MRITAMAHALE was about five months pregnant when the first lockdown was announced on March 22. Overnight, her doctors shut her clinic, medicines became hard to find, and the bustling city of Mumbai, at the heart of her acclaimed debut novel, *Milk Teeth* (2018), became an unfamiliar place. While she wrote on weekends, her job as a product manager at a non-profit AI-for-social-good innovation lab required her to work from home. "It was the scariest time in my life," says Mahale, now 33, who was seven months pregnant when the second wave hit in March. Her only choice was to leave Mumbai for her home town in the state of Karnataka. "I packed up my bags in the middle of the night and drove in a state of shock and fear," she says. "For the first time, I realized that I was not in control of my life."

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world, a deeper appreciation for the hard work of women in the workplace grew. In India, women have become a vital force in the global economy, making up more than 40% of the workforce in some sectors. But as the pandemic shut down workplaces, women found themselves at the center of a struggle to balance work and family life, a challenge that has only grown since the lockdowns began.

In 2017, a comic strip by French graphic artist Emma, titled *You Should've Asked*, had gone viral on the internet. In it, a new mother who is struggling to attend to a dinner guest and her baby is told by her partner that he will handle the guests. "It's not easy to be a housewife," says Emma. "It's not easy to be a mother."

In 2019, a study by the Stanford University School of Medicine found that women in STEM and social sciences have fallen significantly during the pandemic. "In March, April and May, we saw a drop of 30% in the number of faculty, PhD students and postdocs applying for funding," said Audrey Truschke, associate professor of South Asian history at the University of Nevada at Reno. "In June, July and August, we saw a drop of 50%.

For women in academia, the pandemic has meant a shift away from research and toward teaching and student support. "The work has been intense and overwhelming," said Gitanjali Yadav, a plant biologist at the University of Cambridge who is also the government of India's first-ever female joint professor. "I have had to juggle teaching, research and student support, which has been challenging." But despite the challenges, Yadav says she has found ways to stay connected with her students and colleagues. "I have tried to maintain a sense of normalcy and routine, which has helped me to cope with the stress of the pandemic," she says.

For Paromita Chakrabarti, a master's student at the Department of Education at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, the pandemic has meant a shift from teaching to online learning. "I had to adjust to the new normal of teaching online," she says. "It was difficult to keep the students engaged, and it was challenging to maintain the same level of interaction with them."

In the wake of the pandemic, women have had to adapt to new challenges, including the increased workload of working from home. "I have had to manage work and personal life simultaneously," says Madhuja Bandopadhyay, a mentor teacher with the Delhi Directorate of Education. "It has been challenging to balance the needs of my students with the needs of my family."

For Manu Gulati, a mentor teacher with the Delhi Directorate of Education, the pandemic has meant a shift from teaching in person to teaching online. "I had to adapt quickly to the new normal of teaching online," she says. "It has been challenging to keep the students engaged, and it has been difficult to maintain the same level of interaction with them."

As workplaces collapse into home during the pandemic, urban working women are engaged in a struggle to find a fine balance. "It is not easy to be a housewife," says Emma. "It is not easy to be a mother."