A Phenomenological Analysis of the Subjective Experience of Women Working from Home During the Pandemic

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Abstract

This study focuses on the phenomenon of working from home during the pandemic, highlighting the universe of subjective meanings that women with jobs attribute to remote work through a qualitative methodological approach. Based on a phenomenological paradigm, the results highlight that family-work conflict blurred the formal boundaries between the different spheres of work and personal life during the pandemic. The phenomenon of family-work conflict manifests as an experience of time pressure and role conflict, being subjectively experienced as an assumed motherhood, driven by the internalisation of care, responsibility, and guilt as normative standards. The study consists of 10 interviews conducted in April-May 2021 in Bucharest, Romania, with women active in the labour market who have worked from home during the pandemic. The study affirms the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms and societal expectations intersect with individual experiences, particularly in work and family life. Thus, the study emphasizes the need to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces that support individuals in balancing their career and family responsibilities without compromising their personal and professional growth.

Keywords: family-work conflict, subjective experience of working from home, role conflict, phenomenological approach, gender roles

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes at both societal and individual levels. Macro-social changes and challenges have consisted of the health crisis felt across all countries and the economic crisis characterised by waves of closures of various small and medium-sized enterprises or mass layoffs in different sectors of activity. Among the consequences of the pandemic felt at the micro-social level were the restrictive isolation measures, which created a sense of loneliness, helplessness, or uncertainty among individuals. Additionally, at the family level, changes occurred due to the transition to remote work, where professional life activities increasingly merge with household chores and childcare responsibilities.

Recent research developed right after the pandemic, analysing the changes caused at the family level, has revealed that both partners experienced significant pressure in the early

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months of the pandemic due to the high number of tasks arising from family life. (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021). Especially women have been more affected as the burden of domestic work fell more on their shoulders. Women's working hours decreased while the time spent on household chores and childcare increased during the pandemic, unlike that of fathers. Moreover, when working, women were more interrupted by children, experiencing a more fragmented work time as their attention was distracted by the needs of the children (Collins et al. 2021; Sullivan and Gershuny 2018; Sevilla et al. 2020). Additionally, studies reveal that women felt overwhelmed, disappointed, sad, and unsatisfied with the balance between work and family during that period (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Craig, 2020).

Therefore, this study complements previous research and aims to phenomenologically analyse what it means to be a woman working from home. Specifically, the study aims to answer research questions such as: (1) What are the ways in which women make sense of working from home? (2) How does the phenomenon of the intertwining of professional and family life appear relevant in defining the subjective experience of working from home? (3) How are gender inequalities created and recreated through remote work, and what subtle forms of inequality manifest in the practice of working from home? To achieve this, the research used semi-structured interviews as a technique to delve into the universe of meanings shaped by the interviewed women, thus providing a subjective perspective on working from home from the standpoint of women's lived experience.

BACKGROUND

Establishing borders: A phenomenological approach

Borders are demarcation lines between domains, representing the point where specific behaviours for a certain domain begin and end. The literature considers these borders to have three main forms: physical, temporal, and psychological. The physical border refers to the walls of the workplace or the walls of the house, defining where specific behaviours occur. Temporal borders, such as established work hours, divide when work is performed and when family responsibilities can be fulfilled. Psychological borders are rules created by individuals that dictate when thinking patterns, behaviours, and emotions are appropriate for one domain but not for the other (Clark, 2000).

Considering these specifications, the "border theory" (Clark, 2000) has developed, explaining how individuals organise and negotiate the sphere of work and family and the borders between them to achieve balance. The central idea of this theory is that work and family constitute different domains or spheres that influence each other. Considering their contrasting cultural nature, work and home can be likened to two countries with differences in linguistics, acceptable behaviours, and task fulfilment. For some individuals, the transition is easy, such as between two adjacent countries with the same language, currency, and customs. Still, the contrast between work and family is much greater for others, requiring a more complex transition. People cross these borders, transitioning between the two spaces daily, often

adjusting their attention, goals, and interpersonal style to better fit each domain's unique demands (Clark, 2000).

