

ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF THE INDUCED TELEWORK ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN PORTUGAL

Ekaterina REZNIKOVA *

Laura Tereza GOMEZ URQUIJO **

Marta ENCISO SANTOCILDES ***

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered significant shifts in labor markets worldwide, notably an increase in remote work even as restrictions have eased. This rise in telework has led employers to reconsider its viability and feasibility compared to pre-pandemic norms. However, this sudden transition, coupled with gaps in social policies, has disproportionately impacted existing issues such as gender disparities and labor market inequalities.

To explore these dynamics, qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen Portuguese experts specialising in labor and gender issues, alongside fifteen women who experienced a sudden shift from office-based work to remote work. The study examined how this abrupt change affected women's work processes and contributed to the growing trend of feminization of telework, where more women opt for remote work to balance paid and unpaid responsibilities like household and childcare duties. Data analysis was conducted using MaxQD software.

This paper fills a research gap by focusing on female employment, a topic often overlooked in existing literature that predominantly covers general employment trends. The findings shed light on the increasing participation of women in remote work in Portugal, underscoring its negative impact on efforts to create a fairer and more inclusive labor market. Moreover, the study highlights how female telecommuters in Portugal often struggle with blurred boundaries between work and personal life. The findings underscore the need for transformative policies that prioritise positive discrimination in favor of female teleworkers.

Keywords: female employment, gender gap, labor market, Portugal, telework.

1. Introduction

Gender disparity in the labor market is a pervasive issue that impacts women's career trajectories from the onset of employment and continues throughout their professional lives, influencing job promotions, salaries, and access to social security benefits¹. The Covid-19 crisis in Portugal has brought to light the significance of fostering connections between remote and on-site workers, particularly in addressing and mitigating potential gender gaps that may emerge in telecommuting arrangements. Labor market is a profoundly intricate and multifaceted institution, marked by hurdles for women starting from the stage of preparation (education inequality), continuing with lower rates of entry for female workers comparing to men, worsening upon a double burden of additional reproductive labor and up to issues of retirement (pension gap)².

The advancement of technology and digitalization of the labor market have redefined employment as a number of opportunities which can be done presentially, remotely or in a hybrid (mixed) mode³. In this 'atypical

* PhD Candidate, Faculty of Law, Deusto University, Spain (e-mail: e.reznikova@deusto.es).

** Professor, PhD, Faculty of Law, Deusto University, Spain (e-mail: tereza.gomez@deusto.es).

*** Professor, PhD, Faculty of Law, Deusto University, Spain (e-mail: marta.enciso@deusto.es).

¹ See G. Moraru, *Gender equality in job classification and promotion: An analysis based on collective bargaining in Castilla-La Mancha*, 2022, https://institutomujer.castillalamancha.es/sites/institutomujer.castillalamancha.es/files/documentos/paginas/archivos/la_igualdad_de_gnero_en_la_memoria, last time consulted on 03.05.2024.

² See M. Schneider, *Labor-Management Relations and Varieties of Capitalism*, GLO Discussion Paper, no. 934, Global Labor Organization (GLO), Essen, 2021.

³ See R. Donnelly, J. Johns, *Recontextualising remote working and its HRM in the digital economy: An integrated framework for theory and practice*, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(1), 1-22, 2020.

employment'⁴ personal productivity and advancement, as captured by supervisors, have been maintained as an important indicator for maintaining the job and career progression⁵.

The paper covers the impact of induced telework on female employment in Portugal, examining the implications of telework adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic on women's participation in the labor market. It also discusses legal changes related to telework and proposes policy suggestions to address potential gender-related challenges and foster gender equality within the telework framework.

The studied matter is of extreme importance as it addresses potential inequalities that may arise from the widespread adoption of telework, particularly focusing on its impact on female employment. Ensuring gender equality in telework practices is crucial for promoting inclusivity and addressing any disparities that may emerge in the labor market due to remote work arrangements.

The current study intends to answer this matter by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the impact of induced telework on female employment in Portugal. This involves delving into the unique context of telework implementation in the country, analysing legal changes related to telework, and proposing policy recommendations to promote gender equality within the telework framework.

