Home-based telework and gender equality

Challenges and Opportunities

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1

Outline

1. **Women and the home sphere**

2. **Gender differences in home-based telework before and after the pandemic**

3. **Home-based telework: a double-edged sword for gender equality?**

4. **Future directions in law and policy**

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2

Women and the home sphere

'The Sphere of Woman,' Godey's Lady's Book vol. 40 (March 1850): 209

- The public-private divide: gendered division of social space into private 'feminine' sphere of the home and public 'masculine' space in western societies can be seen as a legacy of the industrial revolution

- While many (working-class) women did work in the factories, often in feminised jobs (e.g. making clothes), the 'stereotype' became that the home was a woman's domain

- Public space was associated with professionalism and productive labour, whereas the private space with family and reproductive labour, considered to be 'subordinate'

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3

Women and the home sphere

'The Sphere of Woman,' Godey's Lady's Book vol. 40 (March 1850): 209

- Origins and consequences of the division of social space during the industrial era continue to have an impact on gender relations through ideology, discourse and culture, disadvantaging women

- Unpaid care work, while clearly producing value for societies and economies, continues to be perceived as subordinate or not 'real' work, and predominantly performed by women

- But even paid work performed in the household tends to be invisible, undervalued and precarious – e.g. domestic workers or home-based workers

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4

Women and the home sphere

'The Sphere of Woman,' Godey's Lady's Book vol. 40 (March 1850): 209

- Divide between the public/private space, and between productive and reproductive work, has delineated the boundaries of state intervention in the private space, with significant negative implications for women:

- Late criminalisation of domestic violence
- Exclusion from unpaid care work from domain of labour law and usual understanding of 'work'
- Lower level of protection of domestic workers
- Lack of enforcement of labour standards, including occupational health and safety, in the private home
- Regulatory issues related to social reproduction have been treated as a matter of family or social welfare law, often reinforcing male breadwinner/female housewife model

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5

Home-based telework before/after pandemic

- In the context of rapid changes in the world of work, such as increase of home-based teleworking, we need to consider the ways in which gendered ideology regarding space is produced and reproduced

- The possibility to work from home has been attractive to those with caring responsibilities, the majority of whom are women – e.g. majority of home-based workers are women

- **Home-based telework**: home-based workers who perform telework, which is defined as 'a form of organising and/or performing work' by means of 'information technology, in the context of an employment relationship regularly carried out away from the employer's premises

- Even before the pandemic, the majority of home-based teleworkers were women according to ILO date; but gender differences in the take-up of home-based telework increased during and after the pandemic across almost all sectors

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6

Home-based telework before/after pandemic

Table 1   The proportion (%) of workers working from home before the pandemic by gender and employment status

Employment status	Women	Men	Total
Employee on open-ended contract	18	19	18
Employee not on open-ended contract	16	16	16
Self-employed with employees	35	26	29
Self-employed without employees	37	29	32
Total	20	20	20

Source: ETUI IPWS 2021.

Table 2   The proportion (%) of workers working from home during/after the pandemic (i.e. at the time of the survey in 2021) by gender and employment status

Employment status	Women	Men	Total
Employee on open-ended contract	45	39	42
Employee not on open-ended contract	44	38	41
Self-employed with employees	59	49	52
Self-employed without employees	55	46	49
Total	46	40	43

Source: ETUI IPWS 2021.

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7

Home-based telework before/after pandemic

Table 3   Teleworking (work from home) prior to and during/after the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e. at the time of the survey in 2021) by sectors and gender (%)

Sector	Women	Men	Gender gap
Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing			
Before	20	12	8
During/after	36	26	10
Industry			
Before	20	17	3
During/after	41	34	7
Construction			
Before	31	13	18
During/after	57	24	33
Trade, repair, transportation, accommodation			
Before	15	16	-1
During/after	35	32	3
Information and communications			
Before	29	44	-15
During/after	61	73	-12
Financial and insurance activities and real estate			
Before	29	39	-10
During/after	70	73	-3
Professional, scientific and technical			
Before	30	33	-3
During/after	61	61	0
Admin and support			
Before	27	29	-2
During/after	63	56	7

Table 4   The proportion (%) of workers who teleworked (worked from home) prior to and during/after the pandemic by education and gender

Education	Women	Men	Total
Low: lower secondary			
Before	15	13	14
During/after	35	27	30
Intermediate: higher secondary and post-secondary non tertiary			
Before	14	15	14
During/after	37	33	35
High: tertiary			
Before	29	33	31
During/after	61	60	60
Total			
Before	20	20	20
During/after	46	40	43

Source: ETUI IPWS 2021.

