

VIRTUAL WORK AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN BANGALORE: ENHANCING WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Social sustainability has gained growing importance as cities today rapidly transform into digital and knowledge driven economies. This article explores Bangalore city as a model for understanding social sustainability in the context of virtual work and work-life balance, with a particular focus on women. Social sustainability, which encompasses solidarity, social cohesion, integration, equity, and well-being, is deeply intertwined with economic and environmental sustainability. However, research often examines these dimensions in isolation, overlooking their interconnected nature.

Bangalore, a leading technological and economic hub, provides an ideal setting to analyse the challenges and opportunities presented by remote work in fostering social sustainability. As virtual work becomes more prevalent, it offers potential benefits such as reducing urban congestion, improving workforce participation, and promoting gender equity. However, it also introduces challenges related to digital access, social isolation, and work-life boundaries. This study specifically focuses on women, as extensive literature suggests that work-life balance remains a gendered issue, with women disproportionately affected by caregiving responsibilities and structural workplace inequalities.

The findings emphasize that organizations and policymakers must recognize work-life balance as an essential component of social sustainability and adopt strategies to support inclusive, flexible, and equitable remote work environments. The study concludes by proposing a blended approach allowing employees to balance the benefits of remote flexibility with the collaborative advantages of an in-office settings also to ensure that virtual work contributes to a more socially sustainable future.

KEYWORDS

Gender Equity, Remote Work, Social Sustainability, Virtual Work, Work-Life Balance.

INTRODUCTION

The swift transition to virtual work, significantly accelerated by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally reshaped workplace dynamics, particularly within urban knowledge economies such as Bangalore. As India's "Silicon Valley," Bangalore boasts a substantial concentration of IT and knowledge-based industries, where remote and hybrid work models have been adopted at an unprecedented rate. While virtual work has provided organizations with increased flexibility and resilience, its societal consequences, especially concerning the well-being and work-life balance of women professionals, demands urgently scholarly attention.

This article explores the intersection of virtual work and social sustainability through the lens of women's work-life balance in Bangalore. Social sustainability, often overshadowed by its environmental and economic counterparts, pertains to the ability of a society to maintain and improve the well-being of all its members. In the context of employment, it involves promoting equity, inclusion, mental and physical well-being, and access to opportunities without compromising personal or familial responsibilities. For women—especially those balancing caregiving roles, cultural expectations, and professional aspirations—virtual work offers both opportunities and challenges that are distinct and deeply nuanced (Buddhapriya, 2009).

While advocates for remote work emphasize greater independence, shorter commutes, and an improved ability to manage personal responsibilities, research also indicates that women disproportionately shoulder a heavier load of household and professional tasks. In Bangalore's technologically advanced work environment, where long workdays and high achievement are frequently celebrated, virtual work has blurred the lines separating professional and private lives. This erosion of boundaries, initially perceived as a benefit, has resulted in unrecognized work, the pressure to be constantly available online, and, in some instances, a decline in the mental health of women employees.

This article contends that for virtual work to become a socially sustainable model within Bangalore's corporate landscape, it must be deliberately structured to improve work-life balance for women, going beyond simply relocating the physical workspace. Utilizing a combination of existing data, recent research on the gender-specific effects of remote work, and evolving policy responses within the IT industry, this study demonstrates how organizations can actively promote social sustainability. By implementing gender-aware practices, offering mental health resources, and cultivating equitable workplace cultures in virtual settings, companies can contribute not only

to the empowerment of women but also to the creation of more robust and people-centric workplaces.

This analysis frames virtual work not merely as a technological advancement, but as a significant social trial. Its success, the article argues, hinges on how inclusively and sustainably it is implemented, particularly for women professionals navigating the intricate sociocultural landscape of urban India, specifically Bengaluru.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Virtual work is not a novel concept, with its significant emergence dating back to the 1980s. Baker et al. (2007) prefer the term "remote working" and note the field's definitional ambiguity, stating: "Reasons include that remote working has been studied under various names (e.g., teleworking, telecommuting, and working from home), with no generally accepted definitions; terms are used differently and interchangeably from study to study; and data gathering methods and definitions vary" (p. 38).

