


REMOTE WORK AND WORK-FAMILY BALANCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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***Abstract:** The article is a discussion concerning the essence and importance of reconciliation between work and family life during the COVID-19 pandemic, with special emphasis on remote work of women. Due to the fact that women more and more frequently start professional careers and at the same time they take care of their children and families, it seems important to have a chance to choose the form of employment and working time. Parents often are facing the dilemma of how to reconcile professional career with childcare? Should one of the parents abandon their professional career, and if they should, who should it be? Considering the above, the purpose of the article is to present the essence of the conflict between work and family life in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on remote work of women. The analyzed group were men and women aged 20-49. Research period covered year 2019 and 2020, it allowed to present changes of employment rate and percentage of parents working from home during the pandemic in Poland.*

***Key words:** remote work, work-family balance, COVID-19 pandemic, employment rate, women*

***JEL codes:** J22, J28, J81, I31*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many changes in all spheres of human life, including work arrangements, learning and childcare. It brought a great uncertainty in other areas too. The new circumstances require different, but effective approach, both for themselves, but also for families, children, employees and employers. It means the need of reorganization of the current routine, established habits, redefinition of priorities, sometimes even a reevaluation of the current life in order to return to normalcy as soon as possible. Reconciliation of all spheres

of life, and especially work and family responsibilities, is particularly difficult in these conditions.

In the literature for several decades, it has been indicated how important is the balance between professional career and free time, devoted to yourself and the family. The lack of harmony between various spheres of life causes many negative consequences, both at the level of the individual, as well as organization and society as a whole.

Work-family conflict is increasingly common among women. One of the reason of such situation is an increase in women's labor force participation (meaning more households have both adults/parents employed) and rising expectations for fathers' involvement in children's daily care (Nomaguchi 2009). On the other hand, during the pandemic many employees, especially women were forced to work remotely or partially remotely. They had to not only work, but also fulfill other duties such as childcare, because children also were learning remotely or provide care for an aging parent or family member.

The combination of remote work with family responsibilities can create a feeling of being constantly at work, if the home is both the "place" of work and rest. You may also feel a sense of mental and physical fatigue, which affects the productivity at work. In order to reduce the consequences of this type of conflict, which were especially intense in the 1980s and 1990s, various instruments were introduced to promote harmony in employees' life, however it should be stressed that many of them are not suitable for current circumstances. It is understandably they require adaptation to the changing socio-economic conditions.

2. Methodology and Data

The aim of the article is to present the essence of the conflict between work and family life in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on remote work of women.

The implementation of the goal formulated in this way required the following research questions:

- Has the pandemic influenced the employment rate of parents?
- Does the number and age of children affect the employment rate of parents?
- Has the percentage of employed adults working at home changed during the pandemic?
- How big are the gender differences of these indicators?

The theoretical considerations presented in the article and the analysis of the obtained research results are an attempt to answer those questions. Considering this, the situation of parents, especially women working from home, is analysed in further part of the paper.

The implementation of the aim of the study required critical analysis of the literature studies and conducting empirical analysis, based on data obtained from Eurostat. Research period covered year 2019 and 2020. Such a short research period, but sufficient to achieve the goal, allowed for the comparison of data and labour market indicators before and during the pandemic. The analyzed group were men and women aged 20-49.

3. Work-family Balance – literature review

Work and family responsibilities are undoubtedly the two most important spheres of human life. After many years of focusing on a professional career as a key determinant of success in life, both employees and employers began to notice that conflict between work and private life influences not only employee's productivity but also broadly understood happiness and satisfaction with the life of an individual.

One of the definition of work-family conflict states that "it is a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role". (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). This conflict may be a source of stress and takes two basic forms:

- work to family conflict,
- family to work conflict, that may assume the form of time-based; strain-based and behaviour-based conflict.

That lack of balance can also be defined as "the difficulties perceived by individuals in attempting to combine paid work and family care activities, that is the pressure arising from the perceived incompatibility of work and family roles" (Edlund, 2007; Stiera, Lewin-Epstein, Braun, 2012). Most studies that examine the work-family conflict concentrate on family and job characteristics that ease or intensify the conflicting demands from the workplace and from home. They include features of jobs such as flexibility and form of work e.g. remote work (Maume & Houston, 2001; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003) or conflict exaggerating factors such as the presence of young children (Dex & Bond, 2005, Skórska, 2021).

