

Social Media and Youth Identity Formation: A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective from the Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital work environments has reshaped labor practices globally, while for women in India, this shift has generated a silent crisis. Whereas work-from-home (WFH) was initially celebrated as a flexible model, it has instead blurred the boundaries between professional obligations and unpaid domestic duties, creating a condition of constant digital availability. This paper deals with how the absence of legally protected Right to Disconnect disproportionately affects women by eroding their mental well-being, their autonomy, and avenues for socio-economic upward mobility.

The dissolution of spatial and temporal boundaries separating home and work processes reinforces the expectations of a patriarchal system within which women are expected to bear a triple burden: paid work, unpaid domestic work, and digital emotional management. This has engendered severe mental distress: burnout, anxiety, a reduction in self-esteem, and reduced career visibility. In turn, physical workspaces provide more clearly defined boundaries, structured routines, social support, professional acknowledgment, and protection mechanisms that might be sought out in digital workspaces. Moreover, there is also a digital divide that makes WFH impractical and inequitable for women from low-income, rural, or otherwise marginalized backgrounds.

This paper argues that the recognition of the Right to Disconnect is a necessary labour reform and an imperative human right to protect the dignity, psychological integrity, and economic participation of women. It advocates for gender-responsive labour policies, digital safety norms, mental-health-centric governance, and workplace cultures that respect women's autonomy over time and their bodies. The paper locates women's mental health within the broader discourse on human rights and digital work in a vision of the future where technology empowers women rather than overwhelms them, and workplaces-physical or digital-become sites of equality, safety, and well-being.

Keywords: Right to Disconnect, Women's Mental Health, Work-From-Home Inequality, Digital Labour Governance and Gendered Workspaces.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology and the growing adoption of flexible work models have significantly transformed the modern workplace. While these developments have improved efficiency and connectivity, they have also blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life. Employees are increasingly expected to remain available beyond official working hours through emails, calls, and instant messaging platforms, leading to extended workdays, increased stress, and declining mental well-being. This constant digital engagement has raised serious concerns regarding work-life balance, particularly in sectors such as information technology, where remote work and global time-zone demands are common.

In response to these challenges, the concept of the Right to Disconnect has emerged as an important labour welfare initiative. The Right to Disconnect refers to an employee's legal entitlement to refrain

from engaging in work-related communications outside designated working hours without fear of adverse consequences. Several countries, including France and Australia, have already recognized this right through legislation, acknowledging the need to protect employees from overwork and psychosocial stress. In India, the issue has gained attention with the introduction of the Right to Disconnect Bill in Parliament, reflecting a growing recognition of employee mental health and occupational well-being within the broader framework of labour law reforms.

OBJECT OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives are to analyze how WFH affects the mental health of women and to identify the gendered inequalities that emerge within digital work environments. It also aims to assess the increasing need for a legally and socially recognized Right to Disconnect for women amidst

pressure to be constantly online. Additionally, the study pursues an assessment of the benefits provided to women by safe and structured in-office workspaces for their wellbeing, professional growth, and boundary protection. From these, this study will make some recommendations on gender-responsive labour policies and practice that assure full respect for women's rights, dignity, and mental health in both digital and physical workplaces.

HYPOTHESIS

1. Work-from-home increases mental distress among women due to blurred boundaries, domestic workload, and digital over-availability.
2. Women benefit more from structured, safe in-office workspaces than digital remote work environments.
3. The Right to Disconnect is essential for women's autonomy, dignity, and mental well-being.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research is significant because it situates women's mental health within the broader framework of human rights and digital labour governance. It highlights the urgent need for policy interventions that protect women from burnout, exploitation, and digital overreach. The study also contributes to feminist labour scholarship by demonstrating how digital capitalism intersects with patriarchal norms, reinforcing inequalities. The findings aim to inform employers, policymakers, and civil society groups working toward gender-equitable digital workplaces.

Methodology

The researcher has used both doctrinal and non-doctrinal research depended on the systematic method of collecting data, and analyzing the same in an appropriate order. An extensive analysis of both primary and secondary data was made. The study is more of descriptive in nature with specific reference to the research problem.

