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WORKING FROM HOME DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: Changing preferences and the future of work

Authors: Heejung Chung, Hyojin Seo, Sarah Forbes, and Holly Birkett





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between the 22nd of May and the 15th of June, researchers from the Working from Home during COVID-19 lockdown Project, run by the University of Kent and the University of Birmingham, conducted a survey of UK employees with the aim of understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown and widespread working from home has influenced a range of work-life issues. This research produced the following key findings:

There has been a radical change in work practices and culture

- There has been a **steep rise in the number of employees working flexibly** during lockdown with almost all (86%) employees in our survey having worked from home and 70% of employees working flexitime (flexible starting and ending times of work).
- We also see a **decline in stigma around flexible working** during this period.

Line managers have generally been supportive of home-working

- 90% of respondents who worked from home felt that **managers were supportive of this arrangement**. Respondents suggest that managers have become more aware and more understanding of their responsibilities outside the workplace since the COVID-19 lockdown and mass homeworking. With 72.7% responding positively to the statement 'My manager really cares about the effect that work demands have on my personal and family life'.
- Respondents also suggest managers/organisations have become much better at providing the support and tools needed for effective homeworking since lockdown.

This experience of home-working has influenced preferences for flexible working in the future

- Employees identified positive aspects of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown, including the ability to: **take care of children, do housework and spend more time with their partners**.
- 36% of respondents said they were able to get more work done in a shorter amount of time at home during lockdown, and 43% were able to focus on work priorities while working from home.

- **⅔ of non-parents and 52% of all parents said it is (very) likely that they will work from home** after the COVID-19 lockdown has ended.
- Employees identified the following as key reasons they wanted to work from home more in the future: to reduce commuting times, to spend more time with family, to increase in productivity and to improve well-being.
- **76% of all mothers and 73% of fathers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to work flexibly to spend more time with children**. A further 64% of fathers and 59% of mothers also said that they would like to reduce their working hours to spend more time with family.
- ¼ of our respondents with partners would also like their partners to work flexibly in the future.

There were also some negative experiences of home working during the lockdown

- **⅔ of employees identified the blurred boundaries between work/home as a key negative aspect of working from home**. Many noted lack of equipment and space to work when working from home.
- Missing interactions with colleagues was noted as a key negative aspect of working from home, especially among women without children. This group was also much more likely to feel nervous and stressed during the lockdown than their male counterparts.

Parents, especially mothers, struggled to find the space and time to carry out work during lockdown

- Mothers identified increased housework and childcare as one key negative experience of working from home. **The majority of women responded that they are doing more (or much more) housework and care** – for example more than ⅔ say they do more children's education.
- Only 50% of mothers and 58% of fathers could secure a stable block of time to work during the lockdown, and only 15% of mothers had clear boundaries between work/family, underlining mothers' struggle to work during school/childcare facilities closures.

Mothers have struggled to find the time/space to work during the lockdown



Only 50% of mothers reported having had a stable block of time to work.

Fathers have increased their childcare roles and have cited spending time with children and partner as some of the key positive aspect of working from home



- We have seen a **significant increase in self-reported productivity but a decrease in the actual working hours of mothers, especially those with primary school aged children** (22% decrease), during the lockdown. Mothers are also working considerably more in the evenings than before the COVID-19 lockdown.

Fathers' involvement in childcare and unpaid work in home has also increased during lockdown

- Fathers increased their contribution to childcare and housework during the COVID-19 lockdown, this was higher where fathers had taken more than two weeks paternity leave.
- We see an increase in number of couples who indicate that they have shared housework/care activities during lockdown. This highlights the link between homeworking and sharing of unpaid work in the home and also suggests that parents might have established **new patterns of gendered care and unpaid work in the home during lockdown which could potentially influence behaviours** and wider cultural norms around care and housework in the future.

Worrying trends around mental health and well-being for parents, especially for mothers

- Parents, especially mothers, have felt **very high levels of work-family conflict** during lockdown: half of the mothers who were working from home agreed that their job prevents time for family (49%) and that family prevented time for their job (50%).
- There are signs that the increased workload and conflict between work and family has negatively impacted parents' mental well-being, especially for mothers. Almost half of all mothers felt rushed and pressed for time, more than half of the time during the lockdown. In addition, 46% of mothers felt nervous and stressed more than half of the time. Less than of all parents said they woke up feeling fresh and well-rested.
- These findings indicate **serious concerns for the well-being of parents, who are particularly stressed as a result of lockdown and this may be exasperated as the school/care provider closures** continue or if there is a second lockdown in the future. This is especially worrying for mothers, who struggled to secure time/space to work.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (CONTINUED)

In sum, the experience of mass working from home during the **COVID-19 lockdown has shifted attitudes and preferences around flexible working of managers and workers, and also has the potential to impact cultural norms around the gendered division of housework/care.**

The below are some key future changes we anticipate seeing as people return to work, based on the findings from this research:

- More employees are likely to request/demand flexible working in the future, and with this we may see a decline in flexibility stigma and concerns about flexible working negatively impacting career outcomes.
- However, not everyone wants to work from home all the time. Many employees want collegial interaction, are concerned about lack of equipment or space to carry out their work and blurring boundaries between work and home.
- The experiences during lockdown suggest that increasing fathers' access to flexible working may help couples to share more housework/care responsibilities, and managers and the government will likely be under pressure in the future to find ways to support fathers to work flexibly and take a more active role in caring and unpaid work in the home.
- Many women have been carrying out the double/triple shifts of work/care/home-schooling throughout the lockdown. Many are suffering from feelings of conflict and stress, especially after four months of school closures. Without proper support, which includes ensuring continuous involvement of fathers and well-resourced re-opening of schools and other child caring facilities, we may see a rise in women exiting the labour market and unable to compete with their peers. In sum, without purposeful and targeted approaches to support women/mothers we may see an increase in the gender gap in labour market outcomes/pay.



1 INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Governments from across the world, including the UK government announced comprehensive lockdowns limiting all unnecessary travel and asked all non-essential employees to work from home where possible. The UK Household Panel data Understanding Society found that approximately half of all employees surveyed worked from home at least some of the time during the COVID-19 lockdown in April, with 36% saying they were exclusively working from home. By comparison, the European Working Conditions Survey of 2015, only about one out of six employees have said they worked from home at least several times a month (18% of men and 16% of women) (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2018). In other words, this lockdown has led to mass home-working across the UK economy almost overnight and has provided a unique opportunity to understand how working from home on such a scale may have changed people's perceptions and attitudes to home-working and flexible working in general.

We've gathered data through a survey conducted between mid-May to mid-June, which aimed to gain insights on how work and home-life have changed

throughout the lockdown period and how these changes might have a profound impact on both, the future of work and gendered cultural norms around care in the UK. This report has been written to provide evidence for companies and policy makers to better understand and therefore adapt to the changing context of the labour market and preferences of employees in the future. It will only provide a brief overview of the survey focusing on the data which will be of most interest to policy makers and organisations.

The data presented are generally descriptive, without having controlled for a number of factors, with some comparison across key demographics – such as gender and parental status. Our goal was to see the attitudes of coupled employees with children under the age of 18, and as we mention in our methodological section at the end of this report, our data has an overrepresentation of this group. More in-depth analysis will be done through papers that will be published later on in the year and in 2021 through journal articles and other publications. Throughout the report, when we refer to parents (mothers/fathers) we mean those living with children under the age of 18. Everyone else we refer to as non-parents for the simplicity.

2 PATTERNS OF HOME WORKING BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

We compared the proportion of employees who worked from home before the COVID-19 lockdown with those working from home during the lockdown. As can be seen in Figure 1, almost 1/3rd of our population was able to work from home, at least on some occasions, before the COVID-19 lockdown happened. Since the lockdown the majority of employees have been working from home. We can see that this percentage is higher for women without children as well as fathers compared to mothers and men without children.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the proportion of the respondents' colleagues working from home increased greatly (Figure 2). 2/3rds of all respondents have said that more than 80% of their colleagues worked from home, with more than half of them (41% in total) saying all of their colleagues work from home. This is a

significant increase in numbers given that 2/3rd of all our respondents said that none or very few (less than 20%) of their colleagues worked from home before the COVID-19 lockdown. This clearly shows that there has been a huge shift towards homeworking during the COVID-19 lockdown.

However, the shift towards working from home has not been so clear cut across all sectors. For example, home-working was less common in sectors such as accommodation, hospitality and food services, wholesale and retail trade, human health and social work and residential care and social work (see our web profile document). Interestingly though, even in sectors where home working might seem unlikely to happen the majority of respondents still reported that they themselves and their colleagues were working from home. This includes

Figure 1. Proportion of workers in the survey having worked from home before and during Covid-19 lockdown (%)

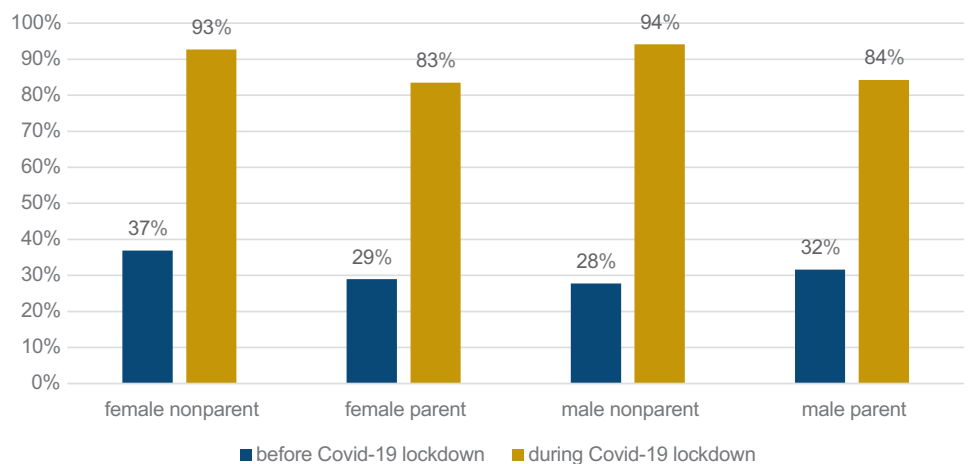
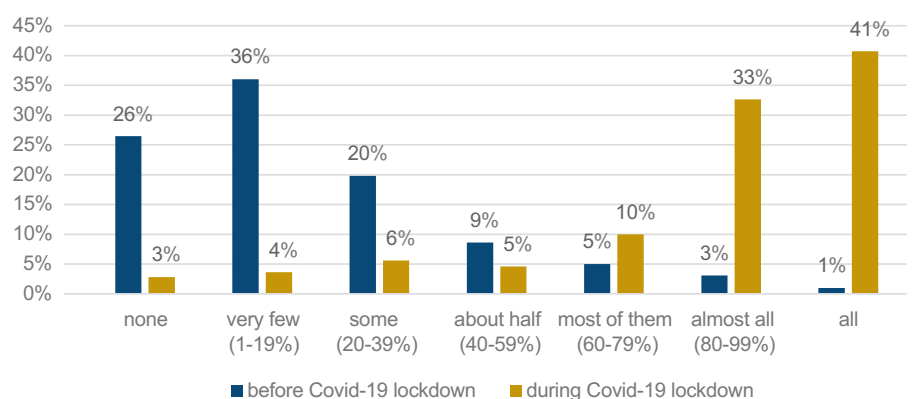


Figure 2. The proportion of work colleagues working from home before and during the COVID-19 lockdown (%)



2 PATTERNS OF HOME WORKING BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN (CONTINUED)

manufacturing (only 11% reported that they worked from home before the lockdown while 80% did during lockdown). The same pattern can be seen for those working in human health and social work and medical and healthcare.