As the consequence of noticing and understanding this conflict, at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, The Work-Family Balance (WFB) concept was created in the United States. It is a complex phenomenon, lacking in a universal definition, therefore different aspects and components are considered and analyzed. The analysis of various definitions of work-family

balance shows that it is primarily the ability to harmoniously combine different aspects of life, such as: work, family including childcare and elderly care, and individual development or hobby (Burke, 2004, Felsted i in., 2002, Skórska 2019). Treating these spheres of life separately and in opposition leads to frustration that you either work too much and "live" too little, or vice versa. Therefore, when looking for a balance, individual spheres of life should be treated as complementary to each other, with the same meaning.

Those aspects are included for example in Allen et al (2010) definition, who conceptualize it as "a global assessment that work resources meet family demands and family resources meet work demands such that participation is effective in both domains". In a similar way, Greenhaus and colleagues (2003) define work-family balance as the "extent to which an individual is equally engaged in and equally satisfied with- his or her work role and family role". According to the authors there are three components of WLB:

- time balance that refers to equal time devoted to both work and family roles;
- involvement balance that refers to equal levels of psychological involvement in both work and family roles;
- satisfaction balance that refers to equal levels of satisfaction in both work and family roles.

Most recently, Greenhaus and Powell (2017) defined work-family balance as "the extent to which an individual's effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are compatible with the individual's life priorities." Understanding that the scope of the concept of WFB is wide, it should be stressed that achieving the harmony between different spheres of life is a challenge for both employers and employees, especially working parents. This became extremely difficult during the pandemic, which has forced many people to reorganize their lives.

3. Results and Discussion

Among many factors influencing the development of the WFB concept, an important role was played by the social and cultural changes of the last decades, including the increase in the professional activity of women and the resulting need for a new division of household duties (Lee et al 2013, Ferguson et al 2012). The transition from the family model, in which only man used to work and develop the professional carrier, to the model in which both men and women are employed, meant that men had to start taking over some of the household duties. In many cases, this division remains unequal, and the resources of free time that women have compared

to men remain much smaller, what the pandemic proved. One of the biggest challenge is the birth of the offspring, that presents parents with a dilemma - how to reconcile professional work with caring for children? Which of the parents should possibly give up their professional career? Or who should work at home?

An attempt to answer such questions requires the analysis of data and indicators such as: the employment rate, the percentage of people working from home taking into account gender, number and age of children.

3.1. Employment rate

The analysis and assessment of the employment situation in Poland requires reference to the employment rate, the differentiation of which is determined not only by sex, age, education level or place of residence, but also by the number of children and their age.

The employment rate among people aged 20-49 in 2019 was 83,3.5%, with the lowest rate for parents of 3 or more children (71.0%), and the highest value for parents of 1 child (82.1%). There is a huge difference between men and women, the employment rate of women is in all cases lower than that of men and decreases with the number of children they have. In 2019 the employment rate among man was about 90-95%, while among women 70% with one child and only 50% with 3 children. It did not change during the pandemic, even slightly increased. What is most interesting, is the differentiation of women employment rate depending on education level (see Table 1).

Tab. 1 Employment rate of women aged 20-49 by educational attainment level and number of children

Educational attainment level	Age of youngest child	Number of children	2019	2020
All ISCED 2011 level	Less than 6 years	1 child	70,0	69,9
		2 children	64,4	64,6
		3 children or more	50,0	51,5
Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education		1 child	45,2	39,8
		2 children	22,7	20,2
		3 children or more	25,0	33,5
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education		1 child	56,6	56,8
		2 children	48,9	47,2
		3 children or more	39,6	38,7
Tertiary education	1 child	81,4	81,3	
	2 children	80,1	80,6	

		3 children or more	72,6	73,8
All ISCED 2011 levels	From 6 to 11 years	1 child	79,7	80,8
		2 children	79,7	79,4
		3 children or more	66,2	64,6
Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education		1 child	23,8	38,7
		2 children	44,8	40,8
		3 children or more	39,6	39,1
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education		1 child	74,7	73,6
		2 children	70,9	70,4
		3 children or more	62,3	58,3
Tertiary education	1 child	90,8	91,9	
	2 children	91,4	90,9	
	3 children or more	82,4	86,3	

Source: (www1)

Low level of education and the number of children, especially those under the age of 6, are the key determinants of female employment rate. While the employment rate of women with tertiary education oscillated around 86-92% regardless the number of children aged from 6-11 years, it was much lower (about 10 p.p.) in case of children aged less than 6.

