

Barriers to Women Professionals' Career Growth during Covid-19 in India

Dr Sushama Chaudhari¹ and Dr. Shivani Chetan Inamdar²

¹ Professor, National Insurance Academy, Pune, India

² Visiting Faculty Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies, Bengaluru, India

sushama@niapune.org.in

sraserkar@gmail.com

Abstract: The slow advancement of women in their workplaces remains a social concern for corporates and industry experts across the globe (International Labour Organisation Report, 2018). During the covid-19 pandemic, the advancement of women got significantly impacted owing to the increased burden of domestic responsibilities and other personal challenges. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Report (2021), women in India were seven times more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic and eleven times more likely to not return to work after the job loss. With the Covid-19 pandemic on the rise and spreading, companies were forced to redesign their work systems, initiate and adopt a remote-work setup option. While, a majority of companies continue with the hybrid model, some companies are slowly eliminating it and returning to the regular office norms as before. This change is likely to impact women, especially the working mothers, owing to the uneven distribution of child-care responsibilities, domestic work, etc. Additionally, conventional barriers such as discriminatory practices, mentoring, networking challenges and role conflicts are expected to persist or rather increase in the changed-working models – be it the hybrid, remote, or completely offline system. The present study focuses on identifying the constraints faced by the Indian women striving against the current for their career advancements, both during the Covid-19 pandemic disruption phase and post-pandemic scenario. The insights from the study will be helpful to gain a cumulative understanding about the challenges faced by women owing to the emerging work system and in addressing the future concerns more systematically.

Keywords: Barriers, Career Growth, Covid-19, Women

1. Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic which hit most parts of the world causing country-wide panic in the early 2020 led to severe health crisis across nations. The World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020 declared covid-19 as a global pandemic (McKinsey Report 2022). India, one of the most populated countries in the world, reported the first coronavirus case in January 2020, which further increased to 107 cases by March 2020 (Ghosh, Nundy, & Mallick, 2020). The Government of India imposed the first phase of lockdown for 21 days on March 24, 2020, which was later extended in phases to prevent the spread of the virus.

The World Economic Forum Report (2021) suggests that the female employment fell by 4.2% in 2020 i.e., during the pandemic as compared to a 3% decline in male employment. The report further states that women employment has been hit harder by the pandemic and they are at a greater risk of job-loss, reduced working hours than men giving a major setback to the efforts of past two decades for a better gender equality. While developed nations like USA, the UK, Europe reported a sudden downshift in female employment during the pandemic, it is the developing economies which suffered the most wherein the percentage of female employment is already at a lower level.

India, with a wide demographic dividend, holding a population of 1.4 billion and being one of the emerging economies of the world, scores one of the lowest in terms of female labour participation. As per Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy report of 2022, only 10% of working age Indian women were either employed or looking for jobs i.e., only 39 million women were employed in the workforce compared to 361 million men. As per the Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (2021), India slipped 28 notches downward and was placed at 140th position out of 156 countries in terms of gender gap in the workforce. During the covid-19 pandemic, India reported an increased female attrition and forced layoffs (Bansal & Mahajan, 2023). The female labour participation rate in India slipped from 24.8% to 22.3% which is one of the highest in the world. Gender studies conducted in India suggest that the burden of domestic responsibilities is clearly tilted towards women in India which slows down their progression path (Barua et al., 2016). During Covid-19 pandemic, this uneven distribution of domestic responsibilities increased manifold due to the changed work norms and policies along with increased household work (i.e., remote working, closure of schools, creches etc).

After two years of the pandemic run, the chief of the World Health Organization has finally declared an end to the Covid-19 menace as a global health emergency (WHO Report, 2023). However, with slow transition from

hybrid mode to physical work, the post-pandemic era continues to face its enduring consequences, impacting the humanity, and presenting some unique challenges which are never experienced before. A study of this nature would be very useful in the Indian context which offers a unique and diverse social, cultural setting as compared to the other geographic regions and where the progression of women in India has remained sluggish than progressive.

2. Prospects for Career Advancement of Women Professionals in India

Organisations across the globe have reported serious concerns over the slower advancement of women in the workplace (Barhate *et al.* 2021). Women constitute half of the world's population; however, they continue to remain under-represented in the corporate hierarchy. As per the International Labour Organization (ILO) Report (2019), while four in five men are involved in paid work, less than half of the women are part of the labour force.

