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Prachi Pandey
Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Government Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Dr. Sarvesh Singh
Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Government Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author:
Prachi Pandey
Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Government Degree College, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Digital flexibility and work-life balance among women educators: A Post-COVID HRM review

Prachi Pandey and Sarvesh Singh

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic changed how people work, and schools across India had to shift to online teaching quickly. This study examines the impact of the digital shift on the work-life balance of women educators in India. It also explores whether schools and colleges helped women teachers adapt to online work through supportive HR policies. Using data from recent reports and studies, the paper finds that although digital teaching gave some flexibility, like saving travel time and choosing teaching schedules, it also created new problems. Many women faced more housework, stress, and lack of support, especially in government and rural schools. The study shows that digital work alone is not enough. Without strong support from schools and fair policies, women educators struggle to manage both work and home. The paper ends by giving suggestions to improve digital access, make HR policies more supportive, and help women grow in their careers.

Keywords: Women educators, Work-life balance, Digital teaching in India, HR support, COVID-19 and education

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly transformed the landscape of work, particularly within the education sector. With the sudden transition to digital modes of delivery, educational institutions had to rapidly adopt remote teaching, online assessments, and virtual collaboration tools. This shift, although necessary, presented unique challenges and opportunities, particularly for women educators in India.

Traditionally, teaching has been perceived as a gender-congruent profession for women due to its structured hours and perceived compatibility with household responsibilities. However, the post-pandemic transition to hybrid and remote models blurred the lines between professional and personal life, intensifying the complexities of maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

As digital platforms became the backbone of academic delivery, women educators were expected to adapt quickly to technology, manage increased workloads, and simultaneously fulfil their roles as primary caregivers at home. These shifting dynamics have highlighted the need to re-evaluate organisational support systems, HR policies, and institutional expectations from a gender-sensitive perspective.

In this context, digital flexibility is defined as the ability to work remotely with adaptable schedules, which has emerged as a critical factor influencing professional satisfaction, productivity, and mental well-being. However, its impact on work-life balance among women educators remains underexplored in the Indian post-pandemic scenario. This paper aims to examine how digital flexibility has affected the work-life balance of women educators in India after COVID-19, drawing on secondary data, policy insights, and recent academic findings. It further seeks to provide a multidisciplinary understanding relevant to HRM, gender studies, and educational planning.

1.1 Literature Review

The concept of work-life balance (WLB) has evolved significantly with the growing participation of women in the workforce, especially in sectors traditionally dominated by men. Valk and Srinivasan (2011) [15] explored how Indian women IT professionals in Bangalore manage dual responsibilities at work and home, revealing deep-seated pressures

rooted in social expectations and workplace structures. Their study identified key support mechanisms like familial influence, coping strategies, and organisational policies. Rajadhyaksha (2012) [10] extended this inquiry through case studies of Indian firms, critiquing the lack of a national work-family policy and exposing the limited scope and implicit gender biases in current organisational interventions.

Adding an intersectional dimension, Lendák-Kabók (2022) [6] investigated how gender, class, and ethnicity influence work-life strategies among female academics in Serbia. The findings suggested that women often navigate balance privately, rather than openly challenging institutional norms, highlighting the systemic nature of workplace inequalities. Similarly, Lyonette (2015) [8] reported that part-time work offers flexibility for caregiving but imposes career penalties on women in the UK, with limited skilled part-time roles reinforcing gendered labour patterns. Chung (2020) [3] deepened this argument by identifying a pervasive "flexibility stigma," particularly affecting working mothers, whose career progression is often hindered despite their adaptability.

Focusing on India's IT sector, Bharathi and Mala (2016) [2] highlighted that personal factors like hobbies, health, and sleep have more impact on WLB than professional variables. Working from home was found to be beneficial, while social media had a negligible influence. Shanmugam and Agarwal (2019) [13] examined motherhood stages in Indian IT professionals, revealing how flexible work options significantly reduce conflict and turnover intentions. Organisational and supervisory support further enhanced satisfaction, underlining the need for maternity-conscious HR policies.

In education, Rawal (2023) [11] examined the emotional toll of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic on women educators in Noida, where merging domestic and professional boundaries led to burnout. Linando *et al.* (2022) [7] echoed these challenges in the Indonesian context, suggesting that women and early-career teachers experience higher emotional exhaustion and require demographically tailored flexible policies.

Desai *et al.* (2011) [4] compared stress levels among homemakers, office-goers, and home-based workers in India. The home-based group reported the least stress and highest satisfaction, driven by flexible routines and supportive home environments. This reinforces the potential of flexible models to improve women's well-being. Ugargol and Patrick (2018) [14] also highlighted the role of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in boosting engagement in the Indian IT sector, though actual engagement levels remained low due to inadequate implementation.

