

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF REMOTE EMPLOYEES' WORK – LIFE HARMONIZATION PRACTICES AND THEIR GENDERED DISCOURSES

MARIA SIMIONESCU (VLĂSCLEANU)

This study explores the gender dynamics of work – life harmonization among remote workers in Romania, with a focus on gender as a social structure. The paper's goal is to discover the personal activities performed by employees during remote workdays and the associated gendered discourses. The study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the subject. Data was collected through video call interviews with 22 parents working full-time remotely or in hybrid arrangements. The sample was selected using quota and snowball sampling techniques. The research identifies a significant time bind conflict for women, who often juggle household chores and childcare, alongside professional duties during remote workdays, experiencing stress and guilt as a result. In contrast, men typically prioritize leisure, and delegate childcare responsibilities, underscoring a disparity in how domestic tasks are shared. The study reveals that the time bind conflict forces women to adjust and develop practices, such as carrying out professional and domestic work activities simultaneously, or doing housework and childcare during work breaks in the remote working days. Our study highlights that such practices can significantly heighten women's stress suggesting that future research should focus specifically on stress levels among remote workers. The paper reveals that, while remote work offers many potential benefits, it can disadvantage women. To ensure that remote work truly supports the harmonization of work – personal life for both men and women, inclusive work structures are needed to address these gender-specific challenges.

Keywords: remote working; gender; work – life harmonization; division of household labor; childcare; leisure.

INTRODUCTION

Our motivation for this study comes from recognizing the importance of work – life harmonization for both men and women. Considering the evolving nature of work towards flexible work structures, such as remote working, and

Address of the corresponding author: Maria SIMIONESCU (VLĂSCLEANU), University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Bucharest, Romania, e-mail: vlasceanu.maria94@gmail.com; maria.vlasceanu1@s.unibuc.ro.

CALITATEA VIETII, XXXV, nr. 4, 2024, pp. 223–244, <https://doi.org/10.46841/RCV.2024.04.02>

drawing from sociological studies, we are eager to discover the gendered dynamics of work – life harmonization for remote workers in today’s Romania. Work – life issues are explored in the literature through various concepts that, while similar, take on different nuances, depending on their context. As we purposely choose the work – life harmonization concept, we believe it may require clarification.

The concept of work – life harmonization implies managing work and life collaboratively, unlike the ideas of balance or integration, which suggest handling them separately (Piderit 2007). This study supports Piderit’s view promoting harmonization as a collective effort involving the economic sector, families, and institutions. We consider that work – life harmonization requires “time work” (Flaherty 2003), efforts to adjust one’s own or others’ time management to organize life. This process involves harmonizing professional work, household duties, childcare, and leisure through collaboration and various tools and practices. This paper aims to explore remote workers’ practices in achieving work – life harmonization.

In order to achieve this aim, we continue this introduction with a brief examination of Romania’s broader context, focusing on how remote work interfere with family life, household labor, childcare, and gender as a social construct. According to the existent studies, telework adoption in Romania is among the lowest in Europe (Vasilescu 2023; Simionescu 2024), with only 6,6% of employees working remotely in 2021. Moreover, women tend to work remotely in a higher level than men, and remote working likelihood increases with parenthood, particularly among women, emphasizing the gendered nature of remote work in Romania (Simionescu 2024). Factors contributing to the low level of remote working in Romania include a workforce dominated by low-skilled labor and limited organizational support for telework (Vasilescu 2023) (Suciu and Petre 2022). Vasilescu (2023) further identifies other challenges associated with remote working in Romania, such as increased mental health strain, workload, and family responsibilities, issues that disproportionately impact women.

These challenges and the gendered nature of work in Romania, mostly faced by women, are related to the cultural expectations related to family life, specific to the country’s context. As the literature shows, the family institution in Romania continues to be considered the most important, compared to work, or to other areas of one’s life, like leisure time, politics, or religion, irrespective of gender (Popescu 2009; Simionescu 2024). Moreover, even if the Romanian family values support women’s participation in the labor market, this responsibility is doubled by the overall support of the housewife image of women (Popescu 2009), and has implications over the division of household and childcare labor.

Research on household and childcare labor division in Romania indicates that traditional gender roles remain prevalent, though some shifts toward equality were

noticed in the recent years, especially related to the childcare activities. Studies show that women predominantly handle household tasks like cooking, laundry, and cleaning, while men take on roles mainly involving home repairs (Chișea 2000); (Apostu 2015). According to the 2018' Gender Barometer, 80% of women identify themselves as primarily responsible for household tasks like laundry and ironing (80% of women), food preparing (77% of women), dishwashing (73% of women) and house cleaning (71% of women), while only about 25% of men consider themselves as main owner for these activities (Grunberg, Rusu, and Samoila 2018). In childcare, Romanian mothers typically manage daily care and educational duties, while fathers contribute to specific tasks like school drop-offs or shopping (Popescu 2009).

Considering the work – life harmonization (Piderit 2007) and time work (Flaherty 2003) concepts' explanations, along with the brief contextualization of the intersections between remote work, household labor, childcare and gender in Romania, we observe that there is a gap in the existent qualitative study of how these aspects interfere with the remote work. While remote work remains relatively uncommon in Romania, its gradual rise suggests potential for future growth. Therefore, this paper's main objective is to discover the personal activities (household labor, childcare, leisure) performed by respondents on the remote working days, and to analyze how these activities and the respondents' discourses about them vary by gender, considering gender as a social structure. To achieve this aim, the following sub-objectives are:

O1: Identify and categorize the personal activities performed by employees during remote working days, with a focus on household labor, childcare and leisure activities.

