

Research Paper

Women's Mental Health and Evolved Work-Life Dynamics Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the work-life balance, intensifying the challenges of married women in remote IT roles. This study focuses exclusively on their experiences, shedding light on the unique stressors and protective factors influencing their mental health. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through purposive sampling from 15 married remotely working IT professionals (ages 30–50), in IT companies across different parts of Kerala, India via semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: Work-Life Balance Struggles, Mental Health Challenges, Employer Support and Organizational Policies, and Coping Mechanisms and Protective Factors. These findings provide critical insights into gender equity in remote work and inform sustainable workplace policies that support women's well-being in the evolving professional landscape.

Keywords: *Work-life dynamics, Married women, Remote IT professionals, Stressors, Coping Strategies*

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced profound changes to work-life dynamics, particularly for women managing professional obligations alongside domestic responsibilities. This period intensified gender inequalities, with women disproportionately impacted by remote work challenges, disrupted support systems, and increased caregiving responsibilities. However, the post-pandemic era has seen a transformation in work environments and societal expectations, making it crucial to explore how these changes continue to shape women's mental health and dual roles. This study examines the intersection of these evolved work-life dynamics and mental health, focusing on recovery, resilience, and long-term implications among IT professionals working from home.

The shift to remote work blurred boundaries between professional and domestic responsibilities, creating significant stress. Post-pandemic, the normalization of hybrid work models and shifts in workplace policies have redefined traditional work-life balance. Limited research exists on how these evolving dynamics influence women's mental health

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and coping mechanisms in the long term, particularly among IT professionals who have experienced unique pressures due to the nature of their work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Impact of the Pandemic on Women's Mental Health

The pandemic disproportionately affected women's mental health due to increased caregiving responsibilities, economic uncertainties, and the blending of work and home life (Heggeness & Fields, 2021). Research has shown heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout among women, particularly those in caregiving roles or dual-career households (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). This disparity stemmed from a confluence of factors, including the disproportionate burden of caregiving, financial insecurity, and the emotional toll of managing home-based learning for children. Women in healthcare and essential service roles faced heightened risks of burnout and trauma due to prolonged exposure to stressors (Sharma et al., 2021). Further studies highlight the impact of intersectionality on mental health outcomes. Women from marginalized communities experienced compounded stress due to systemic inequities, racial discrimination, and reduced access to healthcare and support systems (Kim et al., 2022).

2. Work-Life Balance Challenges and Economic Strains

The shift to remote work blurred boundaries between personal and professional spaces. For women, this often led to an "always-on" culture, intensifying the mental load of balancing childcare, eldercare, and household management (Craig & Churchill, 2021). Studies highlight that women were more likely than men to reduce their working hours or exit the workforce to manage family responsibilities (OECD, 2021). The term "she-cession" emerged to describe the disproportionate economic fallout experienced by women during the pandemic. Women-dominated industries such as retail, hospitality, and education were among the hardest hit, leading to significant job losses and financial insecurity (Couch et al., 2021). For women who retained employment, the pressure to maintain productivity while managing household responsibilities created a dual strain that intensified mental health challenges.

3. Remote Work and Boundary Dissolution

Remote work became the default for many industries during the pandemic, reshaping how women navigated their professional and personal lives. While flexible work arrangements offered some women greater autonomy, others found the lack of physical boundaries between work and home life overwhelming. Studies revealed that women often bore the brunt of household labor and childcare during work hours, perpetuating cycles of guilt, stress, and reduced productivity (Shockley et al., 2021).

Women with young children or caregiving responsibilities for elderly relatives were particularly vulnerable, as their ability to perform both roles adequately was stretched to the limit. The "second shift" phenomenon, wherein women disproportionately undertake household responsibilities after completing professional work, became more pronounced (Hochschild & Machung, 2021).

4. Evolving Gender Roles and Expectations

The pandemic brought to light entrenched gender norms, with women taking on the majority of unpaid labour at home (Alon et al., 2020). This imbalance heightened stress levels and diminished women's capacity for self-care and professional development. However, the

pandemic also catalyzed shifts in traditional gender roles in some households, creating opportunities for the renegotiation of responsibilities (Power, 2022).

This period also prompted a societal re-evaluation of gender norms and workplace expectations. For example, employers were increasingly compelled to consider employee well-being, offering mental health resources and fostering inclusive cultures (Allen et al., 2021).

