



Logged In, but Locked Out: The Paradox of Remote Work and Gender Equality in India

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Abstract: In India, remote work has increased at a rapid rate due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is commonly positioned as one of the avenues to gender inclusivity by minimizing geographic and time-related barriers for women in the workforce. But a paradox is taking shape, as remote and hybrid work arrangements can enhance women's labour force participation, but can also create a flexibility trap where entry does not guarantee equality in the promotion process. This article presents the view that flexibility often shifts the site of inequality from access barriers to advancement barriers instead of eliminating it. In particular, in hybrid organizations, promotion is still closely associated with visibility, informal patronage, and access to decision-makers. Based on available recent research about remote work and gender in India, the analysis finds three interconnected constraints underlying the stalled career progress of women: (i) proximity bias and a visibility deficit that minimizes high-value assignments, mentoring, and promotions; (ii) patriarchal and collectivist expectations that legitimize and solidify women's domestic roles; and (iii) increased unpaid labour and boundary collapse that result in time poverty and less engagement in career-building activities. In reaction to this the article advances an structural equity framework that breaks the connection between career progression and physical presenteeism by means of transparent outcomes-based assessment, institutionalized sponsorship practices, and normalization of flexibility throughout the organization. The paper provides a framework to explain why accessibility does not equate to advancement and discusses what has to be redesigned to accomplish flexibility and structural justice in India's shift to remote employment.

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Introduction

COVID-19 became a catalyst for the surge in the number of remote and hybrid work models across the country, particularly in urban and tech-centric industries. While this began as a crisis management strategy, this soon turned into a common practice that was lauded for the possibility of democratizing paid employment. For women, particularly those constrained by lengthy commutes, caregiving responsibilities, and restrictive social conventions, remote work seemed to be a structural breakthrough. New studies suggest that work-from-home augmented women's labour force participation in urban India and broadened job applications among educated female professionals (Bhagat and Banerji, 2025; Jalota and Ho, 2024). Remote work was widely seen as a tool for gender inclusion since it broke down barriers of space and allowed employees to work from wherever they wanted. But there has been a long-standing theoretical debate in regard to flexibility and gender equality. According to the so-

called “flexibility trap”, any policy intended to promote caregiving might unintentionally disadvantage women since it associates them with lesser visibility, poorer job commitment signals, and slower career development (Formánková and Krizkova, 2015). Comparative studies also make it clear that flexible working is not necessarily beneficial to the issue of gender equality; as long as the systems of evaluation and organizational cultures still value presence and availability, flexibility is likely to reproduce existing gaps (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). These understandings pose important inquiries regarding the dynamics of remote work in the Indian social-cultural framework, in which collectivism and established patriarchal ethical standards influence the decisions women make at work and the way they build their careers.

Recent empirical findings indicate that despite the increased presence of women in remote positions, they tend to get less salaries and promotion opportunities (Nandwani, 2023). This leads to a key paradox wherein remote work makes jobs more accessible, but it does not mean that remote workers will be encouraged to climb the organizational hierarchy. Although the participation indicators improve, the career progression indicators do not. While the research on work-from-home productivity, work-life balance and digital transformation has been increasing, very little focus has been given to the structural processes through which remote work is correlated with stalled progress. The paper fills this gap by combining the theory of flexibility-trap with modern-day evidence from India. It states that remote work without institutional redesign may merely shift, rather than eradicate, gender inequity. Using a structure of equity lens, this paper shows that access to the workforce is different from career advancement, and explains what structural changes are required for flexible work to be consistent with equality.

Literature Review

Autonomy through greater control of time and fewer problems with transportation, as well as the idea that telecommuting makes the workplace more accessible to women – these are the ways in which the potential of telecommuting can be explained. However, the literature on flexi-time and flexible working hours has warned about the fact that “flexibility” does not have to be empowering. On the contrary, it can be used as a two-edged sword, providing greater practicality and decreasing professional power. As Formánková & Křížková (2015) claim, flexible employment can make women professionals the “available” workers, thus decreasing their access to opportunities for becoming leaders and gaining informal power.

