



Citation: Burchi S., Samuk S. (2021) *Being a nomad in one's own home: The case of Italian women during COVID-19*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», Vol. 11, n. 22: 83-95. doi: 10.36253/cambio-10778

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Monographic Section

Being a nomad in one's own home: The case of Italian women during COVID-19

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Abstract. How did women relate to space and time when working at home during the COVID-19 pandemic? We contextualized women's relationships with their home spaces as they became nomads in their own homes during the lockdown. In face-to-face focus-group interviews conducted with 50 women who had experience with smart work or telework in Tuscany, Italy, we observed a range of strategies among women who dealt with forced closures during COVID-19. Justification and acceptance of inequality became a part of the daily life of the women, who fought against unequal distribution of time and space via negotiation, evidence, adaptation, or requests to return to workplaces. During COVID-19, Italian working women were in search of space and time in their own homes, trying relentlessly to respond to the demands of their families and fulfil work-related requirements.

Keywords: COVID-19, gendered spaces, traditional gender roles, housework, smart work.

INTRODUCTION

Home is one of those places where inequality is inherent. To a considerable extent, it is the place where gendered inequalities manifest themselves in a clear-cut division of labor and rationalized inequality, especially for dual-career heterosexual couples (Van Hoof 2011). Patriarchal structures have dominated domestic life (Lasio *et alii* 2017) despite changing family patterns and shifting gender roles (Ruspini 2013). Historically, cultural institutions like the church have supported the idea that a woman's place is in the home (Walby 1989); furthermore, women are typically associated with home and housework from childhood (Oakley 2018). At the time of this writing, the social construction of the "women and homemaking" pairing was more strongly accentuated when the house became a workplace during COVID-19. Especially since March 2020, COVID-19 demonstrated that inequalities in gendered domestic spaces were even more evident (Manzo, Minello 2020: 2).

A strong spatial dimension (Massey 2013) must be considered with respect to COVID-19. Home became the workplace, and the work was disconnected from the real place of work (e.g., office, company); in fact, in the aftermath of COVID-19, every place was eligible to become a workplace, and people had almost no excuse not to be connected. Before COVID-19, at least being at home allowed them to disconnect from work. Some have also argued that working from home has advantages, such as flexibility (Sullivan, Lewis 2001). Nevertheless, lockdown and smart work¹ perpetuate many problems from the perspective of a gendered division of labor. Gendered work from home overlaps with time and space constraints, causing asociality, intensive multitasking, and a constant struggle to defend work from the invasion of private life or vice versa. With these conditions and having no room of one's own (Woolf 1929), women became nomads in their "own" spaces.

We examine all the strategies and manoeuvres of women in accelerated time and limited space. To do so, we first focus on the literature and the context, which is useful to survey research conducted to date; second, we describe our methodology and third, we elaborate our analysis of the interviews. Finally, we close with our findings, paying tribute to previous literature on gender, time, space, and the COVID-19 crisis.

The context of the gendered pandemic: Literature in a snapshot

During COVID-19, the focus of many scholars was negotiated time, space, and relationships. Some authors noted that «a large part of gender inequality in the labor market is related to unequal division of labour in the household» (Alon *et alii* 2020). Carreri and Dordoni (2020) and Power (2020) dealt with the unequal consequences of COVID-19 for women working from home. Another study showed that

many women (...) stopped working during COVID-19 through no fault of their own. Since they are over-represented in insecure, hourly employment and in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic (such as hospitality, leisure, retail and tourism), female workers have consequently lost their jobs or been furloughed at a higher rate than men. (Grown, Bousquet 2020)

In addition, the pandemic has made many social inequalities more visible, among which is gender inequality (Gender Inequality 2020).

