Childcare and Remote Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Ideal Worker Model, Parenthood and Gender Inequalities in Italy

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Abstract

The paper illustrates the results of a qualitative study conducted in Italy during the lockdown, and aimed at investigating the consequences of remote work on work-life balance and gender inequalities in the division of paid and unpaid labor within heterosexual couples. Drawing from 20 online in-depth interviews with 10 heterosexual couples, the paper highlights the expansion of work over other domains, which worsened with remote work. Even if for some interviewed men it was an occasion to experience a more involved fatherhood, for the majority of them a rethinking of their commitment in paid work is inconceivable. Conversely, mothers are more keen on considering job requests as negotiable and perceive a pervasive interference of work on family life, while their husbands often claim that childcare activities may reduce their productivity. Remote work does not allow the redefinition of the working models and does not improve the work-life balance of interviewed couples, which is still considerably unbalanced towards job, with a limited space and time for individual activities. Moreover, remote work, even in this unprecedented extreme situation, does not modify gender normative roles within domestic domain and thus it reproduces and

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sometimes exacerbates gender inequalities with women trying to balance their double role and fathers expanding the time devoted to work.

Keywords: work-life balance, remote work, gender inequalities.

1. Introduction

Lately, the involved fatherhood model (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011; Murgia, Poggio, 2011a; Dermott, Miller, 2015) has been spreading in Western countries. However, several studies (Ciccone, 2011; Magaraggia, 2012, 2013; Crespi, Ruspini 2015; Cannito, 2020a) focused on Italy have shown a gap between cultural changes and changes in practices of fatherhood, which determines the persistence of an unbalanced sharing of care duties between mothers and fathers.

The reasons behind the lack of involvement on the part of Italian fathers are multiple, and are to do with macro dimensions (e.g. the familistic mother-centered welfare state), factors linked to workplaces (Murgia, Poggio, 2011b; Cannito, 2018; Musumeci, Santero, 2018), and the prevalent gender models in the wider cultural context (Magaraggia, 2012; Crespi, Ruspini 2015) and within couples (Naldini, 2015). Indeed, although some changes are occurring, in Italy gender stereotypes remain quite traditional, especially those linked to parenthood. Women continue to be considered and continue to be the primary caregivers for children, while men continue to act as the main breadwinners of the family (Naldini, 2015). Italian fathers, indeed, struggle between their willingness to comply with the 'new fatherhood' model based on presence and involvement with the children, and the traditional model of masculinity enacted by their fathers and still partially encouraged by the wider society (Magaraggia, 2012, 2013).

Symmetrically, workplaces and companies, being gendered organizations (Acker, 1990), tend to incorporate and reproduce prevalent cultural gender attitudes through the marginalization of fathers' work-life balance needs in company-level policies (Cannito, 2018), and through the promotion of working models based on the work-devotion schema (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams et al., 2013) and the idea of an ideal worker (Williams, 2000). These make employees' roles as parents invisible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has recently altered work habits, forcing several companies and couples to adopt flexible working solutions, which are considered by several authors and politicians a useful tool to improve parents' and especially mothers' work-life balance, a sort of 'win-win' situation for both employers and employees (Felstead, Henseke, 2017).

