

The Second Shift Has a Pulse

Women's labour-force participation in India is rising; retention past thirty is not. What the double shift does to emotional bandwidth, and a seven-minute daily protocol that returns some of it.

Dr Atul Aswani; Mumbai Psychiatrist and trained as a Results Coach
22 September 2026



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01

Executive summary

India's female labour-force participation rose from 37.0 per cent in 2022–23 to 41.7 per cent in 2023–24. Emotional bandwidth — the residual capacity to notice and regulate emotion after paid and unpaid work — is what those extra workers run out of first. Late at night, dishes done and homework checked, a team lead in Pune snaps at a message she would have laughed off at noon. Time Use Survey 2024 puts the second shift in minutes: women who do unpaid domestic work still spend 305 minutes a day on it. Women who give care spend another 140 minutes. These are separate pulses, not a single lump. Aon found that 81 per cent of 24,000 working women in India feel mentally exhausted. McKinsey's India pipeline shows the leak: 33 per cent of entry-level formal private roles, 24 per cent of manager roles. Men are 2.4 times more likely to win that first promotion. Current programmes fail because they assume a free evening. Her company's wellbeing webinar started at six, while she stood at the school gate. A seven-minute daily protocol — The Big Sigh Reset, Half-Won Is Still Won, Calendar the Joy, and weekly Teen Achhi Baatein — is sized to the time women actually have. It travels as WhatsApp voice reps and peer circles. Employers see rep counts, streaks, vocabulary breadth and participation — never clinical data. EmotionApp is emotional-fitness coaching, not diagnosis, treatment or therapy. The protocol does not replace childcare, leave or workload design. It returns some of the bandwidth those structures still fail to protect.

02

The problem in India

Entry is no longer the only story. Retention is.

Between 2017–18 and 2023–24, female labour-force participation for those aged 15 and above nearly doubled, from 23.3 per cent to 41.7 per cent. The last step of that climb, 37.0 per cent to 41.7 per cent, happened in a single survey year. Rural women drove most of the gain: 47.6 per cent in 2023–24 against 28.0 per cent in urban India. Men sat at 78.8 per cent. The 2025 calendar-year Periodic Labour Force Survey, drawn on a redesigned sample, put female participation at 40.0 per cent. That figure is not a reversal of the 41.7 per cent reading; the reference period changed. What did not change is the reason women give for staying out. In 2025, 44.4 per cent of women not in the labour force named childcare or personal commitments in home-making.

The double shift working women already inside the labour force carry is measurable. In 2024, women aged 15–59 who took part in unpaid domestic services spent 305 minutes a day on them, down from 315 minutes in 2019. That is still five hours. Per participant aged six and above, women spent 289 minutes on unpaid domestic work against 88 minutes for men — a gap of 201 minutes. Caregiving is a separate pulse, not a number to add to every woman's day. Forty-one per cent of women aged 15–59 took part, against 21.4 per cent of men. Female participants spent 140 minutes; male participants spent 74. The second shift has a pulse because those hours arrive in spikes — school pickup, a parent's clinic visit, the dinner that cannot be deferred — not as one evening block a programme can annex.

That is the soil in which women professionals burnout India takes root. Aon's Voice of Women 2024, the largest named study of women in corporate India, surveyed 24,000 women across more than 560 firms. Eighty-one per cent said they feel mentally exhausted. The share was highest in middle management. Sixty-four per cent of domestic responsibility sat with women, regardless of income or family structure. This is not a story about ambition failing. Seventy-three per cent rated themselves highly ambitious. Ninety per cent said they would put in extra effort. The drain is not will. It is minutes.

Retention past thirty follows the same arithmetic. McKinsey's Women in the Workplace 2025 study of India, Nigeria and Kenya covered 77 Indian private-sector organisations and about nine lakh employees. Women are 48 per cent of university students in India and 33 per cent of entry-level formal private roles. They are 24 per cent of managers and 17 per cent of the C-suite. Men are 2.4 times more likely to be promoted from entry level to manager. Women at entry are 1.3 times more likely to leave than men. The average woman at entry is 39; the average man is 32. After the first promotion the pipeline leaks more slowly. The expensive loss is the mid-career woman, not only the missing chief executive.

