

Socio-economic Aspects of the Crisis Caused by COVID-19: Effects of the Change in the Work Regime

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Abstract

The unprecedented measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a change in everyone's lifestyle, but proved to be extremely detrimental to the psychological, social and economic well-being of a specific group in society, namely families with little children. In order to thoroughly analyze the challenges facing this crisis-stricken group, a qualitative study was carried out using the calendar interview method among 21 randomly selected working parents. The interviews were conducted in December 2021 - January 2022. All interviewed parents have worked in a changed mode of work. This means transitioning from work at the office to work at home and combining it with caring for children who are unable to attend kindergarten or school. The results of the study show that the change in the mode of work in combination with other factors was among the leading causes of stress for the parents and children with lockdown conditions. The effect was especially strong for the women. In addition,

specific sources of stress were disruption of social life, uncertainty about how long the situation will last, and the threat of a pandemic per se. Qualitative data analysis showed that the dominant emotion in the narratives about COVID-19 was fear. Manifested fears were not only related to health, but also to education, welfare and social consequences. The results of the content analysis point out that the measures in general affected predominantly household savings, but they were not related to significant changes in the standard of living. There were serious dynamics in the way participants cope with the changes in the work regime. Although it had seemed at first as a specific stressor for some of them, their attitudes changed over time. One year and a half after the pandemic breakout the respondents report mostly positive attitudes towards remote working and expectations that options for home office or "mixed" work regimes will be kept by employers as long-term practices. Overall, there were specific home office difficulties related to time management, task organization and home setting. The findings can be used by branch organizations and employers to provide assistance to

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employees and to build programs for social and economic support.

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JEL: D1, H12

Introduction

Due to unprecedented measures to manage the COVID-19 crisis, including various restrictions on mobility, the introduction of distance learning, and the temporary suspension of some medical consultations, families with little children face specific difficulties in raising and adapting to the new situation. An additional stressor for parents is the forced combination of professional and parental roles, caused by the need to work in a mixed mode of work. Important gender differences in parental stress can be found according to different studies, which are largely due to cultural specifics as well as the dominant policies of employers in specific countries. Data from online surveys in Bulgaria in March and May 2020 showed higher levels of perceived stress for women (Hristova & Karastoyanov, 2021), and especially women, living in the Capital and working in their homes. A new aspect that adds grounds to consider this group vulnerable from both psychosocial and economic point of view is the reports in the media and official institutions in the summer of 2021 that the dominant strains of coronavirus infection pose a growing health threat to children compared to variants of the virus which dominated the previous months of the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic situation, in a corporate research in Bulgaria the majority of the companies (around 70,3%) reported that they operated in a home office work regime (HR & Leadership Forum 2020 Research).

Half of the respondents in the same research were worried about losing their jobs and the management was the one who had bigger concerns. All these risky aspects show that the pandemic situation led to specific changes in the working environment, which have to be analyzed more carefully from psychosocial and economic perspectives.

The objective of this paper is to explore the socio-economic aspects of the crisis caused by COVID-19 for parents working in a changed work regime. Working parents are an important pillar of the Bulgarian economy, which requires special attention and support in order to be an effective and productive force. Studying the phenomenology and dynamics of experiences and challenges in a family environment from an economic and psychosocial point of view is of crucial importance in order to provide adequate measures and psychosocial support to this crisis-stricken group and their children. Therefore, an exploratory research design, including a mixed method approach, was found to be the most appropriate one to outline the dynamics of the following phenomena of research interest: 1. attitudes towards remote working and mixed mode of working; 2. perceived difficulties relating to the changed mode of working, and 3. emotional experiences, which the vulnerable group of working parents have had during the COVID-19 crisis.

Literature review

COVID-19 measures affected all countries and all organizations regardless of their scope of activity. In response to government public health measures a lot of people started working at home (WAH). On March 13th, 2020 Bulgaria went into its first lockdown due to COVID-19 and the measures adopted to protect people actually prevented them

from gathering at one place and from working together in one and the same place. By June 2020 some of the restrictions were lifted but companies were recommended to continue working in a remote or WAH regime. Prior to COVID-19 the opportunity to work out of the traditional office space was available mainly in the corporate environment and only in extreme situations. Various terms are used to indicate this opportunity: “telework”, “telecommuting”, “remote working”, “homeworking”, “virtual work”, etc. (Graham et al., 2021; Dockery & Bawa, 2018). Regardless of the term, work carried out from the employer’s premises was rare and it was allowed only for a short period of time, on a freelance basis or other specific condition but it was not possible for a large number of employees. Some authors in research prior to the pandemic argued that the effectiveness of teleworking and its effect on the work-life balance as the family interference with work activities is increased (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). Thulin et al. (2019) found that there are gender differences in perceived time pressure and this finding is related to the role types and responsibilities in respective households. It turns out that it is women that are more affected and experience negative effects. The presence of children at home actually increases perceived time pressure for women compared to men and compared to those without children. In a situation of a spreading viral disease epidemic, the presence of children in the household increases the risk of experiencing distress (Taylor et al. 2008). The majority of studies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the pandemic focus on the effect of remote work on parents not only regarding their mental health but also regarding their work effectiveness. For instance, Andrew et al. (2020) note that, during the lockdown,