Being able to manage your own schedule does not necessarily mean that one will get more money or promotions; this is another major factor in causing the flexibility trap. While individuals may think that they have become autonomous, it is possible that their autonomy will not result in increased payments, promotions or negotiations. According to Lott and Chung (2016), schedule control can bring about gender-specific effects like differences in overtime payment and salaries. This is crucial since career advancements in the contemporary world are closely related to the availability and effort patterns. Moreover, it can change evaluative criteria regarding the signals of commitment. The gender stereotypes may cause the perception that women's flexibility means unwillingness and disloyalty to the company despite good performance (Formánková & Křížková, 2015; Lott & Chung, 2016).

Now, let's think about the work-life boundary theory that can explain the reason why flexibility in the workplace does not result in equity. Work-life boundary theory takes into account domains of work and home, which are influenced by boundaries of time, space, and psychology. Flexibility makes these boundaries porous in terms of spatial and role permeability. The latter means mixing up work and home when women do the majority of caring and housework. Blurry boundaries not only merge these domains but require women to constantly switch roles, distribute their attention, and have limited time.

As a result, they have a structural disadvantage with respect to long-term investment in skills, building networks, and participation in tasks that allow demonstrating leadership potential. In this way, flexibility is capable of lowering entry barriers and weakening the conditions for advancement simultaneously.

Social capital theory is the next theory to look at. According to social capital theory, the development of one's career is dependent on access to networks, mentoring, sponsoring, and communication of information and not only on production. Working from home has the potential of disrupting incidental contacts that make up social capital (feedback mechanisms, spontaneous problem solving, and visibility). People who work from home will be less connected to organization networks, especially when promotion process is based on informal recognition and sponsoring. It should be noted

that this is not a gender-neutral problem since women are in disadvantageous position concerning inclusion into elite networks and remote possibilities will increase the gap widening the channels for strategic networking and patronage. In the framework of flexibility trap, reduction of social capital becomes the hidden engine of derailing career development. Women continue to work effectively, but become less likely to occupy leadership positions.

Gender Role Theory is another theory that should be considered. The theory is helpful in proving that the same type of flexibility can be interpreted by different genders in their own way. The social rules of genders produce an appropriate sense of responsibility towards work, taking care, and ambition. Flexibility usage by women is culturally interpreted as domestic obligations. However, men's flexibility usage is interpreted as efficiency. The scripts influence domestic anticipations as well as management appraisals. Consequently, remote work is likely to increase domestic demands on women and to heighten the risk that organizational gatekeepers view physical absence as a sign of reduced commitment. Flexibility gets turned into a sign, and a gendered sign.

Lastly, the flexibility trap makes current gender pay gap issues even worse. Traditionally, women earn less because they are promoted more slowly, don't have a strong bargaining stance, and hold less influential roles (Zhu et al., 2026). Remote work may compound the issue by making it difficult for women to get noticed for promotions or to get assigned to high profile assignments. The implication is that remote work can increase women workforce participation but leave the underlying structure of disparity the same.

This paradigm is particularly pertinent to India since it can be used to describe an apparent paradox of increase in participation and a lack of improvement in seniority, authority and salary. The idea of the flexibility trap is theoretically explained using conceptual tools of European scholarship (Formanikova and Krizkova, 2015; Lott and Chung, 2016), and the socio-cultural environment of India can further enhance the trap due to strong gendering of domestic labour and organizational promotion being driven by proximity and sponsorship. Remote work may thus enlarge the access to labor and create inequality of progress. Again, *both* labour flexibility and structural justice are important. (Formanikova and Krizkova, 2015; Zhu et al., 2026).