5. Shaping post-pandemic equity

The post-pandemic landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for addressing gender disparities and mental health needs. Research suggests that prolonged exposure to pandemic-induced stressors could lead to lasting changes in mental health outcomes, including chronic stress, anxiety disorders, and burnout (Goldberg et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the pandemic has accelerated conversations about systemic reform in work cultures, including greater inclusivity, flexible work policies, and mental health prioritization. Advocacy for equitable parental leave, universal childcare, and subsidized mental health services has gained momentum, paving the way for a more supportive environment for women.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to capture participants' experiences with evolving work-life dynamics and their mental health trajectories post-pandemic. Fifteen married women aged 30-50, working in IT companies across various regions of Kerala, India, and currently engaged in work-from-home arrangements, were selected through purposive sampling.

The sample of married women aged 30-50 in Kerala's IT sector was chosen because of their unique position at the intersection of career advancement, changing family structures, and post-pandemic job transformations. Kerala's thriving IT workforce, rising trend of late marriages, increased remote work adoption, and persistent gender role expectations make this population ideal for researching mental health challenges and coping mechanisms in a changing work-life landscape.

A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared well in advance and expert opinion was taken regarding the nature and content of the questions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study, to ensure ethical compliance.

The current study is part of the investigator's PhD thesis work. It has obtained ethical approval number ULECRIHS/UOK/2023/101 from the University Level Ethics Committee on Research involving Human Subjects, University of Kerala, on 24.07.2023.

Data Collection

Participants were selected based on the following Inclusion criteria:

- Women aged between 30 and 50 years.
- Currently married and residing in Kerala, India.
- Employed in IT companies with an active work-from-home arrangement.
- Available and willing to participate in the interview.

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Preliminary Screening

Participants were asked a set of preliminary questions to assess their eligibility based on career stability, marital duration, and caregiving responsibilities. The screening questions included the following:

1. What is your current job title and experience in IT?
2. How long have you been married?
3. Do you have any children or caregiving responsibilities?
4. Do you currently work from home or in an office?

Only those who met the inclusion criteria were invited to the semi-structured interviews, which were held in person and lasted 45-60 minutes. The interviews used open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses about work-life dynamics and mental health challenges in the post-pandemic era.

Interview questions:

1. Can you describe a typical workday for you while working from home after the pandemic?
2. How did your professional responsibilities change during and after the pandemic?
3. What have been some of the challenges in managing both work and family responsibilities?
4. How would you describe the impact of working from home on your mental health and overall well-being?
5. Are there any specific situations that stand out to you as particularly stressful or overwhelming?
6. What approaches or resources have you found helpful in managing work and family demands?
7. How has the shift to remote work influenced your personal and professional priorities?
8. Have you noticed any changes in your mental health or lifestyle over time?
9. What kind of support, if any, did you receive from your employer to help manage remote work?
10. What changes or policies do you think could help support work-life balance and mental health for IT professionals working from home?

Data Analysis:

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a technique for recognizing, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. This data analysis technique is used to transform scattered and diverse data into rich and detailed data. Thematic analysis was performed in this study in six steps: Getting familiar with the data, generating primary codes, searching for themes, reviewing and revising themes, defining and naming themes, and preparing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The trustworthiness of the data in this study was checked using four separate criteria (credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability) proposed by Guba and Lincoln (Navaei & Negarandeh, 2017; Jokar, Yousefi, & Torkan, 2022). To evaluate the credibility of the data, after analyzing each interview, its content was returned to the participant to confirm the reliability of the results and apply the necessary revisions. To increase the transferability of the findings, the interviewees were selected with maximum variation in terms of job roles, education, and age to explore the phenomenon in question in an extended setting. To ensure the confirmability of the findings, two experts in the field of qualitative research reviewed the reports and transcripts and confirmed the accuracy of the findings.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Characteristic	Details
Age Range	30-50 years
Marital Status	Married
Occupation Types	IT professionals working from home
Parental Status	Mothers (65%)
	Non-mothers (35%)
Geographical Location	Urban (80%)
	Semi-urban (20%)
Educational Background	Undergraduate (65%)
	Postgraduate (35%)
Household Support & Caregiving Responsibilities	Living with in-laws (35%)
	With personal health issues (25%)
	With ill family members at home (20%)
Access to Mental Health Resources	Limited (40%)
	Moderate (40%)
	High (20%)