the amount of time devoted to paid work reduced to an average of 3 h per day while that of housework increased to 9 h per day. Changes in the quantity of time spent on work tasks certainly changes the quality of this work. There are some advantages and disadvantages of remote work. For parents, WAH might guarantee more in person time for the family and better care for the house. Nevertheless, it might affect the quality and the quantity of the work done for the employer organization (ibid., 2020). Recent studies on attitudes towards WAT show “an attitudinal sea change”. Researcher from Australia for example report: “While our 2018 research identified strong levels of resistance, our 2020 research identified strong support for employees to continue working from home post-pandemic. Working from home during the pandemic bridged the divide between employee- and employer-friendly flexibility, serving the needs of organisations and individuals. However, our research suggests that this attitudinal change may not be sustained in the longer term, but that it may have shifted the resistance from individual managers to higher “organizational levels” (Williamson et al., 2022; p. 52). Other authors stress the importance of social factors such as family support, employer support, colleague behaviour. Jain and colleagues state that “Subjective Norms (e.g. employer and family support) will be crucial determinants of the intention to work from home post-COVID” (Jain et al., 2022, p. 64). On the other hand, this puts new long-term challenges for employers including changes in intra-team communication (see Maurer et al., 2022), development of collective regulations and norms (Williamson & Pearce, 2022) in order to legitimize all aspects of remote working as well as more general reforms on the

organizational level: “the acquirement of WFH (work-from-home) capacity would require firms to redesign their work arrangement and workflow and provide introductory training sessions and essential working conditions, such as hardware and software to support telecommuting, communication, and collaboration” (Ge et al., 2022; p. 21).

With regard to pandemic measures, one of the main topics of research is restrictions on movement and confinement in homes (so-called “social isolation”, which is considered a direct consequence of physical distancing). Studies show that quarantine is a psychologically stressful experience in which parents can transfer their distress to their children, as well as start practicing inappropriate parenting behaviors. In turn, this can have serious negative consequences for the family, including the manifestation of symptoms of post-traumatic stress in children (Demaria & Vicari, 2021). Being in quarantine raises feelings of fear, nervousness, anger, grief, and anxiety-driven insomnia similar to the experiences of the Ebola and SARS outbreaks in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Reynolds et al. 2008; Desclaux et al. 2017; Caleo et al. 2018). The fears associated with the pandemic were compounded by the closure of schools and the shutdown of many workplaces, and the ensuing massive loss of employment even if layoffs were temporary (Cheng et al., 2021). In Bulgaria, we experienced the situation of complete lockdowns with kindergartens and schools, which affected all the working and non-working parents. Perhaps, it affected psychologically, emotionally and economically the whole population. Overall, the effects of this extreme situation are negative and research supports this idea. Some authors focus on the financial side of the crisis and prove that mental health,

especially parental one, is negatively affected by economic losses during crises. Orsini and his team (2021) found that parents who suffered economic losses showed higher anxiety and depressive symptoms. Symptoms typical of post-traumatic stress conditions are more common among the unemployed and the mothers (Orsini et al, 2021). Adams et al. (2021) prove that parent stress “increased substantially during COVID-19 and has not returned to pre-COVID- 19 levels” (Adams et al., 2021, p.1) which clearly suggests the need for enhanced mental health resources and support. In addition, research suggests that there is a clear need for prevention of the negative consequences of quarantine, including “governments to carefully consider any quarantine decision and social services to work with children’s mental health services” (Demaria and Vicari, 2021). Limited access to health care stands out as one of the factors increasing the group’s vulnerability, and possible supportive policies and solutions were being sought, including access to alternative services such as telemedicine (Stark et al., 2020). Extreme situations require extreme reactions but they affect all aspects of societal life. COVID-19 crisis showed that no single measure can be taken without having a major effect on any area of life. If the psychological status of people is affected this will result in their way and standard of living.

Overall, the publications show a serious imbalance in the way the situation affects both sexes (see de Paz et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2020; United Nations, 2020). Statistically significant differences were registered with respect to stress, with the average being higher in women (Yan et al., 2021). Gender-specific roles in parenting prove to be an important field of research, and researchers of the effects of the crisis present very interesting

data in this regard. For example, a study on working women in the UK highlights that “The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women in a unique, gender-specific way, especially with regard to their traditional status as household managers” (Adisa et al., 2021). The authors analyze the situation from the standpoint of the theory of social roles and conclude that the need to perform home and work duties simultaneously and in the same space (home) reduces the ability to maintain work-life balance and makes it difficult to distinguish between the roles. The same publication talks about the emergence of an “internal role conflict”, which can be considered specific to women. The congestion resulting from WAH during lockdown, combined with women’s traditional chores and the need for additional childcare (including the need to help students with distance learning), is considered.