Although various aspects of work and household are difficult to alternate, individuals can, to some extent, shape their work and household domains, building borders and bridges between them to create the desired balance (Clark, 2000). Thus, work-family balance is defined as "the extent to which an individual is engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work role and family role" (Kalliath & Brough, 2008, p. 325). Another definition argues that work-family balance represents the absence of conflict or interference between work and family roles (Frone, 2003). Furthermore, work-family conflict represents a form of role conflict in which the pressures of work and family roles are mutually incompatible in some respects, meaning that the responsibilities of the family role hinder participation in the work role (Frone, 2003).

Family life and professional life in a subjective experience

The discussion regarding the relationship between work and non-work involves the importance of time allocation (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001). Time allocation is crucial in balancing various roles and commitments. In the following part, a subjective way to conceptualise the family-work conflict (ibid.) by using the metaphor of time as a "container of meanings" will be detailed.

On one hand, this metaphor imposes a fixed nature of temporal resources. On the other hand, the container metaphor allows us to address the nature of the activities that occupy our time, including their significance. The image of the balance captures the finite nature of time allocation, suggesting that time spent in one domain comes at the expense of other domains. Also, the image of the container emphasises the finite nature of time through its external limits, considering that the sides of the container cannot expand. Therefore, we are all given a fixed number of hours per day. However, the containers are distinguished by their contents, not their loading capacity. Thus, we can choose to cram a multitude of diverse things into a container or leave it empty; we can also fill the allocated hours with a series of small activities or a single large activity, or practically with nothing. The decision about what content we put in the container leads us to a discussion about significance. In an ideal world, the activities that occupy our time entail deeply rooted values and reflect our identity. The time container can thus encompass meanings that affirm identity or put it into discrepancy. The individual experiences and outcomes associated with these two different types of time content are likely different, even if the size of the containers (i.e., the time spent on an activity) is the same (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001).

The container metaphor doesn't divide time into separate chunks for different aspects of life that compete against each other. Instead of imagining work time on one side of a scale and non-work time on the other, the container image suggests that different aspects of time can coexist and interact with each other in the same space (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001).

(Re)structuring family-career boundaries during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has forced thousands of individuals to change their workspace, work from home, or even temporarily or permanently lose their jobs. This has blurred the temporal and spatial boundaries between paid work, household work, and childcare (Sevilla et al., 2020; Craig, 2020). "This dramatic change has opened up the possibility that long-standing patterns in work, family, and gender relationships, central concerns of sociology, will be tested and disrupted during the pandemic" (Craig, 2020, p. 1). Thus, these norms have gradually shifted as women began to enter the workforce, but even so, the share of domestic work for men has not increased significantly, as some studies have found over time (Craig, 2020). Therefore, in the pandemic, individuals following gender conventions regarding task distribution may conclude that the additional work that has emerged in the household and childcare should fall back on women. Even couples deviating from these gendered divisions of domestic work often rely on hegemonic gender conventions in uncertain situations or when equality is difficult to achieve (Carlson et al., 2022). Therefore, the anomic and difficult conditions of the pandemic may encourage partners of different sexes to adhere to gender norms in uncertain times (Carlson et al., 2022).

Regardless of the doubling of households where both partners work in recent decades, women still bear the burden of domestic work and childcare in developed countries (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021). Furthermore, studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Italy, and the United States indicate that parents were under significant time pressure in the early months of the pandemic, and mothers spent less time in paid work because they had more household responsibilities compared to fathers (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

Studies support the idea that toddlers tend to seek help and attention from their mothers, thus interrupting their activities, and their time is experienced as fragmented (Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). Other studies have found that men have greater control over their non-paid work time than women, with women feeling much more rushed and compelled to perform specific household tasks (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018; Craig & Brown, 2017). Some women have admitted feeling nervous, disappointed, and sad because of this situation (Craig, 2020).

