WORKS AND CARE

Can telecommuting resolve the work-life balance conflict?

Rosa Roig Berenguer



The Covid-19 health crisis and its ensuing effects on the economy have accelerated the implementation of telecommuting as the preferred mode of work. Thanks to today's virtual networks and the time-usage flexibility offered by this form of non-attendance remote employment, it's now being touted as the perfect solution to the problem of reconciling our work, personal and family lives. This article, however, arrives at the conclusion that telecommuting is not the answer to our work-life balance issues. Based on a policy paradigm approach, it analyses how work-life balance policies are being formulated by the public administration to increase female participation in the labour market, while telecommuting seeks to introduce a new form of remote work to the information society. The article goes on to address the clash between the two different public policies in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Finally, it reflects on the care economy and the sustainable society model outlined by SDG 5.4 of the 2030 Agenda.

Work-life balance and the public agenda

From a public policy analysis standpoint, all public policy is formulated to solve a collective problem (Dente and Subirats, 2019). The policy measures adopted will dictate the final outcome. So what do we mean when we talk about reconciling our work, personal, and family lives to achieve work-life balance?

The expression work-life balance can be applied to any policy implemented to make our work-professional and personal-family responsibilities compatible. They are policy measures designed to overcome the structural contradiction between the rationale of paid work and that of domestic work, which can here be understood as the unpaid care of our society (Fernández and Tobío, 2005; Roig, 2019; Tobío, 2002). This contradiction has its origins in our economic history and the sexual division of labour in the family unit. The traditional specialisation of work according to sex assigns men the productive function in the public domain (breadwinner), while women are limited to the tasks of mother-carer in the private domain (caregiver). The conflict arises when women enter the labour market and begin working outside the home. How can society successfully insert women into the paid labour market without abandoning the "family responsibilities" imposed by society? The economy requires human resources, and women want to work, but someone has to attend to the care tasks in the family home.

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The term work-life balance, therefore, refers to our attempts to solve this work-related problem, and it's provided for by the European legal framework which determines the implementation of legislation in Catalonia and Spain. Ever since women entered the labour market, the issue of equality between women and men has always been approached by trying to address the inequalities in employment. The 1974 European Social Action Programme first introduced the idea of 'reconciliation' as the formula for reconciling family responsibilities with the professional aspirations of women and men. From the 1990s onwards, we began to accept that employment inequality starts at home as a result of the family obligations socially imposed on women, preventing them from devoting the same time as men to paid work. As a consequence, the personal dimension is an intrinsic part of the equation, which is why we talk about achieving work-life balance by reconciling our work, personal and family lives (Campillo, 2019). Despite this, the various policy initiatives

continue to focus on equal treatment and opportunities for women and men in the labour market, as is the case with the latest European directive on this issue (Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers). Royal Decree-Law 6/2019, of 1 March, on urgent measures to guarantee equal treatment and opportunities for women and men in work and employment, also provides for work-life balance measures from this European perspective, i.e. initiatives aimed exclusively at the labour market.

If the issue is only viewed from an employment perspective, the perception of our responsibility to facilitate work-life balance is also limited, falling solely on the shoulders of women. Unpaid care duties and household chores are regarded as female tasks in the private domain. Governments and companies are only concerned with facilitating female participation in the paid labour market. This distorted view of the challenge leads to the formulation of public work-life balance policies reduced to allowing women in and out of the paid employment sector, so that they can continue to carry out their family duties. In other words, mechanisms are approved to give women more time so that they can carry out the two different types of work.

Western societies such as Catalonia are immersed in an accelerated ageing process which adds a different perspective to the issue of equality between women and men, both within the family unit and in the labour market. Our ageing population is a two-pronged issue caused by an extension of the life cycle and a reduction of the birth rate, either because women reduce the number of children they have or don’t want any at all, or because they’re having them later in life. (Roig, 2019). The authorities are wondering how they can ensure that women have children. Evidently, a society without them has no future. Work-life balance policies are also interpreted as a way to ensure that society can reproduce itself, replacing the older generations with new ones. But yet again, despite the low birth rate being regarded as a social problem, women continue to be held responsible for the demographic drift towards a childless and elderly future. In short, we believe our inability to demographically reproduce our society is rooted in women not wanting to have children.