Productivity is seriously affected. Empirical data from Chinese cities in the Hubei province reveal work productivity decreased among many respondents working from home in 2020, primarily due to family interference with work. Such interference stems not only from the domain of daily life but also from other family members’ e-working and e-learning.” (Sun et al., 2022). According the same publication 51.92% of survey respondents report their work productivity decreased compared to pre-COVID times. Feng & Savani (2020) surveyed 286 U.S. workers of both sexes who had changed employment due to COVID-19 measures. The study shows that during home isolation, women report significantly reduced productivity and job satisfaction compared to men. Even more worrying are the results of Meyer and colleagues, based on a study of workers in Germany (Meyer et al., 2021). They found that the pandemic had a significant effect on intense fatigue in women: “The data

also show that the introduction and removal of home isolation measures affect exhaustion and that women with children who work from home while child care facilities are closed, are particularly exhausted. Autonomy in the work and support of partners mitigate some of these effects. In summary, women’s mental health is more affected by the pandemic than that of men ... interventions aimed at mitigating the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic must be targeted specifically at women.” Many similar findings are contained in a publication by Zamarro & Prados (2021), which focuses on how fathers and mothers are coping with the crisis in terms of childcare, employment, working conditions and levels of psychological stress. The authors summarize that women bear a greater burden than men in providing childcare during the COVID-19 crisis, even those who have continued to work. However, this division of child care is associated with a reduction in working hours and an increased likelihood of leaving work for working mothers (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Another source of stress for working women is partnerships in a situation of home isolation. In this regard, the challenges range from the lack of personal time and space, through the need to provide more intensive physical and emotional support to partners leading to an increase in domestic violence. Dlamini (2021) cites statistics from different countries on the growing percentage of reported cases of domestic violence in lockdown conditions. At the same time, the author emphasizes that the crisis exacerbates the vulnerability of women in various ways, as well as care for the elderly, among other unpaid domestic activities. This compromises the time left for women to participate in income-generating activities.

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Some articles also draw attention to the fact that the measures put the traditional male role in the family in a new light. For example, the situation was presented as a chance by Fisher et al. (2020): “Leaving more men to work from home, the pandemic is a unique opportunity for men to validate, put into practice these attitudes and to share child care and housework. In this way, families who adopt the mantra “we are all in this together” will probably be best able to balance work and family life in this challenging time. “

Bulgaria is not an exception when it comes to these findings. Research in Bulgaria from the early stages of the crisis unequivocally shows that the group should be seen as under intense stress. In a qualitative study published in English and conducted in the first weeks of the state of emergency among 200 mothers of children aged 0-4 years, Paunova-Markova (Paunova-Markova, 2020) states: “mothers of young children report a wide range of perceived threats and difficulties in the early stages of the spread of the infection. There are specific threats and difficulties observed for the reported group. This finding supports evidence from the literature that the current pandemic and its management strategies have a significant negative impact on the psyche. Young children and their mothers are emerging as a vulnerable group.” The publication states in particular that 1 “The perceived threat of the disease is greater than the perceived threats related to the measures and their consequences. On the other hand, all the difficulties reported stem from pandemic mitigation measures” (Paunova-Markova, 2020, p.12). The biggest perceived threat, according to the study, is infection with COVID-19, with concerns focused mainly on family and the immediate environment. Other significant perceived threats are the duration

of the situation, the confinement of the home and the social isolation of the child, followed by the economic impact and insecurity. In the early stages of the crisis, the most common difficulty for this group was the inability of the child to be outdoors, followed by a lack of social contacts and the inability of the mother to come out. Additional factors that aggravate the situation are the limited living space, the lack of a yard or balcony for taking the child out, as well as the presence of an older child who is studying at home or the presence of the mother’s current pregnancy. The above conclusion is partially confirmed by a series of online surveys of attitudes in different phases of the crisis, conducted by the Department of Psychology of IPHS-BAS “Stress and coping with a spreading coronavirus infection”. The survey results show that at the very beginning of the crisis “the most affected by the negative processes ... are active women, from the Capital, with a regime of work – home office” (Stage 1). At the end of the state of emergency in the spring of 2020 the picture remains largely unchanged: “The most negative conditions are rediscovered in active women working full time from home, people on paid leave due to the emergency and older people in cities” (Stage 2). In the autumn of 2020 the third wave of the same study showed significant differences in a large proportion of attitudes towards both the health threat posed by COVID-19 and crisis management measures. However, with regard to anxiety and perceived stress, work under a changed regime continues to be an important factor: “The profile of respondents experiencing high levels of anxiety is people who work from home, those who live in small settlements, and study participants suffering from COVID-19 at the time of the study” (Stage 3) (Hristova & Karastoyanov,

2021). The above questions, as well as the need for a detailed study of the dynamics of experiences in a family environment from an economic and psychosocial point of view in order to provide adequate psychosocial support to working parents, little children and students, explain the research focus of this article on the socio-economic aspects of the crisis caused by COVID-19 with concern to a specific vulnerable group of great public importance, i.e. parents working in a changed work regime.

Methodology

Sample and procedure: Calendar interviews were conducted with parents of at least one child in Bulgaria during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. An individual will be considered a working parent if they are employed or self-employed and live with a child younger than 12 years old. Parents were recruited randomly through advertisements in social media. We posted recruitment advertisements and began assessing initial eligibility based on the criteria for at least one child in a household below 12 years old and parents working in a home office mode. Once eligibility was determined, the study team contacted the potential participant via email or phone to set up a time to obtain verbal consent and provide the next steps of the study. Verbal consent was obtained for all participants. Overall 21 working parents took part in the study. Our first interview started on December 1st, 2021 with data collection ending on January 15th, 2022. All 21 interviews were conducted online via Zoom and recorded with consent of the respondents. Their duration varied between 45 minutes and 95 minutes. Approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of the sample are working mothers who are highly educated. Our interviewees work in a variety of industries – from IT to social

sciences. More than $\frac{1}{3}$ are in expert positions in their organizations; approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ are in managerial positions, and three in team leader positions. Regarding income, six respondents receive between 1000 and 2000 BGN monthly income, four respondents – between 2000 and 3000 BGN, two participants – between 3000 BGN and 4000 BGN and six interviewees receive more than 4000 BGN per month. Six participants have one child, 15 participants – two children, four participants – three children and one participant – four children.

