

## What Does Work-From-Home Mean for Women?

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*There has been near-universal adoption of work-from-home in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Does this shift have similar implications for men and women? What does work-from-home mean for different categories of women, and what are the implications of this shift in terms of class, nature of work, location of work, and degrees of informality?*

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdowns have resulted in seismic shifts in virtually all aspects of work and life, everywhere in the world. It is clear that these shifts will either stay for the entire duration of the pandemic (that is, till a vaccine is found and scaled up), or will be invoked frequently, as countries go through repeated cycles of spikes in the pandemic, followed by lockdowns, then relaxations, followed by the next spike, and so forth.

One of these shifts is a near-universal adoption of work-from-home (WFH) for large segments of the working population fortunate enough to continue to have paid jobs. As the workplace enters the home, does it have similar implications for men and women? Do the gendered implications of WFH vary by income class and/or by nature of work, as well as by the degree of formality/informality of work? How does the movement of paid work—previously outside—into the home interact with unpaid work, which was always inside? I engage with these questions mainly in the Indian context, but with references to international evidence.

However, for a discussion of these issues in the context of developing countries such as India to be comprehensive to include all categories of women, not just middle-class professionals, we have to integrate this discussion with several other dimensions of women's work, and broaden the scope of "work from home." I start with a discussion of pre-existing work arrangements and how these might be impacted by COVID-19, and then move to the new shift to working from home.

Since the discussions on WFH focus on the difficulties of combining work (paid, professional work) with domestic chores and childcare (unpaid domestic work), it is worthwhile to take a moment to revisit the connections between unpaid work and domestic chores.

## **Is Unpaid Work the Same as Domestic Chores?**

Yes and no. In developed countries, the term "work" implicitly refers to paid work, in contrast to unpaid work, which comprises domestic chores (like cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes, laundry, house maintenance, shopping for everyday needs, caring for children and the elderly). Because the large set of activities that comprise unpaid work are tasks related to daily living, any suggestion that puts a monetary value to this work is seen as both outrageous and impractical.

Yet, because these tasks (termed "reproductive labour" by feminist economists) disproportionately fall on women, the implications of engaging with unpaid work inside the home are vastly different for men and women. For women, these engagements invoke a labour market penalty in terms of hiring, lower wages and perceived competence, in contrast to men who are rewarded at similar stages of their lives. For example, married men earn more than unmarried men, or the birth of a child is found to increase male wages (Correll et al 2007). The motherhood penalty is estimated to cost American women \$16,000 per year in lost wages (Fox 2019).

Feminists argue that while the gamut of reproductive tasks is needed for societies to function smoothly and for the next generation of the labour force to be born and nurtured, the costs of this social need are borne by women.[1] It has been estimated that in 2019, the imputed value of this unpaid reproductive work by women was equivalent of \$10.9 trillion, which is more than the earnings of the top 50 firms in the world in 2018 (Wezerek and Ghodsee 2020). The monetary imputation is useful to understand the sheer magnitude of unpaid work.

In developing countries, unpaid work consists of the full range of reproductive labour as above, but in addition, also of economic or "productive" work that is unpaid. What is economic or productive work? This is work which is counted in the production boundary of the System of National Accounts (SNA), or simply counted in the calculation of GDP, or even more simply, is counted as "work" when a man is doing it. Women who are engaged in unpaid productive work (that is, work routinely recognised as work, distinct from domestic chores and care responsibilities) are typically working on family enterprises: on family

farms, in rearing livestock or poultry, in making commodities for sale in the market, in family-owned shops or workshops, on fruit orchards, and so forth. These are economic livelihood-generating activities for the family, which women participate in and contribute to, but are not paid or even recognised as workers. One useful way to think about this is if someone from outside the family was hired for this work, they would be paid.

## **The Traditional WFH Unpaid Workers**

In developing countries like India, women engaged in unpaid economic work have always been “working from home” because, typically, family enterprises are either literally inside the home or very close to it. These women are workers, but with no pay, no benefits and very often not recognised as workers. When they are asked “in addition to your regular domestic work, do you work?” their answer is often a “no” because they see their economic work as an extension of their domestic chores, and they internalise the low worth that society and families place upon the contribution of their labour.

I refer to them as workers in the “grey zone,” likely to not be counted, and therefore to remain outside the folds of the statistical system that counts workers, of governments and policymakers that formulate laws governing various aspects of work (wages/compensation, hours, benefits, safety nets, insurance, maternity or sick leave, etc) (Deshpande 2019).

Also, these archetypal WFH women will continue to work from home even when the pandemic ends to ensure that their family enterprises continue to survive.

## **The Traditional WFH Paid Workers**

In developing countries, there is another category of WFH workers who have been in existence for decades, underpaid, invisible, but often vital parts of domestic or global supply chains. These are the home-based workers. They are contracted by firms (multinational or domestic) or subcontractors on a piece-rate basis. In the garment industry, they are among the lowest category of workers, stitching sleeves, sewing buttons, trimming threads, and embroidering. Other examples of home-based work include food products (for example, rolling papads), bidi-making, assembling sticker bindi sheets, weaving, etc. It is estimated that their number is over 37 million (Dave 2017).

These women work from home, often because it is easier for them to manage their domestic responsibilities with paid work, even with paltry payments and no other form of protection. Often, this is the only type of paid work available in rural or peri-urban areas.

