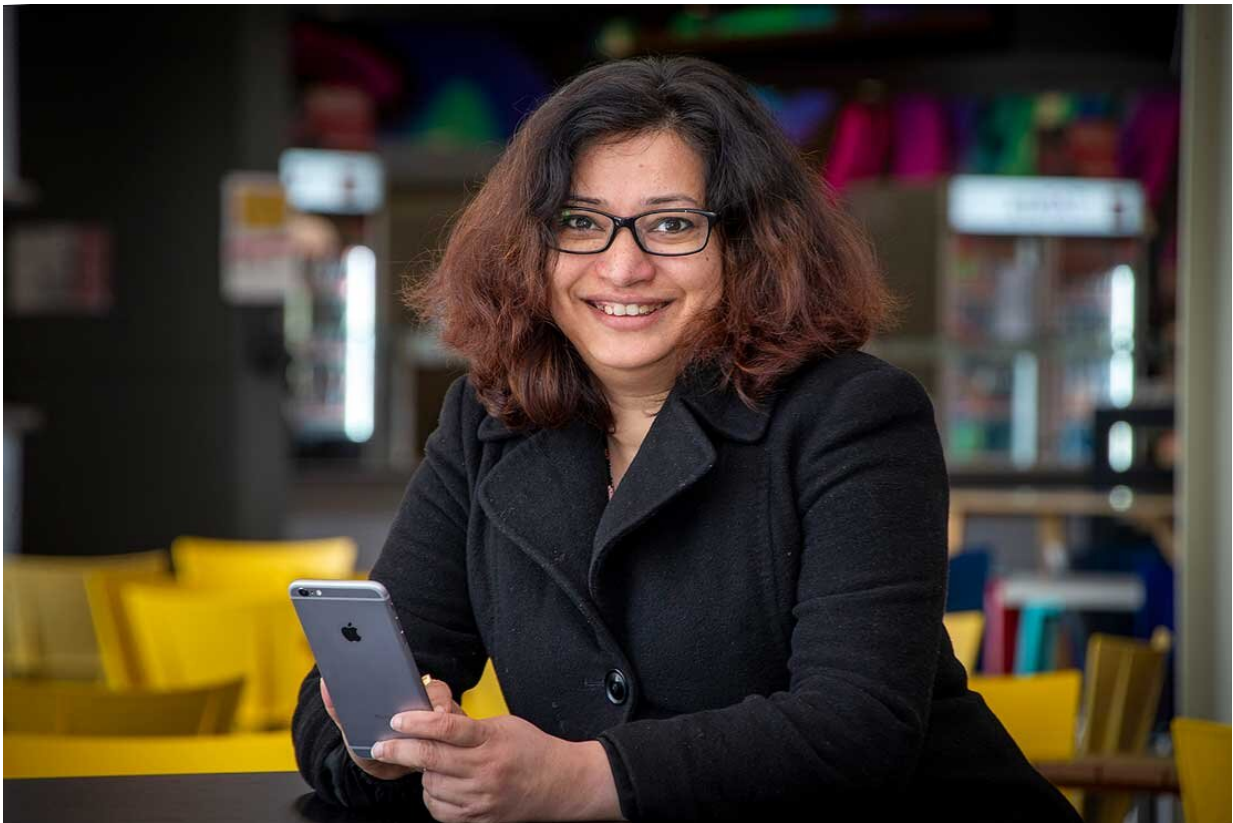


Technology's double-bind for working women

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Dr Debaline Dutta. Credit: Massey University

Smartphones and other mobile devices amplify the patriarchal values that are part of our culture, according to new research by a Massey University expert in organizational communication and gender.

Senior lecturer Dr. Debalina Dutta says while we might all understand the freedoms [mobile devices](#) bring to our lives, it would be a mistake to think the devices are [gender-neutral](#) in their impacts.

"Our mobile devices are full of really cool features, but these things are not neutral," Dr. Dutta says. "They actually amplify the patriarchal values that are part of our culture. This ability to contact someone at all times means [women](#) are expected to be constantly available in their homes and in their work spaces."

Dr. Dutta's qualitative study consisted of in-depth interviews with women working in the male-dominated science, technology, engineering and mathematics sectors (known as STEM), but she says women everywhere will recognize the experiences of her research participants.

She found mobile phones' interactive features can overwhelm women with home and workplace demands, while simultaneously excluding them from informal decision-making channels at work.

The double bind of technology

"It really is a double-bind for women," she says. "Interactive devices give them the flexibility on one hand to continue working with children. However, it also means their role as [family caregiver](#) does not stop when they are at work, and they can still be contacted about work matters at home. These are gendered expectations that do not affect men to the same degree."

Dr. Dutta also found messaging apps provided an informal communication channel in many workplaces and, in organizations where management roles are dominated by men, this can remove women from important conversations.

"Women can be completely excluded from informal chat groups, which can have implications for their careers," she says. "And sometimes, if they do join the chat group, they can feel isolated by the content of conversations, for example if the men in the group exchange messages and jokes they perceive as inappropriate and/or sexist."

While messaging apps can isolate women, they can also be a communication channel that creates additional burdens.

"I think a lot of women feel they can't win. Their friends and family expect them to be active members of chat groups, constantly uploading photos of the kids and responding to questions. Men don't seem to have the same expectations made of them so, when at work, it's fine for them to be fully focused on work."

Awareness and micropractices

She says it is important for women to be aware of these pressures, but to also identify the ways in which technology allows them to connect with others for support.

"I recommend everyday micropractices, being aware and resisting the expectations where you can; but it's not easy, the growth of new technologies can be challenging."

Dr. Dutta's paper, "Mobile phone as interactive technologies mediating gendered work-life conflict: A qualitative study on women in STEM," was published recently in the academic journal *Sex Roles*.

More information: Debalina Dutta. Mobile Phones as Interactive Technologies Mediating Gendered Work-Life Conflict: A Qualitative Study on Women in STEM, *Sex Roles* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-019-01088-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01088-y)

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