Table 1 contrasts the theoretical promises of flexibility with the empirical reality of how these concepts translate within the Indian cultural context, ultimately demonstrating a stalling effect on career advancement

Table 1. Flexibility Trap: Theory vs. Indian Reality

Flexibility claim	How the "trap" is made up	Indian translation	Advancement effect
Flexibility gives workers more control and better work-life balance.. (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020)	Boundaries between home and work collapse, leading to "role overload."	Paid work is frequently interrupted by domestic demands. (Islam, 2021; Chauhan, 2022).	Reduced time for networking, skill-building, and career growth.
Employees can choose when and where they work. (Lott and Chung, 2016).	Use of flexibility is judged differently for women, signaling a "lack of commitment."	Remote work is often misinterpreted as "lower availability" for women. (Venkatesh et al., 2021; Joshi and Kumar, 2024).	Slower promotion pace and lower salary increases.
Flexible work keeps women in the workforce, leading to equality. (Formanikova and Krizkova, 2015).)	Physical absence weakens the informal ties needed for sponsorship and visibility.	Remote work limits access to the informal mentoring found in offices. (Bhagat and Banerji, 2025).	Continued underrepresentation in leadership and "stretch" roles.
Higher participation rates will naturally close the gender pay gap. (Zhu et al., 2026).	Inequality is built into the system through slower career progression.	Pay gaps are determined by the <i>speed</i> of promotion, which remains slow for remote workers. (Nandwani, 2023).	The gender pay gap remains stagnant or continues to widen.

Empirical Indian Evidence: How Flexibility Recreates Inequality

According to Indian evidence, remote work has increased women's access to paid work while doing little to nothing to change the underlying framework of career progression. It is not just a matter of benefits versus harm. Instead, remote working allows access to the labour-market in situations where organizational assessment practices, family division of labour, and gender socialization and expectations are still highly gendered. In the Indian literature, three processes are repeated (A) proximity bias and a crisis of visibility (aligning with Social Capital Theory) (B) cultural imperatives that tame the professional identities of women, (aligning with Gender Role Theory) and (C) intensification of unpaid labour and a collapse of boundaries that restrict career investment. (Aligning with Work-Life Boundary Theory)

- **Proximity Bias and Visibility Crisis**

The promotion in hybrid organizations tends to be still influenced by the proximity-based processes: informal patronage, trust-forming, and high-visibility assignments. Women working remotely can therefore experience a visibility deficit that affects evaluation and promotion even when output is strong. Noting deficits in decision-making inclusion and access to informal mentoring, Joshi and Kumar (2024) suggest that remote work can replicate gender inequality (Joshi and Kumar, 2024). Such disadvantages matter because senior roles depend not only on performance but also on being socially embedded in managerial networks. Venkatesh et al. (2021) further show that professional engagement during work-from-home can be interpreted through gendered assumptions about domestic responsibilities, shaping perceived commitment and leadership readiness (Venkatesh et al., 2021). These interpretive biases prove to be consequential since often promotions are based on subjective decision and not on objective measurements. The economic aspect is compounding: Nandwani (2023) associates gender pay gaps with the promotion pace and role change; in case remote work reduces the pace with which women obtain opportunities sponsored by executives, even with an increase in participation, pay gaps may continue to exist (Nandwani, 2023). The same analysis is made by Bhagat and Banerji (2025) who argue that while remote work increased female workforce participation, it weakened the informal pathways to promotion—such as networking, sponsorship, and professional visibility.

- **Cultural Expectancies and Domestic Containment**

The fact that remote work may be socially acceptable in part because it corresponds to the expectations of women being tied to the home, may explain this. As demonstrated by Islam (2021), the time that women spend under work-from-home is restructured according to the gendered needs and usually prolongs the working day and makes paid work the interruptible one. Chauhan (2022) emphasizes the fact that a lot of women do not have a safe place and continuous time to commit to a prolonged working process. The domestic evidence supports this; domestic labour was still highly gendered among dual earner households (Garikipati et al., 2025), and remote work may augment the responsibility of default by increasing the amount of time women spend at home (Garikipati et al., 2025). Bhattacharjee (2020), suggests that “convenience” can become domestic containment enabling income without disrupting norms around women’s mobility and visibility (Bhattacharjee, 2020). Singh and Sharma (2025) add that in collectivist settings, flexibility is often reinterpreted as family availability, producing “invisibility as compliance” that is socially rewarded but organisationally costly (Singh & Sharma, 2025).

