

The Effects of COVID-19- Induced Transition to Remote Work on Gender Equality



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The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a boom in the use of digital solutions like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, enabling employees across the world to continue working at home, away from their now empty offices. Some companies have struggled to adapt, clinging to the hope of a speedy return to the *old normal*. Others, like Google, Microsoft, and Spotify, have been more open to change, announcing that their employees will be able to continue working remotely, indefinitely. Remote work might well be on course to becoming the *new normal* of the 21st century. Historically, the locality of work, be it the home, the factory or the office, had an impact on women's representation in the labor market and gender relations, both positively and negatively. What will be the long-term impacts of COVID-19-induced remote work on gender equality?

WOMEN'S REMOTE WORK THROUGHOUT HISTORY

It is not the first time in history for workers to make their income from their kitchen tables. The emergence of capitalism in Europe between the 17th and 19th century took place not in the factories but, for the most part, at home. Workers produced consumer goods on large kitchen tables or small workshop spaces attached to family houses. This work was mostly carried out by women and children who were unlikely to write biographies, leaving behind little historical trace. Through limited existing records, depictions in literature, and even architectural clues, historians paint a faint picture of home-working women. These women operated on highly varied time schedules, juggling diverse sets of tasks, while also – compared to that of a factory worker – enjoying greater individual autonomy to decide their workloads and weekly outputs. The emergence of the at-home industrial workforce was fueled by the expansion of

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global trade from the 1600s onward and raising individual incomes, thus a growing demand for manufactured goods¹. Before the invention of the spinning jenny in the 1760s, the first consequential emerging industrial technologies were relatively small-scale and fitted better into the home than the factory. Workers operated more like independent contractors than hourly salary employees, getting paid per finished product, often working longer hours than those in the factory. The economic historians Jane Humphries and Ben Schneider of Oxford University warn against glorifying the 18th century home worker². Dispersed across the country, they were vulnerable to

¹ *The Economist* (2020) *Home-Working Had Its Advantages, Even in the 18th Century*. Available [online]: <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2020/12/16/home-working-had-its-advantages-even-in-the-18th-century>

² Horrell, S., and J. Humphries (1995) "Women's Labor Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790-1865", [in]: *The Economic History Review*, No. 48(1), new series, pp. 89-117.



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exploitation from bosses. Unable to unionize quickly like factory workers could, they had little leverage to demand better pay.

The migration of productive labor from home and into the factory had far-reaching consequences, argue Humphries and Schneider, notably on women's presence in the labor market. Despite its shortcomings, home-based work allowed women to engage in paid labor alongside domestic responsibilities, which men seldom took part in. While by no means an easy task, women could contribute to the household income while looking after the family – a tricky balancing act, unsupported by the factory system. With industrialization, women's participation in the labor market fell, increasing their financial dependence on men³.

Fredrich Engels believed the departure of productive labor from the home had a negative effect on gender relations⁴. He argued that women's oppression originated from the specific structure of the family in a class society. In pre-class egalitarian societies, labor was divided by sex. Still, because much of productive activity happened in the sphere of the home, women's positions in society were secured by their productive power. Engels attributed the development of private property and migration of productive labor from the home into the factory as the main cause of the hierarchical relationship between the sexes, leaving women behind in the home to perform unpaid labor⁵.

Drawing on historical examples, it may be tempting to feel optimistic about the return of the home as a central location of productivity. Today, thanks to information and communication technologies (ICTs), remote workers are able to maintain networks with one another, making them considerably less vulnerable to exploitation than the 18th century home worker. We may welcome remote work as allowing women to no longer have to make the often-difficult trade-off of choosing between a professional career and motherhood. Perhaps even, drawing on Engels' arguments, we may hope that remote work will help equalize the relationship between the sexes. However, in the years prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, studies conducted on remote work and women provide less optimistic insights.