India, being counted as one of the fastest growing economies of the world, has one of the lowest female labour participation rates – 24% (World Bank Report 2019). The percentage of women at the leadership and senior managerial levels is disproportionately low at 14.6% and 8.9% respectively. An ILO report (2018) suggests that the gender- pay gap in India varies between 22 to 39 percent across various sectors. The same situation continues in the services sector which witnesses the highest female participation rate with 30% women in Information Technology, 22.4% in financial services sector followed by other sectors which employ a meagre 4-5% of females (CFA Report, 2022). However, the report suggests that the progression for women is not steady and less than 5% reach the leadership level across all the sectors. The covid-19 pandemic has further threatened to reverse the progression of women in terms of participation and progression in the management hierarchy. It is thus imperative to understand and analyse the barriers experienced by women in their career path both during the pandemic as well as the post-pandemic era wherein the nature of work dynamics has completely changed creating new challenges for working females.

3. Covid-19 in India: The Local Context

The flare up of covid-19 virus impacted lives and livelihoods, adversely affected communities, and disrupted businesses and industries across the world. India, with a population of almost 1.4 billion and a mosaic of social and economic diversity, distinctive cultural values, faced some unique challenges owing to the flare-up of covid-19 pandemic. In order to curb the spread of virus, the government imposed some stringent measures in the form of lock-down restrictions, closing of international as well as inter-state borders, trade restrictions, etc., thus bringing the economic activities to a grinding halt. The outbreak of covid-19 pandemic and its flare-up caused a havoc in the labour market creating unemployment and some significant challenges, especially for the women (World Economic Forum report (2021). The pandemic situation pushed companies to offer options, like 'remote-working', 'work- from-home'. While these measures were taken to adhere to the government norms, it changed the work dynamics drastically, creating some unique challenges such as increased role conflict, child, elder care with no support owing to absence of maids, nanny, closure of schools, day care etc.

4. The Post-Pandemic Period

Research studies conducted during the unsettled period of pandemic had predicted that the work practices adopted during covid-19 would usher in permanent changes in the work patterns and linger even for the years – post covid (Kane *et al.*, 2021). This has proved prophetic to some extent with organizations now offering a hybrid-work model to the majority of their employees. However, many have also declared a "stop" to the permanent work-from-home option, due to concerns over productivity, performance, team integration, etc. A topical study, conducted by the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the University of California (UCLA) in 2023, revealed that remote working practice reduces the productivity, engagement and inclusion of employees up to 18% due to the various distractions involved while being at home.

The exclusion of the remote-working option and/or imposing stringent practices providing limited flexibility is bound to pose severe challenges for women who, besides office work, also carry the primary onus of domestic duties. Further, with the changes in the work-place norms, existing barriers in the form of discriminatory practices, challenges in mentoring, networking, role conflict, etc., are expected to persist or increase, thus limiting career advancements of the 'working' women. Every new measure adopted or change in the policies is expected to bring some unique challenges especially for the women who owe the primary burden of personal responsibilities along with work. Therefore, it is imperative to explore and understand the difficulties or the barriers experienced by women in each phase of these uncertain times.

5. Data Collection and Research Methodology

The study was conceived and undertaken to derive insights into the various barriers encountered by women professionals in India both during and post-covid-19 pandemic scenario by collecting qualitative data. The data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews to understand the real-life challenges of women (Rubin & Rubin 2011). All the respondents were asked about the various barriers they usually encounter in their career progression path.

The primary data was collected in two stages, i.e., (i) during the pandemic between October 2021 to March 2022, and (ii) after the pandemic i. e., from April to October 2023. For the study, convenience sampling method was used. A total of 30 women professionals working in the city of Bengaluru (India) including various sectors, such as Information Technology, Banking and Financial Services, Auditing and Consulting Firms were considered in the study. The interview data was collected virtually, i. e., through telephonic-interview conversation – virtual meetings – using Microsoft Teams, skype, etc., owing to the requirements of social distancing norms and lockdown restrictions in place. In the second phase, the same set of respondents were approached to obtain their views about the differences in the challenges they are experiencing in the post-pandemic phase. All the interviews were subsequently transcribed *verbatim*, preserving the anonymity of the participants. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

6. Methodology

After the data collection, the analysis was done using the NVivo 12 plus software. It helped to arrange and organise the data in a more systematic and meaningful manner. The researchers read, re-read, and examined the data for any themes, patterns. The barriers that emerged were gender discrimination, lack of workplace flexibility, lack of mentoring restricted networking opportunities, role conflict, lack of family support

