

‘Work from home’ as an alternative to daily commuting for working women

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This study examines the viability of working from home as an alternative to daily commuting for the working women of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region in India. Work from home has become a common practice in India following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the mentioned area of India people are known to commute for long distances daily to reach their workplaces, and the ability to work from home has led to saving a lot of time that otherwise used to be lost in commuting. Despite this, the present study argues that working from home is not free from drawbacks and the time spent commuting is not necessarily equivalent to time wasted, especially for working women. The study uses a mixed methodology involving primary and secondary data that are analysed qualitatively and quantitatively to derive the findings. The results derived reveals the disadvantages experienced by the working women of the study area as a result of working from their homes, as well as, brings out the importance and need for commuting in the daily lives of these working women.

Key Words: *Commuting; Mumbai Metropolitan Region; Pandemic; Women; Work from home*

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Introduction

The trend of ‘work from home’ or ‘remote work’ is gaining popularity in recent times. It is often considered a privilege because it saves time otherwise spent in

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commuting on a daily basis, while also, enabling working from the comforts of one's home, thereby giving more family time and personal time (Courtney, 2020). Long commutes to work are also said to have several negative impacts on mental health, physical health, and family life (APS, 2016). Therefore, commuting is often considered undesirable, although, many recent studies suggest otherwise. For instance, Rothbard & Ramarajan (2009) and Gino et al. (2017) argue that commuting actually enables people to transition from their home roles to work roles. Similarly, Clarke (2000) suggests that working people are required to cross the borders existing between the work and family domains. Also, the widespread use of mobile phones on public transport nowadays indicates that commuting time is often used by people to communicate with their friends and family (Bissel, 2015). According to Gino et al. (2017), people who spend at least some time to think and plan about the day and week while commuting are likely to arrive at their places of work better prepared, infused with positivity and productivity. Commuting, especially by public transport, is said to improve fitness levels (Flint et al., 2016; Batista-Ferrer et al., 2018). Concerning women, however, the ability to work from home, apart from allowing them to cut the commuting time, is considered to give them more family time and time for child care (Ibarra et al., 2020). In the wake of the pandemic, the broader implementation of work from home has presented the opportunity to many women who once had to curtail the progression of their careers in order to take care of their domestic responsibilities, to now make an economic comeback, if they should want (Bhattacharyya, 2020). In spite of this, several studies have pointed out the drawbacks that women are likely to face while working from home. The results of these studies have repeatedly stressed that working from home is more likely to add domestic responsibilities on the women (Ibarra et al., 2020) thereby leading to the strengthening of gender roles (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Kim, 2018), with women essentially located at the losing end of this bargain. Powell & Craig (2015) notes that it may be difficult for the women who work from their homes, to maintain boundaries between work and family responsibilities, thus exposing them to work-family conflict and increased stress.

Until recently, work from home has been a rare practice in India. Therefore, the ability to work from home seemed like a blessing to most working people, especially to those who were required to commute daily for long durations. However, under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent declaration of lockdown in the country, work from home has been widely adopted in India. As a result, a massive number of "more than 3 billion" people (Deorah, 2020) have come to work from their homes. This involves people employed in the formal sectors of the economy, such as offices, educational institutes, and financial sectors (Deshpande, 2020a). Thus, under the prevailing scenario of the pandemic, lockdown, and restricted mobility, working from home has become a widespread practice. This has created an opportunity to evaluate the current scenario of working from home and to analyse whether it is

a practical alternative to daily commuting. In this study, the author explores this in the context of the working women of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region.

The focus of the study is on the women considering the gendered character of most homes in India. It is common for the women members to manage the functioning of their homes, irrespective of their employment status. These domestic responsibilities can be seen to be far greater in the case of married women. Although women in India are making great strides in all walks of life, the age-old patriarchal notions are still deeply rooted in Indian society (Goyat, N.D.). Most households in the country do not practice the sharing of domestic chores and housework in a gender-neutral manner (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019; Deshpande, 2020a). With the changes brought about by the pandemic and lockdown with restrictions on mobility, the working women have not only become confined to the four walls of their homes but are also juggling with work from home and domestic chores as households have been cut off from their domestic helpers. Therefore, this raises serious concerns.

