

A positive side effect of the pandemic?

Teleworking and gender equality in the future

1 February 2021



Social scientists have long recognized that access to flexible work arrangements is a major contributor to gender equality [1], and telework is a way to provide the flexibility needed by parents, provided concurrent gender discrimination causes are prevented, as defined by the European Framework Agreement. [2]

We have seen telework unexpectedly increased by the pandemic in the past months. As of 2019, only 5.4% of employed in the EU-27 usually worked from home – a share that remained rather constant since 2009. Estimates from Eurofound suggest that close to 40% of those working in the EU began to telework fulltime as a result of COVID-19. [3] This trend will most probably stay in the future, even if not in such great numbers. Consequently, the negative impact of some aspects of telework have also grown, particularly some forms of discrimination for women (and, indirectly, for their children). They should be confronted and compensated, to avoid the pandemic and its aftermath bring more gender inequality to vast sectors of society.

As a Federation of more than 250 Family Enrichment Centers that operates in 70 countries and benefits over 90,000 people annually, we confirm the urgent need of advocating for it, according to the following guidelines:

The Portuguese Presidency of the European Council has asked the Economic and Social Committee to prepare an exploratory opinion on 'Teleworking and gender equality - conditions so that teleworking does not exacerbate the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men and for it to be an engine for promoting gender equality'.

This paper includes the contribution of IFFD to the opinion, as part of a selection of social partners and civil society organisations that will feed in to its preparation, together with other texts that explain how telework has impacted the situation of telework and its future perspectives.

IFFD Contribution to the EESC Opinion on Teleworking and Gender Equality, 5 January 2021.

*Original available at:
<https://familyperspective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021eescptw.pdf>*

How could telework patterns develop after the COVID-19 crisis? *

With the outbreak of the pandemic, telework has reached a tipping point as more and more companies and institutions have introduced this work arrangement in an effort to keep their employees safe, while ensuring the continued delivery of critical services. Yet, given the large differences in prior experience with telework and other factors discussed in this brief, the transition to telework may have been more challenging for some workers, employers and EU countries than for others. Furthermore, the fact that in several EU countries more than half of those who are currently teleworking had no prior experience, arguably makes the transition even more difficult. This has important implications on employment, firms' productivity, and workers' well-being, at least in the short- to medium-term.

Ultimately, the spread of telework in the longer-term will depend on a broad range of factors, including its effect on productivity and working conditions, as well as its contribution to broader policy objectives such as Europe's digital and green transitions. Evidence suggests that in normal times people working from home can sustain, or even enhance, their productivity, while enjoying a better work-life balance.

Yet, under the current exceptional circumstances productivity, working conditions, or both, may be deteriorating for many workers due to, among other problems, lack of childcare, unsuitable working spaces and ICT tools. Policies to support the transition to more widespread remote work will need to carefully consider the potential benefits and costs for productivity, job quality, and workers' work-life balance and mental health.

Meanwhile, as stressed by the Commission in the communication on the 2020 country specific recommendations, the benefits of telework may not be available to the unskilled or untrained. Against this backdrop, continued income support measures remain crucial to protect the livelihoods of these workers. Yet, to the extent the effects of the current crisis will endure in the longer-term, policies aimed at retraining and upskilling EU workers will also be important to ensure life-long employability of the EU workforce and facilitate workers transitions across industries.

* EU's science and knowledge service – Joint Research Center, 'Telework in the EU before and after the COVID-19: where we were, where we head to', 2020.

1. Work arrangements

Eurostat data shows that the gender pay gap in the EU stands at 14% and has only changed minimally over the last decade. It means that women earn 14% on average less per hour than men. [4]

In response to COVID-19, a number of countries have adopted far-reaching measures to contain losses in jobs and income. [5] Those gains shouldn't be reversed after the pandemic – on the contrary, they should be consolidated and further developed.

2. Access

Access to the Internet is needed for telework, but it is no longer just a yes/no question. The quality of families' connections, and the kinds and capabilities of devices they can access, have considerable consequences for parents and children alike.