6.1 Participant Details

A total of 30 women respondents were included in the study. Table 1 mentions about the demographic details of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Details	No. of Participants
Marital Status	
Married	24
Single	6
Children	
Yes	18
No	12
Industry	
Information Technology	14
Banks and Financial Services	7
Audit and Consultancy Firms	9

Designation	No. of Participants
Executive	9
Senior Executive	6
Middle Manager	8
Senior Manager	6
Any other higher position	1

Figure 1 represents the work arrangement of women employees especially in the post-pandemic period. During the covid-19 pandemic, all the women respondents who participated in the study were working remotely. However, today the statistics suggest that most of the employees (i.e., 33%) are either regularly going to office or working in a hybrid model (50%).

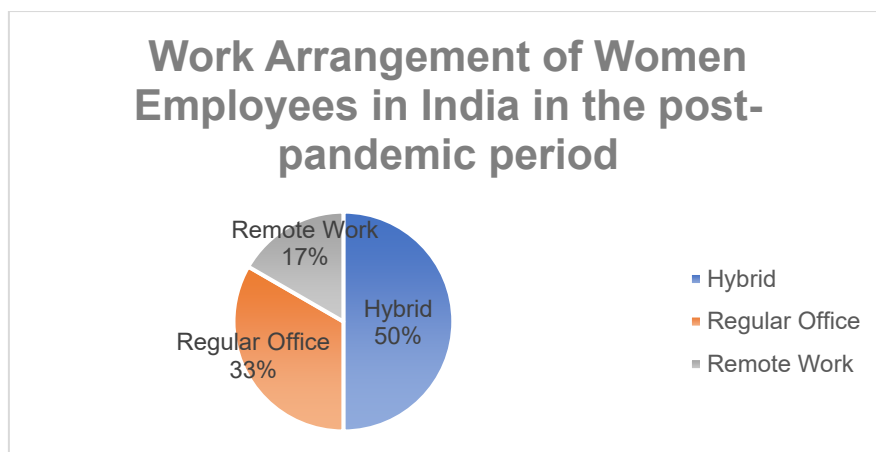


Figure 1: Work Arrangement of Women Employees in India in the post-pandemic period

7. Results

The barriers experienced by women professionals for career advancement during the pandemic and post-pandemic in India are mentioned below.

7.1 Gender Discrimination

Gender Discrimination is defined as a deferential treatment experienced by an individual primarily due to his or her gender (Heilman & Caleo 2018). Women respondents reported experiencing gender discrimination at the various stages of their career including hiring, compensation and promotions, especially after they were married or had children. During the covid-19 pandemic, the already vulnerable and marginalized women employees further experienced inequalities.

A woman working as a senior executive in a bank shared her experience:

"I started looking for work after a gap of few years post maternity. People were not ready to recruit me especially during the pandemic as they thought I have a small kid so it would be difficult for me to manage. I was offered a much lower salary, position than before."

The conventional barrier was experienced by women even in the post- pandemic era.

A manager working for a consultancy firm stated:

"I recently applied for an interview for a job change. They offered a lower position as the company is mandating regular work from office norm. I have a small baby and aged in-laws at home hence it would be difficult for me to go to office on a regular basis. Such incidents are experienced more by women than men".

7.2 Lack of Workplace Flexibility

Workplace flexibility refers to freedom of choice over how, when, and where to do the work (Jones *et al.*, 2020). During the period of the pandemic, organizations were compelled to offer the option of working from home. While it provided the desirable flexibility, women reported experiencing time pressure, stress in multi-tasking and a constant guilt of being unable to fulfil multiple (domestic and office) responsibilities.

A senior manager working with an IT company stated:

"My work has increased so much due to work from home. I have to login early morning, make breakfast, help kids with online classes, do laundry, utensils and so much more. Employers have also become stricter about working hours, login and logout time, duration of lunch, coffee breaks."

In the post-pandemic situation, majority of the organizations across various sectors in India are encouraging or rather mandating the trend of "RTO" (Return to Office) i.e., 5-day work- from-office policy, or hybrid work model (Business Insider 2023). This is causing a rather difficult situation for women who need a more flexible work environment than their male counterparts.

An Executive working with an IT company voiced this point:

“As a mother of two, I was happy to continue my work while being at home. But now my employers are asking me to come to office at least twice a week which might increase to 3 days a week by month end. With limited flexibility, it will get difficult for working mothers like me who need to look after childcare responsibilities apart from work.”