Methodology

The study is focused on the Mumbai Metropolitan Region of India, which is located in the western part of the country, in the state of Maharashtra. It is one of the most densely populated urban agglomerations of the world. It spreads across an area of 6,355 km² (Kakodkar & Sen, 2019). The coastal city of Mumbai, which lies at the core of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, is an economic hub of India. The growth of the service sector in Mumbai has spread across the region, covering the other nodal areas such as Thane, Kalyan, and Navi Mumbai. It is one of the fastest-growing regions of India (Acharya & Nangia, 2004). The women of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region are involved more in regular employment practices rather than casual or part-time employment practices and self-employment (Rode, 2015). People of this region (both men and women) are known to commute for long hours to reach their places of work. On average, the working people of the region spend 8.4% of their monthly income on commuting (Thakkar, 2019).

The study uses both primary and secondary data and is based on a mixed-methods approach. The primary data was collected using an online survey conducted on the working women of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. For the online survey, a semi-structured questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms to a handful of working women in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, who were already known to the author, and they were requested to circulate it among their colleagues for broader coverage. A total of 34 working women responded to the survey. The sample group included women from 21 to 60 years of age, belonging to married and unmarried categories. They responded to questions on their work from home experience and the impact of mobility restrictions on their lives. While citing the experiences shared by the sample group, names were changed in the article to keep their identities undisclosed.

The secondary data for the study was collected from various sources such as books, reports, journals, news articles, blogs, and websites. Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports (2020) have been used in the study to establish the changes in the pattern of mobility in the country.

Results and Discussion

Impact of pandemic and lockdown on mobility

The growing fear associated with the spreading of the SARS-COV-2 virus (i.e., the virus causing the disease COVID-19) led the government of India to call for a 21 days lockdown, which commenced from the 25th of March, 2020 (Hebbar, 2020). Although the lockdown was initially meant for only 21 days, it had to be extended further in the wake of the growing number of cases in the country (Hindustan Times, 2020; Scroll.in, 2020; Banerjea, 2020). Based on the progress of the pandemic in the various areas of the country, relaxations in some form or other have been granted in the less affected areas (Khairnar, 2020; Misra, 2020; Timesnownews.com., 2020). Nonetheless, as a result of the pandemic and lockdown, mobility patterns in the country have changed significantly. Even after certain relaxations were levied upon on the transport sector, mobility has remained limited.

As per the data published by Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports (2020), the percentage of people visiting public transit stations in India on the 17th of February 2020 was 2%, which by the 17th of August 2020 dropped down to -39% (Figure 1). Similarly, the percentage of people visiting their places of work on the 17th of February 2020 was 3%, which by the 17th of August 2020 dropped down to -31% (Figure 2). In both these cases, the highest drop can be seen in the month of April, i.e. the percentage of people visiting public transport stations in India on the 17th of April 2020 was -67% (Figure 1), and the percentage of people visiting their places of work on the 17th of April 2020 was -62% (Figure 2). The reason behind this was that the lockdown during the phase was very strict. Contrary to this, the data on time spent at home in India, published in Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports (2020), revealed it to be 0% on the 17th of February 2020, and on the 17th of August 2020, it stood at 13% (Figure 3).

The highest increase in time spent at home is noted on the 17th of April 2020, i.e., 29%, the reason again being the strict lockdown in this phase (Figure 3). Thus, mobility became limited under the pandemic and lockdown.

Eventual relaxations to lockdown were granted in India starting with the 20th of April at different intensities in different parts of the country. From the month of June, restrictions on mobility in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region have come to be relaxed and inter-district travel has been opened up for those people who are residing within the limits of the municipal corporation (Deshpande, 2020b). In addition to this, the private sector offices of the region also have been allowed to function, whereas, the educational institutions have only been permitted to

carry out non-teaching activities (Deshpande, 2020b). Non-essential travels have not been permitted yet. Even with these relaxations, most private sector offices in the region have continued to operate remotely through work from home practices.

