Hybrid Models and Women's Work in India: Emerging Insights

Learning Note

About IWWAGE

The Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) is an initiative of LEAD, an action-oriented research centre of IFMR Society (a not-for-profit society registered under the Societies Act). LEAD has strategic oversight and brand support from Krea University (sponsored by IFMR Society) to enable synergies between academia and the research centre. IWWAGE is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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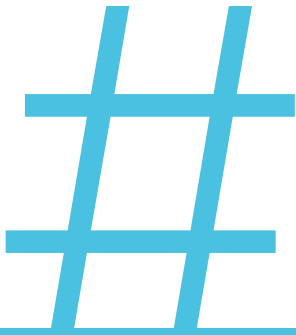
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought in focus hybrid working models that offer flexible working options, especially for women. Hybrid working models provide women more autonomy in how they use their time than in-person working models. While hybrid work has several perceived advantages such as better work-life balance, reduction in costs, and higher productivity, the effects of hybrid work are often found to be gendered. While several studies in the past two years look at perceptions and trends around hybrid work, most studies thus far capture insights from ICT-intensive sectors. With India's current focus on creating "a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy" with the Digital India Programme and the ongoing efforts to expand enterprise development to peri-urban and rural areas, hybrid work models have the potential to expand employment opportunities for women beyond purely in-person working models. However, there is a lack of data and insights on the current state of hybrid work adoption among women, across sectors and regions.

This rapid assessment examines how female working professionals adapted to the hybrid working model during and after the pandemic and explores the perceived benefits and challenges of hybrid work for this segment. Data for the study was collected through phone and online surveys. The sample size for the study consisted of 400 working women, of which 150 were working in a hybrid mode at the time of the survey. A case study of a BPO company based in rural Uttarakhand that provides the hybrid work model to its employees helps throw some light on the current challenges and potential benefits of hybrid work models in rural India. 80% of respondents are aged 30 or under, with the average age of the sample being 27 years. 45% of the sample resides in non-metropolitan cities and towns, and the top three sectors reporting hybrid work in the sample are a) technology, media and telecommunications, b) social services and NGOs, and c) pharmaceuticals, medical services and biotechnology.

Key Findings

The Option to Work Hybrid:
On average, smaller organisations prefer more daily in-person attendance, while medium-sized organisations prefer the fully remote option and larger organisations offer hybrid models. Further, women in senior positions are more likely to be given the option of working in a hybrid model. 21% of hybrid workers in the sample report working in consumer goods, social services, teaching or real estate and construction, which indicates that the possibility of working in hybrid models continues to expand beyond technology-intensive verticals.

Who Chooses the Hybrid Model?

Older women (33-55 years) are more likely to take up hybrid work. Most of the women who did not choose the hybrid option despite it being offered to them work at a junior level, where 35% of respondents opt for in-person work even after being offered the hybrid option. Among the women who are given the hybrid work option but still work from office on all days, most report having no care responsibilities or dependencies at home: this may explain their choice of not opting for the flexibility that hybrid work has to offer.

Hybrid Work across Locations:

Despite there being a higher concentration of hybrid workers in metropolitan areas, we see within our sample that non-metropolitan areas do indeed show potential to become centres for hybrid working models in certain sectors. 31% of hybrid and fully remote workers in our sample work in project coordination or assistant/associate roles in sectors such as technology, media and telecommunication and are located in towns and cities such as Nashik and Badlapur (Maharashtra), Shimla (Himachal Pradesh), Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), and Siliguri (West Bengal). This points to growing hybrid work opportunities in non-metropolitan areas.

Reported Benefits and Advantages:

Over two-thirds of the sample reported an improvement in the management of personal finances since transitioning to hybrid work, which could be attributed to a drop in expenditure on commute and other expenses. In our sample, hybrid workers in the technology and telecommunications sector also reported the greatest growth in workplace motivation. On the other hand, physical fitness suffered (36% of the sample reported a negative impact), followed by stress levels (20% reported increased stress levels, with 40% of these respondents working in business and consulting as well as the social services/NGO sector.)

Key Challenges:

Gap in technological skilling continues to remain a challenge for workers transitioning to hybrid models, which can hinder women's effective participation in hybrid workplaces: nearly a third of the women in the sample who report difficulty in adapting to new technology used by their organisation for hybrid working are from the technology-intensive sector. Similarly, an

absence of organisational culture that enables hybrid work is reported as a significant downside, especially by women in technology (63%) and business and consulting (57%) sectors. Infrastructure is also a key challenge for many hybrid workers in non-metropolitan locations: disparity of resources at home as compared to the office set up are a major disadvantage for those based in non-metropolitan areas (55%). 50% of hybrid workers are of the view that the hybrid model has an adverse effect on women's promotions, compared to their male counterparts, and 44% of hybrid workers perceive a similar negative effect on networking opportunities available to female employees. This highlights the need for employers to ensure evaluation and pay parity within their organisations, and creating workplace policies that provide fair growth structures for women who opt for hybrid working options.

As the hybrid work phenomenon continues to gather momentum, governments and private sector organisations can focus on the following areas to improve hybrid working models and eventually improve women's workforce participation and retention:

For employers:

- Organisations in hybrid-friendly sectors must provide hybrid working options to help women employees contribute to the workforce more efficiently. Pay and evaluation parity for hybrid workers, especially women–and creating fair and equitable promotion and growth structures can ensure women's careers advance at the same pace as their male counterparts and 'a system of trust' with clear reporting mechanisms is established in the organisation.

- Strengthening infrastructure provision for employees in terms of high-speed broadband, co-working spaces, ICT such as desktops/laptops/smartphones, etc.

- Virtual safe spaces through clear workplace policies at the organisational level that account for regulated working hours, employee well-being, and protection against sexual harassment in a hybrid setup; and

- Collection of gender-disaggregated data around employee experience, time use, and workforce participation through hybrid models.

For governments and policymakers:

- *Inclusion of hybrid working arrangements in existing labour codes and regulating working hours, mandating fair pay, and strengthening legal safeguards for hybrid workers, especially women, at an organisational level.*

- *Collection of gender-disaggregated data at sectoral, sub-national, and national level that can help shape policy around hybrid work in the future.*

01

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in wide-ranging changes to the workplace, with an uptake in alternate arrangements such as a hybrid model of working. Hybrid work offers flexible working options, particularly for women. Hybrid working models provide women more autonomy in how they use their time as compared to in-person working models. We know from existing literature that there are several perceived advantages associated with hybrid work. For example, better work-life balance, reduction in costs (Cisco 2022), and higher productivity (NASSCOM 2022) are some advantages of hybrid work identified by employees. Hybrid work also offers the dual advantage of high productivity and increased networking opportunities (Choudhary et al 2022). A study on digitally open employees found that they are most enthusiastic to work in a hybrid setup, to the extent that they will switch jobs if they are offered their preferred hybrid workplace environment (ICIS 2022).

Organisations that offer a hybrid working model have a very high score of positivity and effectiveness in providing the best place to work (Beno, M, 2021). Hybrid work also offers opportunities to increase accessibility to disabled employees (Choudhury et al., 2022) and affords greater flexibility, as well as cuts down on commute time.