These narrations are eye-openers in a way which showcase that women face significant challenges, in case the limited flexibility offered by the organisations are curtailed. If the trend of withdrawing flexible norms continues further, organizations might once again have to bear the onus of losing the potential female-talent workforce.

7.3 Lack of Mentoring

Mentoring is considered as one of the significant factors for fast career advancement, especially for women professionals. However, women experience several barriers to having a good mentor especially due to the issues of cross-gender mentoring, lack of informal opportunities to meet the mentor, and limited availability of trained and dedicated female mentors (Coleman 2020).

Women respondents to the study mentioned that the need for a good mentor became even more crucial during the covid-19 pandemic due to the unconventional virtual mentoring. A woman respondent who had recently delivered a child and working as a manager with a consultancy firm shared:

“Mentoring sessions did not happen at all. I was going through a personal crisis and had no one to talk. I requested my mentor for online sessions, tried to setup calls, meeting requests but it never worked out.”

Post-pandemic, the situation is slowly returning to normal with more physical office days. A senior executive of a bank said:

“I get to meet my mentor at least once a month. Our working days in the office are different. But we mutually decide a day when both of us can come to the workplace and discuss the issues. A one-to-one discussion is much more fruitful than the online sessions.”

The pandemic and its after-effects have left long-term impact on the working norms, policies and practices. In these uncertain days, efficient mentoring- support can help women employees to sustain growth in the corporate hierarchy.

7.4 Restricted Networking Opportunities

The popular saying, “It’s not what you know, it’s whom you know” that rightly explains the need to do networking in the organization for professional development (De Klerk & Verreynne 2017). Virtual networking during covid time period became especially challenging, if not impossible. Networking, which is solely based on personal connect, was limited merely to a computer-mediated conversation link. Organizations moved from the physical set-up of board meetings, conferences to online workshops, video conferencing, virtual gatherings, etc., to comply and cope with the pandemic norms thus limiting the networking skills of employees to a great extent. A respondent working in the IT industry stated:

“I miss going to work, meeting people, networking with colleagues, which is actually challenging when you are working remotely. My company regularly conducts virtual events. But it is no fun. Moreover, I am already burdened with child-care duties owing to the pandemic; so, I have no time left to attend virtual networking sessions.”

In the post-pandemic era, the situation is believed to improve as employees are gradually tracking back to the workplaces. Physical-team meetings, lunch hours, informal conversations are back in place. These breaks are useful especially for networking. An executive said:

“I get to meet my team members occasionally. We have a hybrid-work model; so when I go to office, I make sure to meet my team members for lunch, coffee breaks. This way I get to know more people which is important and necessary.”

With the regular norm of going to office being introduced once again, the networking issues experienced due to covid will gradually fade away. However, the persistent problem of exclusion from old boys’ network, boys club,

men's locker room conversations, or after-office hours parties etc., may resurface which might hamper the career growth of women.

7.5 Role Conflict

Role conflict is one of the widely researched areas with respect to the challenges hindering the career advancement of women. The social-role theory explains that the gender-role division flows from the societal expectations originating from the past eras (Eagly and Wood 1999). In the lockdown situation, availability of domestic help nearly vanished, childcare crisis, closure of schools, no crèche facility, limited family support, etc., exerted additional pressure on women which lead to domestic conflicts and unhappy family situation. An executive of an audit firm said:

"Since there were no schools, day-care or domestic help, we had to do everything on our own, which was extremely difficult and led to occasional conflicts. There was a constant juggling between house and office work which left me exhausted every day."

In the post-pandemic period, employers are putting pressure on employees to report to office at least few days a week. With limited flexibility, pressure of numerous responsibilities, the conflicts between multiple and diverse roles seem to be unavoidable. A senior executive working with a consulting firm shared:

"Conflict in duties arise almost every day. If I have to go to office, I need to plan – who will look after children, provide food, supervise studies, school drops and picking. There is constant conflict between multiple roles."

The gender-imbalance in the household duties often push women to a lower pay and position, hindering or limiting their potential advancement. It leads to the perennial question: can women really "have it all", or do they need to "give up on one" of the domains to focus on another (Sandberg 2015).