The data in this study were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This study investigates the stressors, coping strategies, and protective factors influencing the mental health of married female IT professionals working remotely in the post-pandemic era. The data analysis revealed 71 subthemes, 18 secondary themes, and 4 core themes as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The main themes, secondary themes, and subthemes identified in the study

Main themes	Secondary themes	Sub-themes
Work-Life Balance Struggles	Blurred Boundaries	No boundaries, work boundaries, late-night work calls, personal commitments, family juggling
	Increased Workload	Increased workload, team management, strict deadlines, cross-functional collaboration, client management
	Family Responsibilities	Caregiving, household expectations, family expectations, chore burden, in-law expectations
	Spousal Support Issues	No support, unequal household division, spousal expectations
	Time Conflicts	Scheduling conflicts, work meetings overlapping family time, competing priorities
Mental Health Challenges	Mental Fatigue	Mentally exhausted, emotionally drained, physically drained, overwhelmed, unappreciated
	Work-Related Stress	Multitasking stress, stressful escalation, system upgrade, cybersecurity risks, technical support

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Main themes	Secondary themes	Sub-themes
	Family-Induced Stress	Fertility strain, fertility treatments, hospitalized father, medical emergencies, emotional stress
	Long-Term Impact	Feeling isolated, anxious, resilience growth, therapy support, personal growth
Employer Support and Organizational Policies	Inadequate Flexibility	Inflexible deadlines, 24/7 system availability, lack of accommodations during personal emergencies
	Minimal Empathy	Management indifference, lack of understanding, feeling unsupported
	Mental Health Neglect	Mental health support, no mental health breaks, lack of counselling
	Technical Support vs. Personal Support	Remote quality assurance, task compartmentalization, network monitoring, employer flexibility
Coping Mechanisms and Protective Factors	Boundary Setting	Boundary setting, Task compartmentalization, delegating responsibilities
	Time Management	Daily planning, Task prioritization, schedule management
	External Support-Systems	Family support, childcare support, spousal collaboration, therapy support
	Self-Care Practices	Practicing yoga, practicing journaling, taking evening walks, mental health breaks
	Communication Strategies	Open communication with spouse, team coordination, addressing conflicts with managers

Theme 1: Work-Life Balance Struggles

The data reveals that work-life balance struggles are among the most significant challenges faced by married women IT professionals working remotely. This theme is divided into five subthemes:

1. Blurred Boundaries
2. Increased Workload
3. Family Responsibilities
4. Spousal Support Issues
5. Time Conflicts

Participants emphasized that the shift to remote work has caused blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. With workspaces merged into living spaces, maintaining distinct work and home roles became nearly impossible. One participant shared, *"Work never seems to end. My home has become my office, and I feel like I'm always on call."* (Participant 3). Remote work blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, leading to role conflict and emotional exhaustion. A participant shared: *"Balancing client calls and managing my child's homework felt like an impossible task some days."* (Participant 11).

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The increased workload brought about by remote IT roles, such as monitoring systems, coding tasks, and attending late-night calls, compounded these struggles. As one participant noted, *“My responsibilities seem endless—coding during the day, attending virtual meetings, and then staying up for system upgrades. It’s exhausting.”* (Participant 7). Many participants cited that their employers’ expectations of constant availability added to the stress, making it difficult to disconnect.

In addition to professional demands, participants grappled with heavy family responsibilities, such as caregiving, household chores, and fulfilling family expectations. Balancing family and work demands often resulted in feelings of guilt and frustration. One participant remarked, *“I’m expected to manage everything at home just because I’m working remotely. It’s overwhelming when you’re already stretched at work.”* (Participant 2).

Spousal support issues were another key factor contributing to the imbalance. Participants highlighted unequal divisions of labor at home, leaving them to bear the brunt of both work and family responsibilities. One participant stated, *“My husband assumes that since I’m at home, I should handle most of the household chores. It feels like I have no support.”* (Participant 5). This lack of shared responsibilities not only affected their work-life balance but also strained relationships.

