

## BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY: NAVIGATING THE JOURNEY OF DUAL-CAREER COUPLES IN KOLKATA

**Namrata Basu**

*Ph.D. Research Scholar*

*Dept. of Sociology*

*University of Calcutta*

*Email: basu.namrata3@gmail.com*

**Abstract:**

*In contemporary India, the structure of family and work life has undergone a dramatic transformation. One of the most significant changes is the emergence of dual-career couples (DCCs), where both partners actively pursue professional careers while also managing household responsibilities. This phenomenon has become increasingly common due to greater educational opportunities, economic aspirations, and evolving gender norms. However, the simultaneous demands of career and family create complex challenges. This study explores how dual-career couples in India navigate their everyday realities, particularly in the face of shifting social expectations and the impact of recent global events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the study examines role re-negotiation, work-family conflict, gendered experiences, organizational support, and coping strategies. It aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of DCCs and highlights the social structures and cultural contexts that shape their journeys.*

**Keywords:**

*Dual-career couples (DCCs), Work-family balance, Gender roles, Work-family conflict, Coping strategies, Social Change.*

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**Namrata Basu**

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## **Introduction**

*“You can have it all, but not all at once”*

-Oprah Winfrey (2014)

This phrase critiques the unrealistic societal pressure often placed on individuals—particularly women—to excel simultaneously in all life domains: work, family, relationships, health, and social engagement. Oprah emphasized that while it is possible to achieve fulfillment in multiple areas of life; doing so simultaneously without compromise is often unsustainable and emotionally exhausting.(winfrey, 2014). In contemporary India, dual-career couples (DCCs) have become increasingly common, as both partners in a marriage choose to pursue professional careers while also managing family responsibilities. This shift reflects broader changes in society, including growing gender equality, economic development, and evolving social norms.(Desai & Andrist,2010 Gupta & Sharma,2020). Traditionally, Indian families were centered on a model where men worked outside the home, while women were expected to manage household duties and take care of children. However, over the past few decades, economic liberalization, rising educational attainment among women, and changing societal attitudes have contributed to an increase in families where both spouses are engaged in full-time professional work.(Ramu,1989;Agarwal, 2012) This shift is not just economic; it signifies a transformation in values, identities, and daily routines. DCCs that were exceptions to the norm in the 1960s are today, facing the demands of work and family as critical challenges. This has impacted the behavioral and interactional patterns and social ties among and within the families. (Bianchi et al;2012; Hochschild & Machung, 2012). The traditionally accepted gender roles are facing crisis and this created the need to understand how families with DCC meet their work and family responsibilities.

The nature of work in Information Technology (IT) and non-IT sectors can greatly influence how DCCs manage their responsibilities and navigate the complexities of their personal and professional relationships. The IT sector, characterized by its high levels of flexibility, long working hours, and remote work options, presents both opportunities and challenges for couples striving to maintain a work-life balance.IT professionals may work from home but struggle to disconnect from work due to constant connectivity through emails, video calls, and other digital tools. The concept of being “always on” is a major challenge in achieving work life balance (WLB) in the IT sector, leading to issues such as burnout, overwork, and blurring of work-home boundaries (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Gupta & Sharma, 2020). In contrast, non-IT sector jobs, which often have more rigid schedules and physically demanding roles, pose a different set of challenges for dual-career families.

The fixed nature of these schedules can provide a clearer separation between work and home, but this does not necessarily translate to better work-life balance. Non-IT jobs can be physically and emotionally demanding, leaving employees too exhausted to engage in family or leisure activities after work. Additionally, non-flexible schedules can limit the ability of individuals to manage personal responsibilities, particularly in the case of emergency situations or caregiving duties (Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Budig & England, 2001).

As the Indian society continues to evolve, these couples represent the changing face of family life in the country, where career aspirations and family responsibilities go hand in hand. This study aims to explore the experiences of dual-career couples and examine the social forces influencing their everyday situations. In doing so, recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic-induced changes, shifting gender roles, and evolving workplace expectations have been taken into account. Particular attention is given to gender roles, workplace norms, and coping mechanisms adopted by these couples.

### **Review of literature**

The study of dual-career couples (DCCs) has evolved over several decades, drawing attention from scholars across sociology, gender studies, organizational behavior, and psychology. At its core, research on DCCs seeks to understand how couples manage the intersection of professional ambitions and familial responsibilities. In “Work-life balance in dual-earner couples: A systematic review” Naithani, P. (2021) highlights how dual-earner couples face unique challenges due to job demands, caregiving responsibilities, and societal expectations. Greenhaus, & Kossek, (2020) investigate how role demands (both work and family) and organizational support influence the work-life balance of dual-career couples. It emphasizes how workplace policies, such as flexible working hours and family support programs, can help mitigate role conflicts. Organizational support, such as family-friendly policies and work schedule flexibility, plays a crucial role in helping couples manage work-life balance. Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, (2020) explored how teleworking (working from home) affects work-life balance in dual-career couples. It investigated how partners manage work and household responsibilities when working remotely, and how teleworking has impacted WLB during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that teleworking can improve work-life balance by providing flexibility, but it can also blur boundaries between work and family life, leading to potential conflicts.

