WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WORK FROM HOME IN INDIA DURING COVID-19: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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The outbreak of Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on every aspect of our lives. It led to numerous challenges due to its suddenness, and the consequent sudden influx of many young women professionals to their parents' houses, leading to re-negotiation of boundaries. The present study examines women's unique experiences through detailed idiographic and in-depth analysis as they navigated the multifaceted journey of working from home during Covid-19. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is implemented as a method of data collection, and interpretation. The dataset comprises semi-structured interviews with ten young single professional Indian women working in the investment banking sector. Data analysis yielded two overarching themes: Encountering difficulties in transitioning from the physical mode of working to work from home (WFH) resulting in frustration, anger, feeling overburdened etc., and Covid-19 pandemic, health, and well-being. Results illustrated that the sudden transition to WFH intensified women's workload, causing unbridled role-conflict and boundary-conflict, which contributed to work-life imbalance, a sedentary lifestyle, and led to a state of powerlessness, hopelessness, and anxiety about the future. By focusing on the lived experiences of young female Indian professionals during the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, the present study contributed significantly to the emerging literature on WFH.

***Keywords:** Work from home, Mental health, Work-life imbalance, Covid-19, Interpretative Phenomenological analysis*

1.   Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 has affected every corner of the world resulting in an unprecedented shock on global economies and individual employment (Tušl et al., 2020). With limited knowledge and a lack of preparedness to curb the spread of the virus, governments adopted several public health strategies, including national lockdown (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). One of the aftermaths of the lockdown was the sudden shift to work from home (WFH) arrangement (Tušl et al., 2021). Though more than two years have passed since the Covid-19 outbreak, the virus is resurfacing with new variants, indicating that physical distancing as a preventive measure is here-to-stay (Usman et al., 2021). Several viral diseases are emerging around the world, including monkeypox, the re-emergence of Ebola, and Marburg, which has led to an international public health emergency, indicating that this is not the last pandemic (Jameel, 2022). Additionally, people

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are already struggling with matters that have been exacerbated by Covid-19 in multiple ways beyond healthcare (Jameel, 2022). Experts suggest that Covid-19 will likely become endemic, which suggests that it will be part of our everyday lives and work environment, so people might have to adapt their lives to this condition. In addition, many companies continue to practice WFH after Covid-19, either fully or in conjunction with other work arrangements (hybrid mode) (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). Moreover, many companies are promising permanent remote working and are willing to adapt to WFH in the future as well (Mark et al., 2022). As a result, the rapid and prolonged shift to WFH is producing transformational changes that will have long-term implications on mental health, professional, familial lives, and the work-life balance of employees. Thus, concerns are being raised regarding the impact of WFH on employees' health and well-being, as well as on the organizational outcomes.

WFH is not a new phenomenon, as it was already underway in many countries in the world before the pandemic (Galanti et al., 2021). This practice, however, was mostly followed by relatively few employees of a higher-income earning group or higher occupations (Desilver, 2020). WFH has many advantages for employees, organizations, and society (Harpaz, 2002). Some of these are reduced commuting time (Uddin et al., 2021), less work-family conflict (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), and increased control over personal, family, and leisure time (Johnson et al., 2007). There is some argument that the WFH is rewarding for women (Tremblay, 2002), however, there is sufficient evidence to challenge this proposition, as a large number of women were forced to leave jobs, were laid off, and their salaries being cut as a result of Covid-19 (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Studies have concluded that WFH is likely to increase rather than decrease work-life conflict (Fonner & Stache, 2012) due to increased mental burden and obligation (Xiao et al., 2021), increased technocratic control from the organizations (Bathini & Kandathil, 2020), and increased work-related worries in everyday life (Uddin,2021).

Before the pandemic, WFH was occasionally or irregularly practiced and was only considered by a small number of employees in some organizations (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). This knowledge though important in its way, cannot be extrapolated to understand the effect of WFH in an emergency context such as the Covid-19 (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). WFH has been explored during Covid-19 period as well, however, most of these studies are conducted in western and developed nations, and there is less focus on developing nations and societies (Zhang et al., 2020), which has its own set of challenges such as lack of technical equipment, interrupted internet access, and disturbance due to lack of privacy at home to name a few (Wang et al., 2021).

Natural disaster, war, or diseases outbreak (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), magnifies women's existing inequalities as they increase their workloads, and this decreases women's ability to balance their time among different spheres of life (Fisher et al., 2020; McLaren et al., 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has further intensified the gendered nature of unpaid work at home, with unpaid work falling disproportionately on women, which is physically exerting and time consuming (Chauhan, 2021; Fisher et al., 2020). Moreover, domestic helpers were not allowed to work at home in order to maintaini physical distance, which pressurizes women even more to fulfil the high-level of expectations from the family regarding their performance of household duties (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Jaim, 2021). Due to the increased unpaid work caused by the pandemic, many women had to quit their jobs to take care of household responsibilities, fulfil family duties and caregiving responsibilities at home (Molina, 2021). In India, women spend 536.6 minutes/day on paid and unpaid work, compared to an average of 442.3 minutes/day for men, demonstrating the tedious nature of unpaid work (OECD,2020). However, women's household chores are often ignored and undermined, as they are still considered the sole duty of the women, and they are often obliged and expected to do them, while simultaneously managing professional work (Dogra & Kaushal, 2022;

