Workplace Flexibility and Women's Career Continuity in India: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Indian women professionals engaged in workplace flexibility arrangements and examines how such arrangements influence career continuity. Despite the rapid adoption of hybrid and remote work models across India, limited qualitative evidence exists regarding their long-term impact on women's professional growth. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 women professionals across IT, banking, education, and healthcare sectors, this study identifies five key themes: flexibility as empowerment, flexibility as hidden career penalty, managerial trust and support, intensified dual burden, and negotiated career aspirations. The findings reveal that flexibility enhances workforce participation and retention; however, structural biases, performance visibility norms, and socio-cultural expectations continue to shape advancement opportunities. The study contributes context-specific insights to gender and HRM literature in India and provides managerial recommendations for designing equitable and career-sustaining flexible work systems.

Keywords: *Workplace Flexibility, Women Professionals, Career Continuity, Phenomenology, Gendered Organizations, India.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Workplace flexibility has become a defining characteristic of contemporary employment systems. In India, the post-pandemic transformation accelerated the institutionalization of hybrid and remote work models. Flexible work policies are frequently positioned as progressive HR interventions aimed at supporting work-life balance, particularly for women professionals who disproportionately shoulder caregiving responsibilities. However, the long-term implications of such arrangements for women's career sustainability remain insufficiently explored.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the lived experiences of Indian women professionals engaged in flexible work arrangements.

- To examine how workplace flexibility influences career continuity and progression.

- To identify structural and cultural barriers affecting women's advancement within flexible work systems.

- To understand the role of managerial and organizational support in sustaining women's careers.

- To interpret these experiences using a phenomenological research approach.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior research associates workplace flexibility with improved job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee retention. Nevertheless, scholars also document the phenomenon of flexibility stigma, wherein employees utilizing flexible arrangements are perceived as less committed or less promotable. In gendered organizational systems, such perceptions often disproportionately affect women. Within the Indian socio-cultural context, entrenched gender norms further complicate the relationship between flexibility and career advancement.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates Work–Family Border Theory and Gendered Organizations Theory. These frameworks provide a lens to interpret how women negotiate boundaries between professional and domestic domains within organizational structures that may unconsciously reproduce gender hierarchies.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted to explore participants' lived experiences. The study involved 25 women professionals with a minimum of three years of experience across IT, banking, education, and healthcare sectors. Purposive sampling was used. Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted with informed consent. Data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis involving open coding, axial coding, and theme development to capture shared experiential meanings.

6. FINDINGS

Five major themes emerged from the analysis:

Theme 1: Flexibility as Empowerment – Participants reported that flexible work enabled continued employment after marriage or motherhood.

Theme 2: Hidden Career Penalty – Some participants experienced reduced visibility in strategic meetings and slower promotions.

Theme 3: Managerial Trust and Support – Supportive supervisors significantly enhanced positive flexibility experiences.

Theme 4: Intensified Dual Burden – Working from home increased unpaid domestic labor and blurred work-life boundaries.

Theme 5: Negotiated Career Aspirations – Several participants consciously moderated career ambitions during specific life stages.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that while workplace flexibility supports workforce retention, it does not inherently dismantle structural gender inequalities. Organizational culture, evaluation systems, and leadership perceptions continue to influence career trajectories.

7. MANAGERIAL AND POLICY IMPLICATION

Organizations should adopt outcome-based performance evaluation systems, structured mentoring programs, and gender-sensitization initiatives. Formal career development pathways for flexible workers can mitigate visibility bias.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study focuses on urban professional sectors and may not represent informal or rural workforce experiences. Future studies may adopt longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-method research designs to enhance generalizability.

9. CONCLUSION

Workplace flexibility in India represents both opportunity and complexity. While it facilitates women's workforce participation and career continuity, sustainable advancement requires structural reforms and inclusive organizational cultures beyond policy-level flexibility.

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