Malisch *et alii* (2020) drew attention to the fact that gender equity was absent during COVID-19, and they discussed how the COVID-19 caused barriers to women's advancement in academic careers. The percentage of female academics who submitted papers during COVID-19 decreased 4 to 7 percent compared to the previous year, evidence that more investment in gender equality is needed in academia (Kibbe 2020: 15380). Similarly, Carreri and Dordoni (2020) focused on unequal consequences for researchers during COVID-19, finding that female academics, who were already having difficulty, faced more significant struggles in concentrating on their work after the pandemic. Their interviewees either spoke about "conquering time" or "extreme neoliberalism" (*ivi*: 829). The women admitted that they had more difficulty writing academic papers during the pandemic while dealing with domestic and care work; as mothers they experienced anxiety, stress, and fatigue (*ivi*: 835). Similarly, women could be also punished in academic life for shouldering the burden of the care duties during COVID-19. For instance, Nash and Churchill (2020) researched attitudes at Australian universities about the care responsibilities of academics, specifically the neoliberal understanding in the academic world where scholars are held responsible for their own successes and failures in general. They observed that during COVID-19 universities turned a blind eye to helping female scholars with choices on care opportunities for family members, including children and elders. Institutional support for female scholars was found to be lacking in their case study.

Collins *et alii* (2020) carried out a statistical analysis demonstrating that during COVID-19 mothers reduced their work hours four to five times more than fathers. Furthermore, they suggested that first-time fathers working

¹ When we make references to smart working, we use the term meaning the compulsory teleworking/telecommuting/remote work from home activities that developed during the lockdown, and not only in cases when the term is strictly meaning smart-work activities.

from home could not ignore children's need for care at home (*ivi*: 2) while mothers bore the brunt of the pandemic (*ivi*: 3). Work at home had to be rethought and redivided because the presence of children was incompatible with doing jobs that required focused attention and hours of concentration (Lagomarsino *et alii* 2020: 852). Although women with children aged from birth to five experienced decreased productivity, women without children increased their productivity (Cardel *et alii* 2020; Krukowski *et alii* 2020). The second shift (Hochschild, Machung 2012) became a third hybrid shift in women's lives, in which digital work and manual domestic labor were to be managed in the same space and at the same time.

In the literature review, regarding exacerbating gender inequalities, structural and patriarchal explanations remained central (Becker 1999; Rutherford 2001; Mavin, Yusupova 2020) to understanding the «everyday exploitation of women» (Kynaston 1996: 221) via housework. Kandiyoti (1991: 46) connected the private patriarchy and the role of women: «Private patriarchy is based on the relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life other than the household and the appropriation of their services by individual patriarchs within the confines of the home». Hence, these gendered boundaries exist between the domestic sphere and the professional sphere, where the former is coded as feminine and the latter is coded as masculine (Rendell 2002). The association of women with space, especially within the domestic sphere, has been caused by antifeminist binaries that promote an idea of the total division between being masculine and feminine. «For example, masculinity is associated with work, science, rationality, and strength, while femininity is associated with home, intuition, emotion, and softness» (Coon 2011: 235). This binary also justified inequalities occurring at home more because even fully employed women do most of the housework compared to their partners (Blair, Lichter 1991; Coltrane 2000).

Previous researchers have emphasized the potential and the difficulties of working from home: Silver (1993) examined the negative sides, such as exploitation, isolation, and meeting the demands of the family and the employer in the case of women. Sullivan and Lewis (2001) further scrutinized the positive and negative sides of teleworking from home, suggesting that synchronization of work and family can be helpful in balancing work hours and family time, but it can also perpetuate traditional work and family roles. Massey (2013) questioned whether the time out of work has ever been only “play”, drawing attention to work outside the office that needs to be done (e.g., house chores). She perceptively pointed out that «those long hours (at work), and the flexibility of their organisation, is someone else's constraint» (*ivi*: 132). This information has also confirmed the reasons that the gender gap in work hours increased during COVID-19 (Collins *et alii* 2020).

A recent scholarly work that focused on various elements of COVID-19, work-family balance, and British working women (Adisa *et alii* 2021) suggested that the COVID-19 lockdown had positive and negative effects: although working women bore a more substantial domestic workload and experienced role conflict, family roles were rediscovered. Role conflict was observed among women who worked from home as academics, «causing tensions between the professional, familial, and social dimensions of our lives» (Couch *et alii* 2020: 273). Especially for women working from home “making it through daily life” became the priority (Minello 2020). The contexts and the job sectors differed in nuances reflecting international comparisons. Looking at the Italian example, Del Boca *et alii* (2020) discovered that Italian working women had the opportunity to share responsibilities with their partners in childcare while shouldering the burden of housework, mostly done by women during the pandemic.