Finally, time conflicts frequently arose as participants juggled competing priorities. The scheduling of work meetings during family time or late-night calls often forced participants to choose between personal commitments and professional obligations. One participant shared, *“It’s exhausting to have client meetings scheduled during dinner time. I constantly feel torn between my family and work.”* (Participant 8).

Theme 2: Mental Health Challenges

Mental health challenges emerged as a recurring theme, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of remote work. The theme encompasses four subthemes:

1. Mental Fatigue
2. Work-Related Stress
3. Family-Induced Stress
4. Long-Term Impact

Participants expressed experiencing mental fatigue from the relentless demands of their dual roles. Balancing high-pressure IT tasks with personal responsibilities left them drained both physically and emotionally. One participant explained, *“By the end of the day, I feel completely spent. There’s no energy left for myself or my family.”* (Participant 1).

The nature of remote IT work also brought about significant work-related stress. Tasks such as troubleshooting, system monitoring, and resolving high-priority escalations often came with tight deadlines, leaving little room to breathe. Another participant noted, *“The constant need to respond quickly to system failures or collaborate across teams adds so much pressure.”* (Participant 6).

Family-induced stress further added to the mental load. Participants frequently found themselves juggling caregiving roles, family expectations, and professional responsibilities simultaneously. One participant shared, *“Managing my child when he was sick while troubleshooting a technical issue for work when I was down with fever was one of the most stressful experiences I’ve ever had.”* (Participant 9).

The long-term impact of these challenges was significant, with participants reporting feelings of isolation, anxiety, and burnout. Many described how the lack of social interaction and overwhelming demands took a toll on their overall mental health. One participant remarked, *"It feels like I'm losing my sense of self—I'm disconnected from my friends, colleagues, and even my own family."* (Participant 4).

Theme 3: Employer Support and Organizational Policies

This theme explores the role of employer support and organizational policies in shaping participants' experiences. It is divided into four subthemes:

1. Inadequate Flexibility
2. Minimal Empathy
3. Mental Health Neglect
4. Technical Support vs. Personal Support

Inadequate flexibility in work schedules was a major concern. Participants shared that rigid deadlines and fixed meeting times left little room for accommodating personal emergencies or family commitments. One participant noted, *"Flexibility in deadlines or work hours would make such a difference, especially during times of personal crisis."* (Participant 7).

Participants also felt a lack of empathy from management. Many described instances where their personal challenges were dismissed or undervalued. One participant shared, *"Explaining my caregiving responsibilities to my manager feels pointless—there's no understanding or support."* (Participant 3).

The absence of comprehensive mental health initiatives led to concerns about mental health neglect. Participants emphasized the need for mental health breaks, counseling support, and resources to cope with the psychological demands of remote work. One participant remarked, *"Our company has no provisions for mental health—it's like they don't recognize how challenging this situation is."* (Participant 6).

While organizations excelled at providing technical resources, they fell short in offering personal support to employees. One participant stated, *"We're given the latest tools for remote work, but there's no consideration for how we're coping emotionally."* (Participant 8).

Theme 4: Coping Mechanisms and Protective Factors

Despite these challenges, participants identified several coping mechanisms and protective factors that helped them navigate their struggles. This theme includes five subthemes:

1. Boundary Setting
2. Time Management
3. External Support Systems
4. Self-Care Practices
5. Communication Strategies

Boundary setting was a critical strategy for participants. By establishing clear distinctions between work and personal time, they were able to regain some sense of control. One participant said, *"I now turn off work notifications after a certain time to focus on my family."* (Participant 2).

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Effective time management was another important coping mechanism. Participants described using tools and techniques to prioritize tasks and plan their days efficiently. One participant shared, *"I've started using daily planners to allocate specific times for work and family responsibilities."* (Participant 1).

Participants also relied on external support systems, including friends, extended family, and professional therapy. Emotional support from these networks helped them manage stress and maintain perspective. One participant noted, *"Regular check-ins with my therapist helped me maintain focus and stay grounded."*(Participant 14).

Self-care practices, such as yoga, journaling, and taking walks, emerged as essential for mental and physical well-being. One participant shared, *"Evening walks have become my sanctuary—they help me unwind and clear my mind after a stressful day."* (Participant 4).

Finally, communication strategies were vital in managing challenges. Participants highlighted the importance of open communication with spouses, colleagues, and managers to address issues effectively. A participant stated, *"Having honest conversations with my husband has helped us divide responsibilities more fairly."* (Participant 5).

