



Remote Work and
Gender Inequality
Throughout and
Beyond the COVID-19
Pandemic

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Introduction

Not only is the COVID-19 pandemic an unprecedented stress test on our healthcare infrastructure, but on the way we value workers, and on the way we work.¹ The ability to work remotely is, at the best of times, a privilege not afforded to many. According to Statistics Canada census data from 2016, only 7.5 percent of workers usually worked at the same address as their home, with significant variation by occupation and industry.² The closure of schools and all non-essential businesses means that more people are working remotely than ever before. Within this context, we must attend to how gender inequality can be mitigated or intensified for those who are fortunate to work from home.

Characteristics of remote work

Remote work, as known as telework or telecommuting, is the ability to accomplish the work you get paid for outside of the office. For most people this means working at home, while for others it means working at coffee shops or shared office spaces, or splitting one's workday between locations in order to accommodate meetings. Remote work is one of a suite of flexible work arrangements offered by businesses to accommodate employees' schedules and encourage worker wellbeing and retention.

Eighty-six percent of companies in Canada offer at least one type of flexible work arrangement. Among these firms, over 50 percent provide the option to work remotely part-time (i.e., work from home for 1-3 days per week), or work remotely on an ad hoc basis.³ Under Federal Labour and Employment Legislation, there are measures in place for federally regulated employees to request flexible work arrangements after having

worked for the same employer for a period of six months. While employers must respond to requests for flexible work arrangements in writing within 30 days, they nevertheless maintain wide jurisdiction over the right to refuse such requests.

Benefits of remote work to employers include a perceived increase in productivity, higher rates of retention, strengthened organizational commitment, and improvements to employee performance.⁴ Other studies find that working remotely reduces the number of absences reported, and can help companies save on real estate costs.⁵ Remote work benefits employees by reducing the stress that comes with navigating and scheduling family obligations such as school pick-up and drop-off, and doctors' appointments. The benefits of having control over when and where one works extends to workers' families too; a recent study of low-income mothers found that when they gained flexibility in their work schedules, their children slept longer.⁶

Working remotely also enables people to avoid onerous commutes, which in turn saves money and helps reduce carbon emissions. Another hidden benefit of avoiding commutes is the potential reduction in the gender commuting gap. Because women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid household labour and childcare,⁷ they more frequently opt for shorter commutes that enable them to accommodate their "second shift."⁸ However, searching for work outside of large urban areas means women are choosing from a smaller pool of jobs that pay less well. The option to work remotely means that women can take on higher paying work in city centres while also avoiding lengthy commutes.⁹

Characteristics of remote workers

Research on gender and flexible work arrangements presents mixed results as to whether men or women more often work remotely. South of the border, historically women have been more likely to make use of flexible work arrangements,¹⁰ though this is changing as men are increasingly more involved in childcare.¹¹ In Canada the picture is less clear; early research on remote work suggests that men and women work at home in relatively equal numbers, though men who work remotely are more likely to be in professional and managerial roles, while women who work remotely are more likely to be in clerical roles. In addition, men remote workers have more leeway over their schedules, whereas women's requests for remote work are more often subject to their manager's approval.¹² In general, Canadian men have more autonomy and control over when and how they work remotely.

Remote work has long been held as a reasonable accommodation that employers must provide to employees with disabilities. For many who live with chronic pain, or who would otherwise face a gruelling, inaccessible commute, remote work is a necessity.¹³ People with disabilities likewise benefit from improvements in work-life balance when working from home.¹⁴

Remote work may also be beneficial for trans workers, who experience higher rates of violence and harassment than cisgender people.¹⁵ While it is not a solution to the violence and discrimination that trans people face, remote work may be an important intervention that enables trans individuals to earn a living under relatively safer working conditions.¹⁶

Barriers to work

The ideal worker standard

Despite the many benefits associated with the schedule flexibility that remote work offers, there are some notable disadvantages. When flexible work arrangements such as remote work are offered both formally and informally, penalties can be incurred to those who choose to go the formal route. A study documenting the use of formal versus informal flexible work policies found that women were more likely to make formal requests for flexible work accommodations, whereas men achieved their desired flexible work schedule informally. Men who downplayed their reliance on flexible accommodations by using them on an ad hoc basis and not reporting them received higher performance evaluations than women who made formal requests for flexible work arrangements.¹⁷

The negative repercussions stemming from the use of remote work policies has to do with enduring, widely-held cultural beliefs about what it means to be an "ideal worker."¹⁸ Since the 1940s, our understanding of what it means to be an ideal worker has precluded consideration of responsibilities outside of work that place constraints on the amount of time individuals can dedicate to their job.¹⁹ The definition of an ideal worker as someone who can work long hours and avoid distractions outside of paid work is masculinized; historically, it is men who were able to eschew household responsibilities in favor of logging long hours in paid work.²⁰ Those working remotely deviate from ideal worker standards by making space for non-work related obligations. When women work remotely, employers view them through the lens of motherhood, which can prompt status inequalities. This is because in general, working mothers are perceived as less competent and less committed to their work by employers and managers.²¹

