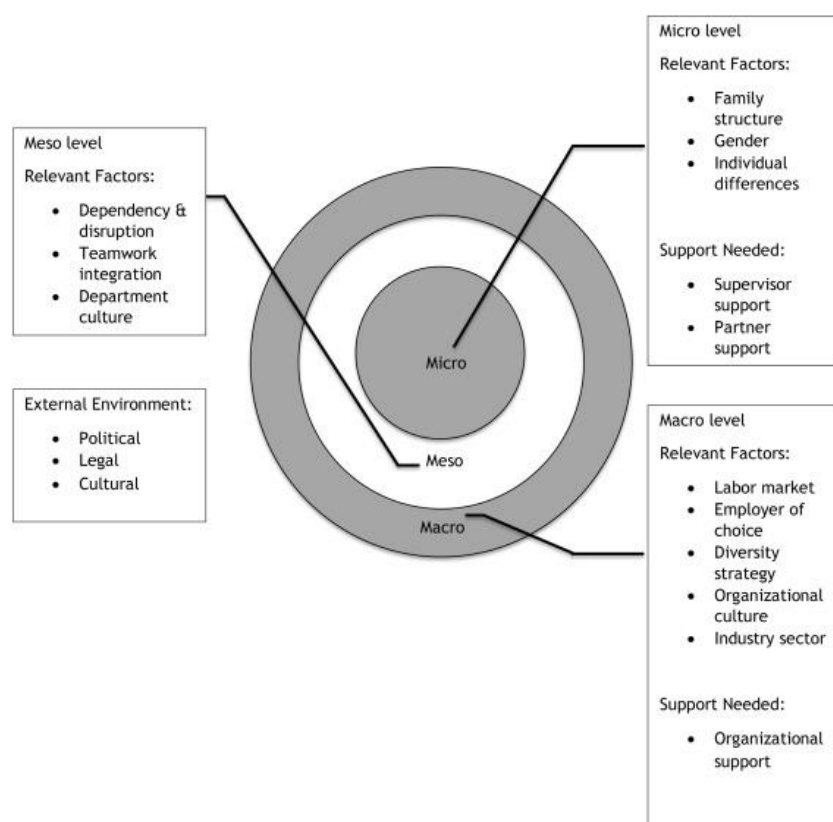
The report has adhered to secondary data in the form of academic and grey literature to study and analyse flexible work arrangements from the perspective of India and other countries. The constraints faced by women such as lack of jobs, the responsibility of childcare, socio-cultural barriers, family commitments, discrimination at the workplace would be addressed in the report. It was noted that women spend more than three times in hours compared to men in regard to *unpaid care* (Anon n.d.). This could be a reason why a lot of women turn down managerial positions or are forced to leave their work because of the inability to manage work life balance. The objective of the report is to see flexible work as a gender equality approach in the workplace which turns out to be effective for both the employer and employee. As there is a lack of studies in flexible work around women in India, an attempt has been made to compile five responses from friends and family with experience in the current workplace across varied industries. The responses are qualitative in nature as they were asked to provide their opinion extensively about the importance of flexible work in connection to their job. Furthermore, since the focus is India, they shared their view on whether flexible work could pave the way for a greater number of women to be represented in the present workspace

## Part 1 - What is Flexible Work?

Flexible work can be defined as “employment scheduling practices that are designed to give employees greater work–life control over when, where, how much or how continuously work is done” (Kossek and Lautsch 2017:9). In simple words, flexible work can be understood as a practice which supports employees to balance their work and personal life. Organizations offer flexibility in a reduction in work hours, working from home, working outside stipulated office hours, reducing or extending contractual hours or working overtime (Groen et al. 2018). The element of trust is predominantly important for employers and employees when flexible work is practiced in an organization (Choudhary 2016). A flexible work policy positively results in job satisfaction among employees (Neirotti, Raguseo, and Gastaldi 2019).

The concept of flexible work has been more in demand in the last few decades as there are more dual-earner couples, women and single-parent families and those who have geriatric responsibility. Under flexible working conditions, employees are assisted in their control of how they can work in order to mitigate the effects of work stress over their work (Choudhary 2016). The government in several countries have legalised flexible work and embedded it in its system.

The ecological model presents a clear understanding of the importance of flexible work entirely at the micro, macro and meso level.



Source : (Smith, Gilmer, and Stockdale 2019) *The importance of culture and support for workplace flexibility: An ecological framework for understanding flexibility support structures.*

### **The micro level: Individual and his or her family**

This is the core which comprises the factors employer as the individual's that are his prime concern for flexibility. The gender, family structure, care for children, elders, or other family members possess a greater need for work life balance structures. An individual's personal interests like education, community engagement or political involvement might also influence flexible work.

This is understandable in the Indian context where women are expected to take care of the family and fulfil other commitments. Thus, they must be provided with the flexibility to manage their schedule.

