

# Home-based work and stress in the pandemic period: a case of working women in Kerala

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study has a twofold purpose. The first purpose is to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women's work-home integration and stress from both a constructivist and positivist perspective. The other purpose is to emphasize the need for enterprises to understand the embedded considerations of occupational stress of women for strategy formulation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study has used a convergent parallel design to obtain data. A total of 63 respondents (a survey with a sample of 53 and ten narratives) was identified using the snowball technique. The respondents were married and working professionals from Kerala. Perceived stress scale was used to procure data on their stress in the home-based work during the pandemic lockdown. Simultaneously narratives were taken from ten respondents from the same pool. The data were analyzed using R software version 4.0.2.

**Findings** – The findings reflect that home-based work was stressful for women, and they weighed home tasks over work needs. There was no age difference in perceived stress, while it significantly differed by profession and designation they hold. Also, a mother felt more stressed than a non-mother. Quantitative data heavily backed up the narratives. Of the sample, 76% experienced higher stress levels.

**Practical implications** – This research will help users understand the stress distribution in women workers and how various sample characteristics influence stress. The enterprise could use this study to introduce a gender touch to their strategy. The study also adds value to the existing literature on home-based work during the pandemic.

**Originality/value** – The study systematically measures the stress felt by women during home-based work using a perceived stress scale. The mixed approach to the study helps to gain a deep understanding of the topic. This study is an original contribution by the authors to the collection of home-based work and stress literature.

**Keywords** Home-based work, Covid-19, Stress, Women, Strategy

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The pandemic situation caused an abrupt shift to the nature of work, from office-based work to home-based work. The employer provides necessary equipment to the employee and works from their residence (Mirchandani, 2000). Traditionally, home-based work is expected to facilitate flexibility for women as it enables them to deal better with childcare and office tasks. However, the empirical fact is that home-based work triggers both ways of work-family conflict; work interfering with family and family interfering with work (Deshpande, 2020; Dubey and Tripathi, 2020; Kramer and Kramer, 2020; Purwanto *et al.*, 2020). The dual role



conflict may overload their role as a parent and a worker to a superfluous spillover. The major conflict arises from the time-based predictors than the strain-based predictors. She finds it challenging to keep the two domains in balance, gradually leading women to mental stress, dismay and health problems (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Majumdar *et al.*, 2020).

In nuclear families, where the husband was the major breadwinner, she could better contribute to family's well-being. Furthermore, she finds a full-time office job in the normal course when her child reaches a certain age. When the pandemic struck, both husband's and wife's offices shifted to the house, and the children's schooling also became home-based. As the home-based work continued, the boundary between work and non-work got thinned, and the effort to balance these two spheres has become more stressful to the women (Del Boca *et al.*, 2020; Feng and Savani, 2020). Bringing work to home causes depressive symptoms in women, especially those who have young children (Shepherd-Banigan *et al.*, 2016). Married working women suffer higher stress than men and unmarried working women (Luecken *et al.*, 1997). In this study, we have addressed two major research issues;

- (1) Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on work-home integration and stress of home-based working women; and
- (2) Need for enterprises to understand the embedded considerations of occupational stress of women for strategy formulation.

The next section of the paper contains a summary of existing literature with an added theoretical review, followed by a data and methodology section and results and discussions with managerial implications. The last section of the paper concludes the study with its limitations and future research scope.

## 2. Literature review

Women have difficulty in balancing between paid and non-paid work at home (Kinman and Jones, 2008). Their involvement in social activities is less compared to men. The pandemic scenario seems to have worsened this situation. Women could not enrich their dual role quality, whereas men seem to control their work and non-work activities. This could be attributed to the gender inequity in the "double burden" prevalent in society (Buddhapriya, 2009; McLaren *et al.*, 2020). During lockdown, continuous work in the digital platforms might lead to cynistic behavior (Trittin-Ulbrich *et al.*, 2021). Cynicism is when employees detach from work due to their negative feelings toward the job (Peter and Chima, 2018; Yildiz and Saylikay, 2014). At this phase, employees regret their career choice and hate themselves. They compromise on their work tasks, and thus performance levels, is low. Home-based work financially benefits more to the high-educated and high-paid men (Bonacini *et al.*, 2021). Globally, unemployment rates have snowballed following the pandemic. Enterprises go for cost cuts, delay growth opportunities and lower employee payments. In a country like India, where economic practices are characterized by gender inequality, pandemic causes an extra burden to women. This generates cynicism and deteriorates the positive work attitude in employees.