Respondents were also asked about their use of flexitime arrangements, particularly the possibility of altering their starting and finishing times at work (Figure 3). Although the change was not as marked as the change to working from home, there was a general increase in the number of respondents using flexitime in our data. Overall, 47% of our sample used flexitime prior to lockdown, whilst 70% used flexitime during lockdown. This increase was

particularly pronounced amongst mothers, where approximately 44% were using flexitime prior to the lockdowns and 73% during the lockdown. This may be largely due to the fact that many mothers might not have been able to work during the day due to care and housework responsibilities. We can also see from the data that mothers have worked longer during evenings/nights during lockdown compared to other groups (Figure 4). On average, mothers went from working 2.4 hours during evenings and nights before COVID-19 lockdown to an average of 3.7 hours during the lockdown, making them the demographic with the most significant increase in hours worked during evenings/nights due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Figure 3. Proportion of employees working flexitime before and during the COVID-19 lockdown (%)

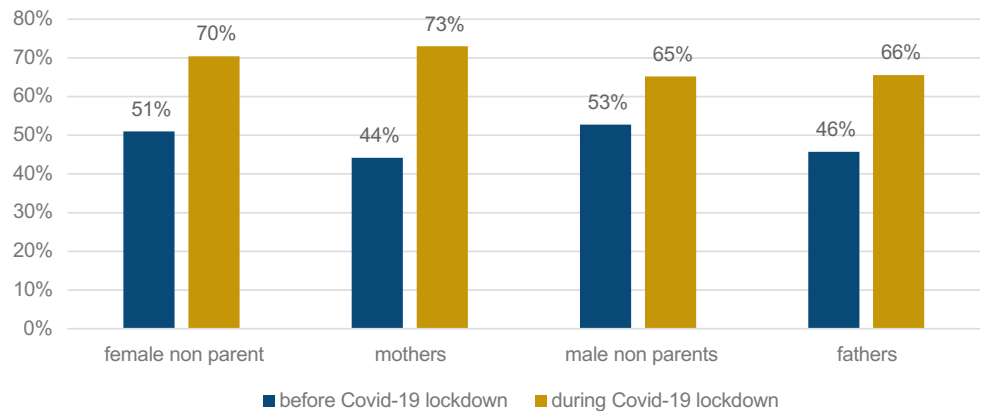
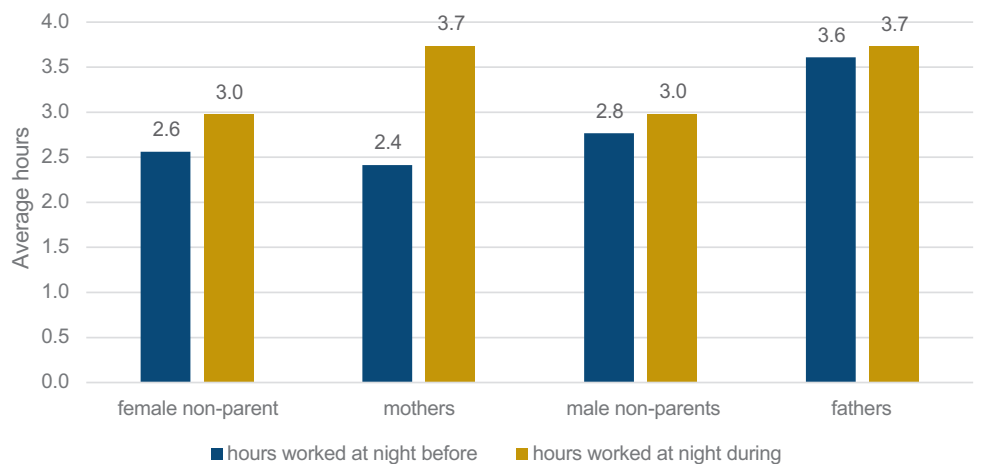


Figure 4. Average number of hours worked by employees during evenings/night before and during lockdown by parental/gender status (number of hours)



3 EXPERIENCES OF WORKING FROM HOME

Positive experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown

The next section of the report explores the experiences of those who have worked from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. As we can see from Figure 5, some of the key positives of working from home have included the capacity to do some of the housework and care that was made necessary due to the lockdown, due to school and childcare facility closures, and the lack of possibilities to outsource housework such as cooking and cleaning. Both mothers (78%) and fathers (84%) chose the ability to spend more time with children/ grandchildren as the key positive outcome of being able to work from home

during the COVID-19 lockdown. It is particularly interesting that the figure for fathers here is high as this may translate into more fathers requesting homeworking or flexible working arrangements post lockdown. Respondents also cited being able to spend time with partners as one of the key positive experiences resulting from working from home during the lockdown, with 71% of fathers and 51% of mothers saying this was the case. Working from home during this period also seems to have improved the mental and physical health of 30% of the respondents.

A large proportion of respondents noted that their productivity increased or their working patterns improved due to working from home during the lockdown period.

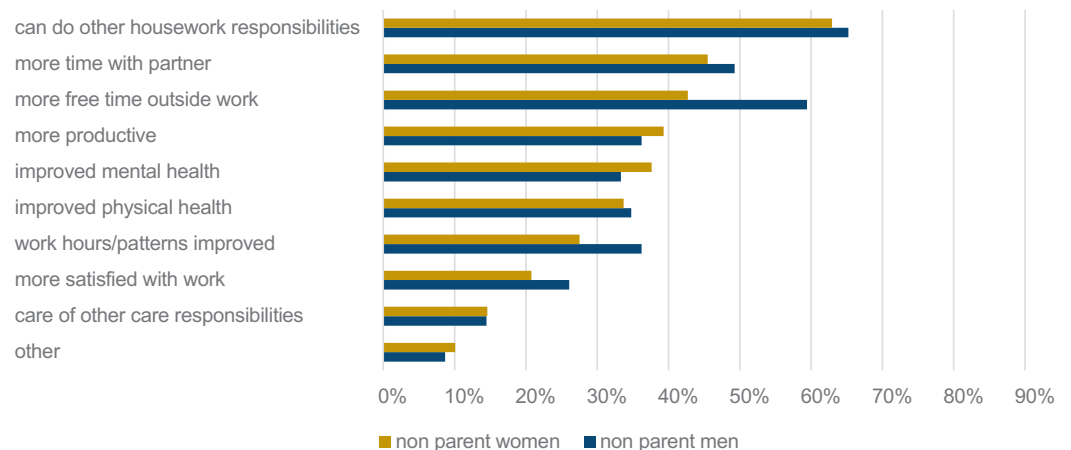
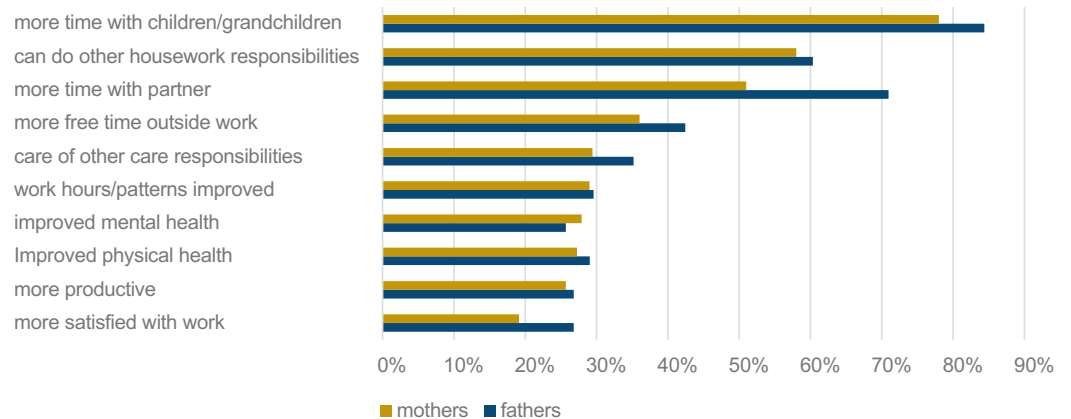


Figure 5. Top positive experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown by gender/parental status (as a % of those who worked from home during the COVID-19 lockdown)

3 EXPERIENCES OF WORKING FROM HOME (CONTINUED)

Figure 6 shows that all groups of respondents experienced increased productivity by at least 25% since the lockdown. This was even higher for non-parents where 39% of women without children said they are more productive, and 36% of men without children said the same. Overall, most respondents identified some positives in working from home during lockdown with only 7% of all those surveyed saying there were no positive outcomes of working from home during the lockdown period.

Negative experiences of working from home during COVID-19 lockdown

Respondents also identified several key negative consequences of working from home during the lockdown. On top of the list was how working from home blurs boundaries between work and family life. Such blurring and multi-tasking of roles has commonly been identified in the research on flexible working prior to the COVID-19 lockdown (Schieman et al., 2009; Lott, 2018; Chung, 2017) and in other research undertaken during the lockdown (for example, Andrew et al., 2020).

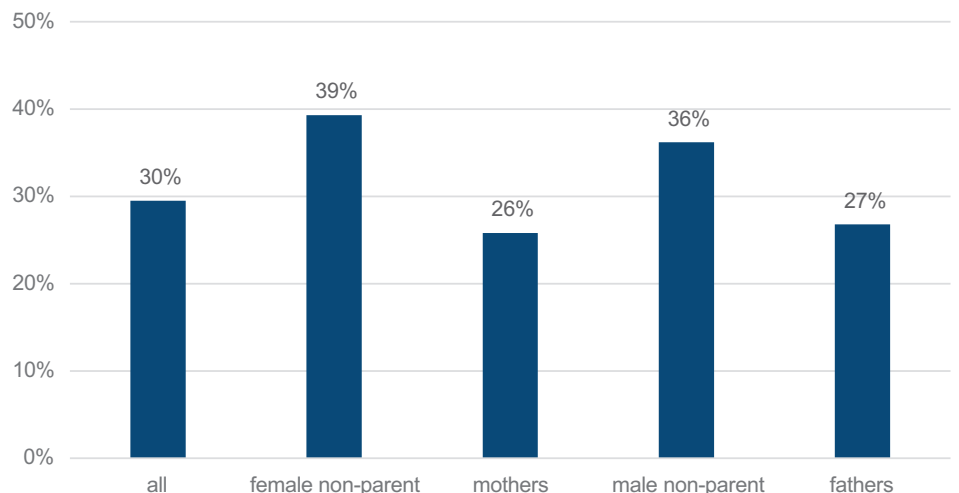
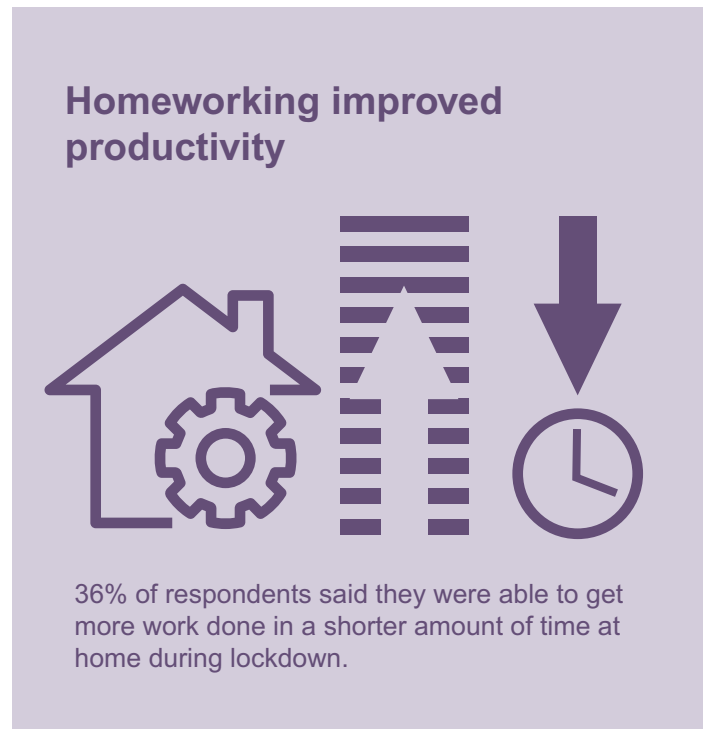