Flexible working, namely workers' control over when and where they work, has increased over the years, particularly for younger generations (Chung, Van der Lippe, 2018). Recent studies show that the majority of millennials express a preference for working from home or for having flexible timetables (see, for instance, Deloitte, 2018). However, the effects of flexible working on work-life balance and on the division of labor within families are under discussion. The pursuit of life-work balance, defined as 'satisfaction and good functioning of work and home, with a minimum of role conflict' (Clark, 2000: 751), is a recent issue. It derives from concerns over the long working hours culture (Crosbie, Moore, 2004), widespread in industrialized countries, which may result in 'boundless' work (Chicchi, Simone, 2017), with negative consequences on health (such as stress) and difficulties in combining work and childcare, particularly for women. One of the major risks is role overload, namely the sensation that the demands of multiple roles exceed available time and resources (Duncan, Pettigrew, 2012). On the one hand, flexible working has the potential to reduce conflicts over time (Singley, Hynes, 2005), namely overlap between schedules, allowing mothers to remain in the labor market after childbirth (Chung, Van der Horst, 2018) or in periods of intense care work demands (Fuller, Hirsh, 2018). Therefore, flexible working may increase women's satisfaction over work-life balance, by more easily adapting work and life commitments and keeping women involved in both domains. On the other hand, with flexible working, particularly working from home, home and work are no longer conceived as separate spheres of life, thus facilitating the process of 'domestication', namely the expansion of work in other, non-productive areas, such as spare time (Morini, 2010). In other words, working from home may induce an intensification of work and an inability to switch off (Felstead, Henseke, 2017). Several studies show that flexible working, particularly when done from home, may cause mutual interference between work and family, especially for mothers (Whitehouse et al., 2002) and produce contradictory effects on employees' wellbeing, both women and men (Bailey, Kurland, 2002). Instead of facilitating balance, flexible working can lead to multitasking and boundary blurring (Glavin, Schieman, 2012).

Moreover, what consequences working from home has on gender equality is not a clear-cut issue. If some scholars maintain that flexible working fosters women's employment, by allowing them not to abandon the job after marriage and childbirth (Chung, Van der Horst, 2018; Fuller, Hirsh, 2018), other scholars highlight the gendered nature of flexible working (Gunnarsson, Huws, 1997; Cech, Blair-Loy, 2014). Flexible working may not be able to modify the gender-normative views that structure women's and men's roles and responsibilities. On the contrary, it may reproduce gender roles both in the sphere of work and that of the family (Lott, Chung, 2016). The gendered expectations related to the

practice of home working are at stake: while men are expected to enhance their work performances and are consequently rewarded (Lott, Chung, 2016), women are supposed to increase their family responsibilities (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). Thus, in both cases working from home can potentially boost life-work conflict, although in different directions. Therefore, remote work's potential to increase paternal involvement may be questioned (Chung, Van der Lippe, 2018); working from home may, instead, exacerbate previous gender inequalities (Sullivan, Lewis, 2001), with women juggling to balance their double role as mothers and workers, and fathers expanding the time devoted to paid work (Lott, Chung, 2016; Lozano et al., 2016; Chung, Van der Lippe, 2018).

2. Methodology and aims of the research

We have pursued two main research questions. First, how does a sample of Italian couples balance family duties and work at a time of simultaneous working from home? Second, is this experience producing a more equitable sharing of care duties between mothers and fathers or is it reproducing gender inequalities?

We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews via online platforms with 10 heterosexual Italian couples, whose components were interviewed separately, and who were working from home, with children aged under 11, and living in Northern Italy. The latter is the part of the country where remote work is most widespread (Istat, 2020b). The number of interviews offers sufficient 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016) to answer our research questions and to offer new insights to current understandings. The interviewees were selected through a snowball sampling, the number of refusals to join the study is limited (5) and related to the difficulty of finding time for the interview or to a specific situation: in some cases, one of the two parents was separated from family because positive to COVID-19. The interviews were conducted online because the lockdown did not allow either the interviewers or the interviewees to leave their home. Although we are well aware of the possible limitations of this kind of interaction compared to a face-to-face one, which are in our case linked in particular to the loss of intimacy (Seitz, 2016), we think our interviews are an interesting source of knowledge. Indeed, in the first place, during the lockdown period in Italy, between March and May 2020, online meetings and interactions became the norm; secondly, many interviewees affirmed that they needed to share their experience with someone external to their network of family and friends.

The interview guide was the same for mothers and fathers and was divided into two parts, a pre-pandemic and a post-pandemic one. The first part was

focused on childcare arrangements and on work-life balance, while the second included questions about changes in the relationship with children and partners, on the interference between work and family, and on possible future changes in interviewees' personal and/or professional lives. The interviews were audio recorded, verbatim transcribed and, then, analyzed through the software Atlas.ti. We decided to conduct a thematic analysis, by developing a common grid with some relevant dimensions derived from our interview guide and from the literature. After this first step, we individually read the empirical material and we added to the grid other codes emerged from the empirical data and, finally, we merged the initial list of codes with the new ones in a definitive grid that was used by both to analyze the interviews through Atlas.ti, in order to minimize the differences between the two researchers.

