

Mode of Working and Work-Family Conflict among Indian Employees: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic brought abrupt changes to modes of working, marked by a rapid and widespread shift from physical workplaces to virtual work environments. This transition altered established boundaries between professional and family roles and heightened concerns about work-family conflict. **Aim:** This study examines whether the mode of working is associated with differences in work-family conflict experienced by working adults in India. It also explores whether these experiences vary by gender, job type, and living arrangements. **Methods:** A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design is used. Quantitative data are collected from 210 working adults aged 20 to 60 years. Qualitative data are collected through semi-structured interviews with a subsample of 11 participants. Thematic analysis is conducted to examine lived experiences of work-family conflict across work arrangements. **Results:** Results indicate that work-family conflict is significantly higher in virtual work settings than in physical work settings. Gender differences are not statistically significant, although women report higher mean levels of conflict across both work modes. No significant differences are observed across job types or living arrangements. Qualitative findings show that virtual work is associated with blurred work-time boundaries, extended availability, increased domestic demands, and competition for household resources. Physical work is associated with clearer boundaries, but greater fatigue related to commuting. Hybrid work emerges as a preferred arrangement that combines flexibility with structure. Organisational, familial, and social support reduce experiences of work-family conflict. Gendered expectations around caregiving and domestic labour shape how conflict is experienced. **Conclusion:** The study demonstrates that work-family conflict is influenced by how work is organised and supported. In the Indian context, mode of working is central to how boundaries are negotiated and role interference is experienced.

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For decades, the challenge of balancing competing demands from work and family life has been a central focus of organizational research, underscored by its implications for employee health and productivity. This long-standing discourse was abruptly reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, mandated public health measures triggered an unprecedented and rapid historical shift from physical workplaces to virtual environments on a global scale. What had previously been a flexible arrangement available to a relatively small subset of the workforce suddenly became the default mode of working for millions. Within this context, work-family conflict (WFC) has become increasingly salient for understanding the implications of changing work arrangements on the interplay between professional and personal domains.

WFC is a well-established construct defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which demands from one domain interfere with responsibilities in the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). It is bidirectional: work-to-family conflict arises when work demands disrupt family responsibilities, whereas family-to-work conflict (FWC) occurs when family obligations hinder work performance. Several theoretical frameworks underpin the conceptualisation and understanding of work-family conflict (WFC). Role Theory (Kahn, 1964) emphasises the strain associated with fulfilling multiple roles that impose competing demands on time, energy, and behaviour. Building on this, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identified three distinct forms of WFC: time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflict. Time-based conflict occurs when time devoted to one role limits participation in another, strain-based conflict arises when stress in one domain reduces effectiveness in the other, and behaviour-based conflict emerges when behaviours required in one domain are incompatible with expectations in the other. Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) complements these perspectives by positing that individuals create and manage boundaries between different life domains, such as work and family, to maintain role clarity. However, in work-from-home contexts, these boundaries can become increasingly difficult to sustain, which may lead to role ambiguity and heightened conflict.

Research has identified multiple determinants of WFC. High workloads, extended working hours, and irregular schedules are associated with elevated WFC (Choi, 2024; Dukhaykh, 2023). Employees exposed to both challenge stress (e.g., time pressure) and hindrance stress (e.g., bureaucratic constraints) report higher levels of conflict (Podsakoff et al., 2007). Conversely, organisational resources mitigate the negative effects of work-family conflict. Specifically, family-supportive work environments characterised by strong colleague and supervisor support, and family-supportive supervisor behaviours (FSSB) are associated with lower levels of WFC and its detrimental outcomes (Hammer et al., 2011; Yao et al., 2024).

Household and family characteristics also shape WFC experiences. Single parents and individuals in two-parent families are more likely to experience elevated conflict than those in childless couples or single-person households (Innstrand et al., 2010). The presence of young children is strongly associated with increased WFC (Kuśnierz et al., 2022). The relationship between gender and WFC is multifaceted and shaped by situational factors. A meta-analysis found men and women report similar overall WFC; however, the direction of conflict often differs. Women more frequently report FWC, reflecting unequal domestic labour, a disparity intensified during COVID-19 (Kusaka et al., 2022; Shockley et al., 2017), whereas men tend to report slightly higher work-to-family conflict, consistent with breadwinner norms (Shockley et al., 2017).