Data analysis shows that women with the lowest level of education are also characterized by the lowest employment rate –in 2020 it did not exceeded 21% for women with three or more children, when the youngest of whom is less than 6 years old. This is not surprising, because professional carrier in such a situation is very difficult, if at all possible. In the case of women with one child (the youngest less than 6 years old), the rate did not exceed 40%. Interestingly, in the case of women with three or more children, it was higher and amounted to - 33.5%. These rates increase with the age of children, but still remain at a very low level. It can be concluded that for some women, the state support, (including 500+ benefit) is more profitable than taking up a job and that can be one of the reason of such results.

3.2. Remote work

As noted above, with the increased participation of women in the labor force and the transition to dual-earner households, the issue of work-family conflict became more salient. Due to the situation around the world caused by the pandemic, maintaining a balance between work and personal life has become more difficult. Combining remote work with everyday private responsibilities, including childcare, shopping, personal development and learning seems difficult for many people.

It should be stressed that during the pandemic, some of the employees were forced to work remotely or partially remotely. The compulsion to work from home influenced the balance between work and family life. Currently, the interest in remote work among employees and employers has increased and is maintained at higher level among women than men (see table 2). However, it should be noticed that for those who work from home, daily experience of work will change significantly.

Tab. 2 Percentage of employed adults aged 20-49 working at home, by number of children and age of youngest child in 2019 and 2020

Age of youngest child	Number of children	2019		2020	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Total	Total	14,3	13,8	20,8	16,8
	1 child	13,9	14,3	19,9	16,9
	2 children	17,4	15,3	24,4	16,3
	3 children or more	14,1	12,7	19,3	14,2
Less than 6 years	1 child	11,4	15,0	18,2	18,3
	2 children	14,1	14,3	20,5	17,1
	3 children or more	19,9	13,2	22,7	14,0
From 6 to 11 years	1 child	14,1	14,3	23,2	17,0
	2 children	18,8	14,9	24,8	18,1
	3 children or more	21,0	18,9	24,9	16,7
12 years or over	1 child	14,1	12,1	19,0	13,0
	2 children	18,8	13,7	24,8	15,6
	3 children or more	17,0	13,6	23,3	19,4

Source: (www1)

Data analysis shows that during the pandemic the percentage of people working from home increased in each of the analyzed categories. In the case of women, the highest (almost 10 p.p.) increase was recorded among those with 1 child aged 6-11, while the lowest (1 p.p.) in the case of men with 1 child aged 12 years of over. It should be stated that regardless the number and age of children, the of percentage of women working from home increased about 6p.p.

In the current situation, reconciling remote work with family life is a considerable obstacle and sometimes makes it impossible to perform professional tasks properly. It is more difficult to organize a workplace at home, as the space used for remote work is largely used by other people (children, spouse). Concentrating on the tasks performed while working remotely is more difficult because everything around can be treated as distractions - noise, lack of a

specific workplace, simultaneous work and childcare, helping the child to learn, television, telephone, using social media while working and performing other domestic duties. These activities consume a lot of time that should be spent on performing tasks at work.

4. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed all spheres of people life, including the way in which people work. The pandemic forced millions of employees to work remotely. Giving employees more flexibility in choosing when and where they work can increase gender equality. In theory, remote work can help mothers better reconcile their work and family responsibilities, it may also make the father more involved. Indeed, during the pandemic the highest increase of adults working from home concerned women. However, it should be noticed that combination of remote work with family responsibilities can create a feeling of being constantly at work if the home is both the "place" of work and a place of rest. It may also affect the feeling of mental and physical fatigue, which influences the productivity. Another consequence of remote work is the inability to participate in practical training and because of limited contact with co-workers, it may affect the feeling of isolation, loneliness and withdrawal of an individual from society. Consequently, the achievement of work-family balance remains one of the most important dilemmas for the employers and employees, especially working parents.

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