7.6 Lack of Family/Spousal Support

Family support plays a key role when it comes to the career growth of women. In India, where family reinforces social and cultural expectations, it is one of the key factors which decides the career trajectory of women to a great extent. Before marriage, support from parents and after marriage support from spouse and in-laws is extremely important (Sandberg 2015). During the prowling-period of the pandemic, family support became a crucial factor. An executive of an IT company said:

"I have 2 kids and I must sit with them for their online classes; look after the domestic work. While my husband is supportive and looks after kids, I do the primary work of looking after household matters."

Post-pandemic, most of the companies are now regulating the norm of reporting to the workplace. A manager of a consultancy firm said:

"My husband and I have adjusted our office days in a way that one of us stays at home to look after children. However, in times of crisis it is usually me who takes a back seat while there is no change in routine for my husband."

The narrations clearly indicate the need for a strong family support for the working women while they are in their professional journey.

7.7 Difference in the Barriers Experienced by Women Professionals During and Post Covid-19 Pandemic

Table 2 suggests the changes in the percentage of a particular barrier i.e., whether it increased, decreased, or remained the same both during and after the covid-19 pandemic.

The results in Table 2 indicate a slight increase (i.e., from 70%) during the pandemic to (73.33%) post-pandemic period in discriminatory practices. This indicates that discriminatory behaviour is embedded more prominently at the office-work setup than in the remote scenario. Lack of workplace flexibility significantly increased from 46.67% during the covid to 70% post-covid. This is primarily due to the employers mandating employees to return to the workplace post-pandemic. Both the barriers, i.e., lack of mentoring and networking mitigated from 58.6% to 50% and 68.9% to 53.3% respectively. During the pandemic, women employees experienced severe challenges due to limited virtual connectivity with supervisors, peers and subordinates. Post-pandemic, connect with

mentors and colleagues has regained and thus the existence of the barriers has reduced marginally but not vanished absolutely. Role conflict also showed an increase from 80% to 86.67% due to offices being re-opened leading to an increased struggle for multitasking. Lastly, in terms of family support, the parity of sharing domestic and family responsibilities seems to be fading again, from 63.33% to 73.33%, with regular office norms being implemented. The results reveal that post-pandemic period, most of the barriers are back in space and are being experienced increasingly by women employees.

Table 2: Change in the percentage of barriers mentioned by women professionals during covid-19 and post pandemic

Barriers	During Covid 19 (Total =30 respondents)	Percentage	Post Covid 19 (Total= 30 respondents)	Percentage	Change in Percentage
Gender Discrimination	21	70%	22	73.33%	↑ (Increase)
Lack of Workplace Flexibility	14	46.67%	21	70%	↑ (Increase)
Lack of Mentoring	17	58.60%	15	50%	↓ (Decrease)
Restricted Networking Opportunities	20	68.90%	16	53.33%	↓ (Decrease)
Role Conflict	24	80%	26	86.67%	↑ (Increase)
Lack of Family/Spousal Support	19	63.33%	22	73.33%	↑ (Increase)

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study is unique and relevant as it focuses on the different barriers experienced by women employees in their career advancement path both during and post-covid-19 pandemic. The theoretical narrations included in the study give a clear and in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by women in both the phases. The change in the nature of barriers from pandemic to the post-pandemic era suggests that the impact of barriers significantly changes as per the work norms and settings. Hence, organisations by taking effective measures can control the challenges experienced by women to a great extent.

Awareness about such impact is relevant and necessary both from an academic as well as industrial/management perspective. The study provides insights about the real-life challenges experienced by women in both the pandemic and post-pandemic era. It is important to understand the barriers which women are facing today as it will have a long-term impact on the gender equity ratio in years to come. It will also help organisations to better understand the concerns of women by re-installing the policies, systems, being active listeners, and offering proactive flexibility. Organizations can understand the needs and aspirations and address the necessity of holistic talent-utilization of the female employees who are bound to experience greater hurdles in their career path progression. The findings of this study would help business leaders, HR professionals, policymakers and researchers in developing a hybrid workplace as they chart the path towards the post-pandemic future.

The study is also enriching for researchers and academicians as it opens an opportunity to explore the real-life challenges, difficulties of women wherein they are experiencing a significant transition of moving from the comfort of working from home to a mandatory work from office norms. While, it is a challenging period for women, corporates are also experiencing some unprecedented challenges in terms of renegotiating with the changing work norms and timely adjusting their policies, practices to address the concern of their employees. Studies in the future have a wide scope to address the concerns both from an employer as well employee perspective in different demographic, geographical or industrial setting.

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