Cost remains the primary explanation for why families are less connected than they would like to be – or why they are not connected at all. But it is also important to explore why families with limited discretionary income prioritize purchasing digital devices. We find that many lower-income families are making the most of whatever forms of connectivity they can afford. [6]

Workers should not incur additional costs when performing their work from their homes. They are also entitled to obtain equipment and tools from their employer that allow them to work as if they were at their regular workplace, without negative consequences on their performance, effectiveness, and wellbeing. Therefore, in order to achieve a similar level of productivity as in the office, the employer needs to ensure that teleworkers have access to the technology and tools that they would otherwise be using if they were at the workplace. A continuous dialogue between the employer and the employees is vital to detect any difficulties with the tools and for the workers to come forward with their specific needs, in terms of ICT equipment and software as well as related training. [7]

3. Housework

The UN Sustainable Development Agenda promotes to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate." [8]

Evidence shows that care jobs are often characterized by temporary or zero-hours contracts, low salaries, work overload and long hours. The care pay penalty is more pronounced for women, in particular in the occupations in which they predominate, such as nursing. [9] Lower pay also undermines the capacity of care workers to obtain care for their family members, thus adding to their overall care responsibilities.

Women are generally more involved in these activities. On average, Eurofound reports them spending 35 hours per week caring for children or grandchildren (compared to 25 hours per week for men) and 18 hours per week doing housework (12 hours per week for men). The difference between men and women in terms of participation in childcare and housework increases even more among those who have children aged under 12. On average, women spent 62 hours per week caring for children (compared to 36 hours for men) and 23 hours per week doing housework (15 hours for men). Single parents, both male and female, spent longer hours than average on childcare and female single parents with children under 12 spent the longest hours of all groups (77 hours per week). [10]

4. Children

The Council of the European Union has recently agreed that “public policies should be designed in order to create the conditions, inter-alia the economic environment, enabling individuals and families to have the children they wish and to enjoy a better quality of life, live in safety and achieve balance between work, family and caring responsibilities.” [11]

The main differences between those with and without small children are in relation to concentration levels and juggling time between work and family. According to Eurofound, 34% of those with children under 12 feel that their job prevents them giving time to the family. Regarding employment status, working women with children under 12 in the household spent 54 hours per week on childcare, compared with 32 hours for men). In terms of housework, women spent more time than men on this, both when they were in employment (16 hours compared to 11 hours), or when they were unemployed or inactive (20 hours compared to 12 hours for men). [12]

To compensate for these differences, comprehensive well-resourced and flexible parental leave entitlements, part-time working arrangements according to parental choice by ensuring non-discriminatory practices towards parents should be established. Parental leaves should be preferred to paid leave for mothers, to avoid possible gender discrimination in the staff selection process, making sure its duration and remuneration are adequate.

Breastfeeding is another need for mothers that shouldn't be neglected. According to UNICEF, only 39 percent of businesses offer any support for breastfeeding, usually in the form of breaks, and more comprehensive programs to support lactating mothers are absent. UNICEF and the World Health Organization recommend exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months after childbirth. [13]

Business employers and labour unions should also work together with governments to ensure safe working conditions for pregnant women and their children, minimize shift work and long, unpredictable working hours of parents with young children, and introduce flexible work arrangements to enable parents to take care of their children. [14]

The future of teleworking post-COVID-19 *

The full impact of COVID-19 on labour markets remains to be determined. However, it is likely that rates of telework will remain significantly higher than they were prior to the onset of the pandemic. Governments and social partners will have to plan for several different scenarios, in which restrictions will be increased or eased according to how the epidemic is advancing or receding on their territory and prepare for teleworking arrangements to once again become generalised on short notice.

During the next, highly uncertain period, workers, employers, and governments will have to adapt to a new way of living and working, which will require new behaviours and new norms. It most likely will involve a hybrid or blended form of isolation (i.e., teleworking) and deconfinement (i.e., the possibility to use the workplace but with controlled conditions based on physical distancing).