The definition of "telework" put forth by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1990 appears to be the most widely accepted: "A form of work in which (a) work is performed in a location remote from a central office or production facilities, thus separating worker from personal contact with coworkers there; And (b) new technology enables this separation by facilitating communication" (Ruiz and Walling, 2005, as cited in Beno, 2018, p. 27).

Over the last ten years, virtual working or working from home was largely viewed as an optional arrangement for employees. However, the recent pandemic has transformed it into a critical necessity for the majority of companies (Financial Express, 2020). Workplaces have undergone a significant transformation, with remote working/work from home becoming essential for organizations to protect employee well-being, thereby creating an impetus to investigate the significant effects on employees now working from their residences. Balancing work responsibilities with family care has become an extremely challenging task for many (Singh Leena P. Jena Artta Bandhu, 2020).

Literature on sustainable productivity examines a growing body of research that redefines productivity beyond traditional output and efficiency metrics. This perspective emphasizes the need to balance production with the well-being of workers, environmental responsibility, and ethical considerations. The following section presents a discussion of the positive and negative aspects of virtual work for employees, drawn from various researchers.

Positive Aspects

The way we work may be forever changed due to the shift in attitudes toward working from home (WFH) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Abigail Johnson Hess & Jennifer Liu, 2020). A recent MIT study shows that half of those employed before the pandemic now work remotely, significantly impacting the work environment, particularly for women balancing family and professional lives.

No career breaks

According to the Harvard Business Review (2020), flexible work options may offer significant advantages for women. There is optimism that removing the stigma associated with WFH, reducing commute times, and eliminating "face time" norms could enable women to maintain full-time employment and avoid career disruptions during caregiving years. As the Times of India (2020) reports, many women face career setbacks due to maternity leave, a challenge that virtual work environments could mitigate by allowing for continuous employment.

Work life balance

Flexible work options offer key benefits for women by reducing commute time, eliminating "face time" norms, and supporting continuous employment during caregiving years (Harvard Business Review, 2020; Times of India, 2020). A BlueJeans survey (2020) found remote workers put in 3.13 extra hours daily, showing women's ability to balance roles. FlexJobs highlights how remote work enables better integration of personal and professional life through flexible schedules.

Less commuting time

Reduced commuting time is a significant advantage of working from home. As Ford and Butts (1991) highlight, eliminating the stresses of rush hour can be particularly beneficial for employees. By decreasing time spent traveling, employees not only lower their stress levels but also reduce expenses related to fuel and vehicle maintenance. This time saved can be reallocated to family, hobbies, exercise, or relaxation, as noted by Sophia Barron (2020).

Reduce Absenteeism

Working from home reduces commuting stress and expenses, freeing time for family, hobbies, and self-care (Ford & Butts, 1991; Barron, 2020). It also lowers absenteeism due to illness or family needs (Lupu, 2017), benefiting women who often juggle dual responsibilities.

Increased productivity

Reduced commuting time is a major benefit of remote work, lowering stress and expenses while freeing time for family, hobbies, and self-care (Ford & Butts, 1991; Barron, 2020). It also contributes to reduced absenteeism from issues like illness or family emergencies (Lupu, 2017), a crucial advantage for women balancing professional and caregiving roles.

Additionally, a 2020 Blue Jeans survey indicated that 40.1% of respondents felt more productive working from home, with another 34.2% reporting the same level of productivity as in the office. This suggests that remote work is largely seen as beneficial by employees.

Job Satisfaction

Virtual work boosts job satisfaction through flexibility and autonomy (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012; Bosin, 2020). However, during COVID-19, women faced added challenges balancing work and family in shared spaces (Latha & Swarna, 2020). Despite its benefits, remote work often increases domestic burdens for women, and organizations remain hesitant due to concerns over productivity, communication, and sustainability.