BOUNDARY BLURRING IN WORK-FROM-HOME (WFH)

The convenience of Work-From-Home (WFH) is often counterbalanced by a significant challenge: the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life. With the removal of the physical and temporal separation of the commute and the office, the two domains become highly permeable, leading to significant negative impacts on employee well-being and psychological detachment.

The absence of a physical transition (like a commute or "clocking out") makes it difficult to

mentally switch off from work. This lack of a clear delimiter encourages work to bleed into personal hours, often resulting in an increase in total hours worked. The physical act of leaving the office serves as a natural signal to the brain that the workday is over. At home, employees can simply turn away from their desk for dinner and return later, or continue working until a task is completely finished, regardless of the clock. While WFH offers flexibility, this autonomy can lead to an internal pressure to demonstrate productivity. Employees may work longer hours to compensate for perceived distractions or to ensure all tasks are completed, leading to "sickness presenteeism" where employees continue working even when unwell. Instead of an eight-hour block, the workday may be shredded into small, fragmented chunks by interruptions, necessitating working late into the evening or on weekends to achieve focused time to complete deep-work tasks.

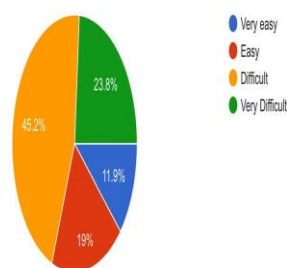
Digital tools—the very enablers of remote work—are a primary driver of boundary blurring by creating an expectation of constant responsiveness. Instant messaging, email, and collaboration platforms (like Slack or Teams) are present on personal devices, creating a sense of obligation to monitor and respond to communication immediately, even outside of defined working hours. The sheer volume and speed of communication across multiple digital platforms (work and personal) can induce techno stress, defined as the stress experienced due to the use of technology. This leads to mental overload and techno-exhaustion, negatively impacting subjective well-being. While tools are designed for asynchronous work, organizational culture often enforces synchronous expectations, meaning an email sent at 9:00 PM is expected to be answered before the next morning.

The continuous intrusion of work ultimately erodes the time required for rest, hobbies, and social connections, which are crucial for long-term mental health. The ability to put work out of one's mind during non-work hours, is vital for recovery and preventing burnout. When the physical space is the same, work-related thoughts and worries are harder to compartmentalize, leading to chronic strain. Personal time, exercise, and hobbies are often the first items to be sacrificed when work tasks creep into the evening, resulting in increased stress, anxiety, and a high risk of burnout.

For many, particularly those with childcare or eldercare responsibilities, WFH means juggling simultaneous role demands, leading to role conflict. For employees without a dedicated home office, working from the kitchen table or a bedroom means the domestic space is perpetually occupied by the professional domain. This lack of physical

separation makes it hard to create a mental separation between roles. The simultaneous demands of a work meeting, a child needing attention, or a household chore create high levels of work-family conflict. Unlike in the office, where work interruptions are typically only professional, WFH introduces constant domestic permeability. The blending of domains can lead to employees performing domestic duties (like laundry or minor chores) during the workday, which, while flexible, can extend the overall workday as they then feel compelled to make up the lost time for work in the evening.

6. How easy is it for you to separate work and personal life during WFH?
42 responses



For this study, a non-doctrinal (empirical) research method was used to understand the practical impact of work culture on IT professionals and the relevance of the Right to Disconnect. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire circulated among employees in the IT sector. The survey included basic profile questions such as age group and current work model (work from home, work from office, hybrid), followed by questions related to productivity and work-life balance.

The responses indicate that a majority of IT professionals feel more productive while working from the office compared to working from home. Many respondents reported difficulty in separating work and personal life during WFH, citing extended working hours and constant digital connectivity. These findings highlight the challenges of remote work and support the need for legal recognition of the Right to Disconnect. The results of the survey are presented using charts to clearly illustrate employee preferences and the impact of different work models on productivity and work-life balance.

GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

The widespread adoption of WFH, often coupled with school and daycare closures, abruptly relocated the bulk of unpaid domestic work and care giving from the public sphere (schools,

daycares, domestic workers) back into the private home. Even before the pandemic, women worldwide performed the majority of unpaid care work. Global data shows that women's share of unpaid domestic and care work increased more significantly than men's during the lockdown periods. Studies indicate that while men may have increased their contribution to domestic work, their efforts were often concentrated in non-routine tasks (e.g., shopping, repairs) that offer more discretion in timing, whereas women absorbed a larger share of the routine, time-consuming duties like cooking, cleaning, and primary childcare. The WFH environment made the long-standing "second shift" (the domestic work a woman performs after her paid job) even more demanding, as the two shifts became spatially and temporally integrated.

