



## Short Reports:

# The Female Load: The Cost of Productivity During COVID-19

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of gender differences on the impact of Working From Home (WFH) arrangements on perceived levels of employee productivity, engagement and wellbeing during the COVID-19 restrictions. Due to the nature of the recent global pandemic, the world of work has had to evolve to meet the needs of organizations and employees alike. For many, this has meant a shift from office to home-based working, resulting in the significant blurring of work and home lives. While WFH has brought opportunities and benefits for both genders, it has also brought challenges in terms of wellbeing, productivity and the potential for burnout. In this study of 121 participants, our data supported previous research that suggested WFH heightened productivity and work engagement but only in the male population. Conversely, working mothers and female primary breadwinners reported significantly higher levels of anxiety compared to men, while also exhibiting higher levels of productivity. The latter finding is of concern to organizations and women alike; what is the long-term cost of this anxiety, albeit productive, for women who face a double shift while Working From Home?

خلاصة: الهدف من هذه الدراسة الحصول على فهم أفضل للفروقات بين الجنسين بشأن تأثير ترتيبات العمل عن بعد، وعلى المستويات المتصورة لإنتاجية الموظفين وانخراطهم ورفاههم خلال القيود المفروضة بسبب كوفيد 19. نظرا لطبيعة الوباء العال مي الأخير، تعين على عالم العمل أن يتطور ليبي احتياجات المنظمات والموظفين على حد سواء. و بالنسبة للكثيرين، يعني هذا التحول من العمل في المكتب إلى العمل عن بعد، مما أدى إلى خلط كبير بين العمل والحياة الخاصة. وفي حين أن العمل عن بد عد جلب فرصا وفوائد لكلا الجنسين، فإنه جلب أيضا تحديات من حيث الرفاه والإنتاجية وإمكانية الإخفاق. وفي هذه الدراسة ال تي شملت 121 مشاركا، أيدت بياناتنا البحوث السابقة التي تشير ان العمل عن بعد رفع الإنتاجية والانخراط في العمل ولكن ف قط عند الذكور. وفي المقابل، اظهرت الأمهات العاملات والمعيلات الرئيسيات عن مستويات أعلى بكثير من القلق مقارنة بالر جال، وتظهر أيضا مستويات أعلى من الإنتاجية. وهذا الاستنتاج الأخير يثير قلق المنظمات والنساء على حد سواء؛ على الرغ م من ان الإنتاجية عالية، ما هي التكلفة الطويلة الأجل لهذا القلق بالنسبة للنساء اللاتي يعملن مناوبتين أثناء العمل عن بعد؟

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**Keywords:** workplace engagement; working from home; pandemic; anxiety; wellbeing

**'Working from Home' (WFH) is not a new concept;** it has been around for centuries. From hunter-gatherers to medieval times, work was primarily conducted in and around the home.



Consequently, living in proximity to work allowed families and communities to more efficiently pool resources and maximize available spaces. It was only during the industrial revolution that work began to migrate away from the home and into designated workspaces. With the advent of factories and the skilled-worker movement, the modern working-outside-the-home model was established. Employees were now working schedules in employer-provided environments with employer-provided tools. The objective was to engage in productive work for which they would be compensated for by the employer. Over the years, this employer-led working model has evolved, and with the decline in manufacturing and the growth of the knowledge-based economy (an economy where work has become less manual and more intellectualized), there has been a shift once again in when, where and how employees work.

Telecommuting, remote working and WFH are terms that have been used to describe this alternative working model where employees are out of the office environment and engaging in work at a time and location that meets both their personal needs, as well as their client's. In the 2017 State of Telecommuting in the US Employee Workforce report (Global Workplace Analytics/FlexJobs, 2017), a significant rise in the number of people engaging in telecommuting was identified. Results reported a 115% increase in the number of US employees working remotely from 2005 to 2015. Globally, there has also been an increase in rates of working from home with 20% of employees in Belgium, 28% in Finland, 16% in Japan, 19% in India, and 4% in the UK (Eurofound/International Labour Office, 2017) now reporting they work from home at least half of their working week.