Method: An exploratory research design with a mixed method approach based on semi-structured in-depth calendar interviews was used in the study. The calendar method gives retrospective narratives on personal experience, dynamics of emotions and stress, dominant attitudes and expectations and “helps respondents gain better access to long-term memory by providing a graphical time frame in which life history information can be represented” (Glasner, T., & Van der Vaart, W., 2009, p. 334). During the interviews the researchers used an online technical tool called *calendar grid* which was especially designed for the purpose of the study. It was visible to the interviewee via shared screen and based on the web page of the project (www.cov19resilience.social). Via the grid the participants could recall chronologically retrospective data and narratives on personal experiences, meanings and explanations of the events in their lives through the pandemic period. The recorded interviews were uploaded in an Electronic Platform for Interviewing with Calendars (www.cov19resilience.social).

Eight life areas were covered during the interviews: place of residence, work, family/household, health, education/qualification, sports and hobbies, social life and dominant emotions. Participants shared their

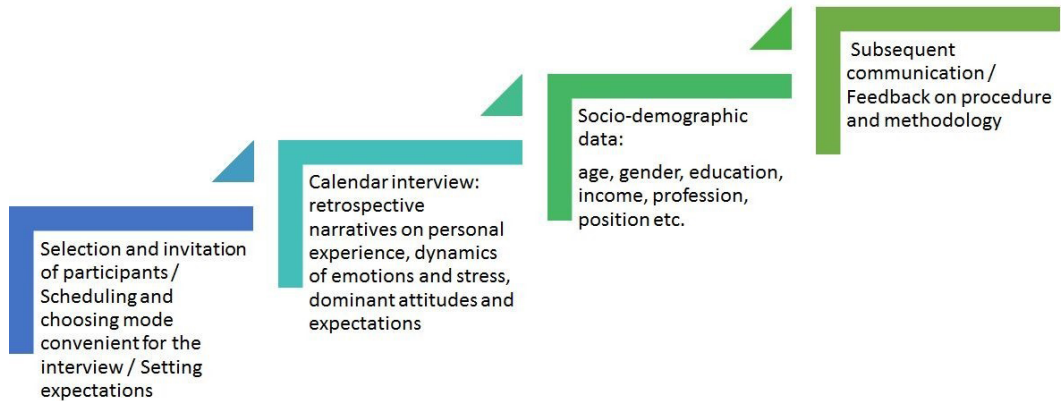


Fig. 1. The procedure of semi-structured in-depth calendar interviewing

experiences and emotions about these areas during different stages of the pandemic, including lockdowns and focusing on the most important events for them in respective stages.

Figure 1 presents the steps in the procedure of the study.

The qualitative interview data were coded and processed both manually and automatically using the QDA Pro suite software package, including QDA Miner 5 and WordStat 8. An exhaustive dictionary of emotions, based on Karol Izard's classification of emotions (Izard, 1992, 2009), was created in the Bulgarian language and integrated into WordStat in order to automatically extract content categories (clouds) of emotional experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. The researchers agreed on the semantic units (subcategories) of each category in advance, incl. *fear, interest, sadness, enjoyment, guilt, disgust, surprise, anger, shame, and contempt*. The same procedure was applied to build and integrate a *home office* semantic cluster/category. The cluster included *home office, work(ing) at/from home, distant/remote/online work(ing)*. Keyword-in-context (KWC) analysis was performed to extract and classify attitudes

towards remote work and mixed mode of work, as well as difficulties relating to the changed mode of work. Co-occurrence analysis was employed to outline the collocates of both "office" and "home office" clusters.

Results

Based on our analysis of transcribed narratives of the interviews combined in a text corpus of 331 pages and 117 009 words, there are three types of results that could be outlined: attitudes towards remote working and mixed mode of working, perceived difficulties relating to the changed mode of working; emotional experiences relating to the COVID-19 crisis.

1. Attitudes towards remote working and mixed mode of working

By means of both automated content analysis and manual thematic analysis we examined the attitudes towards work(ing) at home (also called "home office" and "remote/distant/online work(ing)") and mixed modes of working. When exploring different word clusters, we found that the participants most often used the term "home office" in their narratives about the work experiences that

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they have during the pandemic. The overall frequency of synonyms included in the “home office” cluster is 62 (See Table 1). “Work” is most strongly associated with “home” and “online” and its association with “office” and “present” (i.e. in person work) is much weaker.

Table 1. Frequencies of words included in the “home office” cluster (qualitative data - N=21)

Cluster	Rank	Frequency
Home office	1	35
The home office	2	6
Distant work	3	6
The work from home	4	5
Work from home	5	3
Distant work	6	2
The home office	7	1
A home office	8	1
Work online	9	1
Work at home	10	1
Online work	11	1
		Overall: 62

Source: Authors calculations with QDA Prosuite software package

The majority of the participants explained that the government measures in their companies are followed and no specific company measures were mentioned (apart from the governmental ones). Results of co-occurrence analysis show that “office” is contextually very “close”, most often even equal to “home”, when respondents explain what “office” is mostly relating to, (Table 2). The perceptions of the working environment have changed due to COVID-19 and also due to the recommendations to avoid office locations. Home has become the new office space for most people, including the interviewed working parents. But if the respondents’ homes turned into office space,

where and what would be their home space? Where is their private space and does it exist at all? The answers of these questions are provided by the excerpts from interviews below.