The paper contributes to the existing specialised literature by providing insights into the specific context of telework in Portugal and its impact on female employment. It also analyses recent legal changes related to telework and offers policy recommendations tailored to address gender-related challenges within the telework landscape. This adds to the body of knowledge on telework and gender equality, potentially complementing existing studies and informing future research and policy initiatives in this area.

2. Challenges in evaluating the effects on the labor market

Evaluating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market presents challenges due to limited gender-disaggregated data, as highlighted in the referenced sources. The difficulties in assessing the effects on society stem from incomplete indicators of income inequality and poverty risk, as noted in the World Inequality Report in 2022⁶, which emphasises contemporary disparities in income and wealth, slow progress in gender equality, and the influence of national policies on ongoing inequality. However, current understanding is primarily focused on short-term effects and emerging trends, limiting a comprehensive analysis of the pandemic's societal repercussions.

Despite extensive global research on pandemic impacts on labor markets, a lack of comprehensive data on gender disparities persists. Existing data often excludes individuals without internet access or literacy, perpetuating gender, economic, and geographic disparities that hinder a thorough analysis of labor market inequalities. Women, disproportionately affected by pandemic-related employment challenges, are inadequately represented in data collection and subsequent analysis⁷, further complicating efforts to address labor market issues effectively and impeding informed policy-making due to data limitations.

The scarcity of gender-disaggregated data restricts data availability despite the recognition that women are among the most affected groups during the pandemic. This limitation constrains the utilisation of data for evidence-based policy-making, thereby restricting approaches to tackling labor market challenges. Notably, this study adopts a binary understanding of „gender“ as males and females within gender-disaggregated data⁸.

An essential aspect for enhancing understanding and formulating effective policy responses lies in conducting an intersectional analysis that integrates quantitative and qualitative methodologies while considering variables such as gender, age, and migration status. This approach would provide a more nuanced comprehension of the impact and facilitate more targeted policy interventions. Despite acknowledging the dearth of gender-aggregated data, this study maximises all available sources to achieve its analytical objectives.

⁴ See L. Westhoff, *Does Atypical Employment Come in Couples? Evidence from European Countries*, Social Indicators Research, 2024.

⁵ See S. Yarberry, C. Sims, *The Impact of COVID-19-Prompted Virtual/Remote Work Environments on Employees' Career Development: Social Learning Theory, Belongingness, and Self-Empowerment*, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 23(3), 237-252, 2021.

⁶ See *World Inequality Report 2022*, Harvard University Press.

⁷ See S.L. Flor, J. Friedman, C. Spencer et al., *Quantifying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality on health, social, and economic indicators: a comprehensive review of data from March 2020 to September 2021*, March 2022, *The Lancet* 399(10344).

⁸ See Global Research Council. *Gender-Disaggregated Data at the Participating Organisations of the Global Research Council: Results of a global survey*, 2021, https://globalresearchcouncil.org/fileadmin/documents/GRC_Publications/Survey_Report__GRC_Gender-Disaggregated_Data.pdf, last time accessed on 03.05.2024.

3. COVID-19 and disruption: Portuguese labor market in imbalance

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Portuguese labor market has been extensively studied, with Lima providing valuable insights into this complex situation⁹. In 2020, Portugal experienced a notable increase in the national unemployment rate, rising from 6.9% at the beginning of the year to a peak of 8.1% in the third quarter before gradually declining. By the second quarter of 2021, the unemployment rate had returned to pre-pandemic levels at 6.8%. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these figures do not fully capture the structural changes occurring within the labor market.

The absolute number of unemployed individuals surged from approximately 316000 to 392000 between the end of February and April, marking a 24% increase and causing significant market disruption. The nadir of the working population, recorded in May 2020, stood at 4.5 million individuals, constituting 46.1% of the population.

Data from the European Commission projected an average annual unemployment rate of around 7.7% for Portugal in 2020¹⁰. However, Portugal exceeded this forecast, experiencing substantial impacts during the initial year of the pandemic.

A substantial reduction in working hours was observed in the Portuguese economy during 2020-2021, with a notable decline of 14.9% compared to a modest increase of 1.8% in the preceding 12 months before the pandemic struck.