The effects and benefits of hybrid work tend to be gendered. For instance, women feel that asking for flexible working arrangements negatively impacts their manager's perception towards them (Grzegorczyk et al 2021). In terms of preference for hybrid work, the majority of women with care work responsibilities are of the opinion that work-life balance is better maintained with hybrid work setup and only 4% women prefer all days in office (Gartner, 2021). However, studies find that meetings fatigue women more than men due to stress experienced during non-verbal communication (Grzegorczyk, Mariniello, Nurski and Schraepen, 2021). In the context of India, while a majority of Indians surveyed prefer hybrid work (Microsoft 2022), only 33 percent of women workers are actually given this option by their employers (Deloitte, 2022). Indian women especially are less optimistic about career prospects in a hybrid setup than their global counterparts (Deloitte 2022).

On the other hand, high stress levels, less social bonding (NASSCOM 2022) and non-inclusive behaviour (Deloitte 2022) are some of the disadvantages of hybrid work. Remote work has also been associated by workers with negative effects on their career (LinkedIn Survey, 2021). While India reported highest levels of well-being attributed to hybrid work among 27 countries (Cisco 2022), 72% of hybrid workers also reported lesser work friendships since switching to hybrid work (Microsoft 2022).

While several such standalone surveys in the past two years look at perceptions and trends around hybrid work, most of these are restricted to capturing insights from ICT-intensive, niche sectors such as banking and financial services, business consulting, IT and BPO services in India. As such, these are mostly geographically limited in their scope to metropolitan centres as well, and give us limited visibility on perceptions that non-metropolitan women workers may have of hybrid work. With India's current focus on creating "a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy" with the Digital India Programme[1] and the ongoing efforts to expand enterprise development to peri-urban and rural areas[2], hybrid work models can find success in sectors that have not hitherto been technologically intensive. This study attempts to expand the scope of literature around hybrid work to areas and sectors that have until now not been covered by existing surveys to understand trends that could inform such efforts in the future.

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

The concept of hybrid work is still nascent and has evolved considerably since the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the purpose of this study, hybrid work is defined as a spectrum of routine flexible work arrangements, using information and communications technologies (ICTs)[3], in which an employee's work location and/or hours are not strictly standardised.
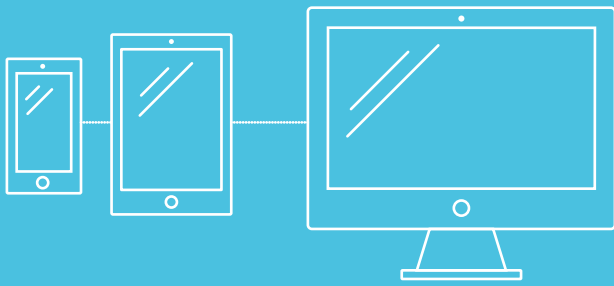
This exploratory study focuses on working-age female employees and freelance consultants. It excludes self-employed professionals, remote work arrangements[4], and gig-workers, and focuses on the formal sector.

The study examines the following research questions:

How have female working professionals adapted to the hybrid working model during and after the pandemic?

What are the perceived benefits and advantages of hybrid work for this segment?

What challenges do they face in a hybrid work setting?

Data for the study was collected through phone and online surveys. The sample size for the study consisted of 400 working women, of which 150 were working in a hybrid mode at the time of the survey. Through key informant interviews, the study also attempts to capture insights around the effect of hybrid work on women in the workforce from labour and gender specialists, researchers, policy makers, lawyers, and employers. Further, a case study of a BPO company based in rural Uttarakhand that provides the hybrid work model to its employees helps throw some light on the current challenges and potential benefits of hybrid work models in rural India. Additionally, a thorough global and national policy review was conducted to understand what policy measures currently exist to aid women's workforce participation, as well as the gaps that can be addressed through organisational and government policies in the near future.

Limitations

In the absence of a comprehensive database of hybrid workers in India, the sampling frame for the phone survey was limited to individuals in the our technical partner's user database who consented to being contacted by the survey team (refer to endnotes for more information on sampling methodology). To address the challenge of low response rates, multiple channels were used to reach potential respondents including email and social media advertisements. The online survey was self-administered and data is self-reported and may be prone to respondent biases. For the online survey, participants self-selected or voluntarily opted to participate in the survey. This may result in oversampling certain segments of the population that have access to the internet or are more digitally fluent.

03

INSIGHTS

80% of our respondents are aged 30 or under, with the average age of the sample being 27 years. 45% of the sample resides in non-metropolitan cities and towns.

3.1 Sample Profile

Average Age: 27 years

30 years or under: 80%

18 - 25 years: 47%
25 - 30 years: 33%
(Freshers, early-career professionals)

Full-time workers:
95%

Metropolitan cities[5]
55.18%

Non-metropolitan cities/towns
44.82%

Age

Employment type

Location: metro/non-metro

Location: top 3 states

Sectors

Top sectors reporting non-hybrid work

Maharashtra
27%

Delhi
14%

Karnataka
10%

Banking, financial services and insurance
46%

Technology, media, and telecommunication
22%

Consumer goods (including retail)
09%

Banking, financial services and insurance
87%

Teaching/Education/ Training
86%

Real estate and construction
80%

Distribution of sectors across regions (Top 4 sectors)
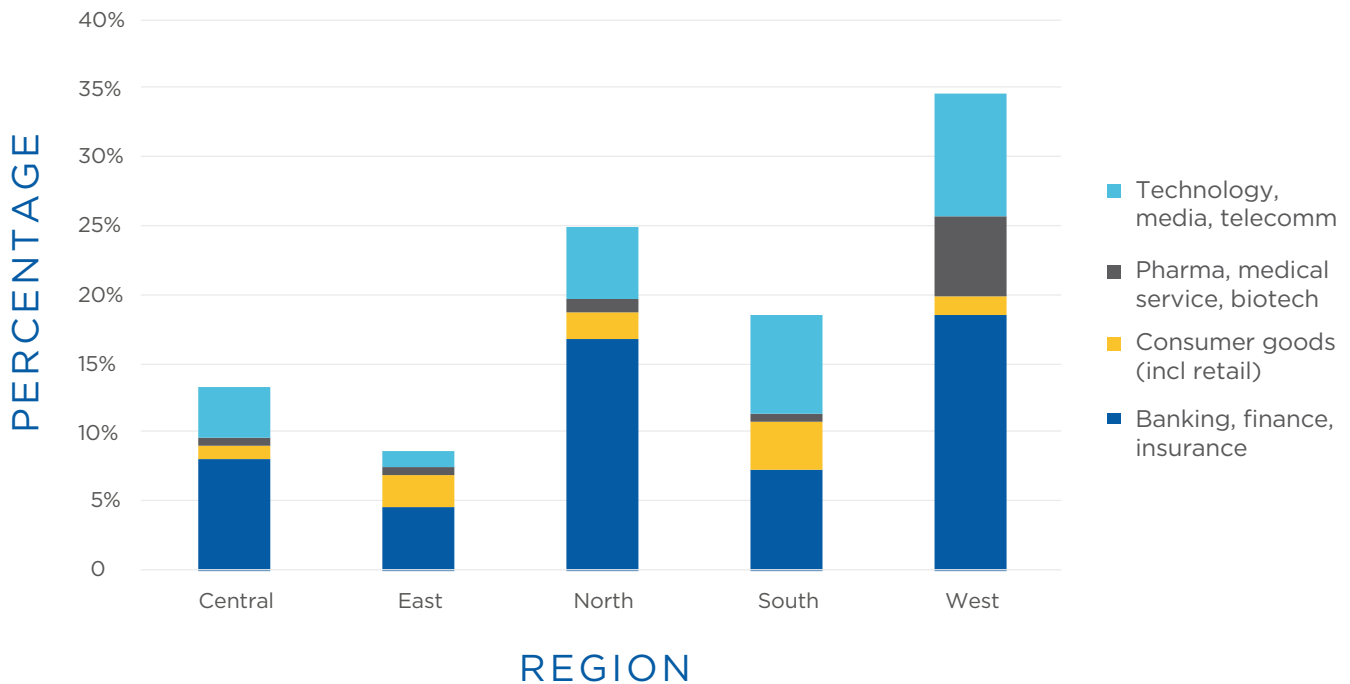
Note: North: Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, National Capital Territory of Delhi and Union Territory of Chandigarh. Central: Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. East: Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Sikkim, Assam and West Bengal. West: Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra and the Union Territories of Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli. South: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu ,Telangana and the Union Territory of Puducherry