Sociologists and psychologists adopt rational theory in social sciences to address non-rational elements when practicing rational choices. The organizational perspective demands the labor to be a rational decision-maker on their choices and maintain production standards established by the organizations. The theory explains the economic viability of choices from the profit-maker view. Monetary benefits are perceived to be the motivator behind rational actions (Scott, 2000). Human feelings and emotions have set off the most economical choices (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997). In practice, people are emotional and might choose to forego

the profit aspect of an action. In behavioral economics, the emotional aspect of the employee is heavily correlated to the family environment to which the employee belongs. The organization's human resource (HR) department should also consider looking into the work-life balance issues of the employees (Gragano *et al.*, 2020).

The pandemic seems to have brought significant adjustments to individuals' feelings, thoughts and career behavior. The choice factor that defines the quality of workplace boundaries got abruptly in home-based work. Employees who maintain high work demand over the house domain find it more difficult to achieve more career success. The integrating role of women in dual-earner nuclear families tends to be more chaotic (Cho, 2020). The sleep health issues and the mounting stress factor do not favor a healthy work-home integration (Gao and Scullin, 2020). Online and virtual arrangements are stressors to many employees concerning the cost involved and the presence of the digital divide. Employees face ergonomic issues too when they try to set up offices in home space. In most cases, the workstation replica set by the employees gets ramified and results in stress (Davis *et al.*, 2020). The prolonged pandemic is causing a career shock to personnel, particularly those in the early phases of their career (Buddhapriya, 2009). Employment opportunities went down, and career advancement opportunities were put on hold (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). Home-based work has made waterline segregation between work and home chores for women. This has led to a loss of pristineness of the profession, loss of respect and she ultimately tries to quit the job (Ransome, 2007). Enterprises need to provide resilience-building programs to secure the employees' morale and improve competencies (Rudolph and Zacher, 2020).

Employment relationship-building efforts are essential as the pandemic made it impossible for workplace supervision (Spurk and Straub, 2020). These relationship-building efforts primarily aim at reducing stress and improving the personal well-being of employees and dependents. The cultural setup around the world assigns different roles for both men and women. It calls for higher responsibilities for a wife than a husband. The extended family and traditional gender role can be highlighted as a reason for the lower support of the husbands in India in sharing domestic work and childcare (Bharat, 1995; Rout *et al.*, 1999; Sekaran, 1992). The *conflict* occurs when the women fit into a breadwinner role. As the women started assuming offices, they found it difficult to manage home roles, take care of kids and elders, etc. The personnel and mental well-being of individuals depend on the healthy balance of their work and family roles. Temporal elements involved in multitasking are not as favorable to women as for men regarding home and work roles (Ansari and Raj, 2020; Gartenberg, 2017). The challenge is for the enterprise to develop effective employee-friendly policies to keep their work-home border healthy. It will lead to creating a family-supportive organization perspective in the minds of the workforce (Booth and Matthews, 2012). Moreover, it will enable the HR department to gain employees' trust, keep them motivated and secure productivity targets of the organizations.

The competing interests between home and workplace demand have been a growing area in HR research (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). How millennials and new-gen workforce approach office have a drastic difference compared to the old-generation workforce (Bennett *et al.*, 2017). Workplace relationships are growing complex. Employees started accessing the office from their residence using the internet technology. As the workplace and technology evolve, conflicts also are emerging adjacent. Due to the hit of the pandemic, the rate of forced innovations rose, and the domain integration issues seemed to be assuming more relevance.

### 2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical root of the paper could be found more from the works of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman on behavioral economics. The contributions of Kahneman combine psychology with economics and help to understand the human decision-making process better.