The concept of underutilization of work provides a comprehensive perspective on the labor market beyond just unemployment rates. This indicator encompasses individuals within the working age bracket (15-64) who are not employed for various reasons, including underemployed part-time workers and those inactive but seeking employment. In Portugal, an average of 761000 individuals were affected by underutilization during the first year of the pandemic, representing an 11.7% increase from 2019 and accounting for 17% of the active population.

In terms of income rates, the average monthly gross compensation per worker in Portugal saw a modest increase of 3.2% during the initial year of the pandemic compared to the previous year, reaching €1,014 (compared to €982 in the corresponding period). This rise does not signify overall salary growth but rather reflects shifts in job structures and compensation dynamics within approximately 4.1 million job positions covered by Caixa Geral de Aposentações.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Portuguese labor markets, manifesting in elevated unemployment rates, reduced working hours, increased underutilization of work, and alterations in income rates due to changes in job distribution and compensation structures.

4. Impact of induced telework on female employment in Portugal

The labor market dynamics in Portugal exhibit a dual structure characterised by a substantial prevalence of temporary employment contracts and a notable proportion of long-term unemployed individuals, including those disengaged from the labor force for extended periods¹¹. The quest for employment in Portugal is protracted, with candidates typically taking an average of 22 months to secure a job, double the duration compared to other EU nations¹². This employment landscape, marked by vulnerability and a high incidence of job losses during crises, underscores the fragility of the Portuguese labor market.

Pre-existing inequalities in Portugal, particularly concerning the unequal distribution of unpaid work encompassing domestic responsibilities and caregiving duties, were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic¹³. The crisis heightened the demand for unpaid work, disproportionately burdening women and weakening their

⁹ See F. Lima, *Um ano de pandemia: uma breve síntese - 2020-2021. A year of pandemic: a brief overview*, Instituto Nacional de Estatística, I.P. Monografia, 2021.

¹⁰ See Eurofound. *Telework and ICT-based mobile work: Flexible working in the digital age, New forms of employment series*, 2020a, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

¹¹ See N. Nunes, *Governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Long-Term Care residences for older people: preparedness, responses and challenges for the future: Portugal*, Colabor-Portugal, 2021.

¹² See V. Duarte, *The paradox of the Portuguese labour market: high long-term unemployment and record job vacancies*, CaixaBank research, 2023.

¹³ See F. Tavares Oliveira et al., *Teleworking in Portuguese communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Journal of Enterprising Communities People and Places in the Global Economy, July 2020; R. Mamede, M. Pereira, A. Simoes, *Portugal: A quick analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and in the business market*, ILO – Lisbon, 2020.

position in the labor market. The gendered impact of the pandemic underscored existing disparities, perpetuating inequalities within Portuguese society¹⁴.

The post-pandemic rebound period in 2021-2022 unveiled a distinctive scenario in Portugal where there was a higher number of economically active women compared to men. Despite this higher participation rate, women encountered challenges in securing employment. While women constituted 64.6% of economically active individuals up to 64 years old, their employment rate stood at 60.5%, lower than men at 67.2%. Additionally, women faced a higher unemployment rate at 6.4% compared to the overall rate of 5%¹⁵. The Caritas report of 2022¹⁶ highlighted persistent labor market issues in Portugal, including underutilisation of available workforce, elevated youth unemployment rates, and regional disparities.

Telework emerged as a pivotal response to the pandemic in Portugal, with data from the National Institute of Statistics revealing a substantial increase in teleworkers during the latter half of 2020, exceeding one million employees and constituting 21.3% of the employed population. Despite initial scepticism regarding Portuguese workers' telework capabilities, the adoption rate surged from 11% to 22%, facilitating white-collar worker retention¹⁷.

The sudden transition to telework brought about significant shifts in work patterns in Portugal. While teleworking was less prevalent before the pandemic compared to other EU-27 countries due to employment structures and qualifications¹⁸, data from COLABOR in 2021 indicated that women exhibited higher telework capacity during and post-crisis. Economic crises tend to amplify existing inequalities; thus, despite increased access to telework for women post-pandemic, they continued to bear the brunt of unpaid domestic responsibilities.