«Spaces and places and our senses of them are gendered through and through» (Massey 2013: 129). Gendered negotiations and restructuring of the division of labor in the domestic and public space change from context to context and region to region from a historical perspective (Flather 2013). Hence, gendered spaces are negotiated and renegotiated, in some cases reproduced along gendered lines. Much of the literature, valuable though it is, has concentrated much less on the women's relationship with home as a space and explaining how they respond to gendered COVID-19 times and gendered domestic work. Aligning with the absence of an abundance of research scrutinizing women's responses to COVID-19, we aimed to answer this question: How did women relate to space and time while working at home during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Context: Impromptu spaces

The workers we interviewed during the lockdown were bewildered about the conditions of confinement, struggling with the development of an unwanted operational working style. Some working women had advantages and were good at managing themselves and their work; for others, it meant only total difficulty: the impossibility of doing their job well and the struggle to manage their own well-being. Among the focus groups no situations involved domestic violence, but in some cases, suffering occurred, especially among women with heavy caring duties and workload – in the initial closure situation – without external support mechanisms.

The concept of working from home (especially in a period of emergency) may be plausibly based on the premise that the space inside the house is an all-available empty space that can be filled with work that comes from external demands without creating direct impact on the household. The doorstep of homes continues to be seen as the gateway to a neutral and self-functioning world, the possible framework for a frictionless reconciliation. All the actions that take place inside the home (childcare is only the most evident) have been thought to be compatible with working from home by emergency decree.

Making home a workplace necessitates a series of adaptations to overcome space and time limitations. Not all homes are equipped with appropriate conditions for work or the space available for it. Space may be limited or too many members of the family may need to work or study from home. Because of the presence of a computer and a wi-fi network, many houses are equipped for working from home, yet they are not all the same. They are inhabited differently, and their porosity toward the outside does not necessarily make them convertible into work environments.

Hardly coincidental, the law on teleworking provides for company visits, the recognition of conditions compatible with safety protocols, and other conditions closely related to the spatial organization of the environment-home. Smart work skips all of these. After all, in the spirit of Law 81/2017, one should not work at or from home but in an “outer place” that employees can choose and decide independently according to their needs. During the past two years, above all, the environment and the home have governed the decentralization of work, and imagining that this will be the case in the immediate future or distant future is not difficult. The home space has been transformed for its inhabitants into the experience of a “hybrid space” in which everyone must constantly manage and negotiate a balance between domestic space (the house that surrounds us with its to-do lists) and organizational space (the work that invades the domestic space and what can be called “cyberspace,” which is that entire world of data, access to information, and residual sociality that today takes place almost exclusively in digital environments). But what happens when this environment (which is the home) is examined, pinpointing above all the experience of women?

METHODOLOGY

How did COVID-19 affect Italian women who were required to work from home? To answer this question, our methodology took the form of focus group interviews (Morgan 1988; Corrao 2000) with 50 women who worked in the public and private sector in Tuscany. This method allowed us to understand how a group collectively made sense of a phenomenon (Bryman 2016: 502). Before, during, and after the interviews, gender sensitivity was respected in all steps of the research (Decataldo, Ruspini 2018: 25). The average age of the sample was 45, and the majority of the women were married with children whose ages varied; some participants were divorcees with children. The connection with the women was established through the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL). During the interviews, researchers took notes and made recordings with interviewees’ permission. The interview sites were mostly offices or the workplaces. We used Atlas.ti to code the interviews. The analysis was primarily data-driven instead of theory driven (*ivi*: 39). In this paper, we focus on the women’s responses to the difficulties of working from home in the context of the pressures of time and space. The themes of analysis relate to feeling isolated and invaded while achieving “productivity” and multitasking at home. The data collected were

extremely rich and diversified, confirming that the women interviewed did not form a homogeneous category (*ivi*: 43) in their attitudes and responses to COVID-19.