Figure 6. Proportion of employees reporting a positive outcome of the COVID-19 lockdown as being more productive, by gender and parent status (%)

The data shows a clear distinction between parents and non-parents and between mothers and fathers regarding the negative experiences of home-working during the lockdown. Mothers indicated that increased housework and childcare was their more commonly experienced negative outcomes of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown (56%), while it was not as common for fathers (34%). This echoes previous studies on home-working which suggests it leads to increased housework/childcare, especially for mothers (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2018; Kim, 2018; Lott, 2019). Both fathers (48%) and mothers (56%) cite distractions from family/home as another commonly experienced negative outcome of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Similarly, increased family stress and reduction in productivity are the next most widely

experienced negative outcomes of homeworking during lockdown. These findings are in the context of the school and childcare compelling parents to co-ordinate their paid work and childcare/home schooling roles. In other words, many of the negative experiences faced by parents were specific to the COVID-19 lockdown context, although these negative consequences faced by parents were also found in studies prior to the pandemic (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2018). As Figure 7 shows, blurred boundaries between work and home remains the most common negative outcome of home working experienced by employees without children. However, for these groups of employees, other negative outcomes included missing interactions with/negatively affected relationships with colleagues/ manager, where 53% of women without children responded that it was a key negative outcome.

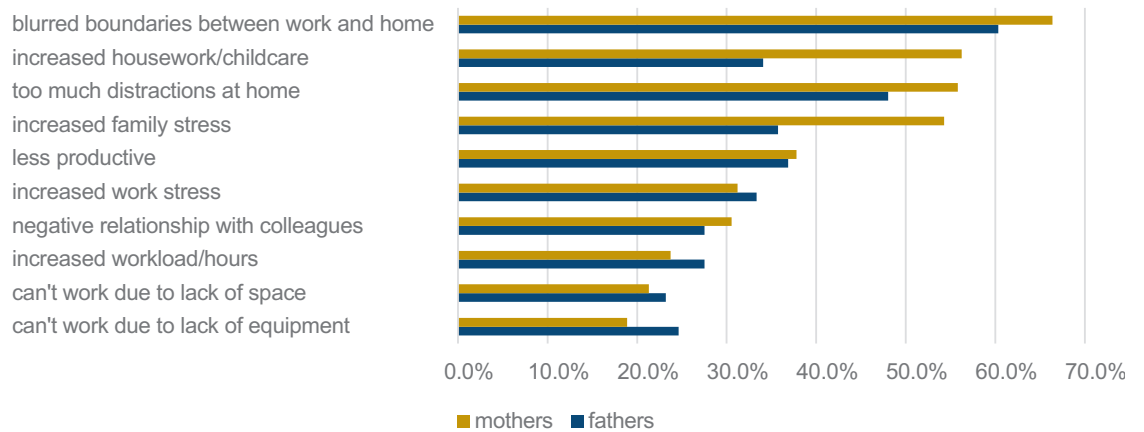
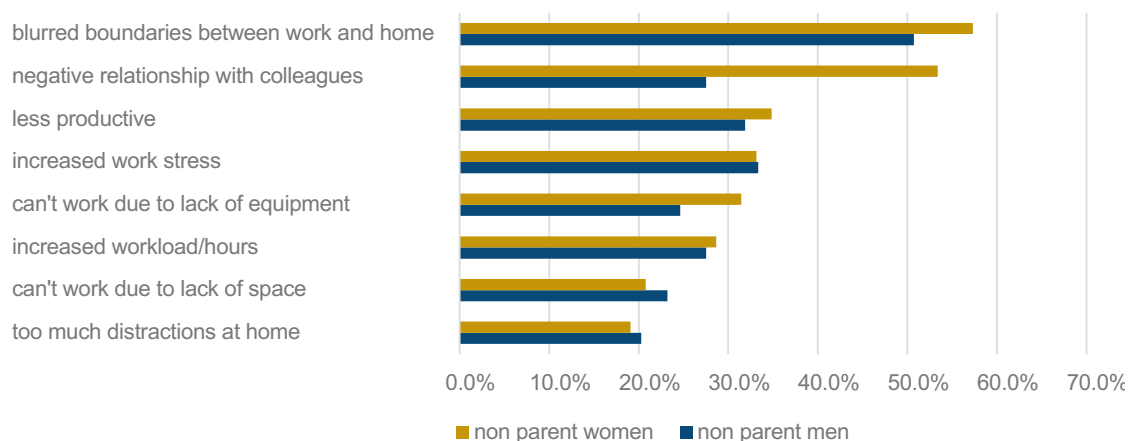


Figure 7. Top negative experiences of working from home during lockdown for mothers and fathers and women and men without children (as a % of all those who have worked from home during the COVID-19 lockdown)



3 EXPERIENCES OF WORKING FROM HOME (CONTINUED)

For both men and women without children, increased work stress was a commonly chosen outcome with 33% choosing this. Similarly for this group, increased work load or working hours was common, again reflecting previous studies on flexible working leading to longer working hours (Lott and Chung, 2016; Chung and Van der Horst, 2018a). Other negative consequences chosen included reduced productivity and not being able to work due to the lack of equipment and space. These findings point to the need to support employees to be better able to work from home effectively.

Figure 8 reports how our sample responded when asked to what extent they agreed with some key statements about their experiences during the lockdown. For example, 36% of the sample working from home said they were able to get more work done in a shorter amount of time at home during the lockdown and 43% said they could focus on priorities at work due to working

from home during the lockdown. These evidence point to the fact that working from home can be used as a performance enhancing tool. Most employees in our sample working from home without children, could also secure a stable block of time to focus on work – 70% of women without children and 74% of men without children. The picture was quite different for parents with only 50% of mothers saying they were able to secure a block of time to work, and 58% of fathers said were able to do so. This also explains why only 15% of mothers agreed that they could maintain clear boundaries between work and home life with working at home in this period. By contrast 32% of fathers said they could maintain clear boundaries, the difference may be explained by the fact that mothers took a larger role in care of children/housework (see section 4).

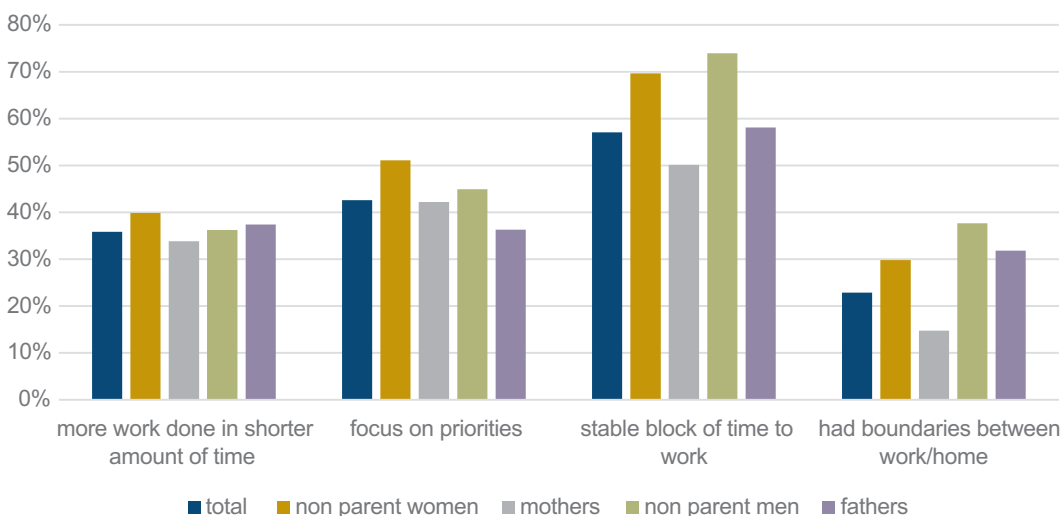


Figure 8. Experiences of working from home by gender/parental status. (as a % of all those who have worked from home during the COVID-19 lockdown)

Mothers' lack of capacity to work

Much of the lack of having the space and time to work has influenced workers' capacity to work during the COVID-19 lockdown, especially for mothers. Mothers have seen the biggest decline in not only their contractual hours but also their actual working hours after lockdown has started. As we can see in Figure 9, mother's actual working hours have reduced by 6.2 hours on average, although fathers' actual working hours have also reduced significantly by 6.1 hours as well. On the other hand,

those without children have had their working hours reduced by only 1 hour. This drop in actual working hours was even larger for women with primary school aged children (Figure 10); their actual working hours dropping by 6.9 hours from pre lockdown from 31.5 hours a week on average to a mere 24.8 hours a week on average during the lockdown- a considerable drop of 22% in their working hours. For fathers with primary school aged children, this drop was only about 14% from 39.3 hours a week on average to about 34.4 hours a week.