LEGAL AND POLICY GAPS

The concept of disconnecting from work finds its roots in Article 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which states that 'Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.' The Right to Disconnect gained significant traction in the 21st century, particularly in response to the rise of digital communication technologies. France became the first country to formally recognise this right through its *El Khomri Law* in 2017. Following France's lead, several other countries, including Spain, Italy,

Belgium, Portugal, and Ireland, have introduced similar laws or policies.. In January 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution advocating for the Right to Disconnect across member states, reflecting the growing consensus on the necessity of such protections in modern work culture.

On February 12, 2024, the Australian Federal Parliament passed the Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Bill 2023, granting employees the right to disconnect after work hours.

On October 28, 2019, Member of Parliament Supriya Sule introduced the Right to Disconnect Bill 2018 as a private member's bill in the Lok Sabha. This bill aims to establish an Employees' Welfare Authority, granting every employee the right to disengage from work-related communications outside designated working hours, and mandating overtime pay with fines for non-compliance. However, the bill faces criticism for its vague definitions and has yet to be discussed in Parliament, reflecting limited awareness of work-life balance issues among law makers.

As established above, today's work culture, which extends beyond official hours, can have detrimental

effects on both the physical and mental health of a person. While courts have yet to thoroughly examine the interpretation of the Right to Disconnect, it can be broadly interpreted under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution which guarantees every citizen the Right to Life and Liberty. The expression 'life' enshrined under Article 21 of the Constitution does not connote mere animal existence; it has a very broad scope, which includes the right to livelihood, better standards of life, and the right to leisure.

In *State of Punjab v. M.S. Chawla*, it has been held that the right to life ensured under Article 21 incorporates inside its ambit the right to health and clinical consideration and in the case of *CESC Ltd. v. Subash Chandra Bose*, the Supreme Court observed that health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Thus, it can be established that the Right to health means both mental and physical health of a person. Further, in *Kirloskar Brothers Ltd. v. Employees State Insurance Corporation*, the Supreme Court held that employers have a duty to ensure that their employees can lead a meaningful life. These judgments demonstrate how Article 21 encompasses the Right to Disconnect within its scope, emphasising the obligation of employers to actively promote and safeguard this right.

To fully grasp the state's obligations in realising the Right to Disconnect, Article 21 should be interpreted alongside Articles 38, 39, 42, 43, and 47. These articles collectively establish the State's responsibility to promote the welfare and mental well-being of its citizens by ensuring humane working conditions, protecting vulnerable groups, and supporting mental health initiatives. These provisions underscore the importance of a balanced approach to work and life, reinforcing the right to disconnect as integral to overall health and societal well-being. Hence, the Constitution empowers the state to legislate and make policies on the Right to Disconnect.

The primary objective of labour legislation like the Factories Act, 1948 and various State Shops and Establishments Acts is to prevent the exploitation of labor by capping working hours. These acts explicitly mandate intervals for rest and weekly holidays. The "Right to Disconnect" is essentially a modern digital extension of these physical boundaries. When an employer sends a work-related communication after hours, it effectively breaches the statutory "spread-over" limits—the total period between the commencement and termination of work in a day.

Labour jurisprudence recognizes that continuous labor without adequate rest leads to "industrial

fatigue," which diminishes a worker's efficiency and mental health. In the landmark case of *Occupational Health and Safety Association v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court emphasized that the right to a safe working environment is a fundamental right. Constant digital connectivity creates a state of "perpetual presence," which constitutes a modern occupational hazard, leading to burnout and stress-related illnesses.

The Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (2020) seeks to consolidate laws relating to worker welfare. While it focuses heavily on physical safety, the "Right to Disconnect" is being viewed as a necessary component of "Conditions of Work." Legal scholars argue that for the State to fulfill its mandate under Article 43 of the Constitution (ensuring a living wage and conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life), the Labour Codes must be interpreted to include the right to switch off digital communication.