We chose Italy as case study because, before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a country with strong cultural resistance to the adoption of remote work: in January-February 2020 only 1.2% of workers was practicing remote/home/telework, but in March and April this quota rose to 8.8%, reaching 21.6% and 31.4% in medium and big companies respectively (Istat, 2020b), so this was a unique opportunity to investigate the effects of remote work on work-life balance. Moreover, compared to other European countries, Italy shows the lowest employment rate for women, around 50% (Istat, 2020a), and a comparatively low fertility rate, 1.29 children per woman (Istat, 2019). These data demonstrate the problems women face when they become mothers, in particular discriminations in the labor market and work-family balance issues. The specific population we decided to interview – they share high levels of education and socioeconomic condition (see Table 1), the typical characteristics of those who can have access to remote work – can be considered as a sort of critical case (Cardano, 2020) in terms of gender equality in relation to the division of labor in the couple. They can have more access to external resources – since, in financial terms, they can afford them – and to sociocultural information and knowledge to challenge gender norms. Moreover, we considered these interviewees more 'privileged' than other parents because, during the pandemic, they simultaneously had access to alternative forms of work, and therefore they could experience and practice new forms of work-family balance. As in Doucet's study (2000) we bet on a specific empirical result: the persistency of an unbalanced division of domestic work, in a context where the possibility this unbalanced division did not occur was the highest. If socially advantaged couples were unable to create new gender division of housework duties, it is plausible that this would not be possible for more deprived couples either. The critical case design allows the extension of the results, because it suggests the presence of a rooted process, not only limited to the observed cases.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Ficticious surname	Pseudonym	Age	Degree	Position	Working time	Type of contract	Number and gender of children	Age of children
Giallo	Tiziana	45	Master's	Project manager	Full time	Fixed-term	1 M	6 years
	Emanuele	48	Master's	Manager	Full time	Open-ended		
Arancione	Licia	39	PhD	Researcher	Full time	Fixed-term	2 (M+F)	3 years 10months
	Emilio	40	PhD	Manager	Full time	Open-ended		
Rosa	Margherita	36	Master's	Freelance*	N/A	N/A	1 F	18months
	Enzo	44	High school	White-collar employee	Full time	Open-ended		
Viola	Felicia	36	Master's	White-collar employee	Full time	Open-ended	2 (M+F, twins)	4 years
	Nino	38	High school	Freelance*	N/A	N/A		
Rosso	Liliana	36	Master's	White-collar employee	Part time	Open-ended	1 M	3 years
	Pasquale	35	Master's	Manager	Full time	Open-ended		
Blu	Simona	38	Master's	White-collar employee	Full time	Open-ended	2 (M+F)	8 years 6 years
	Mauro	37	Master's	White-collar employee	Full time	Open-ended		
Verde	Valentina	37	Master's	Manager	Full time	Open-ended	1F	4 years
	Matteo	39	Master's	Manager	Full time	Open-ended		
Bianco	Giuliana	33	Master's	White-collar employee	Part time	Open-ended	1 F	16months
	Stefano	35	Master's	White-collar employee	Full time	Open-ended		
Nero	Federica	40	Bachelor's	Blue-collar employee	Part time	Open-ended	2 M	7 years 2 years
	Michele	35	Bachelor's	Manager	Full time	Open-ended		
Grigio	Veronica	28	Bachelor's	White-collar employee	Full time	Fixed-term	1 F	14months
	Gregorio	35	Bachelor's	Freelance*	N/A	N/A		

* When we use the label 'freelance' we indicate people who are not formally employees, but usually work outside the home in coworking (1 case) or in companies they cooperate with on a regular basis (2 cases).

3. Results

3.1 Remote work and gender inequalities in paid work

This section focuses on the effects of remote work on gender inequalities in the labor market. We think that the possibility of a more equitable sharing of care duties between mothers and fathers depends on a redefinition of the way paid work is organized (and *vice versa*, as we will show in the next section).