Table 2. Analysis of co-occurrences for “office”

Co-occurrences for “office”	Rank	Frequency	Likelihood	Effect
Home	1	43	391.081	7.746
Companies	3	2	21.579	8.779
Worked	5	3	17.409	5.556
I worked	6	3	14.985	4.971
Hold/keep	7	2	14.158	6.457

Source: Authors’ calculations with QDA Prosuite software package

From an economic point of view the notion that home is equal to office means that people need better home spaces in order to combine work and private space. This could lead to an increased demand for the property industry and search for new types of properties with larger spaces for living and working at the same time.

There is an intense dynamic in the attitudes towards working remotely or in mixed mode. The move to work from home was a serious problem for some interviewees, especially in the first stage of the crisis. Combining work commitments with childcare was a major burden, especially for mothers raising two or more children. In the following periods, stories of such negative experiences appear in connection with those later phases of the crisis, in which there was a temporary closure of institutions caring for children (students were in distance learning, temporarily closed private schools, kindergartens, etc.). It is noteworthy that the same parents do not share negative emotions about working in a

home office when commenting on stages of the crisis, in which childcare was available and functioned normally.

“My experience then with this lockdown and remote work was more like good luck... I entered the distance working very smoothly, through online channels... But there were moments of tension, especially in the beginning, when the children were online, there were such moments because we were more people at home, that suddenly everyone enters, leaves, even if you had a room. There were some noises all the time - they were physically playing inside, knocking on the floor from everywhere and so there was a period of time to adjust, who to walk and sit here or there, who was doing what, and there must have been some frustration in all of us.” (Mother of 3 children, 3,10, and 17 years old; working on mixed mode regime).

Some of the participants in the study reported a relatively quick and trouble-free adaptation to the changed work regime (interestingly, this is most often explained by personality traits - these people describe themselves as “introverts” or “homemakers”). In a number of families, the changed work schedule has contributed to higher involvement of fathers in childcare.

“Yes, maybe I would go to the office a little more often, because the contact with colleagues is lost. And when part of the work is teamwork, it is a burden, it affects. I’m an introvert and in general, isolation doesn’t bother me that much. But I realize that this can be detrimental to my work, because the lack of communication or the loss of communication will affect the results at some point.”(Father of 2

children, 3 and 9 years old; working from home)

Positive attitudes towards remote working seem to increase over time, especially in those households where the general atmosphere and partnerships are described as harmonious, as well as where no serious difficulties of a domestic or financial nature have not been experienced.

“If it’s a matter of personal choice, I’ll probably choose to work from home again.”(Father of 2 children, 3 and 9 years old; working on mixed mode regime).

“The fact that I stayed at home and we can combine a lot of work together is very good for all ... Well, I hope that we will continue to work remotely and combine the useful with the pleasant” (Mother of 2 children, 5 and 9 years old; working from home).

Participants widely share expectations that the remote working model will be maintained or that a mixed mode of operation will be introduced for them even after the end of the pandemic.

“But the remote work itself does not burden me. I even liked it at some point. Because I have more freedom to decide when to work...Yes, I can share my time. I can better manage my personal commitments here with the children. I like that in general.”(Father of 2 children, 3 and 9 years old; working from home)

“[Interviewer: How do you feel about working only from home?]

How do I feel? Well, we adapted in a way. There are pros, there are cons. Let’s say - I live with the idea that for the next two years I will work only from home. We have

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been planning this step for a long time. My colleagues and I had this idea before - to work wherever we want, even when traveling. Covid-19 distorted this fantasy, but we achieved what we wanted.”(Father of 2 children, 1 and 2 years old; working from home)

Some say they see more positives and would not return to office work. Negative emotions (disappointment, anxiety) caused by employers’ initiatives in this direction have been reported in some interviews. There are participants (mostly women) who declare their readiness to change employers if they do not meet understanding and readiness to continue flexible working in the future:

“Now after I have had the freedom to work from home, I realize that it (work from the office) is rather depressing to me and I don’t like it as a form. And accordingly, if our company does not allow me to work from home, I would probably ...look for an employer who will give me this freedom; there are quite flexible companies, as far as I understand” (Mother of a baby, 0-1 year; working from home).

2. Perceived difficulties relating to the changed mode of working

Parents report a variety of difficulties caused by changes in the way they work. Among them we can distinguish **difficulties, related to the setting** (lack of space; lack of appropriate furniture, electronic devices, etc.):

“We lived literally in the kitchen at that time. In the sense that we slept in one room and there was our living room and bedroom, but when you wake up - you sit in the kitchen and start - have breakfast, work at the same table, have lunch at the

same table, work at the same table, then - dinner. And that was it. At one point I started to feel like I was literally living in prison because you have two rooms and from time to time you stay longer on the balcony...” (Father of a baby, 0-1 year; working from home)

These stories usually appear in connection with stages of the crisis, in which students also studied remotely, and/or kindergartens/nurseries were temporarily closed. There are separate reports of parents who have used their cars as either work or personal space for solitude during this period.