Details of the Focus Group Interviews

The interviews were carried out through the construction of 10 focus groups. These focus groups were gathered between one quarantine and another. The initial phase of the research started in July 2020 at the regional headquarters of the CGIL and the rest of the meetings were conducted in a row between September and October of 2020, in different cities of Tuscany. To be more efficient, these focus group interviews were organised in person in order to collect the stories, thoughts, problems and potentialities embedded in smart working. The organisation of the interviews took advantage of the Network of the CGIL Tuscany Women's Coordination. The regional manager of CGIL collaborated with the provincial managers to build the focus groups. There was a standard focus group meeting where the CGIL Women's coordinating officer, often another CGIL official or an employee or a member of the secretariat, a public administration worker, a private sector worker, and a teacher, who is involved in remote working were involved. This kind of all-inclusive organisation allowed us to meet more than 50 women who work in different sectors. Furthermore, the focus group included women from different ages, diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and civil statuses as indicated above. Hence, the focus groups included women who are younger than thirty years old without children as well as older women with school-age children, with teenage children or young adults.

The issues were raised were very specific, related to the particular work that they do as well as the way in which the relevant work places prepared solutions and arrangements during the time of COVID-19. The facts were discussed but also their opinions on these facts mattered greatly within the focus group interviews. Besides, it was proposed by the researchers to participate in the reconstruction of a collective narrative by starting from what they experienced personally, in their work vs. private life context. During the conversations, the participants were invited to talk about the small fragments of their personal experience: the ritual of starting to work, the feelings of fatigue, changes in daily habits, diverse ways of relating to tasks and duties, the invention of forms of communication with colleagues, episodes of interaction with managers and employers during the COVID-19 times. The meetings lasted two hours in average. The research participants could discuss freely without interruption in these three subject areas:

- Presentation of themselves (their job, contract, professional sector, smart working style they had experienced, the initial stages of smart working)
- Changing relationships within the work life (relations with the company or public administration, with the work itself, with the colleagues)
- How COVID-19 and quarantine changed their relationship with home (with the family members, how they rearranged the home in terms of space and division of labor)

Within this context of discussions, it was important for the researchers to understand the emerging problems related to work and family; the solutions proposed and tried by the women; the learning process related to smart working (the potentialities) and the dead ends. Concrete examples were given by women and if not, the research participants were asked to provide more explanatory answers via prompt questions.

As a result of the research valuable information was collected regarding these themes:

- Socio-demographic information (age, level of education, family status, housing type)
- Socio-professional area (contract type, professional sector, characteristics of the smart working model that was adapted by the workplace)
- Hybridisation of the living space (characteristics of the home working environment; equipment they had, connectivity to internet)
- Evaluation of the work reorganisation experience (workload, coordination with the company, cooperation with colleagues, difficulties overcome and unresolved)
- Evaluation of the private life reorganisation experience (management of and overlaps with the activities of children, family, environment, difficulties overcome and unresolved)
- Plans and projections for the future (what to keep and what to change of the work organisation experienced).

The focus groups were recorded and these recordings, together with the researchers' direct observation, constituted the materials from which the following observations and analysis are drawn. The transcriptions were not verbatim and they were sent to the research participants in summary form. The analysis process also focussed on dialectic exchanges between participants where it was possible to see that the discussions helped the researchers capture divergent factors within the groups. This meant that the strategies to cope with Covid-19 lockdown, the level of digitalisation at the work place and the houses in which the people resided were quite different from each other. During the analysis, constant comparison of group discussions was quite useful to reach the themes underlined in this paper.

It is important to underline that as a result of the methodology followed, the plurality and the diversity of experiences of working women in Tuscany does not allow us to arrive at generalisable results to the extent that there is a final definition of the main problem or the ultimate definition of the framework for possible solutions regarding smart working. The aim of this research, however, was to demonstrate in a comprehensive way, the system of contradictions and ambivalences that came to the fore as a result of smart working and how women dealt with work and home related problems during these extraordinary times.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

New alienation

For those who engaged in smart work, not only did interactions with other family members changed, but the work relationships and how work was organized as a team also changed, becoming more and more indirect and formal and mediated by digital devices with a reduction in opportunities for the face-to-face meetings that are essential for the development of emotions, thoughts, sharing of knowledge and values, and building trusting relationships.

The work done in solitude also weakened the ability to resist the colonization by productive rationality of one of the most problematic cruxes of these new forms of "virtual" work, represented by the risk of isolation (Eurofound, Ilo 2017), of the erosion of social support, and of inadequate satisfaction of the need for affiliation (Wiesenfeld *et alii* 2001). A sense of loneliness and dispersion were quite present during the interviews with the focus groups carried out in the first part of the research. Ioanna, an administrative employee in the private sector with two teenage daughters, one of whom had a disability, tried to continue working efficiently from home during the pandemic, sometimes attempting to return to the office. She said,

«I can always work from home, but when my partner takes over, I can go to the office because I need it. I miss being present in the workplace. I feel trapped within the four walls at home. I counted the rings of the curtains in the living room many times».

