

THE IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID-19 ON FEMALES' PRODUCTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 has dramatically affected every firm, institution and organization all over the world. It has drastically transformed working environments as almost every institution resorted to working from home. Every institution have set their own working conditions and allocated their working load among their workforce differently. Female workers who are married and have infants and toddlers were highly affected by working from home especially with the closure of nurseries and day-cares. This study explores the impact of working from home during COVID-19 lockdown on females' productivity in Jordan. To achieve this objective, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with females working in different sectors including; educational, banking, telecommunication and insurance. Data was coded and analyzed using NVIVO 12. The results show that working conditions vary widely among different institutions; where some have offered their female workers flexible working hours and others did not. The flexibility of working hours was found to have a significant impact on females' productivity especially those who have infants and toddlers.

Keywords: Working Conditions, Covid-19, Productivity, Lockdown, Females, Paid and Unpaid Work, Flexible Working Hours

INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has re-shaped the world and changed our normal life. It has hit every aspect of our lives (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021). Countries all over the world have taken different stringent procedures for the aim of slowing down and controlling the spread of the Coronavirus including; imposing the use of masks and hand sanitizers, promoting social distancing and partial or complete lockdown (Abazid et al., 2021). Therefore, every institution around the globe was affected by this pandemic; almost every institution was forced to close and shift to working from home due to strict health and safety procedures. Each institution has responded differently; they have set their own working conditions differently and distributed their working load among their workforce differently.

Working from home is not a novel concept; it has been out there for centuries; during medieval times, people used to work either in or around their homes. While, during the industrial revolution, there was a movement towards designated workplaces where workforce started to work in a more professional working environment; basically established factories and workstations that are more likely to be away from their homes. However, with the rise of information technology and telecommunication capabilities, work in general has become more intellectual and less manual. Therefore, the idea of working from home began to appear to the surface again; questioning how, when and where workforce can work (Christensen, 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19, working from home was not widely practiced. It was rather considered a luxury for high-income earners in senior level positions whose annual earning is above \$65,000 (Wang, 2021). For instance, before the outbreak of COVID-19 only 3.2% of the American workforce was working from home (Simovic, 2021), only 5.4% of the European workforce (Eurofound, 2020), and even less in the Middle East. However, currently working from home is the

buzz word. Literally, it has become the new normal just overnight, with an estimate of 81% of the global workforce being rushed into working from home (Savic, 2020). This sudden shift occurred while most workforce have little to zero experience of such situations and most institutions have not been prepared to support this kind of working conditions (Wang, 2021). Within the extant literature, much has been published about working from home and its benefits for both employees and employers during the last decade. These benefits range from potential increase in productivity, improvement in work-life balance, reduction in commuting time, increase in workforce motivation and improvement in controlling schedules and meeting deadlines (Moretti, 2020; Prasad, 2020). Given the large body of research on working from home, let us not forget that, all these studies were conducted prior the COVID-19 pandemic, when working from home was practiced occasionally, optionally, voluntary, infrequently or by some rather than most or all workers (Wang, 2021; Kniffin, 2020). Thus, some scholars differentiate between working from home at normal times and working from home during COVID-19: being optionally *vs* mandatory and claim that it is a completely new concept referred to as Mandatory Working From Home (MWFH) (Kniffin, 2020; Ford, 2020). As such, the previously listed benefits of working from home might not be applicable for MWFH (Wang, 2021; Kaduk, 2019). Additionally, even for potential benefits of MWFH, scholars claim that these benefits are not distributed equally between males and females (Christensen, 2020; Mustajab, 2020; Etheridge, 2020; Garrido, 2020). This gender inequality is driven by unequal division of paid work (employment) and unpaid work (time spent on domestic work) (Farre, 2020).