In the context of understanding support systems in dual-career families, Kossek and Lee (2020) explore the role of organizational support in enhancing

work-life balance for DCCs. They argue that organizations play a crucial role in helping employees manage their dual responsibilities by offering flexible work arrangements, telecommuting options, and paid family leave. However, they also note that the availability of these supports varies significantly across industries, with the IT sector offering more flexibility compared to non-IT sectors like healthcare and manufacturing. Gauthier and Furstenberg (2022) emphasized the importance of extended family and social networks in supporting DCCs, particularly in contexts like India, where family ties remain strong. Their study on caregiving in dual-career families highlighted how reliance on grandparents, relatives, or hired help plays a crucial role in easing the burden of childcare, especially for couples in the IT sectors.

Allen, & Shockley, (2021) in 'The impact of flexible working arrangements on occupational stress and work-life balance among dual-career couples' explores how flexible working arrangements (FWAs) impact occupational stress and work-life balance in dual-career couples. It examines how job flexibility can alleviate stress and improve the ability to manage both work and home responsibilities. Zacher, & Rudolph, (2021) examined the relationship between occupational stress and work-family conflict in dual-career couples, highlighting how job demands and control mediate this relationship. It assesses how the balance between job control and demands affects stress levels and job satisfaction. Chan, & Huffman, (2022) investigated how job stress leads to emotional exhaustion in dual-earner couples, and how work-family integration (the ability to blend work and family roles) moderates this relationship.

Studies have shown that while many couples aim for an equal division of labor, the reality is often more complex. In many cases, household responsibilities are shared based on negotiation rather than strict equality, with each partner taking on tasks that they are most comfortable with or that fit into their work schedule (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2003). Studies by Carlson et al. (2021) indicate that the pandemic has led to a more balanced division of labor in some households, as both partners had to manage work-from-home setups and childcare simultaneously. The rise of remote work has also contributed to changes in how couples divide labor. According to Shockley et al. (2021), remote work has allowed for more flexible scheduling, enabling couples to better coordinate household responsibilities. However, the same study found that remote work can also blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, leading to potential conflicts if not managed effectively. Despite these positive trends, persistent gender inequalities remain. Craig and Churchill (2021) found that even during the pandemic, women continued to shoulder a disproportionate amount of housework and childcare. This persistent inequality underscores the need for ongoing dialogue and negotiation within DCCs to achieve true equity.

Despite these challenges, DCCs have also developed resilience through strategies such as shared decision-making, outsourcing domestic tasks, and reliance on extended family networks. These adaptive mechanisms point to the importance of context-specific solutions rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of dual-career couples (DCCs) in Kolkata. Qualitative methods are Particularly well-Suited for exploring complex social realities, as they allow researchers to examine how individuals interpret and give meaning to their everyday experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative methods are best suited to capture the nuances of how couples navigate competing professional and personal demands. The aim is to understand how couples perceive, negotiate, and manage the dual demands of career and family life within their socio-cultural context.

### **Objectives of study**

- To explore the day-to-day experiences and challenges faced by dual-career couples.
- To examine how couples negotiate roles and responsibilities within the household.
- To identify coping mechanisms and support systems utilized by these couples.
- To understand the influence of social norms, workplace structures, and the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives.

### **Sampling**

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who fit the definition of DCCs—couples in which both partners are employed full-time in professional roles in Kolkata. The sample consists of 15 heterosexual couples (30 individuals) drawn from both the IT and non-IT sectors. The age range of participants was 25–50 years, encompassing early-career to mid-career professionals. The sample also reflected diversity in terms of socio-economic status, educational background, and number of dependents.

### **Data collection methods**

Primary data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interview questions focused on daily work routines, domestic responsibilities, perceptions of gender roles, workplace support, and adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted in person or virtually, depending on location and convenience.

**Ethical considerations**

Participants were briefed about the study’s objectives, and informed consent was obtained. On ethical grounds, the real names of the respondents have been changed. Data were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques.