O2: Analyze and compare the respondents' discourses regarding performing personal activities during remote working days, with a focus on gender-based differences in attitudes and experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Theory

This study examines gender theory through a sociological lens, focusing on how remote work, household and childcare labor, and leisure are influenced by gendered societal structures. It reviews literature highlighting the distinction between sex and gender, a concept that gained prominence since second wave of feminism, notably through Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "*We are not born, but we become women*" (Beauvoir 2006), emphasizing women's needs for autonomy and shared growth with men. Margaret Mead reinforced this by stating

that “*Gender differences are a cultural creation*” (Mead 1961), rather than biology, a view supported by Judith Butler’s gender performativity concept (Butler 2004), and Erving Goffman’s symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1963). These theories collectively argue that gender is produced and expressed through social interactions, varying widely across different cultures.

The gender theory study is critical not only for understanding how gender is produced, but also for its consequences. Gender is an institutional system of social practices that categorizes individuals into distinct groups, namely men and women (Ridgeway 2004). This categorization based on gender is produced and reproduced, perpetuating social inequalities rooted in the division of labor among men and women, whether within households, between partners, or through occupational segregation. The materialist feminism (Delphy 1978) argues that both capitalism and patriarchy exploit women. From our perspective, contemporary work structures, such as remote working, may exacerbate this dual oppression, intensifying the challenges women face in harmonizing work and family responsibilities.

Gender and Household and Childcare Labor

Authors such as Hochschild, Coltrane, and Oakley refer to the relationship between gender and work, in both domestic and professional settings. Coltrane argues that women and men perform tasks as expressions of femininity and masculinity, respectively, with men often reinforcing their roles by avoiding certain activities (Coltrane 1989). His study of 20 dual-earner couples with school-aged children revealed that “*gender is produced through rough everyday practices and how adults are socialized by routine activity*” (Coltrane 1989). His findings suggest that when domestic duties are shared equally, fathers can develop “maternal thinking” (Coltrane 1989), leading to a shift in the social meaning of gender away from personality, and toward social interaction. We agree with the social meaning of gender in the division of domestic work, and admire the findings on how routine activity socializes individuals in performing and assuming household chores and childcare. However, we believe that Coltrane’s use of the concept of *maternal thinking* reflects the assumption that caregiving is fundamentally feminine. We disagree with this view, as gender theory proves that caregiving roles are socially constructed.

To reinforce this view, we draw on Ann Oakley’s perspective that skills associated with domestic tasks, such as ironing, are shaped by socialization, and emphasizes that both men and women are equally capable of performing these tasks (Oakley 1974). Moreover, as women worked to move beyond the traditional housewife role, and joined the workforce, the power dynamics within couples resulted in “second shift” (Hochschild 2012). This concept refers to the additional

unpaid housework women do after their paid employment. Through her interviews with women, Hochschild observed this increased burden, and called it a “time bind” (Hochschild 1997), which describes the conflict between work and family time, particularly for women. This conflict often leads to the feeling of not having enough time to meet both career and family responsibilities adequately, forcing women to develop strategic practices to manage this imbalance.

Hochschild argued that “*Work has become home and home becomes work*” (Hochschild 2014) as the stressful home life made individuals choose to work, rather than stay home to perform domestic and childcare activities. Through their innovative data collection of objective and subjective measures of stress, Damaske, Smyth and Zawadzki confirm the Hochschild’s hypothesis, proving that not only the stress levels at work are lower, but combining work and home activities increases the overall stress experienced by both men and women (Damaske, Smyth, and Zawadzki 2014). This finding leads us to believe that the new ways of working, such as remote work, may increase stress levels for those engaged, due to overlapping responsibilities into the same time and place.

Gender and Remote Working

Exploring the professional life, we find it relevant to discuss how the progress made in technology in the recent decades has shifted the ways of working, from traditional, on-site working towards remote work. This shift has been popularized even more during COVID-19 pandemic, becoming the best solution for business continuity in a pandemic world (Vasilescu 2023). Post-pandemic, many organizations continue to offer remote working, supporting employees in benefiting from reduced commute time and better work – life balance (Osnowitz 2005). However, recent studies revealed that, during COVID-19 lockdown, when lots of employees worked remotely, women took on more domestic responsibilities, while men increased their paid work, leading to an unequal division of household labor (Waddell, Overall, Chang, and Hammond 2021).

Considering Waddell’s research findings, along with evidence from the introduction chapter that women tend to work remotely more than men, especially with the appearance of children in their lives (Simionescu 2024), we believe that remote work may exacerbate the imbalance in household and childcare responsibilities for women. This arrangement often leaves them bearing the “second shift” (Hochschild 2012), by doubling their responsibilities, “*having in fact two jobs, one on the professional market and one at home*” (Popescu 2009). Although the modern workforce is becoming more inclusive, and remote work can save time by eliminating commuting, it also risks overburdening remote working women, as we understood from the existing literature. We believe this overload can have a significant impact, from limiting career aspirations, to creating feelings of

guilt or alienation, especially for women who want to have it all (both professional and personal fulfillment).

METHODOLOGY

Considering the main scope and the objectives of the research, we have decided upon two research dimensions, both with multiple subordinate indicators, as presented in *Table no. 1*.

Table no. 1

Operationalization of concepts

Objective	Dimensions	Indicators
To discover the personal activities (household labor, childcare, leisure) performed by respondents on the remote working days, and to analyze how these activities and the respondents' discourses about them vary by gender, considering gender as a social structure.	Personal activities performed during remote working days	Remote working habits
		Household labor activities performed during remote working days
		Childcare activities performed during remote working days
	Discourses about performing personal activities during remote working days	Leisure activities performed during remote working days
		Men's discourses about performing personal activities during remote working days
Women's discourses about performing personal activities during remote working days		

Method, Technique, and Research Tool

This study follows a qualitative approach to gain a thorough, in-depth understanding into the complexities of harmonizing the time between work, family, and leisure activities during remote working days. The purpose is to comprehend and interpret the dynamics of this harmonization, as well as to explore the experiences and discourses surrounding these practices. To obtain the sociological data, we have opted for the sociological investigation method, by utilizing the intensive interview technique. This method was chosen for its ability to unveil detailed insights into the personal activities (household labor, childcare, leisure)

performed by respondents on the remote working days, and the respondents' discourses about them.