3.2 Key Findings

The following section is a thematic overview of the major findings from the study: we start with a demographic breakdown of who is given the option to work in hybrid models in the Indian workforce, then proceed to analysing who chooses this option and how location affects the experience of hybrid workers. The next few sections highlight how working women have adapted to the hybrid model, how their experience with ICT tools has been, the effect of hybrid work on their well being, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of hybrid work. We also explore how care work affects the experience of working hybrid for women, and what their opinion is on how hybrid work affects their careers compared to their male colleagues. Qualitative findings are integrated in relevant sections to highlight insights on hybrid work and women's workforce participation from gender and labour experts, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Who Gets the Option to Work Hybrid?

72%
Social services and NGOs

**63%**
Technology, Media, and Telecommunication

59%
Pharma, Medical services and Biotech

In our sample, the largest employers of hybrid workers fell in the Social Services/ NGO and technology, media and telecommunication sectors (72% and 63% of hybrid workers respectively), while workers in sectors such as banking, financial services and insurance (87% workers are in person), and teaching and education services (85% are in-person) reported working fully in-person. In our sample, hybrid working models are less popular in Central and East India, with only 32% and 36% women being offered the option to work hybrid respectively, while almost half or more than half the women in the rest of the country are offered the hybrid option. This is consistent with the sectors these women belong to: in our sample, Central and East India have more women (52% and 48% respectively) in the banking and financial sector, which typically employs fully in-person workers.

We find that on average, smaller organisations (average size = 107 employees) prefer more daily in-person attendance, while medium-sized organisations (average size = 662) prefer their workers to be fully remote. It is the very large organisations (average size= 7035) that offer hybrid models of working to their employees[6].

Distribution of hybrid and non-hybrid workers across sectors

■ Remote   ■ Office Work   ■ Hybrid
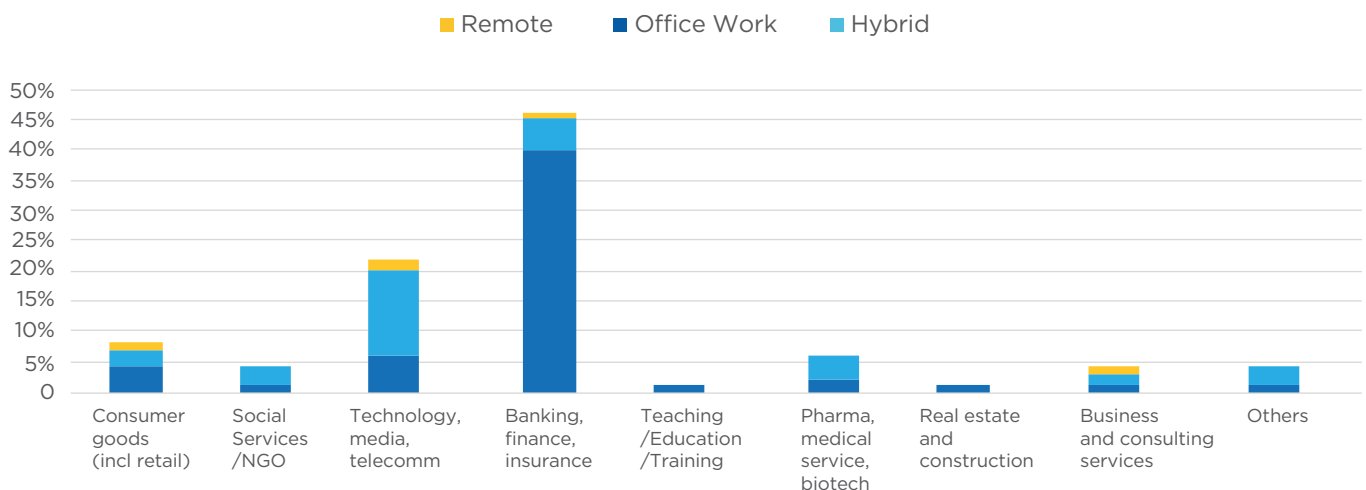
Women at higher levels of organisational hierarchy are more likely to be given the option of working in a hybrid model. Conversely, women opting for a hybrid model are more likely to be in senior positions within an organisation. 62% of mid to senior employees report having the hybrid option compared to 37% of junior employees[7].

Who Chooses the Hybrid Model?

In our sample, 71% of women who were offered the option of hybrid work took it up, which points towards the preference for hybrid work among working women.

Sector-wise trends:

Certain sectors seem to be more hybrid work friendly than others: 55% of hybrid workers belong to the technology, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, business and consulting services sectors, which are ICT-intensive sectors to begin with. However, 21% of hybrid workers in our sample report working in consumer goods, social services, teaching or real estate and construction, which indicates that the possibility of working in hybrid models continues to expand beyond traditionally technology-intensive verticals.

Regional variations:

When given the option, 84% of women chose hybrid work in the Western region of the country, which is much higher than other regions, where about 60-70% chose hybrid work. In this regard, very few women from the Eastern region chose this option, only 42%. This may be attributable to the fact that in our sample, the Eastern region has more women in the banking and financial sector (48%), which typically employs in-person workers.

Preferences by Seniority and Age:

Most of the women who did not choose the hybrid option despite it being offered to them work at a junior level, where the respondents are inclined to do in-person work than either hybrid or fully remote work (35% opt for in-person work even after being offered hybrid option). In contrast, older women (33-55 years) are more inclined to take up hybrid work. Among the women who are given the hybrid work option but still work from office on all days, most report having no care responsibilities or dependencies at home: this may partly explain their choice of not opting for the flexibility that hybrid work has to offer.