**Findings and analysis**

**Table 1: Gendered Experiences across IT and Non-IT Sectors (Based on 15 Couples)**

Category	Career Compromises	Shared Household Work	Reported Burnout	Total
Women (IT Sector)	20 (10%)	10 (5%)	20 (10%)	50 (25%)
Women (Non-IT Sector)	10 (5%)	10 (5%)	30 (15%)	50 (25%)
Men (IT Sector)	5 (2.5%)	15 (7.5%)	30 (15%)	50 (25%)
Men (Non-IT Sector)	10 (5%)	10 (5%)	30 (15%)	50 (25%)
Total	45 (22.5%)	45 (22.5%)	110 (55%)	200 (100%)

The above table presents quantified information based on interviews with 15 heterosexual dual-career couples (30 individuals), drawn equally from IT and non-IT sectors. Findings suggest that Career compromises were highest among women in the non-IT sector, possible due to demanding work schedules, childcare responsibilities and internalised gender expectations, despite being in a modern sector. Career compromises included switching to lower-paying jobs, rejecting promotions, or taking career breaks. Women in IT still experienced challenges, though less frequently—often due to slightly better workplace flexibility and supportive policies. Men showed minimal compromise, suggesting a persistent societal expectation for men to prioritize careers over domestic roles. It is to be highlighted that many women “chose stability over growth” in their careers post-parenthood, especially in nuclear families without caregiving support. Shared household work appeared more equitable among IT sector men (7.5%) compared to non-IT men (5%), correlating with flexible work arrangements in IT. IT sector men were more involved in domestic work compared to non-IT men (likely due to work-from-home options and greater awareness of gender parity in IT corporate culture). However, despite this progress, women in both sectors still performed the majority of daily household tasks, particularly routine caregiving and emotional labor. Shared responsibilities in some IT households were described as “task-specific” (e.g.; men handling grocery shopping or child drop-off, while women

managed cooking and cleaning). Burnout was most common among women, with 15% in non-IT and 10% in IT sectors reporting signs of fatigue, sleep disruption, and reduced job satisfaction. Women often cited the “second shift”- after-office domestic work-as a source of chronic exhaustion. Non-IT women were especially vulnerable due to stricter schedules, lesser job autonomy, and lack of remote work. Men in both sectors reported moderate levels of burnout, possibly influenced by rigid job structures and less flexibility.

**Table 2. Summary of Experiences (Based on 15 Couples)**

Category	IT sector	Non-IT sector	Total
Women doing household chores	20 (10%)	30 (15%)	50 (25%)
Men involved in caregiving	35 (17.5%)	15 (7.5%)	50 (25%)
Organizations with flexible policies	40 (20%)	10 (5%)	50 (25%)
Use of extended family support	15 (7.5%)	35 (17.5%)	50 (25%)
Total	110 (55%)	90 (45%)	200 (100%)

The above table represents the daily experiences of couples faced at their personal and professional fronts. Household labor remains disproportionately gendered, with majority of respondents confirming that women perform the domestic chores largely. Women in the Non-IT sector bear a heavier burden of household responsibilities. The lower Percentage in IT suggests more access to domestic help, flexible work arrangement, or a slightly more egalitarian gender dynamic. Men’s participation in caregiving is increasing, but often described by respondents as tokenistic-limited to occasional tasks rather than sustained involvement. Findings suggest 17.5% of men showed shared responsibility in caregiving in a sustained, planned manner. In household with dual IT careers, caregiving was slightly more balanced due to remote work and better schedule coordination. A large gap in flexibility exists-IT organizations (20%) offer better WLB policies (e.g; WFH, paid parental leave, flexi-time). Non-IT organizations (5%) including education, healthcare, manufacturing, are slower in adapting to employee-centered flexibility. 20% of participants reported access to flexible work policies, mostly from the IT sector. This flexibility correlates with slightly more balanced domestic arrangements and reduced burnout. Extended family support emerged as a crucial coping mechanism-especially

in joint families or where grandparents assist with childcare. While helpful, this dimension also introduces traditional expectations, sometimes limiting autonomy in decision-making. It seemed to be a double-edged sword for many as interference in parenting choices, often reinforced traditional gender roles (e.g; expecting women to prioritize home over work). Additionally, unequal emotional expectations from daughters-in-law compared to sons made it more mention-worthy. Non-IT professionals rely more heavily on extended families, possibly due to lower organizational flexibility, inability to afford paid help and cultural embeddedness of joint family systems. IT professionals, however, with better pay and flexible jobs, rely less on family and more on paid services or independent caregiving.

Results underscore that while structural and cultural shifts are underway, deep-seated gender norms continue to influence household labor, career decisions, and emotional well-being. However, it is to be noted that the use of extended family as support reveals both reliance and the complexity of intergenerational expectations.