### **Meso – The immediate work context**

The support of both supervisor and peer play an important role in attainment and utilization of flexible work arrangement. The nature of the office, department, or unit within an organization are important elements. This is because when employees who avail it affect their department. The coordination and integration necessary among team members are crucial to attaining flexible benefit. Managers in charge of a department must practice flexibility so that their subordinates are not confident to request flexibility when in need. Members of a team must demonstrate strong culture and support their colleague who seeks flexibility.

### **Macro – The organization**

The organizational culture influences the orientation of the organization with either a highly committed, autonomous, flexible workforce or strictness of labour market and capital .

The leaders of the organization must communicate a flexible work policy to the employees through emails or video messages. Managers should be responsible and accountable while supporting work life balance. Flexible work must be treated as an “expectation rather than a privilege” (Smith et al. 2019:564) employees are more motivated to adopt flexible working practices. The IT resources may support employees who work remotely to access and maintain the security of company resources as well as to communicate and work effectively with teams, clients, and other important stakeholders.

The broader socio-political external environment is also crucial to organizations' strategies toward the practice flexibility as we see in the case of India where numerous factors influence the implementation of flexibility.

### **The types of Flexible Work**

The most common and widely practiced flexible work arrangement in the world have been listed below. Each encompassing its main characteristics, benefits and challenges.

### i. Flex time

Flexitime is a popular arrangement where an employee works outside of his pre- set *core* hours. It is usually arranged prior with the employee and employer where a definite start and finish times are established which is flexible. The total hours of work are not usually affected by this arrangement (Government of Canada 2020). The extra time generally sums up to annual leave which is taken by one month to avoid the accumulation of large amounts of leave. Flexitime is extensive in public sector organisations although there is an assumption that flexitime is not popular among managers (O'Brien and Hayden 2008). Flexitime has some "occupational constraints" (Christensen and Staines 1990:462) as it is not conducive for all sectors especially manufacturing or similar entities which require assembly line, batch process flexibility for an individual is not compatible. The *reluctance of supervisors* could be a disadvantage for employees as it could negatively impact the organization's climate, maladjustment and lack of coordination among employees.

### ii. Part-time

Part-time work generally involves working for a fewer number of hours or days in contrast to a full-time job in the same organization. Usually, organisations include some part-timers as it is deemed that permanent part-time workers have faced fewer turnovers compared to other worker categories. The other forms of part-time work include a fixed part-time hours model, voluntary part-time and reduced hours. Work hours may be negotiated, or they could be chosen to support peak work hours depending on the type of business. A major problem for the part-time worker is to keep updated with the staff, new work developments, and job responsibility (O'Brien and Hayden 2008). In part time work employee benefits provided by the organization or government such as insurance, medical care pension, may or may not be provided to employees. Thus, the clauses should be verified before joining the organization (Government of Canada 2020).

### iii. Compressed work week

Compressed hours, sometimes called compressed working weeks, is the restructuring of work time into extended, but fewer, *chunks* during a working week. This could involve compressing hours into 3, 4 or 4.5 days a week, or 8, 9 days out of a fortnight. An employee can accomplish this if he starts work early and finishes late and builds up bonus hours he can utilize later to take half-day or a full day leave from work. The advantage of flexible leave could be beneficial to save expenditure on travel and traffic, avail off days for a family commitment, rest, or holidays. Its demerit lies in *over-intensification of work* due to longer working days resulting in stress and fatigue (O'Brien and Hayden 2008). This type of arrangement is particularly initiated by the employees however the employer could commence in certain instances to improve expertise, augment production or to introduce longer business hours which could result in improved customer service (Government of Canada 2020).

### iv.

## v. Teleworking

Teleworking<sup>2</sup> is also known as telecommuting, remote working or working from home. This involves the employee to perform his assigned work from anywhere apart from his designated workplace. The work schedule could require communication with electronic media either on calls, text, email or other mediums to interact with the colleagues, team members, supervisor or any other individual from inside or outside the organization (Groen et al. 2018). In this arrangement hours of work, communications between the teleworker, co-workers and customers need to be synchronized. The advantage of telecommuting is the autonomy to work freely for the employee, the flexible work hours can help in planning family and work commitments, it can improve time management with less subjection to a conversation or impromptu meetings, an employee can save time and money by cutting down in hours stuck in traffic, it fosters professional flexibility. The disadvantages could be a feeling of isolation and detachment from the office environment, there could be lack of professional support if supervision is needed on a piece of work which could lead to delay of work, long term teleworking could result in personal instability or lack of self-discipline (Harpaz 2002).

