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Gender, Care Responsibilities, and Hybrid Work: Understanding Unequal Well-being Benefits in Urban India

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ABSTRACT: Hybrid work is frequently presented as a remedy for the work–family conflicts that fall most heavily on women, yet the evidence is mixed: flexibility can relieve care demands or intensify them. This study asks whether the benefits of hybrid work are distributed evenly once access is equal. Survey data were collected from 417 employees in 21 information technology, finance and shipping organisations in Chennai, India. Women and men reported statistically indistinguishable access to hybrid work arrangements, work-from-home policy support and flexible scheduling ($d = .13$ – $.14$, all 95% confidence intervals including zero). Their reported outcomes differed: women reported higher home workspace adequacy, perceived schedule flexibility, work–life balance satisfaction ($d = 0.46$) and well-being ($d = 0.33$). Women also reported far heavier domestic coordination loads ($d = 0.80$ – 1.06). Family composition moderated how strongly hybrid work resources translated into outcomes: the association between home workspace adequacy and work–life balance satisfaction was significantly steeper for employees with dependent children than for those with no dependents ($\beta = .56$ vs $.32$). We argue that equal access does not produce equal benefit, because the value of a work-arrangement resource depends on the domestic demands it can absorb. Implications for gender-equitable hybrid work design are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Flexible and hybrid working arrangements are often justified, in policy and in corporate communication, as instruments of gender equality. The reasoning is that they relieve the time squeeze that falls disproportionately on women who combine employment with unpaid care (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). The empirical record is less settled. Flexible arrangements are associated with better health and work–family outcomes in meta-analytic syntheses (Allen et al., 2013; Shiffrin & Michel, 2022), and hybrid arrangements reduce quit rates without productivity loss (Bloom et al., 2024; Decker et al., 2025). However, a substantial literature shows that flexibility can also intensify work, blur boundaries and reproduce gendered divisions of domestic labour (Chung, 2022; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Working at home to catch up on work is associated with higher work-to-family conflict, particularly for women (Kim et al., 2020). Schedule control raises overtime and earnings mainly for men (Lott & Chung, 2016), and requests for flexibility are judged more harshly when made by mothers than by fathers (Munsch, 2016).

Access itself has been the focus of much of this literature: mothers with access to flexitime and teleworking are less likely to reduce their hours after childbirth (Chung & van der Horst, 2018), and organisational and supervisor support are among the strongest correlates of lower work–family conflict (French et al., 2018; Kossek et al., 2011). In India, qualitative work with women software professionals has long documented the negotiation of multiple roles under limited organisational support (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011), but quantitative evidence on hybrid arrangements specifically remains scarce.

These competing accounts share an assumption that is rarely examined directly: that the *distribution of access* is the primary equality question. If women have less access to flexible arrangements, they cannot benefit from them. Yet in professional and knowledge-intensive settings where hybrid work is now standard, formal access may already be broadly equal. The more consequential question then becomes distributional in a second sense: when access is equal, do women and men, or employees with and without care responsibilities, obtain the same benefit from the same arrangement?

This study addresses that question with survey data from 417 employees in the information technology (IT), finance and shipping sectors of Chennai, India. The Indian setting is theoretically useful. Female labour-force participation in urban professional occupations coexists with a highly unequal division of domestic work, which widened during the pandemic (Chauhan, 2021; Deshpande, 2022). Multi-generational household arrangements make eldercare a common obligation alongside childcare. If hybrid work only redistributes when the domestic division of labour is relatively equal, then a setting with a steep domestic gradient is a demanding test case.

We make three contributions. First, we separate access from returns empirically, showing statistically indistinguishable gender differences in access alongside consistent gender differences in reported resources and outcomes. Second, we show that family composition conditions the strength of the association between hybrid work resources and work–life balance, with the clearest contrast between employees with dependent children and those without dependents. Third, we provide evidence from an under-studied emerging-economy context in which the domestic care gradient is steep, extending the flexibility-paradox debate beyond the Western European and North American settings in which it has largely been conducted.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Equal access as a necessary but insufficient condition

Boundary and border theories treat work–life balance as a function of how people manage the permeability and flexibility of the boundary between domains (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). Hybrid work alters that boundary structurally: it relocates part of the working week into the home and gives employees some control over timing. Whether this improves balance depends on fit between the arrangement and the person’s domestic circumstances (Kreiner, 2006).