⁴ Pelz, W. A (1998) "Class and Gender: Friedrich Engels' Contribution to Revolutionary History." [in]: *Science & Society*, No. 1(62), 1998, pp. 117–126. Available [online]: www.jstor.org/stable/40403691

⁵ Sandford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2004) *Feminist Perspectives on Class and Work*. Available [online]: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-class/>

³ Ibid.

WOMEN AND FLEXIBLE WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate previously noted gendered trends, such as those identified by Zoe Young. In her 2018 book, *Women's Work: How Mothers Manage Flexible Working in Careers and Family Life*, the gender and family researcher extensively studies the experiences of thirty women in balancing motherhood with professional careers. The author offers a critical lens on the work-life balance of working women and argues that while flexible working could potentially improve equality in the workplace, in practice, organizational implementations end up constraining women's careers.

She points to the 'inherent incompatibility' of the societal expectations directed at modern women to engage in 'intensive mothering' and at the same time pursue professional employment. The women interviewed in Young's study had mixed feelings about the effects of technology on their work, finding it at once enabling and constraining⁶. These contradictions help to illustrate how the complexities of identities and the overlapping of different spheres of life are enabled by technology.

A 2010 study conducted by Bain & Company found that the lack of access to flexible work models that are responsive to women's specific needs was causing significant divergence in job satisfaction between men and women in the mid-40s age group, just as both genders would expect to take on leadership roles. In this age group, women are more likely to opt out of a promotion or the job entirely, as they are first to lose eagerness for long hours and extended travel expectations. The study suggests



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that through offering flexible work models, companies can increase their female retention rates in executive and leadership roles by as much as 40 %⁷.

According to the gender role theory, societies tend to define the home and family life as central to women's, and not men's, social

⁶ Young, Z. (2018) *Women's Work: How Mothers Manage Flexible Working in Careers and Family Life*, Bristol University Press.

⁷ Coffman, J. and R. Hogey (2010) *Flexible Work Models: How to Bring Sustainability to a 24/7 World*. Available [online]: https://www.asx.com.au/documents/about/flexible_work_models_bain_and_company_2010.pdf

identity⁸. While such gendered perceptions of identity continue to shape social relations, companies risk, consciously or otherwise, systematically reproducing gendered attitudes prevalent in society, for instance by overlooking fathers' work-life balance needs and expecting work devotion⁹. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies and couples to adopt more flexible work schedules, considered by some as an opportunity to equalize both partners work-life balance. While a promising idea in theory, critics warn that women who bear a greater proportion of unpaid labor at home are at a greater risk of burnout and compromised work performance¹⁰, as they disproportionately face having to juggle the responsibilities of homeschooling, child-care and paid employment¹¹.

Further study is necessary to better understand the long-term consequences of working from home on gender equality, however initial signals the pandemic's impacts on gender equality do not bode well. Research of Australian academic workers during the pandemic suggests that women are submitting fewer papers to peer-reviewed journals, while men's submission



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⁸ Feng, Z. and K. Savani (2020) "COVID-19 Created a Gender Gap in Perceived Work Productivity and Job Satisfaction: Implications for Dual-Career Parents Working from Home", [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, No. 7/8(35), pp. 719-736.

⁹ Blair-Loy, M. (2003) *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰ Cannito, M. and A. Scavarda, (2020) "Childcare and Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Ideal Worker Model, Parenthood and Gender Inequalities in Italy", [in]: *Italian Sociological Review*, No. 10(35), pp. 801-820. Available [online]: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v10i3s.399>

¹¹ Wenham, C. (2020) *The Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis and Post-Crisis Period, Report commissioned by the European Parliament*, Available [online]: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU\(2020\)658227](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2020)658227)

rates have risen¹². As families negotiate how to manage childcare, women end up bearing a greater proportion of the burden¹³.