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated gender and social disparities in Portugal, ushering in a new cycle of inequality and precarity. Efforts to mitigate these challenges led to the implementation of new or revitalised policies. The European Commission's financial assistance aimed at preserving economic activities and preventing mass job losses played a crucial role in supporting member states like Portugal during this tumultuous period.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic and induced telework measures have significantly impacted female employment in Portugal, magnifying existing inequalities and introducing novel hurdles. While telework presented opportunities for some women, it also underscored the unequal burden of unpaid work and emphasised the necessity for targeted policy interventions to address gender disparities within the labor market.

5. Advancing telework regulations in Portugal

In 2021, the Portuguese government enacted legislation to regulate telework, aiming to establish a standardised framework for remote work practices within the country. This new law introduced key provisions designed to safeguard the rights and interests of teleworking employees.

A pivotal component of this legislation is the mandate for employers to reimburse teleworkers for any expenses incurred due to their remote work setup. This provision acknowledges the potential additional costs faced by teleworkers, such as heightened utility bills or the procurement of office equipment, ensuring that employees are fairly compensated for these expenditures. By enforcing reimbursement obligations, the law acknowledges and addresses the financial challenges that teleworkers may encounter, promoting equity and fairness in remote work arrangements.

Furthermore, the legislation recognizes the unique needs and vulnerabilities of specific groups of workers. Individuals belonging to these categories have the right to request telework arrangements without requiring prior approval from their employers. Among the identified vulnerable groups are parents with children under 8 years old, individuals experiencing domestic violence, and workers responsible for caring for elderly family members.

¹⁴ See F. Lima, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ See M. Caetano, *Já há mais mulheres disponíveis para trabalhar do que homens*, <https://www.dn.pt/dinheiro/ja-ha-mais-mulheres-disponiveis-para-trabalhar-do-que-homens--14819572.html>, 2022, last time consulted on 03.05.2024.

¹⁶ See Caritas Portugal *Cares! National report on poverty*, 2022.

¹⁷ See F. Tavares Oliveira *et al.*, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ See Eurofound and the International Labour Office, *Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work*, 2017, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and the International Labour Office, Geneva, <http://eurofound.link/ef1658>, last time accessed on 03.05.2024.

By acknowledging these distinct circumstances, the legislation underscores a commitment to safeguarding the rights and welfare of employees navigating challenging personal situations. Telework offers flexibility and support to individuals managing additional caregiving responsibilities or seeking a safe work environment away from potentially harmful conditions. The inclusion of these provisions reflects an acknowledgment of the diverse workforce needs and aims to ensure that remote work is accessible and accommodating for all employees.

The new telework law in Portugal signifies a significant advancement towards fostering an inclusive and equitable work environment. By mandating expense reimbursement for teleworkers and granting vulnerable employees the right to request remote work arrangements, the legislation establishes a framework that prioritises the well-being and rights of individuals engaged in teleworking roles. These measures contribute to cultivating a sustainable and supportive labor market that addresses the evolving demands and complexities faced by workers in today's digital era.

6. Measuring the impact of digitalisation: empirical analysis

6.1. Methods

This qualitative study reports the findings of individual in-depth interviews with 15 female workers and 15 specialists using open-ended questions which were conducted in Portugal in 2023 and lasted for 4 months. Perceptions of specialists and workers on the issue were collected via a questionnaire that was aiming to reflect on the personal assessment of specialists who work with issues of gender and labor in Portugal as well as of females who to switch from onsite mode of work to a remote one. Opinions were collected and the content analysis was applied via MAXQDA.

This investigation uses an exploratory approach as multiple sides of the issue are investigated. In order to look into the challenge that women who switch to a remote mode of their professional activity and attitudes of professionals on that, the interviews were transcribed in a traditional way, however, MAXQDA which is based on a classification system where data is organised into previously defined categories, was applied to texts of interviews. The ability to write notes, as well as to quantify and visualise the results determined the choice of software.