- **Boundary Collapse and unpaid Labour Intensification**

Lastly, commuting cuts do not always translate to time invested back in the career. Time poverty is often caused by unpaid labour and care giving, since they consume reclaimed time. Kundra et al. (2023) demonstrate that the productivity results critically rely on family support; in its absence, domestic demands easily overwhelm work capacity (Kundra et al., 2023). The same study by Chakraborty and Altekar (2021) shows women have an increased work-life imbalance and cognitive load (Chakraborty and Altekar, 2021). According to the qualitative investigations, compensatory plans (working late, multitasking) keep the job, but cause exhaustion and slow down long-term development (Sinha and Sharma, 2024; Guduru and Singh, 2026). Altogether, the evidence makes it possible to make a coherent conclusion: remote work has the potential to increase access, but the progress has been limited due to reliance on visibility, sponsorship, guarded time, and stable boundaries because resources are unevenly distributed under the system of proximity-biased organization and gendered domestic organization (Bhagat and Banerji, 2025; Garikipati et al., 2025; Joshi and Kumar, 2024).

Table 2 summarizes the three core structural constraints identified in the literature and their direct implications for women's career advancement in India

Table 2. Three Structural Constraints and Career Implications in Remote Work Situations in India.

Constraint	Core mechanism	Key implications	Evidence
The Visibility Gap (Proximity Bias)	Remote workers are often excluded from informal office networks, executive sponsorship, and high-profile assignments.	Slower promotion speeds and a lack of progress in closing the pay gap.	Joshi & Kumar (2024); Venkatesh et al. (2021); Bhagat & Banerji (2025); Nandwani (2023)
Domestic Confinement (Cultural Norms)	Cultural expectations treat a woman's remote work as "flexible time" for family chores, making her professional work easily interrupted.	A loss of professional "legitimacy"; managers may doubt her commitment to leadership roles.	Islam (2021); Chauhan (2022); Garikipati et al. (2025); Singh & Sharma (2025); Bhattacharjee (2020)
Blurred Boundaries & Overwork	Managing household labor alongside professional tasks leads to "time poverty" and constant role conflict.	Exhaustion and burnout; a lack of time to invest in networking or learning new skills.	Kundra et al. (2023); Chakraborty & Altekar (2021); Sinha & Sharma (2024); Guduru & Singh (2026); Kumar et al. (2023)

Architecting Structural Equity: Remote and Hybrid Work System Remodeling

If remote work expands women's access to paid employment but stalls advancement, the response cannot be limited to "more flexibility". Indian data suggests that inequality is reconstructed through the architecture of advancement: proximity bias undermines visibility and sponsorship, the cultural norms make the work of women secondary, and unpaid labour burdens shorten time to develop skills and make strategic contribution (Islam, 2021; Garikipati et al., 2025; Joshi and Kumar, 2024; Sinha and Sharma, 2024). This means rethinking how evaluation, sponsorship, and boundary maintenance is done in such a way that less importance is placed on physical presence, social networks, and stereotypical assumptions based on gender availability.

First, organizations need to create joint evaluation processes where candidates are evaluated in relation to others, not just individually (Bohnet et al., 2016). This could happen in the hybrid work setting via the use of carefully calibrated promotion panels to evaluate documented results, job complexities, and competency levels before making a selection. Joint evaluation reduces dependency on stereotypes and helps overcome proximity penalties by taking the decision away from private discretion and into comparative process (Joshi & Kumar, 2024; Venkatesh et al., 2021).

Second, companies have to professionalize mentorship and sponsorship instead of informal networking. The process needs to include formal mentoring and sponsorship relationships, quarterly development objectives, stretch assignments, and sponsor accountability. It concerns particularly distant working mothers as the presence of boundary pressures limits the time they can spend on building informal relationships (Sinha and Sharma, 2024; Bhagat and Banerji, 2025).