### **Working From Home (WFH)**

The benefits of WFH have long since been endorsed by both employers and employees alike (Felstead & Henseke, 2017), in part, due to its strong relationship with employee engagement (Hickman & Robison, 2020). There is now a wealth of research to also support the positive impact of employee engagement on a number of variables including job satisfaction, wellbeing, quality of work, safety, employee retention and profitability (e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Gorgievski & Bakker, 2010; Wigert & Agrawal, 2018). For instance, Bloom et al. (2015) found that employees who WFH significantly outperformed their office counterparts. In their study of call center worker productivity, they found that employees who WFH worked longer and harder and reported higher levels of job satisfaction than their in-office colleagues. Others (Golden & Gajebdran, 2019) have found a positive correlation between performance and WFH as well. It is not only being at home that mattered; Golden (2006) found a link between feelings of commitment to the organization and lower turnover intentions, while Gajendran and Harrison (2007) identified that those WFH reported less work-related stress and feelings of exhaustion. Many of these outcomes are thought to be associated to a greater sense of autonomy and ability to self-determine one's pace and work schedule (Allen et al., 2015).

The benefits of WFH as a tool of engagement also seem to crossover into home life. Lasfargue and Fauconnier (2015) found that respondents saved time on their daily commute by WFH and subsequently used it to spend with family (79%), for personal activities (66%) and/or for activities in the local community (47%). Consequently, 95% of the respondents in their study reported that WFH had a positive impact on their quality of life in and out of work. Employee



engagement is favorable from an organizational perspective because of its link to flourishing and growth in the workplace (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2013). Using WFH as a tool of engagement and route to wellbeing may be fruitful for organizations too. In a meta-analysis of Gallup data, Krekel et al. (2019) found that employee wellbeing is consistently positively correlated with employee productivity, firm performance and profitability, as well as customer loyalty and decreased staff turnover. These findings were echoed by Harter et al. (2002) who also noted that performance and workplace wellbeing work in tandem as they are complimentary and key components of psychologically and financially sound workplaces.

Still, while many studies purport the benefits of WFH on employee engagement and wellbeing, others counter these claims. In relation to psychological wellbeing, Mann and Holdsworth (2003) found that WHF was positively correlated to a range of negative emotions including loneliness, irritability, worry and guilt in employees who also reported more mental health symptoms. This was further supported by Grant et al. (2013) who suggested that WFH had an adverse impact on wellbeing due to overwork and the inability to adequately recuperate. Felstead and Henseke (2017) found that work pressures frequently spilled over into the non-work life of remote workers, with 43.5% of employees reporting difficulties drawing a line between work and family life and effectively switching off at the end of the day (Eurofound/International Labour Office, 2017). Such conditions have been linked to burnout.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from unsuccessfully managed chronic workplace stress that is characterized by feelings of exhaustion or energy depletion, negative or cynical feelings related to a job, and reduced professional efficacy. There has been a growing interest in the concept in recent years with a notable rise in reported cases globally. Using Gallup data, Wigert and Agrawal (2018) reported that 23% of employees identified feeling burned out at work either 'very often' or 'always' with an additional 44% reported feeling burned out 'sometimes'. Such experiences had additional impacts to organizational performance and culture: 63% of these employees were more likely to take sick days, 23% more likely to visit the emergency room and 2.6 times more likely to leave their employer. This was in addition to decreased quality of service and safety levels (e.g. Swider & Zimmerman, 2010; Van Bogaert et al., 2013).

### **WFH During COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a pronounced and disruptive impact on all aspects of society, from personal health to job and financial security; it has had a significant impact on overall wellbeing as employees face pressures to engage in meaningful and productive work from home. Many are also confronted with additional home-life demands such as additional chores (e.g. cooking additional meals) and home schooling responsibilities. These have often taken place in the absence of social support and contact for many households and appeared to impact women the hardest. This has become known as the 'second shift' (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), the double duty of those in paid employment also responsible for a significant proportion of the unpaid domestic work in a home. In couples where both partners are in paid employment, the female of the household has typically undertaken this role. A report by UN Women (2019) highlighted that women do three times the amount of unpaid care and domestic work within families compared to



men. Such gender roles have become even more entrenched during COVID-19 and have had a cascading effect on work itself. Andrew et al. (2020) identified that the additional housework and childcare duties of women during the COVID-19 period resulted in a reduction in the amount of time dedicated to paid work relative to men and have implications for the career progression of working mothers. In sum, while there are benefits associated with WHF, these do not seem to be equally distributed.