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Recent studies further indicate that stress functions both as a predictor of WFC as well as a ramification linked to reduced well-being (Elahi et al., 2022; Wickramasinghe & Nakandala, 2022). These findings underscore the complex interplay of work, family, and individual resources in shaping experiences of WFC.

The transition to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic differed substantially from pre-existing telework arrangements, which were generally planned and voluntary. The sudden, largely mandatory shift to home-based work coincided with heightened family demands, including the continuous presence of school-aged children at home due to school closures, amplifying WFC through increased role interference (Dolce et al., 2024; Feng et al., 2021; Wickramasinghe & Nakandala, 2022). While some employees experienced benefits, such as greater time with family, the overlap of professional and personal responsibilities frequently constrained recovery opportunities and increased strain (Dolce et al., 2024).

The transition to remote work during the pandemic has continued to influence organisational practices, with many companies now adopting hybrid models that combine virtual and physical work environments. These evolving arrangements present both opportunities and challenges for managing work-family boundaries, making it critical to understand how different work settings affect WFC. Recent research indicates that remote work can have varied outcomes depending on contextual factors. For example, Darouei and Pluut (2021) found that remote work in the Netherlands reduced WFC by providing greater control over work schedules. Other studies demonstrate that this relationship is shaped by factors such as job design and organisational support, including the adequacy of tools provided and the clarity of work tasks (Chung & Van Der Lippe, 2020; Ipsen et al., 2021). Much of the existing research, however, has been conducted in Western contexts.

In developing countries such as India, the dynamics of WFC are shaped by distinct socio-economic conditions. A defining feature of the Indian labour market is its overwhelming reliance on the informal sector, which accounts for over 90% of total employment and is characterized by precarious work without formal contracts or social security (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019). This structural reality, often coupled with disparities in digital infrastructure, likely creates a unique context for experiencing WFC. Despite India's large and diverse workforce and rapid digitalisation, empirical research examining these dynamics remains limited.

To address this gap, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the relationship between mode of working and work-family conflict in the Indian context. By examining these dynamics, the study aims to provide insights that can inform organisational policies and practices to better support employee well-being in evolving work environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This mixed-method study explores the impact of different modes of working (e.g., virtual and in-person) on WFC. The research employs an explanatory sequential design, with quantitative data collection preceding qualitative data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Denscombe, 2008). The study's quantitative phase, serves as the foundation for the subsequent qualitative phase, allowing for a richer understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase aims to compare work-family conflict experienced in virtual versus physical workplace settings.

Primary Hypotheses:

- **H1:** There will be significantly higher work-family conflict experienced while working digitally compared to physically.
- **H2:** Females will experience significantly higher work-family conflict than males in both digital and physical work settings.

Secondary Hypotheses:

- **H3:** A significant difference will exist between the work-family conflict experienced by individuals in different living situations (e.g., residing alone or with a non-family member away from home, residing with a nuclear family, or residing with a joint family) while working digitally and physically.
- **H4:** A significant difference will exist between the work-family conflict experienced while working digitally and physically across different job types (e.g., freelancing, salaried employee, or businessman/entrepreneur).

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase seeks to understand participants' lived experiences and perspectives on work-family conflict across different modes of working.

Sample

The sample comprised of participants from the Indian workforce, aged between 20 and 60 years. All participants had experience working in both physical and virtual environments. In the quantitative phase, 210 participants were recruited using snowball and convenience sampling methods. For the qualitative phase, 11 participants from the initial sample participated.