Named industry reports, each in its own universe, rhyme with that picture. Great Place to Work's State of Inclusion 2025, a study of participating formal workplaces, found women stuck at 26 per cent of that measured workforce for a third year, falling from 28 per cent of individual contributors to 19 per cent of frontline managers, 16 per cent of mid-level leaders, 15 per cent of executives and 8 per cent of chief executives. That 26 per cent is not the national labour-force figure; it is the share inside the workplaces GPTW measured. Avtar and Seramont's 2026 Best Companies reading put women in corporate executive roles at 16.7 per cent, down from 20 per cent a year earlier. Economic Times reporting on Xpheno analysis of filings found a net exit of 25,000 women from India's five large IT majors in FY24. McKinsey's India chapter notes a steeper drop in financial services: 31 per cent of entry-level roles, 13 per cent of the C-suite. Among mothers in the Aon sample, 75 per cent reported a career setback of up to two years after maternity. Thirty-six per cent of all women in that study reported a post-maternity setback. Twenty-seven per cent said they would not stay beyond two years.

The global burnout gender gap is consistent with the Indian exhaustion number, and it should be labelled as global. Deloitte's Women @ Work 2024 survey of 5,000 women across ten countries, including India, found that 50 per cent reported higher stress than a year earlier and 23 per cent reported burnout. In the India cut of that survey, 96 per cent of women believed that requesting flexible working would affect career progression; 91 per cent felt they could not talk to their manager about work-life balance; 94 per cent did not believe their workload would be adjusted if they used flexibility. McKinsey and LeanIn's 2025 Women in the Workplace report, a United States and Canada sample, found 60 per cent of senior women frequently burned out against 50 per cent of senior men. Use that figure as context. Use Aon's 81 per cent as the India number.

The comparison is not mysterious. Paid work rose. Unpaid minutes barely moved. Promotion odds stayed tilted. Exhaustion is what you would predict if you treated time-use data as an input, not a footnote.

Table 1. The double shift in numbers

Indicator	Women	Men	Source
LFPR, 15+, usual status, 2023–24	41.7%	78.8%	PLFS 2023–24
Same series, 2022–23	37.0%	78.5%	PLFS 2022–23
Urban LFPR, 2023–24	28.0%	75.6%	PLFS 2023–24
Rural LFPR, 2023–24	47.6%	80.2%	PLFS 2023–24
Unpaid domestic min/day, per participant 6+, 2024	289	88	TUS 2024
Unpaid domestic min/day, women 15–59 per participant	305 (2024); 315 (2019)	—	TUS 2024
Unpaid caregiving min/day, 15–59 per participant, 2024	140	74	TUS 2024
Caregiving participation, 15–59, 2024	41%	21.4%	TUS 2024
Entry-level share, formal private, India	33%	—	McKinsey WITW 2025 IN
Manager share	24%	—	McKinsey WITW 2025 IN
C-suite share	17%	—	McKinsey WITW 2025 IN
Relative promotion chance, entry to manager	1.0	2.4	McKinsey WITW 2025 IN
Relative exit at entry	1.3 × men	1.0	McKinsey WITW 2025 IN
Share who feel mentally exhausted	81%	—	Aon Voice of Women 2024
Share of domestic responsibility (self-report)	64%	—	Aon Voice of Women 2024
Will not stay beyond two years	27%	—	Aon Voice of Women 2024

Women retention workplace India is therefore not a mystery of motivation. It is a time-and-bandwidth problem that shows up in promotion odds and exit intent. Working women stress India is the name of the residue.

03

Why current approaches fail

Most workplace wellbeing programmes are built as if a free evening arrives at 6 p.m. Time-use data say it does not.

A two-hour workshop after close of business assumes a woman has two free hours. She does not. The Time Use Survey already assigned those hours to unpaid domestic work and caregiving. A live session at 6 p.m. is scheduled against school pickup, dinner, and the parent who needs a clinic slot. Childcare is treated as a side issue. It is the main constraint. In the 2025 Periodic Labour Force Survey, 44.4 per cent of women outside the labour force named childcare or home-making commitments as the reason. Inside the labour force the same work continues. It is simply unpaid.