Traditional gender roles have historically depicted men as the breadwinners and women as caretakers of the household and children. These roles have established and challenged social norms regarding gender relationships and family dynamics (Ferree, 2010). In this context, men who have worked from home have had the opportunity to observe the invisible work regarding domestic tasks and childcare, considering that they can no longer easily ignore these responsibilities, especially childcare responsibilities when schools have been cancelled. The workspace, otherwise, serves as the children's play and learning space (Collins et al., 2021). Thus, this can be beneficial, leading to the hypothesis that the pandemic could equalise gender roles regarding domestic and childcare tasks (Collins et al., 2021; Craig, 2020).

The peak of the pandemic in the United States led to an increase in gender disparities in working time, where mothers reduced their working time by up to 5 times compared to fathers. Consequently, gender disparities in working hours increased by 20-50% (Collins et al., 2021). The study conducted by Collins et al. (2021) investigated how partners adjust their working time during the pandemic to cope with other domestic and childcare tasks, testing the hypothesis that the pandemic will lead to an equality of gender roles in domestic work. They found that mothers with children aged between 1-5 years reduced their working hours by 1.8 hours, while mothers with older children had the smallest reduced working hours. Also, women reduced their work hours more to spend time with their children than fathers. Therefore, Collins

et al. (2021) found that the pandemic increased gender inequality, as women had to take on childcare duties and reduce their working hours more than fathers in order to be able to take care of family tasks, which refutes the hypothesis made by other researchers.

Similar to what Collins et al. (2021) found, Sevilla et al. (2020) also identified that women spent less time in paid work and more time in domestic work compared to fathers. Also, as Collins et al. (2021) and Sullivan and Gershuny (2018) argue, the time women spent in paid work was interrupted more by other responsibilities in the family (Sevilla et al., 2020). Mothers work 2 hours less in paid work but take care of the house and children 2 hours more than fathers. Women also combine paid work with childcare activities for 47% of their working time, compared to men who do so for only 30% of their working time (ibid).

Subjective experiences of women working from home

A study (Craig, 2020) analysed a series of open-ended survey responses received in which women said that they felt as if they had returned to an earlier era, such as the 1950s period when women's work was solely domestic and childcare, others mentioned feeling like their primary responsibility was household chores, but now they were also expected to continue their paid work. Some respondents mentioned that when it came to working from home, domestic resources were unevenly distributed. Men often had the privilege of having their own workspace, while women had to juggle working and caring for children simultaneously (Craig 2020).

Another study (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021) took a different methodological approach, conducting real-time diaries that collected data over a period of two weeks during the peak of the pandemic in Iceland from a total of 37 women (mothers). The women described intense emotional labour, as it was their duty to provide comfort to other family members. They also had to handle domestic tasks, which caused periods of stress and frustration, saying that they felt tense and stressed, using words such as overwhelmed, tired, and nervous. For example, one mother who works from home reported that she felt she had no energy for anything other than the bare necessities, that her children wore pyjamas all day, and that this period made her feel anxious and drained of energy. Another woman says that she has experienced a small panic attack thinking about all the tasks she has to juggle, saying, like the first one, that no one has the energy to do various things, such as even putting the children to bed. She also said that she feels guilty because she doesn't get everything done. Also, women in normal situations are more likely to experience guilt in terms of work-family balance, feeling this guilt because they are not the best in various situations, such as spending time with children, despite being always on the run (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Moreover, women multitask more than men, thus experiencing greater time pressure and burnout from all the tasks. At the end of the study, when some restrictions on the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted, women said they only now realized how constrained they were because they had to remove the boundaries between work and family life. Other mothers also described the same in relation to work-life boundaries, where these experiences indicate that working from home can be difficult for parents, particularly for mothers, since their working time is interrupted by other household duties. From this, it can be inferred that women's time is more fragmented, as they are easily interrupted by other household or family-related chores (Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). Also, the idea that the pandemic has brought back the 1950s period regarding the distribution of gender roles was also reflected in the descriptions of some of the participants in the study of Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021).