How will the pandemic affect these workers? Given the severe reduction in economic activity, these workers will find it very hard to get work and maintain their meagre earnings. Already, there are reports of how the two massive negative shocks of demonetisation and a change in the goods and services tax (GST) regime impacted their work negatively, because of a generalised lowering of gross domestic product (GDP) growth

and a depression of demand (Dave 2017). The pandemic-induced recession will make it even harder for them to get work, especially if the larger firms they work for go under.

## **The New WFH Workers**

We now come to the pandemic and lockdown induced WFH workers. These are workers in the formal sector who work in corporate or government offices, in the media, in educational establishments, in retail, transport, financial sectors and so on.

The evidence from India of the actual gendered repercussions of shifting to WFH is yet to be seen. South Asia, India and Pakistan, in particular, have a hand among the most unequal norms of sharing domestic chores and housework (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019). Will the WFH regime, where middle-class families have to manage without helpers, propel men to share the domestic work burden more equitably than they have done in the past? Will the pandemic shift the social norms of sharing of domestic work? Only time will tell.

While there is no empirical evidence on the sharing of domestic work from India yet, there is some evidence from the United States (US). A survey of 2200 adults, conducted between 9 and 10 April 2020 in the US, finds that even though both fathers and mothers are doing more housework during lockdown than they did earlier, the burden is not shared equally. Interestingly, 70% women say that they are fully or primarily responsible for housework, and 66% women say that they are primarily responsible for childcare, and these proportions are similar to the proportions in normal times. In other words, housework and childcare were disproportionately the woman's responsibility and that continues to be the case. This burden on women has not reduced because the father is also working from home.

Homeschooling is a new task which has been added to the usual childcare responsibilities due to school closures. Eighty percent of women surveyed believe that they are spending more time compared to their spouse on homeschooling children. Nearly 46% of men believe that they are spending more time on homeschooling, but only 3% women agree with this finding (Miller 2020). There is often a mismatch in male and female perceptions of who is contributing how much to domestic work. Yet, research shows that men overestimate their contributions to domestic work and women actually contribute more.

A crucial feature of the pandemic is the need for social and physical distancing, and this means that the usual support structures that parents could count on—neighbours, nannies/babysitters/childminders, playdates with peers, and visits to grandparents—are unavailable, which makes the pressure on the parents that much more severe. Will this lead to a change in social norms towards more equitable sharing of domestic work? This is the moot point.

In most societies, women take the primary responsibility for childcare and rearing. Evidence from other countries during earlier epidemics (H1N1, Ebola) reveals that school closures had differential effects on men and women. As their childcare burden increased, women's

labour force participation fell, either in the form of reduced hours or withdrawal from paid labour altogether. School closure has other direct costs related to pandemic control that are gendered (Johnson 2020). Front-line health workers tend to be predominantly women, or as in the case of India, exclusively women. If they have to take time off from work due to school closures and the need to take care of their children, it deprives the healthcare system of vital personnel needed for pandemic control (Minardi et al 2020).

## **Lockdown Means No Work for Many Workers**

There is a large number of workers, both men and women, for whom a closure of economic activity means no paid work. A whole range of informal jobs—whether directly in the informal sector or informal jobs in the formal sector—are threatened when economies shut down. Is there any evidence of this impact being gendered?

The impact of recessions on job losses is often gendered, but not necessarily in one direction. For instance, earlier recessions in the US (2007-2009) resulted in more job losses for men than women. However, there is a view that this time around, women are more likely to face the brunt of job losses because of the nature of businesses that are facing extended closure or possibly the threat of permanent closure (Alon et al 2020). Restaurants, hotels, large retail spaces like malls and department stores, entertainment centres on one end, and domestic work as maids, nannies, cleaners, etc, on the other end of the workspace are large scale employers of women.

## **Women's Work in India**

India has been witnessing a decline in labour force participation rates of women much before the pandemic. While supply side explanations of this decline dominate the research on this topic, in my view, the demand side explanations are more compelling. The pandemic is going to make a bad situation worse, as far as women's work is concerned. Front-line health workers in India (Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers) are exclusively women. They are poorly paid with very exacting work requirements. In addition to the glaring lack of personal protective equipment, there are reports about attacks on them as they go on their daily household survey to assess the spread of the disease (*Hindu* 2020; Mohanty 2020). This makes their work extremely hazardous, with no compensatory payments or protection.

Overall, therefore, the scenario for women workers looks bleak in the medium term, whether they were the classic WFH workers, or are currently working from home due to the pandemic. Going forward, we should use this crisis to overhaul the current system that prevents women from entering the workforce and when they do, by not rewarding them enough. We can do this by recognising the myriad facets of women's work, the need for adequate compensation, putting support structures in place that allow for an equitable sharing of domestic chores and care work, and most importantly, creating favourable opportunities for work and livelihoods within a conscious anti-discriminatory policy

framework. Hopefully, this will also pave the way for shifting gender norms within the home towards greater equality.

## End Notes:

[1] This prompted the work of several feminist economists, such as Nancy Folbre who wrote the book *Who Pays for the Kids?: Gender and the Structures of Constraint*, [https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Who\\_Pays\\_for\\_the\\_Kids.html?id=sQK...](https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Who_Pays_for_the_Kids.html?id=sQK...)

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