Measures

Work-Family Conflict Scale (WFCS)

Quantitative data were collected using the Work-Family Conflict Scale (WFCS) developed by Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian (1996). This self-report measure consists of 10 items: 5 assessing Work-to-Family Conflict and 5 measuring Family-to-Work Conflict. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The original validation by Netemeyer et al. (1996) demonstrated adequate internal consistency, dimensionality, and discriminant validity, providing strong evidence for the scale's construct validity. In the Indian context, the WFCS was validated by Jain and Nair (2016), with both subscales showing excellent internal consistency, in line with George and Mallery's (2003) criteria, confirming its validity for measuring work-family conflict in the Indian population.

Ethics

Prior to participation, all participants provided informed consent. Personal data were pseudonymised, and accessible only to the research team.

Procedure

Quantitative Phase

Data collection for the quantitative phase were conducted online using a Google Form. Participants first provided demographic information, including gender, living situation (residing alone or with a non-family member away from home, residing with a nuclear family, or residing with a joint family), and job type (freelancing, salaried employee, or businessman/entrepreneur). They then completed the WFCS, responding to the same set of items twice - once based on their experiences while working in a physical environment and again reflecting on their experiences in a virtual environment. This dual completion allowed for a direct comparison of work-family conflict across both conditions.

Qualitative Phase

For the qualitative phase, all participants who completed the quantitative survey were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews of which, 11 participants were interviewed.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version 26).

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Sample Characteristics

The sample comprised 210 working individuals aged 20-60 years residing in India (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample characteristics of participants (N = 210)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age (years)	20-30	84	40.0
	31-40	26	12.4
	41-50	57	27.1
	51-60	43	20.5
Gender	Male	115	54.8
	Female	95	45.2
Type of job	Salaried employee	156	74.3
	Business / Entrepreneur	33	15.7
	Freelancing	21	10.0
Living situation	Alone / with non-family	25	11.9
	Nuclear family	122	58.1
	Joint family	63	30.0

Assessment of Normality and Data Preparation

Normality of the WFC scores was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) test. The results indicated that both Virtual WFC and Physical WFC scores deviated significantly from normality (Virtual WFC: KS = .077, p < .01; Physical WFC: KS = .082, p < .01). Visual inspection using boxplots indicated no outliers for Virtual WFC, whereas two outliers were identified for Physical WFC.

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Three main approaches have been proposed for handling non-normal data: parametric analysis of raw data, parametric analysis of transformed data, and non-parametric analysis. Rasmussen and Dunlap (1991) found that transforming data towards normality improves the statistical power of parametric tests, demonstrating that when distributions deviate from normality, both non-parametric tests and parametric analyses of transformed data outperform parametric analyses of raw data, with transformed parametric tests generally showing slightly greater power.

Accordingly, the two outliers identified in the Physical WFC scores were removed, and both Virtual and Physical WFC scores were transformed to approximate normal distributions. Subsequent KS tests confirmed that the normalised scores met assumptions of normality (Transformed Virtual WFC: $KS = .027, p > .05$; Transformed Physical WFC: $KS = .044, p > .05$).

Primary Analysis

H1: A paired-samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in WFC experienced in virtual versus physical work settings. Results indicated a statistically significant difference between the two conditions, with higher WFC reported in virtual work settings ($M = 31.20, SD = 11.79$) compared to physical work settings ($M = 29.20, SD = 12.50$), $t(205) = 4.08, p < .001$ (Table 2).

Table 2: Paired Sample test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Paired 1	Normalised_Virtual_WFC - Normalised_Physical_WFC	2.0014	7.03376	.49007	1.03493	2.96736	4.083	205	.000

H2: Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in WFC in virtual and physical work contexts. For Virtual WFC, no statistically significant difference was observed between genders, $t(205) = -1.09, p = .28$ (Table 3). Although mean scores were higher among women ($M = 32.32, SD = 12.39$) compared to men ($M = 30.50, SD = 11.50$). Similarly, for Physical WFC, gender differences were not statistically significant, $t(205) = -1.04, p = .30$ (Table 4). Mean scores of women were slightly higher ($M = 30.37, SD = 12.57$) than men ($M = 28.54, SD = 12.78$).