## vi. Job sharing and Job splitting

Job sharing is the practice where two or more employees share one or more positions or a set of duties. Job sharing may occur when a few part-time positions are available within the company (Government of Canada 2020). It is regarded to be a *family friendly practice* and could also be a potential mechanism to tackle unemployment. It is widely used in Ireland's education and library and information sector. It is beneficial to retain employees, expand worker dexterity and strengthen decision making. It can be tough when there is lousy communication between the organization and the sharers, there is an increased need for training and monitoring of skills. About 90% of women are job sharers and it is extensive in the public sector.

In job splitting, it is ensured that the task is equally divided between respective employees and both were in charge of their individual work. This can result in honing a skill set and there is no miscommunication and less coordination is required. This could differ on or off weeks, particular days, mornings or night shifts.

## vii. Banking of Hours or Annualized hours

This arrangement allows employees to choose their work days and hours for an approximate time with negotiation. The time frame could vary in weeks, months or years thus it suited for business during seasons or peak hours. Annualized hours are mostly a combination of flextime and compressed work week which could help reduce the number of overtime hours required. This arrangement provides strong flexibility and efficient patterns for both employees and particularly advantageous for an employer (O'Brien and Hayden 2008). It also results in

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<sup>2</sup> Approximately 10% of firms in Spain ([Mayo, Pastor, Gomez-Mejia, & Cruz, 2009](#)) to around 50% in the U.S. U.K. and Germany use teleworking

reduced absenteeism however its challenges lie in its complicated administrative procedure and less authority on some elements of its working time (Titopoulou et al. 2017).

### viii. Leaves and Sabbaticals

Leaves and sabbaticals are sectioned periods of time taken off work which does not harm an employee's employment rights in an organization.

Paid or unpaid leaves are granted by companies for family, health care, education or leisure (Government of Canada 2020).

Sabbaticals are usually long-term leave given to an employee for a period of time for personal projects such as travel, professional accomplishment or community service. It can be either fully paid or partially paid by the organization. Sabbaticals strengthen long term retention of employees, and gain recognition due to loyalty from the employee. After a break, an employee is in a better mind frame physically and mentally and is ready to embrace new skills and challenges. The challenges for organizations could be lack of resources to fund salary, health coverage and other benefits for employees. The employees might face emotional detachment after they return from work. The other employees covering for those who are on sabbatical might face a drop in productivity levels and bitterness towards them (Villalobos 2017).

A table summarising the criteria of flexible work and its types

Criterion of Flexibility in work schedules	Types of Flexible Work
Flexibility in the Timing of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Flexitime</li> <li>● Core Days</li> <li>● Results-Based Professional Work</li> <li>● Contingent Work</li> <li>● Rotating Shifts</li> <li>● Shift Work</li> <li>● Four Day Work Week</li> <li>● Compressed Work Week</li> <li>● Weekend, Evening, Night Work</li> </ul>
Flexibility in the Location or Place of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Telework or Flex place Satellite Offices, Neighbourhood Work Centres</li> <li>● Required Travel or Client Office work</li> <li>● Split Locations</li> <li>● Informal Telework combined with Nonstandard Working Time</li> </ul>
Flexibility in Amount of work (Reduced Workload and Hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Job Sharing</li> <li>● Reduced Load or Customized Work</li> <li>● Part-Time Work</li> <li>● Temporary Layoffs</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Temporary Shutdown</li> <li>● Required Reduced or Part-Time Hours</li> <li>● Overtime Mandates or Limits</li> <li>● Reduced Hours</li> <li>● Phased Retirement</li> <li>● Work-Study or Coops</li> </ul>
Flexibility in Work Continuity (Short-Term Breaks in Employment or Time Off)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Short-Term or Long-Term Leaves (e.g., educational, travel, family, maternity, disability, military)</li> <li>● Sabbaticals</li> <li>● Extended or Indefinite Paid and Unpaid Leaves of Absence</li> <li>● Vacation</li> <li>● Sick Time or Disability Time Off</li> <li>● Part Year Work</li> <li>● Intermittent Leave</li> </ul>



## Part II - Literature Review: All around the world, what do Employers do?

Some practices of flexible work have been selected based on the leading countries who have successfully implemented it in the workplace. Similarly, two studies from India have been included to bring out the contrast between these countries.

### Finland:

In 2011, a study by Grant Thornton<sup>3</sup> accounted that Finland provided the maximum flexible work schedule to employees in 92% organization thus taking a lead in providing flexible work in the world. The organizations in Finland view flexible working as a perk rather than a right in other countries. The *culture of trust* is embedded in Finland's roots since history. The Nordic countries have *flat organizations*<sup>4</sup>, *low hierarchy and a pragmatic* approach which makes it easier to implement flexible work structure in their organizations. The Working Hours Act was passed in 1996, which offered employees the right to adjust their allocated daily hours of work with the flexibility to start or finish three hours earlier or later which particularly contributed to the flexible work culture. Finland's focus on work life balance, collaboration and a *consensus-based decision* has been influential in the practice of flexible work culture (Savage, 2019).