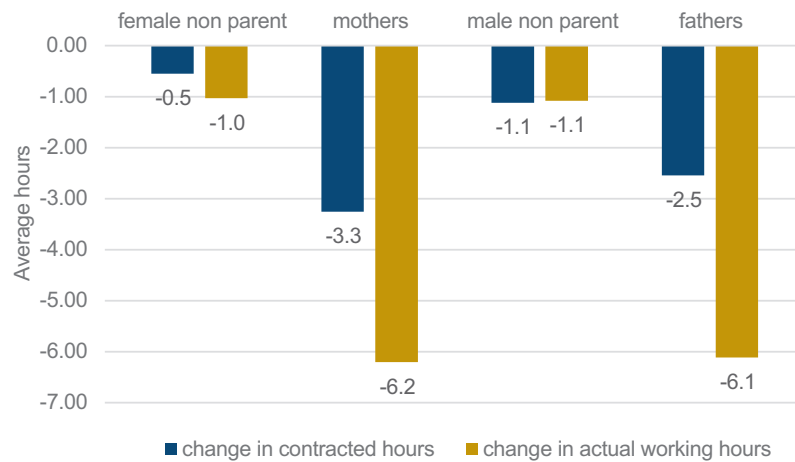


Figure 9. Changes in the contractual and actual working hours by gender/parental status (changes in hours)

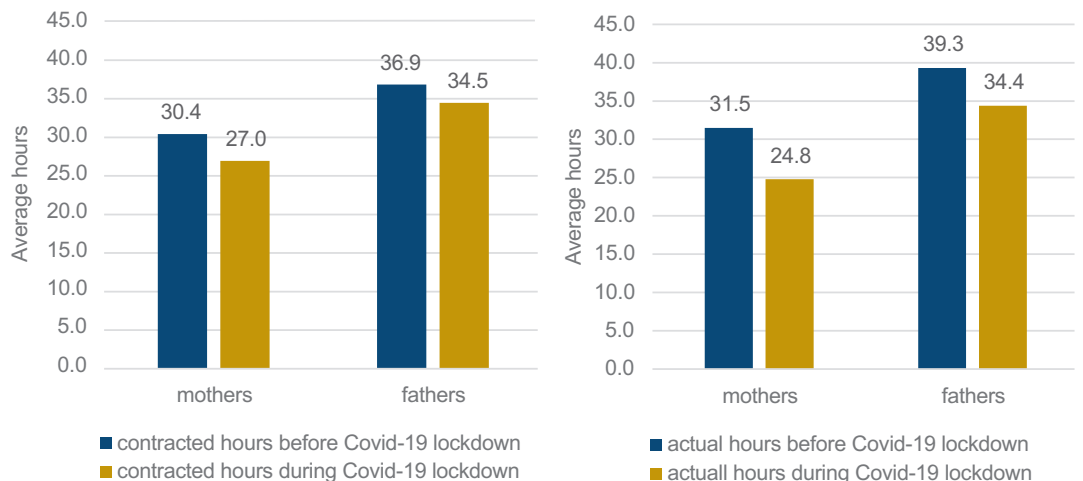


Figure 10. Changes in the contracted and actual hours of mothers and fathers with primary school aged children before and during COVID-19 lockdown (hours)

4 WORK LIFE BALANCE

Division of housework and care

The division of housework within heterosexual couples changed significantly during lockdown. Our survey asked, of those living with a significant other, how they divided up housework activities distinguished into six categories including: cooking, cleaning/laundry, DIY (home, garden, care maintenance etc.), routine childcare (generally looking after children), non-routine childcare (playing with and entertaining children), and children's education (supervising homework and home learning during the lockdown). As shown in Figure 11, women were doing more, if not all, of almost all of the categories of housework/care measured prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, with the exception of DIY and maintenance which is considered a more masculine job (Bianchi et al., 2012; Kan and Laurie, 2018). We do see an increase in the number of couples where male partners took on increased housework/care after the lockdown, resulting in

the couple sharing the work equally or male partners doing more. Possibly the biggest shift can be seen for cleaning/laundry where prior to the lockdown, 65% of couples responded that the female partner was doing more or all of it, which dropped to 56% of couples during the lockdown. Further, most (60%) mothers were doing more, if not all, of routine childcare before the COVID-19 lockdown, but during the lockdown this reduced to 47%. In other words 53% responding that both parents shared or the male partner did most of the routine childcare. However, there were noticeable gender differences between mothers and fathers in their perceptions of how unpaid work in the home was shared. For example, 65% of all fathers said that they share or that they themselves were responsible for routine childcare during the lockdown period, while only 47% of mothers said this was the case – signalling a large discrepancy between mothers and fathers in what they consider to be “equally sharing care”.

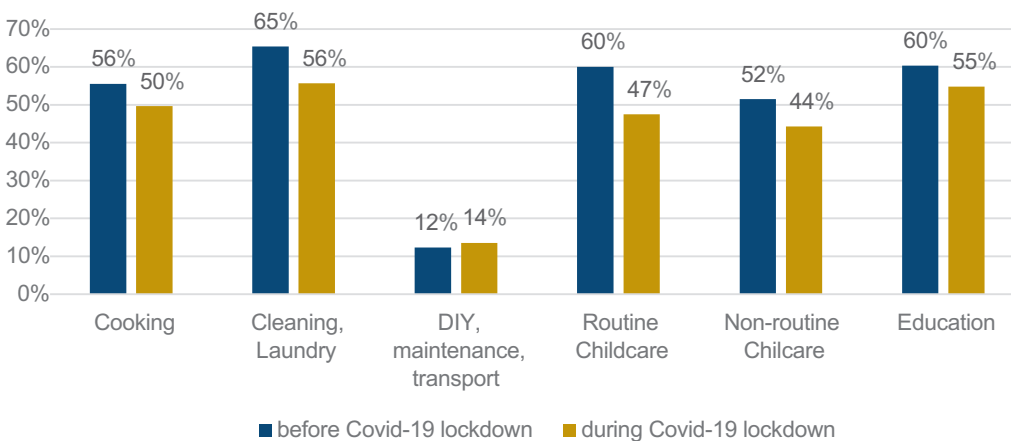


Figure 11. Proportion of heterosexual couples where women carry out most if not all of the housework/care before and after coronavirus lockdown (%) (childcare data is only for those with children under 18 years of age)

This pattern of reduction in the proportion of couples where women were doing more/all of the housework and care during the COVID-19 lockdown does not necessarily mean that women have been doing less of these tasks. When asked whether they are doing more or less of housework/care (Figure 12), the majority of women responded that they are doing more (or much more) of cooking (55%), cleaning/laundry (54%), routine childcare (69%), non-routine childcare (68%), children's education (76%) with an large proportion of those responding that they are doing much more of these activities. This is especially alarming when we consider the extent to which mothers were already working at their max with dire consequences for their mental health even prior to the COVID-19 lockdown (Chandola et al., 2019). This is not the same for men with less than half saying they are doing more or much more of cooking (45%) and cleaning

and laundry (44%), although they did say they are doing more childcare (63% said they do more routine childcare, 61% more non routine, 58% saying more education). Noticeable gender differences in responses were also found here with many men say they are doing "much more". Also, according to our female respondents when asked about their male partners' increase in housework/care roles, their responses are a bit more sceptical in that fewer saying their partners are doing more or much more of these activities. Although it is worth bearing in mind that we do not necessarily have data for all couples in our data sets so direct comparison are not possible.

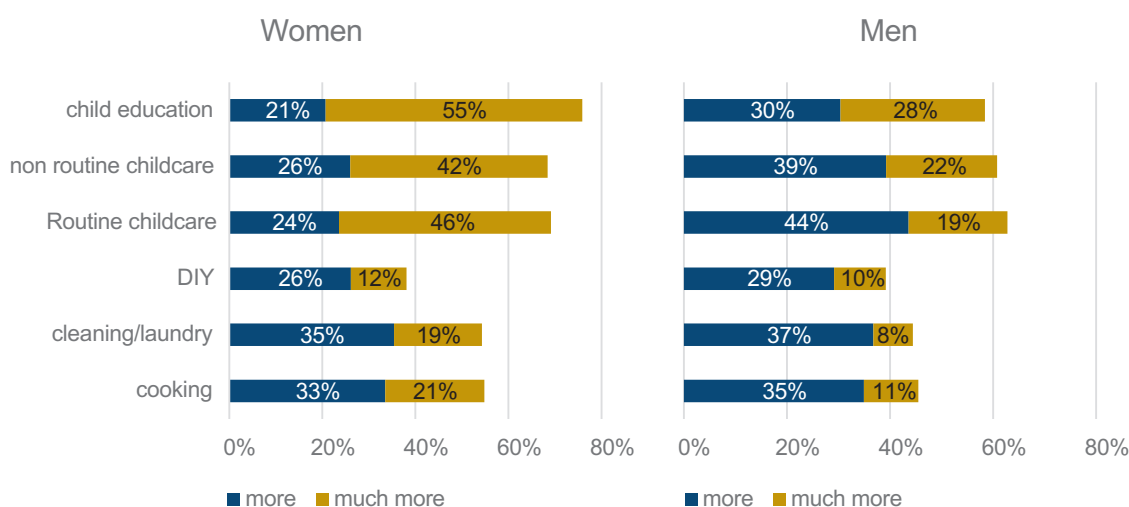


Figure 12. Proportion of respondents who say they are spending more, or much more time on housework/childcare activities by gender (%)

4 WORK LIFE BALANCE (CONTINUED)

Work-family conflict

The COVID-19 lockdown has forced many employees to work from home and school closures have left many having to juggle both housework/childcare and their normal workload. This has led to a large proportion of employees feeling conflict between work and family life. 39% of all respondents said that their job prevents them giving time to their family (27% agreed and 12% strongly agreed) and 30% of all respondents said that their family prevents them from giving time for their job (23% agreed and 7% strongly agreed). These proportions are much larger than has been found in previous studies before the COVID-19 lockdown – for example in the 2015 European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), 16% of employees felt that their jobs prevented them from giving time to their family all or most of the time, although, if we consider those who feel like this ‘some of the time’ this number goes up to 50%. On the other hand, only 22% of

employees felt that their family prevents them from giving time for their job at least sometimes, which is significantly lower than the proportion of employees feeling this way in our survey showing that family to work conflict increased during the lockdown periods.

Parents were much more likely to experience this conflict (see Figure 13), especially mothers who were working from home. Half of the mothers who were working from home during the lockdown period agreed that job prevents time for family (49%) and that family prevented time for job (50%). Fathers were less likely to feel this way with only 40% feeling that job prevents time for family and 32% feeling family prevents time for job. Again, comparing these findings to the EWCS 2015 data, it was actually fathers who felt more work to family conflict in 2015, while mothers felt more family to work conflict during lockdown, although the gap was not as large. This suggests that conflict between work and family life may

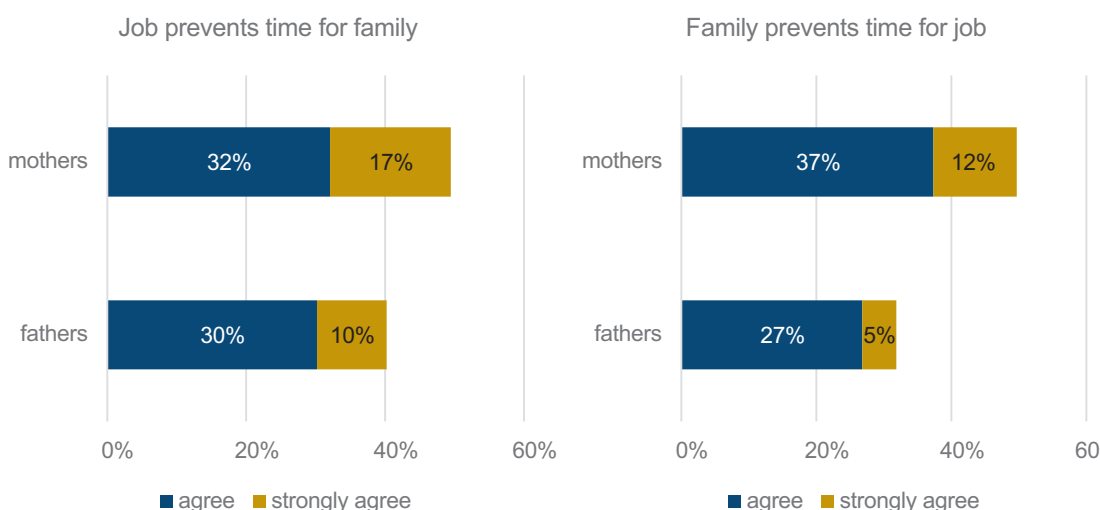


Figure 13. Perception on work family conflict of parents working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown (%)

have increased more for mothers because of the multi-tasking and conflicting demands/responsibilities they faced in this period (Andrew et al., 2020). This increase in mothers feeling that family prevents them from having enough time to do their job will have a significant impact on women's labour market outcomes. We found in the previous section it has impacted the number of hours they were able to carry out which will influence women's ability to stay in jobs and maintain their careers. Especially when workers are asked back into offices starting August 2020 while school are shut and summer care facilities are largely not running¹, and with fears of schools, and childcare places not being able to fully open even after September 2020², it is likely that this type of conflict may lead to more women leaving, or being forced to leave the labour market.