As previously used by other researchers in their studies (Coltrane 1989; Hochschild 2012), the in-depth opinion interview research technique enabled us to discover the distinct practices employed by remote-working parents in order to harmonize the remote work, while juggling household responsibilities and leisure time. Additionally, the paper aimed to investigate whether and how the respondent's discourses differ based on gender. The selected instrument for this research was the semi-structured interview grid (presented in the *Appendix 2*). The advantage of using the semi-structured interview grid was related to the flexibility to introduce additional questions as needed during the interview process (Chelcea 2001). To establish a closer connection with the respondent, an individual research approach was adopted. This involved conducting unique interviews with each respondent via a single video-call meeting, allowing for the exploration of their opinions, narratives, and attitudes at that specific time.

The Procedure of Collecting and Analyzing Empirical Data

The study utilized a qualitative method involving 22 interviews, 12 with mothers and 10 with fathers, to explore the phenomenon among remote workers. The interviews were conducted through face-to-face video calls, primarily via WhatsApp and Teams, from October 2023 to March 2024. One interview was conducted in person at a restaurant, to prevent interruptions and ensure comfort. The preference for online interviews stemmed from the study's focus on remote workers, allowing a cost-effective and convenient method (Irani 2019) that still captured non-verbal reactions, critical for understanding the participants' experiences. The use of video call interviews effectively merged the benefits of traditional in-person and phone interviews, aligning well with the remote work nature of the participants.

The interviews were recorded with participant consent using the Voice Memos application, chosen for its high-quality audio and storage capabilities. The research considered theoretical recommendations (Babbie 2010) for organizing information, with data being transcribed, organized, coded, and interpreted to fulfill the research purpose. The non-verbal data (gestures, facial expressions, interjections), were noted and then analyzed alongside verbal responses, allowing for a better interpretation of respondents' experiences and attitudes. Moreover, the non-verbal reactions observed during the interviews helped us in refine our semi-structured interview guide during the interviews, by prompting follow-up questions, whenever verbal or non-verbal cues suggested ambiguity or raised new issues within the respondents' narratives. The data was organized according to research dimensions, and coded for synthesis based on thematic categories

identified in the concept operationalization section. The tool used for this step was Microsoft Excel.

The Research Universe

The research targeted individuals raising children with their partners who were engaged in either teleworking or hybrid working arrangements. Most participants were based in Bucharest, predominantly living in apartments, with a few residing in Bucharest's suburbs or smaller cities in Romania, typically in houses. All respondents had higher education degrees, with roughly half holding bachelor's degrees, and the other half possessing master's or doctoral degrees. They worked in various sectors, such as IT, human resources, education, reporting, and finance, with about half holding managerial positions. Most respondents worked full-time (40 hours per week), while only one worked part-time (30 hours per week).

By the teleworking form of working, we define the activity of performing job duties from a location different than the employer's place of work, by using information and communication technology (Parlamentul Romaniei 2021). Hybrid working refers to the policy adopted by certain organizations to allow employees to split their work between the office and remote locations, and was the work arrangement of three-quarters of the study's participants, while the remaining quarter exclusively teleworked.

Most respondents were married, with only one engaged, and the average couple relationship duration was 13 years, ranging from 4 to 20 years. The study focused on partners with children, motivated by the increased household responsibilities associated with child-rearing. The 22 participants collectively had 32 children in total, aged between 6 months and 13 years. Inspired by Coltrane's (1989) research on household labor division among couples with school-aged children, this study specifically included families with children under 14 years old to explore the dynamics of juggling household and childcare labor and leisure time during remote working days.

The Interview Sample

Given the actuality of the studied topic, we faced challenges in acquiring statistical data on teleworking or hybrid working individuals in Romania. As already mentioned in the Introduction chapter, there were only 6.6% of the employed population which worked remotely in 2021 (Simionescu 2024). This made it difficult to find suitable participants. To address this, quota sampling and snowball sampling were employed, based on specific criteria, such as being a parent and a remote or hybrid worker. Quota sampling was appropriate for the

study because the universe of research is heterogeneous and vast, while snowball sampling helped expand the pool by encouraging respondents to recommend others from their network. Most participants of this study were either directly contacted by us, or referred through us by our network and the snowball sampling method.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Personal Activities Performed During Remote Working Days

To discover the respondents' practices related to work-life harmonization on remote working days, we investigated their daily routines and activities. This included examining their habits, daily schedules, and the specific activities they engage in during breaks, while working remotely. The most encountered narrative about their remote working habits was that their days varied greatly depending on work demands. We also encountered some exceptions from this narrative, as a few respondents mentioned that their days are usually very busy, while others mentioned that busy days are very rare, and that they usually manage to perform personal activities during the remote working days.

Remote work seems to provide a fruitful context for work – life harmonization (Piderit 2007), as little over three-quarters of the respondents admitted they are engaged in personal tasks during the workday. The performed activities mainly refer to laundry, childcare, and leisure (sleeping late, reading, going to the gym, or watching movies). There were also some respondents, mostly women, who mentioned vacuum cleaning (manual or robots), dishwashing, cooking, or grocery shopping activities, but to a smaller degree as compared with the first three activities mentioned above.

Household Labor

Half of the respondents who mentioned they performed personal activities during their work schedule mentioned that they take care of laundry. The laundry activities refer mostly to starting the washing machine during the day. This task is followed by another one, respectively putting the clothes to dry. In one case a hybrid working respondent mentioned also about doing the third step as well, respectively ironing the clothes. As the woman mentioned, she manages to perform this task during the work call meetings in which she doesn't need to speak: *"Ironing is what I do during in the meetings if I don't have to talk and just listen, I can easily iron laundry"* (A., woman, 40). The respondent mentioned during the interview that, while her husband prefers working from the office, she prefers a hybrid work arrangement. This allows her to enjoy the social interaction of office days, while using remote work days to complete household tasks, such as

vacuuming and laundry. She explained that, by managing these chores during the week, she can avoid having to do them on weekends, providing her with more leisure time. By her explanation, she offered an example of time work (Flaherty 2003).