### The Present Study

COVID-19 may not last, but its impact on the workplace certainly will; thus, more research needs to be conducted to define the optimal conditions in which WFH can support the performance, productivity and wellbeing of employees, particularly working mothers. Accordingly, we looked at the impact of anxiety on productivity on male and female employees working from home at the start of the pandemic, and whether there were gender differences in particular.

### Method

#### Participants

A total of 121 participants took part in this survey (58.7% females,  $n=71$ ; 41.3% males,  $n=50$ ). While the majority of respondents were within the Middle East region, with the survey originating in Dubai (United Arab Emirates), there were a number of responses from countries around the world. The age of participants ranged from 25 to 60 and the modal age category was 35 to 40 years. Further, 88.4% ( $n=107$ ) were in full-time employment with an organization, while 11.6% ( $n=14$ ) were self-employed. Tenure ranged from less than one year of work experience to 22 years.

#### Procedure

To gather data, a questionnaire was designed looking at the experiences of full-time employees during the COVID-19 restricted period (March to August, 2020). Demographics along with levels of engagement, perceived productivity and anxiety were measured. Participants completed the questionnaire online; the link to which was published on social media platforms and groups such as LinkedIn, Facebook and WhatsApp. Permission was given for the link to be shared by participants within their networks to increase the sample size.

#### Measures

*Demographics.* Participants were asked to provide a range of demographic information including age, gender, employment status, tenure and living arrangements.

*Work Engagement.* The most widely utilized measurement tool for workplace engagement is the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-3; Schaufeli et al., 2019). Here, work engagement is made up of three dimensions: (1) Vigor: high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest efforts in one's work, and persistence, even in the face of difficulties; (2) Dedication: feeling a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge; (3) Absorption: being fully concentrated and engrossed in one's work, where time passes quickly and one has difficulties detaching oneself. The short version is



considered to have as good psychometric properties as the original (Schaufeli, 2012). Respondents rated themselves on a 7-point scale from 'Never' to 'Always'.

*Anxiety.* Participants completed the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006), a 7-item self-report questionnaire. Its psychometric properties reveal good reliability as well as criterion, construct, factorial and procedural validity (Kroenke et al., 2007). Participants were asked, "During the COVID-19 restrictions, how often were you bothered by any of the following over the past two weeks" and provided with the seven items, which included as examples, 'Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge?', 'Trouble relaxing?' and 'Becoming easily annoyed or irritable?' Responses were given on a 4-point scale from 'Not at all', 'Several days', 'More than half the days' to 'Nearly every day'. Scores of 0, 1, 2 and 3 were assigned to the categories and summed to produce a total score. Scores greater than or equal to 5, 10 and 15 represented mild, moderate and severe levels of anxiety respectively.

*Productivity.* Respondents were asked "On a scale from 1-10, how productive do you feel you have been over the past few months compared to normal?". This was answered on a self-report rating scale from 1 = not at all productive to 10 = significantly more productive. Further questions were asked for those who reported being at a five (as productive as normal) or above, including: "If you have felt more productive, what aspects of your recent experience do you feel have allowed you to be more productive?" and "What aspects of your recent work experience would you like to retain, if any, going forward?"

