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Remote work, Polish families with children and inequalities in the division of labour. A qualitative longitudinal research perspective

Abstract

The text is devoted to the long-term implications of remote work. It addresses the question of whether remote work deepens or balances inequalities between women and men. The theoretical framework is inspired by boundary theory and considers work performed outside the professional context. A typology of remote work models was developed based on analysing 48 online interviews collected as part of qualitative longitudinal research. Analyses indicate that, depending on the configuration in the family, remote work can consolidate or deepen inequalities (double-shift model), lead to slight and reversible changes (second shift model), and enable more balanced relationships (flexible family model). Including a quasi-control group (participants who worked remotely periodically) allowed for assessing the role played by the durability of remote work experience and analysing the spectrum of sources of satisfaction with it. The text offers a twofold contribution to the literature. Firstly, the analyses confirm that it is necessary to consider who works remotely in the family. Model solutions imply a differentiated approach to the division of labour and the boundaries between

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work and the non-professional context. Secondly, the research confirms that access to a flexible work mode may support forming more egalitarian relationships and reduce the tension between the public and private spheres.

Keywords: remote work, family, boundary theory, online interviews, qualitative longitudinal research

Introduction

Remote work was popularised globally during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurofund, 2022; GUS, 2021). Although in many professional contexts, its scale is smaller than in the first two years of the pandemic, work in this mode has become more accessible (CBOS, 2021; ZPP, 2022). Moving work to home during the pandemic restrictions and the unavailability of educational institutions resulted in challenging experiences, especially for parents (Alon et al., 2021; Binder, 2022b). Nevertheless, this work mode gained social acceptance and generally positive assessments (Eurofund, 2022; ZPP, 2022).

This article discusses the social implications of the pandemic observed at the intersection of remote work and the lives of families. It is devoted to the impact of long-term remote work experience on gendered inequalities in the labour division. The analyses reflect on the transformation of family patterns and associated tension between the private and public spheres (Česnuitytė et al., 2017; Ciabattari, 2021). They were accompanied by a thesis about the incompatibility of labour market solutions and contemporary family responsibilities, strengthening the culturally accepted neo-traditional division of labour (Moen & Yu, 2000; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Shockley & Allen, 2018).

Theoretically, the presented analyses are inspired by the boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). At the same time, they consider the role of work performed in a non-professional context for the inequality in its division between women and men (Sullivan, 2013; Suwada, 2021). The empirical basis was two waves of longitudinal qualitative research (Neale, 2019; Saldaña, 2003) conducted in the years 2020–2021. In total, 48 qualitative online interviews with 24 parents were analysed. The thematic analysis focused on remote work models, emphasising three dimensions of work, i.e., professional duties, unpaid work at home, and care work, as well as their impact on the functioning of families (Gerson, 2010).

The first part of the article reflects on the tension between the public sphere of paid work and the private sphere of home for gendered inequalities, the potential of remote work in mitigating them, and the Polish context. Then, the adopted theoretical and methodological solutions are presented. The empirical part focuses on the developed typology of remote work models in families with children, followed by characteristics of the models and a discussion of the results. The paper closes with conclusions, comments on limitations, and suggestions for further research.

Remote work and the mismatch between work and home

Changes in family patterns in the work context are related to the tension between the private and public spheres. In Western countries, such as European nations and the US, the traditional division between the public sphere of paid work and the private sphere of the home was rooted in the consequences of the industrialisation period (Česnuitytė et al., 2017; Ciabattari, 2021). They were the basis of the separate spheres ideology (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Due to their interdependencies, separating paid work and home duties was an illusion in historical terms and remains so today. Families would be unable to function without either of the two components. Nevertheless, even at present, it is difficult to ignore the impact of this perspective on the organisation of the labour market and the functioning of families, including the ideas about how labour in families should be divided (Ciabattari, 2021; Gerson, 2010; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015).

The consequence of perceiving home and paid work as separate domains is the mismatch between parental obligations and the professional sphere. A successful career requires long working hours, availability, and not being constrained by family commitments (Benard & Correll, 2010). The growing participation of women in the labour market, also in Poland (GUS, 2021), is not balanced by the sufficient involvement of men in unpaid work at home (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Fathers increase their share, e.g., in childcare but mothers still adjust their working hours to the family's needs or resign from professional activity (Sikorska, 2019; Suwada, 2021; Szlendak, 2010). These gendered differences are reinforced by evolving cultural norms associating successful parenting with long hours devoted to children (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Sikorska, 2019; Suwada, 2021). Also, the work related to managing a household is consistently identified with the private sphere and remains largely "invisible" (Ciabattari, 2021). Expectations steaming from traditional gender roles result in a gendered specialisation in housework, as some of it is perceived as typically feminine (mainly routine chores and childcare) and some as typically masculine (such as technical and physically heavy work) (Sullivan, 2013). The culturally accepted way to meet the demands of families with children is often a neotraditional division of labour in which both partners are involved in paid work and family domains, but women still devote more time to childcare and household tasks while men spend more time in paid employment (Moen & Yu, 2000; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Shockley & Allen, 2018).

The persistence of gender norms in the workplace is also a significant obstacle to creating egalitarian gender relations in the family. At the macro level, the reality of employment is organised according to the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990; Gerson, 2010). Mothers still face the phenomenon of the motherhood penalty, earning significantly less based on the assumption that they are less competent, committed, and dependable than non-mothers (Benard & Correll, 2010; Kleven et al., 2019; PARP, 2020). In reverse, fathers who are expected to provide can often expect a fatherhood bonus, i.e., they make more money because they are perceived as more engaged, valuable, and promotable employees (Ciabattari, 2021; Williams et al., 2013). Therefore, even if couples prefer well-balanced relationships, their choices are often limited by how

workplaces are organised (Gerson, 2010). Consequently, the male partner's career will likely be prioritised over that of the female if institutional demands push egalitarian ideals out of reach (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Shockley & Allen, 2018).