Flexibility, as currently offered, often fails for a different reason. Deloitte's India respondents were almost unanimous: 96 per cent believed that asking for flexible working would hurt their career. Ninety-one per cent could not raise work-life balance with their manager. Ninety-four per cent did not believe the workload would shrink if they used the policy. A benefit that costs promotion is not a benefit. It is a trap with better branding.

Programmes also fail because they are sized like offsites. You do not fix a daily constraint with an annual retreat. You fix it with a daily unit cheap enough to run. A practice that needs a quiet hour does not get done. A skill that is useful only after the spike has passed is not useful on the days that matter. A value that never becomes an appointment remains a poster in the stairwell.

Then there is the channel. An app that demands a new login after a full paid day is another task. Women already live in WhatsApp. A protocol that cannot travel as a voice note during the commute is a protocol designed for a life someone else is living.

None of this is an argument against leave policy, crèches, workload design or fair promotion. Those are the large levers. The failure is pretending that a 6 p.m. webinar is one of them.

04

The emotional-fitness model applied

PULL QUOTE

In 77 Indian firms, women hold 33 per cent of entry roles, 24 per cent of manager roles and 17 per cent of C-suite seats.

Think of emotional bandwidth as residual capacity. After paid work, unpaid work and the commute, some of it remains, or it does not. When it is gone, noticing and regulating emotion is the first thing to drop. Emotional fitness is daily practice small enough to exist inside a day that is already spoken for.

EmotionApp delivers that practice as countable reps, not evening lectures. The product is non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching for Indian professionals. Positive-psychology techniques arrive as daily units. An AI coach holds the prompt. A human coach takes the hand-off when the user asks. Specialised professionals sit behind that hand-off. Data stay in India. The build sits under ISO 9001 and ISO 13485. The legal boundary is plain. This is not diagnosis, treatment or therapy.

The constraint is time. The stack below is sized for the minutes that exist.

The Big Sigh Reset. Two short inhales through the nose, one long exhale through the mouth, one to three times. It is the first rep of the day and the reset between shifts. It can be done standing in a kitchen, in a lift, or as a WhatsApp voice note on the commute.

Teen Achhi Baatein. Once or twice a week — not every night — log three things that went right and one line on why each happened. Weekly dosing keeps the practice from going stale.

Half-Won Is Still Won. Score the day's goals on a 0–10 dial. Anything above zero is logged as progress. Pass/fail scoring erases the work that happened after the second shift began.

Calendar the Joy. Every Sunday, book at least three blocks of positive, mastery or connection time as appointments. Unscheduled rest loses to the next unpaid task. A value that is not in the calendar is a slogan.

WhatsApp voice reps during the commute. The protocol travels in the channel women already use. A ninety-second voice note is a rep. No new app at 6 p.m. No camera. Twenty-three Indian languages, so the inner sentence can be the one closest to the tongue.

Peer circles. Small, paced groups so the practice is not another solitary chore. Counts, never confessions: the group sees that you showed up. It does not receive a clinical file.

The model assumes no free evening. It assumes the second shift has a pulse — short spikes of depleted bandwidth, not a single collapse at night. The reps sit inside those spikes.

05

The seven-minute protocol, minute by minute

Seven minutes is not a wellness aesthetic. It is a unit that fits between a school run and a standup. The stack can split across the day. It does not have to be one sitting.

**Minute 0:00–1:30 —
The Big Sigh Reset**

Stand or sit. Inhale through the nose. Sip a second inhale. Exhale slowly through the mouth. Repeat up to three times.

Evidence. Balban and colleagues (2023), in Cell Reports Medicine, compared five minutes of cyclic sighing with an equal period of mindfulness meditation. Cyclic sighing improved mood and lowered respiratory rate more than meditation.

**Minute 1:30–3:00 —
Name one state**

Name the feeling in one precise word. Not “fine”. Not “tired”. A specific label. You cannot work with a state you have not named.

Evidence. Lieberman and colleagues (2007), in Psychological Science, found that putting a feeling into words reduced amygdala response and increased activity in the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex.