We also encountered another narrative from a woman who seemed to judge herself harshly for failing at simple household task, specifically forgetting to take the laundry out of the washing machine when it is over, as she focuses on her work: *“During my work breaks, which are very, very rare, I start the washing machine and drier, it’s a matter of a few minutes but anyway I am failing terribly at this, I forget the clothes in the machine. [...] There are days when those 3 minutes that I use to put my child’s laundry to wash matter so much because after I have clothes to dress him. If I didn’t wash them, I wouldn’t have (A, woman, 32).* The respondent expressed feelings of guilt for not completing simple tasks, like laundry, despite recognizing they only take a few minutes. This guilt was paired with a strong sense of responsibility to ensure her child’s needs were met. She told us that, while her husband works on-site and sometimes travels for work, she works remotely in a senior HR role at a very results-driven organization, and she is also performing secondary work activities in some evenings. Throughout the interview, she appeared stressed, frequently checked her laptop, and mentioned needing to end the call for an urgent meeting. This highlights the pressure she feels while working from home, by having the means to perform household labor, but in the same time, for not having the time to do it, leading to self-criticism over her parenting.

The home cleaning activities that around a quarter of respondents, mostly women, mentioned they sometimes perform during the remote working days refer to dusting and vacuum cleaning, either traditionally or by starting the robot vacuum cleaner. One woman, working on a hybrid schedule in a multinational company, told us that she tries to manage her overall workload to be able to vacuum clean during her remote working day: *“The day of working from home I try to be the day of vacuuming. Since we have a cat, we must do it about 2 times a week” (A., woman, 40).* Another woman, mother of three, working in an NGO for multiple projects, mentioned her strategic practice of effective working by aligning her household labor tasks with her job meetings: *“I work on the idea of simplifying and working efficiently. Before I have a meeting, I start the dishwasher and the washing machine. If I have a 30-minute break, I vacuum clean the house. These are simple things, but they can do a lot. It’s not like if you have a break, there’s nothing you can do. Doing this helps me a lot.” (A. M., woman, 35).* She considers that it’s a pity not to make the most out of the work breaks, and by that she refers to household labor activities.

A male respondent, working fully remotely, while his wife works only from the work site, explained that he took on household cleaning tasks during remote working days because his wife was unable to do them: *“The problem is that, for 1 year and a half, my wife has an incipient form of asthma. She has developed an allergy and, physically, she can no longer help me clean the house. I vacuum clean and wash the house weekly [...] I cannot say that I wanted to clean the house, but she developed this allergy to dog hair and it’s for real, it’s not a joke, she even went to the doctor”* (L., male, 38). During the interview with L., he mentioned that, because he works at his job very effectively and only remotely, he can perform personal activities during his work schedule. Besides vacuum cleaning, he also does the dishes, plays on the console, goes to Karate or prepares his child lunch sometimes. This case confirms Coltrane’s argument that men often reinforce their roles by avoiding certain activities. However, L. doesn’t avoid these activities, he is involved in the household labor, but he avoids to associate himself with those tasks, justifying his involvement with other reasons, such as his wife’s asthma.

As already mentioned by the literature on division of household labor in Romania, (Chipea 2000), (Popescu 2009), (Apostu 2015), (Grunberg, Rusu, and Samoila 2018), the study shows that women are still associated with a primary role for household labor and childcare. Performing cooking activities was rarely mentioned by men attending this study. Regarding this activity, women mentioned that being able to put some food in the oven or prepare a soup in the morning represents a great advantage: *“I throw a packet of food in the oven, it is a small activity, but it matters in the grand scheme of things”* (A., woman, 32). Women usually told us that even these activities take only a few minutes to perform, especially when automatic appliances are used, their importance means a lot for the daily or weekly household and childcare routines. Hearing their discourses, we noticed how they tend to minimize the effort of doing these cooking activities, especially as they mentioned performing multiple household labor activities in parallel with their work meetings, tasks, and deadlines. This overload can accumulate and lead to chronic stress or guilt, as some women experienced.

What we find insightful is how women mention expressions such as “take advantage” or “make the most of it” in their narrative, as remote working offers a true benefit that it’s a shame not to use. For example, a female respondent recently returned from the 2 years maternity leave and who works entirely from home, while his husband works mostly from the office, mentioned: *“I can start the washing machine and the drier. At lunch, I can prepare something quick, like a salad or an omelet, or using the miracle pot I can quickly prepare a chicken stew. How long it takes you? 15 minutes to prepare it and, anyway, we have a one-hour lunch break. It is a time that you can use well. Also, there is the commute time to the office you save as well [...] If I went to the office, I would not get to cook. I take*

advantage of this time, this hour between 9–10 in the morning, if I am at home I can cook a soup and leave it to cool and then put it in the fridge [...]. These are details, but they matter” (I., woman, 33).

This “taking advantage of time” narrative relates to “second shift” (Hochschild 2012) that women face, as they, in fact, perform time work (Flaherty 2003) to harmonize personal and professional responsibilities by using the remote working opportunities. While remote work can be seen as a saving solution, we believe it may actually increase the pressure on women to manage both home and work tasks simultaneously, potentially worsening their situation. In this context, we argue that remote work can lead women to experience dual oppression, as described by Delphy (1978), stemming from both patriarchy and capitalism.