All the interviews were audio recorded and the transcripts were open coded by a researcher. Results: The response rate in this study was 73.65%. The following themes were extracted from the views and opinions shared by the specialists: the abrupt change of working conditions due to the pandemic; peculiarities of telework for female workers; legal framework of telework; feminization of telework; future of telework in Portugal. Opinions shared by female workers included their personal assessment of the abrupt change of the mode of work and its flexibility; individual benefits of new adopted law; preferences and choices concerning the organisation of work; anticipative notions whether telework is here to stay.

The coding was done to make a qualitative content analysis. The categories were concept-based, *i.e.*, defined before the actual analysis of the empirical data starts. Table 1 in the appendix shows the categories and statements of female employees that are tagged under them.

6.2. Study design and participants

This is a study with a content analysis approach which has been conducted to discover the various aspects of the induced work for female professionals in Portugal with the onset in March 2020 and ongoing. Participants were selected based on inclusion criteria through purposive sampling among female workers who were exposed to the change of the mode of work and specialists dealing with issues of labor and gender on a daily basis. Female workers include women with an age range of 18-65, having the ability to understand and transfer concepts to a researcher and experience of working onsite and remotely. Their family and maternity status differs. Exclusion criteria for female workers consisted of: volunteer desire to work remotely, as well as withdrawal and reluctance of the respondent to continue participating in the study. Experts' cohort includes those specialists whose expertise has a link with digitalization and understanding of transformation that occurred due to it with the labor market in Portugal.

All individual and group interviews were conducted by one of the authors of the paper as a PhD student in human rights with the focus on labor rights dynamics and a history of participation in the classes of qualitative research methodology and the use of qualitative analysis software. She also has enough experience in the field

of labor policies. All steps for data recording and data analysis were conducted under the supervision of the faculty members with several years of qualitative study.

6.3. Data collection

After selecting the subjects through the literature review according to the criteria for inclusion in the study, first, the purpose and reasons for the study were explained to each participant and, the times of the face-to-face interviews were set up as desired for the participants. Initially, a pilot interview was conducted, which was analysed and helped to shape the interview guide and how to do the study. Open-ended questions were used to conduct interviews. General questions were first asked to express their individual experiences. In both types of interviews a similar interview guide was used. Examples of these questions for specialists are: „What kind of transformation of employment conditions happened due to the requirement to telework upon the outbreak of the virus?“, „Was telework flexible and sufficient to incorporate all women's duties (homecare, childcare, elderly care) in their schedule during the pandemic?“ „Upon the pandemics, has the dynamics of feminization of telework changed (speeded up, slowed down, introduced a new direction of development)?“ Examples of questions for workers are: „Do you think that the induced telework has been beneficial for your employment?“, „What kind of difficulties the remote work brought to you and how your employer reacted on it?“, „What should be introduced to the regime of remote work to make it more adequate for your everyday professional life?“. To document the data, interviews were first recorded and then transcribed at the right time. Field notes were used as much as possible and non-verbal data such as tone and gestures were also recorded. Interviews were conducted at the workplace of the participants, in an isolated room without the presence of anyone except the participant or via Google meet. A code and nickname were assigned to each participant. Interviews lasted from 30 min to 60 min. A total of 15 individual interviews of experts and 15 individual interviews with female workers were conducted. No interviews were discontinued. One of the interviews was interrupted due to ambient noise and was repeated a few days later.

6.4. Data analysis

Data was analysed based on content analysis with a conventional approach. The advantage of this method was to collect data from the participants directly without imposing any theoretical views by the interviewer. Data analysis was performed with each interview MAXQDA, after recording on paper using. Identified codes were the result of semantic units of the participants' comments.

Qualitative coding was used to analyse the collected data¹⁹. In the process of analysing qualitative data after categorization of the codes and eliminating similar codes, 52 codes were obtained in 16 sub-sub-categories, 7 sub-categories, 3 main categories.

6.5. Theme of perceived difficulties of telework

This theme consists of 2 categories, 5 sub- categories and 12 sub- sub-categories. The main categories consist of individual and socio-economical difficulties.

6.6. Individual difficulties and perceptions of female workers

Individual difficulties include a main category of individual difficulties which female employees meet while teleworking. This main category is extracted from 2 subcategories and 5 sub-sub-categories: inabilities and additional needs (physical and psychological) and mental difficulties (lack of time, lack of motivation and information, internal inhibitors).