## Results

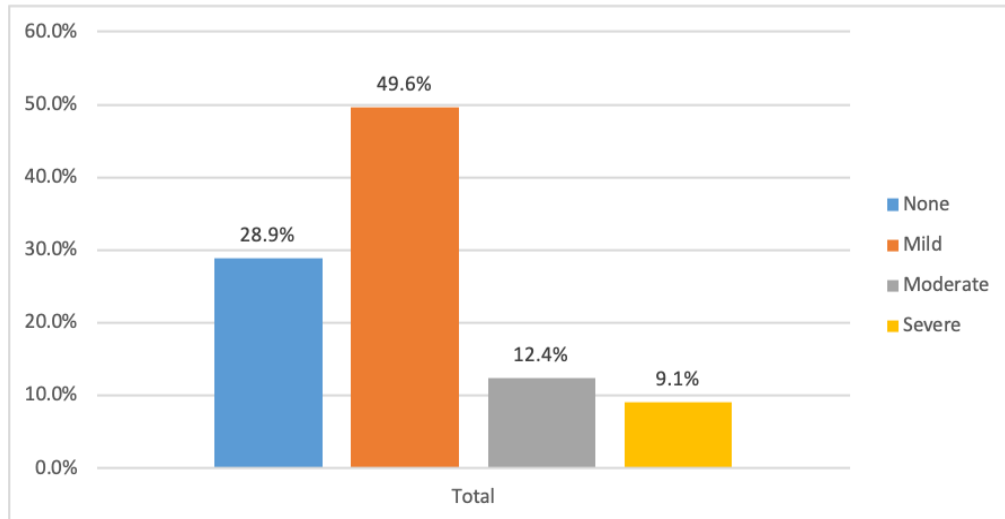
*Demographics.* The majority of respondents lived at home with their family (81.8%; n= 99), 11.6% (n=14) lived alone, while the remainder 6.6% (n= 8) lived with non-family members. Of those at home with family (n= 99), 71.7% (n=71) reported having had their children living in the home with them during the COVID-19 restrictions. Of these, 81.7% (n=58) reported greater home schooling responsibilities, with mothers most likely to be the primary support for home learning, irrespective of whether she was employed or not. The majority (67.8%; n= 82) reported their input to household chores (e.g. cooking, cleaning, shopping) had increased with females bearing the brunt of such duties, relative to men.

*Anxiety.* Responses to the GAD-7 questionnaire were summed and categorized in Figure 1, with the rates suggesting an overall increase in the levels of anxiety experienced. Figure 2 shows that women overall reported higher levels of anxiety (moderate and severe).



