



# LUND UNIVERSITY

**‘Always there’ culture**

*“Home office and the struggle of Mexican women for work/life balance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic”*

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## **Abstract**

Working Mexican mothers have been experiencing drastic changes in their way of life due to the forced adaptation of their office work into a 'Home office' mode. The reason of this sudden change was brought by the Covid-19 pandemic which prompted governments and companies to enforce lockdowns and social distancing as measures to prevent the contagion. This pushed working women to juggle work and home simultaneously what brought a series of unforeseen challenges when trying to achieve a balance in their lives. The aim of this study is to examine how the combination of remote work through new communication technologies, family life and identities impact the work/life balance of Mexican working mothers during the pandemic.

Based on the literature about Telework, media and communication, work / life balance and various gender studies, a qualitative interview was conducted with 8 Mexican working mothers in order to better understand the issue from their experience and standpoint, therefore a phenomenological perspective was employed. The analysis showed that one of the main causes for work related anxiety and stress in working women is the 'always there' culture (permanent connectivity) because it lets work interfere with other areas of private life and also because it was shown to cause disparities between workers by assigning most of the work to those who are 'always there'.

In addition, the participants demonstrated an increase in emotional work in the workplace and in private life. In the work sphere, it was found that women find it more difficult to read the emotions of others through mediated communication and therefore they must do extra emotional work to make more accurate interpretations when interacting with others. In the sphere of private life, women also showed an increase in emotional work by acting as a support network and being 'always there' for family, friends and colleagues with the aid of new communication technologies.

The results indicate that the 'always there' culture does have an impact in the work/life balance of Mexican working mothers. Based on the findings, companies and individuals should make a joint effort to mitigate the effects of permanent connectivity in order to prevent work from interfering with other aspects of family life, thus helping the WLB of working women.

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## **1. Introduction**

The year 2020 brought with it many changes in the social and political arena worldwide. Events such as The Australian bush fires, the outrage protests, the Beirut explosions, the stock market crash, the Brexit and many more (New York Post 2020) shaped our attitudes towards the economic system, our stances about social change and our climate conditions. However, nothing brought more radical changes than the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus which was arguably the most important event that shaped the course of this year resulting in a pandemic hence thousands of deaths and putting millions at risk. For this reason, governments around the world took extreme measures to face the health contingency that threatened the countries with unprecedented strategies: lockdowns and social distancing.

Due to these strategies people have been confined to stay at home and go out only when it is absolutely essential and related to cover basic needs. Under these circumstances, many jobs deemed 'unessential' were prompted to close and or reduce operations, forcing companies to 'reinvent themselves' to stay afloat. Commercial establishments and Institutions alike have seen a great opportunity in new communication technologies which allow them to create alternative strategies to survive such as the 'Home office'. This strategy consists of giving continuity to work related activities and obligations from home through a mediated communication.

Home office or Telework is not a very novel phenomenon since it has been used in recent years by entrepreneurs and companies to cut the costs that pricey rent entails in expensive cities. This work modality can be seen as 'attractive' due to certain positive aspects such as the convenience of working from a comfortable space at home, not having to commute, cutting costs, schedule flexibility and more (Brownson, 2004 p 1). Nevertheless, working from home can also bring some challenges in many aspects of the everyday life, not only presents the struggle of keeping discipline and staying engaged with work assignments but it might also impact the ability of individuals to juggle with social life, family and work in a proper manner and keeping a balance in their lives. The introduction of mediated work in the private space presupposes a reorganization of family dynamics, habits and time management that can affect individuals in many ways. Moores (2012) is of the idea that the use of electronic media transforms social environments which causes an impact on the way people act.

Additionally these changes do not impact individuals equally since the disposal of time depends on their identity, social roles, gender and cultural environment. Scanell mentions that our use of time is closely linked to many intrinsic and extrinsic cultural and social factors as well as individual decision making (Scanell, 2014 p 45). For these reasons some groups within the population may be more affected than others. This could be the case for pink and blue collar employees who can be more vulnerable than white collar workers. Traditionally white collar employees are conformed by people in managerial positions, business owners and professional or semi-professional staff (Gibson and Papa, 2000; Hu and Kaplan, 2010) who are thought to be fairly more privileged than pink or blue collars since their salaries are higher and prestigious (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016 p 536). Furthermore, manual labor (blue collar) and care-oriented/sales (pink collar) labor can hardly transition to remote work due to the nature of their activity.

In the case of Latin American countries such as Mexico, the workload between genders can present inequalities, especially when female roles tend to be more traditional in comparison to other countries in the West. Married women and particularly mothers are not only entrusted to raise children but they also play a very important role in maintaining and providing monetary support for their households. According to Migueles (2018), it is very important to note that in Mexico the number of mothers who are the main breadwinners or who contribute significantly to the family economy has increased in recent years. “In Mexico there are 15 million 785 thousand working mothers, who represent 73% of the economically active female population in the country, according to data from the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE) in the fourth quarter of 2018” (El Universal 2019).