“We are currently in a small apartment and everyone is at home... It’s just a big punishment. Not for anything else, but that we just have to respect each other and somehow interfere. Because if I sit down to work with the student, he will be distracted. My husband, for example, has to talk on the phone, there is no way to talk, because we talk alongside him... and in general everyone compromises with the other.” (Mother of 2 children, 5 and 9 years old; working from home)

The same participant describes the “most difficult” stage of the crisis:

“We both worked from home during the full lockdown. Our big son was studying, the little one was walking around us, or was watching children’s films. We were constantly remarking to him: “Quiet! Your brother is studying, your dad is working!... Because we live in a small apartment and in the beginning, when we couldn’t go out much, we felt it was like punishment to stay all at home. Because they both (the two boys) needed walks, to spend energy outside anyway... they were not

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comfortable at home, they were like tigers in a cage.”

It is important to note that in all reported cases of change of home or renovation of the living space, the families reported that the COVID-19 crisis had an impact on the process. For the families moving into a new home this effect is related to delays and longer time in general (in some cases the movement into the new house happened 12 to 18 months after the initially planned deadline before the Pandemic). Another aspect is related to changes in the interior of the living spaces – it seems families are trying to adapt their homes to the new office function, which in turn reflects and influences their attitudes and expectation towards the distant working mode:

“We plan it (the new apartment) in a way so that we can quickly adapt different rooms for working space. In order not to work, for example, always from the table in the kitchen. But also in the living room to have a desk where you can put your laptop and work; in the bedroom - there is also. Accordingly, we even think about the balcony- to adapt it so that you can sit there and work, if you want. Because in case of a lockdown, or entirely remote work regime, it is more convenient for us”. (Father of a baby, 0-1 year; working from home)

In some cases distant working brought unexpected changes:

“On the other hand, we managed this summer, all summer, to stay on the campsite, on a caravan, which is new for us as an experience and as a working mode. We managed to take the office out there and to test how the work process will

happen. It worked out! We spent maybe about 60 days at the seaside, which was something that never happened before.”(Father of 2 children, 1 and 2 years old; working from home).

Another group of difficulties is **organizational** in nature. In this group we see difficulties to set work and home duties in time; blurring and prolongation of working hours; postponements and shifts in the usual work schedule; inability to care for or help children in the family; difficulties when taking children from school/kindergarten in case of sudden introduction or cancellation of measures related to the pandemic, etc.); inability to combine/implement business and family plans/events. Here are some examples from the authentic narratives:

“The day is fuzzy and it becomes work time is all the time” (Mother of 2 children, 2 and 13 years old; working from home)

“We even realized that we work more than in the office. Not to mention that there were times when you were really in a project, you could forget yourself and sit at the computer in the morning at 8 o'clock. And finish after 8 pm. Which is not possible to happen if you are in the office, because you know and think you have to go home” (Mother of a baby, 0-1 year; working from home)

This aspect seems to be particularly exhausting for some of our participants:

“The main thing was that you are suddenly left alone, i.e. not alone, but on the contrary - with many people, in a narrow space. Your daily life changes and this contributes to some very strong stress. Especially with children, you can't manage them, at home the man, etc. (Mother of 3

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children, 3, 10 and 17 years old; working on mixed mode regime)."

It seems COVID-19 and related measures contribute to more intense conflict between parental and professional roles, especially for women:

"The duties with the baby, the fact that I'm here all day on the computer, staring at the drawings, going to various meetings, going to meetings with the baby... that means 8 kg... I drag them in a basket back and forth. There is no assistance for this and that is why I am so exhausted. Just a lot of obligations are pushed into each other. A stronger organization is needed" (Mother of 4 children, 1,7, 11 and 13 years old; working from home).

Difficulties related to concerns about the financial stability of families were also identified. Economically, COVID-19 and the measures related to it have led to a reduction in family savings without a serious deterioration in living standards.

"Many businesses then took a break. There was a period when it was not clear exactly who was doing what. We started receiving emails again: "Suspending the contract", "Pausing work", etc."(Father of a baby, 0-1 year; working from home)

"I was just preparing for a big meeting...I had to meet some of our Austrian partners... and everything fell apart after that; everything was canceled. And we haven't started relations with these people again for so long and we haven't planned a date for a new meeting."(Mother of 4 children, 1, 7, 11 and 13 years old; working from home).

However, this aspect was a specific source of increased anxiety, especially for

participants who had a new / developing business at the beginning of the crisis or for families in which both parents have had free professions. In these cases, the change in the way of working is directly related to financial losses and lost profits. Some participants reported that the crisis had forced the closure of business initiatives and retraining, as well as temporary employment in two or more places.

"I had to take a second job to pay the bills at my (newly opened) center so that I could educate these children, who, however, did not give me enough income. But my motivation even then was to do everything I could to save and develop the business. I hoped that we would get out of this situation sooner so that new children could come. I did all sorts of things..." (Mother of 1 child, 3 years old; working on mixed mode regime).

"At one point, prices started to rise, at one point we started to lose customers in terms of volume and sales.... the vote on next year's budget simply showed that in order to keep the main business of the company, we would have to make cuts - would have to cut costs and on the basis of this cut costs from the marketing budget, respectively, which will be significantly reduced. In fact, it became clear that there would be no need for a marketing manager, so I had to be dismissed from work." (Mother of 1 child, 9 years old; working on mixed mode regime).

Another large group of difficulties reported by parents can be attributed to **impaired/ limited communication**. As a main negative consequence of the changed work regime, as a rule, there are no drastic declines in the quality of performance or productivity, and the

social aspects stand out in the foreground

- the lack of regular contact with colleagues and clients; impaired or limited communication at work; feelings of loneliness, isolation, loss of social contacts, etc.