Care Work

Childcare is common for remote workers, with about half of those who engage in personal activities during work hours reporting that they perform childcare. A female respondent who works full remotely and whose husband works in a demanding, on-site job told us her experience: *“When I’m home, my mother-in-law takes them outside to play. It’s a little chaos because they both (children) come over me, they always want something, only the hour they watch TV is quiet and, when they’re home, I know I’m not productive” (O., women, 40).* Similarly, another woman working on a hybrid schedule in a multinational company shared her experiences of managing work while her children was home during the summer holidays from kindergarten: *“He stayed at home and it was more complicated, we took 2 weeks off and we also took him to his grandparents, we tried to make a program as much as possible, with many cartoons” (L., women, 41).* To remain productive while working from home with children, parents often use strategic practices, like having their children watch cartoons or taking them to play outside. However, the most encountered solution is leaving the children with grandparents or a babysitter, but grandparents are the most common choice for respondents.

Supervising the children, feeding them, and putting them to sleep are activities that only a few respondents perform during their remote work, as these activities require a lot of time and energy for the parents. On the other side, an encountered activity during remote work is commuting to rapidly take or pick up the children to/from school, kindergarten, extra-curricular activities, or grandparents. For example, this woman that works only remotely, while her husband works only from the office site explained that, despite usually having high volume of work herself, she is the one picking up the child from school: *“Between these work sessions, I also take the big child from school. It happens to me to have some meeting calls during this time, and I just join the call from the car, from my phone to listen” (O., woman, 40).* Both men and women mentioned they often

drive during work calls where they are not required to speak, or work on their laptops in various locations, like parking lots, coffee shops, and libraries.

Setting Boundaries to Unplug from Work – Leisure Activities

Unexpected findings about remote working habits reveal that some employees use their remote work time to engage in leisure activities, whenever their workload permits. Out of the personal activities that the respondents mentioned they perform during their remote working days, around a third of the respondents mentioned they perform leisure activities. Since usually during the work week days the children are at school or kindergarten, the work breaks of remote workers gain various forms, such as sleeping late, performing morning or evening gym/ karate classes, reading, watching movies on streaming platforms, playing on a console, or having a coffee with a neighbor.

A father of two under 2 years children, whose wife is currently on maternity leave, shared that even with her at home and a hired babysitter, managing childcare for both children is still challenging. Although a second babysitter would have been helpful, he chose to be more involved himself, due to the financial costs. He works on a hybrid schedule, and mentioned that during breaks from remote work, he values the opportunity to rest and sleep: *“I wake up just half an hour before the work program starts. I try to sleep as much as possible, it’s because of fatigue with children”* (S., male, 40). Similarly, a mother working fully remotely in a leadership role at a well-known IT corporation shared that, while she appreciates remote work for saving two hours of daily commuting, time she currently spends with her 8-year-old son, she misses the social interaction from the office. To address this, she has developed a habit of having coffee with a female neighbor when their schedules align: *“When my neighbor works from home, I have a coffee with her, but if I have days with many call meetings, I don’t manage to do this”* (R., woman, 40). These two stories highlight how these respondents perform time work (Flaherty 2003) to meet both their needs for social interaction or rest with their professional responsibilities, demonstrating effective work – life harmonization (Piderit 2007).

Analyzing gender-wise, the proportion of men and women doing leisure activities during work breaks is similar, with both men and women engaging in leisure activities during their work breaks. However, analyzing the overall distribution of personal activities performed during the remote working days, women generally engage in household labor and childcare activities during their work breaks, while men engage in leisure, childcare, and only dishwashing, as a household chore. In conclusion, examining leisure time in the context of work – life harmonization reveals diverse perspectives. However, it’s evident that leisure

time holds significant value, serving as an opportunity for relaxation, physical exercise, self-care, and connection with the loved ones.

Gendered Discourses about Performing Personal Activities during Remote Working

Analyzing the gender differences regarding performing personal activities during the remote work, we discovered that women often feel responsible for using effectively the extra time (gained from work breaks and no commuting) to perform household chores and childcare duties. In contrast, men generally view remote work as a benefit for them to be able to spend more time with their children, engage in leisure activities or offer their support, if needed. They typically don't feel responsible to use the extra time gained with remote work to get involved in household labor, such as food preparing, laundry, home cleaning or other administrative tasks.

Women are the only ones who said they prepare meals during the remote workdays, highlighting the concept of "time bind" (Hochschild 1997), where they experience conflict between work and family time. This time bind leads to a crunch time, where primarily women feel they do not have enough time to meet both career and family responsibilities adequately, leading them to develop specific practices to manage this conflict. One practice is performing domestic work during work breaks, such as preparing a soup in the remote workdays mornings, so it can cool until noon to be able to put it in the fridge, or use the oven or air fryer before a call to have food ready while they work. Another practice is multitasking, ironing during a work call that doesn't require them to speak. Women are also primarily responsible for doing laundry, including running the washing machine, dryer, and occasionally ironing. Men reported doing laundry during remote work only rarely.

From the interviews, it appears that both men and women working remotely engage in childcare activities to a similar extent. Despite their distribution seems similar, their discourses about this experience differ. Working while the children are at home was described by women as "weird" (A., woman, 29) "chaotic" (O., woman, 40), "complicated" (L., women, 41), "unproductive" (O., woman, 40) or "throw all the balls in the air and see what falls" (A., woman, 32), while men describe this experience differently. Men mentioned that when the children are home during their workdays, they ask the grandparents or babysitter to take care of the children.

A man in a senior managerial role shared that, although he is expected to work fully from the office, he has an informal agreement at work allowing him to start later in the day. He remains available via phone or laptop most of the time, including weekends and holidays. His routine involves waking up late due to staying up at night to read or work, checking emails from home, going to the gym,

and then heading to work after lunch. Despite his flexible schedule, he mentioned that during his child's school breaks, either his mother or his wife (on her remote workdays) take care of the child: *“On vacation, she (child) stays with the grandparents or if A. (wife) works from home, she stays with her, she gives her something to do, generally if she works from home she stays with the child, if I stay, I can't stay because I have to leave [...] to go to the gym and then to work”* (A., male, 42). His perspective and time work (Flaherty 2003) illustrates a form of work – life harmonization that prioritizes personal needs.