### New Zealand

A study conducted in 2009 by (Fursman and Zodgekar 2009) based on the research initiated by the New Zealand Families Commission in 2007-2008. The aim was to understand how flexible working arrangements can support family wellbeing, the challenges and opportunities of flexible work. A mixed method approach was undertaken with 1000 nationally represented samples. The findings of the study depicted 88% of the respondents could take their time off occasionally and 77% stated that they could take their time off regularly. However, the preference for the types of flexible work arrangement differed from each family according to their responsibility. The participants emphasized on the availability to choose flexible work appropriate for their family and the ability to have control over it. Findings included the identification of a range of positive impacts and the barriers to the use of flexible working arrangements. The positive impact of FWA by the respondents included availability of quality family time, ability to perform care responsibilities while working full time, less stress experienced by caregivers and parents and a happier lifestyle. The negative impacts stated by the respondents included the feeling of guilt for utilizing the flexible work and dissatisfying

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Thornton is one of the world's largest professional services networks of independent accounting and consulting member firms which provide assurance, tax and advisory in 140 countries (Ltd n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Flat organizations have fewer management layers, actively involved in decision-making, reduced hierarchical overload, shorter chain of command and increased communication between employees and management (Garbuio and Lin n.d.)

their supervisor, some felt that it was complicated as work invaded their family time especially when they worked from home.

The Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act 2007 increased the demand for flexible work which enabled employers to request flexible work and employers to attend to the request (Anon n.d.). A business operations survey<sup>5</sup> in 2018 revealed approximately men 54% and 49% of women have access to flexible hours (Anon 2019b).

## India

### Study in an IT company in Bengaluru<sup>6</sup>.

The study was conducted to analyse the correlation between flexible work arrangement and employee engagement in the organization, Employee engagement is a central concept in human resources which determines a relationship between the employee and the organization. It determines how absorbed an employee is in his work which results in his productivity, loyalty and commitment towards the organization. Employee engagement also yields positive business results.

Demographic details of participants which indicates a stark difference in the number of men and women working in the company; reflecting the underrepresentation of women in the workforce.

Categories		Numbers
Gender	Male	433
	Female	61
Marital Status	Married	228
	Never Married	252
	Others (separated/divorced )	24
Total Work Experience	2–5 years	259
	6–10 years	216
	11–15 years	29
Age	25 years	142

<sup>5</sup> The business operations survey collects performance measures from New Zealand businesses to better understand the practices and behaviours they undertake that may affect their performance

<sup>6</sup> Bengaluru is a metropolitan city also known as the Silicon Valley of India (Anon n.d.)

	26–30 years	233
	31–40 years	122
	41–50 years	7
<b>Parents</b>	18.70%	

In this study, each employee availed at least one type of flexible arrangement out of the seven in the organization.

Flexible work types	Flexible work hours	Flexi shift	Work from home /satellite office/ telecommunicating	Part time	Job sharing	Extended Leave	Parenthood Leave
Availed	412	117	198	11	14	78	75
Percentage	81.74	23.21	39.28	2.18	2.77	15.47	14.88

The results revealed commonly the employees who availed flexibility feel the need to be engaged in their job more compared to those who did not. The opportunity of flexible work corresponded to its usage by the employees as it can be deduced that flexible work is positively related to employee engagement.

Total Number of Participants	Percentage of Engagement and Disengagement		
	Highly Engaged	Neither Engaged nor disengaged	Disengaged
504	7%	51%	41%

The result is drastic as it can be seen in the table that only 7% employees felt highly engaged out of 504 employees whereas 41% or almost half the workforce in the organization felt disengaged in their jobs indicating lower motivation and poor job satisfaction.

### Study among women in the IT sector

This study was conducted with 13 women in the software sector study based on a qualitative exploratory methodology. The objective was to discern the factors of work and family influence balance is maintained of Indian women in this sector as they have to fulfil the dual role of a homemaker as well as a professional the study is based on an exploratory qualitative study of 13 women IT professionals in the software sector in Bangalore.

The table shows the demographic details of the participants:

<b>Total number of Participants</b>	13	
<b>Age group</b>	26-40 years	
<b>Experience</b>	3-16 years	
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Married</b>	9
	<b>Single</b>	4
	<b>Parents</b>	6

Semi-structured interview was conducted based on six themes as shown in the table.