Third, companies require transparent promotion rubrics that explicitly define promotability, including competencies, evidentiary criteria, and exposure to high-impact work. When standards are vague, managers rely on presence, responsiveness, and cultural fit, which reinforces gendered interpretations of commitment (Islam, 2021; Singh & Sharma, 2025). Rubrics should be combined with cross-team calibration to eliminate manager-specific bias.

Fourth, the performance management process must evolve towards models emphasizing outputs that compensate individuals based on measurable performance rather than mere attendance. Responsiveness needs to be replaced by deliverables, milestones, and quality metrics, especially in view of the fact that females are burdened with more unpaid labour than males (Chakraborty and Altekar, 2021; Kundra et al., 2023).

Fifth, institutional reforms require leadership bias training on proximity bias and flexibility stigma (Chauhan, 2022). It is imperative that career development is no longer dependent upon the physical presence of the employee. Through institutional restructuring in ways that are data-driven and socially intelligent, flexibility will finally be a vehicle for equity (Nandwani, 2023; Kumar et al., 2023).

The table below highlights the institutional re-designs required in order to overcome the structural constraints outlined above.

Table 3: Structural Constraints vs. Advancement Outcomes

Structural Problem	Mechanism	Institutional Redesign	Expected Advancement Impact
Proximity bias	Bosses favor those they see in the office.	Use location-neutral metrics and formal mentoring programs.	Increased promotion equity
Domestic Confinement	Women are expected to be "always available" for chores.	Normalize flexibility for men too; protect deep-work time.	Less career "penalty" for remote work.
Time poverty	Housework leaves no time for upskilling.	Provide skill-development credits and set clear advancement timelines.	Higher promotion velocity
Pay stagnation	Slow promotions lead to stagnant wages.	Transparent pay and promotion audits	Narrowed gender pay gaps

Discussion

In this paper, I suggest that remote work in India might be a flexibility trap since it provides greater access to jobs for women while replicating inequality in career advancement. The key theoretical framework is the difference between entry and upward mobility. Traditional discussions of workplace flexibility take for granted that greater access will ultimately lead to equality, but the current data reveal that despite the increase in the number of women at work, the system of promotions, pay rises, and leadership remains the same. (Formankova and Krizkovska, 2015; Nandwani, 2023).

There are three ways by which the flexibility trap consolidates itself. Firstly, in a hybrid setting, bosses continue to prefer the individuals whom they meet in person. This leads to what can be termed as the visibility trap where promotions are dependent on informal conversation and being "seen," something that remote workers do not get (Joshi and Kumar, 2024; Bhagat and Banerji, 2025). Secondly, remote working causes the distinction between work in the office and work at home to blur. Due to cultural practices of gender roles continuing, women who are doing their jobs from home will frequently be interrupted by domestic chores. It means that they would have limited time left for long-term planning and things such as skill development and networking (Chakraborty and Altekari, 2021; Sinha and Sharma, 2024). Thirdly, remote work impedes the building of social capital through reduced informal communication channels where trust and mentorship is built. (Nandwani, 2023).

There are some obvious policy ramifications: remote work should not be a unidirectional gender intervention. Equity necessitates the redesign of advancement architecture, which is structured assessment, official sponsorship and mentoring opportunities, open promotion criteria, and safeguards that decrease the anti-flexibility stigma and bias towards physical presenteeism (Bohnet et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2023). To move from these theoretical implications toward actionable change, the following specific interventions are proposed for Indian organizations and policy-makers.

Suggestions and Recommendations for Institutional Realignment

If the "flexibility trap" is a product of structural design, its resolution cannot be left to the individual agency of women workers. Instead, it requires a deliberate recalibration of organizational logic. Based on the analysis of the visibility deficit, domestic confinement, and boundary collapse, the following recommendations are proposed to decouple professional advancement from physical presenteeism.