How Experience of Hybrid Work Changes with Location

Distribution of women across metro and non metro areas
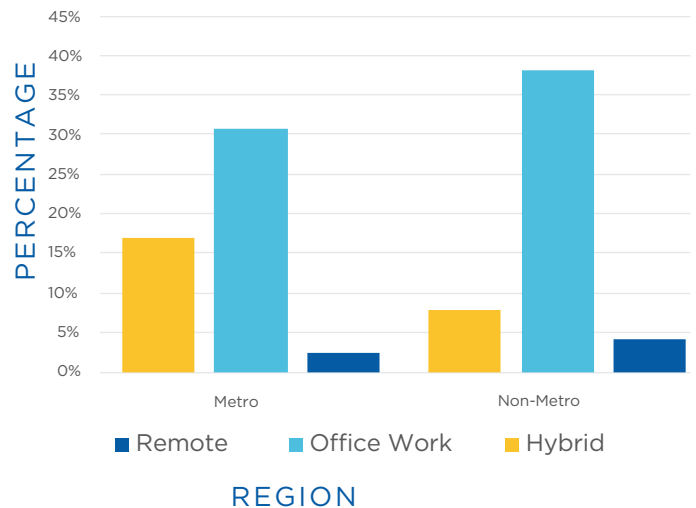
There is a higher concentration of hybrid workers in metropolitan areas in India (74% hybrid workers are from metropolitan areas), with larger numbers of fully in-person workers (62%) and a majority of fully remote workers in our sample being located in non-metropolitan areas. There are, however, growing hybrid and fully remote work opportunities in non-metropolitan areas: 31% of hybrid and fully remote workers in our sample work in project coordination or assistant/associate roles in sectors such as technology, media and telecommunication and are located in towns and cities such as Nashik and Badlapur (Maharashtra), Shimla (Himachal Pradesh), Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), and Siliguri (West Bengal)[8].

There are regional differences in ease of transitioning to hybrid models reported by our sample. In the southern region, the proportion of women who feel they are sufficiently skilled in the technology required for hybrid work (81%) is slightly less than their counterparts in other regions (90%). Furthermore, a large proportion (41%) report finding adapting to new technology as a difficulty in the south.

The reported benefits of hybrid work also differ based on location: hybrid workers in metropolitan areas report greater flexibility and greater participation in the workplace as compared to their counterparts in non-metropolitan areas.

However, hybrid workers in metropolitan areas also tend to be at a greater level of seniority, which could affect both these aspects of their work. Differences in the resources available for work at home and the office (internet, working space, stationery, and any other resources that respondents require to work) also differs based on the location of the women. 55% of respondents living in non-metropolitan areas found variance in resources available at home as compared to the office set up to be a major disadvantage. According to 59% of the respondents in non-metropolitan areas, this is an important factor in their experience of hybrid work, while 22% found this to be unimportant in metropolitan areas.

We see within our sample that non-metropolitan areas do indeed show potential to become centres for hybrid working models in certain sectors, but infrastructure is still a key challenge for many hybrid workers in these locations at present. A focus on bridging this disparity between urban and peri-urban and rural areas with initiatives such as Work Near Home centres[9] could prove to address this existing gap and further enable hybrid work in non-metropolitan areas as well.

## Adapting to a Hybrid Model: Experiences and Perceptions

Hybrid work is still a nascent phenomenon:

95% of hybrid workers surveyed only shifted to hybrid mode due to the pandemic. Transitioning from an in-person to hybrid model of working is also easier in metropolitan areas, with only 21% of women in metropolitan areas reporting it to be challenging. Of those who were working in hybrid mode before the pandemic, most were in technology, media and telecommunication.

Technological skilling continues to be a challenge for workers transitioning to hybrid models: 16% of hybrid workers in the sample found adapting to new technology for communication challenging. Nearly a third of the women who report that adapting to new technology (ICT tools and other digital platforms and software) used by their organisations to work in these models has been difficult are from the technology-intensive sector. These women are in their 20s to late 30s.
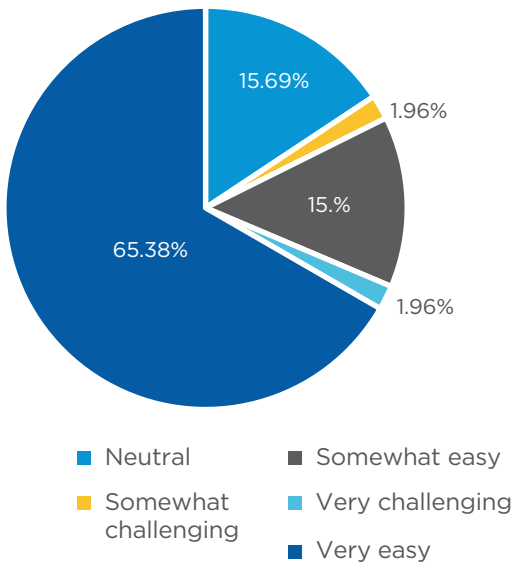
This points to gaps in skills that can hinder women from effectively working in hybrid models, especially in technologically-intensive sectors and in states that perform better in terms of education: 62.5% of the women in our sample who report difficulty in transitioning to new technology for hybrid work belong to the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal which are IT/ITeS hubs in the country.

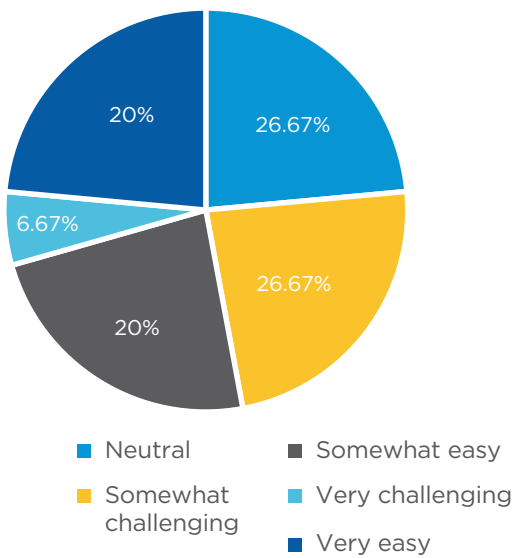### Difficulty in adapting to technology
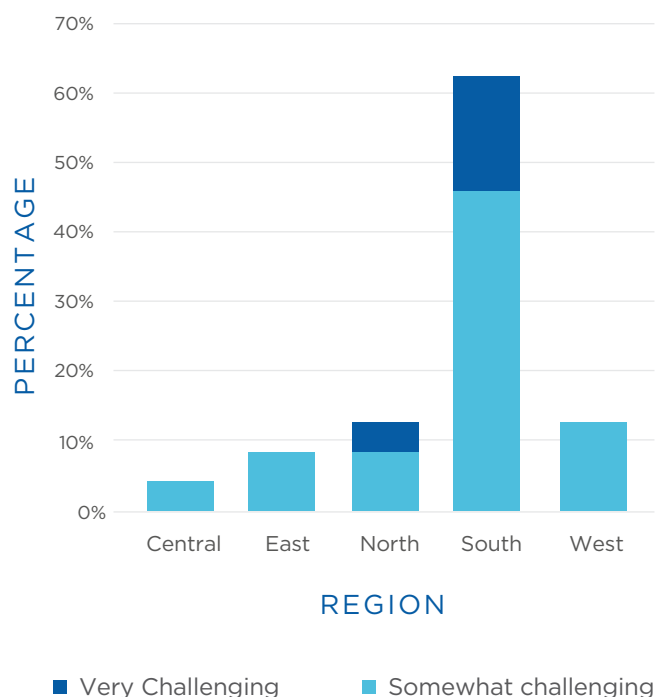
Ease of transition to hybrid work varies by location, seniority levels, and sector. Additionally, women in metropolitan areas find certain aspects of hybrid work to be more challenging than their counterparts in non-metropolitan areas. 65% of early career professionals reported finding the transition to hybrid work easy. Progressing up the ladder, adapting to an at-home setup (29% respondents) is a crucial disadvantage in transitioning to hybrid work for mid level employees, while new work hours (25% respondents) are reported as a challenge for employees across mid to senior levels. Additionally, 22% of hybrid workers also report new expectations as a challenge in adapting to a hybrid work setup. 65% of respondents working in the hybrid model in the business and consulting sector and 60% of hybrid workers in the social services and NGO sector report disparity of resources between home and office as a major disadvantage.