One of the possible solutions in such a situation may be various forms of remote work. Even before the pandemic, access to flexible work options was considered beneficial for forming more egalitarian relationships (Gerson, 2010; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Nonetheless, despite the prolonged availability of appropriate infrastructure, even in the EU and the US, solutions of this kind were spreading relatively slowly before the COVID-19 pandemic, which can also be associated with the attachment to a clear distinction between the sphere of paid work and the home (Barrero et al., 2021; Sostero et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2013).

Polish context

In Poland, "telework" was introduced into the Labour Code in 2007, and it was replaced with "remote work" only in 2023 (The Act of December 1…, 2023). Until the pandemic outbreak, this solution was practised minimally and rarely the subject of original research[2]. According to Eurostat, in 2019, the share of employees working from home in Poland was 8%, of which only 1% "usually" worked remotely and 7% "sometimes" (Sostero, 2020). It placed Poland at the forefront of the CEE region and slightly below the EU-27 average. In professional contexts where remote work was possible, almost all (95%) who had the opportunity to use it were satisfied with their experience (Kantar TNS, 2018).

Working from home via ICT has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. With differences in measurements[3], there is a consensus regarding the trends. A sharp increase took place in the spring of 2020. Later, it was subject to fluctuations, after which a decrease in the scale was observed in the second year of the pandemic (CBOS, 2021; GUS, 2021). The scale of this phenomenon in Poland and most CEE countries levelled above 10%, but the distance to the EU average (over 20%) increased (Eurofund, 2022). Although employees partially returned to their offices, this work mode has become generally more available than before the pandemic (CBOS, 2021, 2022; GUS, 2021; ZPP, 2022). Many researchers assume that the popularisation of this solution would cause permanent changes in labour markets globally (Aksoy et al., 2022; Barrero et al., 2021; Felstead, 2022). In Poland, its inclusion in the Labour Code also facilitates this process.

Pandemic remote work experiences were primarily positive for employees across the EU (Eurofund, 2022). Poland was no exception in this regard. Most Polish employees (63%) would happily work remotely, at least to some extent (ZPP, 2022), and parents tended to put a higher value on working from home than people without parental obligations (Aksoy et al., 2022). Intriguingly, women more often than men

[2] An overview of the pre-pandemic literature on tele- and remote work was presented elsewhere (Binder, 2021).

[3] Studies conducted in Q2 2020 indicated 10.2% (GUS, 2020), 21% (CBOS, 2020), and over 31% (Eurostat in Sostero et al., 2020) of remote workers in total employment.

emphasised that remote work made it easier to reconcile parental duties with professional careers (CBOS, 2022). It was even though the transfer of work to the home resulted in women performing a disproportionate share of unpaid work at home (Binder, 2022b; Szczudlińska-Kanoś & Marzec, 2021). Mothers, more often than fathers, simultaneously dealt with care and professional work (Eurofund, 2022). It often resulted in a particularly unfavourable arrangement, undermining their professional performance and creating potential risks for career development (Alon et al., 2021; Binder, 2022b; Eurofund, 2022; Lyttelton et al., 2020). Nevertheless, women significantly more often than men favoured remote work for anyone interested when the nature of the work allowed it (ZPP, 2022). What is more, women also would be willing to sacrifice a higher share of earnings than men to be able to work remotely (Lewandowski et al., 2022). These ambiguities prompt an in-depth analysis of the reasons for satisfaction with remote work and, more broadly, the implications of its long-term experience for families with children.

Theoretical inspirations

The boundary theory inspired the theoretical framework of the presented analyses (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). It sensitises the consequences of moving professional work to the home space and the related shift of spatial and temporal boundaries separating these spheres. In the context of families, effective management of work from home requires ongoing negotiation between partners to maintain boundaries and create transitions between worker and other social roles (Felstead, 2022; Felstead et al., 2005). The range of possible solutions conventionally falls between a clear separation of work and home spheres (segmentation) and their full integration (Ashforth et al., 2000; Felstead et al., 2005). Both maintaining boundaries and accepting their blurring are associated with specific costs, affecting the subjects' well-being and relationships with others. Switching between roles becomes more manageable with time as well as the development of individual scripts and conduct strategies, which emphasises the role of cumulating experiences and tracking these phenomena long-term (Felstead, 2022; Felstead et al., 2005).

The tensions between the public sphere (related to paid work) and the private sphere (related to family life) manifest themselves at the junction of professional and non-professional life. It was the reason for adopting a general assumption about the incompatibility of labour market solutions and contemporary family responsibilities, for which the popular remedy is the neo-traditional division of family responsibilities and gendered specialisation in housework (Moen & Yu, 2000; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Shockley & Allen, 2018). Therefore, in the empirical part, work is analysed in its three dimensions: professional (paid) work, unpaid work at home (chores), and care work (childcare). While drawing a clear line between routine chores and childcare may be difficult, the distinction was clear to study participants. This conceptualisation helps better understand the processes underlying the gender division of labour (Sullivan, 2013; Suwada, 2021). It also allows for the recognition of work performed outside the professional environment, reflection on the ambiguity of satisfaction with remote

work, and comprehension of the implications of remote work for the functioning of families with children (Barrero et al., 2021; Bloom, 2020; Ellison, 1999).