He introduced the elements of reference points and loss aversion in his *prospect theory*. Reference upheld the idea that individual behavior gets nuanced to gains and losses relative to reference points than being measured in terms of wealth generation. Loss aversion is when individual behavior is sensitized to potential losses than profits (Majumdar *et al.*, 2020). His theory substantiates the presence of a cognitive element that triggers human to be irrational decision-makers. The findings of Nobel laureate Richard Thaler were also in consonance with the ideas of Kahneman. Thaler found empirical shreds of evidence that do not reconcile with the rational paradigm in financial decision-making while explaining the endowment effect (. . . the idea that individual behavior values things owned, rather than things they do not own).

The *role theory* helps the reader understand the theoretical foundations of work–life. As per the theory, individuals balance their lives mostly between their work role and family role. Each role vests a set of rights, duties, responsibilities of its own. The behavior is influenced by social position held by the individuals. Doctors, engineers, teachers or any professionals try to represent the status provided by the profile in their behavior to the rest of the world. Adopting the theory to the management discourse, organizations help their employees to establish a better balance between their work roles and family roles (Edwards and Rothbard, 2005; Staines, 1980; Zedeck, 1992). Also, the *boundary theory* emphasizes the need for drawing visible boundaries between multiple roles (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Mirchandani, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). The boundary fully separates the two domains and helps the individual fully integrate a domain at a given time. The employee can be psychologically engaged in other domain while in one (Hesselmann *et al.*, 2015; Linville, 1987). Employees seek high segmentation between the dual roles to live to the two domains' differing behavior expectations (Clark, 2000).

The *social exchange theory* states that cost–benefit calculations occur in every relationships (Blau, 1968). The properties of self-interest and interdependence plays in personal relationships, professional relationships and ephemeral relationships (Bostrom *et al.*, 1981; Cook *et al.*, 2013). The cost–benefit calculations leads to a *tradeoff* (Friedman *et al.*, 1998) between the domains. Any conflicts between these domains are directly reflected in the workplace performance, as the employee is in a dilemma regarding assigning priority tags to one over another (Haar, 2006). The more rewards an employee could earn by spending more time at work was considered as an excuse to forego the home domain (Friedman, 2018).

*Occupational stress* studies in medical, engineering, psychology and organizational context are gaining increased popularity (Beehr and McGrath, 1992). From a micro point of view, stress alone is not a disease. It is related to the anxiety and depression felt by the employees due to a mismatch between their work demands and their contribution to it. Headache, sleeplessness, short temper, lack of concentration, etc. are the commonly found symptoms of stress attacks (Rout and Rout, 2002; Rout *et al.*, 1999). Stress ultimately leads to poor performance at the office and the failure to meet the responsibilities at home. Compared to men, women face more work-related stress (Kouvonen *et al.*, 2005).

### 3. Data and methodology

#### 3.1 Sample

The sample for the study contributed a total of 63 (a survey with a sample of 53 and ten narratives) responses. The data were collected using an electronically administered questionnaire (perceived stress scale). Respondents were identified through referrals taken from them after each subsequent intervention. The nature of their work was office going, and the Covid-19 pandemic situation has forced them to shift their office to home. Table 1 describes the sample characteristics in detail. The 53 identified women resided in the Kattappana municipality of Idukki district, Kerala. The mean age of the sample was

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	
Age	20–28	9	
	28–36	34	
	36–44	10	
	Above 44	3	
Motherhood	Have kids	40	
	No kids	13	
Type of work	Teaching	13	
	IT	18	
	HR	9	
	Govt. employee	5	
	Others	8	
	Designation	Administrative	9
		Executive	16
Operations		28	

**Table 1.**  
Sample description

**Source(s):** Primary

29.5 years. The majority of the respondents were between the age group of 28 and 36 years. Of the sample, 40 were mothers of kids aging seven months to eight years. There were 13 teachers, 18 information technology (IT) professionals, nine HR professionals, five government employees and eight women from other miscellaneous professions in the sample. Many of the women were staff at operations and executive line of work, while a small proportion was only managing administrative roles. Further, 28 of them were working in operations, 16 at the executive level and nine were working at the administrative line of work.