Our masculinized understanding of what it means to be an ideal worker hurts men, too. Men, and especially fathers, are increasingly more involved at home.²² Because they are held up as the prototypical ideal worker, men's deviation from this unrealistic ideal can have more consequences than women's. Men's requests for flexible accommodations are often met with derision and career penalties such as harassment and mistreatment, reduced pay, demotions, and poor job evaluations.²³

Work design

Work design also poses a challenge for remote workers.²⁴ In order to save on real estate costs and foster innovation, many companies are transitioning away from assigned cubicles and towards unassigned seating in open-concept workspaces.²⁵ The drive for collaborative innovation puts pressure on employees to work onsite, and within the past five years, major companies such as Yahoo, Best Buy and IBM have scaled back or cancelled their policies on working from home.²⁶

A recent study finds that a Silicon Valley-inspired work design called agile methodology – where people from different divisions are seated at the same table, and white boards are used for communicating in lieu of written documentation – likewise motivates a work culture where individual needs for schedule flexibility are subordinated to the needs of the team. Consequently, rates of remote work usage plummet in agile work settings. The failure of agile work design to accommodate the structural constraints that trail caregivers – and mothers in particular – into the workplace may hinder their occupational growth and wellbeing.²⁷ This unintended consequence is important to recognize in light of the fact that the agile trend is on an upswing; while there are no official statistics on growth of agile in Canada, McKinsey surveyed 2500 American companies and found that 74% of firms were prioritizing the transition to agile, and 40% of firms had already

begun transitioning divisions to work under the agile system.²⁸

Is COVID-19 ameliorating or aggravating views of remote work?

Even those who fiercely resist remote work are compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic to work at home. What this means for our long-term acceptance of remote work remains to be seen. We can imagine the COVID-19 pandemic intensifying pre-existing dispositions towards remote work for better and for worse.

Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Easier to handle non-work obligations	Simultaneous childcare provision
Enables work-life integration	Prevents work-life segmentation
No commute	Social isolation

Those with young children who are new to remote work are experiencing a skewed version of working at home. Whereas most remote workers report increases in productivity when working from home,²⁹ throughout the COVID-19 pandemic parents with young children are barely muddling through. Home life is more disheveled than usual as parents attempt to keep their children entertained while also managing their concerns about food provision, on top of the other chores required to make households run smoothly. Working remotely under these conditions is not the norm. However, for parents experiencing remote work for the first time, the additional stressors wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic may permanently leave a bad impression.

Some people prefer to keep work and life firmly segmented.³⁰ Individuals predisposed towards work-life segmentation may find remote working conditions difficult, as it becomes harder to separate the domain of work from the domain of family. For these people, this negative spillover can produce even more strain, and may hamper their wellbeing.³¹

Extroverts may find it challenging to work remotely, removed from water cooler talk and co-worker interaction. For those who crave social interaction, working in an isolated environment may impair their mental health.³² At a time when more fulfilling forms of physical interaction are curtailed, such as meeting up with friends, attending a concert, or playing team sports, working from home may be a bleaker experience for extroverts when compared to working remotely under normal conditions.

On the flip side, many remote workers may be experiencing gratitude for their ability to continue paid work throughout such unprecedented conditions. And those new to remote work may likewise find that they are better able to manage non-work obligations, such as being home to receive deliveries or accommodating grocery pick-ups.

Some people enjoy integrating paid and unpaid work obligations. Research finds that this is especially the case for millennials, as well as those accustomed to non-standard forms of work.³³ Indeed, for many individuals, integrating work and life is not a choice but an imposition wrought by broader labour market dynamics, including decreasing rates of long-term salaried employment.³⁴ For many people, working a 9-to-5 job in a large office and having strict work-life segmentation is a foreign concept. Whether it's perceived as a welcome lifestyle or not, those who are accustomed to integrating work and non-work life may be better able to cope with remote work under the COVID-19 physical distancing measures.

Finally, many people are, for the first time, enjoying savings on time and money from the lack of commute. Saving money on gas and car maintenance may provide much needed relieve for individuals and families at a time when COVID-19 is having wide-ranging repercussions on job security and earnings. In addition, major urban centres have seen improvements in air quality. According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, the lockdown in China cut the country's carbon emissions by 25 percent, due to the reduction in coal burning, oil refining, and airline traffic.³⁵

Is COVID-19 the great equalizer or intensifier of gender inequality among remote workers?