Table 3: Independent Samples Test for Gender (Digital workplace)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Normalised_Virtual_WFC	Equal variances assumed	.155	.694	-1.094	205	.275	-1.81848	1.66272	-5.09671	1.45975
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.086	192.168	.279	-1.81848	1.67410	-5.12045	1.48350

Table 4: Independent Samples Test for Gender (Physical workplace)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Normalised_Physical_WFC	Equal variances assumed	.015	.903	-1.036	205	.302	-1.83615	1.77275	-5.33131	1.65901
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.038	198.022	.301	-1.83615	1.76963	-5.32588	1.65358

Secondary Analysis

H3: One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine differences in WFC across living arrangements (living alone/with non-family member, nuclear family, and joint

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family). For Virtual WFC, the analysis showed no statistically significant differences among the three living-situation groups, $F(2, 204) = 1.40, p = .25$. Similarly, for Physical WFC, the analysis indicated no significant differences among the living situations, $F(2, 204) = 0.72, p = .49$.

H4: One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine differences in WFC across job types (freelancing, salaried employee, or businessman/entrepreneur). For Virtual WFC, the analysis showed no statistically significant differences among job categories, $F(2, 204) = 1.68, p = .19$. Similarly, no significant differences were observed for Physical WFC across job types.

Qualitative Results

The thematic analysis identified six interrelated themes (Figure 1) capturing participants' experiences of WFC across remote, hybrid, and physical work arrangements. These themes reflect how work modes shape boundaries, domestic demands, support systems, gendered role expectations, and health and well-being. Together, the findings illustrate the complex ways in which structural work arrangements and social contexts influence experiences of strain, and coping during and following changes in working practices.

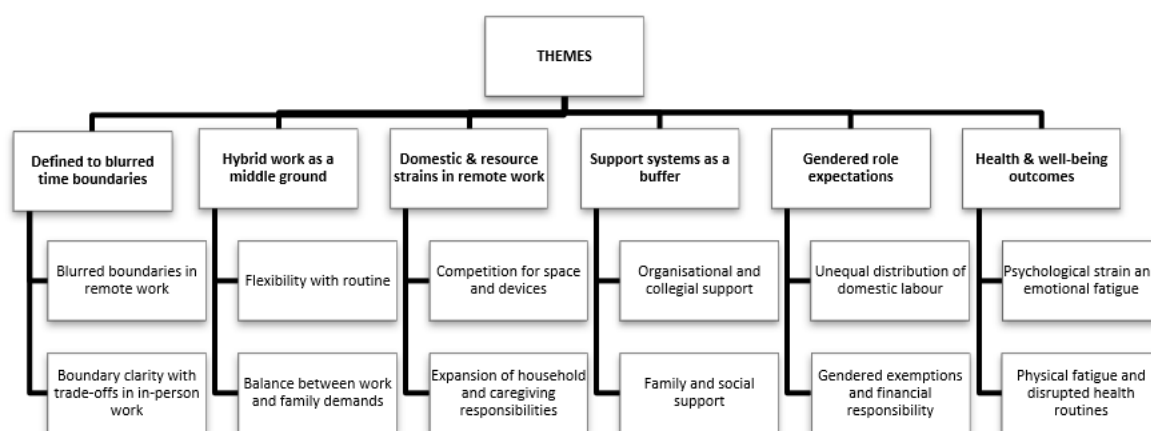


Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Defined to blurred time boundaries

Participants described contrasting boundary experiences across work modes. Remote work was commonly associated with blurred time boundaries, whereas physical work was perceived to have clearer work hours.

Subtheme: Blurred boundaries in remote work

Participants frequently reported difficulty limiting work hours while working remotely, with expectations of availability extending beyond designated work times.

“It was difficult to limit the hours of working remotely” (P1, 28, M)

“I was expected to be available even after the normal working hours” (P8, 28, M)

These experiences contributed to a sense that personal and family time was increasingly encroached upon.