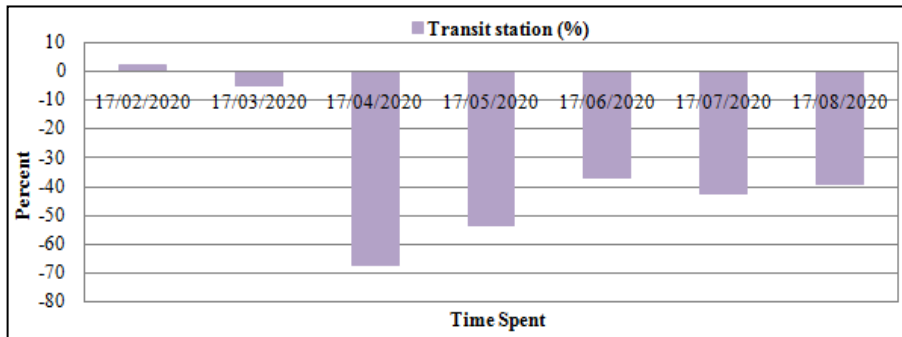


Figure 1. Changes in the number of visitors at public transit stations in India from the 17th of February 2020 to the 17th of August 2020. *Source:* Computed by the author based on the data from Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports, 2020

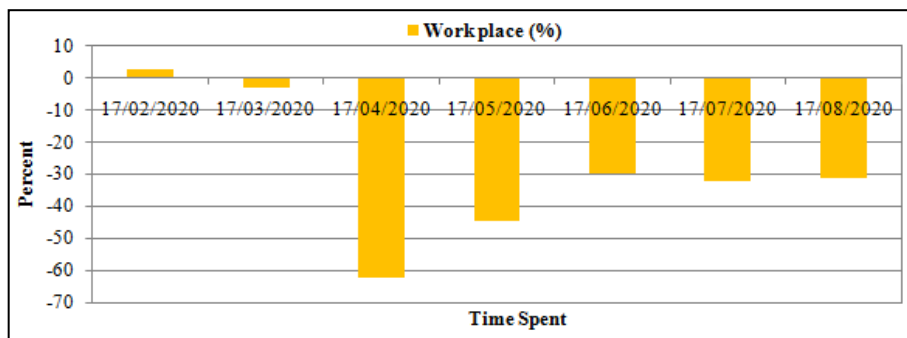


Figure 2. Changes in the number of visitors at workplaces in India from the 17th of February 2020 to the 17th of August 2020. *Source:* Computed by the author based on the data from Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports, 2020

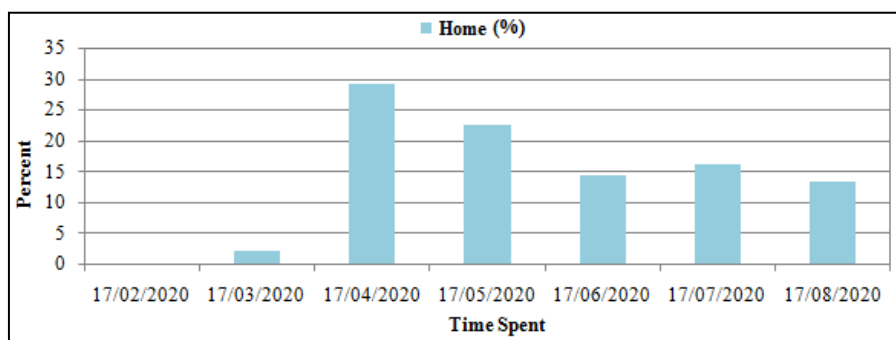


Figure 3. Changes in the amount of time spent at home in India from the 17th of February 2020 to the 17th of August 2020. *Source:* Computed by the author based on the data from Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports, 2020

The 'work from home' experience

Working from home has led to varied experiences among the working women of the study area. Based on the answers given by the respondents to the survey, a vast majority (91%) of women who are working from their homes during the pandemic have termed their experience to be negative (Figure 4). In other words, only 9% of the working women in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region have a positive experience as a result of working from home.