### 3.2 Instrument

The perceived stress scale was used to procure information on women’s stress in the home-based work during the pandemic lockdown. It is a classic stress assessment tool developed in 1983 (Cohen *et al.*, 1994). The scale records the feelings and thoughts of the respondent for the previous month on a five-point scale (0 – never to 4 – very often). The reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ). Higher alpha values (above 0.70) indicate strong internal consistency, and our alpha was  $0.76 > 0.70$ . The scale item scores were combined to calculate the respondent’s stress level and were analyzed against the various sample parameters of age, type of work, designation, etc. Simultaneously narratives were taken from ten respondents from the same pool. Collected data are analyzed using R software version 4.0.2. Google Forms were used to record the scale responses, and Zoom meetings were called for semi-structured interviews. The data were collected between May and August of 2019.

### 3.3 Design of the study

The researchers adopt a pragmatic approach to understand the in-depth issues associated with the work–home integration of married women in home-based work. A convergent parallel design (Creswell, 2011; Kettles *et al.*, 2011) was used in this study. Compared to a single scientific inquiry, a mixed methodology helps to gain more insight into the research issue. This design, Figure 1, helps to understand the scenario by obtaining complementary data. The qualitative data collected is expected to enhance the precision of the conclusions drawn from the quantitative data. There was no particular sequence followed in executing the mixed methodology.

#### 4. Results and discussion

This section of discussion is based on primary narrative of the respondents regarding their work-home integration issues during the pandemic. Home-based work situation due to Covid-19 has resulted in increased stress on working women whose children are pursuing school, husbands are working and aged parents are there to take care in the same environment. They face time management issues to deal with daily work tasks, and hence, they are busy dealing with children and other dependents in their homes. The respondents reportedly experience symptoms of stress. Women from nuclear double-earner families face higher time management issues and incidents of stress. Higher incidents of sleeplessness, headache and tiredness were common attributes identified in their behavior from the primary interview.

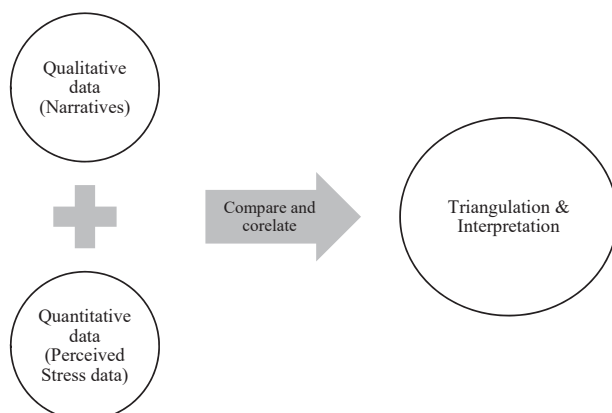
Rose (name coded), a college lecturer and mother of two children, states:

Since Covid-19 closed my institute, I'm facing excessive stress and headaches. Managing kids and other inmates is highly stressful now. Now, I must be at work before daybreak. I have become a full-time mother, while working from home. It is really exhausting. I'm not sleeping peaceful nowadays. I have a sixteen-month-old son, who depends on me most of the time, which makes working from home a real challenge.

Elona (name coded), an IT professional and mother of four-year-old states:

Both of us work for the same employer, and yet I lag in-office tasks. I'm investing a lot of time in cooking and in caring for old inmates. I'm not able to reach my work potential at home, and it is stressful.

The respondents were explicit regarding the stress felt and factors contributing to it. Childcare, dependents care, cooking, a working spouse, etc. are contributing to mounting stress. The importance of office-going practice in the productivity of women is reflected throughout the narratives. The respondents were from middle-income families and were not enjoying any superior positions in their offices. They shared similar chairs in the organization structure, and their views apply to a vast portion of the working population in our society. The term-document matrix in [Table 2](#) contains the codes in homogeneity, summarizing the informant's narratives (a broader picturization of narratives is presented in the word cloud, [Figure 2](#)). The border between work commitments and home commitments got significantly thinned, and working women struggled to assign priorities between the two spheres.



**Source(s):** Adapted from Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark & Smith, 2011

**Figure 1.**  
Convergent parallel  
design



narratives have indicated incidents of women losing control over their true selves and experiencing headaches, body pain, tension, inflated blood pressure and lack of proper sleep since the home-based work began. The majority of respondents sharing high perceived stress scores elucidate the constructive part of the analysis.