All the interviewees describe their work environment and their clients as extremely demanding, and report situations of overwork before the beginning of the pandemic (Chicchi, Simone, 2017). Both mothers and fathers, in fact, used to work longer than their working hours, and also in the evenings and weekends.

> My work is very stressful, at least for me. It happens sometimes, working with social networks, that I have a problem during the evening, or that I receive an e-mail on my personal phone (which is also the company one). So, yes, the work interferes on private life both because you receive requests from clients or from your boss and because you have your phone in your hand and you see the e-mail and it is a source of concern, I mean, if I realize that something is wrong I try to fix it, or maybe it's just you thinking about work (Felicia, 36).

> For example, in February and January we both had all the weekends full of work and we lost our balance because we gave too much importance to work and less to family life (Pasquale, 35).

During the pandemic, in contrast to the data reported by Eurofound (2020), in almost all cases our interviewees increased their working hours or at least the intensity of work, as it may happen with home working (Felstead, Henseke, 2017).[1] One of the interviewees talked about a lack of 'remote work etiquette' because job demands used to arrive at all hours with no respect for the time for personal life, and overcoming the barriers between the private and the work sphere (Felstead, Henseke, 2017).

> As far as I'm concerned I would say 24 hours a day of work or close to that, for me and my husband it is 24 hours a day or at least all the waking hours, constantly, with no rules, with no priorities, without giving any space to work-

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[1] It must be noted that this discrepancy with the European data can be explained by integrating the official data with informal (sometimes illegal) arrangements: for example, one of our interviewees was put in furlough (*cassa integrazione* in Italian) by her company, but during the lockdown continued to work the same as or even more than before.

life balance […], with a total lack of 'remote work etiquette' […], with WhatsApp messages coming at every hour of the day and of the night (Tiziana, 45).

Therefore, it seems that Italian employers and employees embrace the work-devotion schema (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams et al., 2013), which implies unconditional acceptance of requirements coming from the work environment and a strong commitment, measured in terms of hours spent in paid work. The interesting fact is that this model stresses the importance of being physically present at work, so remote work, in theory, might have weakened it, but this is not the case: presence, in fact, moved from a physical space to a virtual space over which employers have the same control through employees' self-discipline and the blurring of the physical boundaries between work and life produced by technology.

Moreover, the work-devotion schema is strongly linked to the ideal worker model (Williams, 2000) whose main characteristic is being entirely devoted to paid work, and therefore free from care duties. For this reason, this model affects men and women differently; in fact, despite the overwork experienced by both partners, the intensity of the investment in paid work is different for mothers and fathers, and the experience of working from home during the period of the lockdown in Italy had different effects in terms of gender equality.

First of all, before the pandemic, in 7 out of 10 couples, women asked for a work time reduction (such as part time) after maternity leave, although some of them returned – by contract or de facto – to a full-time job to meet companies' requirements. In contrast, 3 out of the 10 fathers interviewed lived in another town, at least during the child's first year, coming back home only on weekends; two of them now live in the city where the research has been conducted but are commuters since they continue to work in another town. Moreover, 3 fathers used to travel for work, and to be absent for entire weekends and sometimes weeks. It must be said, though, that 2 fathers in the sample are freelance: Gregorio works regularly from home, while Nino worked from home until the children reached the age of two – though supported by a nanny who works for his family exclusively. It is interesting that Nino during the interview defined himself as a '*mammo*' (a joke about the word '*mamma*', 'mother' in Italian) and said that his children used to call him '*mamma*'.

During the pandemic, this unbalanced investment in paid work exploded: consistently with previous studies (Lott, Chung, 2016; Lozano et al., 2016; Chung, Van der Lippe, 2018), with remote work 8 women tried to juggle to balance their double role as mothers and workers, by sacrificing the investment in paid work and leaving it to evenings, nights and weekends.

So, only two mothers kept on working regularly, but it is worth pointing out that one of them is the wife of Nino, a dad who is already used to work from home, and a woman who could count on the help of their babysitter, who kept her regular scheduled working hours.