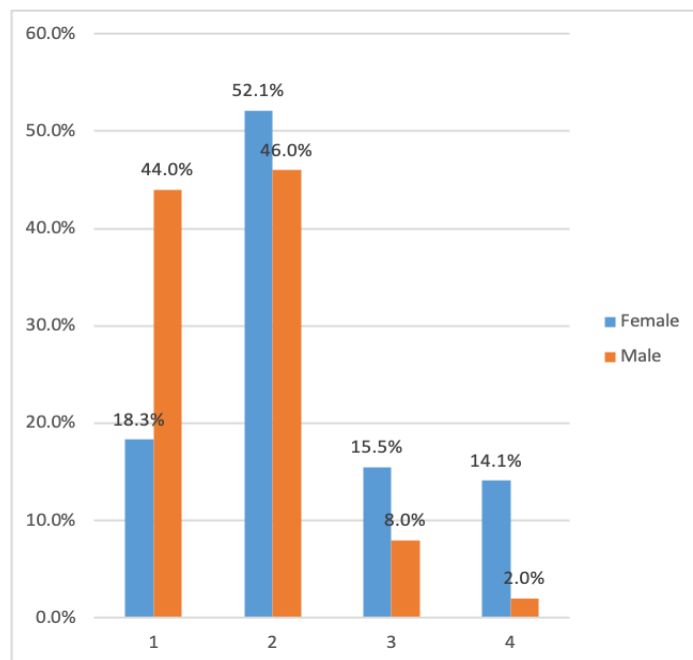
**Figure 1**

*GAD-7 Distribution of Results*



**Figure 2**

*Gender and Anxiety*

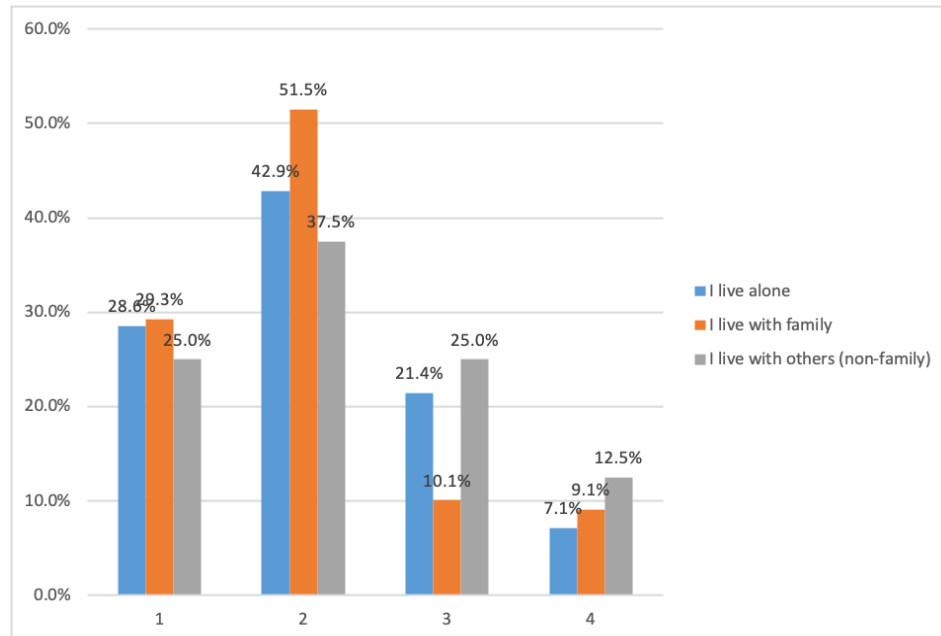


When anxiety scores were considered in relation to living arrangements, those living alone or with others had higher levels of moderate/severe anxiety compared to those living with family (Figure 3).



**Figure 3**

*Living Arrangements and Anxiety*



*Working Hours.* Almost 51.2% of respondents reported their working hours had increased, while 69.4% (n=84) noted a degree of flexibility in their working patterns with only 25.6% (n=31) working regular set hours. Of those who worked flexibly, 75% (n=63) reported that this flexible working pattern was different to pre-COVID times with 95% of participants reporting that the degree of flexibility in their working patterns had increased.

*Productivity.* When asked to rate how productive they felt over the past few months compared to normal on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = Not productive at all; 10 = Significantly more productive), 49.5% of respondents reported that they felt more productive than normal (ratings greater than 5 - As productive as normal). This finding increased to 78.4% when those who felt as productive as normal were included (Rating greater than or equal to 5).

Those reporting greater productivity were asked about contributing factors. Verbatim comments were thematically analyzed, with the most frequent including: (1) Fewer distractions while WFH and, had time to think and be more flexible and efficient with working hours and attention; (2) Did not have to travel to work and could spend the additional time working more productively; (3) Had better work-life balance therefore had more time to self and the family. Going forward, respondents identified the need to maintain “flexible working to better balance work and home life” and the “ability to work from home when needed.”

The following hypotheses were also tested.

- H1: Vigor is inversely correlated with anxiety (measured by GADSUM)
- H2: Dedication is inversely correlated with anxiety (measured by GADSUM)
- H3: Absorption is inversely correlated with anxiety (measured by GADSUM)
- H4: Anxiety (measured by GADSUM) is inversely correlated with Productivity



Correlational analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses. Overall, hypotheses were not supported ( $p > .05$ ) and effect sizes were relatively small. Nonetheless, once data were split by gender, H2, H3, H4 were supported ( $p < .05$ ) for male participants, but not for female participants. The effect sizes for male participants were still relatively low ( $r = -.30$ ,  $r = -.307$ ,  $r = -.5255$ ,  $p < .05$  for H2, H3, H4, respectively), and effect sizes for female participants were notably small (0.1-0.17) and not statistically significant. Next, t-tests comparing variable means for males and females revealed that female general anxiety ( $M = 8.12$ ) was much larger than male general anxiety ( $M = 4.9$ ), despite there being no significant relationship with general anxiety on other variables for women. All other variable means were similar (no statistically significant differences), with a difference of less than .3.