Formal access, however, is a property of the job and the employer, not of the household. In organisations with codified hybrid policies, eligibility typically follows role and grade. Where women and men occupy comparable professional roles, formal access should therefore be similar, even if usage and consequences differ (Eaton, 2003). Evidence that flexible work benefits depend on use rather than availability (Allen et al., 2013) implies that access-based equality measures may conceal inequality in realised benefit.

H1: Women and men do not differ in reported access to hybrid work arrangements, work-from-home policy implementation or flexible schedule availability.

2.2 Unequal returns

If access is equal, differences in reported resources and outcomes must arise from what employees do with the arrangement and what it relieves. Voydanoff’s (2005) demands-and-resources account of work–family fit holds that a resource is valuable in proportion to the demand it addresses. Where women carry a heavier domestic load, the same arrangement resolves more pressing conflicts and should be evaluated more positively. Women also report stronger positive work-to-family spillover than men (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). Two mechanisms follow. First, women may invest more in making home-based work workable, producing higher reported workspace adequacy and perceived schedule control. Second, the relief obtained when a chronic conflict is eased should register as higher balance satisfaction and well-being.

A competing prediction exists. If hybrid work primarily enables women to absorb more domestic work without reducing paid work, it may increase rather than decrease strain (Chung, 2022; Hjalmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Kim et al., 2020). This study cannot adjudicate causally between the two accounts, but their predictions for reported outcomes differ in sign, which makes the test informative.

H2: Women report higher levels of hybrid work resources (home workspace adequacy, schedule flexibility perception) and of work–life balance satisfaction and well-being than men.

H3: Women report substantially higher domestic coordination load (childcare integration, eldercare management, household task coordination) than men.

2.3 Family composition as a conditioner of returns

The same logic implies a within-gender gradient. Dependent children impose demands that are simultaneously time-based, unpredictable and non-delegable, particularly where formal childcare is limited. Employees with dependent children should therefore convert hybrid work resources into balance and well-being more strongly than employees without dependents; those with other family obligations, such as eldercare or extended-family responsibilities, should fall in between. Comparative evidence from the pandemic period is consistent with this gradient: caregiving load shaped both the use and the consequences of home-based work (Collins et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Shockley et al., 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020).

H4: Family composition moderates the associations between hybrid work resources and employee outcomes, which are strongest for employees with dependent children, intermediate for those with other family responsibilities and weakest for those without dependents.

Finally, gender and parenthood should compound. Because mothers carry more of the childcare and household coordination load than fathers in the study setting (Chauhan, 2021; Deshpande, 2022), the gender difference in reported balance should be concentrated among parents.

H5: The gender difference in work–life balance satisfaction is larger among employees with dependent children than among employees without dependents.

3. METHOD

3.1 Design, setting and participants

The data come from a cross-sectional employee survey conducted in 21 organisations in the Chennai metropolitan region: eight IT firms, seven financial-services firms (banks, insurers, investment firms and financial-technology companies) and six shipping and logistics organisations. Organisations were eligible if they operated formal or informal hybrid arrangements, employed at least 50 people and agreed to distribute the survey through a nominated liaison. In shipping, participation was restricted to administrative, documentation, customer-service and management roles for which hybrid work is feasible.

Of 621 invited employees, 451 responded and 417 provided usable data (67.2% usable response rate; 92.5% of returns retained after screening for incomplete responses, failed attention checks and invariant response patterns). Data were collected over four weeks in [MONTH–MONTH YEAR]. Participants were aged 22–64 years ($M = 38.4$, $SD = 9.2$), 52.4% were women, 57.3% held a master's or professional qualification and mean organisational tenure was 7.2 years ($SD = 5.8$). Family composition was distributed as follows: 43.2% had dependent children, 25.4% had other family responsibilities such as eldercare or extended-family care, and 31.4% had no dependents. Table 1 reports the sample profile. Companion analyses of the same survey examine the mediating mechanisms linking hybrid work features to outcomes, and the organisational determinants of policy implementation; the present analysis is confined to gender and family composition and does not duplicate those results.