Methodology

The presented longitudinal analysis is based on two waves of qualitative longitudinal research (Neale, 2019; Saldaña, 2003). The first one was conducted in the spring and summer of 2020, and a year later, data collection was continued with the same participants[4]. The purposeful sample included four recruitment criteria: gender, type of life situation (young adults, parents, and seniors), place of residence (city, town, village), and macro-region (northern, central, southern). Due to the pandemic, the project was conducted remotely. The primary research technique was individual online video interviews. At the same time, in the event of technical difficulties or lack of appropriate digital infrastructure, the respondents were also allowed to participate in the study by telephone[5].

In total, 48 interviews were analysed. A group of 24 parents (12 women and 12 men), who experienced remote work in their families due to the pandemic and participated in the study twice, was selected for the analysis from a wider group of interviewees. The selection included people whose work was permanently or temporarily moved to their homes, taking into account its varied scope (from partial to fully remote). In addition, in 13 out of 24 cases, the partners of the research participants also experienced remote work in the analysed period.

Parents were defined as persons living with dependent children. Marriage or the fact of having a partner was not a recruitment criterion. Nevertheless, in the analysed group, all respondents were in heterosexual relationships, and only in two cases were unmarried. Participants were primarily parents of children in pre-school and early school age. All respondents had tertiary education. Professionally, the respondents fit into a broad category of specialists, including areas of IT, finance, administration (business and public), sales, education, and others. Detailed information on the participants is presented in the annexe.

The collected interviews were transcribed (verbatim) and subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process included familiarising with

[4] The selected interviews were part of a larger dataset collected under two projects: (1) *Determinants of change in social attitudes and lifestyle in the context of current challenges related to climate change. Example of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland* (n=150) was conducted in the spring and summer of 2020 by the team of Piotr Binder, Hanna Bojar and Dariusz Wojakowski, at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and commissioned by the Institute of Environmental Protection – National Research Institute (Contract no. PZ. 022.19.2020.CC-CD); (2) *Social impacts of the pandemic. Selected socio-demographic categories in the lifestyle perspective – a longitudinal study* (n=109) was conducted a year later, by the team of Piotr Binder, Hanna Bojar, Marta Karkowska, Dariusz Wojakowski and Kinga Zawadzka, at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and supported by this institution as part of the internal order No. 16.

[5] More on the research methodology (Binder, 2022a).

the dataset, coding, and generating initial themes, followed by developing and refining them (Braun & Clarke, 2021, pp. 35–36). The longitudinal character of the dataset required taking into account not only intensive case analysis but also both the synchronous perspective (cross-analysis within the waves of the study) and the diachronic perspective (tracking changes between the waves) (Neale, 2019; Saldaña, 2003). The collected data was organised, coded, and then analysed with the support of MAXQDA (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

Models of remote work in families with children

The empirical part presents the evolution of remote work models in families with children. These were conceptualised based on the analysis of two waves of collected interviews, which allowed for recognising the features of the proposed models and reaching beyond the participants' experiences. The initial version of the typology was offered based on the analysis of interviews collected in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic (Binder, 2022b). Implementing the second wave of the study created the possibility of diachronic data analysis. Returning to the same people gave grounds for reflection on the proposed models' changes during the research. The new and expanded version of the typology presented below includes three basic configurations of remote work in the family, i.e., when: (1) a woman works remotely (double shift model), (2) when a man works remotely (second shift model), and (3) when both partners work in this mode (flexible family model)[6]. The dynamic professional situation of the respondents was the reason for including in the analysis also people who worked remotely temporarily. Parents who stopped working online between the waves of the study created (4) a quasi-control group (temporary disturbance model), which impacted the final shape of the analyses. Despite the uniqueness of each participant and the differences between their families, respondents gravitated toward one of the presented models. At the same time, due to the volatility of the professional situation during the pandemic, some of the study participants experienced various changes in how their work was organised (often multiple times) and, as a result, changes in the models practised in their families. Lastly, due to the nature of the publication (limited size) and the fact that an extensive analysis of the initial versions of models was presented elsewhere (Binder, 2022b), the characteristics given below are illustrated only with excerpts from the second wave of the interviews.

[6] The names of the models refer to the concepts functioning in the literature on issues at the interface between work and home, i.e., "double duty" (Alon et al., 2021), "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 2012), and "flexible families" (Gerson, 2010).

Table 1. Models of remote work in families with children

Double-shift model	Second shift model	Flexible family model	Temporary disturbance model
Professional work			
– Female (F) remotely, Male (M) on-site – F discontinuous (flexible boundaries) – M continuous work, regardless of the care situation (rigid boundaries – M prioritisation of work	– M remotely, F on-site – F continuous, outside the home – M continuity depending on care situation (rigid boundaries) – M prioritisation of work	– F and M remotely – continuity depending on the care situation – a less clear division of work/non-work spheres (flexible boundaries) – lower prioritisation of M's work	– F and/or M temporarily remotely – chaotic organisation of paid work – on-site mode of work as a return to "normality" – F openness to remote work in the future
Unpaid work at home			
– F leading role (low priority) – M as before the pandemic or less – F/M inequality preserved/deepened – gendered specialisation	– F leading role – M as before the pandemic/ slightly more – M less involvement in new activities, partial reversal of changes – gendered specialisation	– F/M more egalitarian division (flexible arrangements) – M more involvement in new activities – more work together – less gendered specialisation	– F leading role (low priority) – M no changes or temporary modifications – fast return to the pre-pandemic setting – gendered specialisation
Care work (childcare)			
– F's priority, including working hours – M less involved, typically after work – more involvement of M as an exception – the growing role of external support	– F's priority after work – M more involved when institutions unavailable – otherwise, M involved after work – the growing role of external support	– F/M more balanced involvement – more time devoted to children – more attention to children's needs – the growing role of external support	– F's priority, including working hours – M less involved, typically after work – emergency setups when institutions unavailable – the growing role of external support
Impact on the family			
– lasting reorganisation of life's rhythm – deepening of the F/M inequalities – less family time, negative impact on family – remote mode as support for F work overload	– lasting reorganisation of life's rhythm – limited impact on F/M inequalities – limited impact on family – remote work resulting in M's more time at home	– persistent lifestyle modifications – reduction of the F/M inequalities – more family time, positive impact on family – positive assessment of the pandemic period	– a temporary disturbance of life's rhythm – no impact on F/M inequalities – no lasting impact on the family – memories of the "pandemic holidays"