Furthermore, a trend was identified in the women's descriptions, namely that many of them were surprised by how unequal the distribution of work in the family during the pandemic

was and how much time and energy they devoted to housework and family care. This lived experience of women sustains the experience of gendered time (Bryson & Deery, 2010). This conceptualisation emphasizes the social differences between women's time as a cyclical, qualitative, relational, natural time, predominantly associated with private life and caregiving, and men's time as a linear, quantitative, commodified, clock-measured time, associated with the capitalist workplace (Bryson & Deery, 2010).

Even so, the pre-pandemic situation is still characterized by the presence of subjective time pressure, multitasking, fragmented time, and a large amount of domestic tasks that burden women more than men (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003; Craig & Brown, 2017; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). Time pressures, which can be both objective, in the sense of a heavy workload, and subjective, with reference to feeling on the run and rushed can arise both from the public life (the workplace) and the private sphere of one's own home (Kleiner, 2014). Time is both an individual and a family resource and how each family member spends their time has implications for how other family members spend their time (Craig & Brown, 2017). Women, on average, have more contaminated leisure time and less 'pure leisure time', doing more unpaid, multitasking work than fathers (ibid.). Women and men experience the demands coming from work and family differently, so there is a greater likelihood of gender differences in this situation. This means that women are more involved in housework and childcare and fathers spend more time on paid work. Moreover, gendered constructions of family roles not only lead men and women to use their time differently but also to subjectively experience family time as gendered (Craig & Brown, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study sought to understand how the family-work conflict was shaped and experienced during the pandemic from the perspective of women. The research examined various aspects of women's social lives during the crisis that has affected the economy, health, and society. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do women make sense of working from home? (2) How does the phenomenon of the intertwining of professional and family life appear relevant in defining the subjective experience of working from home? (3) How are gender inequalities created and recreated through remote work, and what subtle forms of inequality manifest in working from home?

The study was conducted in a qualitative manner to emphasise women's subjective experience. This research explores how women interpret and experience this phenomenon, aiming to identify subtle gender inequalities that result from the conflict between work and family. As a descriptive research, this study examined women's experiences during the pandemic. It involved an in-depth analysis of the subject to produce accurate and consistent results. The study sought to understand this phenomenon better and provide relevant descriptions using appropriate techniques. Subsequently, this study's approach is phenomenological. This approach implies "searching for the meaning and essence of the experience" (Mapp, 2008, p. 1), which is obtained through the respondents' descriptions of their experiences during the interviews (Mapp, 2008). Thus, the object of research in the phenomenological approach is the lived experience of a phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007).

The research instrument is the semi-structured interview. Through these interviews, the study expected to discover women's lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the family-work conflict. The semi-structured interview offers the possibility of

flexibility in the data collection process, thus allowing questions to be introduced or removed as the interview unfolds. I have also opted for the interview technique because I aimed through this research to make an intrusion into the universe of lived experience in order to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of how women experienced the period under analysis, namely the pandemic period that caused changes in the way the imbalance between work and family is subjectively experienced.

The collected interviews were conducted online via Zoom, over the phone, and face-to-face. Thus, 6 interviews were conducted online, 2 were done over the phone, and another 2 were conducted face-to-face, totalling 10 interviews. The interviews were conducted in April-May 2021 in Bucharest, Romania. The sample for analysis consists of women active in the labour market who have worked from home during the pandemic. Snowball sampling was used to identify the respondents. They are mothers of children between 2-10 years old and have agreed to participate in the study by providing information about how they experienced the conflict between work and family and how it influenced them. Also, the work domains of these women include education, marketing, healthcare, law and public relations.