Generally, females are disproportionately burdened with childcare and household responsibilities. For instance, in the US, they spend almost twice as much time as males on unpaid work. Similarly, in Europe, they handle almost two-thirds of the unpaid work (Cui, 2020; United Nations, 2020) and in the Middle East, the percentage is even higher. Historically, pandemics have aggravated gender inequalities and COVID-19 is not an exception (Johnston, 2020). Several studies and official reports have proofed that COVID-9 increased domestic violence against females, disproportionate loss of employment among females and increased demand for unpaid care work on females (Cui, 2020; United Nations, 2020; Alon, 2020). As for married females with young children, the domestic workload has amplified during the COVID-19. It has left mothers with no option other than full-time child-care by themselves due to the closure of all educational institutions and the stringent restrictions of gatherings that prohibited any kind of extended family support in child-care (Cui, 2020; Clark, 2020; O'Sullivan, 2021). The disproportionate distribution of domestic duties means that the COVID-19 have enlarged the gap between females and males domestic workload which in turn will affect their productivity unequally (Johnston, 2020).

According to Cambridge Dictionary, productivity is defined as “the rate at which a person, company, or country does useful work” (Cambridge University Press, 2021). However, many scholars agree that productivity represents the efficiency of a worker, a firm, an institution, a sector or even an economy and can be measured as a ratio between output and input (Al-Qudah, 2019; Shrouf, 2020). Despite its importance as an indicator of efficiency, measuring productivity is challenging due to many reasons; for instance, tasks change and differ among workers, tasks might be performed differently by different workers and for some tasks time limits are not necessarily set. Nonetheless, studying productivity especially during COVID-19 is imperative to identify the optimal way for working from home considering the available resources and the capabilities and differences of the workforce. Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of working from home during COVID-19 lockdown on females’ productivity in Jordan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data was collected through 45 qualitative semi-structured interviews which were conducted with 25 married females and 20 unmarried females working in different sectors including;

educational, banking, telecommunication and insurance. The researcher deemed semi-structured interviews the most appropriate in this research because it fits with the exploratory nature of the study and enables the researcher to use a flexible list of open-ended questions based on the interview's topic while allowing the interviewee to elaborate, give examples, or re-direct the conversation into related hidden and interesting areas (Abdellatif, 2021).

Participation was voluntary and interviewees were informed that their responses would be anonymised and recorded. All interviews were conducted either over the phone or using Microsoft Teams. The interviews' questions were developed based on the research objectives and literature review and covered the following areas; working conditions, flexibility of working hours, changes in unpaid workload during COVID-19 and productivity during COVID-19. All interviews were conducted by the researcher between April and May 2021, using both English and Arabic. Each interview lasted between 20-40 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed and translated; afterwards data were coded and analyzed using NVIVO 12.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As for the first theme concerning working conditions, interviewees highlighted some important factors including; workload, monitoring and support. 40% of the interviewees reported an increase in their workload especially those working in the educational sector which influenced their work-home balance. This can be explained by the need not only to prepare for the class or lecture but also to record it in some instances, in addition to dedicate more time to communicate with students to answer their questions and sometimes to discuss some issues with their parents. Moreover, 50% of the interviewees claimed that they experienced different forms of monitoring from their managers and supervisors such as; have camera on, submit daily report and attend frequent check-up meetings. While most of the interviewees who experienced additional monitoring forms indicated that these practices helped them to stay focused and keep on track with their tasks, others felt it was an extra burden. Finally, 35% of the interviewees indicated that they received support from their institutions during working from home which helped them to perform their tasks and overcome the challenges they face. The following quotes demonstrate the variation of working conditions that our interviewees experienced,

"I am not happy at all about opening the camera while I am working, it's like I am being watched all the time, as if I am not trusted".

"I just can't handle it anymore. It's too much!! The amount of work I have been given is unbelievable. It seems it's never ending. COVID-19 is killing me mentally and physically".

"My employer has been amazing during COVID-19; we have got the best support ever. We communicate to discuss the tasks and timeframes and we chat all the time. We are really connected. We are doing really well".