DISCUSSION

This study offers insights into global discussions on gender equity, the impact of technology-driven work environments, and strategies for fostering sustainable work-life balance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and themes were identified using thematic analysis. It highlights the mental health challenges and protective factors faced by married IT professionals working remotely. Four key themes were emerged namely Work-Life Balance Struggles, Mental Health Challenges, Employer Support and Organizational Policies, and Coping Mechanisms and Protective Factors, each highlighting the intricate interplay between professional responsibilities, personal commitments, and systemic influences.

The theme of Work-Life Balance Struggles revealed significant challenges stemming from the dissolution of boundaries between work and home life. Participants frequently described being overwhelmed by the simultaneous demands of professional work and domestic responsibilities, with tasks often overlapping throughout the day. This aligns with role theory, which posits that individuals occupying multiple demanding roles may experience role conflict, leading to stress and reduced performance (Kahn et al., 1964). The findings resonate with studies that emphasize the "double burden" faced by women, who often shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving and household duties even as they manage full-time professional roles (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Furthermore, cultural expectations that frame women as primary caregivers exacerbate these struggles, making it difficult for them to establish boundaries or advocate for equitable role distribution at home. The second theme, Mental Health Challenges, highlighted the emotional toll of managing overlapping responsibilities. Participants frequently reported symptoms of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of isolation. These findings align with the conservation of resources theory, which argues that stress arises when an individual perceives that their resources (e.g., time, energy, emotional support) are insufficient to meet demands (Hobfoll, 1989). In line with existing literature, caregiving responsibilities, such as managing fertility treatments or addressing medical emergencies, compounded participants' emotional strain (Chandra et al., 2021). Several participants also reported feelings of unappreciation and being undervalued, which mirrors findings from studies that link workplace inequities and

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domestic burdens to decreased self-efficacy and heightened stress levels (Gatrell et al., 2014).

Employer Support and Organizational Policies emerged as another critical theme, underscoring the significant role of workplace structures in influencing employees' mental health. Participants who lacked organizational support, such as flexible deadlines or empathetic leadership, reported exacerbated feelings of stress and burnout. These findings align with Karasek's job demand-control model, which suggests that high job demands coupled with low control over work processes can lead to poor mental health outcomes (Karasek, 1979). Conversely, participants who experienced flexibility, clear boundaries, and access to mental health resources reported higher satisfaction and well-being. This aligns with studies showing that supportive organizational policies, including flexible work arrangements and access to mental health resources, can buffer the effects of job stress and burnout and improve overall employee satisfaction (Tremblay & Genin, 2008; Bloom et al., 2021).

The final theme, Coping Mechanisms and Protective Factors, illustrated the strategies participants employed to navigate their challenges. Participants emphasized the importance of self-care practices, such as yoga, journaling, and evening walks, as effective stress-management tools. These findings align with self-determination theory, which highlights the role of intrinsic motivation in fostering well-being through activities that promote autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Social support also emerged as a critical protective factor, with participants frequently citing emotional and practical support from spouses, family, and peers. This finding is consistent with research that underscores the role of social support in mitigating stress and enhancing psychological resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Additionally, participants who sought professional counseling or engaged in structured mental health practices reported greater coping, highlighting the importance of access to mental health resources.

Overall, these findings suggest that married IT professionals in remote work face a confluence of structural, cultural, and personal challenges that contribute to mental health strain. The findings align with prior research on the gendered nature of work-life conflict, emphasizing the need for systemic interventions at multiple levels. Furthermore, the interplay between professional and personal demands underscores the importance of holistic support systems that address both organizational policies and familial dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex and interconnected challenges faced by married women in remote IT roles, emphasizing the impact of work-life imbalance, emotional strain, and insufficient organizational support. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience through various coping strategies, such as self-care, social support, and professional guidance.

The findings underscore the need for organizations to adopt policies that promote flexibility, empathetic leadership, and accessible mental health resources. Simultaneously, societal norms regarding gender roles and caregiving responsibilities must be challenged to ensure equitable distribution of domestic duties. Future research should explore diverse cultural and professional contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics and inform targeted interventions to support married women in dual-career households.

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Conflict of Interest

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