RESULTS

The respondents express a series of subjective perceptions that can be observed from the responses provided. The initial thoughts that arise in the mind of a woman working from home revolve around concern about how she could manage her time to balance both work and family life successfully:

> *"She might feel pulled in two directions because she has to divide herself between work at home and everything that involves household chores and children while also performing well at work. She might worry that she can't do both, thinking: How can I divide my time and energy, and how well will I mentally cope?"*

> "*How will I manage to work... to complete tasks for the office or those related to my professional life at home? What will I do with the children during all this time while I'm working from home? When will I be able to finish so I can spend time with my children? At what time can I talk to my husband today?"*

> *"I think she would consider how to balance work and home, and if she has children, this would also involve school closures. I believe she would worry about how this would work with working from home, having the children around her and if she had someone to help her."*

> *"Chaos."*

> *"Frustration, concern, sadness."*

> *"Probably how she could divide her time, working from home, between work tasks and family, children especially and household chores. "*

Additionally, women's thoughts are directed towards both work and children, as well as household chores, indicating that the families they come from adhere to a traditional model in terms of the division of household tasks and childcare responsibilities, where women

predominantly undertake these tasks. A significant concern for women arises from the uncertainty of how they will manage working from home while simultaneously needing to supervise and care for their children, a task that falls mainly on them, especially in situations where partners are not at home or are also working from home, with a tendency for children to gravitate towards mothers:

"I think the child prioritises relationships very strongly, so when the mother is at home, they tend to go to the mother first, so the mother is the one who is much more interrupted than the father."

"I refer to my own experience where my children prefer me for activities over my husband."

This phenomenon has been noted in previous studies (Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018) that identified that when children are young, they tend to initially seek help or attention from their mothers, interrupting their activities and causing them to perceive work time as more fragmented. From women's perspective, what determines these thoughts is the overlap between their professional and family lives, which leads to role conflicts in a context where it becomes difficult to balance the responsibilities from work with those from the family domain.

Thus, the pandemic threatens the boundary between work and family, leading to the closure of schools and kindergartens. Now, parents must take on the responsibilities of schools and kindergartens while working, which puts pressure on them, especially women. According to the respondents, being a mother while holding a job creates challenges for women as they struggle to balance their work and home responsibilities. This can lead to role conflict, where they feel torn between behaving as a mother and homemaker at the office and acting as an employee at home. Such a dynamic can cause difficulties for women in completing all their tasks effectively:

"Well, it's about household chores. If I am also working and must take care of cooking, cleaning, and everything else, this question arises: How much energy will I have, how much time will I have to do both, and will I still have time for myself?"

"I think it's exactly about balancing plans. I have two young children, and when both of them were at home most of the time, there was a very strong pressure on me to divide my time very well between work and family life."

"The idea that I have to fulfil both work obligations and household chores, children."

Based on the interviews, it can be observed that most women identified more with the role of a mother than an employee during the daytime. They prioritised caring for their children, who were often very young, and the level of dependency on the mother was relatively high. Thus, this confirms what the mentioned studies have identified, namely that mothers sacrificed their working time to take care of children and household tasks (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Craig & Brown, 2017; Sevilla et al., 2020).

The fragmentation of daily routines

When the actual working hours ended and women became wives and mothers, the opposite happened; they became employees who worked at night to make up for the time during the day

when they had to give up their status as employees to become mothers. In terms of describing how remote work looked during that period, women generally said that the work period was intertwined with the period during which they had to take care of their children:

> *"With much interference... I was teaching with the doors closed; the kids were crying; it was very hard. It was very complicated to explain to a 3-year-old, 'Mommy needs to spend 2 hours in an office teaching, and you can't come in.' Theoretically, he understood, but there was an immediate need, and he would burst in during the class. […] was extremely hard, especially because this 8-hour work interval wasn't just 8 hours of work, not even consecutive, with a little break; they were very fragmented, working in pieces, always adapted to the kids' schedule."*

> *"I'm lucky to have children who are quite understanding; I'm okay because even if I'm interrupted, I usually get back into the task quite easily. My problem was that, with interruptions like making them food and attending to them, my work schedule was extended into the night. When the children went to bed, I still had some work to finish because I couldn't fit it all in.*

