



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

The COVID-19 outbreak was a stimulus for the steep growth in remote and hybrid work arrangements in India, especially in urban and technology-driven sectors. What started as an emergency measure rapidly evolved into a normalized form of employment, frequently praised for its potential to democratize 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. By using a lens of structural equity, this paper demonstrates that workforce accessibility is distinct from career progression, and highlights the institutional shifts needed to align flexible work with equitable outcomes.

Literature Review

The promise of remote employment is frequently expressed in terms of autonomy: more control over time, fewer commuting burdens, and an apparent increase in labor-market access for women. However, research on flexible work arrangements has long warned that "flexibility" is not necessarily emancipatory. Instead, it can serve as a double-edged sword, increasing short-term practicality while reducing long-term career power. According to Formánková and Křížková (2015), flexible employment can relegate women professionals to the status of "available" workers, limiting their access to leadership chances and informal influence. In this view, flexibility is less a weapon of equality and more of a device for reorganizing inequality making it less visible but more lasting.

Gaining control over one's schedule does not always lead to higher pay or professional advancement; this is a primary contributor to the flexibility trap. Even when workers appear to gain autonomy, the gains may not always transfer into increased compensation, promotion, or negotiating strength. Lott and Chung (2016) show that schedule control can yield gender-differentiated consequences, such as differences in overtime pay and earnings. This is significant because modern career advancement particularly in professional and managerial fields is frequently linked to patterns of "availability," discretionary effort, and perceived commitment.

Additionally, it might also alter evaluative standards towards informal indications of dedication. Gendered expectations can lead to interpreting women's flexibility as a lack of desire or loyalty to the organization, even if performance is high (Formánková & Křížková, 2015; Lott & Chung, 2016).

First, let us consider the work-life boundary theory that explains the reason why workplace flexibility might not lead to equity. Boundary theory considers work and home as domains, which are governed by time, space and psychological boundaries. Remote work undermines these boundaries through spatial permeability (blurring physical distance) and role permeability (blurring the lines between different roles). When women do most of the caring and housework, blurred boundaries between work and home don't just mix the two. They also force women to keep switching roles, split their attention, and have too little time.

This brings structural disadvantage to long-term career investments like skill-building, networking, and working on high-visibility assignments to indicate leadership potential. Flexibility is thus able to reduce entry barriers and at the same time weaken the circumstances that enable progress to occur.

The second theory to consider is the social capital theory. This theory emphasizes that careers are advanced through access to networks, mentors, sponsors, and information flows, rather than solely through output. Working remotely has the potential to undermine incidental interactions that constitute the construction of social capital (informal feedback loops, spontaneous problem-solving and everyday

visibility). Remote workers will be less integrated into organizational networks in case the promotion systems are still based on informal acknowledgment and sponsorship. This is not a gender-neutral vulnerability: women are already disadvantaged in terms of their inclusion in high-status networks, and remote options can lead to making the difference even larger by weakening the channels through which strategic relationships and patronage are established. Under the flexibility trap paradigm, reduced social capital is an invisible engine of derailed progress: women are still working and still productive, but are less apt to find themselves in leadership roles.

The third theory to consider is gender role theory. This theory supports the fact that the same flexible arrangement might be perceived differently by different genders. Gender conventions are social scripts that create what is considered to be a proper devotion to work, care giving duty, and ambition. Women's use of flexibility is often culturally interpreted as prioritizing domestic obligations, whereas men's use of flexibility is frequently viewed as a sign of efficiency or strategic decision-making. 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 Krizkowska, 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 Krizkowska, 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). Structural equity therefore requires redesigning evaluation, sponsorship, and boundary protections so that career trajectories are less dependent on physical presence, informal networks, and gendered assumptions about availability.

First, organizations should implement collaborative evaluation systems in which applicants are evaluated comparatively using uniform criteria rather than in isolation (Bohnet et al., 2016). In hybrid environments, this can be accomplished through calibrated promotion panels that assess documented outcomes, role complexity, and competencies prior to designating applicants. Joint evaluation lowers reliance on stereotypes and mitigates proximity-based penalties by moving judgements from private discretion to structured comparison (Joshi & Kumar, 2024; Venkatesh et al., 2021).