**Minute 3:00–4:30 —
Half-Won check**

Pick one goal from the paid day. Score it 0–10. Log the number. If it is above zero, it counts.

Evidence. Amabile and Kramer’s progress principle, drawn from about 12,000 diary entries by 238 knowledge workers, found that making progress — including small wins — was the strongest predictor of a good inner work life. Incremental progress appeared on 76 per cent of people’s best days.

**Minute 4:30–6:00 —
One scheduled joy, or
one weekly three-
good-things line**

On weekdays: confirm tomorrow’s Calendar the Joy block still stands, or place one. On the weekly day: write three good things and why each happened (Teen Achhi Baatein).

Evidence. Implementation intentions — if-then plans that put an act on a cue — raise follow-through. A 2024 meta-analysis of 642 tests found effects from $d = 0.27$ to 0.66 . Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005) found that three-good-things, practised for one week, raised happiness and reduced depressive

symptoms at one, three and six months. Emmons and McCullough (2003) found a weekly list outperformed a more frequent grind; people adapt when the same exercise is forced daily.

Minute 6:00–7:00 —
Send or skip

Send the voice note to the coach thread if that is the day's channel. Or close the timer. The streak is the metric. The content is not a clinical record.

Evidence. Lally and colleagues (2010) found that automaticity rose with context-stable repetition; the median time to a habit was 66 days. A seven-minute, same-context rep is built for that curve.

Delivery note for a chief human resources officer: the seven minutes can split — 90 seconds before standup, 90 seconds after school pickup, 90 seconds on the train. The protocol does not replace childcare, leave policy or workload design. It returns some of the emotional bandwidth those structures still fail to protect.

06

Measurement

What gets counted gets protected. What gets clinicalised gets hidden.

EmotionApp measures the first and refuses the second. The line on the product is exact: counts, never confessions.

The dashboard holds four employer-visible numbers.

Rep counts. How many Big Sigh Resets, Half-Won logs, Calendar the Joy blocks and Teen Achhi Baatein entries the cohort completed. This is attendance at a practice, not a mood score.

Streaks. Consecutive days or weeks with at least one completed rep. Streaks track context-stable repetition, the condition Lally described. They do not track how anyone felt.

Emotional-vocabulary breadth. How many distinct feeling-words the cohort uses over a window. Lieberman's labelling work is the rationale: a finer name is a more usable handle. The employer sees a breadth number. The employer never sees the words a named person used.

Participation. Share of the enrolled cohort that completed a weekly minimum. This is the operational metric a DEI lead can put next to promotion and exit data.

What the employer sees: aggregated rep counts, streak distributions, vocabulary-breadth averages, participation rates, and language mix. What the employer never sees: the content of a voice note, an individual feeling-word, a clinical score, a diagnostic label, or any record that would turn coaching into a health file. India-resident data and DPDP-compliant processing are the floor, not a slogan.

This is the opposite of a wellness survey that asks people to rate their anxiety on a Friday. That survey produces a number leaders cannot act on and employees are right to distrust. A rep dashboard produces a number leaders can resource: more peer-circle seats, a commute window that is actually protected, a manager who stops booking over the joy block.

Throughput is not surveillance. Content is. You can count reps without reading the note.

07

Implementation — a 90-day plan

A pilot is a startup with a stop date. Ninety days is long enough to get past the week the kick-off buzz fades and the voice notes thin out, and short enough to keep a chief human resources officer's attention. Owner names below are roles, not vendors.