In this context, the contrast between men's and women's practices and trajectories of life during the lockdown is striking. On the one hand, not surprisingly (Lott, Chung, 2016; Lozano et al., 2016; Chung, Van der Lippe, 2018), men expanded the time devoted to paid work, redirecting the time they saved by not going physically to work to the job. In their words, in fact, the requirements from their workplace are depicted as non-negotiable, unlike their partners'. This is consistent with other studies, for example about the reasons behind the non-sharing of parental leave (Miller, 2012; Cannito, 2020b).

> He is very busy, he works more than before [...]. I try to take one hour after lunch to work while he stays with the children. [...] He is in the cooperative's management, which is now the anti-crisis unit, and they do meetings every evening at 7 p.m. during dinner. He is the only one with small children, he tries to have dinner with us with headphones on, he walks away only when he has to speak, he listens to the meeting. [...] My work is very fragmented, so we try to dovetail with his various meetings (Federica, 40).

On the other hand, since they work so hard during the week, fathers have more free weekends than the mothers and, by not working outside, they spend more time at home, allowing them complying with the most common feature of the 'new' fatherhood: presence (Dermott, Miller, 2015).

In this sense, working from home has produced an increased involvement with the children on the men's part, in terms of the quantity of time spent at home, at least, but also of a self-confidence as fathers that makes them feel like they are more complete parents who can enact different roles, both educational and caring. This aspect is particularly noteworthy because working from home seems to allow men to embrace a new form of fatherhood that can exist only if they are more present at home. Contemporary men, in fact, because of their willingness to distance themselves from the models of their fathers and their consequently uncertain identity as parents, often abdicate from all their roles including the educative one. As pointed out by Deriu (2005: 157; authors' translation), 'contemporary fathers risk escaping not only from the authoritarian role of traditional fathers, but also from the role of responsibility appertaining to the parent themselves.' The experience of remote work, then, has produced a shift in this sense, making men (educational) fathers.

> Yeah, in my case the relationship with *** [son's name] has changed because since I am more present at home, I am not only the dad he plays with. You

know, when you don't see him for a long time during the day, you don't want to be the strict dad, you see him 10 minutes a day. At this moment, instead, there are moments when I scold him, I am more of a dad as a concept [...]. So the range of your roles [has enlarged], you help him understand, you scold him, you comfort him and you become a more multifaceted dad, and more present (Emanuele, 48).

She [his daughter] learns something different every day and you notice it, it's fantastic, in the end it was an opportunity [being at home in lockdown]. […] If you think about the fact that you are spending so much time with your daughter, you realize that these things don't come by very often […]. Now I have the certainty that if Margherita [his wife] should go away for a week, I could be serenely on my own with the baby for a week. [...] Now I have a wealth of experience that makes me feel confident as a father, I am more self-confident, for sure (Enzo, 44).

Although these are encouraging changes in fatherhood, they also shed light on gender inequalities: fathers, unlike mothers, have more flexibility in their relationship with the children, so that, if they do minimum adjustments in the organization of their time, they comply very easily with the model of 'good fatherhood' (Miller, 2011). Moreover, their flexible work-life balance allows them to be less stressed than mothers and to take the best from work and from family life, without calling into question gendered norms about parenthood (Baker, Bosoni, 2015).

Finally, gender inequalities also emerge from mothers and fathers' working plans about the future. Five interviewed mothers, in fact, were planning to cut off their working hours after the pandemic by taking part-time or simply by reducing their work responsibilities. Considering that 3 more women in the sample were already in a part-time job gives a hint of the different positions mothers and fathers decide to occupy in paid work, the reasons for which will be better explained in the next section.

As for fathers, nobody talked about reducing working hours, but it is encouraging that five fathers considered asking for some days working from remote in the future, and/or for reducing their work travels. From this perspective, Italy is a conservative country where, as already mentioned, one's physical presence in the workplace is considered by managers, but also by the workers themselves, as essential.

If everybody is working and they organize a meeting and you are the only one in remote work, that's a problem: you feel excluded and they do not accept you, they do not want you (Emilio, 40).