Government-mandated lockdowns and mass teleworking were initiated in an emergency situation in many countries, and social partners were often not involved in the negotiation or design of teleworking arrangements, with the exception of a few countries where these processes are deeply embedded in existing organizations at all levels, such as Germany and the Nordic countries. Going forward, it will be imperative to ensure that social partners play a central role in drawing out the lessons learned from the first two phases of the initial pandemic response and workers transitioning from office-based work to teleworking, and to apply these lessons to revise existing or initiate new teleworking policies.

Early-stage research and surveys have found that a very high percentage of workers would like to telework more frequently—even after physical distancing restrictions have been lifted. Additionally, some workers have now realized that their jobs can be performed outside of traditional office spaces, and are now also more comfortable using technology. Many leaders who previously were resistant to their teams working from home have experienced that it can be done and are supportive of workers teleworking more frequently. For example, one study of 1,000 SME owners and decision-makers in 19 cities across the UK reports that nearly one in three (29 per cent) SMEs plan to increase flexible working post-pandemic.

* ILO, 'Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond - A Practical Guide', 2020.

Policy context in Europe *

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is of unprecedented scope and magnitude, affecting the health and socioeconomic situation of millions of people across the globe. In the European Union, over 2.2 million people had contracted the virus by September 2020. The economic impact is equally grim. In July, the European Commission estimated that the European economy would contract by 8.3% in 2020. The prediction is that divergences between Member States will widen because of large differences in the scale of the impact of the pandemic and the extent of recoveries.

In response, the European Union and its Member States have introduced many measures to tackle the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. At the centre of the efforts lie measures that aim to rebuild national economies, safeguard jobs and promote social cohesion. On 27 May 2020, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced plans to borrow €750 billion to support recovery efforts in the EU. On 21 July, the Heads of State and Government of the 27 EU Member States reached agreement on the plan at a special European Council meeting (the longest European Council meeting ever). The plan is still subject to negotiations between the European Parliament and the EU Member States.

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of the equal right to social protection. Through the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), this right will be extended to all people, irrespective of their employment relationship, and

extends the same coverage rights to self-employed people. The crisis also shows the importance of income protection – the EU framework for national minimum wages is about to be introduced as part of the implementation of the EPSR. With many jobs gone (at least temporarily), the crisis also underscores the need for urgent action to tackle unemployment – especially youth unemployment.

The 'Living, working and COVID-19' e-survey provides an insight into the impact of the pandemic on people's lives. It helps to identify the areas of life and work most affected by the pandemic and provides data about both material and non-material aspects. The results will help policymakers understand where action is most needed in living and working conditions to bring about an equal recovery from the pandemic.

The findings of the e-survey from the first round reflected widespread emotional distress, financial worry and low levels of trust in institutions. Levels of concern abated somewhat in the second round, particularly among groups of respondents who were benefiting from support measures implemented during the pandemic. At the same time, the results underline stark differences between countries and between socioeconomic groups that point to growing inequalities.

The results confirm the upsurge in teleworking across all countries during the COVID-19 pandemic that has been documented elsewhere, and the report explores what this means for work–life balance and elements of job quality.

* Eurofound 'Living, working and COVID-19', 2020.

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- [1] Goldin C, How to Achieve Gender Equality, Milken Institute Review, 2015.
 - [2] "Telework, is a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis" (Article 2).
 - [3] Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.
 - [4] Eurostat, Gender Statistics Database, 2019.
 - [5] Cf. ILO brief, The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work, 2020.
 - [6] ILO, Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, 2020.
 - [7] ILO, Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, 2020.
 - [8] Target 5.4.
 - [9] ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture, 2018.
 - [10] Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.
 - [11] Conclusions on Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead, 2020.
 - [12] Eurofound, Living, working and COVID-19, 2020.
 - [13] UNICEF, Family-Friendly Policies - A Global Survey of Business Policy, 2020.
 - [14] UNICEF, Business and Family-Friendly Policies - An Evidence Brief, 2019.