In terms of inabilities and additional needs during the remote work mode, most participants referred to the constraints which are resulting from physical and functional conditions of working from home. They noted:

„The main change of the working conditions that has happened is that the work space and life space united and collided“(r. 11)

„Now I wake up and I am immediately at work.“(r. 7)

„Since the work moved to my kitchen table, sometimes I simply can't disconnect at the end of the working day and continue thinking about work being in the kitchen“ (r. 2).

¹⁹ See K. Charmaz, *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, Sage, 2006.

In terms of the assessment by female workers of the organisation of telework and its flexibility one of respondents said:

„The remote work seems to be a flexible arrangement, however, if I consider all the work that I do professionally and non-professionally it turns into a never-ending working day with no break and before at least I didn't work going to the office” (r. 3).

The respondents showed a concern and weak understanding of the new legal regime of telework:

„I heard about a new law, but I still pay on my own for the electricity and wifi, the company does not reimburse it.” (r. 7, r. 15)

On the feminization of telework as a tendency of women to work exclusively in a remote mode, one respondent explicitly showed her concern of becoming an invisible worker:

„Being at home helps me to manage many tasks but I am not sure that this way I can grow professionally” (r. 6).

Future of telework is an unknown concept for most female respondents, however they unite in a point of view that telework is here to stay.

6.7. Assessments and perceptions of specialists

The example of coding is given in table 2 (in the appendix).

All specialists agree that telework is a mode that has become an inevitable element of the organisation of work. However, some of them focused on the point that it hasn't changed anyhow the structure and content of responsibilities at home.

„One hundred years ago women were responsible for washing clothes in rivers, now devices do it, but women are still those who take care of it and they do it while doing their work remotely” (r. 16).

Several specialists noted that *„telework has to do with bringing women back home”* in a sense that it is a retroactive process, negatively influencing the equality of rights (r. 19, 25, 29).

As for the future of telework, experts notice the following:

„Digitalization is a speedy process, and it is difficult to anticipate how it goes and which eventual consequences it will have” (r. 20).

„There is a clear capacity that more and more people will telework in the nearest future” (r. 23).

On legal novelties there are opposite opinions in a way that some experts consider positive discrimination of female workers as a step forward (r. 16, 21) as long as others think that it is unacceptable (r. 27, 29).

The most concern experts show towards a mental health of workers as the isolation is an intrinsic element of teleworking even for workers who live with their family as it goes far beyond the physical isolation:

„The disruption of contact with other colleagues can bring a high level of anxiety that later on can end up in a burnout that will have a direct impact on the productivity” (r. 24).

„Women tend to have a slower pace of career advancement and the remote mode of work makes it even more difficult to grow professionally and eventually may bring a lot of consolidated distress and disappointment” (r. 16).

Feminization of telework as a tendency of women to choose the remote jobs among the others was also reflected and specialists consider the concept as the crucial one as female workers take such a mode of work as a form of a conciliation, an attempt to facilitate the work-life conflict for women, however, one expert (r. 21) noted that *„it is not a case at all as it brings several structural disadvantages such as the loss of separation between private and professional and longer shifts that women tend to finish after those, who they take care off, fall asleep”.*

The general idea of several specialists was that telework and the impact that it brings to inequalities and female employment are extremely dynamic concepts and they should be observed and followed as by now it is impossible to conclude definitively whether it is benevolent or not. However, based on the present data and existing studies, the suggestions to the existing policy can be given:

„Legislator is to consider females as special actors of the labor market as numbers continuously show that women have to cope with a double or, sometimes, a triple burden compared to male employees” (r. 30).

„The capacity of the labor market to offer more remote jobs is not a stable figure, that is why we can only guess how it is going to be in the following years and how many women will be able to join and rejoin a labor market under telework. No doubt that it is a positive tendency for females, however, it is possible to make the

regime of telework more comfortable and adequate for all categories of workers meaning not leaving a space for uncertainties and voluntarism” (r. 27).