This theme emerged from the interviews several times. In some cases, participants freely spoke about alienation or organization of everyday life that veered toward regressive forms. Olympia, a private sector worker, said, «And then there is the fact of alienation. 'Cause I could get out of bed and sit in front of the computer, a bit like my daughters do. It's terrible, though». The conditions of loneliness, isolation, and complete (however supervised and controlled) self-management changed the way of working, which led to new forms of alienation.

The lack of ability to count on the usual exchange among colleagues in person made some situations very problematic, both for those who worked as a team, in which the exchange of opinions was central, and for those who structured a perfect division of labor over time, arriving at consensus on some specific points with colleagues to rearrange online meetings embedded in virtual schedules. Discussion of the loss of the relevance of the social component of work has accompanied the discussion of smart work from the outset. This loss travelled in two directions: that of changing interactions to the point of modifying the contents of the work and that of creating excessive isolation. In this sense, apparently not a coincidence, in many cases participants preferred – when it was possible – to give up remote work or try to integrate work from home with occasional in-person work at the office.

Home as a prison and a workspace

After having worked in several European offices of a company, Lara, a former manager, changed professions when she decided to adopt a child. At the time of this study, she was a high school teacher. When she found herself teaching online at home with her husband, who has been working remotely for many years, she came to terms with the inequality regarding housework and childcare more than ever. She decided to create a colour-coded Excel spreadsheet that noted on a chart the times their child spent with each parent: «At that point we started over. When he saw that his hours were like blue dots in a sea of pink, he realized what was happening». She convinced her partner with this evidence. She added that he helped her more with cooking: «We ate carbonara most of the days and we put on weight, but I said, 'Okay, at least he helps'». This change in his attitude showed that men could no longer ignore the emotional and care work that is a part of daily life (Collins *et alii* 2020). What is important here is that Lara made the invisible visible and the unseen seen.

The women working from home had to defend «their time and space», including the inner self or consistency of place-work connection as all became very invasive, despite the positive sides of smart work, in which one benefits from being away from a competitive work environment. For instance, Lara, who had worked in the past at several multinational companies with a competitive work culture, admitted the great potential in smart work (Sullivan, Lewis 2001). However, when the quarantine was in place, it was another story. Workers had to distinguish between smart work and obligatory work from home during the lockdown. With the entire burden of working from home, childcare, and housework imposed onto the individual, some women felt that time for themselves had melted into thin air. Accordingly, Lara said,

«I want the ability to work from wherever I choose, and it has great advantages. And that is priceless because of the freedom it gives you. The problematic side is that 'You're at home. Take care of this or that!' Smart work increases the self-organization of time. You are the one who has to defend the work from everything that looms. During quarantine, this situation intensified».

Barbara, another interviewee, said that she had to do much more in the domestic sphere than her own work: «If you have to do more because others take it for granted that you do it all, staying at home becomes tantamount to imprisonment». Barbara's words were important because the housework and other work-related duties left no time for leisure activities during COVID-19. The image of a prison also derives from women's work being "taken for granted" and the supposition that she could "naturally" do what she did before COVID-19, together with working professionally from home with no outdoor sociability unless she had a garden and time to relax. Thus, home became prisonlike with only obligations and repetitious "penal labor."

During the lockdown people could not leave their homes and could not socialize with others, making the situation worse than a prison with full-time service expected from women in most of the stories we heard. In contrast with this situation, if one were in an office with colleagues, the situation differed. Olivia stated:

«When you're in the office, you live with your colleagues, who know you're there to work. When you work from home, you live with people who don't understand you're there to work, not to serve them. You have so many jobs in one day; for example, I haven't had lunch out since I've been staying at home, which I used to do at work. I used to love leaving the house when I went to work. Now I'm an employee and a homemaker. I used to do this housewife thing only on the weekends».