Table 1. Sample profile ($N = 417$)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Women	218	52.4
	Men	199	47.6
Family composition	Dependent children	180	43.2
	Other family responsibilities	106	25.4
	No dependents	131	31.4
Sector	Information technology	147	35.3
	Finance	142	34.1

Characteristic	Category	n	%
	Shipping and logistics	128	30.7
Age	22–30 years	128	30.7
	31–40 years	165	39.6
	41–50 years	89	21.3
	51–64 years	35	8.4
Education	Bachelor's degree	178	42.7
	Master's degree	186	44.6
	Professional degree	53	12.7
Current arrangement	Formal hybrid arrangement	315	75.5

3.2 Measures

All perceptual measures used 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). *Access* was captured by three constructs: hybrid work arrangement type (five items on discretion over daily work location and regularity of home–office alternation), work-from-home policy implementation (five items on policy clarity, technology support, training, managerial backing and fairness) and flexible schedule availability (five items on control over start and finish times and organisational accommodation of schedule changes). *Hybrid work resources* comprised home workspace adequacy (six items), schedule flexibility perception (six items) and reduced commuting time (six items). *Outcomes* comprised work–life balance satisfaction (five items, adapted from established work–family balance measures), employee well-being (six items covering stress, energy, sleep, physical health and emotional well-being) and adaptation success (five items). *Domestic coordination load* was measured by three indicators covering childcare responsibility integration, eldercare management and household task coordination. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .82 to .92 and composite reliability from .88 to .95; average variance extracted ranged from .59 to .79, and the square root of each construct's average variance extracted exceeded its correlations with other constructs.

Content validity was established through a two-round review by five subject-matter experts, with all retained items reaching a content validity ratio of at least .80 (Lawshe, 1975). The instrument was piloted with 25 employees. Common method variance was addressed procedurally and statistically: the first unrotated factor accounted for 34.2% of variance, full-collinearity variance inflation factors ranged from 1.34 to 2.87, and a theoretically unrelated marker variable was uncorrelated with the study constructs ($r = .08$, $p = .389$) (Kock, 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

3.3 Analysis

Gender differences were tested with Welch-corrected independent-samples t tests, with Cohen's d and 95% confidence intervals as the primary effect-size statistics. Because H1 predicts the absence of a difference, we interpret access effects through the confidence intervals rather than through the significance of the null-hypothesis test. Moderation by family composition was tested with hierarchical regression including mean-centred interaction terms, controlling for age, gender, education, tenure, sector and organisation size, followed by simple-slopes analysis within each family-composition group. Differences between simple slopes were evaluated with Fisher r -to- z contrasts, which treat the standardised slopes as correlations and are therefore approximate. Missing data were minimal (1.05% of item responses) and missing completely at random (Little's MCAR $\chi^2 = 23.45$, $p = .891$; Little, 1988). Analyses were conducted in SPSS 28 and SmartPLS 3.3.3. The study was approved by [INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS COMMITTEE] ([NUMBER], [DATE]); participation was voluntary and anonymous.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Equal access (H1)

Women and men did not differ meaningfully in reported access (Figure 1; Table 2). The gender differences in hybrid work arrangement type ($d = 0.14$, 95% CI $[-0.05, 0.34]$), work-from-home policy implementation ($d = 0.14$, $[-0.05, 0.34]$) and flexible schedule availability ($d = 0.13$, $[-0.06, 0.33]$) were small and their confidence intervals included zero. H1 was supported. The upper bounds of these intervals exclude effects larger than about one-third of a standard deviation, so a substantively important access advantage for either gender is unlikely in this sample.

