

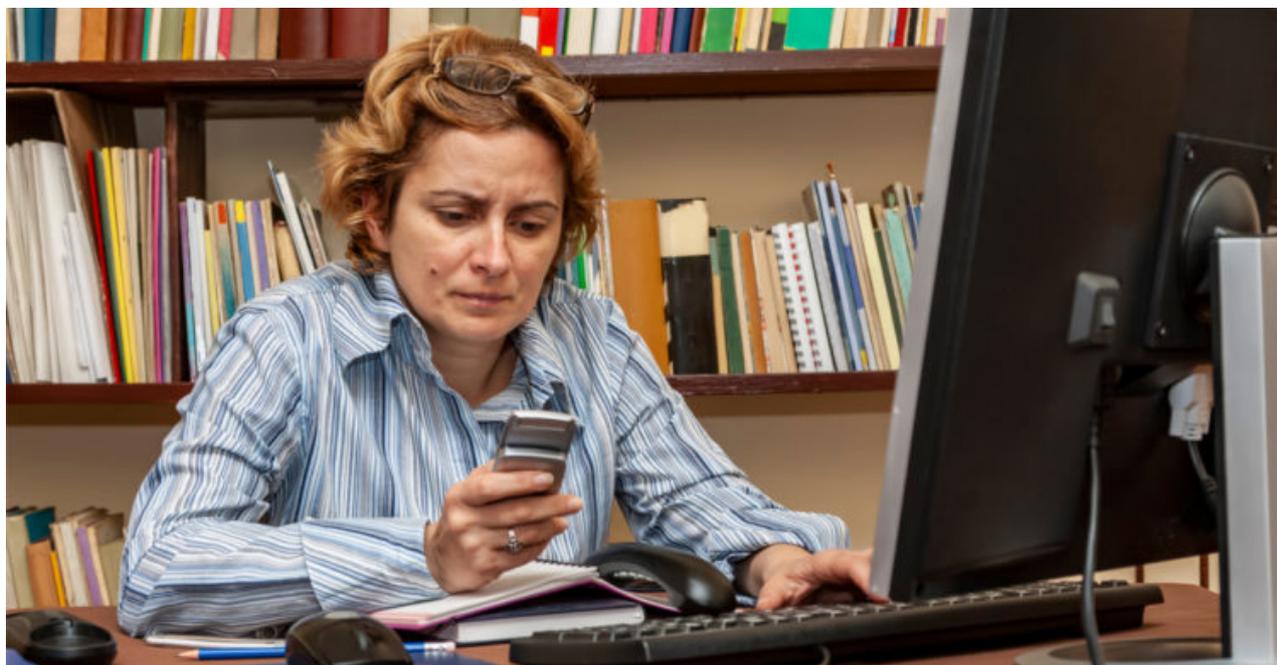
The home as office—what’s gender got to do with it?

SE socialeurope.eu/the-home-as-office-whats-gender-got-to-do-with-it

Kalina Arabadjieva and Paula Franklin

March 30, 2022

The rise of home-based telework should finally dispel the notion that only work in the public sphere is, really, ‘work’.



Home, sweet home?—teleworking carries psychosocial risks (Radu Razvan / shutterstock.com)

The division of social space into the private sphere of the home and the public domain is a legacy of the industrial revolution with many enduring ramifications for gender inequality. Central has been the division of labour, in which home is for the unpaid, invisible and undervalued work of women, while the public world is for work with remuneration, traditionally conducted by the male ‘breadwinner’.

For women, working from home has often been the only feasible way to combine unpaid work—such as childcare—with paid employment. Employers then ‘allow’ women to work from home, enduring worse terms and conditions, less autonomy and a poor working environment.

Before the pandemic, around 57 per cent of home-based ‘teleworkers’ were women. During it, 41 per cent of women (and 37 per cent of men) across the European Union started working from home. Women will likely seize new opportunities to work from home after the pandemic, too: the proportion of women in occupations amenable to telework is estimated to be higher than for men (45 and 30 per cent respectively).

Home-based teleworkers could however continue to suffer disadvantages arising from the perception that only work performed in the public sphere *is* work and from insufficient labour protection. The distinction between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ domains and paid and

unpaid work has traditionally marked the boundaries of labour law and regulation. Unpaid domestic labour falls beyond the scope of labour protection and even paid work performed in the home has been subject to much less rigorous state intervention.

Telework challenges

The surge of home-based telework during the pandemic has highlighted many associated challenges. In addition to being less protected in the 'private' space, home-based teleworkers are at risk of being sidelined at their workplace, with reduced professional visibility and career prospects and less access to information and personal and professional support.

And women are likely to be affected disproportionately. Telework can exacerbate work-life conflicts more severely for those workers with a higher 'double burden' of paid employment and unpaid care responsibilities, most of whom are women.

With its potential for isolation, lack of social support and online harassment and violence—again mostly targeted at women—telework is rife with psychosocial risks (PSR) with direct and cumulative impacts on the health of workers. As the sources of these risks, such as high workloads or remote surveillance, lie beyond the control of the individual concerned, preventive measures must entail collective action.

This includes changes in the physical, social and legal landscape. Development and enforcement of health and safety provisions, for example, is crucial. Yet the presumed binary divide between public and private space has made it difficult hitherto to argue for legislation on subjects that appear to be in the 'private' realm.

Even with the challenges remote work brings, people do want to do telework. If organised well, it offers possibilities for a better work-life balance, particularly for those (whatever their gender) with caring responsibilities.

As workplace and employer control increasingly spill into the home, societal assumptions that work performed in the physical space of the home is subordinate—or not 'real work'—have clearly become untenable. Regulation is necessary to protect home-based workers' wellbeing, their working conditions and, indeed, their privacy and ability to separate work from genuinely private life. This could have positive, transformative effects not only on how home-based (tele)workers are perceived at work and protected in law but on how unpaid domestic labour is regarded too.

Positive opportunities

Home-based telework can indeed challenge the gender norms and relations embedded in an outdated division of social space. But strong policies and measures are required to seize the positive opportunities it presents. A 'right to disconnect'—which has attracted attention at the EU level—is only one essential action.

Legal obligations on employers are necessary to prevent risks to physical and mental health for home-based teleworkers, accompanied by increased resources for enforcement. Measures will be needed to guarantee worker autonomy, including over working space and time, to ensure that telework does not primarily benefit employers—and that home-based teleworkers are not disadvantaged in terms of conditions, career opportunities and support. Collective agreements play a key role in developing solutions adapted to specific sectors and workplaces.

‘Gender mainstreaming’ in the regulation of telework is essential, including in relevant framework agreements. A gender-transformative approach that values this mode of working should also go hand-in-hand with equal involvement in care by men, strong family-friendly policies and investment in childcare.

This piece was written as part of the ‘Future of Remote Work’ project at the European Trade Union Institute, with an edited volume due in early 2023



Kalina Arabadjieva

Kalina Arabadjieva is a researcher at the European Trade Union Institute, with a PhD in labour law. She is working on gender equality and the just transition.



Paula Franklin

Paula Franklin is a senior researcher on occupational safety and health and working conditions at the European Trade Union Institute.