Next, we examined gender differences split further by having children versus none as well as having an employed partner versus unemployed. For women with children, anxiety was directly correlated with productivity although with a small effect ( $r = .19$ ;  $p < .01$ ). For men without children, absorption was strongly inversely correlated with general anxiety ( $r = -0.73$ ;  $p < .093$ ). For men with unemployed spouses, vigor was positively correlated with general anxiety, but only to a small effect ( $r = .309$ ;  $p < .018$ ). For women with unemployed spouses, anxiety was correlated with productivity although with a small effect ( $r = .07$ ;  $p < .01$ ). All other hypotheses for these subgroups showed no statistically significant relationships. These findings should be considered in light of the small sample sizes (women with kids = 38, men with kids = 33; women without kids = 33, men without kids = 13; women with employed spouse = 44; men with employed spouse = 23; women with unemployed spouse = 10, and men with unemployed spouse = 22).

### Discussion

Our findings show that during the COVID-19 period, the majority of employees moved towards a flexible working pattern which had a positive impact on productivity with 77.3% of participants reporting greater flexibility and a productivity score of 5 or above. They identified fewer home-based distractions, less travel/commuting time and consequent time to focus on other things including work, and the opportunity for better work-life balance as contributors. Coinciding with previous literature, WFH appeared to maintain and heighten levels of productivity and work engagement, seemingly through the ability to exert greater autonomy and flexibility to manage one's time and workload (Allen et al., 2015).

In line with previous research (e.g. Kessler et al., 2004), the women in this study reported significantly higher levels of anxiety than males. These higher levels were similar to those in clinical populations. Löwe et al. (2008) identified that within the general population, 4% and 1% were found to have moderate and severe anxiety levels respectively, while in the primary care population, 14% and 9% were reported. The reported levels of anxiety in our sample were similar to the latter. In turn, this anxiety had an impact on the outcomes. For males, lower levels of anxiety were found to have a positive influence on their productivity, dedication and absorption levels. One variant on this is for males with unemployed spouses. They were found to have higher levels of work vigor but also anxiety. For working mothers and female primary breadwinners, anxiety was found to be positively correlated with productivity; that is, anxiety appeared to drive productivity.





This positive relationship nevertheless begs the question: what is the long-term cost of such productivity? For these women, the pressures stemming from home and demanded by work during the COVID-19 restrictions were in part to blame. Financial and job insecurities may have also contributed, including anxiety stemming from additional pressures to perform and save one's employment; the blurring of work and home life boundaries may have made it difficult to 'switch off' where juggling the demands of work and home schooling with limited access to social support and human connectivity made the task more difficult. Still, connection with family appeared to mitigate such effects as those who lived with family reported less anxiety than those living alone or with non-family members.

Overall, individuals were more productive and engaged but equally, highly stressed and exhausted. Moeller et al. (2018) identify this pattern as 'engaged-exhausted'. In their study, approximately 40% of participants reported high levels of engagement and low burnout rates (called 'optimally engaged'), while almost 20% reported high levels of engagement and high levels of burnout. These 'engaged-exhausted' employees are passionate about their work, show high levels of interest and equally, high levels of stress and frustration. Our findings seem to reflect the same pattern: a significant level of engaged-exhausted employees, which organizations must attend to lest they begin to see consequences in attrition rates and vulnerability to mental health conditions over time.

From this study, we have found that males were able to be productive and engage with work, with little or no reported anxiety. Their positive psychological health allowed them to focus on work and maintain productivity, performance and engagement despite the global disruptions associated with COVID-19. In contrast, increased levels of anxiety were pervasive in the female cohort. Of particular concern, are mothers and female primary breadwinners. Given the reported increase in household chores and home schooling responsibilities, in addition to paid work, it is unsurprising that anxiety levels were high. Despite this, increased levels of anxiety appeared to drive productivity at work.