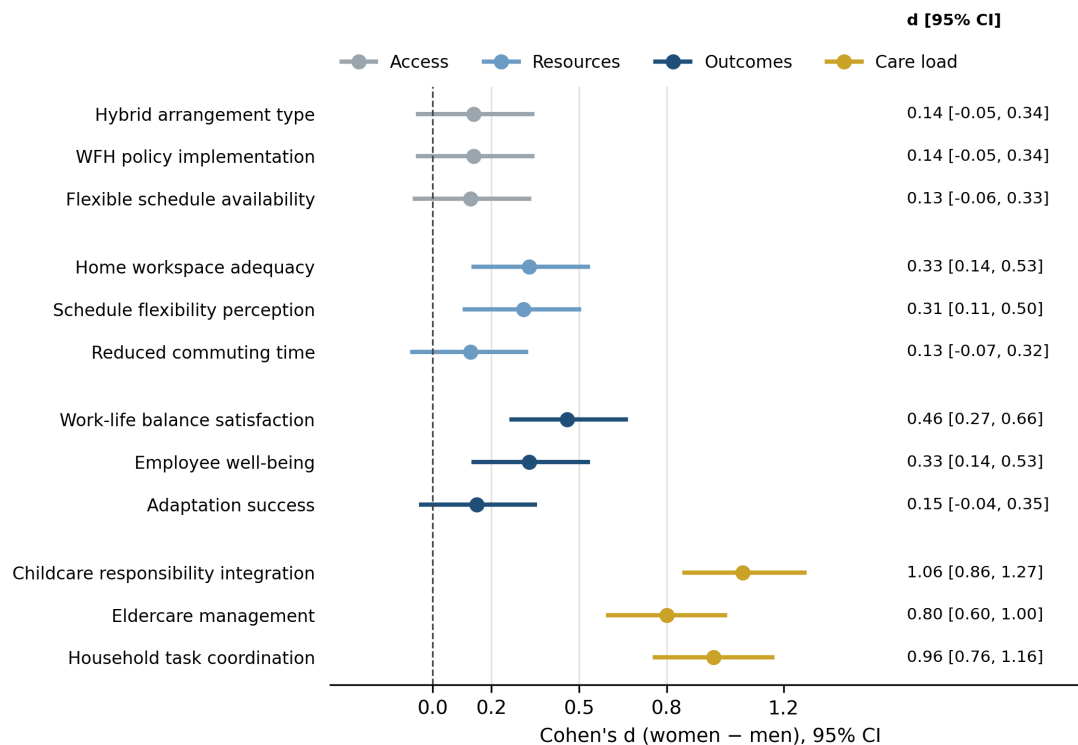


Figure 1. Gender differences (women – men) in access, resources, outcomes and domestic coordination load. Points are Cohen's d with 95% confidence intervals; $N = 417$ (218 women, 199 men).

4.2 Unequal returns (H2) and unequal load (H3)

Gender differences in resources and outcomes were larger and statistically reliable (Table 2). Women reported higher home workspace adequacy ($M = 5.6$ vs 5.2 ; $d = 0.33$, $[0.14, 0.53]$), higher perceived schedule flexibility (5.2 vs 4.8 ; $d = 0.31$, $[0.11, 0.50]$), higher work-life balance satisfaction (5.6 vs 5.0 ; $d = 0.46$, $[0.27, 0.66]$) and higher well-being (5.3 vs 4.9 ; $d = 0.33$, $[0.14, 0.53]$). Differences in reduced commuting time ($d = 0.13$) and adaptation success ($d = 0.15$) were not reliable. H2 was supported for four of the five relevant constructs.

The largest differences were in domestic coordination load. Women reported markedly higher childcare responsibility integration ($d = 1.06$, $[0.86, 1.27]$), household task coordination ($d = 0.96$, $[0.76, 1.16]$) and eldercare management ($d = 0.80$, $[0.60, 1.00]$). H3 was supported. The contrast between the access effects ($d \approx 0.13$ – 0.14) and the care-load effects ($d \approx 0.80$ – 1.06) is the central descriptive finding of this study: the same arrangement is being applied to substantially different domestic circumstances.