7. Conclusions

This paper enters into the debates about „telework” and „female employment” in neoliberal labor market by exploring the ways in which female workers have to make compromises in their professional track, in the context of Portuguese employment. While there is no doubt that being included into the labor market is central to female employment, gendered and personal expectations regarding what this engagement means are dissatisfying and upsetting for women, in spite of any attempt that working remotely might bring. In “careless” companies neither supervisors nor human resource management consider that female workers also need to be gratified gradually, and they are simply expected to intensively perform the labor needed for production²⁰. Our analytical choice to focus exclusively on women is supported by the understanding that gender gap so far is an intrinsic element of the modern labor market²¹. Thus, by looking at the experiences of women, we were not claiming that the challenges of telework exist only for women, nor that they represent a unified feminine (or feminist) standpoint²². Our objective was to highlight the experiences of women in Portugal with regard to their endeavors as professionals in a pandemic time. Based on the data analysis, the study suggests that the Covid-19 crisis has worsened gender disparities in Portugal in the short term, potentially leading to negative long-term effects on female employment. This is primarily due to the emergence of new precarious conditions and the absence of gender-sensitive responses.

Indeed, the existing literature on the impact of telework on employment offered initial evidence that males are also affected by the atypical jobs²³. Little is known in details, however, about how men deal with the growing emotional distress and unclarity of career advancement as teleworkers, a gap that requires future research. Adopting a broader understanding of female remote work, our study also opens new investigative avenues to explore how the remote mode of work shaped career track strategies to navigate their professional responsibilities and expectations while being apart from colleagues and supervisors. Studies investigating the impact of the change of mode of work towards a remote one on women demonstrated how female workers found themselves torn between trying to create a perfect environment for conciliation of the double burden and a desire to be acknowledged as professionals, always experiencing a lack of recognition for any labor²⁴. Our paper adds to this debate by showing how women’s commitment to duties remotely can be linked to a number of different consequences, including the distress with mode of work and companies’ gendered expectations of accepting less, the consumer culture of human resource management, the lack of adequate institutional understanding of telework management and a genuine commitment to solve life-family conflict. Interviews conducted with female workers who transitioned to telework revealed a mix of uncertainty and satisfaction, with telework offering relative flexibility. Similarly, expert interviews highlighted concerns about telework being misconstrued as a solution to work-family conflicts for women, as well as the growing desire among women to work remotely, potentially reinforcing traditional gender roles.

In the case of Portugal, given the gendered precarity in the labor market and the importance of being included into the labor market under any price, for many women, the negative impact of feminization of telework might irreversibly compromise their careers. It is essential to acknowledge the inherent instability and job insecurity experienced by female workers in Portugal. We are aware, however, that not all women were equally affected by the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the massive shift to telework that was maintained after the end of the sanitary crisis. The scholarship has shown that existing inequalities experienced by sexual minorities, racialised women, single mothers and mothers with disabilities are exacerbated upon new dimensions of segregation emerge²⁵. Thus, the lack of diversity in those sectors of work that can adopt telework

²⁰ See M. Afota, Y. Provost Savard, A. Ollier Malaterre, E. Leon, *Work-from-home adjustment in the US and Europe: The role of psychological climate for facetime and perceived availability expectations*, The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 34(14), 2765-2796, 2023.

²¹ See N. Gravel, *Impacts of Gender and COVID-19 on the Division of Labour*, Carleton University, 2023.

²² See R. Alexander, *Spatialising careership: towards a spatio-relational model of career development*, British Journal of Sociology of Education, 44(2), 291-311, 2023.

²³ See Eurofound. *Working conditions and sustainable work: The rise in telework: Impact on working conditions and regulations*, 2023.

²⁴ See A.D. Watson, *The juggling mother: Coming undone in the age of anxiety*, UBC Press, 2020.

²⁵ See A. Lanau, M. Lozano, *Precariedad laboral y dinámicas de pobreza en hogares con niños*, Perspectivas Demográficas, Núm. 027, 2022.

reproduced in our sample is a key limitation in our findings. We agree that telework can constitute a path to conciliation and certain flexibility to many families. However, „the price” of such a path also encompasses a big volume of distress that can deplete women's well-being. Thus, the tendency of female workers to look for a necessarily remote job, without any clear understanding and instruction on how they can proceed with their professional development exacerbate their mental and emotional distress. Taking up Donnelly and Johns' idea²⁶ of humanised human resource management, we argue that, when management is informed by an ethic of care that also considers workers' needs, and not by a unilateral expectation of productivity, employees are better motivated and empowered by the process instead of experiencing invisibility and feeling of being lost and abandoned. Professional work underpinned by an ethic of responsibility for employees is committed to alternative forms of professional interactions, transforming enterprises into a place of mutual success and growth²⁷ instead of a marketplace. This allows for the creation of a true productive community supported by a network of reciprocal care, in which female workers' needs are also taken into account.