On a broader organisational level, Eshun and Segbenya (2024) [5] found that in Ghanaian universities, FWAs and wellness programs improved performance, with work-life balance acting as a key mediator. However, Senthanar *et al.* (2021) [12] warned that without authentic structural support, flexibility can become performative. Their Canadian study found that organisational expectations often undermine the very benefits flexible roles are meant to offer.

Ali *et al.* (2024) [1], through a systematic review, affirmed that better WLB encourages women's career aspirations in India, supporting inclusive HRM development. Oyewobi *et al.* (2019) [9] made a similar observation in Nigeria's construction sector, where family-friendly policies increased organisational commitment and improved outcomes, especially in male-dominated work cultures.

1.2 Research Gap

The literature review presents an overall understanding of the growing influence of digital platforms and flexible work arrangements in the education sector after the COVID-19 pandemic. While global studies have explored the broader implications of digital flexibility on educators, there remains a significant lack of sector-specific research in the Indian context, especially focusing on women educators. Furthermore, the intersection of HRM strategies, digital infrastructure, and gendered work-life balance is underexplored. There is also limited secondary data-driven analysis that investigates how policy-level changes and digital transitions have shaped the professional and personal lives of women educators. This study aims to bridge these gaps by analysing the role of digital access and HRM frameworks in influencing work-life experiences among women educators in India.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the impact of digital flexibility on work-life balance among women educators in India.
2. To assess the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in facilitating or hindering digital transitions in the education sector post-COVID.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data. The research aims to explore the impact of digital flexibility on the work-life balance of women educators in India in the post-COVID era. It draws on qualitative insights and quantitative indicators from previously published academic literature, government reports, and institutional policy briefs to understand sector-specific shifts in HRM practices and gendered outcomes.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Digital Access: Rural-Urban Divide

The availability of the internet and digital tools among educators heavily influences the effectiveness of digital flexibility. Sources indicate a considerable rural-urban gap:

Table 1: Rural vs Urban Digital Infrastructure

Indicator	Urban Areas	Rural Areas
Household Internet Access	42%	15%
Schools with Internet	42%	14%
Schools with Computing Devices	43%	18%

Source: Compiled from MDPI (2023), PMC (2023), and The Indian Express (2022)

The urban household internet access is nearly three times higher than in rural areas (42% vs 15%). School-level disparities are equally stark: only 14% of rural schools have internet compared to 42% in urban zones. This digital divide significantly undermines rural women educators' ability to engage in effective digital teaching, negatively affecting their flexibility and work-life balance.

4.2 Increased Workload and Emotional Burnout

According to a nationwide survey by the **Centre for Policy** Research (CPR, 2022), nearly 62% of women teachers

reported working longer hours post-COVID, with the average working day increasing from 7.5 hours to 10 hours. The burden was more intense in urban private schools due to continuous performance evaluation and digital lesson planning. Moreover, mental health tolls were significantly higher among women educators, especially those with caregiving responsibilities at home.

The following chart demonstrates levels of emotional burnout among women educators across different educational tiers based on recent data from regional educational boards and research by the Indian Association of Educational Psychology (IAEP, 2023).

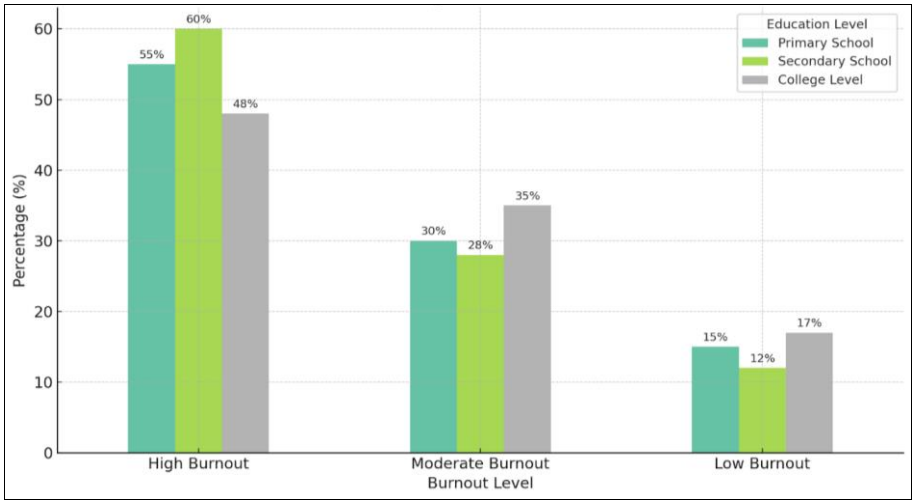

Fig 1: Emotional burnout levels among women educators in India (Post-COVID)

Burnout Level	Primary School (%)	Secondary School (%)	College Level (%)
High Burnout	55	60	48
Moderate Burnout	30	28	35
Low Burnout	15	12	17

Source: Compiled from Francis & Fraga (2022), Shekhar & Koul (2023), Gopinath & Chitra (2023)

Secondary school educators report the highest levels of burnout due to complex academic content delivery and frequent student assessments. Primary educators also reported stress, mostly due to a lack of structured digital tools for young learners.