“Well, the positive (effect) is that I manage to deliver better results in less time, and the negative one - definitely now the communication with our colleagues is broken, especially since new colleagues have entered... It would have been 100% faster to introduce colleagues if we were working face-to-face... Definitely at some point there is an accumulation and the so-called burnout happens... because you get blocked. During all these months you get stuck in one place ... no conversations and drinking with friends... because I have many friends there, among colleagues. So, it’s negative – another option for emotional ventilation drops out” (Father of 3 children, 1, 10 and 11 years old; working from home).

“... before I constantly met colleagues, we talked in the hallway, we laughed. Now I go and I’m alone...I rarely see anyone, or they come for a while and leave. We used to get together at Christmas at the institute, or on birthdays. We all got together when someone had a birthday, we played music, and it was nice. But now it’s gone. It affects my mood, definitely, it’s depressing. It also affected my motivation to dress, to put on make-up. I used to have a lot more desire for these things” (Mother of 3 children, 5, 17 and 18 years old; working on mixed mode work regime)

“Remote working seems to me to be something that is being introduced end masse. And to which we must adapt. Which for me might be a big plus - being able to do things from home, remotely.

But I would miss the live meetings, the contacts, the informal ones - in the work environment. Not so much to discuss some cases professionally. We will do it online and it will work. But this nice and warm part is lost and I definitely miss it. And I would still miss it if we continue to be in such a remote-distant mode. It is also a prerequisite for more misunderstandings. For things that can’t be ironed out if you don’t have frequent personal contacts. Maybe some regularity in live meetings... This, on the other hand, is a form of commitment that not everyone can make... But maybe at least to some extent it would solve this emotional issue. Because it happens to be very lonely at one point.” (Mother of 2 children, 1 and 8 years old; working from home).

At the same time, in some families this is reflected in increased conflicts between partners or difficulties in communication between parents and children (participants report a lack of tolerance, nervousness, often “raising the tone”, “threats”, etc.). Digital communication and excessive use of electronic devices are often cited as reasons for communication disruptions/limitations.

“At the beginning of 2020, I lived with my husband and child. Already in September, October we broke up with my husband and now I live separately. The child lives either with me or with him. Did the situation play any role? It certainly has an impact, because this is a situation that makes us both very nervous. All this uncertainty about what will happen. We were not so worried, from a health-wise point of view, for ourselves, but rather from the point of view of what will happen in the country... And in fact, we were very stressed. At first

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we wondered what to do, whether or not to move to another place. In the end, each of us experienced the stress differently, and in the end we could not find a common language”(Mother of 1 child, 3 years old; working on mixed mode regime).

“... towards the children ... we became more irritable. And maybe with each other ... Because when you have no contact with other people, you have no channels to release the tension somehow, to share ... And - yes - we became more irritated with ourselves, and with the children maybe too.” (Father of 2 children, 3 and 9 years old; working from home)

3. Emotional experiences relating to the COVID-19 crisis

With regard to Carroll Izard’s classification of emotions (Izard, 1992, 2009), content analysis results via WordStat showed that *the most prominent/frequently mentioned emotions, either explicitly or implicitly, were fear, interest and enjoyment.* Emotions such as anger, shame and contempt, were not found in the responses of the interviewed parents. Table 3 and Figure 2 illustrate the predominant emotional background of the working parents during the COVID-19 crisis. In almost 50% of the cases respondents associate COVID-19 with fear and have experienced fear due to the pandemic on different occasions. The distribution of emotions of the working parents are shown below (See Table 3).

Emotional experiences of the working parents during the COVID-19 pandemic are illustrated by the word cloud below (See Fig. 2).

Discussion

The studied working parents used very often the term “home office” or synonymous terms in their narratives about the work experiences

Table 3. Frequencies of emotions of working parents

Emotion	Frequency	% Shown
Fear	141	47.64%
Interest	54	18.24%
Sadness	36	12.16%
Enjoyment	35	11.82%
Guilt	21	7.09%
Disgust	6	2.03%
Surprise	3	1.01%

Source: Authors calculations QDA
Prosuite software package



Fig 2. Working parents in the COVID-19 crisis: emotional background

that they had during the pandemic. They talked about “home office” and “online work” rather than work at the office (in person). The perceptions of the working environment have changed due to COVID-19 and also due to the recommendations to avoid office locations. Home has become the new office space for many people, including the interviewed working parents.

From an economic point of view the notion that home is equal to office means that people need better home spaces in order to combine work and private space. This could lead to an increased demand for the property industry and search for new types of properties with

larger spaces for living and working at the same time.

Attitudes towards remote working have changed:

It seems that it was harder at the beginning of the pandemic and also that the burden was predominantly for women in the family. Negative experiences repeat when childcare institutions are closed because of the measures, but negative emotions are not reported when children are back to schools and kindergartens.

In the latter phases of the crisis positive attitudes towards remote working are set: some results suggest they may be additionally related to personality characteristics (probably introversion, internal locus of control, moderate or low dispositional anxiety etc.). Such attitudes in our study are expressed more frequently in families, who reported cohesive relationships and good partnering models. The same refers to families with stable financial status and appropriate setting at home.

In general all participants in the study expressed their expectations that remote work will still be an option or tendency after COVID-19. Some express it in connection with their own working conditions and others – in the context of their general description of future trends and tendencies.