The situation is worse in places like Catalonia, and the south of the EU in general, where society is based on the family-state model (Guillén and León, 2011). In this model, the social welfare system relies on women acting as unpaid carers in families. This reality is made possible by the rigid sexual division of labour within the family organisation. The non-socialisation of unpaid care in a State of a patriarchal nature (Pateman, 2019) burdens these tasks on the female population in exchange for no economic retribution or social esteem. The public administration adopts a welfare character more akin to a charity run by the Catholic Church, than a Nordic-style system of universal social protection. The government only intervenes in severe social problems of extreme poverty.

> In southern Europe, the public agenda never defines care and unpaid housework as a social responsibility. Yet the non-socialisation of these tasks is at the root of inequality between

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In southern Europe, the public agenda never defines care and unpaid housework as a social responsibility. Yet the non-socialisation of these tasks is at the root of inequality between women and men in the labour market, as well as the low birth rate. According to the Canary Islands' Institute of Equality (2019), women face a triple barrage of tasks every day, combing the traditional employment workload with the family workload (unpaid care and domestic tasks) and the emotional workload (corresponding to affective relationships); a scenario that translates into increasing gender gaps like the pension gap and the health gap. Women are left with less income at the end of their lives and assume the emotional weight of family unity. Unlike men, women have to share their available time between the productive and personal spheres which means they're unable to devote as many hours to paid work. This acts as a barrier to taking leadership and executive positions; a situation that affects their retirement pension and has repercussions on their health due to the emotional weight of care management.

In other words, from both a labour and demographic perspective, we perceive work-life balance as a problem of female time availability. Flexible time usage is, therefore, one of the main arguments for promoting telecommuting as a mechanism for reconciling the dynamics of the paid labour market with the rationale of the Parsonian family.

Flexible time usage: telecommuting

Our concern with providing flexible time usage for working women originated with the market economy. At the beginning of the industrialisation process, home working was used as a mechanism to facilitate the incorporation of women into the labour market, providing cheap labour without a contract and flexible hours to ensure they would continue to carry out their domestic "duties". Effectively, women were a low-cost double workforce because they provided care in the family environment for free. This type of work was and still is present in industries that require intensive labour, such as the textile, toy or shoe industries (Balcells, 2014; Domínguez Alvarez, 2005; Ybarra, Fuster Olivares and Doménech Vilariño, 2009), which form part of the industrial fabric of Barcelona, Elche and Sabadell, to name but a few.

Technological advancement in the twentieth century gave rise to a new form of remote work structured around the information and communication technologies: telecommuting. This form of work represents an alternative to the face-to-face work culture and generally allows workers to manage their own time. Hypothetically, this makes it an ideal candidate for solving the work-life balance conflict. Nilles himself (1975), who invented the concept of telecommuting in the context of the 1973 oil crisis, emphasised its suitability for the personal and family sphere. Rather than people moving to the workplace, in telecommuting,

it’s the work that moves through social networks. Thus, it offers the possibility of being at home and working for a company.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to telecommuting’s most significant growth spurt, being implemented as the preferred mode of work by various royal decree-laws (RD-Law 8/2020, of 17 March, RD-Law 10/2020, of 29 March, RD-Law 15/2020, of 21 April, or RD-Law 28/2020, of 22 September). However, none of them cite the coverage of care tasks or unpaid domestic chores as the reason for its new-found starring role in the employment sector. The public administration’s priority is to resume economic activity while preventing coronavirus contagion as a result of contact between people.

Indeed, in the second half of 2020, telecommuting is experiencing a boom. According to data from the Catalan Institute of Statistics (2020), 71.4% of Catalonia’s businesses have adopted telecommuting. The figure for Spain overall is 48.8% (Spanish National Institute of Statistics 2020). Prior to the health crisis, this type of remote work only accounted for a small part of the employment sector, as evidenced by data on its prevalence in working populations in 2019. According to Eurofound, in Catalonia, only 4.6% of employees opted for this form of work, while the figure for Spain was 4.8%. The European average was around 10%, with the Netherlands standing head and shoulders above the rest with a rate of 14%.