Many men, though, think that this experience of working from home during lockdown has shown that workers' productivity does not necessarily depend on their physical presence at work, and they would like to use it to negotiate remote work arrangements with their companies in order to be more present at home.

> So the fact is that COVID has proved that another way of working exists. At this point there are no more alibis for managers and top managers. The theme here is how you can decline it on your working reality, it's a question of 'how' and not 'what': the 'what' has already been proved, it can be done (Emanuele, 48).

3.2 Work-life balance and childcare

The parents, and the mothers in particular, describe a pre-pandemic difficult and complex organization of childcare and work-life balance. Paradoxically, despite the overwork during the COVID-19 outbreak and children being at home from school, with all the difficulties that this brought, for many of the couples interviewed the lockdown made family management simpler and less stressful.

> I am enjoying this period. Restrictive measures depress me, but let's say it is nice to wake up unhurriedly, we do not have the anxiety of arriving at school at eight o'clock. I like spending the day with my children, I can read a book to them whenever I want. […] For me this is a positive period because I have more available time and it is easier to manage (Simona, 38).

> Everyday stress is fading away, and although I am worried for the collective social and economic situation, I am relaxed about my situation and my family. It is a calmer and more protected atmosphere, I am afraid of coming back to work right now (Margherita, 36).

The main consequence is the reduced overlap of schedules (Chung, Van der Horst, 2018) related to the perception of having more time available and being easier to manage, since trips to go to work or to school have substantially decreased. In parallel, parents' stress and anxiety due to their need to stick to different, hard-to-balance timetables and the consequent sensation of being constantly running out of time have decreased during lockdown. Being at home, in a comfortable setting, seems to mitigate tensions related to work and to give interviewees the perception of being more autonomous in managing their work-life schedules, preventing role overload (Duncan, Pettigrew, 2012). More specifically, as far as their parental role is concerned, according to

interviewees, particularly mothers, the quality of time spent with children is higher in terms of the attention devoted to them, as pointed out by Felicia: 'They perceive my presence and I perceive theirs, the bond is more intense'. Children are reported as more relaxed and calmer, satisfied of the presence of both parents, and the latter have the possibility to witness some of their achievements.

> I am super happy because we have experienced together some moments we would have lost if she had gone to kindergarten, for example her first steps. In the last two months she has grown up a lot and we have enjoyed every single moment (Giuliana, 33).

As far as the working role is concerned, some interviewees highlight the possibility of going off the '8 hours grid' by optimizing job tasks in a shorter span of time, without decreasing productivity, and saving quality time for family that is not only concentrated in the evening:

> I am more satisfied right now. I am able to optimize my work, I mean: in two hours I did a presentation that would have taken me two days at the office, coffee breaks and lunch included. […] In retrospect I have realized that the eight hours spent in my office created a great unbalance with time devoted to family, because they were the central hours of the day. When at home, during the evening, we were then inevitably more tired and nervous, and our child too. It will be hard to spend eight hours in the office again, I value my time now (Veronica, 28).

For two interviewed fathers this extreme experience of work-life balance added up to a sort of training experience, which taught them to adopt a scientific management of different activities in order to reach a balance between family and work duties and prevent burnout:

> We have learnt to be more efficient, to better optimize working and family time […] by being more deliberate. You have to be careful not to be overwhelmed by everything, and thus a better organization is needed (Michele, 48).

> We are trying to organize family life better. Before, we did not have a clear guide for everyday life, but we have realized that programming family and working life is a guarantee for a better balance between the two spheres (Mauro, 37).

It is worth noticing that the two interviewees do not call job requirements into question, as previously highlighted; rather, they seem to transfer business

language and management to family life, by praising a sort of 'factory-family' and referring to the principles of efficiency and optimization, culturally dominant in our neoliberal performance society (Chicchi, Simone, 2017).

At the same time, consistently with previous studies (Glavin, Schieman, 2012) working from home, according to the interviewees, has generally reduced the separation between work and family, making the boundaries between the two spheres blurry:

> Everything has turned upside-down. I feel like living in a bubble: family life, job and private life are no longer separated (Federica, 40).