Babbar et al., 2021). This is presumed to cause work-family conflict and overload of work for women, making it difficult for them to efficiently fulfill their professional and domestic demands (Adisa et al., 2021). Thus, during the current crisis, women are involved in challenging dual roles (balancing the professional and family front) with no means of outdoor recreational activity or socialization activity, while men were expected to expand their work spheres (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic catalyzed a great deal of reshuffling of young professionals into their parent's homes (Butler, 2020). Moving back-in with families added an extra layer of stress on women employees as they had to balance professional and familial obligations (Adisa et al., 2021). This unexpected situation led to a completely new experience for the women employees as it led to a sudden transition from the office to living back with parents due to lockdown, financial, safety, and various other reasons, after years of living independently. This situation added extra pressure on women employees due to the parental expectation of fulfilling domestic responsibilities while managing work thereby leading to performing multiple roles and renegotiating the work-family boundaries (Chauhan, 2022; Adisa et al., 2021). Thus, the pandemic and WFH exacerbated a series of existing inequalities and increased vulnerabilities among women employees (Uddin, 2021). Moreover, moving back to their parents' house seems to have upended their independent-self and autonomous lifestyle (Bhumika, 2020). Thus, women employees are dealing with a new situation and navigating competing demands of professional and domestic lives with no means of any outdoor recreational activity, that might have affected their mental and physical health.

Moreover, the emerging literature on WFH during the Covid-19 has focused mainly on married women (Adisa et al., 2021), dual-earning couples (Chauhan, 2022), and woman in nuclear families (Rana et al., 2021). However, there is a dearth of literature on single, unmarried women employees working in the investment banking sector. This sector may provide a unique perspective as there are not many women employees in the finance sector (Chandler, 2022), who were placed in the joint family set-up while performing WFH during Covid-19, making them even more vulnerable. Therefore, the present research is a modest attempt in this direction to explore the lived experiences of women employees navigating through paid and unpaid work which might have affected their motivation, performance at work, and well-being.

For the present study, role theory (Turner, 2001) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) were used as theoretical frameworks to provide a parsimonious explanation of multiple roles and blurred boundaries between professional, personal, and family life. In the last few years, women have made remarkable progress to gain recognition in their respective fields but the pandemic and temporary double-dislocation (first government mandated WFH, then WFH while displaced into their parents' homes from their independent world) seems to have challenged women's career-oriented-independent self (Liu et al., 2021). It's difficult for them to psychologically disconnect from one role and switch to another role due to the blurred boundaries of their job and domestic life while working at home (Jaim, 2021). Consequently, frequent boundary violations due to interruptions, both from work to family and vice-versa, restricts employees of their privacy, personal space, and time which leads to low energy and burnout (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, the abrupt transition and the factors that accompanied this new unplanned work setting were too unexpected to process, resulting in questioning their independent self (Liu et al., 2021). All these changes led to juggling between multiple roles, and blurred boundaries between work and family life, impacting their physical health, mental health, and performance at work (Liu et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2021). Thus, there is a need to explore and make sense of the experience, thoughts, and accompanying feelings to understand the impact of WFH during Covid-19 in the lives of women professionals.

The present study explores the lived experiences of unmarried, highly career-invested women of the upper-middle class section of society, working in the financial market. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as it is a valuable approach to adopt when researching

an area that is dynamic, contextual, subjective, and has previously lacked exploration (Smith et al., 2009). The rationale for the choice of this method is that it provides an appropriate framework for the development of an in-depth understanding of the WFH phenomenon as it leads to rich detailed narratives of the lived experiences of women employees to understand the impact of double dislocation during a pandemic while living with their families during the mandatory lockdown restriction. Thus, IPA can enhance our understanding of the women employees' personal experiences through detailed idiographic and in-depth analysis as they navigate the multifaceted journey of WFH during mandatory restrictions of being at home.

2.   Method

2.1.   Participants

The data was collected from India between August and September 2020. Purposive sampling method as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) was used. Snowball sampling was also used in some cases. Due to the government-mandated lockdown, telephonic interviews were conducted. The sample of the present study consisted of ten single and unmarried female participants aged 24-29, who were staying in Delhi, India with their families and working from home. The selected participants were working in a global investment banking firm in India (located in Bangalore and Mumbai) before Covid-19 mandated lockdown. In the current role they have an experience of 1-5 years (M=3.6, SD=1.49). They have stayed independently before the Covid-19 pandemic for 3 to 8 years (M=5.2, SD=1.66). However, at the time of data collection, they were sharing the space with 5-13 family members (M=7.4, SD=2.49). In terms of educational qualification of the participants, 8 of them were postgraduates (more than 17 years of formal education) and 2 were graduates (up to 15 years of formal education).