Table 2. Gender comparisons on access, resources, outcomes and domestic coordination load

Construct	Women (n = 218) M (SD)	Men (n = 199) M (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i> [95% CI]
Access					
Hybrid arrangement type	5.3 (1.4)	5.1 (1.4)	1.46	.146	0.14 [-0.05, 0.34]
WFH policy implementation	5.2 (1.4)	5.0 (1.4)	1.46	.146	0.14 [-0.05, 0.34]
Flexible schedule availability	4.9 (1.5)	4.7 (1.5)	1.36	.175	0.13 [-0.06, 0.33]
Hybrid work resources					
Home workspace adequacy	5.6 (1.1)	5.2 (1.3)	3.38	< .001	0.33 [0.14, 0.53]
Schedule flexibility perception	5.2 (1.2)	4.8 (1.4)	3.12	.002	0.31 [0.11, 0.50]
Reduced commuting time	5.0 (1.6)	4.8 (1.6)	1.27	.203	0.13 [-0.07, 0.32]
Outcomes					
Work–life balance satisfaction	5.6 (1.2)	5.0 (1.4)	4.68	< .001	0.46 [0.27, 0.66]
Employee well-being	5.3 (1.1)	4.9 (1.3)	3.38	< .001	0.33 [0.14, 0.53]
Adaptation success	5.1 (1.3)	4.9 (1.3)	1.57	.117	0.15 [-0.04, 0.35]
Domestic coordination load					
Childcare responsibility integration	5.8 (1.3)	4.2 (1.7)	10.72	< .001	1.06 [0.86, 1.27]
Household task coordination	5.4 (1.2)	4.1 (1.5)	9.71	< .001	0.96 [0.76, 1.16]
Eldercare management	5.1 (1.4)	3.9 (1.6)	8.12	< .001	0.80 [0.60, 1.00]

Note. Welch-corrected *t* tests. Positive *d* indicates a higher mean among women.

4.3 Family composition as a conditioner of returns (H4)

Family composition moderated all three resource–outcome associations examined (Table 3; Figure 2). The interaction terms added significant variance for home workspace adequacy → work–life balance satisfaction ($\Delta F = 7.23, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .03$), schedule flexibility perception → well-being ($\Delta F = 6.45, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .03$) and reduced commuting time → adaptation success ($\Delta F = 5.67, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .02$). In every case the ordering followed the prediction: steepest slopes for employees with dependent children, intermediate for those with other family responsibilities, flattest for those without dependents.

Pairwise contrasts qualify this pattern. The difference between employees with dependent children and those with no dependents was significant for the workspace → balance path ($\beta = .56$ vs $.32; \chi = 2.60, p = .009$), marginal for the flexibility

→ well-being path ($\beta = .58$ vs $.41$; $\chi = 1.96$, $p = .051$) and not significant for the commuting → adaptation path ($\beta = .52$ vs $.38$; $\chi = 1.52$, $p = .129$). No contrast between adjacent groups reached significance. H4 is therefore supported in ordering and in the overall interaction tests, but the evidence for a graded difference is strongest for the workspace pathway. In practical terms, home workspace adequacy accounted for about 31% of the variance in work–life balance satisfaction among employees with dependent children, compared with about 10% among employees without dependents.

Table 3. Simple slopes of hybrid work resources on outcomes by family composition

Path	No dependents (n = 131)	Other family responsibilities (n = 106)	Dependent children (n = 180)	ΔF	ΔR^2	Children vs no dependents
Home workspace adequacy → Work–life balance satisfaction	.32	.45	.56	7.23	.03	$\chi = 2.60$, $p = .009$
Schedule flexibility perception → Employee well-being	.41	.49	.58	6.45	.03	$\chi = 1.96$, $p = .051$
Reduced commuting time → Adaptation success	.38	.47	.52	5.67	.02	$\chi = 1.52$, $p = .129$

Note. Entries are standardised simple slopes (all $p < .001$) from hierarchical regressions controlling for age, gender, education, tenure, sector and organisation size. ΔF and ΔR^2 refer to the step adding the interaction terms (all $p < .001$). Pairwise contrasts use Fisher r -to- χ and are approximate.