Serial No.	Theme	Category	Dimension
1.	Familial influences on life choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Role models</li> <li>● Life decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Father and brother</li> <li>● Education</li> <li>● Career</li> <li>● Marriage</li> <li>● Children</li> </ul>
2.	Multi-role responsibilities and negotiating them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Role conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Taking care of the children</li> <li>● Taking care of dependent parents or parents-in-law</li> <li>● Being a homemaker</li> </ul>
3.	Self and professional identity;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work identity</li> <li>● Family identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hierarchy of role identities</li> </ul>
4.	Work life challenges and coping strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Nature of the IT</li> <li>● Prioritising commitments</li> <li>● Personal self-management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working hours</li> <li>● Tight deadlines</li> <li>● Setting priorities in work and family</li> <li>● Pursuing life interests</li> </ul>

5	Organisational policies and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work family programmes</li> <li>● Women friendliness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Flexible working hours</li> <li>● Child-care facilities</li> <li>● Working from home</li> </ul>
6	Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family/spouse support</li> <li>● Domestic help</li> <li>● Supervisor/co-worker support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Instrumental</li> <li>● Emotional</li> </ul>

The response of the interview has been comprehensively summarized in the table demonstrating the themes which correspond to the category. The elements in the category influence the dimensions of the work-life balance of these women.

The findings suggested that career and life choices of most of the women are determined by the family. It is common in India for women to comply with their desires to conform to their family's traditions in order to avoid strain between personal choice and family expectations which considerably influence their work life balance. It was asserted by the respondents that due to the expectation to perform multiple roles, they did not get sufficient time for themselves to relax or pursue other interests. The married respondents stated that they got less time to spend with their husband or relatives who stayed away due to tenacious work schedules. The respondents who were parents were faced with the challenge of their conflicting identities from the work and family front. The sacrifices in their personal lives affected their career. The study demonstrated the support of their partners in achieving balance along with the support of domestic help and other family members (Valk and Srinivasan, Vasanthi n.d.)

### **The contrast of flexible work practice in developed and developing countries**

From the above practices of flexible work, it might be difficult to compare the flexible work arrangement in India and other developed countries. There is a major gap in the developing and developed countries in terms of environment, resource, infrastructure, organization safety, hierarchy, societal values which influences the implementation of flexible work in the organizations. In Europe, 3 out of 4 employees have access to some form of flexibility in their work schedule. The government encourages flexibility at work and employees have the right to request flexibility in their schedule in the Nordic countries (Anon n.d.). In the United Kingdom, the demand for flexible work is fundamental as 92% consider it crucial while searching for a job and 70% employees felt flexibility in their jobs made it more appealing and

30% preferred flexible work arrangement to a salary hike revealed a study by Capability Jane<sup>7</sup> (Burnford n.d.). In all the OECD member countries it was estimated that 11% of employees in these countries work for approximately 50 hours more. The highest rate being Turkey followed by Mexico and Colombia. To support the work life balance of employees there is some provision of flexibility provided either by the government or through legislation (Anon n.d.). In developing countries, labour practices are mostly considered to be *poor* or *unacceptable*. They also depict a negative relationship between the GDP and working hours. Factors such as labour practices, legislations, minimum wage, education level, human resource policies, social security workplace safety are not up to the standard in several countries (Robertson et al. 2016). However, their developing countries cannot be generalized or compared with one another. Each has its specific potential, for instance, some China recorded 85% of its employees being provided with flexible work in a survey by Polycom<sup>8</sup> (Writer n.d.)

The connotation of neoliberalism is different in comparison to the west. The advent of new economic policy in 1991 opened the door to the IMF and World Bank which promoted liberalization and globalization in the country. The private sector introduced new culture in the Indian workforce which challenged the traditional bureaucratic mode of governance in the public sector. The private companies emphasized on individuality, creativity, promising salary and job security (Arabandi 2011). The IT Sector bloomed in India and globalization brought with the multinational companies which initiated western work culture. The rise of software services and IT-enabled services industries exhibited a direct outcome in the global economy. Several companies located in advanced industrial economies began outsourcing and offshoring a huge range of work from India where skilled human resources were more easily available at a low cost. The process of production, distribution and management of goods and services picked up momentum in the 1990s at the same time when India's IT industry picked up in India. The flexibility in work hours was provided in these organizations to the employees. Even today flexible work is mostly provided in the IT industry which shows the opportunity of flexible work structure which can be expanded to other industries.

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<sup>7</sup> A recruitment business focused on sourcing talented executives on a flexible working basis (Anon n.d.)

<sup>8</sup> Based in America, it is a multinational corporation with expertise in video collaboration, cloud management and analytics (Anon n.d.)

## Part III - Flexible Work in India – Word from Women in the workforce

The data collected some views of my friends back in India on flexible work arrangement. Their names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

The questions on the have been asked based on the following elements:

- If there is a provision of flexibility in their respective organization
- If yes, then how is it beneficial to them?
- If not, do they feel the need for it?
- If they think that flexible work defines the way to the future especially for women in India.