India, as a founding member of the ILO, is guided by international labor standards. The ILO Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No. 1) was the first international convention to set limits on working hours. Furthermore, the ILO's Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) calls for a "human-centered approach," specifically highlighting the need to regulate telework and digital labor to ensure a healthy work-life balance.

II. SUGESSTIONS

The Right to Disconnect has emerged as an important labour welfare concept in response to the increasing blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life, especially due to digital technologies and remote work. In countries such as France and Australia, this right has been legally recognised to protect employees from being expected to engage in work-related communications outside official working hours. In India, the idea was formally introduced through the Right to Disconnect Bill, 2018, and has gained renewed attention in recent years alongside broader discussions in Parliament on labour reforms, occupational safety, and employee mental health under the new labour codes. Although a comprehensive law exclusively on the Right to Disconnect has not yet been enacted, parliamentary debates and policy discussions increasingly acknowledge the need to regulate excessive working hours and protect workers' well-being in a digitally driven economy.

Implementing the Right to Disconnect in India requires a detailed and context-sensitive framework because of the country's diverse workforce and economic structure. India's labour market spans formal and informal sectors, IT and IT-enabled

services, manufacturing, healthcare, gig work, and small and medium enterprises, each with different work cultures and expectations. A uniform rule may not be practical; therefore, the law must allow flexibility while still setting clear boundaries on after-hours work. Recent labour legislation passed by Parliament, particularly the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, highlights the importance of safe and healthy working environments, which can be extended to include protection from psycho-social stress caused by constant connectivity and long working hours.

A robust implementation mechanism would be essential to ensure that the Right to Disconnect is not merely symbolic. This could involve the creation of a monitoring authority under existing labour departments to oversee compliance, receive complaints, and ensure that employers do not indirectly pressure employees to remain available beyond official hours. Regular audits and surveys could be conducted to assess workload patterns and identify violations, especially in sectors where extended availability is informally expected. Employee feedback mechanisms would play a crucial role in identifying job strain, burnout, and mental health issues linked to overwork.

Equally important is raising awareness among employers and managers about the significance of the Right to Disconnect. Many organisations equate constant availability with productivity, even though research shows that excessive work hours reduce efficiency and increase stress-related illnesses. Sensitisation programs, guidelines, and best practices issued by the government can encourage employers to adopt healthier work cultures. Protecting employees from retaliation for exercising their right to disconnect would further strengthen confidence in the law.

Ultimately, the success of the Right to Disconnect in India depends on balancing economic competitiveness with human well-being. While challenges such as global time-zone differences and client-driven demands remain, prioritising employee health must be the central objective of the state and its organisations. By embedding the Right to Disconnect within India's evolving labour law framework and supporting it with effective enforcement and awareness, the country can move towards a work environment that respects both productivity and personal life, contributing to a healthier and more balanced society.

III. CONCLUSION

The Right to Disconnect represents a critical step toward redefining the relationship between work and personal life in an era dominated by digital connectivity and evolving work practices. For a

country like India, where long working hours and constant availability are often normalised—particularly in technology-driven and service-oriented sectors—the need for such a right is both timely and essential. While India has initiated the conversation through the Right to Disconnect Bill and related parliamentary discussions within the broader labour law reforms, the absence of a comprehensive and enforceable framework highlights the gap between policy intent and practical protection.

A well-implemented Right to Disconnect can significantly reduce psycho-social stress, job strain, and burnout, thereby improving employee mental health, morale, and long-term productivity. However, its success depends on thoughtful adaptation to India's diverse economic landscape, sector-specific work cultures, and global business demands. Rather than imposing rigid rules, the law must strike a balance between flexibility for employers and clear protections for employees, ensuring that professional obligations do not encroach excessively on personal time.

Ultimately, prioritising employee well-being is not only a social responsibility but also an economic necessity. Healthier employees are more engaged, innovative, and productive, which benefits organisations and the national economy alike. By strengthening legal backing, ensuring effective monitoring, encouraging employer accountability, and fostering cultural change around work expectations, India can move toward a more humane and sustainable work environment. The Right to Disconnect, therefore, should be viewed not merely as a labour reform, but as a long-term investment in the well-being of individuals and the overall progress of society.

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