The double-shift model

Within this model, women worked remotely, while men worked on-site. The men's paid work thus had clear boundaries, was located outside the home, and performed continuously. This model enabled men to concentrate on professional duties as their primary activity. They prioritised this sphere, which was reflected in the interviews because they talked about paid work more willingly. Narratives of women were holistic and included a full spectrum of their duties. Their statements about employment were intertwined with threads referring to other life dimensions: *I traded an eight-hour job for a more flexible one. Sometimes I have to work in the afternoons and evenings, so I don't have that afternoon for my family and home* (F, 2_JT_32)[7]. They perceived a flexible approach to the issue of boundaries between paid work and home as a must. Remote work facilitated coping with non-professional duties: *The possibility of working online is a massive plus in this situation, which allows me to embrace it somehow logistically* (F, 2_PB_64). In the long view, discontinuity in the professional duties performance also generated backlogs and the need to make up for them later: *I have constant shortages at work, constant shortages at home* (F, 2_JT_33). Professional work performed in such conditions was losing quality and did not satisfy women as before the pandemic.

It was primarily women who were burdened with unpaid work at home. Nevertheless, with the number of duties, it gained a relatively low priority, which resulted in a sense of home neglect and discomfort. A recurring topic was involving children in these activities: *At the beginning, there was a plan to share the cleaning with my husband, but it absolutely did not work out. So I knew I was alone with this. So I started cleaning with my children* (F, KZ_102). Normalising the pandemic and the availability of care institutions has eased the situation and created better conditions for women working online. However, it did not help to solve the issue of the "second shift": *I'm just slowly starting to clean the house because such a mess as we have after this pandemic was rarely at my place* (F, 2_JT_33). The situation of men was different. The range of changes they experienced was much lesser: *My husband would come home from work and do what he had been doing* (F, 2_PB_64). Their involvement in unpaid work at home was happening exclusively after working hours and was limited to their specialisation, which primarily included physically heavy work and technical work: *You can say that I don't have household duties except that I keep a budget in my hand and pay the bills […] I also had duties related to building our house, but that's probably all* (M, 2_ES_141). Compared to the pre-pandemic period, the only change was their frequent involvement in shopping. However, the gradual return to earlier consumption practices eliminated this element.

Care work was also primarily the women's task: *It is either the kindergarten or me. There are no other options* (F, 2_JT_33). Participants' narratives indicated a generally low involvement of men in the study group. They stayed home less often than women and spent little time with their children after work: *I try to spend my free time with my*

[7] The cited fragments of interviews are marked with codes consisting of gender (F – female or M – male) and the interview reference number.

son, which I don't have much (M, 2_ES_141). A change observed in the second year of the pandemic was the greater importance of various forms of support, from family members to babysitters: *Our parents are basically retired, so we were able to organise care with their involvement* (M, 2_ES_141). Progressive adaptation to the pandemic made assistance more available, especially from older family members. The possibility of resorting to support, even to a limited extent, improved the situation of women within this model. In addition, such solutions at least partly filled the gap in care work related to the fairly low involvement of men. Their more active participation under this model was an exception. It required a more flexible organisation of professional duties, which would enable them to support their female partner and synchronise with the rhythm of care institutions: *Since I don't have a job with fixed working hours, I adjust it to be able to drive children to kindergarten and bring them back* (M, 2_KZ_91).

In the long run, entering the double-shift model meant a permanent reorganisation of the previous rhythm of family life. The direction of changes indicated consolidation or deepening of inequalities between partners. Overburdening women with housework and childcare, and orientation of men to professional duties resulted in less family time. It was emphasised by the fact that opportunities to spend time together appeared in these families when they went beyond the framework of the model: *My husband and I were able to watch several seasons of series […] but only because my husband had orders cancelled due to the pandemic, so he had more time. When we are busier, he has no time to rest, let alone spend some time with his family* (F, 2_JT_33). The female participants also repeatedly emphasised their fundamental problem of the lack of time for their needs: *I want to have this time for myself, in which I can only take care of myself. It is what I miss* (F, KC_21). The perspective of the second year of the pandemic confirmed that practising this model, despite the greater availability of institutions and external support, was mainly at the expense of women. The possibility of remote work was organisational facilitation, allowing them to cope with their duties more effectively. However, paradoxically, it could also worsen their situation and deepen inequalities.

The second shift model

Under the second shift model, the roles of women and men were reversed. Women could leave home and perform their paid work on-site continuously. Men performed their professional duties online, resulting in periods of combining paid work from home and care work. However, men's professional activities did not consume less time than before the pandemic: *I have much more of this job. It turned out that everyone wants to do something, and I have many orders* (M, 2_JZ_120). What distinguished their narratives was prioritising professional work. Duties related to employment were presented in the first place as more important: *I mark the hours when I am going to finish, usually at 4 pm. Then I turn off the computer and move to household activities* (M, 2_AND_14). Also, men tended to set rigid and impermeable boundaries. They preferred the segmentation of paid work and home duties: *There must be discipline in determining when it is work and when it is the rest […] I have been able to maintain such a strict working time* (M, 2_ES_143). Unlike women in a similar situation, men

appreciated the calmer pace of their paid work: *I'm not in a hurry, I'm not chasing anything, because I can plan everything* (M, 2_AND_14). Their satisfaction also generated the spillover effect to other aspects of their lives: *I have such a slow life thanks to the pandemic* (M, 2_OD_134).