¹² Bem, S.L. (1993) *The Lenses of Gender*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

¹³ Office of National Statistics (2020) *Parenting in Lockdown: Coronavirus and the Effects on Work-Life Balance*. Available [online]: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/condition-and-diseases/articles/parentinginlockdowncoronavirusandtheeffectsonworklifebalance/2020-07-22>



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Worryingly, a recent EU annual report on gender equality found that *“the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities between women and men in almost all areas of life.”*¹⁴

To ensure against deepening structural gender inequality and reproduction of traditional gender roles, companies' flexible work models must take into account the unique needs of women and can do so most effectively by ensuring adequate representation of women in the decision-making process. A recent study comparing the experiences of remote work for female and male software engineers in Brazil, found that various incentives adopted by companies to facilitate remote work, were a significant predictor of men's well-being, but not women's, suggesting organizational failure

¹⁴ European Commission (2021) *Report on Gender Equality in the EU*. Available [online]: https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/2021-report-on-gender-equality-in-the-eu_en

to adequately understand unique challenges of remote work for women¹⁵. Companies exposed to the productivity cost of their female employees having to bear the bulk of household and childcare labor, have an opportunity to improve institutional practices to better account for women's needs¹⁶. The concern remains, however, whether they will take up this opportunity or end up simply penalizing women for any compromise in their productivity¹⁷. On the flip side, fathers who have had to spend more time on housework and childcare responsibilities¹⁸, may wish to continue to do so after the crisis subsides and seek to renegotiate institutional expectations of work devotion. However, early research in the UK on the sharing of household work and childcare during lockdown signalled the trend to be seemingly temporary¹⁹. In a recent video conference for International Women's Day, Angela Merkel echoed concerns highlighted in the EU's annual report on gender equality²⁰, warning that *“We have*

¹⁵ Machado, L., C. Caldeira, M. Perin, C. de Souza (2020) “Gendered experiences of software engineers during the COVID-19 crisis”. *IEEE Computer Society*

¹⁶ Feng, Z. and K. Savani (2020) “COVID-19 Created a Gender Gap in Perceived Work Productivity and Job Satisfaction: Implications for Dual-Career Parents Working from Home”, [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, No. 7/8(35), pp. 719-736.

¹⁷ Andrew, A., S. Cattan, M.C. Dias, C. Farquharson, L. Kraftman, S. Krutikova, and A. Phimister, and A. Sevilla, (2020), *How Are Mothers and Fathers Balancing Work and Family Under Lockdown?*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, London.

¹⁸ Lamont, T. (2021) *‘I had No Idea About the Hidden Labor’: Has the Pandemic Changed Fatherhood Forever?*. Available [online]: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/feb/20/i-had-no-idea-about-the-hidden-labour-has-the-pandemic-changed-fatherhood-for-ever>

¹⁹ Tapping, A. and P. Duncan (2020) “Lockdown-Fuelled Novelty of Domestic Chores Wanes for Men” [in]: *The Guardian*. Available [online]: <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2020/dec/09/lockdown-fuelled-novelty-of-domestic-chores-wanes-for-men>

²⁰ *Report on Gender Equality in the EU* (2021) Available [online]: https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/2021-report-on-gender-equality-in-the-eu_en



Forest Gate
Poplar Aldgate
London Bridge

WORLD LONDON
STILL LIVING
HOUR

STOP
CHILDREN

STOP
CHILDREN

55





WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO WORK IN ESSENTIAL AND CARE ROLES, IN WHICH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS AMPED UP PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH RISKS FACTORS

*to make sure that the pandemic does not lead us to fall back into old gender patterns we thought we had overcome.*²¹ Germany recently passed legislation that requires companies to include more women on their executive boards, but Merkel stresses that more must be done to support women, including greater access to childcare facilities, putting care labor back into public political discourse.