Second, companies need to formalise mentoring and sponsorship as an alternative to informal networking. Program requirements should include formally assigned mentors and sponsors, clear quarterly development expectations, documented stretch assignments, and built-in 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 ought to change to models focused on outputs that reward quantifiable contributions as opposed to presenteeism. Responsiveness should be substituted by clear deliverables, milestones, and quality indicators, particularly since women get more unpaid labour burdens than men (Chakraborty and Altekar, 2021; Kundra et al., 2023).

Lastly, reforms need leadership bias training on proximity bias and flexibility-stigma (Chauhan, 2022). The ultimate goal is to ensure that career growth does not depend on an employee's physical location. By redesigning organizational systems to be data-driven and socially aware, flexibility can finally become a tool for true inclusion (Nandwani, 2023; Kumar et al., 2023).

Table 3 outlines the necessary institutional redesigns required to counter these structural constraints and achieve equitable advancement outcomes

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

This paper suggests that remote work in India can be operating as a flexibility trap: it increases the access to employment among women, but replicates imbalance in career progression. The most important theoretical input is the distinction between entry and upward mobility. Mainstream flexibility discourse usually presupposes that better access will eventually result in equity, yet the existing data indicate that even when more women are working, the systems that control promotions, raises, and leadership roles haven't changed. (Formankova and Krizkovska, 2015; Nandwani, 2023).

There are three mechanisms which lead to the consolidation of the flexibility trap. To start with, in hybrid environments, bosses still favor people they see in person. This creates a "visibility trap" where promotions depend on informal chats and being "seen", which remote workers are missing out on (Joshi and Kumar, 2024; Bhagat and Banerji, 2025). Second, remote work blurs the line between office work and housework. Due to the traditions of gender roles continuing, women working from home are often interrupted by domestic chores. This leaves them with less time to focus on long-term goals, like learning new skills or networking. (Chakraborty and Altekar, 2021; Sinha and Sharma, 2024). Third, remote employment disrupts social capital formation by reducing the informal communication channels where trust, mentorship, and sponsorship are typically forged. This results in slower promotion speeds and stagnant pay trajectories. (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. Instead, leadership must adopt a data-driven approach that prioritizes transparency in how high-value work is distributed.

- **Location-Neutral KPIs:** Performance metrics must be strictly decoupled from physical presence. Managers should be trained to evaluate "impact" and specific "outcomes" rather than "intensity" or "responsiveness," which often serve as proxies for a lack of domestic distractions.
- **Formalized Sponsorship Circuits:** Since remote women lose out on the informal networking that often leads to promotion, organizations must institutionalize sponsorship. This involves pairing remote female high-potentials with senior executives who have explicit accountability for the development and visibility of their protégés.
- **Audit of "Stretch" Assignments:** Firms should conduct regular audits to ensure that high-visibility projects—those that lead to leadership roles—are not being disproportionately assigned to those physically present in the office.
- **Organizational Culture: De-gendering Flexibility.** The cultural association of flexibility with "women's needs" often leads to a secondary status for female remote workers. Organizations must actively work to transform flexibility from a gendered accommodation into a universal professional standard, thereby reducing the stigma associated with working from home.
 - **Universal Flexibility Mandates:** To eliminate "flexibility stigma," remote and hybrid options should be encouraged and modeled by male leadership. When flexibility is viewed as a "women's issue," it reinforces domestic confinement; when it is an organizational standard, it becomes a gender-neutral productivity tool .
 - **"Deep Work" Sanctuaries:** To mitigate the cognitive load of blurred boundaries, organizations should implement "asynchronous-first" communication periods. Protecting "deep work" time helps ensure that women, who face higher domestic role permeability, are not penalized for failing to provide instant digital responsiveness.
 - **Bias Training on Presenteeism:** Leadership development must include specific modules on "flexibility-stigma" and the "halo effect" often granted to office-based workers. Understanding that physical presence does not equate to higher commitment is essential for equitable talent management.
- **Policy and Infrastructure: Supporting the "Home" in WFH.** Finally, it must be recognized that remote work in India occurs within a specific socio-cultural vacuum where public and private support for caregiving is often absent.
 - **Subsidized Care Infrastructures:** Corporate support for childcare is an essential prerequisite for remote work to be successful. Remote work is not a substitute for childcare; without professional support, "time poverty" will remain the primary barrier to women's upskilling and career investment.
 - **Right to Disconnect Guidelines:** Establishing clear boundaries for after-hours communication can protect women from the "double burden" of being perpetually available to both their employers and their families, thereby preventing long-term 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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