CHALLENGES

Isolated from others

In the article "The History of Loneliness," Jill Lepore highlights the health risks of isolation—a concern increasingly relevant in remote work settings. Naina Khare (2021) notes that women working from home often face social disconnection due to the loss of daily interpersonal interactions. Traditional office spaces not only support professional collaboration but also foster emotional well-being through informal social bonds.

People from different income brackets

Virtual work heavily relies on stable internet and adequate digital infrastructure. As Denning (2020) notes, for higher-income individuals, internet access is a given, but for many, especially lower-income groups, digital inequalities persist. Remote work has exposed these gaps, with families often competing for devices and bandwidth—especially where children attend online classes. Additionally, many lack basic physical amenities like ergonomic furniture or climate control, impacting productivity and comfort, and deepening existing socioeconomic disparities.

Difficult to define boundaries in case of women employee

Naina Khare (2021) notes that women continue to shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities, a

reality that has become more challenging in the shift to remote work. The blurring of boundaries between home and professional life makes it difficult for women to manage multiple roles simultaneously. As they juggle childcare, household chores, and salaried work within the same space and timeframe, their focus becomes divided, motivation declines, and both personal and professional outcomes are compromised.

Effecting mental and Physical health

B.L. Shivakumar and Thirumoorthi Rangaraj (2020) highlight a strong link between remote work and rising levels of anxiety, stress, and depression among employees. Their study attributes these mental health challenges to the uncertainty brought on by the "new normal" of working from home, including concerns over job security, layoffs, and the broader economic slowdown.

Lack of Trust

Lack of trust in telecommuting can limit career growth due to reduced interaction, weaker networks, and poor management support (Bathini & Kandathil, 2020). Chung et al. (2020) found that some managers respond with excessive surveillance and constant availability demands, undermining employee autonomy and work-life balance.

Job Insecurity

According to a recent Ipsos survey for the World Economic Forum, over 54% of working adults fear job loss within the next year. The economic downturn triggered by the pandemic has led many organizations to adopt cost-cutting strategies, including extensive downsizing. This heightened sense of job insecurity has become a major source of stress for employees, adversely affecting their productivity and overall performance.

Impact on women employee

An article in *Harvard Business Review* highlights that even with workplace flexibility and mobile work options, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic and childcare responsibilities compared to men. This structural imbalance persists regardless of whether work is performed remotely or in-office. Similarly, *The Wall Street Journal* reports that remote work during the pandemic may have negatively impacted women's careers, suggesting that working from home can inadvertently hinder professional growth rather than support it.

NEED OF THE STUDY

The COVID-19-driven rise of virtual work has transformed workplace structures, especially in Bangalore's IT and knowledge sectors. While offering flexibility and efficiency, it has also strained work-life balance and well-being. Women professionals face increased pressures as home-work overlap amplifies existing responsibilities and reinforces gendered labour roles.

This study examines the intersection of virtual work, social sustainability, and gender dynamics. For urban professional women, remote work blurs personal-professional boundaries, offering flexibility while reinforcing traditional roles and increasing unpaid labor. These shifts impact role negotiation, opportunities, and long-term workforce participation.

Aligning remote work policies with social sustainability—centred on equity, inclusion, and well-being—is vital. In Bangalore's IT and service sectors, where women are a significant workforce, designing virtual environments that enable career growth without compromising health is essential.

Corporate sectors in urban hubs like Bangalore significantly shape both workplace culture and societal gender norms. Hence, remote work policies must be inclusive and responsive to women's unique challenges. Without such alignment, virtual work risks reinforcing gender disparities. Embedding social sustainability in these practices is key to advancing gender equity, organizational resilience, and broader societal change. This study explores how remote work impacts work-life balance for women in Bangalore and how organizations are adapting.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In recent years, virtual work has gained significant momentum, with Gallup reporting that approximately 42% of the U.S. workforce engages in remote work at least part of the time. Although this shift offers notable advantages—such as greater flexibility and relief from the stress of daily commuting—it has also raised important questions about its implications for employee productivity and overall health.