The fact that men spent more time at home created the possibility of greater involvement in unpaid work. It was partially observed in the first year. However, this tendency has not continued: *Even in a way, let's say a little less because my wife took over more chores* (M, 2_ES_143). Thus, women were mainly burdened with unpaid work at home, which formed their "second shift". As in the previous model, men willingly devoted their time to activities they were accustomed to and specialised in. These were more often related to physically heavy tasks and non-routine technical maintenance than everyday household duties. Normalisation of the pandemic could also lead to a reversal of previous changes towards a more balanced division of labour: *My wife does the cooking. In my case, I completely turned it off. While on Sunday, I used to cook because I liked it, but now we rather pack in the car and go somewhere to a restaurant* (M, 2_JZ_120). There were few clear indications of men's openness to new duties, and they were primarily concerned with what is called "helping" female partners perform tasks rather than taking over some of their work. In addition, these situations mainly involved couples relatively well-balanced before the pandemic: *Ordinary household chores are what they used to be. They are not all permanent. Sometimes we exchange, nothing has changed here* (M, 2_KC_19).

The study's first wave indicated that remote work also created conditions for more intense contact between fathers and children. In the long term, these phenomena did not deepen. If possible, men were delegating care work to their female partners: *My wife took over taking care of the children because she had such opportunity […] they play downstairs, I'm upstairs* (M, 2_JZ_120). As a result, men's care work was also presented in terms of "help" provided in free time: *I have a little son […], he takes much time. Playing with him is probably the main way of spending my free time* (M, 2_KC_19). Men could indicate specific activities related to the children they perform. However, none of the participants in this model showed that they perform all children-related activities interchangeably with their female partner: *I clean the bathrooms, I bathe the children, these are certainly two things I do* (M, 2_ES_143). Moving men's professional work home did not stimulate a greater balance in care work, and the change observed at the beginning of the pandemic was unstable. Paradoxically, this was also related to the general improvement of the parents' care situation. Returning children to institutions meant fathers working from home could no longer pay attention to children during working hours. Similarly, the growing availability of support in care work (primarily grandparents) was a mechanism that allowed limiting contact with children.

As in the previous model, consolidating men's remote work resulted in the reorganisation of family life. Changes, however, concerned men mainly. Contrary to the holistic approach of women working remotely, men primarily emphasised the professional aspects. From their perspective, the rhythm of family functioning did not change significantly: *Essentially, little has changed when it comes to family matters* (M, 2_KC_19). The potential for change brought by the transfer of men's professional work to the

home materialised only to a small extent. A clear shift in the emphasis towards greater balance usually did not take place. The intensified presence of men at home created the opportunity for more interactions with household members, including children. However, this effect seemed to be offset by the tendency to set rigid boundaries between paid work and home duties, the availability of institutions, and external support. Only some participants indicated spending more time with their families and engaging in new activities. At the same time, these were usually families whose members were already very close to each other before the pandemic: *We already spent much time together. When it comes to a choice between professional and family work, we have always been very focused on family life* (M, 2_ES_143). In families where the tendency to prioritise a man's position and paid work was firmly rooted, the changes were only subtle in the long run.

The flexible family model

The remote work of both partners was the basis of a model that differed from the remaining two due to the symmetrical nature and the distinct internal dynamics. A longer perspective deepened this pattern. Although for such families the initial period of the pandemic was the most challenging, from a professional standpoint, the respondents expressed satisfaction with the new solution: *It works, generally over the year, at least in our team, there was no failure* (F, 2_PB_63). Partners developed a consensus regarding joint work from home and internal (home) rules for its organisation: *At the beginning, we had some tensions that someone was too loud […]. Later it all worked out, and we had no major problems working next to each other* (F, 2_OD_124). Although the arrangements were diverse, their general feature was a flexible approach to the boundaries between paid work and home duties: *I don't have to work from eight to four, but I can take a longer break during the day* (M, 2_LK_50). It was also related to more time spent at home and greater accessibility for household members. The less clear-cut division between different types of work disturbed the continuity of work, and its fragmentation intensified, especially during periods of unavailability of care and education institutions. In turn, the symmetrical nature of this model also stimulated more egalitarian solutions and less emphasis on prioritising men's work.

Under this model, involvement in unpaid work at home differed. The fact that the partners spend time together fostered openness to flexible solutions: *We have it pretty well divided. It's not a rigid arrangement that I do "this", and my husband does "that". It's just intertwined, and none of us feels overburdened* (F, 2_OD_124). This model did not eliminate inequalities in the division of work. However, it created the conditions for levelling the differences: *Before the pandemic, I would just leave at eight and come back at six. All that time was taken out of home life. Now, I can do many things during the day* (M, 2_LK_50). The participants understood a more "egalitarian" approach differently, and gendered specialisation also appeared in this model. Some claimed they lack a clear division: *Maybe I put the laundry in more often, and my husband cooks and cleans more?* (F, 2_OD_124). Also, only within this group, shifts of duties to the male partner were observed: *Because my wife has been promoted […] she*

works really long hours. Therefore, I took over some of the duties (M, 2_KC_50). Nonetheless, these arrangements were the most effective in families where balance was valued even before the partners changed the working mode: *Generally, it hasn't changed […] we take turns doing everything from cooking, laundry, bathing the children, and so on* (M, 2_KZ_92).