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²⁶ See R. Donnelly, J. Johns, *Recontextualising remote working and its HRM in the digital economy: An integrated framework for theory and practice*, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(1), p. 1-22, 2020.

²⁷ See Cewinska J., Striker M. *Managers' Interference with Employees' Lifestyles While Working Remotely during COVID-19 Pandemic*. *Sustainability*, 15(15), Faculty of Management, University of Lodz, 90-136 Lodz, Poland, 2023.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Assessment and perceptions of female workers

Meaning unit	Code	Sub-subcategory	Subcategory	Main category	Theme
There is no division between my own space and my professional life as there is no space for that in the apartment (r1)	Collision of home chores and professional work	Lack of time	Mental issues	Individual issues	Perceived issues
I wish I could have more real - life contact with my colleagues. Sometimes before a zoom meeting we share details of our personal life, but I know that other teams don't do even that. (r1)	Lack of communication with colleagues and management				
Sometimes working remotely, I feel like doing a lot, but I am so bored working from home, and it makes me lazy (r2)	Lack of readiness and motivation	Lack of information and motivation			
I don't know enough about the new law on telework and am afraid to ask for reimbursement of wifi and electricity.	Lack of enough information				
It is embarrassing to ask for special treatment at work as you are a woman and mother.	Shame	Internal reflections			
Sometimes I am not sure that I do the task in a right way and it is awkward to ask my manager since I am remote (r5)	Negative thought				
I am scared that I will be called back to work in office and I won't manage to take care of my elder mother	Fear				

I think that if I am called again to the office, I might miss working from home (r.7)	Worrying				
My company is going fully remote and I feel uncertain about how it will function eventually (r5)	Anxiety				

Table 2. Assessments and perceptions of specialists

Meaning unit	Code	Sub-subcategory	Subcategory	Main category	Theme
Women mistakenly can consider telework as a win-win situation that can make them feel good and effective in any environment - home and professional one. It leads to the situation that they chase only remote jobs excluding the opportunity of working in the office or in a hybrid way (r.21).	Transformation of career choices.	Feminization of telework	Collective unconscious and conscious issues	Professional observation mixed with individual observations	Reflection based on professional experience
The development of telework is to produce a positive effect on rural areas as employees including female ones tend to come back to their native towns and cities from capitals as they are able to work from there and support their families, obtaining a more peaceful environment (r.18).	Capability of future telework	Future of telework			
Mentioning a female worker as a special subject of law can lead to an ambiguous situation and undesired consequences for labor markets, giving preferences to a wider number of workers without any substantial reason for it (r. 27)	Positive discrimination and gender perspective in legislation	Legal adequacy			
The new law gives an overview of all additional costs which have to be a burden of an employer, however there is no monitoring over that (r.23).	Mechanism of new law on telework				
Teleworkers tend to be kind of lost for their colleagues and managers who work in the office (r. 17)	Professional loneliness	Peculiarities of telework conditions			
Living in a modern world, workers obtain mostly a tiny or small environment which is frequently not adjustable for both work and recreation. This way, a kitchen table becomes an office one (r. 25).	Merge of home and professional environment				
Management tends to involve mostly those subordinates with whom they have direct personal contact. Remote workers have to be extremely initiative to be noted and invited, especially if we talk about female workers (r.19).	Invisibility of remote workers				
Being on a run of home and professional chores, female employees tend to leave tasks for a calm time when everybody fall asleep in their residencies (r.30)	Longer shifts				
Feeling themselves further from the office than those who work presentially, female workers tend to underestimate themselves and feel lost concerning a further professional responsibility. This way, they are losing potential opportunities for their talent development.	Vague understanding of career growth				

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