Research reveals that remote workers often face social isolation and diminished interpersonal interaction. A Buffer survey reported that 20% of remote employees cited loneliness as their top challenge. Blurred boundaries between work and personal life in virtual environments further contribute to stress, burnout, and reduced productivity.

Despite growing literature on virtual work, key gaps persist in understanding the root causes of its adverse effects. While effective communication and

organizational support have been shown to mitigate some issues, persistent challenges such as technological barriers and poor ergonomic setups continue to impact employee well-being and performance.

A systematic investigation into the impact of virtual work on employee well-being and sustainable productivity is essential. Qualitative insights can reveal underlying patterns and key influencing factors. Addressing this gap will help organizations develop targeted interventions that support employee health and performance, ensuring long-term sustainability in a virtual work landscape.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the impact of virtual work on the work-life balance of women professionals in Bangalore, with a particular emphasis on those employed in the IT and knowledge-intensive sectors.
 2. To examine the interplay between virtual work environments and principles of social sustainability, focusing on equity, inclusivity, and the holistic well-being of women employees.
 3. To investigate the gender-specific challenges and emerging opportunities associated with remote work, especially in relation to unpaid care responsibilities, role negotiation, and career advancement.
 4. To evaluate organizational policies and support mechanisms designed to assist women in virtual work settings, and to assess their effectiveness in fostering sustainable and equitable work practices.
 5. To identify the key facilitators and constraints influencing sustainable productivity and health among women working remotely, considering technological, organizational, and socio-cultural dimensions.
 6. To develop actionable policy and practice recommendations aimed at promoting inclusive, gender-responsive virtual work models that support social sustainability and enhance organizational resilience.
1. **H1:** Virtual work has a significant positive impact on the work-life balance of women professionals in the IT and knowledge sectors in Bangalore.
 2. **H2:** Women professionals working in virtual settings experience a higher burden of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities compared to their male counterparts, affecting their overall well-being and productivity.
 3. **H3:** There is a significant association between organizational support (e.g., flexible scheduling, mental health resources, ergonomic assistance) and improved sustainable productivity among women remote workers.
 4. **H4:** Inadequate technological infrastructure and lack of ergonomic support are negatively associated with the physical and mental health outcomes of women working remotely.
 5. **H5:** The presence of gender-sensitive remote work policies are positively correlated with women's job satisfaction, career progression, and long-term workforce retention.
 6. **H6:** Increased work autonomy and flexibility in virtual work environments contribute significantly to social sustainability outcomes such as inclusivity, equity, and employee engagement for women.
 7. **H7:** Women who receive strong managerial and peer support in remote work settings report lower levels of stress and burnout compared to those with minimal support structures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this study is to explore how various elements of the virtual work environment influence employee productivity and sustainability. An exploratory qualitative methodology was employed, utilizing structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from employees working in IT and ITeS sectors. The research focused on female professionals actively engaged in remote work settings.

To capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, the study used a questionnaire comprising open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their views in detail without the constraints of predefined response options. This

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

approach enabled the collection of rich, nuanced data reflective of real-world challenges and coping mechanisms in virtual work contexts.

The data source for this study is primary, obtained directly through interviews with selected employees. Participants were purposefully sampled to represent diverse roles, experience levels, and personal circumstances within the remote working ecosystem. Table 1 presents the demographic and professional profiles of the respondents.

Data collected through interviews were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and key themes. The analysis focused on core areas such as work-life balance, stress management, physical ergonomics, and mental health—all of which are essential to understanding sustainable productivity in remote work environments. These insights underscore the need for organizations to design responsive remote work policies that address both organizational goals and the holistic sustainability of their workforce.