PANDEMIC AFFECTS WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The European Union's annual report on gender equality suggests that the pandemic has caused higher unemployment of women than men. Early data indicates that

more women exited the labor market after the first wave of the pandemic than men. In the second quarter of 2020, unemployment fell equally among men and women, however, women had a harder time re-entering the job market in the summer of 2020, with women's employment rising by only 0.8% compared with 2.4% of men's²². This is likely because women overall tend to be overrepresented in service and client-facing roles, such as hospitality, tourism, accommodation, retail, food, or entertainment, all of which have been severely impacted by social distancing measures²³. The labor sectors dominated by women are less likely to allow for telecommuting, hence greater risk of experiencing unemployment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

On the other hand, men are more likely to hold positions that are compatible with telecommuting, and henceforth less likely to face unemployment²⁴. Therefore, before inferring the potential risks and opportunities of working remotely for women, it is important to take into consideration that women are more likely to find themselves unemployed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from the UK suggests that women are seven percent more likely than men to have been furloughed or fired²⁵. Unemployment not only poses a risk to women's financial security in the short

²² *Report on Gender Equality in the EU (2021)* Available [online]: https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/2021-report-on-gender-equality-in-the-eu_en

²³ United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, New York. Available [online]: www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf

²⁴ Alon, T., M. Doepke, J. Olmstead-Rumsey, and M. Tertilt (2020) *The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality*, working paper [26947], National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA. Available [online]: www.nber.org/papers/w26947

²⁵ Sevilla, A., and S. Smith, (2020) *Baby Steps: The Gender Division of Childcare During the COVID19 Pandemic*, University of Bristol. Available [online]: www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2020/may/childcare-inlockdown.html

²¹ Agence France-Presse in Berlin (2021) "Covid Could Endanger Progress on Gender Equality, Says Merkel", [in]: *The Guardian*. Available [online]: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/06/covid-could-endanger-progress-on-gender-equality-says-merkel>

run, but also can have notable negative impacts on their future earnings and career progression. This is of particular concern taking into account that women on average receive less pay than men and are less likely to have assets and savings, exposing them to a greater risk of financial difficulty and poverty as a result of unemployment²⁶.

FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Similar concerns touch female-run businesses, as here too women tend to manage client-facing ventures. There has been much institutional attention highlighting the economic opportunity of Female entrepreneurship. The UK has launched the Investing in Women Code, supported by HM Treasury and 22 participating organizations²⁷. However, structural barriers remain prevalent.

Research has consistently indicated that women entrepreneurs face numerous disadvantages, magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Female-founded start-ups received negligible VC funding of just 2.3% of total global venture investments in 2020, noting a 27% decrease since 2019²⁸. Women have also been found less likely to seek growth financing or credit²⁹. Researchers have

²⁶ Carli, L. (2020) "Women, Gender Equality and COVID-19" [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*. Vol. 35(7/8) pp. 647-655. Available [online]: [10.1108/GM-07-2020-0236](https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-07-2020-0236)

²⁷ Rose, A., P. Scully, and J. Glen, (2020) *The Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship – Progress Report*. Available [online]: <https://media.natwestbusinesshub.com/uspUz4YSdyBKwr7T8kew>

²⁸ Teare G. (2020) "Global VC Funding to Female Founders Dropped Dramatically This Year", [in]: *Crunchbase News*. Available [online] <https://news.f.com/news/global-vc-funding-to-female-founders/>

²⁹ Rosa, J. and D. Sylla, (2016) *A Comparison of the Performance of Female-Owned and Male-Owned Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises*, Government of Canada. Available [online]: www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/061.nsf/eng/h_03034.html#sect-2



MOTHERS ARE WORKING FEWER PAID HOURS AND SPENDING COMPARATIVELY MORE TIME ON HOUSEHOLD WORK DURING THE LOCKDOWN THAN FATHERS ARE

shown that women face higher interest rates and weaker term sheets, resulting in higher repayment burdens³⁰.