Experience of transitioning for junior-level employees

- 15.69%
- 1.96%
- 15.%
- 65.38%
- 1.96%

Legend:
- Neutral
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat challenging
- Very challenging
- Very easy

Experience of transitioning for mid to senior level employees

- 20%
- 26.67%
- 6.67%
- 26.67%
- 20%

Legend:
- Neutral
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat challenging
- Very challenging
- Very easy

Use of Communication Technology Tools[10] for Hybrid Work

Better connectivity with teams and/or clients as well as improved productivity are reported as the greatest strength of ICT tools used for hybrid work. 90% of the hybrid workers in our sample report that they feel sufficiently skilled in using these ICT tools, even as 54% of them did not receive any training from their organisation in using these applications. Of those who said they did not feel sufficiently skilled, 59% were hybrid workers and the remaining were daily office goers, and 52% were located in non-metropolitan areas. This indicates that there may be a need for skilling for professionals in non-metropolitan India who opt for hybrid work.

WhatsApp remains the most popular ICT tool for work-related communication, with over 60% of hybrid workers using it every day or nearly every day for official communication in the workplace. This is followed by Microsoft Teams (25%) and organisation-specific communication platforms (23%) respectively. Ability to use emoticons is reported as the most popular feature for an ICT tool, with 57% of women saying it is useful to them. Conversely, ability to control disturbance is perceived as the least popular tool, with only 11% of women saying this was useful to them.

We also asked respondents about their usage of online learning platforms for upskilling as a part of ICT usage for hybrid work. Udemy is the most used learning platform in the sample (29% respondents use it), closely followed by Coursera (26%). The most usage of Coursera happens in the Social services/NGO sector, while Udemy is used most often in Business and consulting (43%), Technology (41%) and Telecommunications (50%). Coursera is mostly used by respondents located in Delhi (50%), while Udemy is used in Maharashtra (45%) and Telangana (55%).

Effect of Hybrid Work on Finances and Well-being

69%
Reported an improved management of personal finances

55%
Reported increase in workplace motivation

36%
Reported adverse impact on physical health

We asked hybrid workers in our sample what effect hybrid work has had on their finance management, social life, physical fitness, stress levels, eating habits, and workplace motivation. Over two-thirds of respondents reported an improvement in management of personal finances. This could be attributed to a drop in expenditure on commute and other expenses and is consistent with existing literature that highlights reduced costs as a benefit of hybrid work (Cisco 2022)1. A majority of respondents also reported an increase in workplace motivation (55%). Sector and seniority levels seem to play a role in the effect of hybrid work on workplace motivation: in our sample, technology and telecommunications sectors reflect the greatest growth in workplace motivation. Those at the seniormost level report the greatest improvement in workplace motivation, while those at the mid to senior level report the lowest improvement.

On the other hand, women also experience a negative impact on their lifestyle, particularly on physical fitness (36% of the sample reported a negative impact), followed by increased stress levels (20% reported a negative impact). 40% of these respondents work in business and consulting as well as the social services/NGO sector. A majority of these respondents are located in the metropolitan areas (90%).

Perceived Advantages of Hybrid Work

89%
hybrid workers report saving time on commuting is the most important advantage

80%
consider flexibility of work hours to be a crucial factor

22%
of all respondents want to leave the workforce entirely due to lack of flexibility, long commute.

Existing literature around reduction in costs and a better work-life balance supports our findings about what advantages workers perceive to be most crucial in hybrid setups (Cisco, 2022). For a majority of hybrid workers (89%) saving time on commuting is the most important advantage of the hybrid model. This finding is consistent across locations and seniority levels in our sample. Most women (80%) also consider flexibility of work hours to be a crucial factor in hybrid work. This is more so for women who either carry out all household and care responsibilities themselves or with some help of family members: 46% report flexibility is the most important advantage for them, while for the remaining hybrid workers, other advantages such as saving time on commute are ranked higher (discussed in detail below). In our sample, 34.2% of respondents reported having flexibility in work hours, with hybrid workers enjoying the greatest amount of flexibility (53%), while daily office workers had the least flexibility (20%). Women working in large organisations enjoy greater flexibility, as do women at junior to mid level (50%) when compared to their senior counterparts. Telecommunications emerges as the most flexible sector within our sample.

The commute to work and flexible work hours emerge as factors affecting women's participation in the workforce: 22% of all respondents want to leave the workforce entirely because of lack of flexibility and distance between their home and office. Further, 17% of women who want to switch their jobs report needing more flexibility, and that their office is too far from home.

While women do tend to opt for hybrid work due to the flexibility it offers, this can also affect how much they are involved in workplace discussions and the opportunities they are provided, ultimately affecting their careers. A gender specialist interviewed for the study also highlighted how proximity bias may influence women's access to opportunities.

"When I (as an employer) think of who to assign work to–especially urgent or critical work–I'm more likely to think of somebody who is sitting next to me than somebody who is not. It's out of sight, out of mind."

This is supported by existing research which shows that 67% of Indian organisations are planning to require employees to work in-person full time within the next year (Microsoft 2022), higher than the global average of 50%.

Subsequently, Indian women report to be less optimistic about career prospects in a hybrid setup than their global counterparts (Deloitte, 2022). Even in our sample, 50% of hybrid workers perceive that currently women's promotions are more negatively affected in a hybrid work model than that of their male counterparts, and 44% of hybrid workers perceive a similar negative effect on networking opportunities available to female employees. Further, women who enjoy greater flexibility to work from home also report a higher gender differential.

For many women, this need is connected to care responsibilities. Gendered social norms result in women being the primary caregivers in families, and care work is seen as their primary responsibility even if they are engaged in paid work outside the house. Thus, when women take up formal employment with these existing demands on their time, the flexibility provided by hybrid models becomes a key enabler for retaining them in the workforce, an advantage that fully in-person models do not provide. In our sample, 46% of women for whom saving time is an important feature of hybrid work handle most or all parental duties alone. Additionally, 100% of women who dedicate 4 or more hours to care work at home report that saving time travelling to and from office is a very important aspect in favour of hybrid work. This further strengthens the argument for flexible working models that account for these care responsibilities that are shouldered by women in the workforce, and provide more autonomy over their time.