The remote work of both parents also changed the sphere of care work. This area also required the close cooperation of parents: *Simultaneous work and caring for the children were out of the question, so we divided the time* (F, 2_PB_63). Even if involvement was far from equal, women emphasised that the close presence of a partner positively impacted their well-being, especially in the case of young children. Long-term experience with remote work allowed parents to develop many scenarios for care work. What they had in common was that parents paid more attention to their children than before the pandemic: *I spend more time with my children because working time is a bit more flexible now* (F, 2_KC_21). A manifestation of this was, e.g., shortening the length of their stay in institutions: *It seems that a child shouldn't stay in the facility for so long, these ten hours* (F, 2_JZ_109). Time devoted to children allowed parents to get to know them better and respond to their needs. A particular example was the decision of parents to transfer children to homeschooling: *I just decided to enrol my children in home education* (F, 2_KC_21). It was a challenge that took the flexible approach to the boundaries to the next level. Simultaneously, external support in care work became more available. Once again, these were primarily family members, predominantly grandparents.

Participants indicated that the changes in their family lives became permanent: *Now it's hard to remember what it was like before the pandemic* (F, 2_OD_124). The reorganisation of their lives was associated with a shift in emphasis on the family sphere: *I think that the fact that now we spend much time together as a family is something worth cherishing* (F, 2_JZ_109). The progressive normalisation of the pandemic has not altered it. A recurring theme was strengthening family ties: *The pandemic has united us as a family* (M, KZ_91). Relationship changes coexisted with modifying everyday practices. They could concern daily rituals (e.g., sharing breakfast) but also include lifestyle elements such as diet, sports, or the possibility of finding time for oneself: *Practically every day, I have an hour of yoga, run, or functional workout. I owe it to the pandemic and remote work* (F, 2_PB_63). Unique for this model were plans for further life modifications, e.g., moving to the countryside or even decisions about profound life reorientations: *For a longer period, we want to live on a boat and explore the world* (F, 2_KC_21). What connected participants was their satisfaction with the direction of changes, which led the respondents to an upbeat assessment of the pandemic period as a whole: *For us, the pandemic meant benefits in terms of lifestyle, its organisation, and psychologically […] it is a very positive period* (F, 2_PB_63).

Temporary disturbance model (quasi-control group)

The basis of the last model was that remote work was only a temporary experience. Due to the fragmentary nature of these experiences, interviews with participants who

fit into this model were analysed together, regardless of who in the family worked remotely. The common element for them was the feeling that their professional situation was normalised after a disturbance. The return to the on-site work was perceived as positive and expected: *Generally, going from home to work is great* (M, 2_AND_4). The assessments of remote work were complex. Some of them were critical, primarily in the first months of the pandemic when their paid work was often poorly organised: *We had no idea what awaited us, what was ruining our efforts* (F, 2_PB_71). Such statements also evaluated an extraordinary period, which was difficult to separate from the work mode. However, participants also saw the positive aspects of performing professional tasks from home. Especially women repeatedly claimed it was supportive and facilitated coping with everyday home duties. It also made them interested in remote work in the future: *I hope that employers will start to think about this form of work because it makes it easier to combine family and professional life* (F, 2_PB_71). It was especially the case when women could work remotely without caring for children simultaneously: *When the kids went to school and kindergarten, and we worked at home, it was great* (F, 2_OD_127).

When remote work was temporary, families implemented one of the models proposed earlier. Due to the short-term nature of the experience, those who worked remotely in the family played less of a role, as women did most of the unpaid work at home regardless of the scenario. If a female partner worked from home, household chores usually fell on her shoulders: *I do everything. […] If you tell my husband bluntly that he has to do something, he will do it. But, most of the housework is my responsibility* (F, 2_AND_1). Some changes were observed when the male partner worked remotely. However, even then, the modifications were temporary and reversible: *When I had the opportunity to work from home, I took care of the house more. I took over some things from my wife. I was there and cared for cooking, cleaning, and such basic things. Now we're back again* (M, 2_AND_4). Also, when both partners worked online, there was no shift toward a more balanced division of labour: *At first, I was glad that there was someone else at home and that we would try to share responsibilities. It turned out that when my husband is at home, he doesn't help. He only works* (F, 2_OD_127). Regardless of the implemented model, the participants agreed that periodic changes did not affect the division of duties at home in the long term.

Childcare was the main challenge also for parents who worked remotely only temporarily. A sudden disturbance of the life rhythm triggered solutions developed in emergencies. These were based primarily on women's work: *When the kindergartens were closed in March, it was clear that I was the one who had to stay home with our daughter* (F, 2_AND_1). Even if male partners took on some care work, the women emphasised an asymmetry of commitment: *After a while, I had the feeling that I was on maternity leave all over again* (F, 2_OD_127). However, the extra time spent with the children intensified the bond with mothers: *My relationship with my son became stronger because I was at home with him while working remotely* (F, 2_PB_71). Men's involvement was limited. It was the highest when the male partners worked remotely. At the same time, care work was then presented primarily as an obstacle to paid work: *For some time, my four-year-old daughter did not go to kindergarten. Well, it was quite a hindrance […] she enjoyed the fact that she could disturb me* (M, 2_AND_4). Within the other two models, fathers' involvement was limited to the time after work, emphasising fun and recrea-

tion: *My husband took our children a lot for walks and trips* (F, 2_OD_127). As within other scenarios, the disproportionate burden on women was mitigated over time by the availability of institutions and external help.