These perspectives shows that remote working has a double standard regarding childcare availability, because mothers work from home with their children around, when it is the case, while fathers don't do it as much, asking for someone else to cover for their part. This gendered way of perceiving the remote working days with children reflects the time bind, which is felt primarily by women, as they are perceived, by men and by themselves, as main caregivers. As already stated in the existed literature that the work and home responsibilities combined increase the individual's level of stress (Damaske, Smyth, and Zawadzki 2014), and now confirmed by our findings, women feel a higher level of stress to balance dual responsibilities. In contrast, from the conversations with men about spending time with their children during the remote workday, it seems that they perceive it more as a benefit, rather than a responsibility. They discuss how beautiful is to be able to leave the office room to see, hug and kiss the children during a work break.

Three remote working fathers told us about their childcare experience time during the remote workday:

“When he wakes up, if I don't have to work, I go to him because it's a cuddle time and it's pleasant, I think I spend half an hour with him” (S., male, 36).

“It's the simple fact that I go to the kitchen, make myself another coffee, and see the children. It's nice to come and they see me and grab my leg to take them in my arms and kiss. It's like an extra benefit for me, and there may be cases when an urgent situation may appear, and I am needed during the day.” (R., male, 32).

“I still take breaks during the day, I leave the office room, I talk to the children. These are 5-minute breaks to unwind my legs [...] but that is all I do, I work until the evening” (C., male, 40).

Despite the three fathers have a similar context at home, as their wives do not work, both S. and R.'s wives being on 2-year maternity leave and C.'s wife being a stay-at-home parent, the C. discourse differentiated from the other two. While S. and R. feel content with their current arrangement, C. shows a sense of guilt, as he resents working long hours and not spending enough time with his child. During

the interview, he mentions that despite working fully remotely, he activates in a very demanding environment that requires his full attention during the work hours. Although he appreciates being well-compensated, he admitted feeling regret over working long hours, and not spending enough time with his child.

In conclusion, the analysis of gender dynamics in remote work shows that women typically bear a greater burden of household and childcare responsibilities than men. Women often feel a strong duty to use their time efficiently for household chores and childcare. In contrast, men generally see remote work as a benefit to spend more time with their children, and to engage in leisure activities, without feeling responsible to handle household tasks, or be the primary care taker during their work schedule. While both genders engage in childcare during remote workdays, women often express more overwhelming sentiments about working from home with children present, whereas men tend to delegate these responsibilities and enjoy more relaxed interactions with their children during breaks.

CONCLUSIONS

To discover practices that enhance work – life harmony for remote workers, we focused on two research dimensions: the personal activities remote workers engage in during workdays and their discussions about these practices, with a consideration of gender differences. Regarding the first dimension, we discovered that remote work provides a propitious context for work – life harmonization, as approximately three-quarters of respondents engage in personal activities during work hours. They predominantly involve in household chores, childcare, and leisure activities such as reading or physical exercising. Some other respondents, mostly women, also mentioned performing tasks like vacuuming, dishwashing, cooking, pet care or others.

A few women report feeling guilty for not meeting their own expectations for domestic work due to prioritizing their professional responsibilities. This guilt emotion is related to the Hochschild (1997) time bind conflict, and it is a burden specifically mentioned by women. Women often mention cooking activities, particularly highlighting the advantage of the remote working days to cook, especially by using automatic pots or cooking machines. To face the Hochschild (2012) second shift, women often perform time work (Flaherty 2003) to align cleaning or cooking tasks with work schedules, optimizing their time schedules.

During remote workdays, childcare is a common activity, but to stay productive, they use strategic practices, like letting children watch TV, play outside, or stay with grandparents or babysitters. Parents often commute for school drop-offs or pickups, and some work and have work calls from cars or versatile

locations. The unexpected findings on remote working habits revealed that many employees value the ability to engage in leisure activities when their workload permits, proving that the organizations that offer remote work truly play their part by providing a context for employees to enhance their work – life harmonization (Piderit 2007). About a third of respondents engage in leisure activities, like sleeping late, attending gym classes, reading, or socializing when work demands are low.

Concerning the second dimension, the comparison of the men's and women's discourses on performing personal activities during remote working days, the study reveals that women often feel a heightened sense of responsibility to effectively utilize the time gained from remote work and they primarily allocate it to household chores and childcare duties, and less on leisure. On the contrary, men tend to view remote work as a benefit to spend more time with their children, and to engage in leisure activities, without feeling as responsible for household tasks as women do. This highlights a disparity in how household labor and childcare responsibilities are shared, suggesting that men do not equally share these responsibilities, often prioritizing their well-being and leisure time. Therefore, the pressure of the second shift (Hochschild 2012) is felt by women in a higher level, thus creating the "time bind" (Hochschild 1997) conflict, stress and, a feeling of guilt.

Both men and women engage in childcare during remote work, but they express different sentiments about the experience. Women often feel overwhelmed by the challenge of balancing childcare and professional productivity, highlighting the difficulties they face when they must work while the children are home. In contrast, men tend to better delegate childcare responsibilities, and enjoy the occasional time spent with their children during work breaks. This difference in tone illustrates how the burden of the second shift (Hochschild 2012) often falls more heavily on the women. Having in mind this difference of approach, we can argue that the men encountered in the study do not equally share the childcare responsibilities with the women, and implicitly, did not develop the sense of ownership on childcare labor or, as the author calls it, "maternal thinking" (Coltrane 1989). In contrast, they delegate childcare to remain professionally productive, without putting their well-being at risk for meeting multiple roles at once.