Beyond this range of negative and positive views on remote work is the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic might affect the gendered allocation of paid/unpaid work. Canadian women and young workers have been hardest hit by the economic downturn prompted by the pandemic. Statistics Canada reports that women between 25 and 54 have lost more than twice the number of jobs as men in the same age group.³⁶ This means that women who would otherwise be engaged in paid work are now at home full-time, and likely taking on the majority of childcare and household labour. This may result in setbacks for women even when they return to work; research on the effect of employment gaps on the division of household labour indicates that the longer the duration of their employment interruption, the more likely mothers are to perform additional housework.³⁷

On the other hand, if physical distancing measures continue for the foreseeable future, but schools remain closed, a different outcome may emerge.

Because Canadian men tend to have more autonomy over how and where they work, we may see more men working remotely and increasing their share of childcare in the event that their spouse has more rigid limitations on their work location. This is particularly the case for families with a spouse working in healthcare, since the vast majority of nurses in Canada are women.³⁸ Men married to nurses and other healthcare workers (regardless of their gender) are obligated to take on more unpaid household labour; essential frontline workers beget essential childcare and household workers. Evidence suggests that men's exposure to increased shares of childcare and household labour during paternity leave can have long-lasting effects on gender roles and the division of labour.³⁹ It is possible that men's increasing shares of remote work and childcare throughout the COVID-19 pandemic may similarly have long-term effects on a more equitable division of labour.

Policy recommendations

Once we manage to mitigate the spread of infection and better yet, a vaccine for COVID-19 is implemented, we as a society have the opportunity to preserve some of the unintended yet positive outcomes created by our collective physical distancing efforts. With regards to remote work, companies and policymakers may consider promoting the following ideas and practices:

- Remote work is not just for mothers. Fathers want and make use of remote work when it is offered and supported by management. Moreover, remote work is important for people with a variety of lived realities: those with disabilities, those with eldercare responsibilities, those facing long commutes, those with volunteer duties, and those with animal care responsibilities. Companies can ensure that remote work is promoted as

a practice *designed for everyone*. Once remote work is promoted across the board, it may normalize the practice and remove the stigma associated with it.

- Research suggests that a lack of managerial support and training is a hindrance to working remotely.⁴⁰ Managers have not had the occasion to confront any biases they harbour regarding remote work, which in turn makes employees hesitant to request flexible work arrangements. *Managerial training regarding the benefits of flexible work arrangements* may be a key intervention. Training might include teaching middle management that those who work remotely are also ambitious, as well as encouraging high-performing senior management to be more vocal about their use of flexible work arrangements. This will convey to junior staff that it is acceptable to accommodate personal obligations.
- Given the increasing prevalence of agile and collaborative work environments, where co-location is important, management can explore what changes can be made to systems and procedures to *facilitate the use of flex time and remote work*. This might include more investment in video conferencing, and ensuring that daily meetings are taking place at times that are convenient for the entire team.
- Accommodating work-life balance does not begin and end in HR departments; it includes *considering the need for work-life balance throughout the work design process*. If remote work policies are siloed from other aspects of organizational processes and practices, companies may end up reinforcing or even amplifying gender disparities.

- Currently, the [Canada Revenue Agency](#) allows employees to claim home office expenses even if a work office is provided, as long as the employer signs and certifies Form T2200, Declaration of Conditions of Employment. With so many additional people working remotely, the *CRA may want to consider temporarily lifting some of the certification measures, and streamlining the process* by which individuals can claim home office expenses over the long term.
- Many Canadians struggle to afford Internet access at home. This effectively rules out remote work as an option for individuals with low incomes. The federal government can consider extending its [Connecting Families](#) initiative by *increasing income thresholds, and including households with and without children*.⁴¹

Conclusion

Social scientists have long recognized that lack of access to flexible work arrangements is a major contributor to gender inequality.⁴² The failure by companies to support the use of flexible work arrangements may deter women from applying to well-paid positions and prevent

men from contributing their fair share of work at home. While the glass ceiling that prevents women from advancing in the workplace is upheld by scaffolding located in the household, the glass ceiling that prevents men from taking on more responsibilities in the household is upheld by scaffolding located in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has unsettled this workplace scaffolding. Companies that have been forced to accommodate remote work through policy changes and improvements in communication technologies may find that their employees are reluctant to revoke their newfound flexibility once the pandemic subsides.⁴³

If the pandemic does enable more people (and men in particular) to work remotely over the long term, we need to acknowledge that any equitable improvements to the division of household labour are accruing to those who are already privileged (i.e., those who are in positions to conduct their work from home).⁴⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that essential workers are not and cannot be treated as expendable. They also deserve to benefit from having more schedule control, and future research and policy must focus on how a variety of employment arrangements can be designed to accommodate non-work obligations.

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