Sharing parental leave and the impact on shared caring in lockdown

Figure 14 reveals that fathers who had taken more than the statutory two weeks Paternity leave alongside their partners following birth or adoption were likely to do more care before and after lockdown than their peers. For example, from our data, 50% of mothers whose partners have taken more than two weeks of leave responded that their partners were sharing or doing more of childcare during the lockdown period. This is an important finding as it highlights the value of fathers taking more than two weeks leave after the birth or adoption of their child for encouraging more equality in child caring over time (for example, Birkett and Forbes, 2019).

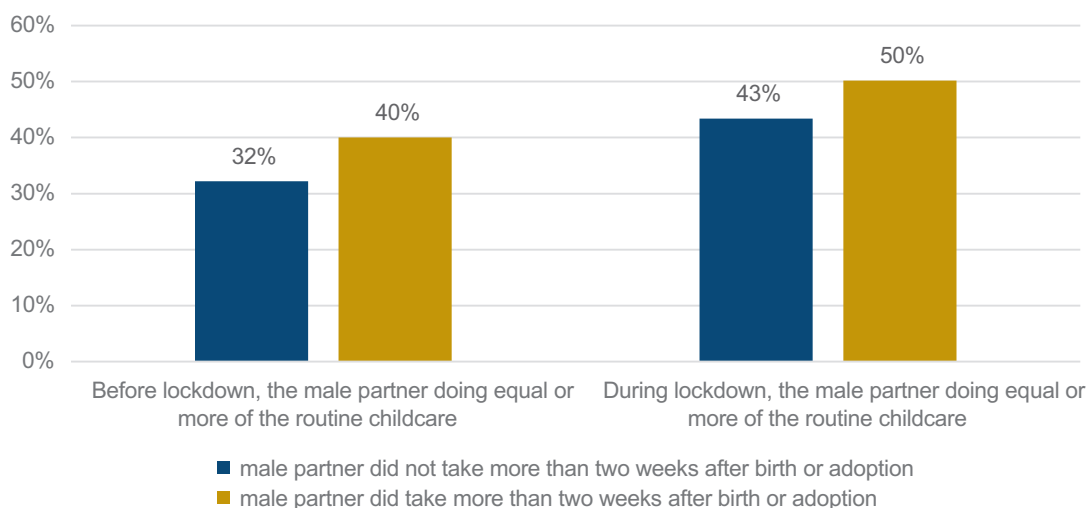


Figure 14. Women reporting male partner sharing routine childcare equally or doing more of the childcare by whether they both took more than two weeks leave after birth or adoption (%)

1 www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/19/parents-worried-by-lack-of-uk-summer-camp-options-due-to-covid-19-guidelines

2 For example, there are fears of mass nursery closures: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nursery-close-coronavirus-reopen-childcare-minders-uk-a9621356.html

4 WORK LIFE BALANCE (CONTINUED)

Well-being outcomes

We also examined how patterns of work and work-life balance influenced the well-being of respondents. Figure 15 shows that a significant number of people felt rushed/pressed for time or nervous and stressed more than half the time in the past month. What we can also see is that parents, especially mothers, were much more likely to feel this way compared to the other groups – with 48% feeling rushed or pressed and 46% feeling nervous and stressed for more than half the time during the past month. Interestingly, female non-parents were likely to feel as nervous and stressed (46%) as mothers although this was not the case for male non-parents.

Examining the more positive effects of the lockdown, a similar pattern emerges. Women, especially mothers, report they have not felt rested, active/vigorous or calm or relaxed in the month leading up to our data collection (see Figure 16). When considering the previous month, only 31% of mothers responded that they had woken up feeling fresh and rested and only 32% responded that they have felt active or vigorous more than half the time, while 41% reported feeling calm or relaxed more than half of the time. In comparison, for fathers, although only 33% reported waking up feeling fresh and rested more than half the time, 42% felt active and vigorous, and a half felt calm and relaxed. However, most people reported feeling cheerful with women (both mothers and women without children) more likely to feel this way more than half the time.

Figure 15. Proportion of employees feeling the following feelings more than half the time in the past month during lockdown (including most/all the time) (%)

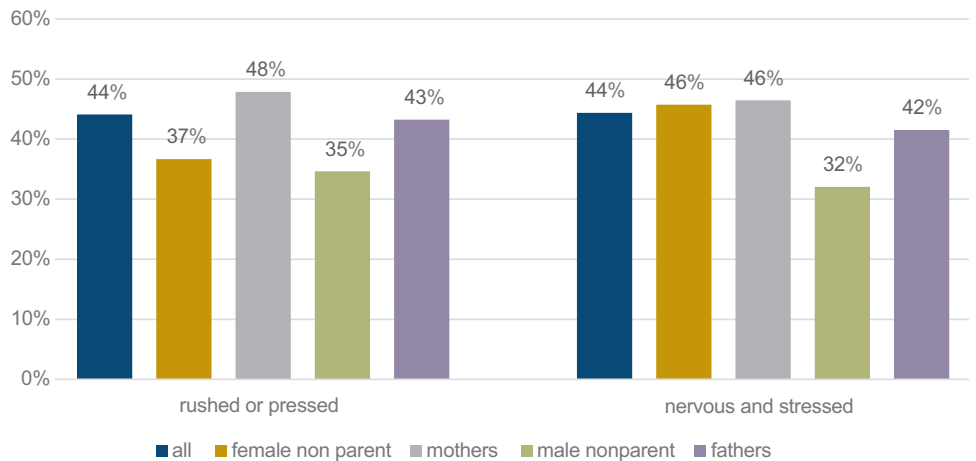
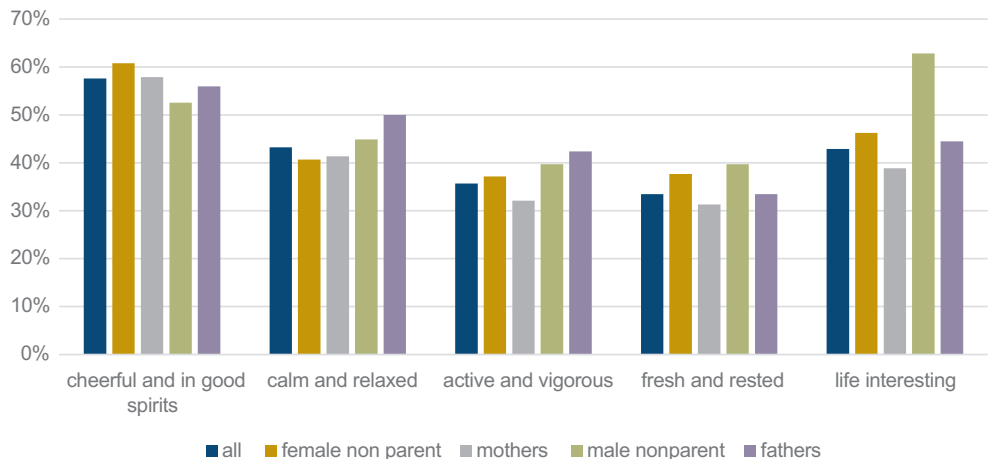


Figure 16. Proportion of employees reporting the following feelings more than half the time in the past month (during lockdown) (including most/all the time) by gender/parent status (%)



5 WORK CULTURE BEFORE AND DURING LOCKDOWN

The survey also examined respondents' perceptions of work cultures and flexibility stigma – i.e. having negative perceptions of those working flexibly or believing that flexible working can lead to negative career outcomes (Chung, 2018). Many of those who worked from home during the COVID-19 lockdown believed that their managers had been supportive of working from home prior to lockdown (50%) but this increased dramatically during the lockdown with 90% saying their managers were supportive of home-working (Figure 17). This increase has been seen across all groups in our data (Figure 18), with the largest increase coming from mothers who did not feel that there was much management support prior to the lockdown. In comparison, those who did not work from home during the lockdown, possibly due to the fact that they worked in specific sectors where homeworking was not possible, they were much less likely to say that managers were supportive both prior (20%) and during (38%) the lockdown. However, even within these groups of employees we can see that there has been a considerable change in perceived management support

for working from home. Similarly, we can see that there has been a slight reduction in employees' perception that working from home negatively impacts colleagues (15% to 13%), and that it can lead to negative career outcomes (16% to 10%) among those who worked from home during the lockdown. This is not necessarily the case for those who did not work from home (19% to 22% increase for negative impact on colleagues and 15% to 13% for negative impact on career). One thing to note is that for both groups even prior to the COVID-19 lockdown we can see that respondents did not hold stigmatised perceptions against flexible employees compared to previously gathered data, where up to 1/3rd of employees in the UK held these beliefs (Chung, 2018). This may be because we are asking for retrospective information about how respondents thought of these issues before the lockdown while we as a society had been experiencing home working on a mass scale for the past two-three months. This experience may have already shaped people's beliefs on flexibility stigma, changing what they remember as their thoughts were prior to the lockdown. Another positive change is that employees are

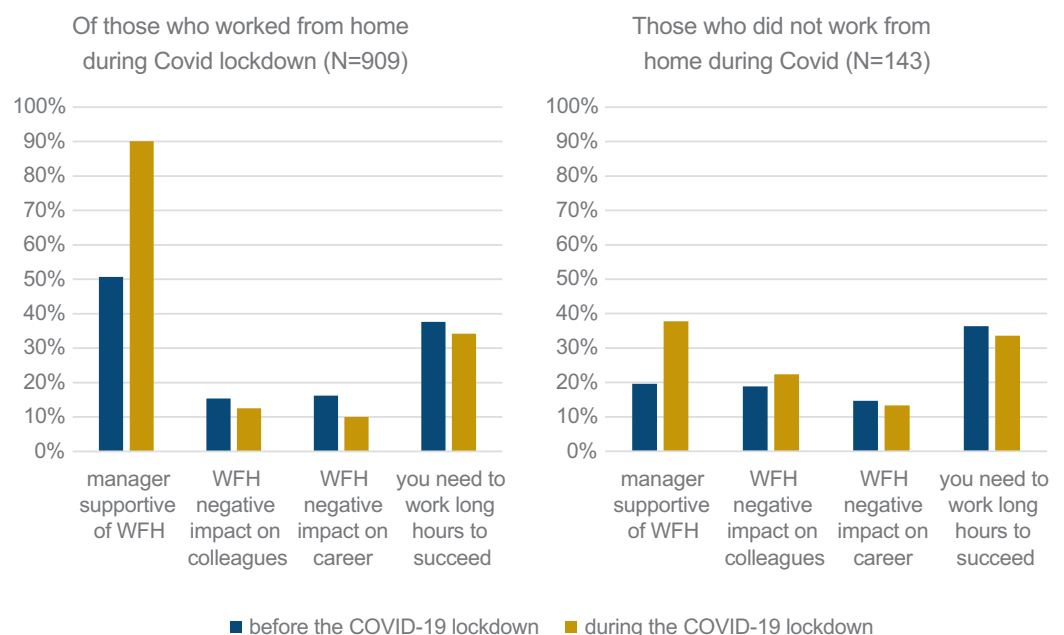


Figure 17. The perception of management support and impact of working from before and during the COVID-19 lockdown (%)

5 WORK CULTURE BEFORE AND DURING LOCKDOWN (CONTINUED)

less likely to say that their work environments have a long hour work culture (38% to 34% among those who worked from home and 37% to 34% among those who did not). Although this is not a big change it is moving in a positive direction.