4.3 HRM Responsiveness and Policy Gaps

In addressing the second research objective, evaluating the role of HRM in supporting digital transitions, this section examines how Human Resource Management (HRM) frameworks across India's education sector have responded post-COVID, specifically concerning women educators. Despite an increasing acknowledgement of the necessity for flexible and inclusive HR practices, the actual implementation of such policies has been uneven across different institutional types.

According to data compiled by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2023), the uptake of mental health support and digital training remained minimal in government institutions, while private and higher education institutions showed better, though still insufficient, responsiveness.

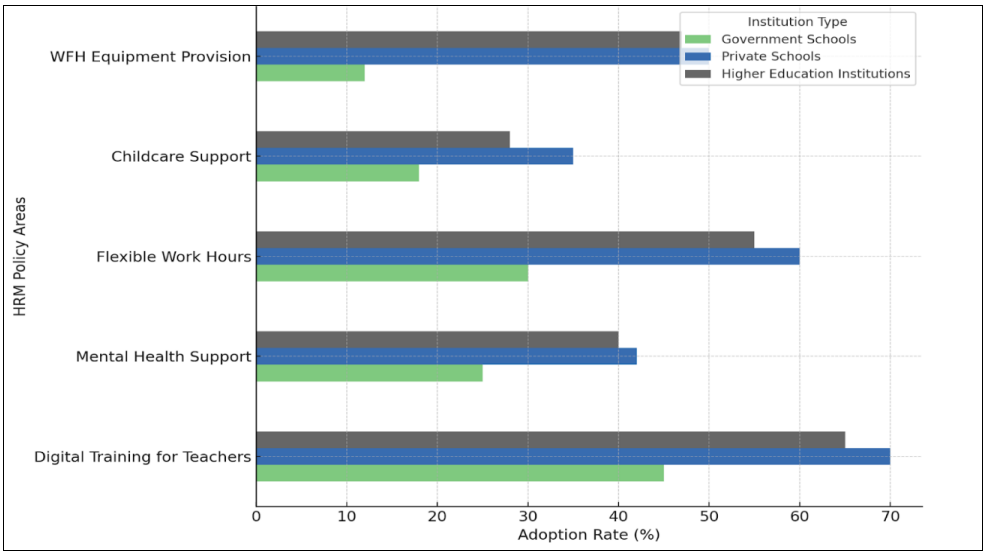

Fig 3: Adoption of HRM Support Policies in the Indian Education Sector (2020-2024)

HRM Policy Area	Government Schools (%)	Private Schools (%)	Higher Education (%)
Digital Training for Teachers	45	70	65
Mental Health Support	25	42	40
Flexible Work Hours	30	60	55
Childcare Support	18	35	28
WFH Equipment Provision	12	50	47

Source: Misal (2024); Srinivasaiah & Swamy (2022); Institutional trends based on NCERT annual findings (2023), as cited in secondary literature

The disparity in HRM policy adoption indicates a systemic gap in policy-level support structures, especially in government-run and rural institutions. Women educators in such settings lack the infrastructural and institutional scaffolding necessary to benefit from digital flexibility.

4.4 Autonomy and Career Mobility

Another dimension central to understanding the effect of digital flexibility on work-life balance is the degree of autonomy and opportunities for professional growth that it enables. While flexibility in digital teaching theoretically provides women with greater control over time and task management, it often fails to translate into career advancement or leadership pathways.

Recent reports by NITI Aayog (2022) and UGC (2021) have highlighted that institutional structures across much of the Indian education system remain hierarchical and opaque, especially in government and semi-aided schools. Many women educators report that while online teaching gives them the autonomy to design lesson plans and manage delivery schedules, decisions about appraisals, promotions, and training access are still centralised and male-dominated.

Table 1: Perceived Autonomy and Career Support (Women Educators, 2020-2024)

Institution Type	Digital Teaching Autonomy (%)	Career Progression Support (%)
Government Schools	45%	28%
Private Schools	62%	35%
Higher Education Institutions	70%	50%

Source: Compiled from NITI Aayog (2022) and University Grants Commission (2021)

Higher education institutions, due to increased internationalisation and academic freedom policies, offer more autonomy and relatively better promotion structures. However, even in these settings, women often face implicit biases and glass ceilings.