Number	Age	Experience	Marital Status	Job Description	Availability of Flexible at wok
Respondent 1	25	8 months	Single	Project Coordinator: E-learning	No
Respondent 2	27	1 year 9 months	Single	Counselling Psychologist	Yes
Respondent 3	26	2 years	Single	Publication Associate Incubation	Yes
Respondent 4	30	4.5 years	Single	Data Scientist	No
Respondent 5	50	17 years	Married	Assistant Professor	No

### Respondent 1

*“It’s not been long since I entered the corporate world and it’s my second switch since then. The main reason was not that I hated the position I was offered but the environment I was put into in a span of five months.*

*One of the reasons was not being flexible and partial all throughout the working hours were extended although the majority of workforce were women. We were supposed to stay late at the office and there was no compensation for the same*

*Moreover, the main reason I left that job was because my mom felt sick and being the eldest I had to be there with her and take care of the house chores. I shared my problem with the senior manager and her immediate reply was, WAKE UP EARLY AND DO IT AND COME ON TIME rather*

*giving me some relaxation on the working hours or work from home. I personally think in case of emergencies such things have to be considered. I know it has its cons too but then a relaxation never creates harm rather it builds confidence and job productivity of an employee. In India I believe always the gender disparity will be there no matter how progressive one becomes”.*

### **Respondent 2**

*“There is an understanding of human lifestyle inherent in my workplace. So regardless of gender, flexibility is an available option. Apart from regular informal catch ups, we also have the option of bringing kids to the office for a couple of hours if there isn’t any other alternative for the employee. As far as the hierarchy positions are concerned – both genders are represented equally. I personally don’t feel there is a gender gap in salaries in my organization”.*

### **Respondent 3**

*“India is a patriarchal society. This will not change even if the workplace scenario changes. A woman is expected to balance personal and professional life while working. So, a flexible work arrangement is the best option for India. Being a Psychologist, I understand that the psychology of women will not change. The society is not the sole reason for women to do household chores along with their professional work. This is in the personality of a woman to perceive that a man will not be able to do household work efficiently. Thus, she would do it herself and take the extra burden.*

*I have worked in two different sectors until now. Initially, I used to work in online tutoring. I could choose my work timing in the organization. I chose night shifts which had the flexibility of working from home where I could work in my comfort zone rather than working in an office space. The second sector is where I am working currently as a counselling psychologist. All these months in lockdown, I worked from home. I am currently freelancing and my work is flexible. I provide counselling to people over calls or chat. The client can choose the medium which can vary between audio or visual calls. I find this comfortable as this informs me about my appointment beforehand. I do not have any deadline and I can work according to my mental status and time. This seems to me the best one as I do not have any work pressure.*

*I can prepare in advance for it. It also gives me enough time for further studies. Living in Indian scenario, I find that FWA is more suitable for me rather than fixed work timing”.*

### **Respondent 4**

*“I have three years of experience in India and almost two years of experience in Ireland. There is a striking difference in the work culture between these two countries.*

*In India, agreeing with the common notion – yes, I did not have much flexibility with my work. I was told that I do not put in extra efforts as others do, especially because after finishing my work I would go to play basketball or badminton. Even after completing the designated amount of time in my workstation, I was not spared from the tantrums. This was pretty much three*



*years in India till 2017. In September of 2018, I joined my current company which is incredibly supportive of work-life balance, which sometimes, considering my earlier experience, makes me believe that they are a bit too lenient. I do not expect this to happen anytime if I go back to India.*

*In India, being involved with the Diversity and Inclusions team, I have heard many real-life accounts of terrible work-life balance for women, especially the ones who have younger children to take care of. This has always been a challenge in every sector women go to. I have heard stories of crucial work being delegated to someone else post maternity leave because the manager thought she would not be able to keep up. This is the story of many women in India, not in Ireland. My colleagues here say that they have never felt threatened because of their feminine responsibilities”.*

### **Respondent 5**

*“When I trace my career trajectory, I notice that it has been a mixed one. I began my career as a high school teacher where there was no scope of flexible work arrangement. Strict regimentation left me drained and I didn’t have any time to pursue my other interests. However, after I shifted my base, and started my career afresh in a College as a part-time teacher, I did enjoy considerable flexibility. I could attend Seminars, write papers and work as a Guest –Teacher parallelly. To find a better foot-hold I joined a college as a full-time faculty. And since that day, all my academic pursuits have been put to rest. I sincerely feel that teaching professionals need to grow and develop their skills in tandem with the demands of the job.*