Reports from Statistics Canada indicate that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been hit the hardest by lockdown restrictions. As women are most likely to own or hold leadership roles in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), they are disproportionately affected³¹. The report also finds that going digital will play a major role in business survival strategies, but that women entrepreneurs are likely to lack the required assistance and human capital needed to effectively implement digital technologies.

³⁰ Orser, B., Riding, A. and Manley, K. (2006) "Women Entrepreneurs and Financial Capital", [in]: *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, No. 5(30), pp. 643-665.

³¹ Statistics Canada (2021) *Staffing Actions Taken by Businesses During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Business Characteristics*. Available [online]: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310023101>

Furthermore, Canada's economic relief response is thought to overlook the gendered structures of businesses, resulting in women not qualifying for government payouts to the same extent as men. For example, one Canadian government's relief program targets SMEs with employees, while women are twice as likely as men to be self-employed and, as a result, less likely to receive it³². Women make up just 16% of SMEs with one employee, but more than 38% of self-employed Canadians. Such governmental oversight is likely to have lasting, negative consequences on female-led businesses³³.

ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Women are more likely to work in essential and care roles, in which the COVID-19 pandemic has amped up physical and mental health risks factors³⁴. Worldwide, women make up as much as 70% of the healthcare workforce, and typically serve in front-line health roles³⁵. Therefore, they are at a higher risk of exposure to infection than men³⁶, and are on the whole less likely to have the option of working remotely.

³² Statistics Canada (2019b) *Study: Self-Employed Canadians: Who and Why?*. Government of Canada. Available [online]: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190528/dq190528f-eng.htm>; www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/061.nsf/eng/03086.html

³³ Grandy, G., W. Cukier, and S. Gagnon. (2020) "(In)Visibility in the Margins: COVID-19, Women Entrepreneurs and the Need for Inclusive Recovery" [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, No. 7/8(35), pp. 667-675.

³⁴ Robertson, C., and R. Gebeloff (2020) "How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in 'America'", [in]: *New York Times*. Available [online]: www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share

³⁵ United Nations (2020) *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, New York. Available [online]: www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf

³⁶ ILO (2020) *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work, Second Edition*. Available [online]: www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-and-responses/WCMS_740877/lang-en/index.htm



THE GENDERED GAP BETWEEN WORKING PARENTS HAS INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY SINCE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC. SIMILAR PATTERNS HAVE BEEN DOCUMENTED IN EUROPE AND ASIA, POINTING TO THE WIDENING OF THE GENDER GAP IN CHILDCARE, ELDERCARE, AND HOUSEWORK AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC

Moreover, women are also more likely to have to make the tough choice between risking their health or face unemployment. One US nation-wide poll found that the majority of essential workers were worried about contracting the virus and putting their families at risk, sometimes choosing

to segregate from other members of their household, consequently reporting higher levels of stress and isolation³⁷. Hence, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women, carrying out the bulk of essential duties, have been disproportionately exposed to the risk of infection and impaired mental health.

BLURRED BOUNDARIES

There is extensive research on the subject of work-life interference experienced by women, but the bulk of it assumes work and family settings as separate, non-overlapping spheres³⁸. The COVID-19 pandemic created new sets of challenges, where people's work and family share the same physical locality, creating new challenges for working women, particularly mothers. In July 2020, Zhiyu Feng and Krishna Savani from the Renmin University of China and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, respectively, conducted a study on work productivity and job satisfaction by gender during the pandemic. Looking specifically at heterosexual, dual-career couples, who were in full time employment before and during the pandemic, they found a statistically significant drop in work productivity and job satisfaction in women, compared to their male partners³⁹.

Additionally, the Institute for Fiscal Studies based in London found that mothers are working fewer paid hours and spending comparatively more time on household

³⁷ Glenza, J. (2020) "US Medical Workers Self-Isolate Amid Fears of Bringing Coronavirus Home", [in]: *The Guardian* Available [online]: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/medical-workers-self-isolate-home-fears-coronavirus.