2.2.   Procedure

Data was collected through telephonic semi-structured interviews. The data was recorded through an audio-recording device available in the mobile phone. Consent for recording the interview was taken beforehand, and interviews were scheduled according to the ease and comfort of the participants. An interview schedule was prepared prior to the interviews using the guidelines by Smith et al. (2009) for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In the present study, fifteen open-ended questions with stimulating prompts were asked, primarily as cues for participants to speak and tell their own stories. As the interview progressed, there were minimum constraints by the interviewer. During this process, the interviewer and the participant engaged in a dialogue in which initial questions were modified according to the participant's responses, and the interviewer probed interesting and significant areas. This schedule helped to facilitate a natural flow of conversation and it included key questions or areas the researcher wants to discuss (See Appendix).

Sample of the interview questions are given below: Tell me about your experience of WFH during Covid-19? What aspects of your life has Covid-19 impacted the most? In what ways did your family members react to your work schedule? How did you feel during this sudden transition from office to working from home? The interview schedule was followed in a flexible manner to adopt a process of reflecting and probing, such as: How did you feel about that? Can you please elaborate that part, and what did you mean by that?

In the end, the researcher provided a summary to the participants with the chance to clarify or add any further information. Interviews lasted for about 75-120 minutes and every participant was given an opportunity to discuss issues of prime concern or interest so that they can tell their story in their own words.

2.3.   Data analysis

IPA was applied while analyzing the narrative accounts generated through in-depth interviews. The analysis followed the iterative and multi-step procedure outlined for IPA by Smith et al. (2009). The transcripts were read several times to immerse in the data. The notes, memos and exploratory comments were developed in the margins of the transcript. This was then followed by developing and writing emergent themes at the higher level of abstraction in the other margin (Smith et al., 2009). Thereafter, the first author mapped connections between the emergent themes, which resulted in an overarching superordinate theme by using techniques of abstraction and subsumption (Smith et al., 2019). To draw connections between emergent themes, the researcher typed and printed out the list of themes in chronological order, the sequence they appeared in the transcript. Some emergent themes clustered together to develop into superordinate themes. Whereas some of the emergent themes themselves acquired the status of superordinate themes, as the theme brought together a series of related sub-themes together. During this process, some themes that had a weak evidence base were dropped. The result was a table of superordinate themes and sub-themes for each participant, within which the identifying information of each theme (such as the page number and keywords) were listed. This process was repeated for each participant. Each transcript was analyzed independently, thereby upholding the idiographic commitment of IPA which allowed new themes to emerge for each participant before moving on to explore patterns between cases (Smith et al., 2009). Lastly, a table of master themes for the group was documented by cross-case examination of tables of super-ordinate themes that were established for each participant. By identifying common themes across individual transcripts, clustering them together through points of convergence and divergence, and providing descriptive labels to each cluster, this step was accomplished. IPA studies focus on the examination of convergence and divergence, illuminating ways in which participants' perceptions of the experience are similar and different (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Both authors engaged closely with the data and reviewed the themes and subthemes, this process enabled both authors to rigorously search for the assumption that might have influenced the data. Lastly, the master table was then translated into a narrative account interspersed with verbatim extracts from each participant.

3. Results

In-depth analysis of the interview transcripts yielded two superordinate themes (Encountering difficulties in transitioning from the physical mode of working to WFH resulting in frustration, anger, feeling overburdened etc., and Covid-19 pandemic, health, and well-being) manifested through four-subthemes are illustrated below:

3.1 *Encountering difficulties in transitioning from the physical mode of working to WFH resulting in frustration, anger, feeling overburdened etc.*

This superordinate theme highlights the sudden transition during Covid-19 from office-based work to WFH, resulting in uncertainty, lack of control, low motivation, increased stress, gendered distribution of household chores, and poor mental health.

Lack of preparedness while working from home causing helplessness, anxiety, and role conflict. Most of the participants expressed their state of confusion because of the lack of preparedness to deal with the WFH arrangement. Throughout the interviews, the participants reported the sudden changes as challenging, making them feel helpless and anxious. The participants reported an increase in role-conflict, resulting in tension and imbalance between the work and home domains. Dhriti (29-year-old, Managing Director) mentioned that:

> When this (Covid-19 lockdown) happened, nobody was actually prepared because the whole office shifted to working from home and it was so abrupt, so troubleshooting and figuring out things like what I am supposed to do? And what is everyone doing? How can I work better? And is there any way to do that? What should I focus on work or family or myself? (29-year-old, Managing Director).

Her description of becoming accustomed to WFH is evocative of confusion and stress due to a lack of readiness towards WFH. The need to be prepared and productive while working from home is evident from the series of questions in her narrative which describes her desperation to develop a better system to maintain efficiency. Most of the participants are stressed and anxious due to the sudden transition which has led to excessive pressure and limited time to prepare for WFH challenges, resulting in difficulty in separating roles and enhancing proliferation of role conflict. Similarly, Aisha (29-year-old, Global Head of Sales) mentioned that the abrupt shift because of the lockdown mandate to WFH has led to unexpected challenges, making her tense:

> It has been an extremely difficult phase. This didn't start off as like a gradual process, but this was a sudden shift and the preparedness to the process of working from home was absolutely zero. This is not a normal WFH situation. Everyone's home, there are issues related to space, privacy and it was a mandatory situation. So, the world is in such a big mess already. (29-year-old, Global Head of Sales).