Types of managerial support towards work-life balance issues before and during the COVID-19 lockdown are detailed in Figure 19. While most respondents rated the different types of managerial support highly before and during the lockdown, for the statement “My manager really cared/ cares about the effects that work demands have on my personal and family life” there was an

increase from 66% before the lockdown to 73% since the lockdown saying they agree or strongly agree with the statement. This suggests that managers have become more aware of and more understanding of employees’ responsibilities outside the workplace since the COVID-19 lockdown and mass homeworking.

Figure 20 explores respondents’ experiences of the tools provided by organisations for home working before and during the COVID-19 lockdown. There was an increase in respondents agreeing that their organisation supplied the appropriate tools for working from home (from 41.1% to 62.2%) and that their organisations provided effective

Figure 18. Perceived management support for working from home before and during the COVID-19 lockdown by gender/parental status (%)

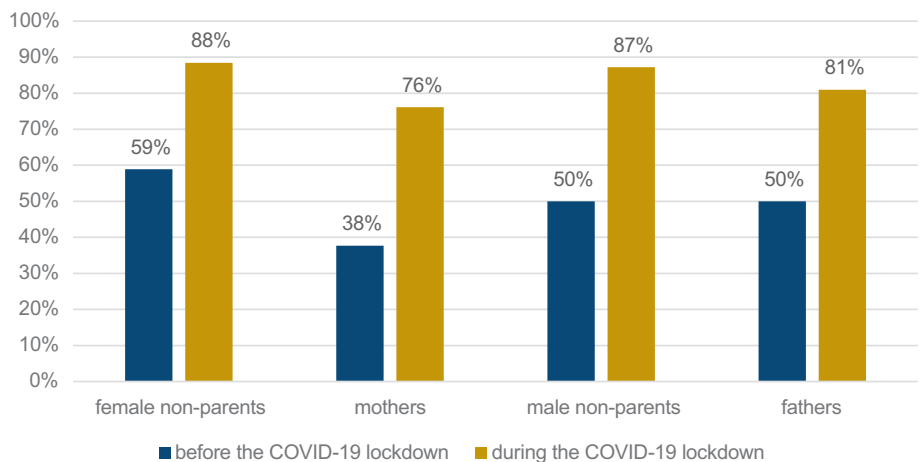
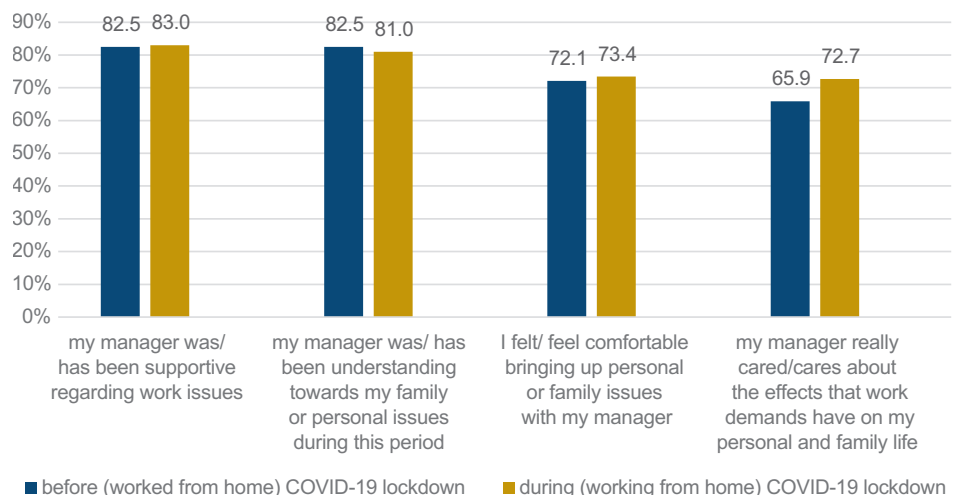


Figure 19. Managerial support for those working from home before and those working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown (%)



support for tools used when working from home (from 46.5% to 64.6%).

One clear change in perceptions has been around whether working from home leads to negative career outcomes (Figure 21). We can see that women (both mothers and non-mothers) were more likely to believe that working from home can lead to negative career outcomes prior to lockdown. This fear, however, has reduced significantly for women during the lockdown. What is more, as shown in Figure 18, we also see that mothers were the group who felt least supported by managers when it comes to working from home before the COVID-19 lockdown (only 38% felt this was the case

compared to more than half for all other groups), but this has risen significantly (to 76% feeling supported) although still lower than any other comparison groups. This may be due to the fact that employers are less likely to trust mothers to work when working from home due to an assumption that mothers will privilege housework and childcare above paid work (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2018; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Munsch, 2016). There may have been an improvement in this area during the COVID-19 lockdown because home-working was a necessity in many cases, but what the data shows us is that this lack of trust may not have been completely alleviated.

Figure 20. The proportion amongst those working from home agreeing or strongly agreeing to statements involving tools (%)

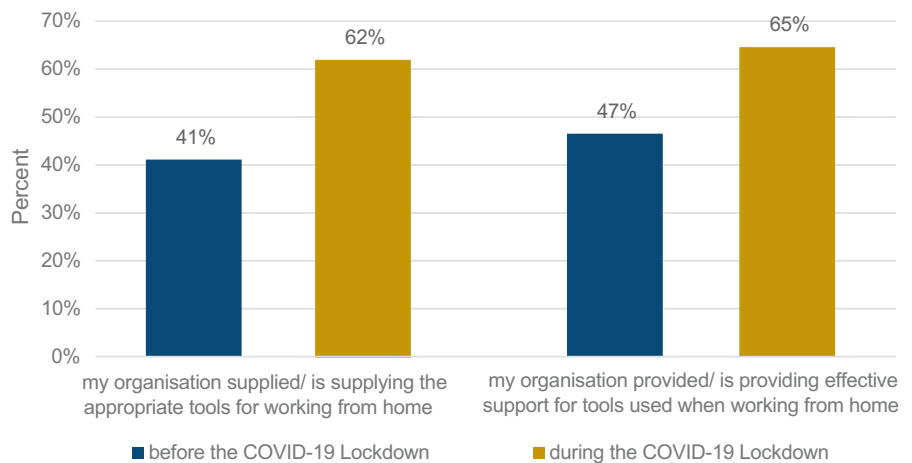
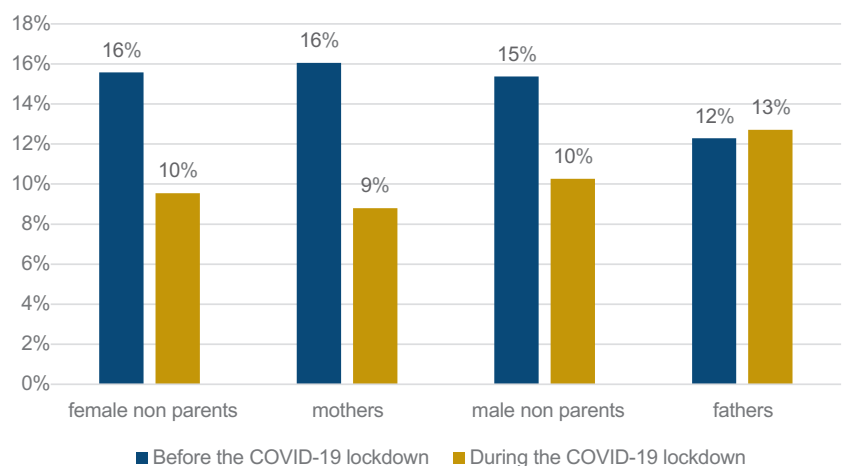


Figure 21. The proportion of employees across different gender/parental statuses agreeing to the statement “Working from home leads to negative career outcomes” before and during the COVID-19 lockdown (%)



6 FUTURE PREFERENCES/ATTITUDES

Approximately 2/3rds of all respondents who were not parents, both male and female, and just over half of all parents in our survey (52% for both mothers and fathers) believe that they will be working from home after the COVID-19 lockdown has ended. Again, given that less than 1/3rd of our respondents did so prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, this is a remarkable increase.

When asked why they would be working from home (Figure 22), the number one item chosen by both parents and non-parents was to reduce commuting time with more than 70% of all respondents choosing this option. Given that the average commuting time for UK employees is an hour a day³, with those in London spending on average 84 minutes a day on commuting⁴ every day,

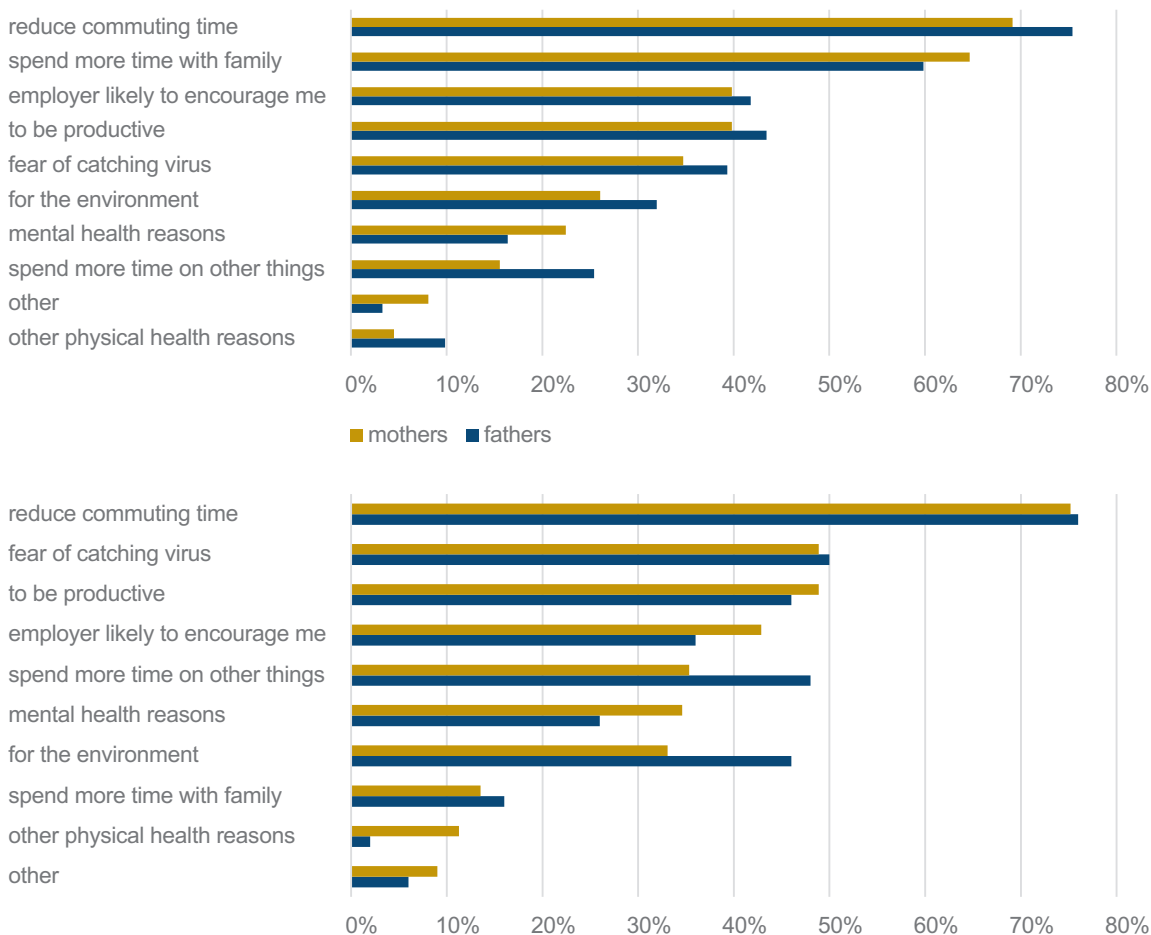


Figure 22. Top reasons why employees would like to/think they will work from home after the COVID-19 lockdown has ended by gender/parental status (% of workers who chose this option)