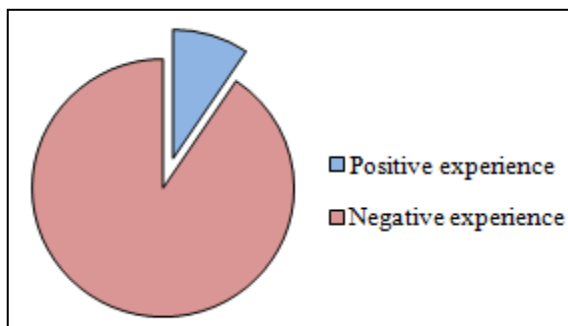


Figure 4. Nature of experience. *Source:* Calculations based on the primary data

The most frequently stated phrases were analysed based on the description of their experiences by the respondents. These were 'stressful life' (21%), 'lack of peace' (11%), 'depressed life' (9%), 'stagnant life' (8%), 'difficult life' (7%), 'imbalanced life' (7%), 'busy life' (6%), 'more personal time' (6%), 'working hours extended' (4%), 'financial issues' (4%), 'problems in family' (4%), 'decreased productivity' (3%), 'socially distant' (2%), 'increased productivity' (2%), 'lack of discipline' (2%), 'more time' (2%), and 'mental disturbance' (2%) (Figure 5).

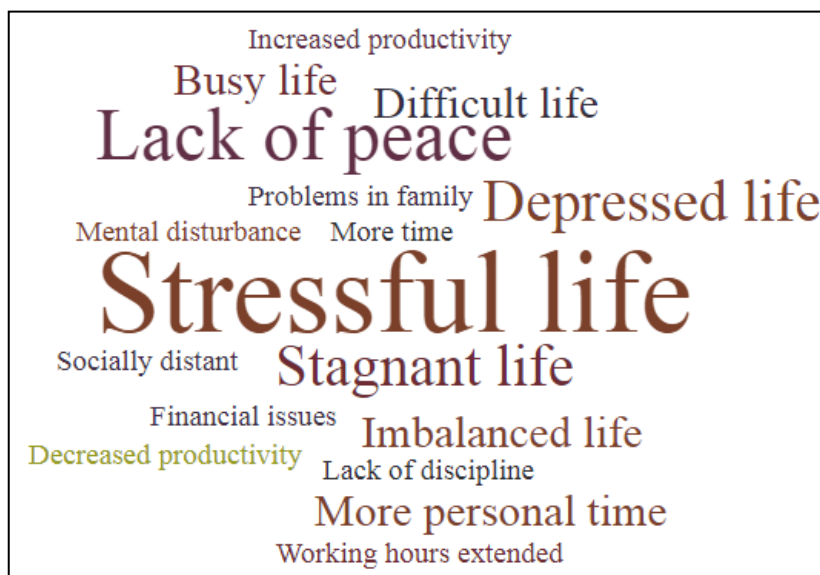


Figure 5. Experiences of working from home. *Source:* Calculations based on primary data.

Impact of mobility restrictions

The mobility restrictions under the pandemic and lockdown have also impacted the working women of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. However, before delving into the impact of mobility restrictions on the working women of the study area, it is important to understand the general trend of mobility in the region. Public transport is highly preferred by the residents of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, where more than 80% of all its motorised trips are undertaken on public buses and rail services, of which more than half are taken on the rail services (Varshney, 2018). The 'Mumbai locals' i.e. the suburban railway service, is highly preferred by the working people of the region for daily commuting. According to Varshney, (2018), as many as 2,900 of these trains are used by around 8 million people to commute across the Mumbai Metropolitan region and these trains are nearly four times overcrowded than their network capacity during peak hours. The impact of the restricted mobility can be understood from the narratives of the working women which they have shared while responding to the online survey.