³⁸ Demerouti et al. (2007) "The Role of Personal Resources in the Job Demands-Resources Model" [in]: *International Journal of Stress Management*, Vol. 14(2), pp.121–141.

³⁹ Feng, Z., and K. Savani (2020) "COVID-19 Created a Gender Gap in Perceived Work Productivity and Job Satisfaction: Implications for Dual-Career Parents Working from Home" [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*. No. 7/8(35), pp. 719–736.



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work during the lockdown than fathers are. Mothers were also found more likely than fathers to have their paid work interrupted by household responsibilities. Mothers combine their paid work and other responsibilities (primarily childcare) 47% of their time, compared to 30% of fathers'. Compared to the 2014–2015 data, mothers and fathers used to get interrupted proportionally during paid work; now mothers report getting interrupted over 50% more often⁴⁰. The findings suggest the gendered gap

⁴⁰ Andrew, A., S. Cattan, M.C. Dias, C. Farquharson, L. Kraftman, S. Krutikova, and A. Phimister, and A. Sevilla, (2020), *How Are Mothers and Fathers Balancing Work and Family Under Lockdown?*, Institute for Fiscal Studies: London.



ADDITIONAL
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between working parents has increased significantly since before the pandemic. Similar patterns have been documented in Europe and Asia, pointing to the widening of the gender gap in childcare, eldercare, and housework as a result of the pandemic⁴¹.

Another study conducted by the Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow found that the relationship between personal life interference with work and emotional exhaustion was moderated by gender, such that

⁴¹ UN Women (2020) *The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's and Men's Lives and Livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary Results from a Rapid Gender Assessment*, Istanbul. Available [online]: <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/impact-covid-19-womens-and-mens-lives-and-livelihoodseurope-and-central-asia>

women experienced it more than men⁴². The findings are consistent with previous research on the work-family conflict as a contributor to women's emotional exhaustion⁴³. Boundary theory is often used in analysis to facilitate better understanding of how individuals manage their time and energy between multiple life domains, such as those of work and family. A person in everyday life will cross various boundaries when crossing from one domain to another. These may be physical (like the home or the office), but are also temporal and psychological. They help the individual mediate interference between the multiple domains of their life.

Boundary theory suggests there is a psychological demand associated with transition between domains that require different sets of psychological and cognitive efforts, and frequent transitions can leave a person feeling emotionally exhausted⁴⁴. The suddenly altered reality of working from home increased the challenge for employees to minimize work-life interference, contributing to increased emotional exhaustion.

The differences in experience of work-life interference across gender lines reflect the continued grip of gender role expectations in societies around the world. To varying degrees, the home continues to be viewed as the primary domain for women. It is important to note that additional factors such

⁴² Bhumika (2020) "Challenges for Work-Life Balance During COVID-19 Induced Nationwide Lockdown: Exploring Gender Difference in Emotional Exhaustion in the Indian Setting" [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, No. 7/8 (35), pp. 705-718.

⁴³ Posig, M. and J. Kickul (2004) "Work-Role Expectations and Work Family Conflict: Gender Differences in Emotional Exhaustion" [in]: *Women in Management Review*, No. 7(9), pp. 373-386.

⁴⁴ Bhumika (2020) "Challenges for Work-Life Balance During COVID-19 Induced Nationwide Lockdown: Exploring Gender Difference in Emotional Exhaustion in the Indian Setting" [in]: *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, No. 7/8 (35), pp. 705-718.



UNLIKE A MAN, A WOMAN WITH A JOB STILL FACES EXPECTA- TIONS TO FULLY PARTICIPATE IN HOUSE CHORES

as class, culture, and religion will inevitably also affect women's experience of remote working, further exacerbating gender inequalities.