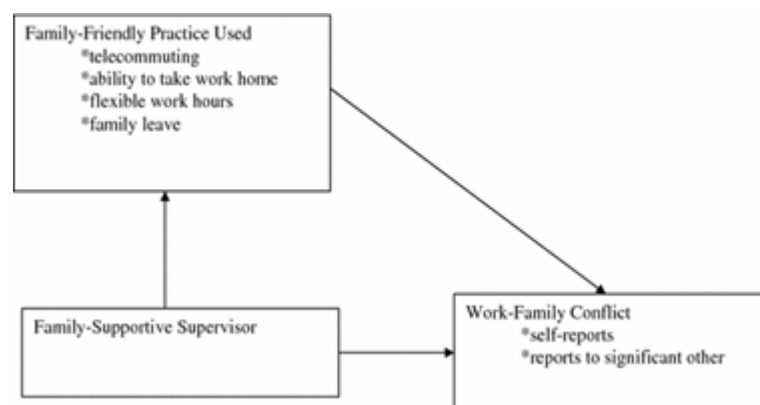
*I would have immensely benefited if there had been some flexibility at my workplace. I could utilize the free time in taking up meaningful research projects, teaching at other institutions, guide doctoral students, visit foreign universities for career development programs etc. In India, an organization should have provision for flexible working hours. I believe that the flexibility will not only enrich the organization and the employees but also make room for the employment of the women. In most of the nuclear families, the husband and wife work together to provide a better future to their children. If there is a provision for flexible working hours, then the couples can effortlessly take care of their children and provide them with financial as well as emotional security”.*

## Part IV – Analysis and Discussion

The above opinions reflect the challenges faced by women in urban India. Two out of five women have stated that they have the provision of flexibility in the workplace. They have also explained how it is increasingly important for women in India to have flexible work for personal goals or other commitments.

One of the respondents mentioned freelancing which shows the precedence of gig economies in the Indian workforce. This is becoming popular among the younger generation or as an extra source of income for people. It is temporary in nature and lends ownership over projects. There are risks associated with it as most employers in gig work do not get health care, job security, paid leaves, insurance or other benefits which are provided in a full-time job (Anon n.d.). Thus, to accommodate these natures of work and to introduce flexibility in India there is a need to restructure the existing labour laws.

India is witnessing a greater number of women who are receiving higher education. It is an interesting fact to note that there has been a drop in their fertility rates. The State of World Population 2018, by the UNFPA, revealed that India's average fertility rate between 2015 and 2020 was recorded at 2.3 per woman. This could be influential in escalating India's economy indicating better health, education and decrease in child mortality rates (Anon n.d.). According to the World bank, the female percentage in the workforce is woefully low at 27% in 2018. The absence of women from the labour force portrays that women are at a disadvantage compared to men which is a worrisome trend. This could be a reason why India ranks poorly in UN rankings in Gender Development Index and Gender Inequality Index, as the participation of women in the workplace has been consistently low (Sharma n.d.).



Source: (Breugh and Frye 2008) *Work–Family Conflict: The Importance of Family-Friendly Employment Practices and Family-Supportive Supervisors*

As mentioned by one of the respondents, with the rise of nuclear families all the responsibility is shared between the husband and the wife. The changing structure, fluctuating weather conditions, civic unrest and the availability of flexible work makes it easier for employees to

function better and be productive (Anon n.d.). The model depicted above demonstrates how family friendly policy can help to reduce conflict in work and family with support from supervisors and effective practices. The arrows portraying a flow of communication and coordination between these three aspects.

It could be said that the women's low rate of labour participation lies in the gap in earnings of male and females. Women usually do not work if they are married to educated men as the difference in their earnings could cause discrepancy in family relations. Some shreds of evidence found that there were caste and religion-based discrimination towards women. They received a lower wage for entry level jobs (Bhalla and Kaur n.d.). It is important to acknowledge this intersectionality when framing a policy of flexible schedule which needs to be devoid of any discrimination.

## Conclusion

The report highlights that women have been dropping out of the formal workforce, despite rapid economic growth. The founder of Avtar Career Creators<sup>9</sup> stated that 18 % of women who quit their work never returned (Wright, 2011). The reason attributed is that India women have to take sole responsibility of children. They cannot avail benefits offered in developed nations such as protected parental leave, childcare facilities, subsidized care assistance or unpaid leave for family emergencies which creates hindrance (Valk and Srinivasan, Vasanthi n.d.).

The recent trends depict underrepresentation of women which is not justifiable. A balance needs to be achieved between work and home in working families which requires policy intervention to ensure that women are empowered and equipped to be equally represented in the workforce (Fletcher, Pande, and Moore 2017).

There are also challenges in implementing flexible work practice in India. It is difficult to change the attitudinal differences and fight the cultural barriers of a country practicing them toward women for centuries. There is a lack of authentic data and studies which confirm the validity and reliability of the implementation of flexible work. Lack of infrastructure and funds to support flexible work practice. There could be dishonest employees from either gender who could take advantage of flexibility, end up not working and exploiting the company's resources. There is a lack of awareness among employers' right practice which can cause insensitive behaviour towards employees.

The challenges cannot counter the positive attributes of flexible work in the workplace. Women who reach managerial positions have shown the ability to network with colleagues, perceive and understand situations, possess a strong sense of dedication, loyalty and commitment towards the organizations. They have been able to multitask, collaborate efficiently, crisis management skills, interactive leadership style, maintain sensitivity in relationships (Anon n.d.).