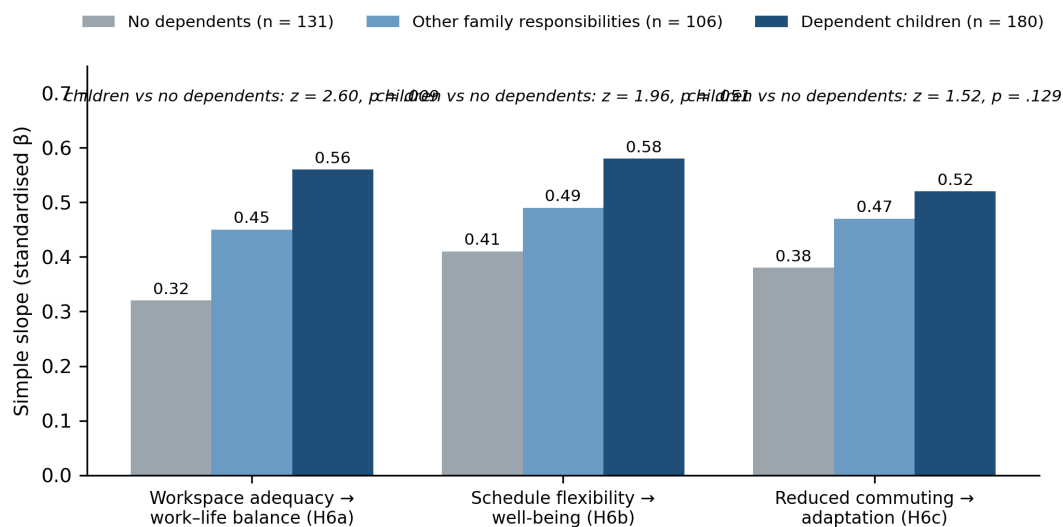


Figure 2. Simple slopes of hybrid work resources on outcomes by family composition, with contrasts between employees with dependent children and employees with no dependents.

4.4 Gender and parenthood combined (H5)

The gender difference in work–life balance satisfaction was concentrated among parents. Among employees with dependent children, women reported substantially higher balance satisfaction than men ($M = 6.1$, $SD = 1.0$ vs $M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.3$; $t = 4.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.76$). Among employees without dependents, the gender difference was not significant ($p > .05$). H5 was supported. Figure 3 summarises the overall argument: access is equal, the domestic load attached to it is not, and the returns to the arrangement follow the load rather than the access.

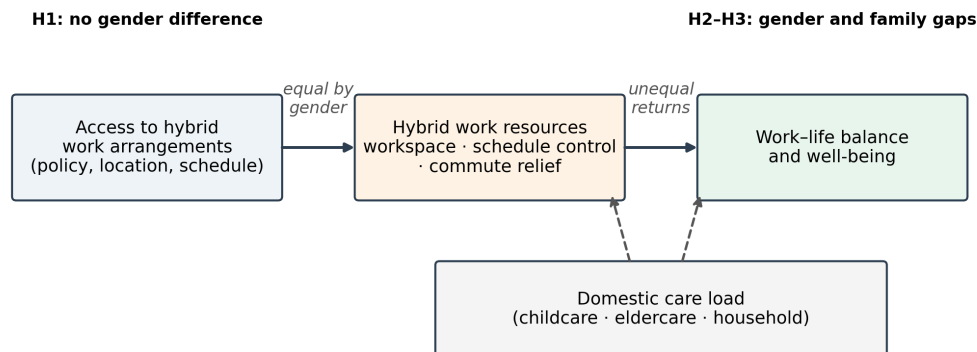


Figure 3. Summary of the argument: equal access, unequal domestic load, unequal returns.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Access equality is not benefit equality

In this sample, formal access to hybrid work was gender-neutral while reported benefit was not. This finding matters for how organisations evaluate their own flexibility policies. Equality audits typically count eligibility, uptake or headcount by arrangement type. Such metrics would have recorded parity here, and would have missed both the larger gender gap in reported outcomes and the much larger gap in domestic load that plausibly produces it. Following Voydanoff’s (2005) demands-and-resources logic, a work-arrangement resource is worth what it relieves; groups facing heavier domestic demand therefore extract more from an identical arrangement. The result extends the “use versus availability” distinction in the flexibility literature (Allen et al., 2013; Eaton, 2003) by showing that even equal access can yield unequal value.