She mentioned that the lack of mental readiness due to the sudden shift of WFH is making it difficult to stay productive on organizational related tasks. This was emphasized through terms such as "absolutely zero" which depicts her state of helplessness and lack of control over the situation. She draws a comparison between WFH arrangement before and after Covid-19. The phrase "not a normal work from home" in the above narrative depicts the confusion and stress of the unusual circumstances in which she was required to adapt to professional work. It's disrupting her personal and physical space as the situation is unusual. Moving back with her family members is impacting in preserving healthy work-family boundaries and productivity at work. The mandate of the imposed lockdown in India for the safety concerns of people, which she didn't chose for herself is causing uneasiness and anxiety. She seems to be extremely devastated and terrified as the global conditions are presently chaotic and in shambles. The uncontrollability and chaos are reflected throughout her interviews. Neeta (27-year-old, Analyst) shared a similar feeling of worry:

> You see the circumstances are not normal. You have a lot on the plate right now because of this pandemic. And that adds to a lot of pressure which becomes mentally exhausting. So eventually when I took a flight home, I did have thoughts of talking to a

mental health professional because it was all so sudden and because of the pandemic it was a lot for me. I was worried about this sudden change and what will happen next? (27-year-old, Analyst).

A state of panic and concern are reflected from the above excerpt by the participant because of the changes that are unavoidable. This has created a high degree of anxiety and unease, which had an emotional impact on her. The participant seems extremely worried and tense because of the unforeseen transition to her work, and she is finding it mentally exhausting to deal with it. There is also a sense of fear as she is struggling to acclimatize to a new work environment and demands (household and professional). She seems to be aware of her anxiety-provoking thoughts, perhaps expressing her desire to talk to a mental health professional. The difficulty to cope with the changed circumstances is reflected in the phrase "what will happen next?", which also reflects uncertainty and lack of control and concern over the events.

Unequal distribution of household chores at home causes frustration and dissatisfaction. While all the participants demonstrate the impact of living back with their family members on their independent lifestyle and mental health, there are differences in how the impact is represented across participants. As already discussed, most of the participants are trying to adjust to the pandemic while satisfying the needs of their family members, even though they mentioned that they had to work hard to manage the overload of domestic work to focus on professional demands as well. However, the participants of the current study seem angry as they voice out the unequal allocation of household work, as male members of their family were laid back and merely focused only on professional work whereas women were juggling and engaging in professional demands along with domestic work. Esha (28-year-old, Head-finance Division) mentioned in her interview that "I'm tired of saying yes and doing everything. I can't be agreeing all the time and do things. I'm getting frustrated and I can't make my family happy all the time" (28-year-old, Head-Finance Division).

Eisha feels worn out due to the overload of endless professional and domestic responsibility. Living back with her parents and pleasing them by "agreeing" and "saying yes" seems to be overburdening. The extract also represents the challenge of saying "no" to her parents/other family members to unburden herself from household work, impacting her mental health. Similarly, Shubhika (26-year-old, Associate) described her dissatisfaction with her obligation to do household work, even though her brother is not expected to contribute:

I have been given a lot of household duties, but my brother is not given that. We have the   same pay scale and even I'm managing my work and my household duties. But I don't want to create a scene. This is absolutely unfair and unacceptable. Why am I the one doing all the things? (26-year-old, Associate).

Like the other participants, Shubhika depicts feeling burdened and furious by the amount of unpaid labor given by her family members. She felt frustrated as she bears a higher and disproportionate burden of unpaid household chores as compared to her brother. The anger over the unequal treatment is apparent through the usage of the words "unfair" and "unacceptable", yet she doesn't want to cause tension and disturbance among the family members. Her interview reflects a sense of not being acknowledged and being taken for granted. It seems that there is a need to make her parents aware regarding the unequal distribution of household responsibility. Also, most of the participants mentioned their desire to return to their pre-pandemic life. The desperation of returning to pre-pandemic life dominated Kavya's (28-year-old, Associate) transcript, as she conveyed the impact of living with her family members on her mental health:

> I feel very selfish in saying this, but right now I want to go back. It was nice earlier but now it's just very stressful because the first few days my mom pampered me but then there are some disagreements over the way I am working. So, all these thoughts make me angry, and they affect me mentally (28-year-old, Associate).

She feels guilty for expressing her desire to return to her independent lifestyle. Her reference of "nice earlier" and "first few days" drew a comparison between the initial days of lockdown and the present situation. She seems to be irritated and annoyed by the constant interference of her mother in her style of working. Initially she was delighted with the treatment she was receiving at home. But with the passage of time, the differences, and conflicts over her style of working led to frustration and a sense of not-being valued. The irritation of listening and working according to the parents' needs rather than working in her own independent and autonomous ways is affecting her well-being. Most of the participants felt confined over their family's decision-making power, which seems to be instigating a lot of anger and frustration.

3.2 *Covid-19 pandemic, health, and well-being*

This superordinate theme reflects the changes in routine, physical activity, sleep, and mental health of the participants. Most of the participants mentioned feeling helpless and anxious as they are scared for themselves and their co-worker's future in the organization.