RD Law 28/2020, of 22 September 2020, on remote work, suggests that the perspective on the problem may have changed in line with Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/19/EU. It insists on the availability of flexible work forms, like remote working, but doesn’t point to the social responsibility, either of the State or society as a whole. Furthermore, work-life balance is only referred to as a positive by-product of telecommuting. The preliminary recitals of Decree 77/2020 of 4 August 2020, on telecommuting for personnel of the Government of Catalonia, clearly states: *“the optimisation of working time and the availability of time it generates increases satisfaction among staff in addition to having a positive effect on productivity. In turn, this increased satisfaction reverts to the organisation through greater employee engagement”*.

This rapid and urgent deployment of telecommuting in exceptional circumstances represents an explosive cocktail for the issue of gender (General Workers’ Union-Catalonia, 2020). The collapse of formal and informal care networks due to the confinement (school closures, closure of day centres, overcapacity of nursing homes, the moral questions around asking older adults to provide care so that higher-income earners can avoid contagion are just some examples of this), the lack of a pre-existing remote work culture among both companies and workers and the lack of material resources and regulations to delimit workspaces in the home are some of the explanatory variables of a decidedly negative outcome with incredibly diverse female faces.

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According to data from ongoing research on the remote-working population in the context of Covid-19 and the state of alert in Spain (Aybar, Pavia and Roig, 2020), more than 60% of respondents say their performance at work has been affected by having to work from home. Comparing the replies of women and men, we can see that the former are 6 points above the latter. When asked about the challenges of reconciling their work, personal and family life, 20% of women said that it was difficult, while only 17% of men felt the same way. When asked about their willingness to continue with this type of work after the state of alert, 21% of men said they would be willing, while the figure drops to 18% for women. But the concept of telecommuting as a solution to the work-life conflict is unequivocally thrown into doubt by the respondents' answers to the question of whether they expect care and domestic tasks to affect their work during the state of alert: 77% of women said they expected it would, while only 23% of men felt the same. In other words, 3 out of 4 women believe their work would be affected, and their performance would decline. The so-called triple workload day that women take on as a result of the rigid and traditional sexual division of work at home is mirrored by the increased levels of sleep disturbance they experience compared to men (50% of women compared to 40% of men).

The care economy

To summarise, in the words of Duran (2018), our problems in reconciling our work, personal and family lives stem from the issue of care, which is inherent in a non-care economy. Unpaid care and domestic work are considered to be matters for the private domain and aren't, therefore, prioritised in the public agenda. Nor are they attributed any monetary value during economic analysis. GDP excludes these types of activities, which have been labelled as 'unproductive' ever since the eighteenth century when Adam Smith distinguished between productive and unproductive activities. In this sense, it's worth noting that the feminist strikes organised since 8 March 2018 have adopted the slogan "*If we stop, the world stop*s". The motto reflects the argument that these unpaid activities should carry an accountable economic weight because they're essential for human life. A point that was effectively demonstrated by the Icelandic women who brought their country's economy to halt when they stopped carrying them out in October 1975. According to the ILO (2019), unpaid care and domestic work would have accounted for 15% of the Spanish GDP in 2017. In Catalonia, a study by the Women, Business and Economy Observatory (ODEE, 2016) actually quantified the possible contribution of this type of task at more than 23% of the 2015 Catalan GDP.

The truth is that humans are one of the most dependent mammals on Earth. As Cortina (2013) points out, from birth to death, individuals are constantly in need of biological, social

and material assistance. The moment we leave our mother's womb, we are unable to function alone. As adults, we may have an accident or fall ill. And, when we're older, in the last stage of the life cycle, our bodies deteriorate naturally or through disease or accident. Yet, the adjective 'dependent' still carries immensely negative connotations. Being dependent is negative, and is interpreted as an economic burden. We need to ask ourselves what type of society we want to live in? A productive society or one that puts human beings at its centre? Where are the ethics in the current model of political, economic and legal organisation?

The 2030 Agenda is our first step towards a new sustainable society model that has people at its core. One that includes women and recognises the value of care. As stated in SDG 5.4, moving in this direction requires us to recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family, as nationally appropriate. If the model of society remains unchanged, and we fail to accept social responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, equality between women and men cannot be achieved. It's a question of the societal model. The state and society must assume their responsibilities. We, therefore, need to change the legal framework (making care a fundamental right, for example), increase investment in social infrastructure (nursery schools, nursing homes and day centres, among other initiatives) and instigate a cultural change (company tax incentives for encouraging men to request reduced working hours to take on care duties in the family, among other proposals).

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