PRACHI: REMOTE WORK AND WOMEN IN INDIA

Asiya Islam at the University of Cambridge focuses her research on the lives of lower-middle-class women in the context of socio-economic change in urban India. Her most recent case study documented the immediate experience, and potential long-term consequences of remote working during the COVID-19-induced lockdown for Prachi, a young woman working in an e-commerce company in Delhi. Prachi's account of suddenly working from home is one of deterioration of her physical and mental health caused by *"limited access to infrastructure, increased workload, hyper-surveillance from her employers, and restricted access to space and time for herself."*⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Islam, A. (2020) "Two Hours Extra for Working from Home": Reporting on Gender, Place, and Time from the COVID-field of Delhi, India" Newnham College, University of Cambridge. Unpublished manuscript. Available [online] [doi: 10.1111/gwao.12617](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12617)

In India, the practice of women working from home is common, as women regularly participate in the large informal economy by predominantly producing material goods such as textiles or mechanical parts. However, this type of home working tends to be undertaken as a subsidiary means of income and differs significantly from the 'modern' practices of remote working that are understood as full-time and the sole source of workers income. In Dr. Islam's case study, Prachi describes the limitations of her home environment: no access to a computer, no air-conditioning, no private space to work without distraction from other family members, and unreliable internet. While Prachi's employer equipped her with a laptop, they could not account for the patchy Internet connection, which meant Prachi had to work longer hours, sometimes stretching into the night, before she was allowed to log-off for the day.

Additionally, her employer's heightened surveillance made Prachi feel distrusted and devalued, as if they lacked appreciation that she and her colleagues are trying their best to adapt to home working and the additional pressures associated with it. Islam's previous research suggests that lower-middle-class income women in India value employment not only for the income, but also for the resources they can access in their offices (computers, air-conditioning, among others) and for the chance to routinely leave the home, associated with numerous domestic responsibilities⁴⁶.

Despite being the household's main income provider, Prachi's family saw her devotion to work as an excuse not to participate in house chores, accusing her of 'being a queen'. Unlike a man, a woman

⁴⁶ Islam, A. (2020a) "It Gets Really Boring if You Stay at Home": Women, Work and Temporalities in Urban India", [in:] *Sociology*, No. 54(5), pp. 867–882. Available [online] <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520934995>



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with a job still faces expectations to fully participate in house chores. Prachi depicts the disparity in treatment by her family between herself and her brother, whose income is lower than hers. Her family would make sure not to disturb her brother and tend to his needs around the clock,

*“because he is working.”*⁴⁷ Prachi raised her frustrations that despite her salary providing for the whole family, she gets no say in how it is spent. Additionally, she notes her male colleagues receive higher salaries because her bosses expect them to be their families’ main breadwinners. However, contrary to this assumption, Prachi believes that many women like her are the main income providers.

Prachi’s account offers a glimpse into the challenges of working remotely in developing countries. For women like Prachi, the value of employment is closely linked with access to office infrastructure and the opportunity to escape the domestic labor expectations at home. Working remotely during government-imposed COVID-19 lockdown deteriorated Prachi’s mental and physical health. Understanding the different ways the COVID-19 pandemic will impact women’s access to the labor market across the world will determine the success of EU funded programmes implemented in partnership with the ILO and UN Women, such as the WEEMPOWER/Asia initiative⁴⁸.

CONCLUSIONS

With only recent and limited data available, how COVID-19 will impact women’s employment in the long-run remains to be seen. Pre-pandemic literature on remote and flexible work notes that while allowing mothers to better balance paid work and childcare, it can compromise women’s career progression. Societal expectations of being a *good mother* alongside a professional career, can lead to more

⁴⁷ Islam, A. (2020) *Two Hours Extra for Working from Home’: Reporting on Gender, Place, and Time from the COVID-field of Delhi, India*, Newnham College, University of Cambridge. Unpublished manuscript. Available [online] [doi: 10.1111/gwao.12617](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12617)

⁴⁸ European Commission (2021) *Report on Gender Equality in the EU*. Available [online]: https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/2021-report-on-gender-equality-in-the-eu_en

mothers opting for flexible work solutions, while fathers return to full-time in-person work, risking exclusion from often dynamic, decision-making discussions in the office.

Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, many women reported to have been sacrificing their professional productivity for childcare and home responsibilities, often at the cost of their mental well-being. Although both mothers and fathers have spent more time on childcare during the lockdown, mothers continue to bear the bulk of the responsibility, and have become the 'go-to parent' in the majority of households⁴⁹. Women across all sectors have reported significant work-life interference as a result of working from home. Employers choosing to continue to offer remote work options must take the gendered disparity into account if they are to ensure adequate support for their female staff. Perhaps more pressingly, it is crucial that governments' COVID-19 recovery strategies reflect how occupational sex-segregation resulted in women being disproportionately hard-hit by unemployment as they make up the majority of employees in service and client-facing jobs. Without targeted and sustained effort to boost post-pandemic female employment, the crisis will worsen economic gender inequality for years to come, as unemployment can have negative effects on women's career progression and future earnings. It is vital that decisions shaping post-COVID-19 economic recovery are not just taken with women in mind, but by women represented in elected political institutions and corporate executive boards.

Additionally, women continue to account for only a negligible percentage of fund-receiving entrepreneurs and face disadvantages in accessing investment and credit. Studies have shown governments failing

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⁴⁹ Andrew, A., S. Cattan, M.C. Dias, C. Farquharson, L. Kraftman, S. Krutikova, A. Phimister, and A. Sevilla, (2020) *How Are Mothers and Fathers Balancing Work and Family under Lockdown?*, Institute for Fiscal Studies: London.

to adequately target economic relief for women-led businesses. Such governmental oversight is likely to have lasting, negative consequences on female-led businesses.

Furthermore, any analysis of the effects of remote work on gender equality must also take into account the economic, cultural, and religious dimensions of women's lives across the world, in order to ensure international response is adequate. As the case of Prachi demonstrates, women working

remotely in India face discrimination from their employers as well as their own families, who do not perceive women breadwinners as entitled to the same treatment and privileges as their male counterparts. In fast-developing urban settings like Delhi, office jobs have value for women beyond income. They allow for access to attractive material infrastructure, like desktop computers, printers, and air conditioning. They also provide women with an escape from the overbearing pressures at home to conform to traditional gender role responsibilities, which young women increasingly view as unfair.



FEMINISTS HAVE LONG SOUGHT TO POLITICIZE THE PRIVATE SPHERE BY REJECTING THE PUBLIC-PRIVATE DIVIDE, WHICH KEPT WOMEN'S ISSUES OUTSIDE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS ARGUABLY HELPED TO DO THAT

LOOKING FORWARD

There are, however, opportunities for improvements in gender equality in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, remote-working parents have been additionally impacted by school closures, which are likely to be temporary. Nevertheless, the gendered experiences of remote work have helped to shed some light on the prevalence of women bearing the burden of unpaid care labor.

Fathers have had to spend more time on housework and childcare responsibilities⁵⁰, creating the opportunity that they may continue to do so after the crisis subsides, renegotiating to challenge institutional expectations of work devotion. Companies have been exposed to the productivity cost of their female employees having to bear the bulk of household and childcare labor, creating an opportunity to improve institutional practices to better account for women's needs.

⁵⁰ Lamont, T. (2021) *'I had No Idea About the Hidden Labor': Has the Pandemic Changed Fatherhood Forever?*. Available [online]: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/feb/20/i-had-no-idea-about-the-hidden-labour-has-the-pandemic-changed-fatherhood-forever>

Feminists have long sought to politicize the private sphere by rejecting the public-private divide, which kept women's issues outside of political discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably helped to do that, by forcing government-leaders, company-bosses and women's local communities to take a moment to consider the pressures of unequal distribution of unpaid care labor women face across all studied societies.



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