Olivia's words proved that the social construction of "being a housewife" still represents the patriarchal expectation of women in some cases (Kynaston 1996; Becker 1999; Rutherford 2001; Mavin, Yusupova 2020).

Rachele was also distressed about another type of "invasion", in which her home space became the place of work: the inability to disconnect mentally if the labor at home was not divided equally among family members. When the spaces of different emotional and professional work merged, home felt like a place for all kinds of anxieties and a lucid mind was only a distant possibility. She said:

«Then you are at home, and they call you. Mom calls you. I have an elderly mom from whom I hear a lot, with whom I'm always in touch. However, when I'm at school, I treasure the hours she does not call me. When I did DAD (distance learning), she called all

the time. She didn't know any boundaries anymore. Plus, you're at home. You have a moment. You get up, turn on the water, load the washing machine. We are always a little bit multitasking, but this way we did that even more. And that is not good. I'm not saying that to do things well, one has to do them one at a time, but every world has its rules. Every world has its things. Doing all things in the same place never gives you the right distance. The detachment provides lucidity. It bothers me that the house is also where you refresh yourself, but now it loses this quality if it becomes a workspace. It's another place where you carry all kinds of tension».

For working women, being at home and doing everything in one space did not let them distinguish one "world" from another. The other members of the family assumed that if "mom, daughter, partner" were at home, she needed to do something about housework because *being home* was equated with "availability". For instance, Rachele's family members could not accept that she was working and had to be present online for her work-related responsibilities. The women who normally worked at offices were bothered by their homes' becoming workplaces during COVID-19, other family members presuming their constant availability in this so-called "private" space.

Being a nomad in one's own home

Women have been observed to assume the burden more than the men in the house, and in terms of spaces, women prioritized their children and partners when they needed to choose a space to work, which surely affected how they worked. For instance, they might choose the smallest room to give more space to others. This was the case with Maria, who shared the room with the cats and their litter boxes because the living room was taken by her son, who is an engineer; and her partner had taken another room. If space was unavailable, if the house was too small, women felt more constrained in a smaller space that was not originally designed to serve as a workplace. Besides, Maria's workplace had not yet converted to digital signatures, so she had to do many things with a printer and fax machine, which were not available at home. In addition to rearrangements and restrictions on space, Maria had to complete tasks around the house for others during her work time. These tasks, including cooking and preparing everything for the men, was a "normalized" part of her domestic work. Maria wanted to return to the office because she was unhappy with the situation. Even three weeks later when she returned to the office, she awakened early to prepare food for the men in her family because they still worked from home.

Truly, women can bring equality to the home and make houses less gendered spaces. Alternatively, they can adapt to more demanding multitasking because they feel that they still need to care for others. A variety of mechanisms of collaboration existed in homes, yet everything done at home became a matter of productivity and keeping track of time. For Pamela, time was mostly for work and for others whom she felt obliged to care for. Furthermore, during any time when she attempted to reenergize herself, she had to spend it instead helping other members of the family. For her, when work started and ended was not clear. From time to time, her partner helped her, but his help had limitations as well.

If a conflictual situation arose between women and men with more than one child, they often experienced difficulties. For instance, Pamela had to lock herself in a room without a proper internet connection at home, so she had to work leaning out a window to enable the connection. It took her a long time to convince the family members that she was there but "not there." She said:

«During the quarantine I had my whole family in the house, which is quite large: my husband; two of my three children, one of them with a four-year-old; and my 92-year-old mother, who was the most challenging to manage because she did not understand when not to talk. My mom is wonderful because she laughs at everything. She is cheerful, but she embarrassed me a couple of times. Then the child would come looking for me because I would lock myself in my room and lean outside the window to benefit from the internet... I worked like this, locked in my room with my head out the window to get the net on my phone. It took a long time to convince them that no one was supposed to come in if I was locked in».

The invasion of work into private space was exacerbated by the invasion of the female workers' space by other family members. Truly, when a woman was at home, others thought that person was entirely available to help or do things for them; in the case of women, this assumption was more readily accepted than in the case of men,

who tended to impose strict boundaries on their time and space. As a result, women became nomads in their own homes.