A series of chi-square tests were conducted to identify how stress is distributed among various sample characteristics. From Table 4 it is understood that the perceived stress categories did not differ by age,  $X^2(6, N = 53) = 12.7, p > 0.05$ . The relation between stress and motherhood was significant,  $X^2(2, N = 53) = 53.1, p < 0.001$ . Mothers were more likely to suffer more stress than the non-mother. Respondents had children from the age of seven months to eight years old. The children at this age require extra care, and they depend on their mother primarily for their needs. Children were at the initial years of their basic schooling, and virtual schooling seems to have limitations. The professional care they used to receive in their schools could not be replicated in the home space with parallel effectiveness. A chi-square test of independence showed a significant association between perceived stress and type of work,  $X^2(6, N = 53) = 66.74, p < 0.001$ . Women working in the HR and IT profession have suffered high stress compared to teachers and Govt employees. It is also found that there is a significant relationship between stress and workplace designation,  $X^2(6, N = 53) = 67.71, p < 0.001$ . Women in the operations and executive line of work seem to suffer higher stress than women who handle administrative/managerial profiles. Also, there were old-aged dependents in a few homes. Some old aged suffered complicated medical conditions that required full-time attention. Home nurses and maids have stopped visiting homes, and it caused a double burden to the women in houses. Middle-income families find it more difficult to adapt to the new normal imposed by Covid-19. Financial constraints, space issues, missing the societal aspect from life, love, touch, etc. have been reported as stressors and caused negative effects on family well-being (Lee *et al.*, 2020).

The initial analysis has helped researchers measure the stress level and understand the stress distribution among various population characteristics. Keeping this knowledge as base, the sample was approached again and asked to prioritize work and home tasks.

Category	Chi-square tests of independence
<i>Age in years</i>	
20–28	$X^2(6) = 12.77$
28–36	$p > 0.05$
36–44	$n = 53$
Above 44	
<i>Motherhood</i>	$X^2(2) = 53.1$
Have kids	$p < 0.001$
No kids	$n = 53$
<i>Type of work</i>	
Teaching	$X^2(6) = 66.74$
IT	$p < 0.001$
HR	$n = 53$
Govt. employee	
Others	
<i>Designation</i>	
Administrative	$X^2(6) = 67.71$
Executive	$p < 0.001$
Operations	$n = 53$
<b>Source(s):</b> Primary	

**Table 4.**  
Comparison of stress  
by sample  
characteristics

Claire (name coded), an HR professional and mother of five-year-old states:

I have to cherish my family needs first. After all everything is for them. . . office assignments are do important. . . cannot say no to kids and other family chores. . . sometime keep the system unattended and do chores.

The decision-making factor of women was in favor of the home domain. The respondents were ready to or forced to keep their assignments unattended in the home space. The embedded influence of family needs seems to enable women to choose home over work needs. The lockdown is stressful, and it potentially influences the job performance of women. The enterprise cannot expect productivity hikes, especially from women, when a forced innovation compromises the family role. The rise of the work or home dilemma always induces working women to choose home over work needs. Rationality is subjective in situations, and the HR department often misses this soft spot in planning strategy. The decision-making stimulus, particularly women, needs to be addressed in terms of the psychological and behavioral prospects. Theoretical contributions of Thaler and Kahneman could be adopted to the organizational settings to understand the economic aspects of behavior. Home-based work makes a female staff think of maintaining her parenthood better than her professional expertise. In the light of the prospect theory, she tries to keep up her family as to averse loss than gaining from her profession. The expected utility she bears as a caregiver is a reference point rather than absolute outcome as an employee (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979).

#### 4.1 Implications for managerial practice

Covid-19 has created a particularly challenging environment for pandemic HR management managers have to quickly move into the unknown anonymity (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020) as they try to adapt and cope with radical changes in their work. Social environment, for example, employees who previously worked full-time or, for the most part, within the physical boundaries of their organization, now need to adapt to a remote work environment. Due to the closure of non-essential businesses, even those well adapted to remote work conditions face the challenges of the inability to search for alternative workspaces (e.g. cafes, libraries, etc.) (Sharma and Sharma, 2021). Aside from the growing inability to distinguish between work and personal life, the closure of schools and childcare services has increased parental needs for employees, further blurring the line between work and family spheres. While these work-family relationships may seem particularly demanding to women employees with children, unmarried and childless workers are not immune to the adverse effects of such altered work conditions, as they may be at the greatest risk of loneliness, lack of purpose, etc.