Sedentary lifestyle and health. All the participants expressed that WFH is leading to physical inactivity. They are stuck at home without a clearly defined routine and work which is making them lethargic. This is resulting in psychological states of frustration, sadness, and anxiety. Covid-19 mandated stay-at-home restriction is hampering participants' movement and exercise routines. This is what Meher (25-year-old, Analyst) echoed:

> I'm not going to work…I've started to gain weight. I'm always inside my house…lying around, sitting, and not doing anything. My sleep schedule has completely changed. There is no schedule at all actually. This is causing a lot of mood swings and headaches. I can't concentrate and I feel so exhausted all the time (25-year-old, Analyst).

There seems to be a lack of motivation to have a fitness routine. The sudden transition to WFH is causing weariness, fatigue, and burnout. She feels guilty and helpless as she cannot return to a healthy routine. This is depicted through the phrase "no schedule at all", referring to the loss of control over her life and porous boundaries between work and domestic domains. The sedentary lifestyle seems to be contributing to sleep disturbance, stress, fatigue, and mood swings. Most of the participants mentioned that reduced physical movement is affecting their attention to work. Other participants felt that the loose structure of WFH seems to be disturbing healthy eating habits and sleep patterns. Samiara (25-year-old, Analyst) mentioned that she was ignoring her health due to her chaotic work routine. She stated in her interview that "My breakfast, lunch and dinner timings were so messed up and I basically wasn't taking care of my health. So, I started having migraines and headaches, back pain and my weight started increasing" (25-year-old, Analyst).

She expressed that the stress and the overload of professional demands seems to be resulting in skipping meals. She is aware of her irregular eating pattern impacting her physical health. It seems that the unstructured life is preventing the participants from maintaining sustainable habits. Neeta

(27-year-old, Analyst) mentioned that her eating pattern is getting disturbed because of lack of time from her professional demands:

> Some days are very hectic. I forget to eat my lunch because I'm just working back- to-back. Then I eat a lot and snack in between which are usually cookies, fried foods, and all of these. I'm usually tired and there is so much work…the deadlines and meetings (27-year-old, Analyst).

She mentioned that some days are enormously frantic where it's a challenge to indulge in healthful eating pattern. The perceived lack of time due to professional overload is resulting in poor dietary intake. The inconsistent meal pattern and unhealthy dietary practice seems to be consuming her mental resources and physical energy. In another extract, Kavya (28-year-old, Associate) mentioned that her sleep cycle is extremely disturbed, which is resulting in stress and fatigue:

> I still can't get into a routine, and I have a very unstable routine which is messing up my   sleep pattern. So, my sleep schedule is bad and because of this my eating habits like breakfast, lunch and dinner timing are off. I have a permanent headache all the time. I don't know what to do (28-year-old, Associate).

The stress of having a structured routine is deteriorating her sleep schedule. She seems to be struggling to adapt to the WFH environment, which is leading to unpredictability and inconsistent health habits affecting her physical health. The need to gain a sense of stability while working from home is causing stress and making her feel overwhelmed. She seems to be motivated to get into a structured routine but felt powerless and helpless, impacting her physical and mental health.

Perceived uncertainty, fear, and lack of control. Most of the participants mentioned that they are feeling anxious as they are uncertain about their status and future in the organization. Seema (24-year-old, Analyst) mentioned that she felt powerless and scared over the thought of losing her job:

> There is always an uncertainty of losing the job. I find it interesting to do office work but   there is always pressure in my mind of losing the job. My friends got fired, a lot of employees are getting laid off and I don't know what I will do if they fire me from this job (24-year-old, Analyst).

Panic resulting from the Covid-19 layoffs has negatively affected her efficiency, pleasure, and motivation to work. There is a sense of fear and loss evoked after her friends and co-workers were laid-off. She is overwhelmed and feeling anxious over the possibility of losing her job, and the news of her friends being laid off added to her stress and state of helplessness. The joy of working is being ruptured by the pressure to survive in the organization. Job-related insecurities and the challenge of sustaining oneself during Covid-19 are leading to fear, panic, and self-doubt. Similarly, Aisha (29-year-old, Global Head of Sales) is in a state of constant worry, which is leading to uneasiness:

> My firm hasn't really laid people off. But I don't know for how long that's going to be. I'm really worried about getting laid off. There is always a pressure in my mind what will happen if I lose this job (29-year-old, Global Head of Sales).

She doesn't feel safe as her chances of survival in the organization is threatened. However, her organization has not laid-off employees, but the unpredictability of the pandemic and the economic

recession caused by it is making her feel helpless. Most of the participants are stressed as the challenging job market seems to be creating a state of uncertainty on the professional front. The job insecurity and financial anxiety are causing cynicism, leading to a negative appraisal of the overall situation, which is impacting Aneesha's (27-year-old, Analyst) professional task:

> I have become so negative that I can't focus on my work. Thoughts like what will happen if   the clients back out, will I still have my job, and how will I manage my finances? These thoughts are always in my head (27-year-old, Analyst).

It seems that the thought of losing her job has led to undesirable thoughts leading to low motivation, low productivity and that's affecting her mental well-being. The pandemic has led to negative appraisal of the overall situation, which is leading to sadness, disinterest, and disengagement from work. Most of the participants, including Aneesha, feel that the current situation has led to the loss of control and autonomy over the present situation, resulting in an unpredictable situation that damages their physiological, mental, and security needs.