5.2 Relief or absorption?

The direction of the gender difference requires care in interpretation. Women reported *higher* balance satisfaction and well-being, which is consistent with a relief account: hybrid work resolves conflicts that were previously more acute for them. It appears inconsistent with UK evidence that fathers working from home increased their domestic contribution while mothers remained primarily responsible (Chung et al., 2021), with the stronger versions of the flexibility-paradox argument, in which flexibility mainly enables women to absorb more unpaid work and thereby intensifies strain (Chung, 2022), and with evidence that flexible scheduling raises work-to-family conflict more for women (Kim et al., 2020).

Three considerations temper this contrast. First, our outcome measures are evaluative and arrangement-referenced: respondents assess satisfaction with their current balance, not their absolute workload. A woman who has absorbed more domestic work but avoided a daily commute may report improved balance even if her total workload has risen. Second, the comparison is between women and men within the same labour market, not between women under hybrid and office-based conditions; the counterfactual differs from that in studies of flexibility use. Third, the reference point is likely to be gendered: relief is judged against a prior situation that was more constrained for women. The evidence here therefore supports the claim that hybrid work is *evaluated* more positively by those carrying heavier care loads, not the claim that it redistributes that load. Time-use or diary data would be required to test the absorption account directly, and our design cannot settle the question.

5.3 Care responsibilities as the operative gradient

The family-composition results locate the mechanism in domestic demand rather than in gender as such. Employees with dependent children converted workspace adequacy into balance satisfaction roughly three times more strongly, in variance terms, than employees with no dependents. Employees with eldercare and extended-family responsibilities fell in between, which is notable in a setting where such obligations are common and are frequently omitted from work–family measures developed elsewhere (Chauhan, 2021). The gender difference in balance satisfaction was itself concentrated among parents, which suggests that gender operates here largely as a proxy for the distribution of care work, consistent with Indian evidence

on the gendered division of domestic labour (Deshpande, 2022) and with the international literature on caregiving and remote work during and after the pandemic (Collins et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Shockley et al., 2021).

5.4 Implications for practice

Three implications follow. First, organisations should measure the *returns* to flexible arrangements, not only access to them: parity in eligibility can coexist with substantial differences in what employees obtain. Second, because the workspace pathway showed the clearest gradient, investment in home workspace quality — equipment, ergonomic support, connectivity and a defensible claim on domestic space — is likely to yield the largest balance gains for employees with dependent children, and is a more targetable lever than schedule policy alone. Third, support should be framed in terms of care responsibilities rather than gender. Framing it as a women's benefit risks reinforcing the flexibility stigma documented in experimental work, in which flexibility requests are penalised for mothers and rewarded for fathers (Leslie et al., 2012; Munsch, 2016), and risks entrenching the assumption that care is women's work.

5.5 Limitations and future research

The design is cross-sectional and all constructs are self-reported by the same respondents, so causal claims are not warranted and common method variance cannot be excluded despite the procedural and statistical checks reported. The care-load measures are brief and were not validated against time-use data; the mediating role of care load in producing the gender difference could not be tested with the available data and should be examined directly in future work. Gender was recorded as a binary variable, which excludes non-binary employees and any within-category variation. Family composition was measured categorically; household size, partner employment status and availability of domestic help — all consequential in the Indian context — were not captured, and domestic help in particular may substitute for the resources studied here. The sample is restricted to professional roles in three sectors in one metropolitan labour market. Finally, employees were nested in 21 organisations and organisation-level variance was not modelled explicitly. Longitudinal designs, dyadic data from couples and time-use diaries would allow the relief and absorption accounts to be distinguished.

6. CONCLUSION

Equal access to hybrid work did not produce equal benefit. Women and men in this sample reported the same access to hybrid arrangements, but women reported better workspace conditions, greater perceived schedule control, higher balance satisfaction and better well-being, alongside a far heavier domestic coordination load. The returns to hybrid work resources were steepest for employees with dependent children. If hybrid work is to serve equality rather than merely accompany it, organisations need to look past access statistics to the domestic demands that determine what an arrangement is actually worth.

Declarations

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