Private life in particular seems to be sacrificed by the interviewees, with a very limited time devoted to individual activities such as hobbies or going out with friends and colleagues. In this sense, working from home has the effect to eliminate the opportunities to socialize with colleagues and take a break from one's job during the day. This creates an intensification of commitment to one's job, as previously outlined, with the job also eroding spare time (Morini, 2010).

> Coffee break lasts three seconds at home. Moreover, I am a smoker. At my office smoking implies going out, chatting with my colleagues; at home I smoke on the balcony, with headphones on, while having a Skype meeting (Valentina, 37).

The perception of the expansion of one's work and family duties at the expense of individual time and activities, with working/family days getting longer, is common in the sample. One of the most widespread resolutions, therefore, is to try to set aside some free time in the future.

> I think I will try to carve out some time for myself. I need to remember it, it is priceless (Federica, 40).

Work and family reciprocally interfere, but they do so in different ways for fathers and mothers: for the former, family often interferes with work and limits their ability to focus and their productivity, with a consequent sense of guilt directed at their boss and colleagues. Most fathers are worried about their loss of productivity during lockdown and about their colleagues' judgment, to the point of being highly stressed and of losing weight for this reason. They are particularly afraid of the long-term consequences of this situation, as two interviewees highlight:

> My worry is that over time my colleagues and my boss will be less sympathetic with my situation and that they will tolerate my inefficiency less (Stefano, 37).

> I would like to feel like a person who earns his salary, not that sense of guilt related to: 'I would like to, but I can't.' Guilt destroys you, and also makes you lose 6 kilos (Emilio, 40).

For interviewed mothers, work interferes with family by preventing them from responding to their children's requirements and from mentally switch off from their job, in line with the concept of the 'boundless job' (Chicchi, Simone, 2017), with a sense of guilt directed at children (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). The majority claim that their job was too pervasive in the past, and that the current situation helped them to understand that sometimes requirements are negotiable and not 'a matter of life and death':

> To be focused on work you need to set boundaries, and it is not nice to do it with your family. So sometimes you need to postpone something: you sample the most important meetings, you select what is more important in that moment. When you work you give priority to the job, but if your child interrupts you and needs your attention, you give up, because nothing changes in terms of your productivity (Valentina, 37).

> My job was boundless, in terms of mental investment. I had a lot of problems and I took them home (Liliana, 36).

> It seems to me that work interferes more with family because we are all at home and I need to hide to have a video call, I hear my child crying and searching for me and I feel like I am depriving her of my presence. I cannot say that I separate myself from her despite everything, like his father, because my daughter might need me. (Veronica, 28).

This indispensable and exclusive presence of mothers in their children's lives, especially when they are toddlers and breastfed, is reflected in an unbalanced division of childcare activities, in the most egalitarian couples as well. Although domestic work is almost equally shared (with a predominance of women's cooking and doing the cleaning) and parents are both present, they do different activities with children. Fathers usually play and help children with their homework, leaving care duties such as clothing children, bathing them or putting them to bed to mothers, with the justification that 'children prefer her', which is an apparent concealment of gender norms. In other words, men are considered more suitable to educational and leisure activities, while women are considered more suitable to care activities; this division of labor is justified by invoking children's inclination to their mothers. This implies that women are

more skilled for these types of duties, while their children's preference is most probably the result of their habit of doing the activity with her:

> Before COVID it was impossible for his father to put him to sleep. It was my exclusive responsibility because the child wanted only me (Liliana, 36).

On the one hand, this centering on mothers' activities seems to have intensified during lockdown, favored by the constant co-presence of mothers and children, with the effect of making some fathers feel marginalized and regret the exclusive activities of the past:

> Now she is happy, so devoted to me, I cannot think about separating (Margherita, 36).

> I miss those moments with her, when I took her to the market or to the park, only the two of us (Matteo, 39).

On the other hand, as previously outlined, fathers are physically present, and this implies in some cases a more equitable sharing of duties and responsibilities, as well as a higher recognition of mothers' commitment and fatigue.

> Being all at home I feel relieved, because during breaks he is present and helps me, while before he got home late in the evening and I was alone all day. Being at home, he acknowledges the efforts of the day and supports me, even if it is only at the emotional level (Federica, 40).