4.   Discussion

Covid-19 led to unforeseen, and unexpected changes which have abruptly upended the normal routines of work and life domains (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The unprecedented shift to WFH arrangement has led to the challenges of juggling between work and family domains on a daily basis impacting the health, well-being, motivation, and performance in both domains of life (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). Many people moved back home to be with their parents/family (including the participants in the present study) as a result of the fear and anxiety associated with Covid-19, financial difficulties, the uncertainty of the present (as well as the future), and psychological concerns about their health and that of their loved ones for an extended period, without outdoor-recreational or socialization plans (due to the mandatory stay-at-home policy) (Butler, 2020). There is some literature available on WFH of pre-pandemic time, however, the unprecedented pace and mandatory WFH arrangement during Covid-19, requires further probing (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, the present research attempted to explore the WFH experiences of ten highly-career-invested professional Indian women working in global investment banking firm in India. The data analysis yielded two superordinate themes: Encountering difficulties in transitioning from the physical mode of working to WFH resulting in frustration, anger, feeling overburdened etc., and Covid-19 pandemic, health, and well-being, and two subthemes under each.

The results illustrated that most of the participants had difficulty in transitioning from a physical office to WFH during Covid-19. The sudden transition with no demarcated boundary between work and personal life triggered a sense of ambiguity and lack of clarity among the participants. The participants of the present study were working at home, away from the office, without any preparation and prior knowledge of WFH which affected their well-being and productivity (Wang et al., 2021). This resulted in work-overload, which is further magnified by the lack of perceived control over the new work environment. The state of confusion due to the sudden changes in lifestyle and 'structure of life' has deteriorated participants' mental health as they are experiencing burnout and emotional fatigue (Tušl et al., 2021). The results of the present study align with the existing literature that the unprecedented situations made it difficult to return to normality, thereby impacting work performance, mental health, and well-being of employees (Usman et al., 2021). Moreover, the

sudden loss of the common physical space of interaction such as the office and moving back with the parents has affected their work, independent lifestyle, and sense of self (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). Most of the participants stated that they experienced a lack of support, acknowledgment, autonomy, and respect in the domestic and professional domains while working from home during Covid-19 (Tayal & Mehta, 2022; Jasrotia & Meena, 2021). According to Babbar et al (2021), women devote the same number of hours to household work as men spend doing a paid job. However, women's worth in the family is often undermined because unpaid work is considered their responsibility, and not seen as an economic (or revenue-generating) activity in Indian households (Babbar et al., 2021). Thus, living back with their family members increased their household responsibilities, reinforcing traditional gender roles, as increased responsibility mainly fell on female members of the family, even when they were working full-time (Uddin, 2021). This is consistent with the gender role theory (Bem, 1993) which posits that societal norms describe women to shoulder a substantial majority of housework and childcare. Consequently, this led to spillover from professional life into domestic responsibilities and vice versa, which negatively impacted participants' mental health (Dogra & Kaushal, 2022). Hence, there was a general feeling of frustration, self-doubt, being undervalued, and not being supported by family members among the participants. As a result, most of the participants expressed a desire to return to the pre-pandemic independent life due to the feeling of not being valued and taken for granted at home because of gendered cultural norms. The present study highlights the dual responsibilities of working Indian women with respect to sustaining their jobs, as well as being the full-time nurturer on the domestic front, impacting participants' well-being, mood, and physical health (Chauhan, 2021). The present study is consistent with the literature that suggests that even though women are burdened with a disproportionate amount of unpaid work, their duty toward household chores, professional life, and financial support is often ignored and undermined (Vyas, 2021). Moreover, women take on primary responsibilities of domestic work and adjust their working lives to accommodate family pressures (Warren, 2021), as evident in the present study, where participants seem to be agreeing to the family member's demands and feelings.

Recent literature has also hinted that the current crisis has intensified pre-existing gender gap, reversing the important gain made by women in the last decade in the workforce (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Feng & Savani, 2020). After long struggles, some women have been able to reach a much higher position in their careers but Covid-19 and WFH dramatically increased the natural roles (e.g., caregiver or caretaker) and the set of identity-related expectations (e.g., caregiving, house chores, employee, sister, daughter, etc.) of women, causing participants to be engaged in multiple roles simultaneously and causing stress and burnout (Adisa et al. 2021). Thus, this crisis has placed them in a position where their career aspirations have plummeted, eventually decreasing their autonomy, causing frustration, and burnout during Covid-19 (Connley, 2021). This resulted in work overload, role conflict and boundary violation (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). Moreover, the lack of physical space at home resulted in frequent interruptions while working. Thus, the boundaries between the work and home domain got fuzzy, and the gap between work and personal lives disappeared leading to job dissatisfaction and burnout (Bathini & Kandathil, 2020; Adisa et al., 2021). The findings of the present study mention that the unpredictable sudden transition to WFH, pandemic related stress, and job insecurity seem to have elevated the stress and anxiety level of the participants. This might also be an explanation for reduced sleep quality, increased anxiety, and unhealthy dietary habits, as studies have linked stress with emotional eating (Burnatowska et al., 2022), heightened anxiety (Bennett et al., 2021) and reduced sleep quality (Orr et al., 2022). Moreover, studies done during the pandemic have mentioned that the absence of job security (Blustein & Guarino, 2020) resulted in anxiety, depression, and poor sleep quality among employees (Blustein & Guarino, 2020; Basyouni et al., 2021). In addition, participants reported an increase in