According to Sunita, one of the respondents of the survey: *"I miss commuting to the office. It used to take off my mind from all the problems at home. Now there is no diversion. Life has become very monotonous."* (Source: Primary data)

Another respondent, Radha, stated: *"I used to travel daily to work by the Mumbai locals, where I had befriended many other regularly commuting working women. Meeting them almost daily in the ladies compartment and having conversations with them on various topics used to be so much fun. Gone are those days! The pandemic and lockdown have brought a halt to our lives. We are now stuck at home, working throughout the day."* (Source: Primary data)

Travelling by the 'Mumbai Locals' is much more than a mere train journey for these working women. The ladies compartment in these trains offers so much to the women that travelling by these trains is a reason for them to look forward to every day (Kulkarni, 2018). In other words, the 'Mumbai Locals' is not just a mode of transport for regularly travelling working women. It holds much greater importance to them, where, in the course of their regular travels, they not only make new friends but also celebrate with them big and small occasions of their lives (Kulkarni, 2018). The women's compartment is also conceived as a safe space by most women, as it allows them to move beyond their insecurities, reservations, and discomforts, etc. Some women also consider it to be ideal, as it allows them to enjoy some alone time (despite being in a crowd), where they can read, take short naps, or simply relax (Chaudhary, 2016). Besides, women travelling in these trains also enjoy purchasing various products such as cosmetic items, essential goods, and food items that are sold by the visiting vendors at lower prices than the regular market ones (Choudhary, 2010; The Art Blog, 2013; BLAH-BLAH, 2017).

According to Monika, one of the respondents of the survey: *"I used to cherish my life as a working woman. I enjoyed my commute to the office, as it helped in taking away my mind from all the problems that existed at home. But now working from home makes me feel so depressed. Along with this, there are so many domestic responsibilities that*

now I am required to take care of as our domestic helper is also not able to come due to the lockdown.” (Source: Primary data)

Another respondent, Mina, stated: “Now there is no peace at home. Tension and quarrels have increased. Forget about going to work; now we cannot even escape from our homes for some mental peace. My present life is all about working from home, cooking, taking care of my kids and tutoring them, and having arguments with the family members. I am so fed up. I just want to go back to my peaceful old life.” (Source: Primary data)

Under the pandemic, as households have been cut off from their domestic helpers; children are being required to be tutored at home, and the weight of the never-ending confinement at home has made it difficult to keep the balance between work and daily life (Gambhir, 2020). Besides, the purpose meant to be served by a home is completely different from what a workplace is meant to be for. In this context, Patton (2020) points out that in homes without any designated space for home-office and where both male and female members work from home, space usually defaults to the male member/s. Additionally, involuntarily working from home can also lead to an increase in work-family conflict (Lapierre et al., 2016). The ‘work from home’ scenario presented here is not only involuntary but also was initiated in a hasty manner following the sudden declaration of the lockdown by the government. Therefore, the working people couldn’t plan it in advance and had to proceed with it either willingly or unwillingly.

Conclusion

Although the notions of remote work, work from home, and virtual offices have been gaining popularity in recent times and are also being envisioned as the future of work (Gambhir, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has made it possible to actually put it into practice at a much grander scale. As a result, working people have been able to gain hands-on experience in working from home. This has revealed the myths and realities associated with this practice. Based on the discussion made above, it is clear that the transition to ‘work from home’ during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly not been easy for the working women of the study area. Domestic problems and quarrels have also increased, with nowhere to escape. Since, India has the most unbalanced norms of sharing domestic chores and housework (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019; Deshpande, 2020a), working from home has increased the burden on the working women significantly. Due to lack of sharing of domestic work, usually in the households where women are employed, they employ domestic helpers, but with the lockdown households in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region have been cut off from them. Besides, with the schools being shut, kids are required to be homeschooled. All these have overburdened working women. Therefore, the scenario of working from home has proved to be highly impractical for the working women of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. This has reinforced the need for and importance of mobility in their lives. Commuting used to be a

blessing in disguise for these working women, and under the pandemic, they have become deprived of it. Nonetheless, it is essential to remember that the emerging scenario is influenced by the pandemic and lockdown, where the normalcy of life has ceased to prevail. When the situation normalises, if the scenario of working from home continues, it would be interesting to evaluate the emerging pattern under the new scenario.

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