From the perspective of the impact on the family, the interviewees shared a narrative about overcoming temporary disruption: *I think we have returned to the old ways* (F, 2_OD_127). A retrospective look at remote work sometimes evoked emotional memories of women, which were related to work overload or a personal crisis. Men paid much less attention to this period. In one of the cases, the participant even forgot that he periodically worked from home a year earlier and shared his experiences: *My job was not suspended, it was not locked down in any way, so I went to it quite normally* (M, 2_KZ_105). Respondents often spontaneously mentioned family and its importance when asked about their reflections on their lives in the context of the pandemic. They also shared observations about a turn towards the family they notice: *While following friends on Facebook, unlike earlier, there are more pictures of whole families, not just individuals* (F, 2_PB_71). However, the changes in their families were temporary: *Just a year ago I thought that yes; that somehow we spend more time together and we are closer to each other. It seems to be back to normal now* (F, 2_AND_1). The period of remote work in family life was associated with ordinary memories of shared time and watching TV shows. However, if any changes in family rituals were consolidated, they were minor.

Discussion

The two waves of interviews created a basis for reflection on the implications of the long-term remote work experience for families with children and the remote work models practised within them. The results of the analyses focus on the six issues discussed below.

Firstly, the longitudinal analysis confirms that the fact who worked remotely in the family impacted the division of labour and the functioning of families as a whole. The experience of the study participants indicated that the answer to whether remote work contributes to deepening or reducing inequalities in the division of labour is complex. The double-shift model, under which women worked remotely, created conditions for consolidating or deepening the asymmetry in the division of labour. It was the most unfavourable solution for women, implemented mainly at the expense of various dimensions of their work. The model of the second shift, i.e., the reverse situation, impacted how the work of men who performed their professional duties remotely was organised. Although this solution created the conditions for their greater involvement in household duties and childcare, it led to relatively small changes in the long run. In turn, the flexible family model, i.e., a situation in which both the work of a woman and a man was transferred to the home, favoured changes towards more balance in the division of labour. Moreover, these changes were accompanied by modifications of lifestyles and, in some cases, plans for comprehensive life reorientations.

The second issue concerns the durability of the conceptualised models. A systematic data comparison led to the conclusion that the models based on the work of one

of the partners (double shift and second shift models) retained their durability and clarity primarily during the strictest epidemic restrictions. From the perspective of the division of labour in the family, these models became partly similar as an adaptation to the pandemic progressed, restrictions were eased, and the availability of care, and education facilities increased. In other words, if only one of the partners worked remotely in the second year of the pandemic, it began to play a lesser role, whether it was a woman or a man. In both these cases, families gravitated towards a neo-traditional division of duties. Apart from professional work, women performed most of the unpaid work at home and care work. The main difference was that the "second shift" was distinctly separated from the "first" for women working on-site. However, even if they worked from home, men focused primarily on professional work and engaged only in selected household duties, usually following their specialisation. In turn, the model based on the remote work of both partners was characterised by far-reaching stability. The gradual easing of pandemic restrictions changed the context of its functioning, but it retained its specificity.

The third point involves gender specificity regarding the approach to boundaries. Under all the proposed scenarios, transferring professional duties to the home required a confrontation with the frontiers between professional work and other life dimensions (Felstead, 2022; Felstead et al., 2005). The research indicates that the specificity of models was related to the practised approach to boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). There was also an apparent gender effect consistent with the literature on the subject (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Women working remotely, also in the long term, preferred a flexible approach, which allowed them to cope with professional work, unpaid work at home, and childcare. Despite being more open to household duties at the pandemic's beginning, men working from home tended to segment these spheres as consistently as possible, allowing them to concentrate on professional tasks during conventional hours. However, both partners' remote work resulted in a more flexible approach to the existing boundaries, roles, and responsibilities. Men's attachment to segmentation indicated that they were the ones who had to do more adaptation work. At the same time, this change in the flexible family model enabled the shift towards a more egalitarian division of labour.

Fourthly, in the long run, most respondents working in remote mode were satisfied with the remote work and the changes it brings. Thus, it went beyond the "honeymoon" phase (Barrero et al., 2021; Bloom, 2020; Ellison, 1999). The reasons for this varied depending on the model. For women working remotely, it was primarily a possibility of more effective time management when overloaded with various work dimensions. The "facilitation" by enabling women to alternate professional work and household duties perpetuated the existing inequalities, creating conditions for their deepening. Men working remotely appreciated a slower pace of professional work and, thus, life. They prioritised professional work, which in the long term, limited the impact of moving their work home on the functioning of the family. Both partners working from home created different conditions. In the flexible family model, lifestyle modifications, including reducing inequalities in the division of labour, were the source of satisfaction. Also, the positive impact of changes in the organisation of professional work on the functioning of the family as a whole was emphasised (Gerson, 2010).

It was reflected in the general orientation towards family, a sense of strengthening the bond, and plans for further changes.

The fifth issue concerns the role of the durability of remote work experiences. The possibility of including a quasi-control group indicated that the respondents working remotely only temporarily fitted into one of the three proposed models. In their narratives, however, the main emphasis was on the issue of returning to normality. Temporary experiences of remote work did not have a lasting impact on the division of duties in families or their functioning in the long term. Nevertheless, this working mode met with generally positive opinions among the participants working from home only periodically. Experiences related to remote work were attractive enough to stimulate the respondents' interest in continuing it in the future. It mainly concerned women who appreciated time-saving and the possibility of more effective time management, as in the double-shift model. Once again, although this solution "facilitated" coping with different dimensions of work, at the same time, it perpetuated inequalities in the division of labour. These observations underscore the diverse meanings behind remote work satisfaction and readiness to continue it. They also remain essential in the context of new Labour Code regulations and the increasing availability of remote work, especially for parents of young children.