Respondent SI no	Job Title	Department/Team
1	Agile Coach	Occupant Safety System
2	CEO	Design
3	Product Manager	D&A
4	Software Integrator	Occupant Safety System
5	Manager Software	Quality function
6	Quality Coach	PME / ATO
7	AVP	IT
8	Manager	Data and Analytics Operations

9	SW project Manager	ESA PS2 CC
10	HR live support administrator	Human Resources
11	EPQ	SDS/QMM
12	DevOps Engineer	DevOps
13	Delivery Director	Global Delivery – IT
14	Process lead	Account
15	Customer Success Manager	Sales
16	Software engineer	Development

Table 1: Respondent Profile

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes that encapsulate the diverse and layered effects of virtual working on employee productivity and sustainability. These themes are: (1) Blurred Boundaries and Work-Life Integration, (2) Shifts in Perceived Productivity and Performance Evaluation, (3) Emerging Physical and Mental Health Concerns, (4) Digital Communication and Institutional Support Mechanisms, and (5) Gendered Implications of Remote Work Structures. Each theme is explored in detail below, contextualized through relevant literature and theoretical frameworks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the remote work experience.

1. Work-Life Integration and Role Overlap

A key theme was the blurring of work-life boundaries, with many participants—especially women—struggling to separate professional and personal roles. Temporal flexibility often led to an “always-on” culture, increasing role strain and reducing work-life balance.

“Even though I save time on commuting, I feel like I’m working longer hours. My day never seems to end.” – Female Software Developer, 35

This finding supports previous research (Bloom et al., 2021) that highlights how remote work can inadvertently intensify workload and increase domestic labour, especially for women.

2. Perceived Productivity and Performance Management

Respondents reported mixed views on productivity in virtual settings. Some experienced improved focus due to fewer office distractions, while others faced challenges like lack of routine, self-discipline, and unclear performance metrics.

"I'm more productive when I set my own pace, but at times I miss the structure that the office used to provide." – IT Consultant, 40

These insights resonate with the findings of the Blue Jeans Work from Home Survey (2020), which reported similar divides in productivity perceptions among remote workers.

3. Physical and Mental Health Challenges

Many respondents reported ergonomic issues, physical inactivity, and mental fatigue. Inadequate work setups, extended screen time, and irregular breaks were key contributors to physical discomfort and psychological stress.

"I started having neck and back pain, and my anxiety levels have gone up due to constant online meetings." – Female Data Analyst, 28

This corresponds with WHO (2021) findings, which highlight an increase in sedentary behaviour and mental health challenges linked to extended remote work, especially in the absence of organizational support for employee well-being.

4. Digital Collaboration and Organizational Support

Though digital tools enabled collaboration, many participants felt communication became impersonal and transactional, weakening team cohesion and stifling creativity due to the loss of informal interactions and spontaneous idea sharing.

"Our team works well technically, but the social element is missing—we're just ticking boxes now." – Project Manager, 42

The role of leadership and HR support was also discussed, with respondents noting that empathetic leadership and flexible policies significantly influenced their remote work experience.

5. Gendered Dynamics of Remote Work

A key finding highlights the gendered impact of virtual work, with women facing greater difficulty balancing dual roles and noting that unpaid care work often goes unrecognized in evaluations of productivity.

"When I attend meetings, I'm also making lunch or checking on my child's online class. This multitasking is exhausting." – Female IT Professional, 32

These insights underscore the need for gender-sensitive policies that address caregiving responsibilities, equitable workload distribution, and supportive structures in virtual work environments.

FINDINGS

The discussion in this research paper is in line with the themes that arose from the focus group and interview transcripts. The main aim of this study was to understand the impact of virtual working on factors effecting sustainability and productivity of employees. An exploratory method used to analyse semi-structured interviews of employees working for IT industry. Essentially, the researcher's goal in doing a thematic analysis is to discover recurring patterns or themes within the collected data (Saunders et al, 2016). To analyse the data, the researcher reviewed each interview transcript multiple times and took notes during the interviews to look for recurring themes (Rugg and Petre, 2010). The transcripts of the interviews review at a more abstract level, with the use of a pen, to code and detect recurring themes.