“It blurred the boundaries between working hours and personal/family time” (P8, 28, M)

Subtheme: Boundary clarity with trade-offs in in-person work

In contrast, physical workplace settings were described as confining work within clearer time limits.

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“It confines the working hours” (P1, 28, M)

However, participants also noted that commuting introduced fatigue and reduced available energy for family life.

“It was a bit exhausting to commute to work” (P11, 28, F)

Theme 2: Hybrid work as a middle ground

Hybrid work arrangements were consistently perceived as an effective compromise between remote and in-person working.

Subtheme: Flexibility with routine

Participants highlighted that hybrid schedules provided flexibility while maintaining structure.

“three days in the office and two days working from home” (P6, 55, M)

This structure was perceived as supporting better organisation of both work and personal responsibilities.

Subtheme: Balance between work and family demands

Hybrid work was repeatedly framed as facilitating family time without compromising professional engagement.

“Hybrid model seems to be the best for work life balance” (P3, 25, F)

“It makes it very easy to manage both work and family” (P7, 26, F)

Participants also valued the opportunity for growth and collaboration afforded by partial in-person work.

“Allows for both growth opportunities and increased free time” (P8, 28, M)

Theme 3: Domestic and resource strains in remote work

Working from home altered household dynamics and placed new demands on domestic resources.

Subtheme: Competition for space and devices

Participants described challenges related to limited physical space and access to work resources, and such constraints required continuous negotiation within the household.

“Space allocation in the house became a challenge” (P1, 28, M)

“Everyone needed a different space and devices” (P7, 26, F)

Subtheme: Expansion of household and caregiving responsibilities

Remote work coincided with increased domestic responsibilities for some participants. For others, caregiving responsibilities intensified due to illness within the family.

“During COVID, my father contracted the virus. So, I had to be the caregiver and manage household chores for a while till he recovered.” (P11, 28, F)

Theme 4: Support systems as a buffer

Participants' ability to manage WFC was strongly shaped by the availability of support systems.

Subtheme: Organisational and collegial support

Supportive workplace practices were described as easing work-family strain.

“Shipping computers home, covering internet usage expenses” (P6, 55, M)

“Emotional support from my coworkers helped a lot” (P11, 28, F)

Subtheme: Family and social support

The presence or absence of family and social support shaped participants' experiences to manage daily demands and levels of strain. Participants living in joint families described tangible daily support.

“My family and friends are my biggest support system” (P7, 26, F)

“All my regular chores... is taken care of by the family” (P2, 28, F)

In contrast, the absence of such support increased strain.

“We managed everything ourselves without extended family support” (P9, 45, M)

Theme 5: Gendered role expectations

Participants' accounts indicated persistent gendered expectations shaping WFC.

Subtheme: Unequal distribution of domestic labour

Women were commonly described as carrying dual responsibilities across work and home.

“Helping in household chores... during work hours too” (P2, 28, F)

Subtheme: Gendered exemptions and financial responsibility

Participants noted that men were often exempted from household responsibilities.

“men are given a free pass from household responsibilities” (P7, 26, F)

At the same time, one male participant highlighted financial pressures linked to gendered roles.

“financial responsibility is heavily on me” (P9, 45, M)

Suggestions for reducing gendered strain were also raised.

“By not assigning roles to only specific gender” (P1, 28, M)

Theme 6: Health and well-being outcomes

Participants described both psychological and physical effects linked to changes in work arrangements.

Subtheme: Psychological strain and emotional fatigue

Remote work and pandemic-related changes were associated with anxiety and stress.

“Transitioning... to working online was a bit stressful” (P11, 28, F)

Some participants also described emotional distance from work.

“I felt a bit dissociated from work” (P6, 55, M)

Subtheme: Physical fatigue and disrupted health routines

Participants reported physical strain and difficulty maintaining health routines.

“quite tiring with the eyestrain” (P11, 28, F)

DISCUSSION

The present study examines whether the mode of working is associated with differences in work-family conflict among working adults in India, and whether these experiences vary across gender, job type, and living arrangements.