However, during lockdown the division of care work did not change, particularly in less egalitarian couples; rather, it was radicalized by the absence of external support, for example from a maid for housework or from grandparents for childcare. This resulted in an extra burden for women, who might feel overwhelmed by domestic duties and childrearing activities overlapping with job requirements.

> Homework and child, nothing has changed: 80% me and 20% my husband (Valentina, 37).

> I usually had a maid who did the cleaning, [now] she can't come […] I do much of the cleaning now, for example the bathrooms and the hoovering. It is not easy, sometimes I feel tired (Simona, 38).

4. Concluding remarks

The aim of our study was to investigate how Italian couples balanced paid and care work, and effects of this balance in terms of gender equality in an unprecedented situation characterized by remote work and by the lack of external help.

As far as paid work is concerned, both men and women report situations of overwork before the pandemic, which have remained stable or have worsened with remote work. Especially the interviewed fathers, who are still those who work longer hours, report a sense of guilt for not spending more time with their children, but portray the requirements of the workplace as non-negotiable. However, for some of them this period of working from home was a chance both to perform fatherhood more involvedly and multifacetedly, to reflect upon the possibility of a switch in the way work is usually organized and to push their companies to adopt remote work in the future. Although this may signal a redefinition in the relationship men have with paid work, two remarks are necessary. Firstly, unlike mothers, fathers do not call into question their engagement in paid work, nor do they envisage the possibility of a reduction of their working hours. Secondly, and this is strictly interwoven with the previous point, they accept the adoption of remote work as far as they have realized and demonstrated to their companies that their productivity has not decreased. Therefore, in this sense remote work is only apparently a redefinition of paid work because, in reality, it does not add up to a questioning of the dominant work paradigm. In fact, the ideal worker model and the work devotion schema not only persist, but adjust to the new working conditions where presence is declined in terms of the employee's online and virtual availability. Moreover, because of the persistence of this paradigm, remote work does not modify the complex organization of family and work life: on the contrary, the idioms of business and management also colonize the family sphere, with the adoption of a 'factory-family' model. Finally, spare time and social life were almost absent before the lockdown, and remote work did not improve the situation: rather it worsened it by nullifying personal relationships built at work and reinforced during the breaks.

As far as work-life balance is concerned, all the interviewees maintain that in the current situation they are able to spend more time with their children and are more satisfied, but they also perceive fuzzier boundaries between work and life. Moreover, during this period, the division of care duties has remained strongly gendered and unbalanced between men and women, even in the most egalitarian couples, while in less egalitarian ones inequalities have tended to exacerbate. Again, this has to do with the different position occupied by paid work in women's and men's lives: when a redefinition of the time one devotes

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to paid work in favor of care (and domestic work) is needed because of the birth of a child or of an extraordinary situation (such as the current pandemic), mothers are expected and ready to do it. This is particularly evident in how the interferences between work and family are conceived: for the majority of the interviewed fathers, family interferes with work, not the other way around, while the latter attitude is peculiar to the interviewed mothers. Fathers, indeed, feel a sense of guilt towards paid work when they perceive a decrease in their productivity. Conversely, mothers feel blameworthy for their involvement in work duties at the expense of the time spent with their children. However, none of the interviewed mothers planned to leave her job, so in this sense remote work – combined with a reduction of the work timetable – may allow women to remain in the labor market (Chung, Van der Horst, 2018).

Of course, our study has several limitations due to the small sample and to the extraordinary and extreme situation the couples were facing when interviewed. Future studies should investigate the consequences of remote work on work-life balance and gender inequalities in 'normal' situations. Despite these constraints, the lockdown was a unique opportunity to explore childcare arrangements when parents are both present, working from home and without any external support. We think that our results yield interesting insights about remote work, work-life balance and gender inequalities.

To conclude, remote work may have the potential of increasing the presence of parents – both mothers and fathers – with their children. However, without a redefinition of the dominant models and the current organization of paid work, remote work will neither improve work-life balance nor cause a more egalitarian sharing of care duties and investment in paid work between men and women.

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