Perceived Challenges of Hybrid Work

As hybrid work is still a nascent concept, survey findings indicate that organisational culture may not always match up to the employees' expectations from the hybrid model. It has been established that employees are actively looking for hybrid workplaces (ICIS, 2022), and organisations that actively offer such models are perceived to be ideal places to work at (Beno M, 2021). As such, absence of organisational culture that enables hybrid work is reported as a significant downside in our sample, especially for women in technology (63%) and business and consulting (57%) sectors. Most women from this group, majority of whom are under the age of 33

(63%) also report that reduction in social bonding is a major disadvantage, implying lack of interaction that occurs in an in-person office culture when working from home in a hybrid model. Most respondents who report that their participation in workplace discussion has decreased, also state that they feel an absence of organisational culture as a disadvantage. This again points to the lack of organisational readiness to aid employees' transition to hybrid working models, which affects how much women are able to participate in workplace discussions in such models.

The effect of the blurring of demarcation between personal and professional spaces is reflected in employees' perceptions of the downsides of hybrid work. 56% of hybrid workers surveyed report disturbance of work life balance to be a crucial disadvantage of hybrid work. Of these, 33% said that they work after hours or on the weekends, 47% also stated that their overtime work load has increased in the past two years and 45% are not compensated for it. This phenomenon is reported most in the social service/NGO sector where 70% of respondents work after hours and on the weekends. On the other hand, the technology sector is one of the few sectors where only around a quarter of the respondents (26%) report undertaking overtime work, closely followed by the banking sector (where 8 out of 10 workers do not report undertaking overtime work).

Additionally, since reduction in social interaction and bonding in the workplace is a concern, hybrid work may be the preferred option over completely remote work for employers, notes an employer from the development sector:

"We've seen that people feel less connected to the organisation if they're just working from home 100% of the time. So we want people to connect with the people that they were working with."

While women in select geographies, sectors, and roles are able to utilise the hybrid model to be a part of the workforce for the foreseeable future, most key informants interviewed for this study concur that the hybrid model will continue to be a part of the modern workspace as it continues to evolve and adapt to a post-pandemic world.

As the study also aims to understand the effect of hybrid work on women's participation in the formal workforce, we asked respondents about

Understanding Attrition among Female Hybrid Workers

any plans they may have to switch jobs or quit the workforce entirely. Over a quarter of the women surveyed (27.25%) want to change their job, of which a majority are daily office goers (69%) and a quarter are hybrid workers. Among office goers who want to switch their jobs, 40% of respondents report working after-hours or on weekends. While an equal proportion of women across metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (30% each) are looking for new job opportunities, certain sectors see a stronger trend: banking as well as real estate and teaching are sectors where a significant number of women are looking to make a job switch (50% in the former and 40% each in the latter). These are both traditionally more suited to in-person work than hybrid, which further strengthens our findings that women are looking for hybrid working models and tend to move out of sectors–or indeed, the workforce–if these options are unavailable. In our sample, Rajasthan emerges as the state where this phenomenon is most evident.

Both non-hybrid and hybrid workers report low pay as the top reason to switch jobs or quit the workforce respectively. Non-hybrid workers however also report wanting to quit the workforce entirely due to inhibiting factors such as an unfriendly work environment (16%), and are pushed out of the workforce due to life events such as marriage and childbirth (16%). In contrast, hybrid workers report wanting to switch jobs due to reasons that are more growth-oriented, such as lack of learning and growth and the existence of other competitive opportunities. Interestingly, not many non-hybrid workers report flexibility as a reason for switching jobs (8%) or quitting the workforce entirely (12%), but hybrid workers report flexibility as a major deciding factor for switching jobs (15%) and more importantly, for quitting the workforce entirely (42%).

45% of women who wish to change jobs also report that they have thought of quitting the workforce altogether. Banking sector has the highest proportion of women who wish to quit the workforce entirely, with 40% saying that they have thought of quitting work altogether. In our sample, most respondents (68%) who want to

quit working entirely are daily office goers. Thus, even as women prefer hybrid models due to the flexibility and time savings they offer, the organisational culture in workplaces is typically more suited to in-person models. This highlights the need for employers to revisit evaluation metrics and reporting mechanisms to ensure evaluation and pay parity, and nurturing a culture of trust to create workplace policies that provide fair growth structures for employees working in a hybrid mode. Further, there is a need to focus on national-level policies that regulate working hours, provide flexibility and fair pay, and organisational-level policies that encourage women's participation in the workplace and address lack of in-person social interaction.

Care Work, Time Use, and Hybrid Work

Time spent by hybrid workers on care work reveals interesting trends: women who work in a hybrid model spend around an hour on average engaged in care work on days when they are in office, and nearly an hour and a half on days they work from home. On the other hand, the women who work in person report spending more than two hours engaged in care work on a working day. One possible explanation is that since personal and professional spaces and times are no longer as separated in hybrid work, they may not realise how much time they are actually spending on care work, and may report lesser time than they actually spend on care work every day. Thus, it is evident that for working women the location of the workspace (whether they work in the office or at home) determines their time use, and the flexibility provided by hybrid models can prove to be an advantage for them.

The reported advantages and disadvantages of hybrid work also differ based on how much time women spend on care work. Women who find increased work-life balance to be an important benefit spend an average of 1 to 1.5 hours on care work every day. Similarly, women who found saving time on commute to be the most important benefit spent the most amount of time on care responsibilities in our sample. Women who spend more time on care work responsibilities tend to find the transition to hybrid work more challenging, which points to a need to provide better organisational support

such as digital infrastructure, pay and evaluation parity, and adequate skilling to such employees in order to equip them to take up hybrid work if they wish to do so.

Among the challenges in transitioning to hybrid work, women who found adapting to new technology for workplace communication challenging spent the most amount of time on care work, as compared to other factors. Any programs or efforts addressing skilling needs of women workers should thus account for any care responsibilities that demand their time, and may have to structure interventions differently based on when women are able to dedicate the most time and attention to the program.

The unequal burden of unpaid care work expected of women within the household continues to persist in hybrid work models. As boundaries between work and personal lives are blurrier in hybrid models than in fully in-person models, women also end up working for longer/inconvenient hours to achieve work-related deadlines. A gender specialist interviewed for the study noted that "*There is an expectation that you are at home, you can do this, you can multitask. You can pick up the children in between - you can take care of an ageing parent while you're home. And as a result, the same expectations are not held for men when they are working from home. And the expectations may not always be imposed by others but self-imposed..*"

Here, it is interesting to note that the type of support available to women to fulfil care work responsibilities also affects their experiences: among women who report sharing most responsibilities with their spouse, 58% find it easy to adapt to the new hybrid setup, while majority of women who hire outside help for care responsibilities find this transition difficult. Further, among the women who were not given an option to work hybrid, around 42% stated that they either handle the parental duties/duties towards dependents alone, or a female family member helps them, pointing to a significant segment of women who do have care responsibilities but are not able to access hybrid working models because their organisations do not provide them the option. Thus, the first step would be to expand the hybrid model to more working women so that they are able to benefit from the flexibility it provides and are not pushed out of the workforce due to the lack of an alternative to fully in-person working models. Additionally, even in hybrid models of working,

the more care work within the household is equally shouldered by men and women, the more likely it is that women find the requisite time and encouragement required to return to the workplace using such models. This requires structural changes at the societal level in how care work is distributed more equitably within the family, especially between spouses.

Is There a Gender Differential in the Hybrid Work Experience?