Our research confirms the traditional division of household and childcare labor already mentioned by existing studies in Romania (Chipea 2000), (Popescu 2009), (Apostu 2015), (Grunberg, Rusu, and Samoila 2018), (Simionescu 2024), showing the increased burden of the "second shift" (Hochschild 2012) is mostly experienced by women. Despite the fact that remote work offers flexibility and an opportunity for work – life harmonization, women still feel the "time bind"

(Hochschild 1997) conflict, as they mentioned they lack time to adequately meet career and family responsibilities. The study reveals that this conflict forces women to develop strategies, such as carrying out professional and domestic work activities simultaneously, or doing housework and childcare during work breaks to manage their overall responsibilities while working remotely. Performing professional work followed by domestic work at home increase the stress levels, as already demonstrated by Damaske, Smyth and Zawadzki (2014). Our study aims to highlight that women's practices we encountered in our research (multitasking or skipping proper work breaks) can significantly heighten women's stress. We suggest that future research should focus specifically on stress levels among remote workers.

In conclusion, while remote work offers many potential benefits, it can also disadvantage women. Delphy (1978)' view of women experiencing dual oppression by capitalism and patriarchy remains relevant in the context of remote work in Romania, where working remotely may worsen rather than alleviate their situation. As stated in the introduction, our study was motivated by the recognition of the importance of work – life harmonization, seen as a collective effort involving the economic sector, families, and institutions (Piderit 2007), a process that require “time work” (Flaherty 2003). To ensure that remote work supports genuine work – life harmonization for both men and women, further research is needed to develop inclusive remote work structures that address these gender-specific challenges, such those presented in this study.

Appendix 1

The Sample's Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Gen	Age	City of residence	Marital status	Children	Current professional status	Partner's occupation	Highest education level	Industry	Contribution at work	Type of remote working	Weekly working hours	Secondary work activity
M	38	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Doctor's degree	Education	people manager	1-2 days per month WFH	30-39 hours	No
M	32	Bucharest	married	1	entrepreneur	CIM	Master's degree	Education	entrepreneur	1-2 days per month WFH	50-80 hours	No
F	33	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	Human resources	individual contributor	1-2 days per month WFO	20-29 hours	No
F	35	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	IT	individual contributor	1-2 days per month WFO	40-49 hours	No
F	32	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	IT	individual contributor	1-2 days per month WFO	50-80 hours	Yes
M	36	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	CIM	Master's degree	Data reporting & Analytics	people manager	1-2 days per month WFO	30-39 hours	No
F	40	Crevedia	married	2	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	Customer support	individual contributor	2-3 days per week WFO	30-39 hours	No
F	33	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	Finance	individual contributor	2-3 days per week WFO	40-49 hours	No
F	40	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	Data reporting & Analytics	individual contributor	2-3 days per week WFO	40-49 hours	No
F	35	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	Operations	people manager	2-3 days per week WFO	40-49 hours	No
F	41	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	Human resources	individual contributor	2-3 days per week WFO	40-49 hours	No
F	29	Voluntari	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	Human resources	individual contributor	2-3 days per week WFO	40-49 hours	Yes
M	40	Bucharest	engaged	2	full-time worker	CIM	Bachelor's degree	Finance	individual contributor	2-3 days per week WFO	30-39 hours	No
F	35	Rosu	married	3	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	IT	people manager	50% WFH & 50% WFO daily	50-80 hours	Yes
M	42	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	IT	people manager	50% WFH & 50% WFO daily	20-29 hours	No
M	36	Bucharest	married	3	full-time worker	CIM	Bachelor's degree	IT	individual contributor	50% WFH & 50% WFO daily	30-39 hours	No
F	40	Campina	married	2	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	Engineering	individual contributor	full WFH	30-39 hours	No
F	40	Bucharest	married	1	full-time worker	full-time worker	Bachelor's degree	Video production	people manager	full WFH	30-39 hours	No
M	38	Bucharest	married	2	full-time worker	full-time worker	Master's degree	IT	people manager	full WFH	20-29 hours	No
M	40	Campina	married	2	full-time worker	Stay at home	Bachelor's degree	IT	people manager	full WFH	40-49 hours	No
M	33	Bucharest	married	1	part-time worker (6h)	part-time worker (6h)	Master's degree	IT	people manager	full WFH	30-39 hours	Yes
M	32	Bucharest	married	2	full-time worker	full-time worker	Doctor's degree	Education	people manager	full WFH	50-80 hours	Yes

Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Grid (main topics)

A. Socio – Demographic profile

- A1. What is your gender?
- A2. What is your age?
- A3. Can you tell me what is the area of residence and the city you live in?
- A4. What is your marital status?
- A5. How many children do you have and how old are your children?
- A6. Apart from your partner and children, do you live with anyone else?

B. Employee profile

- B1. What is your current employment status? But your partner's one?
- B2. What is the last level of education you have graduated?
- B3. What industry do you work in?
- B4. What is the function/role you are currently activating in?
- B5. Do you have a leadership position?
- B6. On average, how many days do you work from home per week/month? How would you characterize this working arrangement?
- B7. On average, how many hours do you work per week?
- B8. Do you also carry out secondary work activities, in addition to the function already discussed?

C. Personal activities performed during remote working days

- C1. How does your usual remote working day look like? What is your usual schedule?
- C2. Tell me about the habits you have on the remote working days. How does your day start? How do you take work breaks? What do you do during breaks?
- C3. Do you manage to perform any other activities, non-work related in the remote working days?
If yes: What kind of non-work-related activities do you usually manage to slip into the schedule when you are working from home?
- C4. Do you perform any household labor activities during remote working days?
If yes: What kind of household labor activities do you usually manage to slip into the schedule when you are working from home? How do you feel about performing these activities during remote working days?
- C5. Do you perform any childcare activities during remote working days?
If yes: What kind of childcare activities do you usually manage to slip into the schedule when you are working from home? How do you feel about performing these activities during remote working days?
- C6. Do you perform any leisure activities during remote working days?
If yes: What kind of leisure activities do you usually manage to slip into the schedule when you are working from home? How do you feel about performing these activities during remote working days?
- C7. Please tell me about your experience and habits with working from home when the child/children are also at home. How do you manage to supervise them during your working hours?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apostu, Iulian. (2015). *Căsătoria între stabilitate și disoluție*. Bucuresti: Tritonic.
- Babbie, Earl. (2010). *Practica cercetării sociale*. Iasi: Polirom.
- Beauvoir, Simone. (2006). *Al doilea sex, ediția a III-a, Vol.VI*. Bucuresti: Univers.

- Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Chelcea, Septimiu. (2001). *Metodologia cercetării sociologice. Metode cantitative și calitative*. București: Economica.
- Chipea, Floare. (2000). *Femeia în contextul schimbării. Statusuri, roluri, identități*. Oradea: Ed. Universității din Oradea.
- Coltrane, Scott. (1989). Household labor and the routine production of gender. *Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems*, 473–490.
- Damaske, Sarah, Smyth Joshua and Zawadzki Matthew. (2014). Has Work Replaced Home as a Haven? Re-examining Arlie Hochschild's Time Bind Proposition with Objective Stress Data. *National Institute of Health Public Access*, 139–138.
- Delphy, Christine. (1978). *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*. London: Verso.
- Flaherty, Michael G. (2003). Time work: Customizing temporal experience. *Social psychology quarterly*, 17–33.
- Goffman, Erving. (1963). *Stigma*. London: Penguin Books.
- Grunberg, Laura, Rusu Andreea and Samoila Elena (2018). *Barometru de gen*. București: Centrul de Dezvoltare Curriculară și Studii de Gen: FILIA și Centrul de Formare și Suport pentru o Societate Echilibrată.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. (2012). *The Second Shift*. London: Penguin Books.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. (1997). *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. (2014). *Social Stratification; Chapter the Time Bind. When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Irani, Elliane. (2019). The Use of Videoconferencing for Qualitative Interviewing: Opportunities, Challenges, and Considerations. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 8(1): 3–8.
- Mead, Margaret. (1961). *Coming of age in Samoa*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Oakley, Ann. (1974). *The Sociology of Housework*. London: Robertson.
- Osnowitz, Debra. (2005). Managing Time in Domestic Space Home – Based Contractors and Household Work. *Gender and Society*, 83–103.
- Parlamentul României. (2021, September 1). Legea nr 81 din 31 Martie 2018 cu modificări și completări prin Legea nr.208 din 21 iulie 2021. București, România: Monitorul oficial
- Piderit, Sandy K. (2007). Balance, integration and harmonization: selected metaphors for managing the parts and the whole of living. In D. Bilimoria, & S. K. Piderit, *Handbook on Women in Business and Management* (pp. 2006–2014). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Popescu, Raluca. (2009). *Introducere în sociologia familiei. Familia românească în societatea contemporană*. Iași: Polirom.
- Ridgeway, Cecilia L. (2004). Unpacking the gender system. A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. *Gender & Society*, 510–531.
- Simionescu, Maria. (2024). Exploring the gendered dynamics of work and family life. A secondary descriptive analysis in the Romanian context. *Sociologie Românească*, 29–50.
- Suciu, Marta – C. & Petre Adrian. (2022). Telework in Romania. Current State and Sustainable Socio – Economic Effects of its Development. *Sciendo*, 53–68.
- Vasilescu, Cristina. (2023, 1 4). *The Impact of teleworking and digital work on workers and society*. Retrieved from [Europarl.europa.eu: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662904/IPOL_STU\(2021\)662904\(ANN05\)_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662904/IPOL_STU(2021)662904(ANN05)_EN.pdf)
- Waddell, Nina, Overall Nickola C., Chang Valerie T. & Hammond Matthew D. (2021). Gendered division of labor during nationwide COVID-19 lockdown: Implications for relationship problems and satisfaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1759–1781.

Acest studiu explorează dinamica de gen a armonizării dintre muncă și viața personală în rândul angajaților la distanță din România, cu un accent pe abordarea genului ca structură socială. Scopul lucrării este de a descoperi activitățile personale desfășurate de angajați în timpul zilelor de lucru la distanță și discursurile lor, în funcție de gen. Cercetarea a avut o abordare calitativă, folosind interviuri semi-structurate pentru a explora subiectul. Datele au fost colectate prin interviuri, prin apeluri video, cu 22 de părinți care lucrează cu normă întreagă de la distanță sau în mod hibrid. Eșantionul a fost selectat folosind tehnica de eșantionare pe cote și tehnica bulgăreului de zăpadă. Cercetarea identifică un conflict legat de timp în cazul femeilor, care adesea jonglează cu treburile casnice și îngrijirea copilului, împreună cu sarcinile profesionale, în timpul zilelor de lucru la distanță, resimțind stres și vinovăție ca urmare a acestui conflict. În schimb, bărbații acordă prioritate petrecerii timpului liber și delegă responsabilitățile de îngrijire a copilului, acest fapt subliniind o diferență în modul în care sunt împărțite sarcinile casnice. Studiul dezvăluie că acest conflict legat de timp obligă femeile să se adapteze și să dezvolte practici, cum ar fi desfășurarea simultană a activităților profesionale și de muncă casnică, sau efectuarea treburilor casnice și de îngrijire a copiilor în pauzele de lucru când lucrează la distanță. Studiul nostru evidențiază că astfel de practici pot crește semnificativ stresul femeilor, sugerând că cercetările viitoare ar trebui să se concentreze în mod special asupra nivelurilor de stres în rândul lucrătorilor la distanță. Lucrarea dezvăluie că, deși munca la distanță oferă multe potențiale beneficii, poate dezavantaja femeile. Pentru a ne asigura că munca de la distanță sprijină cu adevărat armonizarea vieții profesionale cu cea a vieții personale atât pentru bărbați, cât și pentru femei, sunt necesare structuri incluzive de muncă care să adreseze aceste provocări specifice genului.

Cuvinte-cheie: telemuncă; gen; armonizarea muncă – viață personală; diviziunea muncii casnice; îngrijirea copiilor; timp liber.

Received: 08.08.2024

Accepted: 06.11.2024