A key quantitative finding of this study is that participants reported significantly higher WFC while working virtually compared to physically. This finding aligns with research highlighting the interconnections between workload, strain, and WFC (Ford et al., 2007). The qualitative findings further elucidate the mechanisms underlying this difference. Participants consistently described remote work as blurring boundaries, with expectations of extended availability and

difficulty disengaging from work. Such boundary permeability likely facilitates spillover from work into family life, contributing to heightened WFC in virtual settings.

Previous studies examining WFC in remote work contexts have yielded mixed findings. While some studies reported reduced WFC with remote work (Schieman et al., 2021), others observed increased conflict, particularly family-to-work conflict (Reimann et al., 2022). The present study suggests that these discrepancies may stem from differences in work demands, boundary management, and contextual resources. The sudden and largely involuntary shift to remote work during the pandemic, coupled with increased family demands such as caregiving and household responsibilities, may have heightened perceptions of role overload for many workers. Qualitative accounts of increased domestic responsibilities, and competition for space and devices, provide examples of how virtual work environments amplified role interference and strain.

In contrast, physical work settings were perceived as reinstating clearer boundaries, effectively containing work within defined hours. However, this was not without cost. Participants noted commute-related fatigue and physical exhaustion, which reduced available energy for family life. These findings suggest that while physical work may reduce boundary blurring, it introduces other forms of strain, highlighting that neither mode of working is inherently conflict-free.

Hybrid work emerged as a salient theme in the qualitative findings. Participants repeatedly described hybrid arrangements as a practical middle ground that combines flexibility with structure. By allowing partial remote work alongside in-person engagement, hybrid models appeared to support better organisation of work and family responsibilities while preserving opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, and professional growth. This finding aligns with emerging literature suggesting that the benefits of remote work are highly contingent on design, autonomy, and organisational support (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020; Ipsen et al., 2021).

Quantitatively, no statistically significant gender differences were found in WFC in either virtual or physical work settings, although mean scores indicated that women reported slightly higher WFC than men across both contexts. These findings are broadly consistent with prior research showing that men and women often report similar overall levels of WFC, even when the sources and directions of conflict differ (Shockley et al., 2017). The qualitative findings, however, provide important context for interpreting these patterns within the Indian socio-cultural setting. Qualitative accounts pointed to persistent gendered expectations around domestic labour and caregiving, with women more likely to juggle paid work alongside household responsibilities, while men were often positioned primarily as financial providers. These accounts resonate with Rothbard's (2001) framework of enrichment and depletion, which suggests that women's roles tend to be more permeable, making them more vulnerable to work-to-family depletion. It is also possible that the scale used to measure WFC captured certain forms of conflict more effectively than others, potentially overlooking gendered experiences that manifest differently. For instance, emotional labour or cognitive load, may disproportionately affect women but remain underrepresented in standard WFC measures.

Participants described both psychological and physical consequences associated with different work arrangements. Remote work was linked to stress, anxiety, dissociation from work, and physical strain such as eyestrain, while physical work was associated with fatigue related to commuting. These findings reinforce prior evidence that stress functions both as a predictor and a consequence of WFC (Elahi et al., 2022; Wickramasinghe & Nakandala, 2022).

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As organisations increasingly adopt hybrid or fully virtual work models, the findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to mitigate WFC. Evidence from initiatives such as Results-Only Work Environments (ROWE) suggests that schedule control can help employees manage work-family boundaries (Kelly et al., 2011). Family-supportive supervisor behaviours further support boundary management (Hammer et al., 2011). Policies promoting clear expectations around availability, the right to disconnect, flexible scheduling, and supervisor training in emotional support may be particularly relevant in the Indian context.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the mode of working influences how work and family roles interact. Work arrangements shape boundary regulation and guide how competing role demands are negotiated. Boundary permeability determines the extent to which role interference is experienced. Support systems influence the effects of work arrangements on WFC. In the Indian context, household organisation and caregiving norms shape how WFC is experienced.

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Conflict of Interest

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