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We need to make sure telecommuting does not exacerbate gender disparity



Global authorities such as WHO and the International Labour Organization have proposed interventions to improve the telecommuting experience, such as establishing work–life boundary strategies, designing ergonomic remote workplaces, and maintaining regular social interactions.¹ However, the potential negative gendered consequences remain under-acknowledged. When women work from home, they report a disproportionate increase in domestic labour, childcare-related disruptions, and declines in productivity and mental health.² If not addressed, teleworking might exacerbate existing gender inequities in career advancement, health, and rights, among others, especially as global telecommuting rates continue to climb throughout 2022 and beyond.^{1,3,4}

In general, women are more likely to telecommute than men, both before^{5,6} and after the COVID-19 pandemic,^{3,7,8} and women are more likely to report mental health issues. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 62.3% of telecommuting women (vs 42.6% of telecommuting men) in the USA reported two or more new mental health issues after transitioning to remote work.⁹ These women reported more depression, loneliness, anxiety, and stress,^{2,10} and sharper declines in job satisfaction, engagement, efficiency, and work–life

balance, when compared with men.^{11,12} Additionally, women reported higher rates of fatigue than men, due to extra hours spent on unpaid labour (eg, housework, childcare, and eldercare).^{10,13} Because telecommuters are generally paid and promoted less than office workers,^{1,5,14} the increasing gender gap in telecommuting could exacerbate existing disparities in pay and promotion that women already experience relative to men, in turn negatively affecting women's health.^{15,16}

Intersectional factors including socioeconomic and partner employment status can heighten telecommuting-related gender inequity. For instance, mothers with lower earnings and fewer resources to hire domestic helpers, for example, experience steeper increases and heavier burdens of domestic labour⁸ and more health issues when compared with high-income mothers, due to their lower income buffer and job security.⁹ These consequences are exacerbated for single mothers, who bear substantially higher burdens of domestic labour than telecommuting single fathers and members of dual telecommuting couples.^{7,17}

All of this said, telecommuting can empower gender equity if used effectively.^{8,18} For instance, telecommuting can help women maintain their usual work hours after childbirth.¹⁸ Before the pandemic, mothers who worked

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remotely (typically in private sector jobs) experienced a smaller differential in paid labour hours compared with mothers who worked in person, due to their increased work flexibility. However, the negative gendered consequences (eg, asymmetry in domestic labour, childcare, and health outcomes) must be monitored and eliminated to ensure that telecommuting does not end up doing more harm than good. To this end, we suggest three organisational solutions.

First, when workplace flexibility practices and policies are developed such that they deliberately target traditionally undervalued groups (such as women, mothers, part-time employees, or people with disabilities), the practices and policies themselves become stigmatised—organisations can help to break down this bias by increasing men’s or other dominant group telecommuting rates. Organisations can attract more men to telecommuting by creating more hybrid and telecommuting jobs and encouraging people of all genders to apply. One reason men resist telecommuting is the belief that telecommuters have fewer opportunities for training and career advancement,^{4,19} so organisations must establish and protect high-quality advancement and training opportunities for employees to engage in during their usual work hours. For example, networking is crucial for creating career opportunities, so organisations must provide tailored and frequent networking opportunities for telecommuters, again during work hours.

Second, organisations must go beyond equality to equity, by providing tailored support to asymmetrically

affected employees, such as telecommuting single mothers. Telecommuting benefits organisations by reducing physical space needs and increasing productivity.³ Organisations could leverage these gains to establish more robust networks and funding for employees who are disproportionately disadvantaged by teleworking. Many nations (eg, France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Canada, and Brazil) have recently granted employees the right to disconnect after hours.²⁰ Tailoring this policy to support telecommuting single mothers, for example, might allow them to customise their right to disconnect hours, to minimise domestic distractions and facilitate balance between paid and unpaid labour. Additionally, organisations could provide these mothers with a stipend for paying for domestic helpers or childcare-related services.

Finally, employers must create a culture that enables teleworking women to succeed by initiating and supporting employee-driven teleworking initiatives and the training of managers. Employee-driven initiatives (eg, employee resource groups) allow employees to offer their insights and cocreate solutions. Such initiatives, with the support of the organisation and top management, have effectively increased workplace inclusion by increasing development and networking opportunities for women, employee engagement and satisfaction, and racial and ethnic representation.²¹ Including employee perspectives in the identification of problems and solutions helps to ensure that organisational responses are appropriate and effective. Furthermore, organisations must make sure that managers understand and are committed to eliminating the gender gaps that can accompany telework. Managers are typically the direct facilitators of organisational initiatives and policies, so careful managerial training is crucial to the success of teleworking²² and inclusivity²³ policies. Training might include getting middle and top management to proactively design accommodations such as increased flexibility in work extensions for women who have an increase in domestic responsibilities, limiting or eliminating after-hours work engagements, and assigning office housework and unpromotable tasks that are typically completed by women (ie, service and support work such as taking notes and organising meetings) more equally.

Telecommuting represents an exciting modernisation of work that is associated with many potential benefits,

but organisations must understand and address the gendered consequences that might curtail decades of hard-won gains in gender equity. The workplace exodus towards telework is still a recent occurrence, so continued monitoring of resulting health and equity outcomes is crucial. Future research should continue to examine how telecommuting affects gender-specific facets of health, as well as women's long-term career prospects and economic security. Finally, as the bulk of current research on telecommuting originates during COVID-19, it will be prudent to monitor and adapt policy and practice as we hopefully emerge from this pandemic and establish longer-term work norms.

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