> *"In the first part of the day, being with the little one for kindergarten and speech therapy, I really adjusted my activities to his schedule. And after finishing activities with him, only then could I resume my work, and I stayed up later in the evening."*

> *"I worked at the Red Cross, and somehow I was on the front line, but from home and the workload was extremely heavy. The actual work would start at 6 am and finish at 12 midnight with very short breaks. My husband worked, also being on the front line, and then I was alone with the baby and working at the same time. For me, it was extremely stressful, exhausting, frustrating".*

Women who worked from home overlapped their work schedule with childcare duties, meaning they adjusted their work hours according to their children's schedules. This led to women working in the evening or overtime, as they may not be able to complete all their work during the day while also caring for their children. Women also reported that they had many interruptions in their working hours due to childcare duties, which resulted in women not being able to finish all their work that day and needing to continue working in the evening after the children went to bed. Thus, working from home during the pandemic meant that women experienced a fragmented, prolonged evening work schedule, where some women felt stressed, tired and frustrated because they had to balance their work and childcare tasks.

Childcare duties also caused many interruptions, resulting in fragmented working time. As a result, the experience of working from home is closely tied to the family context, with children playing a major role in the working routine. Women interviewed declared that they faced interference between their work and family life. Specifically, respondents reported the occurrence of situations where work tasks interfere with their family life and vice versa. This interference is predominantly felt due to the shared space and time in which both activities are carried out. The co-existence of work and family in the same space and time leads to the previous overlap, which can have negative implications for women, such as increased stress and decreased productivity:

"Yes, family life did intervene. I couldn't work on weekends because I had children to take care of, so it was impossible. But there were indeed Saturday evenings when I was working after putting the children to bed."

"Yes, there were moments when the children might cry; maybe they were sleepy, or grandma couldn't put them to bed. You had to stop your work, and often, you might have had meetings that needed to be postponed or rescheduled because sometimes the little one throws a fit, and you can't just put it 'on hold,' the need of a small child is paramount."

"Yes, there was interference between work and family because I had to do everything in the same space and simultaneously. There were moments when I was working, and the children were at home, and I had to detach myself a bit […] I couldn't detach completely because they were toddlers; I still had to keep an ear out for them to make sure nothing went wrong."

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders have blurred the lines between work and family life. The usual boundaries between these two aspects of life have been erased, forcing women to juggle household chores, childcare, and work tasks simultaneously. This has resulted in an overwhelming burden on women, who must complete these additional tasks on top of their regular work responsibilities.

Care, responsibility and guilt as normative standards

Two tendencies were observed during the interviews regarding how the women coped with housework and childcare. For some of the women interviewed, sharing these tasks with their husbands was possible. At the same time, this was not possible for others because the amount of work for the job was too much and housework and children were put on the secondary plan, making these women feel guilty regarding their family and children. From the structure of the interviews, care, responsibility and guilt emerge as normative standards:

"I felt overwhelmed at one point because I didn't have any time to cook, for example. I mean, I started to feel guilty because I'd put some chores on the second plan."

"We tried to share the domestic chores as much as we could [...]. Regarding childcare, the options were either one parent taking one child and the other parent taking the other child or one parent looking after both children. My husband would cook, or sometimes I would ask him to sit and play with the kids while I cooked."

"The cleaning lady couldn't come, so we did more cleaning, but we shared the cleaning tasks. I also prepared food when needed… Well, my husband also makes cookies, so he used to make cookies, and I used to cook food."

"When the kids were at home, and the schools were closed, it was much more difficult to get work done and take care of the house and the children. They would constantly ask me to play with them and engage in various activities. However, when they are in kindergarten, things are a bit easier."

"I didn't do very well as a mom. I mostly fed my child sandwiches and occasionally managed to make a soup or healthy meal. I left my child alone a lot with the phone, the TV, and similar things. I couldn't cope and, in a way, I sacrificed my child..."