food intake, which seems to have resulted in weight changes, and other physical health issues such as fatigue, tiredness, and body pain. Recent literature during the pandemic has demonstrated that emotional eating can help to cope with difficult situations and negative emotions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is significantly associated with stress and depressive symptoms (Benedict et al., 2021; Orr et al., 2022). Studies have also mentioned that Covid-19 related stress may have led to unhealthy eating habit which could have led to the development of a more negative mood, reduced physical activity, lack of motivation, and disruption of daily routine (Benedict et al., 2021; Burnatowska et al., 2022), which is also reported by the participants. Furthermore, behavioral changes such as decreased physical movements, reduced exercise, disturbed sleep patterns, and changes in dietary habits (Xiao et al., 2021) made mental health issues even more serious (Tušl et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021).

5.   Conclusion and limitations

The study provides insights into the lived experiences of the impact of Covid-19 on highly career-invested young professional women who are working from home. The advent of Covid-19 with its rapid transition to WFH brought challenges when it came to managing boundaries, as many participants had difficulty managing the work and non-work domains due to the family, domestic, professional demands, and the sudden nature of the pandemic circumstances. The present research used role theory (Turner, 2001) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) to understand the lived experiences of single, professional Indian women while working from home in India. In the last few years, women have worked hard and have made remarkable progress in constructing their career-oriented identity and agentic self in the organization by overcoming numerous barriers. However, living back with parents has added extra pressure due to the parental expectation of fulfilling domestic responsibilities while juggling between professional, personal, and domestic domains, thereby leading to performing multiple roles and depriving participants of fulfilling their professional demands efficiently. This sudden transition from office has shattered their hard work and dedication, questioning their career-oriented-independent identities.

The results indicated that balancing multiple roles and demands of work, family and personal life has been a source of challenge for the participants, resulting in physical and mental health concerns among the participants. This also led to the feeling of not being valued and taken for granted at home. The rapid transition to WFH due to the sudden lockdown mandate made it difficult for the participants to effectively manage permeable boundaries which led to a state of helplessness, powerlessness, and frustration. The current findings indicate the fear and anxiety due to the economic recession and unemployment, which has resulted in a feeling of uncertainty. Moreover, WFH and Covid-19 have influenced the usual structure and lifestyle of the participants. Changes in the lifestyle of participants including physical activity, sleep patterns, and eating habits have repercussions on physical health, as well as affect the well-being of participants.

Despite some of the important contributions of the present study, the study also suffers from certain limitations. Firstly, given the government-mandated restrictions during the pandemic, all interviews were conducted telephonically which may have influenced the researcher's ability to establish a strong rapport with the participants and grasp important non-verbal behavioral cues. The findings of the study may also be reflective of the rapidly changing lockdown rules and restrictions employed by the government of India due to Covid-19. Besides, this study has focused on professional women working in less explored investment banking firms, and living in New Delhi,

India- The capital city of India. Thus, unintentionally disregarding the challenges faced by women working in rural parts of India, as well as women working in other services and sectors.

6.   Implications of the study

Although the present study was conducted during a period of mandatory lockdown restrictions, the results of the study have implications for employees, organizations, and policymakers beyond lockdown and Covid-19. Through the lens of role theory (Turner, 2001) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), the present study navigated the journey of unmarried, single, and childless women while working from home during Covid-19 in India. The participants are dealing with a completely new situation and are navigating between competing demands of professional life and 'being at home', which has blurred the boundaries of work and family, impacting them mentally and physically. Theoretically, the study contributes by demonstrating how a context as specific as that of mandatory lockdown has shaped the experiences of working from home, and how role theory (Turner, 2001) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) can be applied to understand the impact of Covid-19 and WFH on single professional women's personal, family, and professional life in India. Mandatory lockdowns, physical distancing norms, self-induced isolations (or quarantines), and the pandemic have hastened a rise in WFH. With Covid-19 accelerating the WFH culture, the growth of flexible workspaces is bound to propel, especially since several employers are looking at WFH as a long-term practice (Mukherjee & Narang, 2022). Moreover, Covid-19 is not the last pandemic since experts predict Covid-19 will likely become endemic (Mark et al., 2022). Thus, the study also highlights the importance of developing adaptive responses and practical implications to the sudden transition from offices to home, as well as adapting to future uncertainties and emergencies more efficiently. Subsequently, WFH represents the new reality of the contemporary world for all its employees. As a result, every stakeholder needs to be prepared to deal with WFH in a more effective manner, so that both employees and organizations can benefit from it.