3 TUC report based on ONS data for 2018: www.tuc.org.uk/news/annual-commuting-time-21-hours-compared-decade-ago-finds-tuc

4 [www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/Media/Press-Releases/2019-press-releases/lloyds-bank/british-workers-spend-492-days-of-their-lives-travelling-into-work/#:~:text=With%20an%20average%20daily%20commute,or%20Wales%20\(52%20minutes\)](http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/Media/Press-Releases/2019-press-releases/lloyds-bank/british-workers-spend-492-days-of-their-lives-travelling-into-work/#:~:text=With%20an%20average%20daily%20commute,or%20Wales%20(52%20minutes))

being able to work from home can provide employees with more time for work, family life or other activities outside of work. Long commuting times have been found to contribute to the gender pay gap (Joyce and Keiller, 2018) – i.e. women move jobs to work places that pay less yet are closer by after childbirth. Therefore, an increase in employees working from home could help reduce the gender gap of wages. Furthermore, 65% of mothers and 60% of fathers chose being able to spend more time with family as a key reason for home-working in the future. A large proportion of employees said they would like to work from home to be more productive (40% for mothers, 43% of fathers, 49% of women without children, 46% of men without children) as well as noting that it is likely that their employers will encourage them in the future or that they would do it because of fear of catching the virus.

A remarkable 76% of all mothers and 73% of fathers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed when asked whether they would like to work flexibly to spend more time with children (Figure 23). Even more interestingly 64% of fathers and 59% of mothers also noted that they would like to reduce their working hours to spend more time with family. The fact that mothers are already more likely to work part-time for childcare reasons (Chung and Van der Horst, 2018b) explains why we see fewer women respond that they would like to reduce their hours. Those who have worked from home during the COVID-19 lockdown period were most likely to say they would like to work flexibly and reduce hours to spend time with family in the future. Again, there are signs that having worked from home, employees have enjoyed the opportunity to spend more time with their children as well as their partners, which has increased the demand to shift priorities for parents to want to have a better work-life

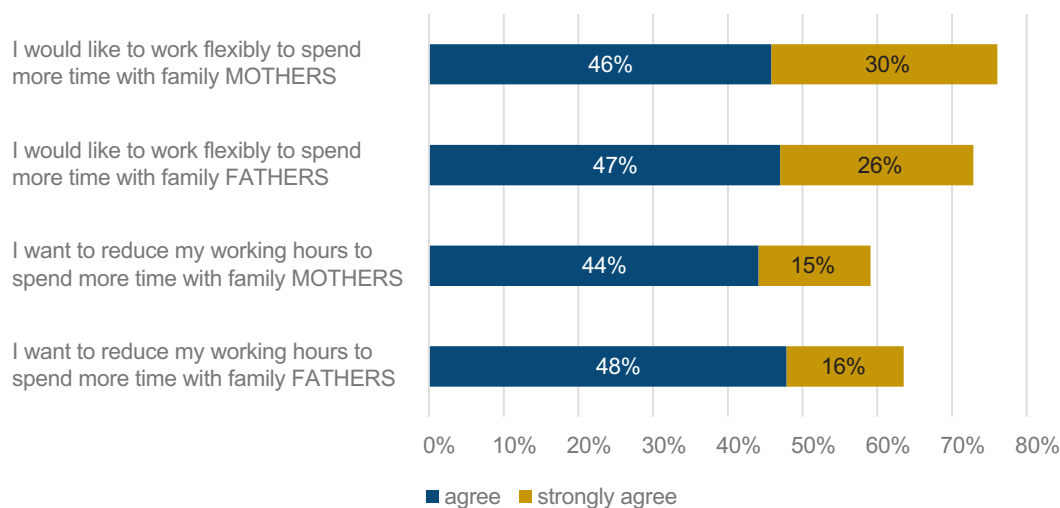



Figure 23. Proportion of mothers and fathers who (strongly) agree that they would like to work flexibly or reduce their working hours to spend more time with family in the future (%)

6 FUTURE PREFERENCES/ATTITUDES (CONTINUED)

balance through flexible working and reduction of working hours. This shows a clear need to help support parents, especially fathers, to ensure their demands for a better work-life balance are met through better access to flexible working and working hours reduction without fear of repercussion on their careers (see also, Working Families, 2017).

What is more, more than ¾ of respondents also said they would like their partners to work flexibly in the future (Figure 24). 12% would like their partners to work from home, 23% flexitime, while 40% said they would like their partners to have both flexitime and the ability to work from home in the future. Especially for mothers, fathers' increased capacity to take on more housework and care roles may be a factor driving these results. Overall, we see a clear sign for a change in attitudes and preferences around flexible working.

3/4 of all parents say they would like to work flexibly in the future to spend more time with children



Almost 2/3rds of all parents say they would like to reduce their working hours to spend more time with children.

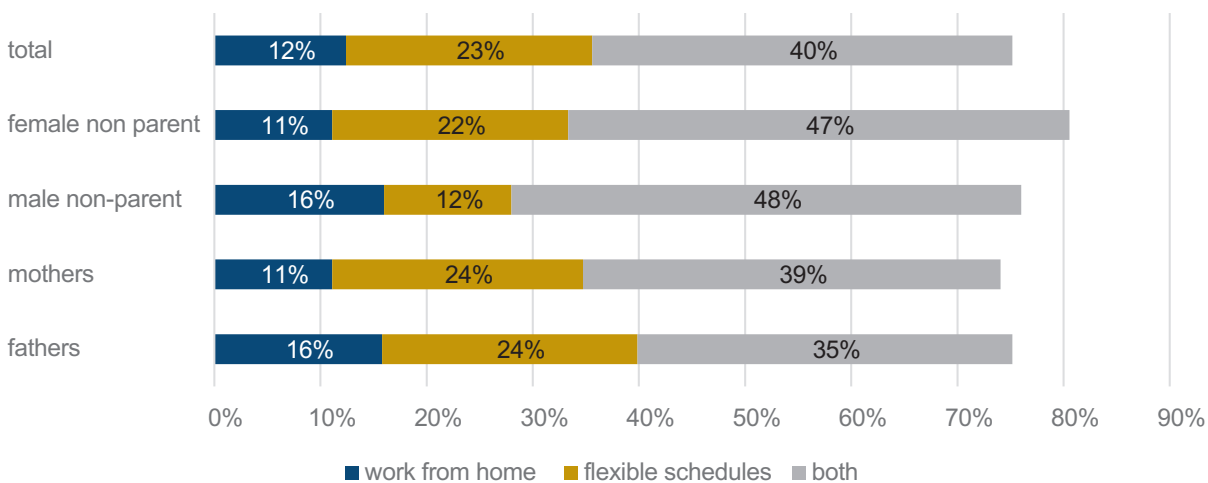


Figure 24. Proportion of employees who would like their partners to work flexibly in the future by gender/parental status (%)





7 CONCLUSION

In summary, one of the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown has been a nationwide move towards working from home across the economy, including sectors that had not previously embraced home working. This data suggests that individual employees' predominantly positive experiences of home working during this period have influenced their attitudes and preferences towards flexible working and the division of housework/care for the future. What is more, we see evidence to show that, as the number of employees who work from home rises, it is likely that there will be a decline in stigma around flexible working and reduced concern about flexible working negatively affecting career outcomes.

The research also suggests that there will continue to be a proportion of employees who do not want to work from home. The following factors were key: a desire amongst many workers for more in person collegial interaction, lack of equipment or space to carry out work, and wanting to have clearer boundaries between work and home life. This suggests that in the future managers need to have open discussions with employees to understand what working arrangements would be the best to allow them to effectively balance work and home commitments, including being clear about key aims and goals that need to be met and what support the organisation can offer. This open dialogue between line managers and employees about what can work in the interests of all is crucial to enable a shift away from the organisational culture of presenteeism and long hours in the office as a sign of commitment and productivity, to a culture where employees are given more freedom over when and where to work as long as key aims and goals are met.

The research also highlights that many women have been undertaking the double/ triple shifts of work/ care/ home-schooling throughout the COVID-19 lockdown and limiting their capacity to work. Many are suffering from feelings of conflict and stress, especially after four

months of school closures. We may see a rise in women exiting the labour market, in the near future, as well as an increasing number of women unable to compete with their peers without children or with men in the workplace due to the additional burdens they have experienced. There needs to be increase in support, including more legal protection of workers with care responsibilities, more protection for flexible workers (see also, Chung, 2018), encouraging more involvement from fathers, and providing ample resources for schools and other care facilities ensuring that they are able to open safely. Without purposeful and targeted approaches to support women/mothers, we may see an increase in the gender gap in labour market outcomes/pay.

Our research also suggests that increasing fathers' access to flexible working may help support couples to more equally share housework/care responsibilities in the future beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. This can help support mothers' labour market participation (Langner, 2018; Chung and Van der Horst, 2018b). However, it is clear that fathers are still concerned about the potential negative consequences flexible working may have for their careers. If any real culture change is to take place regarding social norms around care in the UK, managers will need to support fathers more to ensure they have the opportunity to get more involved in caring and unpaid work in the home, such as through well paid ear-marked parental leave for fathers, and policy makers will need to support stronger rights to flexible working for all employees, without fear of discrimination. Finally, we also see a future preference of parents to reduce working hours to spend more time with children and family. As recent news reports have mentioned, the majority of UK workers are in favour of shorter working weeks/4-day weeks⁵. Such support seems to also be visible in our data, and policy makers and employers are encouraged to think of ways to support such preferences in the future.