With this study, we also attempted to capture women's perceptions of whether hybrid work affects men's and women's careers differently. We asked a series of questions to measure gender differential, which measures perceptions of differences in increment, promotions, surveillance at work, networking and upskilling opportunities, inclusion in meetings, and exposure to key leaders for men and women who opt for the hybrid work model

In our sample, 51.43% of women doing hybrid work say that men and women's careers are differently affected by hybrid work. 1 in 4 women who work the junior most and senior most levels tend to report no gender differential between men and women as an impact of hybrid work. In contrast, around 3 out of 5 women working at a mid level believe there is a gender differential. The gender differential reported differs with factors such as location, flexibility, care responsibilities, and amount of participation in workplace discussions. More women in metropolitan areas (46%) report a gender differential in the effect of hybrid work on women's careers than their counterparts in non-metropolitan areas (30%).

Women having greatest flexibility reported a higher gender differential: 64% of hybrid workers who have flexibility in both work days and work hours report a gender differential, whereas only 18% of the women who had no such flexibility reported a gender differential. This could be attributed to potential adverse effects on their careers when they avail the flexibility provided by hybrid models of work. Deeper inquiry in this area in the future can help throw more light on nuances around these reported perceptions.

Hybrid Work in
Rural Uttarakhand

CASE STUDY

A BPO company based in rural Uttarakhand was profiled for the study, to understand the potential for hybrid work in rural India. This organisation has three centres in this region and provides a flexible, hybrid work model to its employees, over half of whom are local women. Through a focus group discussion (FGD) with the employees, an in-depth interview with the employer, and some field observation, the research team attempted to understand the experiences of women working in the hybrid model in rural India.

The organisation works with a local NGO to recruit and train women from the local community, which has led to improved community perceptions around women's participation in the formal workforce. The organisation offers a flexible hybrid model, wherein employees have the option to choose the number of remote work days depending on their domestic obligations and additional responsibilities such as harvest season during summers, when many women also assist their households in farming activities. As the workforce shifted to virtual work during the pandemic, the organisation provided laptops, power backup, and technical training to employees to ease their transition to a remote model while working in a region where digital infrastructure is still underdeveloped. Due to this tailored support provided by the organisation, post-pandemic the teams decided they could work better from home. The employer also introduced clear reporting structures and expectations regarding which tasks need to be completed in office, and initiated monthly in-person reviews so that more flexible workers also have regular evaluations.

For the employer, the driving factor of the hybrid model is the foundation of trust between the organisation and its employees. As the organisation's representative shared:

"It is a system of trust: it can work from home, and also in this kind of hybrid model."

The night shift ends at 4:30 AM, and employees working from the office have the option to stay in the company guest house attached to each centre. Female employees also use this guesthouse to help them with care responsibilities: e.g. the child of one of the female employees comes and stays at the guesthouse after school, and they return home together after the shift is over.

Despite these challenges, the organisation requires at least one member from each team to come to the office per shift, while the others may work from home. There are monthly in-person performance reviews for all employees. Many women prefer coming to the office because they look forward to the interaction with their colleagues, improved collaboration and productivity in office, and due to competing demands in terms of housework and paid work. As one FGD participant shared:

"Our families may ask for food to be prepared by noon, but we could also have an office deadline at the same time. In this situation, we will not be able to do either task (in time), and get scolded from both sides (sic). [Everyone laughs] When working from the office, you can only get scolded by (the employer)."

However, working from home brings its own set of challenges. While laptops are provided by the company, the employees are expected to connect to the internet through their own smartphones and data connections. The participants reported using Google and YouTube to troubleshoot ICT-related issues themselves, or calling/text messaging colleagues to understand and adapt to new technology. As this is a hilly terrain, internet connectivity poses issues, especially in the rainy season.

The lack of availability of a dedicated workspace within a shared household space, especially during the pandemic, posed special challenges–as one participant shared:

"Sometimes, if I had some important meeting, and my family members would not know whether I have a meeting or am simply working, they would call for me loudly in the middle of the meeting; saying something like 'feed the goat'! At the time, I didn't know what to do! In that moment, I couldn't even find the mute button!"

Unmarried women report lesser familial obligations, with their families encouraging them to prioritise their jobs. Married women face more pressure from their families to prioritise care work and housework. However, these women also report greater support from family members in joint families. As with the survey findings, we find that working women acknowledge that sharing of care responsibilities by their spouse is an important enabler, especially in households with joint families. One participant noted:

"The husband is the only one we can ask for help, say to cook the food if we are running late. We can't ask our in-laws or our parents in that manner, because they are older. Everyone is either older or younger, but the husband is equal."

In regions where industrial activities may be unviable on a larger scale, outsourcing technology-based services can provide flexible employment options for women. However, there is a need to address infrastructural constraints and gendered social norms which may influence the uptake and scaling-up of these models.

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CONCLUSION

This exploratory study aimed to throw light on the experiences and perceptions of female hybrid workers across metropolitan cities and beyond, which is a new addition to the literature. Working women are not a homogenous monolith--age, seniority, nature of sector, and location may influence women's choice and adoption of hybrid work, and our findings reflect this variance in their experiences, perceptions and choices with respect to hybrid work.

Care work has demands on time for most working women in India, and the flexibility of working hours and the time saved on commute in hybrid work models are perceived as strong benefits when compared to fully in-person or fully-remote models by respondents in our sample. A majority of them opt for it when their organisations offer them the option, especially older women who are at higher levels in the organisation. So much so, that not having flexibility at work – especially in hybrid work models–is actually pushing women to consider switching jobs or quitting the workforce entirely. It is thus evident that bringing gender-equitable and sustainable hybrid work policies to the workplace is an important step to ensuring that women continue to participate in the workforce.

With access to the right enabling infrastructure, hybrid work has the potential to provide flexible employment opportunities to women. Access to technology that is required for a hybrid model to function also remains a challenge for many women in the workforce. This comes in many forms: the availability of laptops, internet connection etc. as well as digital literacy and comfort with ICT tools. When working from home, the availability of a dedicated workspace is an important factor in how effectively women are able to work, and depending on household size, number of hybrid workers in the family, and other household assets this may place some women at a disadvantage compared to their peers. As such, active investment in co-working spaces and digital infrastructure in peri-urban and rural India under initiatives such as Digital India and Plug-n-Play offices[11] can help address this gap in resources that currently hinders women in non-metropolitan areas from participating in the workforce.

Since hybrid work is a relatively new phenomenon in India, the model is in its nascent stages. The option of hybrid work and the ease of transition to hybrid work varies by women's geographical location, seniority levels, and sector of work. Moreover, there is a lack of nationally representative data on the scale and extent of hybrid work across industries, sectors and different socio-economic segments of the population. Future efforts in this regard can focus on bridging the data gap and building evidence-informed use cases for hybrid work in the medium and long term - as certain industries, geographies and functions may be better suited to transition to a hybrid mode at scale. Further

research is also required to understand how such flexible working options may have an impact on other dimensions such as women's health and well-being and career progression.

As hybrid work models continue to gain popularity as a staple feature of the workplace even after the COVID-19 pandemic, regulating hybrid work is challenging since laws and labour codes around working hours, employee benefits and allowances, sexual harassment, and worker well-being are primarily designed keeping in mind in-person working arrangements. Stemming from the blurring between personal and professional spaces, employers and organisations opting for the hybrid model have begun formalising policies around online and in-person etiquette, performance metrics and productivity measures for employees working from home, and policies around harassment–sexual or otherwise–in the virtual workplace.