For example, care regarding children is maintained by organizing a schedule in which parents take turns supervising the children so that they can also take care of tasks at work. In other situations, care is more difficult to maintain when only the mother is responsible for the children because the father is not at home. In some cases, the responsibility for household chores may have been shared between the partners, while in others it fell to the women's shoulders who either had difficulty or failed to take care of them, leading to feelings of guilt, especially in the case of the woman who confesses that work caused her to neglect her child and be unable to look after him or her properly. As another study describes, women in normal circumstances are more likely to feel guilty about work-family balance. This guilt arises from feeling inadequate in various situations, such as not spending enough time with their children, despite always being busy (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

In this instance, the significance of schools and kindergartens in helping parents manage their work schedules when their children are away is highlighted. This is in comparison to when children stay at home and parents, especially mothers, have to juggle both work and childcare, which can be demanding and make it difficult for them to work.

The subjective feeling of uncertainty and emotional overwhelm

Regarding how the women felt in relation to housework and childcare chores, they declared that they felt overwhelmed, which means that there was a large number of tasks that came from this area of family life that burdened the women both physically and mentally:

"I had moments when I felt extremely overwhelmed with everything that was coming at me [...] They were screaming; they were crying; you couldn't get them to sleep, it was difficult to get them both to sleep at the same time. Most of the time in the evenings, even though I planned to work, I often couldn't do it, I often fell asleep with them in bed."

As can be seen from the previous responses, it was the childcare tasks that made one of the women interviewed feel overwhelmed, as she had two young children who required extra attention due to their young age and the dependency they had on their parents. Women had to do a lot of emotional labour, which made them feel overwhelmed, tired and frustrated because they had to provide comfort and comfort to their families all the time (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

The heavy assumption of motherhood is also evident in the situation, as women working from home often find it difficult to detach themselves entirely from their role as mothers, as in the following excerpt: "I couldn't detach completely because they were toddlers; I still had to keep an ear out for them, to make sure nothing went wrong". This invasion of psychological boundaries makes it challenging for women to navigate the different roles they play throughout the day, leading to a constant role conflict between being a mother and being an employee.

In other cases, women reported that they found it difficult to cope because they were left alone with the children and household chores because the husband was away at work or had a lot of work to do, but was also at home. Even though the women also worked, the household chores implicitly fell to them, as they were the only ones who could take care of

them, which meant that they had to take care of double the number of tasks, alone, which explains the feeling of overwhelm and the difficulties they experienced:

"There were times when it was really hard for me, because my husband works a lot, from morning till night, which meant that everything that involved the household chores fell on my shoulders, and it wasn't easy."

Women keenly feel the experience of overlapping professional and family life during the pandemic period. The fact that they were required to fulfil their roles as employees and parents within the same context made accomplishing these tasks difficult due to the overlap of the two domains. This entire situation has caused women to feel worried and fearful and to question whether they will indeed be able to cope with this new challenge. From a phenomenological perspective, their time container has been overloaded with new activities that need to be carried out, jeopardising the maintenance of balance between the professional and family domains. Even though the tasks have doubled, the time available to execute them remains the same. Women have reported that household tasks were distributed, but they still ended up doing more work due to their role as the primary caregiver and homemaker:

"I shared some tasks, but overall, I ended up with more, so to speak. I'm aware that I had more, but there was also an implicit part, me being at home, he couldn't do them."

"Well, the chores are divided very simply with my husband who is always away from home, so most of them fall on me. He takes care of very few purchases that are not easy for me online or around the house, and that's all, the rest is on me because I'm at home."

"I've taken on more than I had before."

Therefore, gender inequalities are created and recreated through the practice of household work in the pandemic context, giving rise to subtle forms of inequalities that predominantly affect women in terms of household chores. Another study (Carlson et al., 2022) has identified that in the pandemic context, individuals tended to believe that the new household chores that arise should fall on women because of specific gender conventions whereby women carry out household tasks.