Week	Owner	Action	Metric
0	CHRO + DEI lead	Name the cohort: mid-career women, one function or one site. Write the legal boundary in the invite: coaching, not diagnosis, treatment or therapy. Confirm India-resident data and DPDP notice.	Cohort list signed; notice sent
1	DEI lead + HRBP	Kick-off on WhatsApp. Teach The Big Sigh Reset live, ninety seconds. Enrol peer circles of 8–12.	Enrolment rate; first-rep completion
2	People manager	Protect one 10-minute window in the paid day. No meeting over that slot.	Share of managers who blocked the slot
3	EmotionApp coach	First human hand-off office hour. AI coach remains the daily prompt.	Hand-off requests; response time
4	DEI lead	First dashboard review. Publish only aggregates.	Weekly participation; streak at day 28
5–6	HRBP	Add Calendar the Joy to the Sunday message. Managers asked not to book over named joy blocks.	Joy blocks scheduled and kept
7–8	DEI + Comp & Ben	Map the protocol against existing leave, hybrid and caregiver policies. Close the gap the protocol cannot close.	Policy gaps logged; owners named
9–10	People analytics	Join participation data to retention risk for the cohort, in aggregate. No individual join.	Participation vs intent-to-stay, cohort level
11	CHRO	Mid-pilot review with function head. Keep, widen, or stop.	Decision recorded
12–13	DEI lead	Second cohort design if the first clears the participation bar.	Waitlist size
Day 90	CHRO + DEI	90-day pack: participation, streaks, vocabulary breadth, exit intent in the cohort, manager slot-keeping. Decision on year-one scale.	Scale / iterate / stop

The metric that matters at day 90 is not a smile score. It is whether mid-career women in the cohort are still in the building, still taking reps, and still visible in the promotion slate.

08

One-page checklist the reader can run this week

1. Pull last year's exit list for women aged 28–42 in one function. Count them. That is the retention problem in your building, not a national abstract.
2. Open the Time Use Survey 2024 press note. Read the 305-minute and 140-minute lines. Stop describing unpaid work as “help at home”.
3. Ask three mid-career women, privately, what time of day they actually have seven minutes. Believe the answer. Schedule the pilot there.
4. Cancel one 6 p.m. wellbeing session this month. Replace it with a ninety-second Big Sigh Reset in the team huddle.
5. Write the legal sentence into the invite: EmotionApp is emotional-fitness coaching. It is not diagnosis, treatment or therapy.
6. Check the DPDP notice and India-resident hosting before anyone sends a voice note.
7. Tell managers that a Calendar the Joy block is an appointment. Booking over it is the same as booking over a customer call.
8. Measure participation and streaks only. Do not ask for a mood score.
9. Put Tele-MANAS 14416 in the footer of every message. Coaching is not crisis care.
10. Book the day-28 dashboard review now, while enthusiasm is cheap.

A checklist is an implementation intention with a logo. If-then: if it is this week, then these ten acts happen.

09

FAQ

Q1

Does a seven-minute protocol fix women retention workplace India?

No. It returns some emotional bandwidth. McKinsey's India study found men 2.4 times more likely to be promoted from entry to manager. Seven minutes will not rewrite that ratio. Leave, workload and promotion still have to move.

Q2

Is this diagnosis or therapy?

No. EmotionApp is non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching. It does not diagnose, treat or offer therapy. When a user needs more, a human coach hands off to specialised professionals. Crisis care is Tele-MANAS 14416.

Q3

Why WhatsApp rather than another app?

Because that is where the day already lives. Aon's 24,000-woman sample reported 81 per cent mental exhaustion. A second login at 9 p.m. is not a solution to that number. A voice note on the commute is.

Q4

What does the employer actually see?

Rep counts, streaks, vocabulary breadth and participation. Never the content of a voice note, never an individual feeling-word, never a clinical score. Counts, never confessions.

Q5

Why weekly Teen Achhi Baatein instead of a nightly journal?

Because people adapt. Seligman's three-good-things trial used a short burst and still saw gains at six months. Emmons and McCullough found weekly lists beat a grind. Two entries a week is the dose the evidence prefers.

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EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. It is not diagnosis, treatment or therapy. If you are in crisis, contact Tele-MANAS 14416.

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Dr Atul Aswani is a Mumbai Psychiatrist and trained as a Results Coach. He founded EmotionApp, a non-clinical emotional-fitness platform for Indian professionals, at Tranquilo Meditek Sytems Private Limited, Mumbai. The work is delivered as countable daily reps, with an AI coach and human hand-off, in 23 Indian languages, on India-resident infrastructure, under DPDP and ISO 9001 and ISO 13485.

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NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

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SAFETY NOTE

If you are in distress, please contact a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS on 14416.