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8

Home-based telework before/after pandemic

- In the context of rapid changes in the world of work, such as increase of home-based teleworking during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, we need to consider the ways in which gendered ideology regarding space is produced and reproduced

- The possibility to work from home has been attractive to those with caring responsibilities, the majority of whom are women – e.g. majority of home-based workers are women

- **Home-based telework**: home-based workers who perform telework, which is defined as 'a form of organising and/or performing work' by means of 'information technology, in the context of an employment relationship regularly carried out away from the employer's premises

- Even before the pandemic, the majority of home-based teleworkers were women according to ILO date; but gender differences in the take-up of home-based telework increased during and after the pandemic across almost all sectors

- **Telework will continue to expand as a mode of working,** and women are more likely to take up home-based telework, not least because more women than men work in occupations that are 'teleworkable', plus they may have greater incentives due to care responsibilities

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9

HbTW and gender equality – a double-edged sword?

Opportunities
- Better work-life balance
- Integration into the labour market and other economic opportunities
- More equal sharing of care responsibilities

Challenges
- Lack of visibility in the workplace and reduced career prospects
- Gender stereotypes and increased double-burden
- Range of negative health impacts

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10

Lack of visibility and reduced career prospects

- Physical absence of home-based teleworkers from the office may be seen as a lack of commitment, resulting in career penalties such as being overlooked for promotion

- Lack of trust from their organisation mediated by the lack of face-to-face contact, both by management and co-workers

- Lack of face-to-face contact can reduce opportunities for knowledge transfer and (informal) learning, impacting career development

- Female teleworkers, especially those with children who spend more than half of their hours in HbTW, are more likely to report experiencing reduced visibility and fewer career development opportunities

Image: Pixels, Vlada Karpovich

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11

Gender stereotypes and increased double burden

- Increasing use of HbTW by women workers could entrench existing gender stereotypes that associate women with the home space

- May also lead to women taking on a greater amount of unpaid care work, given their availability to undertake such tasks in the home alongside their work, leading to (even) greater work-life conflicts or interruptions at work

- These can, in turn, lead to poorer performance and affect career prospects while also contributing to risks to mental and physical health

- Structural disadvantage can be self-reinforcing, so it is important to assess the benefits of HbTW for gender equality against background of existing issues

Image: MS Office Stock Photos

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12

Negative health impacts

- HbTW is often associated with increased availability, longer working hours, intensification of work and blurring of boundaries between work and private life

- (Home-based) Teleworkers report more issues such as fatigue, eyestrain, headaches and anxiety

- Two psychosocial risk factors particularly affect women: **work-life conflicts and job insecurity.** Increased PSR are related to muscoloskeletal disorders, which again affect women disproportionately

- HbTW can exacerbate work-life conflicts for those who already have caring responsibilities, because of the effects mentioned above

Image: MS Office Stock Photos

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13

Negative health impacts

- Job insecurity is also relevant, because HbTW is associated with a lack of recognition and hides a risk of contractual distancing or limited-term/precarious contracts, which already affect women

- Telework increases the risk of online (sexual) harassment and cyber-bullying, by colleagues or third parties

- Working from home may expose women to higher risk of domestic violence and reduce the 'safe' space of the workplace

- It is an issue that OSH regulation often does not extend/is poorly enforced there, and sometimes does not include the prevention of PSR; domestic violence often not seen as a workplace issue

Image: MS Office Stock Photos

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14

Future directions in law and policy

Challenging assumptions on the public-private divide, work and gender

Recognising that care is essential to the functioning of our societies and economies

Gender mainstreaming across measures on telework

Gender-sensitive work organisation and design of telework arrangements

OSH regulation extending to the home (where relevant) and enforcement competences

Measures regulating telework, though legislation or collective agreement

Right to disconnect

Adequate care services

Family leave entitlements

Working time reduction

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15