As main difficulties relating to the changed mode of working we can outline the following groups:

- **Difficulties, related to the setting** - lack of space; challenges, related to the lack of appropriate furniture, electronic devices, etc.
- **Difficulties in time management and task organization** - mismatching domestic

duties with professional tasks; prolongation of working hours; disruption of work schedule; inability to care for or help children; logistic difficulties in case of sudden introduction or cancellation of measures related to the pandemic; inability to combine/implement business and family plans/events.

- **Concerns about the financial stability of families** - loss of savings and businesses; need to work more; need to change professional fields or expand professional roles. Economically, this has led to a reduction in family savings without a serious deterioration in living standards. However, this aspect was a specific source of increased anxiety.
- **Communication difficulties** - lack of regular contact with colleagues and clients; impaired or limited communication at work; feelings of loneliness, isolation, loss of social contacts, etc.; in some families - conflicts between partners or difficulties in communication between parents and children. As a main negative consequence of the changed work regime are pointed social aspects of the new situation, not declines in the quality of performance or productivity.

Emotional experiences relating to the COVID-19 crisis in general

The most prominent emotion in the narratives of our interviewees was fear, followed by interest and enjoyment. Emotions such as anger, shame and contempt were not found in the responses of the working parents. A possible explanation is that fear is a life saving mechanism, which consolidates efforts and gives mobilization of the organism in order to find a way to survive. Or in other words, fear is a protection tool in stressful situations

such as crises (Selye, 1957). This negative emotion is either directly or indirectly reported in the interviews or indirectly as a synonym of anxiety, unrest, worries, scare, and even horror, threat, etc. Fear includes worries about the both physical and emotional survival of the family members and of the respondents themselves. From a psychological point of view this result can be associated with increased levels of anxiety and stress for the working parents, which corresponds to previous research results (Demaria & Vicari, 2021, Orsini et. al., 2021).

The most prominent/frequently mentioned emotion, either explicitly or implicitly, was fear, followed by interest and enjoyment. Emotions such as anger, shame and contempt were not found in the responses of the interviewed parents. An interesting finding is that participants were not surprised or at least did not express surprise by the pandemic measures and situation. A possible explanation is that fear is a life saving mechanism, which consolidates efforts and gives mobilization of the organism in order to find a way to survive. In other words, fear is a protection tool in stressful situations such as crises (Selye, 1957). This negative emotion is either directly or indirectly reported in the interviews as a synonym of anxiety, unrest, worry, scare, horror, threat, etc. Fear includes worries about both physical and emotional survival of the family members and of the respondents themselves. From a psychological point of view this result can be associated with increased levels of anxiety and stress for the working parents, which corresponds to previous research results (Demaria & Vicari, 2021, Orsini et. al., 2021).

Conclusion

The results of this interdisciplinary study can have implications in two separate directions. First, we expect that attempts to bring "back to the normal" employees with full time office attendance could potentially provoke resistance, especially among parents with young children. The role conflict for this group is extremely intensive in the context of the pandemic and this should be taken in consideration by the employers, HR experts and other specialists, involved in socioeconomic and psychological wellness of people in the organizations. Specific sources of stress for the parents are measures, related to COVID-19 that imply periods of distance learning in schools, limited access to pediatrics and childcare services. In times, when such measures are put in force, those employees will need special support to cope with the situation.

A second line of implications refers to recommendations for effective policies and measures in times of potential future crisis. The experience with COVID-19 and the related measures could help the employers to set more realistic expectations about the dominant emotions and experiences on an individual level in such situations. It seems parents with little children are especially vulnerable in times of crisis. They need special attention and help in order to adapt to intensive changes in the work regime. To be more specific – as the main pressure seems to be focused on the figure of the mother – we can expect that such measures and policies will be more effective if they are designed in accordance with the needs of the working women and after that their scope can be expanded to working parents and caregivers in general.

Some participants in our study declared strong positive attitudes towards remote working and said they would be ready to change the workplace if this option is no longer available. This, in combination with the current needs in the workforce market, leads us to the conclusion that some sectors and companies can gain a strong competitive advantage in attracting qualified employees by offering options for remote work and agile working regimes. Also new trends in the HR functions could be expected – starting from assistance how to manage time and to set role boundaries in home office conditions, expanding the social benefit and wellness programs with more healthcare and psychological services, development of new practices and policies for control and assessment, and – last but not least – search and design of effective solutions that could compensate the loss of team cohesion, social bonds and socio-emotional aspects of the relationships in the workplace.

The study has two major limitations, concerning mostly its sampling and procedure. Firstly, it was the difficult access to the vulnerable group of working parents due to their overwhelming responsibilities both at home and at work fronts during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The increased household chores under the lockdown conditions combined with working from home or in a mixed mode, and also with taking care of their children, incl. in the home-based school all day long, made a number of potential respondents unwilling to participate either in an online or in a face-to-face interview. The second limitation is relating to the inability of some respondents to recall and make a difference in their memory between their attitudes, emotional experiences and perceived difficulties at the different stages of the COVID-19 crisis. The latter limitation can

actually serve as a useful direction for future research of individual and group attitudes and experiences under pandemic conditions. The dynamics of experiences would better be explored in longitudinal studies. Replication of the findings by a larger amount of survey data is advisable and forthcoming as a next stage of the research project.

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