The last point concerns a broader socio-cultural background. Practices rooted in the separate spheres of ideology and social expectations of gender roles are enduring. The narratives of people who worked remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that they may be susceptible to change. The study concludes that changes towards a more egalitarian division of labour in families with children required a redefinition of the relationship between professional life and home responsibilities at the family level. The reorganisation of the professional life of both partners required research participants to be more open to flexible solutions, which were the key to increasing the balance in the division of labour between women and men (Gerson, 2010). It was associated with a more effective matching of professional and family commitments (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Therefore, on the one hand, this research is a partial empirical confirmation that in the Polish context, the neotraditional division of labour in families is associated with limitations resulting from how workplaces are organised (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). On the other hand, flexible working arrangements can support reducing gendered inequalities by allowing parents to practice a more balanced distribution of duties (Gerson, 2010; Williams et al., 2013).

Conclusions

The paper reflects on the long-term implications of remote work for families with children. Since the analyses were accompanied by the assumption that contemporary workplaces are incompatible with parental obligations (Gerson, 2010; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015), it was investigated how the solution of remote work would be filled with social practices. The adopted theoretical solutions, i.e., boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996) and considering work

performed in a non-professional context (Sullivan, 2013; Suwada, 2021), enabled the presentation of a multidimensional impact of remote work and a fuller picture of gendered inequalities. The answer to whether remote work deepens or balances inequalities in families is complex and has been discussed based on the developed typology of remote work models. The analyses suggest that it depends primarily on who works remotely in the family, indicating that remote work reflects the tension between the private and public spheres (Česnuitytė et al., 2017; Ciabattari, 2021). However, the research displays that modifications of the neotraditional model of the division of labour are possible (Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). It confirms that access to remote work can support forming more egalitarian relationships (Williams et al., 2013), as it enables more flexible approaches to roles and responsibilities, which also positively affect the functioning of families (Gerson, 2010). The longitudinal perspective (Neale, 2019; Saldaña, 2003) allowed tracking changes in remote work models and enabled comparing them with a quasi-control group of those who worked remotely temporarily, which uncovered the variety of the meanings behind satisfaction with remote work (Barrero et al., 2021; CBOS, 2022; Eurofund, 2022). These conclusions contribute to the literature on the subject. They may be vital for quantitative research on remote work, which rarely considers remote work models implemented in families (Alon et al., 2020) or the durability of the experience (Bloom, 2020; Ellison, 1999).

Limitations and future research

Although the study was nationwide, it is based on the analysis of a limited number of cases and is devoid of representativeness. The respondents raised their children in cohabiting couples, most of whom were married, which means that the conducted analyses do not consider numerous different scenarios, including the situation of single parents. In addition, the study participants were forced to change their working mode by restrictions related to the epidemic threat in conditions when remote work was a known but still not very popular solution. The popularisation of this solution during the pandemic, followed by the amendment of the Labour Code facilitating access to this mode of work, created a new context in which the phenomenon of remote work will require further research. It will be necessary to examine a more comprehensive range of remote work models in families and extend the analyses to include the perspective of employers tasked with organising work in new, different conditions. Finally, although the processes underpinning the popularisation of remote work are global, the questions about national and regional (including CEE) specificities remain open. The answers will require systematic international comparisons.

Annexe

Table 2. Details of participants included in the presented analyses

No	Interview code	Gender	Born	Profession	Partner's profession	Partner worked remotely	Number of children (age)	Place
1.	AND_1	F	1990	city clerk	mining engineer	No	1 (5)	town
2.	AND_4	M	1985	school teacher	civil servant	No	1 (4)	town
3.	AND_14	M	1973	merchant	beautician	No	3 (8, 21, 26)	town
4.	KC_17	M	1969	veterinarian	civil servant	Yes	2 (11, 22)	town
5.	KC_19	M	1987	tutor	housewife	No	1 (3)	village
6.	KC_21	F	1985	therapist	office (not specified)	Yes	2 (5, 8)	city
7.	JT_32	F	1992	insurance agent	business co-owner	No	1 (2)	village
8.	JT_33	F	1980	bank analyst	contractor	No	2 (3, 12)	town
9.	JT_36	F	1982	academic teacher	academic teacher	Yes	1 (3)	city
10.	LK_50	M	1980	marketer	manager	Yes	2 (11, 13)	city
11.	PB_63	F	1981	HR specialist	IT specialist	Yes	2 (2, 6)	town
12.	PB_64	F	1980	project manager	lighting engineer	No	2 (3, 5)	town
13.	PB_71	F	1977	civil servant	business owner	No	1 (9)	town
14.	KZ_91	M	1982	event manager	corporate employee	Yes	2 (3, 4)	town
15.	KZ_92	M	1977	interior designer	English teacher	Yes	2 (3, 10)	city
16.	KZ_102	F	1980	project coordinator	corporate employee	Yes	3 (4, 6, 7)	town
17.	KZ_105	M	1977	electrical engineer	sociologist	Yes	2 (7, 12)	village
18.	JZ_109	F	1988	presentation designer	workflow coordinator	Yes	2 (1, 3)	city

19.	JZ_120	M	1984	software engineer	preschool teacher	No	2 (1, 5)	village
20.	OD_124	F	1985	marketer	IT specialist	Yes	1 (1)	city
21.	OD_127	F	1978	school teacher	market researcher	Yes	2 (5, 8)	city
22.	OD_134	M	1960	sales representative	nurse	No	3 (20[8], 25, 27)	village
23.	ES_141	M	1986	paramedic	manager	Yes	1 (2)	town
24.	ES_143	M	1991	academic teacher	housemaker	No	2 (1, 3)	town

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