As for the second theme relating to flexibility of working hours, only 30% of the interviewees were given the freedom to decide when and how to accomplish their tasks. This flexibility has massively helped the married females with young children. Those who were given flexible working hours seemed more relaxed and grateful for their institutions, while the others indicated that strict working hours was a huge burden. Some of the interviewees' responses are reflected in the following quotes,

“Can you imagine working continuously from 8 AM until 4 PM while three kids are screaming and fighting around you? It is driving me crazy! I am honestly thinking of resigning”.

“I am really grateful that I was given a flexible schedule. I have one year old twins, working while they are awake is absolutely impossible”

“I am so stressed and exhausted, sometimes I am in a meeting and my daughter is in the other room attending her online classes and keeps coming and going asking me questions. My new-born is on my lap and my little son wants me to play Lego with him. They just can't understand that I have work to be done. My employer is fed up with me asking for excuses. Oh I wish I can have someone to help, or I can work at my own timings”.

Regarding the third theme concerning the changes in unpaid workload during COVID-19, all interviewees confirmed that COVID-19 lockdown have caused a surge in their unpaid workload including; cooking, cleaning, teaching their children or young siblings and caring for their little ones. Only 5% of the married females claimed that they got some help from their husbands while 20% of the unmarried females got some help from their mothers and siblings. Some interviewees' commented,

“It's like they never become full, I feel like I am in the kitchen all day. Let me tell you something in a typical lockdown day, my son wants pancake for breakfast, my daughter wants a chocolate cake for snack and my husband wants roast chicken for dinner. I have piles of laundry and I have to do the homework with my son. On top of this I have my job, I have to record my classes and keep on touch with my students. It is insane”.

“Oh my God! Please don't remind me of that time. It felt like I have to be a superhero with 8 hands to be able to fulfill their needs”.

“Oh I can tell you, 24 hours caring for my baby, cleaning, cooking, sanitizing, playing with my girls with their Barbie house and above all my husband is complaining all the time from the kids' noise”.

Finally, regarding the last theme relating to productivity during COVID-19, 65% of the interviewees claimed that working from home has negatively affected their productivity. The surge of unpaid workload has slowed down their performance and ability to accomplish their paid workload. For married females with young children the decrease in the productivity is amplified. They highlighted the huge amount of interruptions and distraction they experienced while working from home. The other 35% of the interviewees reported that their productivity improved or remained the same as usual. They explained that this was the result of being offered flexible working hours, in addition of feeling more comfortable working from home at their own peace. Some of the interviewees' responses were:

“I am no longer productive. I used to produce 2-3 research papers a year. I barely finished one during 2020 and things are not brighter in 2021”.

“Being productive while having 4 kids setting next to you, shouting mommy mommy continuously is impossible”.

“To be honest, without my company's support and flexible working hours, I wouldn't make it. That's why I was able to complete all my tasks without delays”.

“I had to give my laptop sometimes to my son to attend his classes and wait until he finishes being able to do my work. Definitely, 2020 was not my best performance”.

“Yes I am more productive in COVID-19. I love working from home! Wearing my pyjamas, setting in my own comfortable bed and I am so happy working 24 hours”.

“You know I think if I were given the luxury of flexible working hours, I would have been more productive. But let me tell you something, they just don’t understand what we are going through as working mothers”.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research showed that females have different experiences in working from home. It was evident that working conditions vary widely among different institutions. Some females experienced a surge in their workload and different forms of monitoring while some reported being offered great support from their institutions. Additionally, the flexibility of working hours was not an option for most of the interviewees as most of their institutions were strict in their time slots. Moreover, the amount of unpaid work has amplified for all females; married and unmarried. For all these reasons, working from home has negatively affected females’ productivity especially those who have infants and toddlers. However, the flexibility of working hours was found to have a significant impact on maintaining or improving females’ productivity. Finally, this research suffered from some limitations regarding the number of interviews which could affect the generalizability of the findings. Thus, future research might consider investigating this phenomenon at a wider scale through using questionnaires or across different countries or even digging deeper to identify possible ways of supporting working mothers during lockdowns and similar situations.

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