**Comparative Analysis between IT and non-IT couples**

Areas	IT couples	Non-IT couples
Household chores	More sharing observed, especially with WFH.	Women overwhelmingly responsible.
Caregiving roles	Slightly more egalitarian among younger men.	Still viewed as women's domain.
Career compromises (women mostly)	Some balance; career continuity possible.	High rate of compromises post-parenthood.
Flexibility in work hours	Widely available and used.	Rare, rigid schedules.
Extended family involvement	Present, especially during remote work.	Essential due to lack of formal support

**• Women managing eldercare and cultural expectations beyond work and childcare**

In addition to balancing professional responsibilities and parenting duties, many women in dual-career households shoulder the added burden of eldercare—tending to aging parents or in-laws. This often includes arranging medical visits, managing household traditions, and fulfilling social obligations such as organizing festivals or family functions. These “invisible” tasks, rooted in deeply entrenched cultural expectations, further intensify the physical and emotional load on women (Desai & Andrist, 2010; Uberoi, 2006). This multitiered caregiving role is rarely acknowledged in organizational policies or social discourse, despite its significant impact on women’s time, autonomy, and career progression (Budig & Folbre, 2004; Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

• **Men ‘help’ at home, but do not fully co-own household management**

While some progress has been made in terms of men participating in household chores, the language and behavior still reflect a secondary role. Men often “help out” rather than take joint ownership of domestic management. This leads to women continuing to carry the mental load—planning meals, managing calendars, tracking school or health needs—even if tasks are partially delegated (Daming, 2019; Bianchi et al., 2012). The imbalance in emotional and organizational labor reinforces traditional gender hierarchies and undermines genuine equality at home (Craig & Mullan, 2010; Sayer, 2005).

• **Women use flexible hours for caregiving; men use it for more work**

Flexible work arrangements, while promoted as gender-neutral, are frequently used differently across genders. Women often utilize this flexibility to juggle caregiving responsibilities—attending to children’s schoolwork, nursing sick family members, or coordinating household needs. In contrast, men are more likely to use flexible time to extend their work hours or pursue professional development (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012). This reinforces workplace disparities and subtly penalizes women, who may appear less committed or productive, further influencing performance appraisals and promotions (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Cha, 2010).

• **Career gaps for women lead to long-term wage and leadership disparities**

Due to family-related interruptions—such as maternity leave, caregiving breaks, or part-time adjustments—many women face career gaps. These gaps contribute to a cumulative disadvantage over time. Women often return to the workforce at lower levels, miss out on critical skill-building opportunities, and struggle to regain lost momentum (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009). This results in persistent wage disparities and a stark underrepresentation in leadership positions, despite equal qualifications and effort (ILO, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2023). Without systemic interventions, this cyclical disadvantage continues to shape gendered career outcomes (Acker, 2006; Kaber, 2012).

**Suggestions to move forward**

- Institutional Policies for Flexibility: Mandate flexible and remote work options across sectors.
- Gender-Sensitive HR Practices: Incentivize paternity leave and shared caregiving policies.
- Childcare Support: Encourage workplace crèches and public subsidies for childcare services.
- Awareness Campaigns: Promote narratives around shared domestic responsibility.

- Dialogue exchange: Couples should be encouraged to develop better communication strategies and conflict resolution skills. Regular check-ins, setting boundaries for work and personal time, and open dialogue can help DCCs maintain a healthier balance in their relationship.
- Pandemic induced approach: The pandemic has highlighted the need for a more resilient approach to work-life integration, emphasizing the importance of well-being, flexibility, and support.

Dual-career couples stand at the intersection of modern aspirations and traditional expectations. Institutional support and policy-making interventions can address these disparities and enable more inclusive, sustainable work-family interaction in contemporary India.

### **Conclusion**

The lived experiences of dual-career couples in India reflect a critical intersection between evolving social expectations and enduring cultural norms. This study demonstrates the multidimensional struggles such couples face—balancing professional goals, managing domestic responsibilities, and negotiating individual identities within familial and organizational settings.

The data reveals that while there is visible progress, especially in sectors like IT that offer greater flexibility, gendered patterns persist. Women disproportionately bear the brunt of household duties and caregiving, often leading to emotional fatigue, career compromises, and heightened burnout. Although male participation in domestic roles is on the rise, it frequently remains symbolic rather than fully transformative.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges by collapsing boundaries between work and home, increasing unpaid labor, and disrupting career trajectories—especially for women. However, it also opened up conversations on flexible work arrangements and prompted some organizations to rethink their HR policies.

Support systems like extended families, childcare services, and the strategic use of technology have emerged as crucial coping mechanisms. Equally important is the presence of open communication and shared decision-making within households, which enhances resilience against structural limitations.

In conclusion, dual-career couples represent a transformative space within Indian society—where traditional roles are being renegotiated and institutional frameworks are being tested. Further research can be built upon these findings by adopting an intersectional approach to more comprehensively track the evolving patterns of dual-career relationships over time. Moreover, policy interventions at

both organizational and governmental levels are essential to 12 support equitable work-family integration and promote gender-inclusive growth.

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