Moving forward, organizations must take heed: while WFH has a positive effect on productivity, wellbeing and engagement, there is a notable gender difference, particularly for working mothers and female primary breadwinners. The increase in reported productivity for this population should not be confused with workplace wellbeing. While these women rose to the occasion and bore the heavy brunt of both roles, psychological wellbeing was likely impacted. Coury et al. (2020) identified that as many as one in four women are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce entirely because of the double impact of working from home during COVID-19, with many reporting feelings of exhaustion and burnout. The potential loss of females in employment, voluntary or otherwise, is a looming financial loss for families and a step backwards for the workplace the world over. Indeed, in a report for the McKinsey Global Institute, Madgavkar et al. (2020) noted that such gender regressive actions could stunt global GDP growth by up to \$1 trillion by 2030 if no action is taken to rectify the current situation.

### **Future Directions**

Further exploration is needed to consider the impact of this increase in anxiety and workload on the psychological and physical health of women, more specifically, in rates of burnout



in this population should the COVID-19 working from home context continue. It is also recommended that wellbeing scales of a psychological nature be included such as the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2009), the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE; Diener et al., 2009), or the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) to get a real picture of wellbeing and what that may constitute for workplaces in the future.

### **Recommendations for Organizations**

Despite research supporting the benefits of WFH, there remains resistance from management to permit it in many organizations (Eurofound/International Labour Office, 2017), even if a remote working policy is in place. This may be due to the fact that it is not conducive to the traditional 'command and control' style of management. Still, it is hoped that because of the way in which WFH has been forced on many managers as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions, they may acknowledge its ability to enhance productivity and engagement at work. Yet, as women are more vulnerable to COVID-19 related economic effects given existing gender inequalities, taking action to redress the issue now could improve social and economic outcomes for women globally, as well as boost global economic growth. Accordingly, organizations must do their part to advance gender parity and create sustainable businesses for the future.

Organizations must also do more to oversee levels of psychological illbeing (i.e. anxiety, depression) and wellbeing (i.e. positive emotion, life satisfaction, meaning) in the workplace. While beneficial, it is not enough to provide resources such as webinar workshops, information on mental health or access to employee assistance programs as these often take a generic educational or awareness focus, or are accessed as a means of critical remediation. Instead, managers should avail of more developed training around psychological illbeing to understand what it is, what to look for, how to address it and what to do in its wake. More importantly, they may reach out to providers to learn how to build, maintain and promote states of wellbeing through the form of positive psychology intervention training for a more resilient workforce – not only during crisis, but going forward. All of this must be measured and monitored for points of intervention to be identified. Finally, as organizations move towards forms of blended work, managers necessarily must work with employees to facilitate such change. The following recommendations may help.

- Provide practical guidelines to employees working from home on how to set up a safe and productive work environment. For example, how to position the screen for maximum visibility and less glare, how often to take breaks and methods to position oneself to safeguard against bad posture. Consideration must be heeded for individuals with specific physical needs.
- Work with each employee to assess workload and identify the potential for over or under work. Adjust and allocate work to be mutually beneficial to employers and the employee, and consider the broader context under which individuals are operating e.g. child or elder care, as well as home schooling responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements may be used to accommodate work-life demands.
- Define and agree upon roles, responsibilities and expectations about objectives, results and timelines, considering task conflicts which require calibration. Work with employees to set boundaries and realistic conditions around work hours, break/rest times, over-time and leave.



- Train managers to act as role-models and educate them on best practice techniques to promote safe, healthy and supportive work environments. This should also include how to manage remote workers and communicate virtually.
- Psychological check-ins must become the norm in all employee conversations so that action can be swiftly taken, if needed. This is especially true for vulnerable employee groups such as those living alone/without family, working mothers and female primary breadwinners.
- Awareness and supports need to be provided for those in the ‘engaged-exhausted’ category, with interventions tackling solutions at the individual, team and organizational level.

### Conclusion

While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges to work and home life, it has also brought with it an opportunity to reflect on what is working well and what needs to change within the world of work and potentially home life too. By creating new workplace norms, there is the potential to create a new, more empowered and healthier workforce where everyone can thrive socially, mentally and physically. In turn, there is also the potential to evolve traditional gender norms that persist within the home and create a more balanced, harmonious and equitable environment for everyone.

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