Alice's situation encapsulated that of the women who had children, worked from home, and felt obligated to gain the respect of the household by dedicating more time and space to her work. She said:

«And by the way, there was the whole domestic thing. I had everyone in the house. Everyone was eating. Everyone was dirty... It was a constant alternation from one thing to another for the house. I used to use these tricks: I'd turn off the video on the Zoom conference while I peeled onions. I was happy to have everyone at home, but I had much work to do, so they all started to understand and respect me after a while. It always seemed to them that my work, because I like it, was neither arduous nor difficult... I felt guilty for not being there physically, so I was always working to make up for it. I was working at home even before COVID-19, but it just got worse. The job of caring for an elder was the hardest because my mom was completely unpredictable; you never knew what she might do. In short, a big mess. Solved, but difficult. In all this *bailamme* [confusion] the only one who gave me a hand was my husband, but not much...».

As indicated above, the women had to do more and more multitasking. Pamela stated that besides cooking and taking care of children, she also had to take care of an elder. When everything became work and care for others, home became an alienating place for many. The positive side was that other family members noticed she had to work hard. On the negative and more difficult side, the professionalism required by her job did not exactly align with the emotional care work she did at home (Burchi 2017).

Paloma shared the room with the iron and ironing table in the only place where she could isolate herself. She said:

«I worked in a little used room in my house, the ironing room. That was my workspace and it kept my experience from being totally horrible. It was important to have my own space. This was strange mixture of a private environment and a more professional one. I had to be careful not to make the connection too invasive».

Thus, the women had to negotiate time and space. Because the home was a place where professional boundaries did not exist, they had to carve out space for themselves at the cost of working in the presence of cats or the ironing table or at a corner of a kitchen table.

Laura admitted that «working in a house is cumbersome, despite the square footage». Many of the women moved around, looking for space for themselves. Rachele said that she was the most nomadic; she was left with the empty spaces the others had left, if any: «One in the living room, one on the terrace, one in the kitchen, one in the bedroom. I work in shifts, and so at 8 o'clock when I leave, someone must have already used the kitchen». She changed spaces according to the demands of other members of the family. Even though it might sound stimulating, doing so interrupted her work and her routines. She was a nomad in a place she nevertheless called her own home, which was contradictory in a way. Similarly, Marina noted that she also had to change many places in the house. She said:

«It took me a while before I found my optimal location. I started in the kitchen but realized others were spinning [changing places to work] as well. I tried the bedroom, but the problem was my back. I couldn't work lying down [on the bed]. I needed privacy, though, or video conferencing or phone calls were just plain invasive. I finally settled on the attic. We have a big house in the country. I had to do everything from my mobile phone».

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the house was a prison for some women because of the continuous demands of housework and smart work. The availability of the women was assumed by family members, and the work done at home felt like penal labor. For those who were public employees, a lack of digitization at work also affected their smart work practices negatively. For instance, in a few of the cases, women asked to go back to the office so that they could finish their work. Cases of alienation arose, and balancing working from home with working from the office became a possibility if one were able to do hybrid work (especially for those in the private sector).

Some women chose to expose inequalities in the time they spent with their children to their partners, leading to a moderate change in gender roles. Role conflict was an essential part of working from home, especially for women who had to juggle work and home-related duties simultaneously (Couch *et alii* 2020). Some partners were helpful but not to the extent that the division of work was equal (Collins *et alii* 2020). Equal labor division did not occur in the majority of the cases (Blair, Lichter 1991; Coltrane 2000; Hochschild, Machung 2012). From an optimistic point of view, we can definitely confirm that family ties were strengthened for some because family members spent more time together at home (Adisa *et alii* 2021).

The insufficient face-to-face sociability with colleagues during the lockdown affected women negatively. Before the lockdown, they went out for lunch with their colleagues and enjoyed a change of scenery outside their offices. They particularly missed even short lunch hours because these meant transcending work stress for a moment. Like time, space was another problem. Some women shared space with the ironing table or cat litters, or they used the edge of the kitchen table. Some of them had to move around the house like nomads, depending on who used which room. One found a solution locking herself into a room and trying to get the internet by leaning out the window, illustrating that the infrastructures at home were not the best for all. Even those with more spacious houses felt that square footage was not the answer but being closed inside was more problematic with so many overlapping work, home, and care demands. Most of the care work still fell on the shoulders of the women, not the men. Children and elders required more attention, which cut into the serious time needed for work. Women who felt that they had to multitask thought that they did not do their best at work, so they compensated by overworking to avoid feeling guilty. Working extra office hours to keep work from piling up was also among the responses to COVID-19.