The construction of the gendered self in defining the lived world

Women identify themselves through the multitude of statuses they possess, including being a wife, a mother, an employee, and so on:

"More of a homemaker than someone with a job."

"Like a woman who managed. Women who stay at home know how much they have to do and are pulled in all directions, and it's hard, and for that reason, I call them heroines, and that's my opinion about women who work from home."

"Multilaterally developed. I discovered in myself some qualities I had no idea about. So practically, you're an employee, you're a mother and a wife, you also do shopping, you cook."

"You know that picture of the woman with many hands who does everything, that's me. The one who, at the same time, thinks, organises, talks, and does. The octopus mom."

Additionally, some women identify more with the status of a homemaker than an employee, indicating that they have dedicated more of their time to household chores than to work-related tasks. Previous studies have noted this, which found that women felt more like homemakers, similar to the conditions of the 1950s, because they were the ones primarily responsible for household chores while their husbands were at work (Craig, 2020).

Furthermore, other respondents describe themselves as "multilaterally developed" because they have so many tasks to fulfil. Women describe themselves through the lens of the multiple activities they undertook while working from home. The workplace and the roles of mother, wife, and homemaker determine how women describe themselves.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of the study reveal that the experience of being a woman working from home entails a role conflict due to the overlap of the employee status with the role of mother, where women are challenged to manage both work tasks and household and childcare duties. Additionally, during that period, women have felt more like mothers than employees, prioritising their dependent toddlers. These findings confirm what previous studies have indicated, namely that mothers have sacrificed their work time to take care of children and household chores (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Sevilla et al., 2020).

Therefore, women make sense of working from home by intertwining the two spheres of professional and family life, where there are numerous interruptions due to children's needs and household chores. Regarding the distribution of household chores between spouses, women have reported that there was an attempt to distribute tasks, but ultimately, they ended up doing more work, as they were the ones staying at home. Consequently, gender inequalities are created and reinforced through the practice of working from home in the pandemic context, giving rise to subtle forms of inequalities that prevail, especially in household tasks, which largely remain the responsibility of women. As identified by previous studies (Carlson et al., 2022) in the pandemic context, individuals may tend to believe that newly arising household chores fall to women because they follow gender-specific conventions that household chores are performed by women. Even in the case of couples who discard these gendered divisions of domestic work, they often still rely on hegemonic gendered conventions in times of uncertainty or when equality is hard to achieve (Carlson et al., 2022).

From the point of view of the construction of the gendered self, women described themselves through the lens of the multiple activities they undertook while working from home. Both work and being a mother, as well as being a wife and housewife lead women to use them in their self-descriptions. Therefore, women identify themselves by the multitude of statuses they possess, namely that of being a wife and a mother, an employee, etc.

The relevance of this study lies in its ability to offer a portrait of women working from home during the pandemic in a context where few qualitative studies have explored this subject, as most research has focused on quantitative analysis. Additionally, this study is relevant because it confirms previous studies regarding working from home during the pandemic, but from a qualitative perspective.

Therefore, during crises like economic downturns or health emergencies such as COVID-19, women's unpaid work intensifies, including caregiving, household chores, and

emotional support. To address this, policies should recognise and value unpaid caregiving work through social benefits and financial support, such as caregiving allowances, tax credits, and pension credits for caregiving periods. Moreover, public awareness campaigns can help shift societal perceptions to appreciate these roles. Also, creating supportive work environments with flexible work arrangements, remote work options, and employer-supported childcare services is crucial. Encouraging employers to offer on-site childcare or subsidies can help working parents. Gender-equitable policies, such as substantial paternity leave and programs promoting shared caregiving responsibilities, can encourage a more balanced division of tasks at home. Also, community and government support are essential, including increased funding for affordable and accessible childcare services, flexible options, and mental health resources for caregivers. Thus, collaboration among government agencies, employers, civil society organisations, and families is crucial for effective policymaking. Public-private partnerships can support families by leveraging resources and expertise.

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