1. Work-Life Overlap

Remote work blurred boundaries between personal and professional life, especially for women managing dual responsibilities, leading to increased role strain.

2. Productivity Variance

While some reported enhanced productivity due to fewer office distractions, others struggled with self-discipline and lack of structure.

3. Health and Well-being Concerns

Poor ergonomics, prolonged screen time, and limited physical activity contributed to physical strain and mental fatigue.

4. Decline in Team Cohesion

Digital tools enabled task coordination but lacked the informal interactions essential for collaboration and innovation.

5. Gendered Impact

Women faced greater pressure from unpaid care work, which remained unacknowledged

in productivity evaluations, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

6. Policy and Support Gaps

Many organizations lacked adequate support systems for remote workers, including wellness programs and gender-sensitive interventions.

7. Preference for Hybrid Models

Participants favoured hybrid work arrangements, highlighting the need for inclusive, flexible, and sustainable work policies.

These findings highlight the importance of designing remote work frameworks that promote well-being, equity, and long-term organizational sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implement Gender-Inclusive Remote Work Policies

Organizations should develop frameworks that acknowledge the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women. This includes flexible scheduling, equitable task distribution, and dedicated support for caregiving responsibilities.

2. Adopt Hybrid Work Models for Flexibility and Connection

A blended work approach can offer the autonomy of remote work while preserving opportunities for in-person collaboration, thus mitigating isolation and fostering team cohesion.

3. Strengthen Employee Well-being Initiatives

Introduce comprehensive wellness programs that address ergonomic needs, mental health, and physical well-being. Support should also include provisions for home-office setup and regular wellness check-ins.

4. Redefine Productivity Metrics

Move beyond traditional output-based evaluation to more holistic performance assessments that consider individual contexts, challenges, and contributions—particularly for women balancing dual roles.

Foster an Inclusive Digital Culture

Encourage empathetic leadership and

promote inclusive communication practices. Regular informal engagements and virtual team-building activities can help maintain morale and social connectedness.

5. Invest in Capacity Building and Digital Readiness

Provide training on digital collaboration tools, time management, and remote work best practices to enhance adaptability and reduce productivity barriers.

6. Establish Responsive Feedback Mechanisms

Implement ongoing feedback systems such as surveys or focus groups to capture employee experiences and use these insights to refine remote work strategies.

7. Engage in Policy Dialogue and Advocacy

Collaborate with industry bodies and government agencies to formulate policies that promote socially sustainable remote work, ensuring inclusivity, equity, and long-term organizational resilience.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the profound implications of virtual work on the professional and personal lives of women in Bangalore's IT and knowledge-driven sectors. While remote work arrangements offer increased flexibility and autonomy, they also tend to blur the boundaries between paid employment and unpaid domestic responsibilities—particularly for women—thereby deepening existing gender inequalities.

The findings call attention to the need for organizations to move beyond surface-level flexibility and adopt a more deliberate, gender-responsive approach to virtual work. Integrating principles of social sustainability—such as equity, inclusivity, and employee well-being—into remote work policies is essential for ensuring long-term productivity and resilience. As the nature of work continues to evolve, embracing inclusive, hybrid models and support systems will be critical for creating a more equitable and sustainable future of work for all, especially women.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study primarily focuses on urban women professionals in Bangalore's IT sector, suggesting opportunities for broader exploration. Future research could examine diverse geographic and occupational

contexts, including rural and non-IT sectors. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches may offer deeper insights into evolving remote work dynamics and gendered impacts over time. Comparative studies across regions or cultures could further highlight policy and organizational differences. Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of specific interventions—such as flexible scheduling, mental health support, or virtual mentorship—would enhance the development of inclusive and sustainable virtual work models.

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