This research provides some crucial insights in relation to “home” as a gendered space: First, home became a prison if the women had to work all the time for themselves and for others (Sullivan, Lewis 2001); second, they became nomads who had to adapt to circumstances in which they needed to find a quiet room to work. Being a nomad arose from the expectation that women were to sacrifice more within the home space, were in motion more than others in order to finish chores, and also tended to give priority to other members of the family if they all had to work within a limited space. This metaphor of “being a nomad” is useful to show that not everyone was in the same boat in terms of home equality (Boccagni 2020). Furthermore, even if everyone were in the same boat during COVID-19, women had a very active and nonpossessive relationship with home. In other words, it could be said that they did not feel that they owned their spaces in the homes. They moved through the home, adopting a dynamic and multitasking style established within space and time limitations. In some cases, going from bed to the computer was an alienating experience, and they missed going to the office (differentiating the spaces of their public and private lives); quite a few women demanded to return to the office.

On the positive side, flexibility (Sullivan, Lewis 2001) and good family time increased (Adisa *et alii* 2020), but these were overshadowed by the difficulty of multitasking and space seeking. The home became a place of constant movement and action like a battlefield (Burchi 2017). During COVID-19 women could not find leisure time and space outside work and housework (Massey 2013). In short, during the COVID-19 lockdown Italian working women had to defend their workspace, multitask to complete family-related chores and work assignments, and show evidence for inequality while negotiating with their partners. Being a nomad in one’s own home was not only a consequence but also a strategy to use space in an efficient way in order to finish the work and escape the hurly-burly of the house (which ironically is supposed to be the place of relaxation and calm). The home, instead, became one of the centers of capitalistic production with its constant preparative, consumptive, progressive, and alienating patterns during COVID-19.

Looking at the socio-political implications of this study, there are three concluding thoughts regarding the possible role of employers, functioning of workplaces, and improvement in gender roles for working couples. The first thought is related to the requirements of smart working and how employers should be aware of the fact that it is not easy for any employee to work from home if the digitalisation systems are not in place (especially in the public sector) and if the infrastructures are not ripe to benefit from a good internet connection and other related technologies (programmes and software that ease communication amongst colleagues). Moreover,

the employers shall shoulder more responsibility to make remote work more friendly, social and comfortable as the solidarity that is established between colleagues via lunch and coffee breaks (including face to face interaction) are absent when people work from home. Therefore, new methods of team building (e.g., walking in the nature, online informal chats) can be suggested at this point by the employers/directors and human resources. Otherwise, work can lose its meaning for many, and possibility of a burnout can increase. The second thought is related to the workplaces. When workplaces shifted from office to home for everyone, it was taken for granted that smart working for a man and a woman could generate the same efficiency levels, an assumption which is groundless for the reasons indicated above and underlined in this paper. Hence, the workplaces need to provide the flexibility and hybridisation between working at an office and smart working. It is probable that this kind of flexibility would strengthen the agentic action taken by workers, who can arrange themselves better and feel freer when they want to work from an office or from home, according to the times and urgencies they need to deal with. The third thought is related to a societal fact that cannot be resolved straightforwardly by policies, regulations and laws in general, because it requires societal change. The gender roles are deeply rooted in many societies in such a way that women can have a difficult time balancing and performing different roles (mother, daughter, worker vs. employer, wife, cleaner, and more) that burden them. Hence, the housework (especially for working women) requires equal share by the members of the family. Furthermore, the women's space at home where they create, work, write and think, is extremely important, not less important than spaces used by other members of the family. The sacrificial behaviour on the side of working women shall not be normalised but questioned. The main question, therefore, is: how equal is the share of caring duties, work duties and home duties inside the home when a couple engages in remote work? Last but not least, the inequality that arises from women being a nomad at home, is a theme that needs to be revisited from a psychological, philosophical, anthropological and socio-political point of view both by scholars and policymakers, who are interested to promote equal gender roles. Therefore, the micro, meso and macro structures of society (including employers' actions, changing work structures and evolution of gender roles at home) need to be addressed with their complexities to be able to resolve this dilemma in a holistic manner.

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