The result of the present study indicated that lack of preparation for the sudden transition to WFH resulted in anxiety and feeling of uncertainty among the participants as they adapted to the numerous work and domestic conditions under eruptive pressure. To deal with such sudden changes in work arrangements, managers or organizations should create a culture of trust by engaging in meaningful conversations with the employees and finding ways to reconfirm the established trust (Zak, 2017). Managers or organizations can cultivate trust by giving clear directions, introducing schedule-controlling tactics (Kelly and Moen, 2007), and building a mutually agreed upon system of communication and reporting protocols. Further, organizations can be respectful and sensitive to employees' lives outside of work, and this might help to reduce work-family conflict (Kerman et al., 2022). During such a crisis, each employee has a unique situation at home to deal with, thus managers should be sensitive to employee needs by involving them in participative decision-making, allowing flexible schedules and limiting mandatory synchronized collaboration (Gong & Sims, 2022). Lastly, organizations can introduce the mentor-support systems, employee assistance programs, mindfulness-based interventions (Slutsky et al., 2019), and wellness services, in addition to traditional mental health services to help employees manage and cope with emotional and mental distress experienced while working from home (Xiao et al., 2021).

Moreover, the results show that an unprecedented shift to WFH has severely impacted working women's lives due to the expectation to fulfill multiple roles within the domestic setting, which has blurred the line between personal-work-family spheres. This has reduced work-life balance (WLB), increased inter-role conflicts, frequent boundary violations, and affected their motivation, performance, well-being, and satisfaction with both the domains. Thus, participants were constantly

challenged by the demand of work and family because of the gendered workplace and role expectations at home, even though women have struggled for years to establish their career-oriented independent selves. To deal with the above-mentioned issues, the employees should apply the behavioral, temporal, physical and communication segmentation tactics by Kreiner et al. (2009). Examples of behavioral strategies include imitating the office routine, such as getting ready for the office in the morning, choosing an isolated space for work, and changing clothes when finished with work. From a temporal perspective, employees can establish strict work and family time, establish a time to stop working, and turn-off work notifications on their devices (Haun et al., 2022). They can create a separate workspace or workstation to create a physical boundary between work and private life. Lastly, Kreiner (2009) mentioned that during boundary violations, employees should verbalize and communicate to create awareness and prevent future boundary violation situations. The demands and difficulties in attaining segmentation and balance have fallen to females, thus the findings of the present study reiterate the need to take gender-responsive economic, organizational, and social measures, to maintain their well-being (Carvalho et al., 2021). Sedentary lifestyles, poor dietary intake, and reduced sleep quality are also among the problems faced by participants. Employees can maintain an active and healthy lifestyle by having an alternative workstation that allows them to stand or be active while working from home, scheduling daily meals to avoid snacking throughout the day, practicing sleep and digital hygiene, and scheduling some movement-based activities with family members (Bartman et al., 2022). Lastly, organizations can offer monetary incentives to inactive people who meet predefined physical activity goals each day (or week) (Bartman et al., 2022).

As countries gain control over the pandemic, WFH may become less mandatory, but more widely available for employees (Mark et al., 2022). It is therefore crucial that organizations promote work-family balance and be more inventive in dealing with employees in the WFH arrangement, given its prevalence during the pandemic and in future emergencies. Thus, organizations and leaders should be more well-prepared to manage autonomy, engagement, and productivity effectively as employees are working from home. Hence, employees should be supported with training courses aimed at increasing self-awareness, resilience, and developing skills to develop digital competence, which will empower them and help them adapt to the rapidly changing circumstances.

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Appendix - Interview Schedule

Questions	Probes
1. What are your feelings and experiences with work from home during Covid-19?	Physically, emotionally, and mentally?
2. Can you tell me how you start your day while working from home?	Describe your daily routine? Can you elaborate and take me through your day? (Meal timings, break, family time?)
3. What was your initial thoughts/subsequent reaction of Covid-19 lockdown that led to work from home?	What was going on in your mind then? (thoughts/ associations/ fantasies)
4. What aspects of your life has Covid-19 impacted the most?	Personal/professional/social/family/physical health/ emotionally? What kinds of problems did you face? What did you do/or should have been done to help you overcome your problem(s)?
5. What changes did you notice in yourself during this sudden Covid-19 crisis and working from home?	How do you feel about yourself? If yes to changes: How would you say you have changed?
6. What was your family's feelings to returning home and working from home during covid-19?	How did living and working in the house affect your professional life and personal life? How did you feel about the family's feelings/reaction to your work from home?
7. On a daily basis, how do your family members see you when you work from home?	What about the way other people see you while you WFH? (Colleagues, friends)
8. If you had to describe the changes you noticed in work and family conditions as you started to work from home, how would you?	What words come to mind, what images/thoughts/feeling/examples? How did you decide to go about these changes? Coping mechanism?
9. Could you describe a good day and bad day (while working from home) in your own words?	What do you do when you are having a bad day/good day? How do you cope? What do you do after a good/bad day?
10. How was this work from home similar or different from your previous experiences of work from home before pandemic?	Examples?
11. Has the lockdown and Covid-19 crisis affected you in ways that has made you change the way your family members/colleagues or you see yourself differently now than before?	In what ways? Can you give some examples?
12. How do you see yourself in the future if this work from home continues?	Can you imagine how life would be if WFH continues?
13. How do you feel if work from home is a permanent thing in future?	How did you feel about this? Do you think about the future much while working from home?
14. How do you think your life would be if you worked somewhere else and not at home during this crisis?	Can you describe how you would have felt if you were not at home?
15. Would you like to add anything else? Any other thoughts, feelings, or experiences about working from home that you want to talk about?	