4.5 Perceived Benefits vs Structural Inequities

While digital flexibility has been presented as a progressive work model for educators following COVID, the lived experiences of women teachers in India reveal a complex duality. On the surface, remote work offered benefits such as reduced commuting time, the ability to manage home and work tasks concurrently, and a degree of scheduling autonomy. However, these advantages were often superficial, overshadowed by deep-rooted structural inequalities based on gender roles, digital poverty, and regional disparities. According to data from UN Women (2021) and the World Bank (2022), nearly 75% of Indian women educators initially found remote work liberating, but over 60% of them reported increased domestic workload due to social expectations surrounding caregiving. This imbalance was even more evident among women in rural areas and lower-income households, who had limited access to personal devices and reliable internet connections.

Furthermore, caste and class intersections played a subtle yet powerful role. Educators from marginalised communities were more likely to work in underfunded rural schools with inadequate digital infrastructure. Many of these women reported that digital flexibility increased expectations but did not come with support such as personal laptops, digital literacy workshops, or time-off policies.

Table 2: Digital Flexibility - Benefits vs Barriers (Reported by Women Educators)

Variable	Reported Benefit (%)	Reported Barrier (%)
Time saved on commuting	78%	-
Autonomy in teaching schedule	65%	-
Increased family caregiving workload	-	62%
Poor home infrastructure	-	58%
No institutional support for WFH tools	-	61%
Digital fatigue/eye strain	-	55%

The perceived benefits of digital flexibility (such as saved time and scheduling control) are offset by systemic challenges that mostly affect women, particularly those in rural and socioeconomically constrained settings.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how digital flexibility has shaped the work-life balance of women educators in India post-COVID, and to assess the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in enabling or obstructing this transition. The findings reveal a nuanced landscape.

While digital work environments offered initial relief through reduced commute times and flexible scheduling, these perceived benefits were unevenly distributed and often undermined by entrenched social and institutional barriers. Emotional burnout remains high due to increased caregiving responsibilities, digital fatigue, and the blurring of work-home boundaries. The autonomy granted by digital platforms did not necessarily translate into improved career mobility or reduced stress, particularly for women in public

and under-resourced institutions.

HRM played a critical but inconsistent role across different educational institutions. Private schools and higher education institutions demonstrated better responsiveness, adopting flexible work hours, mental health support, and digital training programs. However, government schools lagged significantly in providing basic infrastructural and psychological support, reinforcing structural inequities that digital modes of work were supposed to mitigate.

These findings highlight that digital flexibility, while structurally promising, fails to operate as an equaliser without active institutional intervention. It tends to reproduce and, in some cases, amplify existing gendered labour burdens. The pandemic-induced shift to digital work has therefore exposed not only technological gaps but also deep-rooted asymmetries in how labour, care, and mobility are valued within Indian education systems. Unless holistic reforms are introduced, digital flexibility will remain a half-measure — more symbolic than substantive.

5.2 Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for a rethinking of how digital work models are implemented in Indian educational institutions. While digital flexibility was introduced as a response to pandemic-related disruptions, it is now an enduring feature of the academic landscape. However, without systemic support and policy sensitivity, this model disproportionately burdens women educators, especially those in public, rural, and socioeconomically disadvantaged settings.

The observed mismatch between perceived autonomy and institutional support reveals that flexibility, in isolation, cannot solve structural gender inequities. To ensure that digital transformation is inclusive and empowering, institutions must rethink their HRM strategies, infrastructural planning, and evaluation mechanisms. These recommendations are proposed to bridge the current policy-practice gap:

1. Gender-Sensitive HRM Policies

- Institutions should develop inclusive HRM frameworks that prioritise women educators' dual roles. This includes:
- Providing regular digital skill training
- Structured mental health support (especially in rural areas)
- Dedicated childcare provisions or allowances

2. Flexible but Structured Work Models

Flexibility should not mean unpredictability. Clearly defined teaching hours, leave policies, and digital workload expectations should be part of institutional policy to prevent burnout.

3. Technology Access Equity

- To reduce structural disparities.
- Government funding must ensure devices and a stable internet for teachers
- Infrastructure grants should prioritise female-led rural schools

4. Promotion and Appraisal Reform: Career advancement systems must incorporate transparent metrics for digital teaching contributions. Women educators need mentorship and fair representation in appraisal and promotion boards.

5. Cross-Sector Collaboration: Partnerships between government bodies (NCERT, UGC), NGOs, and private ed-tech firms can help develop localised solutions for digital inclusion, particularly targeting women educators from marginalised communities.

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