A push for investment in these areas can help bring an entire segment of aspirational working women into the formal workforce, especially in sectors such as teaching, social sector/NGO, and pharmaceuticals which have hitherto not been considered hybrid-friendly, but show potential for hybrid work.

As the hybrid work phenomenon garners momentum, governments and private sector organisations can focus on the following areas to improve hybrid working models and eventually improve women's labour force participation rates:

For employers:

- *Organisations in hybrid-friendly sectors must provide hybrid working options to help women employees contribute to the workforce more efficiently. Pay and evaluation parity for hybrid workers, especially women–and creating fair and equitable promotion and growth structures can ensure women's careers advance at the same pace as their male counterparts and 'a system of trust' with clear reporting mechanisms is established in the organisation.*

- *Strengthening infrastructure provision for employees in terms of high-speed broadband, co-working spaces, ICT such as desktops/laptops/smartphones, etc.*

- *Virtual safe spaces through clear workplace policies at the organisational level that account for regulated working hours, employee well-being, and protection against sexual harassment in a hybrid setup; and*

- *Collection of gender-disaggregated data around employee experience, time use, and workforce participation through hybrid models.*

For governments and policymakers:

- *Inclusion of hybrid working arrangements in existing labour codes and regulating working hours, mandating fair pay, and strengthening legal safeguards for hybrid workers, especially women, at an organisational level.*

- *Collection of gender-disaggregated data at sectoral, sub-national, and national level that can help shape policy around hybrid work in the future.*

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NOTES

1 Digital India Programme,
https://digitalindia.gov.in/vision-vision-areas/

2 Ministry of Rural Development's National Rural
Economic Transformation Project,
https://aajeevika.gov.in/what-we-do/national-rural-economic-transformation-project

3 such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and
desktop computers

4 Remote work is defined here as an
arrangement in which an employee, under a
written remote work agreement, is scheduled to
perform their work at an alternative worksite
and is not expected to perform work at an
agency worksite on a regular and recurring
basis.

5 We classify the following cities as
metropolitan based on the most populous cities
in the country based on data from the 2011
census: Mumbai, Delhi NCR, Bangalore,
Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Kolkata,
Pune, Surat, Jaipur, and Kanpur.

6 Size of the organisation is the estimated size
self-reported by respondents.

7 Seniority level is self-reported and may differ
in each sector and organisation.

8 Indicative selection for illustrative purposes;
actual roles and job designations reported by
respondents vary based on sector and
organisation.

9 https://opendigest.in/kerala-govt-approves-setting-up-of-work-near-home-centres/

10 Note: ICT tools here refer to applications
used for (work-related) communication,
whereas technology adoption refers to any
technology that is used by respondents to
complete their actual tasks at work. These
include but are not limited to software, digital
suites, tools, applications, devices, and/or
platforms used by them beyond the
applications for workplace communication
mentioned here.

11 https://www.goa.gov.in/goa-co-working-spaces/

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ANNEXURE

Methodology

A mixed methods approach helped us capture larger trends and patterns around hybrid work and women's workforce participation, while also allowing for nuanced, specific insights around themes such as care work, gendered effects of hybrid working, and effective policy efforts. This study was divided into three parts:

- a quantitative phone and online survey conducted with hybrid and non-hybrid women workers across different sectors

- KIIs and a business case study to understand perspectives from employers, gender specialists, lawyers, academics/policy makers, and hybrid workers in rural India

- a policy review that included consultation with leading organisations in hybrid-friendly sectors to produce recommendations for gender-friendly hybrid work policies that can help women's workforce participation.

Data analysis was conducted using STATA (version 15.0) for statistical analysis of the quantitative data, while content analysis of the KIIs and FGD transcripts was conducted to draw out the major themes reported in the qualitative inquiry.

Sampling

For the initial phone survey component, we collaborated with our technical partner TeamLease Services Limited, to obtain a sample of women workers registered with them as users of their mobile application. Sample size for quantitative survey was 400 working women–of which 150 were hybrid workers and 250 were non-hybrid, so as to provide a comparison group in the absence of a counterfactual. However, the margin of error is 4.9% with a 95% confidence level, ensuring that the results are still statistically significant.

Stratified random sampling was used to draw up a sample frame for the phone survey. TeamLease shared a database of 7000 users who consented to be approached by LEAD for the study; these users world in select hybrid-friendly industry verticals. We classified the verticals into 10 sub-sectors for the purpose of this study. Due to low response rates, subsequently an online survey was circulated on social media, emailers newsletters, and sent to personal and professional contacts of the research team through convenience and snowball sampling methods. For the KIIs and case study, respondents were identified through purposive sampling and interviews were conducted virtually/in-person as per respondents' availability and comfort.

Sector-wise distribution of sample across regions
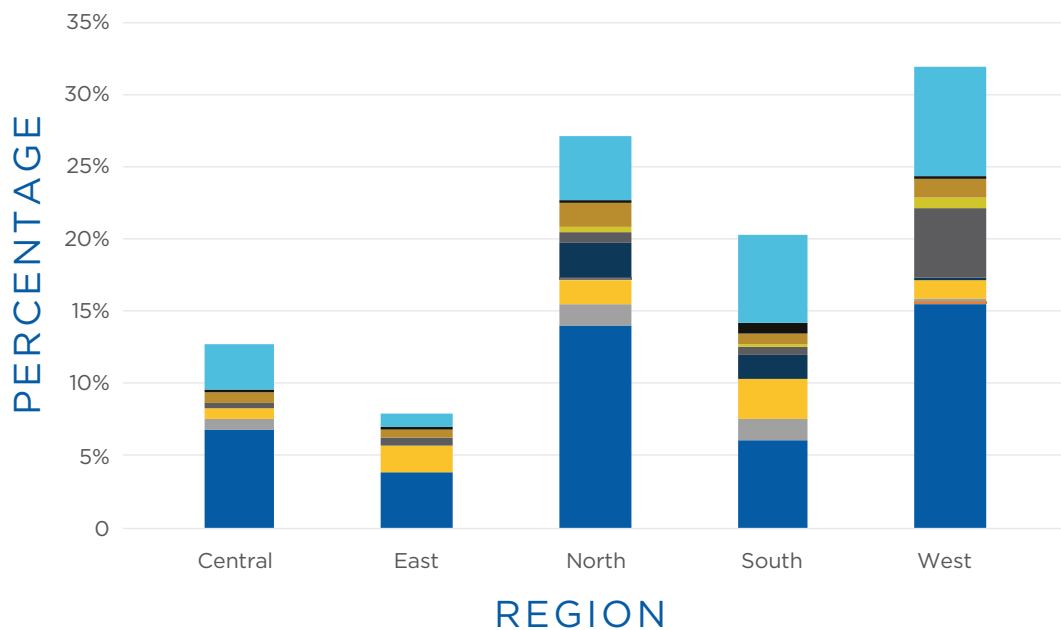
Legend:
- Technology, media, telecomm
- Teaching/Education/Training
- Social Services / NGO
- Real estate and construction
- Pharma, medical service, biotech
- Others
- Hospitality, travel and tourism
- Consumer goods (incl retail)
- Business and consulting services
- BPO
- Banking, finance, insurance