The Covid-19 pandemic has given enterprises a reason for staying uncertain-prepared. Emergencies like this will force organizations to innovate in technical, physical and socio-psychological spheres for survival. The overloaded roles have caused severe time management issues and affected their performance standards. To deal with the short-term productivity loss (Cho, 2020), the department could assist women in planning a more effective *schedule control* tactic (Golden, 2008; Kelly and Moen, 2007). Giving women the autonomy to schedule their work facilitates self-leadership (Galanti *et al.*, 2021), better performance and satisfaction (Feng and Savani, 2020). Effective schedule control can minimize stress arising from multitasking in home-based work (Schieman and Badawy, 2020; Schieman and Young, 2010).

For sustainable employee performance, the enterprise could adopt a gender approach. Family-inclusive medical insurance, online tuition facilities for kids, extension in assignments, work sharing, paid special leaves, career-building activities, etc. are areas

where the HR department could focus (Kerman *et al.*, 2021; Kuo *et al.*, 2020; Smith and Gardner, 2007). The enterprise could assist the employee on efficient work scheduling for sustainable performance (Agba *et al.*, 2020; Anderson *et al.*, 2003; Beutell, 2010; Ng *et al.*, 2006). Work schedule will help employees allot adequate time for multiple roles, enjoy health benefits and find satisfaction (Beutell, 2010; Flo *et al.*, 2013; Kelly and Moen, 2007; Staines and Pleck, 1986). A resource-based approach, structural and psychosocial assets could facilitate the staff's psychological well-being and help to create a family-supportive organization perception in employees' minds (Lapierre *et al.*, 2008). A superior experience from the work domain could contribute to the family domain (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006); if this is the rationale, then the enterprise could affluence the decision stimuli of their employees.

Another area where the enterprise needs to focus is on the post-pandemic dealing of the employees. Post-pandemic realities will require re-skilling and upskilling employees (Przytuła *et al.*, 2020), especially the fresh millennial recruits (Rusi, 2021). The new normal in which they were recruited to does not entirely reflect the enterprise work culture. Employees who were sent to home-based work from an office, the enterprise will require to design flexible work options to retain their performance and satisfaction (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Davidescu *et al.*, 2020); hence, the schooling and childcare services are not restored in total capacity.

## 5. Conclusion

The considerations of performance dynamics of the women seem to be highly embedded in their home domain. The inter-role conflicts surge more in home-based work than ever before. The constructivist part of the study revealed that women's emotional incline to the home domain makes her assign higher priority to home needs. Recreating the workplace dynamics to a house seems to be extremely challenging, especially for mid-sized families. The positive work attitude is often compromised for childcare, dependents care and other chores. The employees live as a mother more and employees less in home-based work. She suffers from sleeplessness, headache and other stress symptoms. The positive approach to the study has found no age difference in stress distribution, and childcare is the primary stressor. Women in IT and HR professions face higher stress compared to other professionals. Higher in the managerial hierarchy, lesser the stress level. Working at operations and the executive line of work seems to be highly stressful for women.

The Covid-19 crisis has increased the workload of women in both their home and work domains. The subjective variables that are not directly attributed to work but influence it via qualifying the individual's work positive decisions need special attention of the enterprise. Compared to her husband, she compromises more time for integrating multiple roles. The enterprise should track the stress level of the staff for their effective work-life integration. A gender approach in the policy design and efficient work schedule is expected to generate high morale and commitment among women helps to sustain their performance. A focus in this area could better assist the enterprise in dealing with challenging times like Covid-19 and sustained productivity.

### 5.1 Limitations and future scope

This study only focuses on women employees. How home-based work affects different gender might have other dimensions that the researcher does not discuss. A gender-neutral approach to the topic might yield better results.

This study was conducted during the initial half of the nationwide pandemic lockdown. Continued lockdown might have introduced forced innovations, changing work culture, behavioral changes, etc. To better understand how home-based work has impacted the

women workforce, one could plan a longitudinal study including more variables to the present study frame.

The researcher has not considered the generational difference among the sample. There might be a change in the degree to which home-based work causes stress to different generations (Gen X and millennials). Future researches could consider this generational difference in stress and home-based work studies.

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