5 www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-four-day-week-poll-rishi-sunak-corbyn-a9595201.html

8 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for organisations/managers

- 1 Improve communication of flexible working policies to all employees and ensure that the benefits of using flexible working policies are included. Consider including champions⁶ that have used the policies, including fathers and those at senior levels within the organisation, so as to overcome concerns on how policy take up may negatively impact careers.
- 2 Actively encourage worker-managers to have frank discussions around work-family issues and encourage workers, especially fathers, to request flexible working to allow them to productively fulfil their roles as employee and parent/family member.
- 3 Think of new ways to ensure key performance outcomes are met by rethinking work productivity and effectiveness as a team to ensure those working flexibly are not disadvantaged.
- 4 Explore with workers a variety of ways to help change cultural attitudes around productivity, presenteeism, flexible working, gender and caring. For example, reverse mentoring programme by Millennials with board and Senior Management Team (SMT) members can help improve intergenerational understanding.
- 5 Think about how to better support employees working from home and other types of flexible working and the potential unintended consequences in terms of wellbeing such as overworking, blurring of boundaries, stress, loneliness, and burnout.
- 6 Ensure appropriate training is available for HR and line managers around flexible working policies and highlight the importance of flexible working as a performance enhancing tool.
- 7 Advertise all positions (if possible) as open to flexible working as a strategy for improving employee attraction and inclusion.
- 8 Encourage take up of caring leave (Paternity, Shared Parental, Parental Leave) and flexible working including part-time work and other policies upon return to ensure active engagements of fathers in care/household roles.
- 9 Help support fathers to take Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and/ or extended Paternity Leave (PL; i.e., beyond two weeks PL) by helping them overcome the financial barriers. Consider enhancing SPL and/ or enhance and/ or extend Paternity Leave to align with the Maternity Leave offering within the organisation. In doing this, the organisation would help encourage gender equality in the home which is also likely to lead to improved gender equality in the workplace.
- 10 Engage with guidance from the Government Equalities Office (GEO) on the subject of Gender Pay Gap (GPG) reporting to help develop an action plan to include the organisation's GPG reporting on how to tackle any existing GPG.

6 The Equal Parenting Project's Fathers in the Workplace Toolkit is a free resource which can help organisations to better support fathers in the workplace and gives specific guidance on how to identify and promote fatherhood champions, how to effectively communicate available policies to fathers and how to support fathers returning to work. The toolkit can be found here: <https://more.bham.ac.uk/fathersintheworkplace/>

Policy recommendations for policy makers

- 1 Provide stronger rights for flexible working, making it a day one entitlement for all workers irrespective of their employment duration.
- 2 Encourage the assumption that all jobs will be available as flexible working by default with the exception of those jobs that provide publicly transparent (Gender Pay Reporting) and legitimate reasons.
- 3 Provide better support and protection against discrimination for workers working flexibly to ensure workers working flexibly or those requesting to work flexibly to not face negative career outcomes, especially during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4 More support should be given to schools and other child care facilities to ensure that they are able to open safely.
- 5 Develop a simple return to work module to support employees on their transition back to the workplace (not at home) post the COVID-19 lockdown (recognising that some may not be returning for some months). Within this module emphasise the key business benefits of flexible working.
- 6 Consider introducing longer (more than the statutory 2 weeks) ear-marked well-paid parental leave for fathers to help change the gender norms on whose responsibility it is to care for children, and to meet the demands of fathers who would like to take on a larger role in care/housework.
- 7 Consider mandatory publishing within gender pay gap reporting for organisations with 250 employees or more to outline workers' rights to flexible working – e.g. providing it as a day one right, having all jobs advertised as flexible, or proportion of jobs currently done flexibly, and other family-friendly policies available (e.g. shared parental leave, occupational pay). This would also help organisations to understand where they stand compared to competition and encourage change to improve talent retention and recruitment. By doing this, the flexible working policies would be easily accessible to employees and potential employees for the future so they can make informed choices without experiencing stigma or unconscious bias.
- 8 Consider developing a return to work package for new parents within a gender equality toolkit that outlines all the legal entitlements new parents would be entitled to, including flexible working and parental leave etc. This toolkit should be accessible and easy to use for organisations that do not have their own HR department.
- 9 Develop and launch a campaign to promote flexible working (particularly to fathers) to detail the benefits of flexible working and to help address the perceived barriers and consequences of using flexible working.
- 10 Look at ways to support organisations to deal with wellbeing and mental health issues caused by the COVID-19 lockdown and long-term homeworking.
- 11 A thorough gender analysis of the economic and labour market impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is needed with further resources targeted to support women's labour market participation including providing targeted funding for certain sectors in the economy.
- 12 Investigate what policies and legal changes are needed to growing demand for a shorter working/4-day week in the future.

METHODOLOGY/ABOUT THE PROJECT

Working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown is a joint project by Dr Heejung Chung based at the University of Kent, and Dr Sarah Forbes and Dr Holly Birkett based at the University of Birmingham. The project has gone through ethics review at the University of Kent. This research aims to understand how this pandemic, the lockdown and working from home have influenced a range of work-life issues and preferences and attitudes on flexible working for employees and managers in the UK.

The employee survey asks employees on their experiences of working from home, division of labour, impact of working from home on attitudes towards and preferences for flexible working in the future. The data was collected between the 22nd of May and 15th of June of 2020. The goal is to decipher whether people still maintain their preferences from previous waves with an introduction of a new norm in working realities of employees, or whether work patterns go back to pre-COVID-19 periods. We also ran an employer survey (during July-early August of 2020) (for more info: <http://wafproject.org/wfhemployers/>) which focuses on how managers have managed staff during the COVID-19 lockdown, working patterns, levels of trust and changing attitudes to homeworking across the organisation since the COVID-19 lockdown.

This report is based on the employee survey, restricted to those who are currently residing in the UK, over the age of 18, and is in dependent employment. A combination of different sampling procedures was used to gain access to a total of 1,160 completed survey respondents – with a heavier emphasis on cohabiting couples with children, which was our main target population. We used the online survey panel Prolific academic to gain access to 560 respondents mostly focusing on employees who currently live with a significant other, and lives with a child under the age of 18. The rest of the responses was gathered through circulating the links to the survey through various channels; we used social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and targeted partner organisations that distributed the survey through their internal links/mailling list. The survey has an over-

representation of responses from one institution in the Higher Education sector and one multi-site company in the banking industry. Due to this sampling procedure, although we have insightful data from a large number of respondents, we cannot claim that the data represents the general population of the UK. As we can see from the survey respondent profile (www.wafproject.org/covidwfh), we have an over representation of women, with higher education, and those cohabitating with children: for example, of our total sample in our analysis there were 648 mothers, 236 fathers, 199 women who did not live with a child under 18, and only 78 men who did not live with a child under the age of 18, which may also shape the results. However, in most of our analysis we have tried to compare the results between those with and without children, between men and women, which helps overcome some of these limitations. Furthermore, we do not aim any claims to represent the general population of the UK. Having said this, it does provide us with a good idea of the behaviours and attitudes of especially parents within the UK.

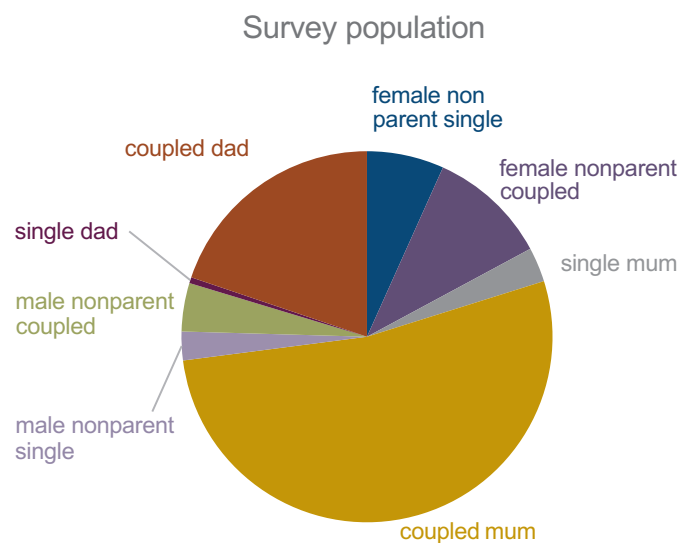


Figure 25. Profile of respondents in the data

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Short introduction of the team

The Working from Home (WFH) COVID -19 project is a collaborative project undertaken between the Work Autonomy, Flexibility and Work Life Balance Project at the University of Kent and the Equal Parenting Project at the University of Birmingham. The WFH Project is made up of two distinct but complementary packages of work, one covering employees experiences of homeworking during lockdown (<http://wafproject.org/Covidwfh/>) and one covering employers and managers experiences of homeworking during lockdown and beyond (for more information on this work package see <http://wafproject.org/wfhemployers/>). Dr Heejung Chung from the University of Kent is leading the Employee package and Dr Sarah Forbes from the University of Birmingham is leading the Employer package on this project.

The research team for the Employee package of work and authors of this report include:

Dr Heejung Chung is a Reader in Sociology and Social Policy, PI of the Work Autonomy Flexibility and Work Life Balance Project at the University of Kent. Dr Chung's research interests are broadly around issues concerning cross-national comparative analysis of welfare states and their labour markets. Dr Chung is currently researching how flexible working impacts individual's work-life balance and gender equality, and the role of contexts in moderating that relationship. Heejung worked extensively with governments and stakeholders across the world, including the Netherlands, South Korea, Italy, Estonia and the European Union level. She has worked with UK government bodies such as the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Government Equalities office and she sits on multiple advisory boards including 2020 Maternity and Paternity Rights survey, 2020 Employee Rights Survey, and the Shared Parental Leave review, offering expert advice on flexible working, family-friendly policies, and gender equality issues in the UK. For more info see: www.heejungchung.com

Hyojin Seo is a Research Assistant of this project and a PhD Student at the University of Kent. Hyojin's research focuses on cross-national comparative analysis of gender segregation within the labour market and the role of family policy in gender segregation within Europe and East Asia. Hyojin has extensive experience of working on Government and HE research projects in the UK and South Korea.

Dr Sarah Forbes is the Co-Director of the Equal Parenting Project, member of the Responsible Marketing Group and Associate of the Work Inclusivity Research Centre and Centre for Responsible Business at the University of Birmingham. Sarah's research focuses on encouraging voluntary behavioural change and her methodology research has received recognition with prizes awarded by Harvard University and the Academy of Marketing. She is a member of the Government Equalities Office WAGE research programme and has actively advised the government review of SPL as well as the measures included in the 2020 Maternity and Paternity Rights survey. Sarah, as Co-director of the Equal Parenting Project, was also involved in the development and launch of the Fathers in the Workplace Toolkit which aims to help organisations better support fathers in the workplace.

Dr Holly Birkett is the Co-Director of the Equal Parenting Project and Co-Director of the Work Inclusivity Research Centre, at the University of Birmingham. Holly has been undertaking research in the field of career transitions all her academic career and research on gender equality and parenting in the workplace since 2017. She has recently been involved in a mixed methods study of Shared Parental Leave for the Equal Parenting Project, the results of which have been used by government departments and industry partners through her role as a special academic advisor on the government review of SPL, the Business in the community Equal Parenting Project and the Advisory group for the 2020 Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey. She was also involved in developing and launching the Fathers in the Workplace Toolkit, which has been designed by the Equal Parenting Project to help organisations better support fathers in the workplace.

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