- **Managerial Interventions: Standardizing the "Invisible".** To counter the proximity bias that inherently favors in-office employees, managers must move away from "intent-based" or "effort-based" evaluations, which often rely on gendered perceptions of commitment. Rather, leaders need to take a data-based approach that emphasizes transparency in the allocation of high value work.

- **Geographically Blind KPIs:** All performance indicators need to be completely dissociated from location. Managers need to be taught to assess "impact" and "outcome" rather than "intensity" or "responsiveness," which can act as proxies for the lack of domestic distractions.
- **Sponsorship Circuits:** In order to overcome the loss of informal networks and hence promotions that come from being physically present in the office, organizations will need to build a sponsorship program. Here, the organization should match remote female high-potentials with senior sponsors who are accountable for the growth and visibility of their proteges.
- **"Audit" of Stretch Assignments:** Organizations need to audit themselves regularly for any tendency towards giving high visibility assignments, which eventually result in leadership opportunities, to employees physically present in the office.
- **Organizational Culture:** Degendering Flexibility. The perception of flexibility as something related to "women's needs" results in secondary status being accorded to remote female employees. It is important for organizations to move towards making flexibility a neutral professional practice, rather than a gender-based accommodation.
- **Mandatory Universal Flexibility Policies:** In order to address "flexibility stigma," flexible work options must be promoted and exemplified by male leaders. Where flexibility is perceived as a "woman's issue," domestic containment becomes reinforced, whereas when it is an organizational norm, flexibility becomes a gender neutral productivity resource.
- **"Deep Work" Safe Havens:** In order to alleviate the burden of boundary blurring, "asynchronous first" communications periods must be instituted by organizations. Safeguarding "deep work" time will help guarantee that women, facing higher domestic boundary permeability, are not penalized for their inability to offer instantaneous digital responses.
- **Training on Bias Related to Presenteeism:** Leadership training must include particular attention to "flexibility stigma" and the "halo effect" associated with office based workers. It is important to understand that presence is not synonymous with greater commitment.
- **Policy and Infrastructure:** Supporting the "Home" in WFH. Last but not least, it is important to remember that WFH in India happens in a very particular socio-cultural vacuum where there is little public or private support for caregiving responsibilities.
 - **Supported Care Infrastructure:** It is imperative that corporations should facilitate child care as it is the necessary pre-condition for remote working to become effective. Remote working cannot replace child care; otherwise, "time poverty" would continue to be the main obstacle for women's up-skilling and investments in their careers.
 - **Right to Disconnect Guidelines:** These guidelines help prevent women from becoming vulnerable to the "double burden" of always being on call at work as well as at home, thus preventing burnout.

Conclusion

Remote work is currently a prominent feature of the Indian labour market and has extended access to paid work among women. Nonetheless, the reviewed evidence suggests that remote work is necessary, but insufficient, for gender equity. Flexibility has the ability to minimise obstacles that are associated with commuting, safety, and geography, but it does not necessarily break the organizational and socio-cultural frameworks that determine progress. As long as promotion systems remain tied to proximity, informal sponsorship, and discretionary decisions, remote work will continue to generate a visibility penalty that stalls career advancement (Joshi and Kumar, 2024; Bhagat and Banerji, 2025). At the same time, unpaid household expectations based on gender can deepen and speed up the collapse of boundaries and deny time for women to invest in developing skills and making strategic career choices (Islam, 2021; Garikipati et al., 2025; Sinha and Sharma, 2024).

The main concern is that access without reform exacerbates inequality: women may engage in greater numbers while enduring limited mobility, slower wage growth, and ongoing leadership under-representation (Nandwani, 2023). Structural transformation is consequently necessary. To promote fairness in remote and hybrid work, location-neutral evaluation and promotion procedures, formal sponsorship, transparent standards, and protections to prevent proximity bias and flexibility stigma are required (Bohnet et al., 2016; Singh & Sharma, 2025).

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