However, the positive attributes of flexibility cannot be emphasised enough. The MCI estimated that currently India's GDP is as low as 17% due to a lower share of women's contribution in the workforce. The GDP would be at the highest level globally if women's participation would be similar to men with pay parity, equal number of hours worked, and representation within each sector as it affects the overall productivity. If women contribute to the economy to their *full-potential* it would add up to \$28 trillion which is 26% to annual global GDP in 2025 compared scenario (Anon n.d.) Introduction of flexible work could act as a tool for gender equality in the workplace. This could help in reducing the gender gaps and stereotypes within the organization among fellow employees (Chung and Lippe 2018).

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<sup>9</sup> An India-based talent strategy consulting firm to help women balance work and life through flexible work arrangements

Flexitime is most popular in India however it may not be conducive to all industries. Companies must introduce flexible work which is appropriate to their nature of work. India needs to nurture an environment where women, whether in formal or informal labour, are given the appropriate employee benefits and risk-free working environment. To ensure that educated women are a significant part of the workforce and the skill programmes are effective in generating employment in urban areas, policymakers must formulate strategies towards the diversification of jobs. Publicising female role models, and creating a healthy, safe, and hygienic work atmosphere would go far in dissolving the taboos and insecurities associated with women working. If these issues are included in a gendered form of budget and policy making, female labour force participation in India can turn out to be a beam of hope. (Ratho n.d.). It should be treated as a way of life rather than something luxurious or unattainable. The report emphasises that in India women must be given this support and there is a need for policy intervention to bridge the gap in the labour market as a holistic approach. However flexible work is the way to the future and every attempt is worth the effort. Thus, it is time for India to empower women by providing the opportunity to untap their potential with equal participation in the workforce.

# Policy Recommendations

## GOVERNMENT: LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

- A nationwide policy in flexible work according to company and line of work. The States implement a national policy with the liberty to modify the practices according to the requirement.
- There should be a flexible work arrangement by law which can be adopted by all the companies across all the sectors. A right to request flexible work must be provided in every organization according to its suitability which can be legally exercised by the employees. This provision can be achieved by amending the Companies Act 2013.
- The Maternity Benefit Act was amended in 2017 which now provides 26 weeks paid leave to women. This is extremely gendered, stereotyped and reflects the patriarchy embedded in India as it completely ignores the role of father as a primary caregiver. There must be an equal paternity leave so that new fathers can take some time and support the new mother.
- India has a bureaucratic mode of governance. Thus, it is essential to include the government and ministry of Ministry of Labour and Employment and Ministry of Human Resources. Academic, stakeholders, in this case, women from a different industry, HR professionals to co-design labour laws and introduce flexible work policy in urban India in the formal sector.
- The concept of childcare is concentrated towards the mother to provide care. Many parents and family members do not support their children to be left with domestic help as shown in studies. The government can introduce policies around affordable and reliable childcare and creche facilities.

## TRAINING

- There must be adequate training opportunities in private-public and other sectors which can be provided by the government and organizations which can help women to upgrade their knowledge and skills when there is a need or when they are promoted to a new job role, reach the managerial position or return to work after a break.
- Studies have shown a positive impact of vocational training for women. It increases their employability skills and interpersonal skills. Similarly, business training programmes can develop business management and entrepreneurship in small and medium sized industries and economically empower women (Chinen et al. 2017).
- Research has shown that employee training improves competency of employees and the firm, improves employee morale, increases productivity, helps employees to attain their targets and shapes their attitudes (Elnaga and Imran 2013).

## IN THE ORGANISATION

- The job description should mention the availability of flexibility which would motivate employees while applying for a job and they would feel that their needs will be prioritized in the organization
- There is a need to invest in supportive communication and empathy training for supervisors, so that they are considerate towards women employees rather than stereotyping them for the choices they make (Anon n.d.).
- The safety of women in the workplace is a huge concern. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 is a positive step towards addressing harassment at work. All workplaces must be gender inclusive and non-discriminatory. The safety of women not only in the workplace or also outside work is an issue for women. If there is a provision of flexibility, employees can avoid night shift or if there is no other option organization can arrange for transportation.

## ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

- The meaningful role of HR managers to implement HR policies which are employee and family friendly which could support all employees.
- Provision of sabbaticals for employees who wish to take long breaks especially women who wish to take more time pregnancy, marriage, studies or other reasons.
- Bias free hiring practices, especially towards women based on their age and gender rather than their qualification, should be the only determinant for recruitment.

## ACADEMIC

- The important role of academics and researchers to work in the area of women in the labour market and ways to boost women's employment.
- To find proficient researchers who can study the female labour participation to get authentic data so that the possible threats can be deduced.

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