The inspiration for this case study was based in my own experience of dealing with the emotional ups and downs of friends, family and former colleagues during the lock downs. Throughout these times I was able to observe how these women were in a state of constant anxiety and dissatisfaction. Often they would pour their feelings on social media as a way to cope and in many occasions I found myself being the shoulder to cry on when I was contacted to hear their problems. The root of their despair was largely caused by the inability to control the two most important aspects of their lives: work and the private life. This problem is not exclusive to my network of acquaintances since it is enough to go around in the web and listen to the

testimonies of other people to realize that it is not an isolated issue, rather it is a social phenomenon that occurs in other parts of the world as well.

This research intended to obtain first-hand accounts of the experiences of Mexican mothers who were or are working from home through ICT's (Information and Communication technologies). The aim of this study is to examine how the combination of the Home office and family life can impact their work/life balance during the pandemic. Moreover this study seeks to get an understanding of this phenomenon and contribute to the existing body of research in aims to provide data that could potentially help individuals and institutions to improve the wellbeing of women and their families by creating better work/home conditions.

Research questions:

Three research questions were formulated for this study:

RQ1: What are the challenges that working mothers face to obtain a work/life balance when doing Home office?

RQ2: How were paid labor and the occupational identity carried out remotely through mediated practices?

RQ3: How were domestic work and women's multiple identities in the private sphere performed during lockdowns?

The first question aimed to learn not exclusively about family and work dynamics but also how the spatial and temporal aspects of the everyday life were reorganized. The second question attempted to address how the work was carried out through ICT's in addition to their performance as professional workers. Lastly, the third question sought to understand how women combined domestic chores with their roles as household managers as well as main caregivers and providers of emotional support during the crisis.

Before moving on to the next chapters, it is important to mention the key concepts of the theoretical framework, as they were used as a standpoint for the theories employed. These are: phenomenology, gender and New Communication Technologies. This work draws from Heidegger's phenomenology that centers on being and temporality. His perspective rivet on the

relationship of human beings as actors and their “lifeworld”, that is, the idea that the reality of each individual is influenced by time and the world they live in. Furthermore, since this study is based on the experiences of women, it was relevant to use a gender outlook. The intent was to elucidate how the behaviors, norms and roles associated with a female identity are related to the domestic and work environment of the participants. Lastly, a new communication technologies viewpoint was pertinent as they took a central role in people’s lives during the lockdowns. ICT’s provided people with extended communication capabilities that are not bound by time and space. These capabilities became essential to keep in touch with the outside world and to continue with the daily tasks amidst the pandemic.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 The role of the media and new communication technologies during Covid-19 and their repercussions on the WLB of working mothers.**

Communication is an essential part of human life. Scholars such as Couldry and Hepp (2017) are of the idea that communication is necessary for the “social world” to exist, since it is the conduit through which the interactions and interrelations that create the social world take place. They believe that the social world or “empirical world” in which we live is not only grounded in ideas but in practice, i.e. we articulate the reality by our everyday actions. They explain that communication as a “meaning- making practice” is the key element of how the social world is created as meaningful, when the media and its infrastructure have become progressively vital in daily communication practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2017 p 28). The authors point out that, although for each individual experiencing reality face-to-face is the core of how we experience the social world, there has been a shift from direct communication, to a mediated one. Nowadays is more common to sustain social relations through mediated communication.

The media and new communication technologies were already embedded in people's daily lives before the pandemic; however their use intensified with the advent of the Covid-19. Possible infections and confinements have made face-to-face interactions prohibited and even feared. During this time, many aspects of daily life were affected, mainly social ones. Suddenly there were no longer outings to work, to school, to the park; it was as if the very reality of our social world was being shaken from the ground. Under these circumstances individuals were forced to



find alternatives that would allow them to carry out their daily activities by means of new communication technologies. Moreover, the indefinite halt to direct social interactions that has been enforced coupled with the already growing presence of new communication technologies have brought some undesired outcomes.

At present, one of the main guides that are used for the construction of our reality is the information obtained in news channels which help us to understand what is happening locally and even globally (Scholten et al., 2020 p5). In addition, the ever-growing presence of new communication technologies such as the internet, social media, mobile devices and messaging applications in our daily habits have highlighted a phenomenon known as information overload, infoxification or infobesity (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). This phenomenon is described as the excessive generation of information that is impossible to assimilate and process; which is created by communication media whose main interest is to excite and capture the attention of its audience, leaving aside the veracity of its content (Scholten et al., 2020 p5). This phenomenon is relevant in these times because the mass media have been monopolized by the news about Covid-19 (Scholten et al., 2020 p5). It is important to point out the potential health risks that these circumstances can cause in the population. Research in recent decades shows that information overloads can have medium to long-term effects on levels of stress, anxiety and self-esteem (Bawden & Robinson, 2009; Pantic, 2014).

On the contrary, media outlets have shown less interest in the effects of mediated communication and WLB. There is not a lot of research on the role of new communication technologies and its impact on the WLB (work/life balance) of mothers working from home during Covid-19. Despite mass media paying frequent attention to the issue of remote work and the accounts that people post on their social media, the body of research is limited. Some studies have been made on the productivity and job satisfaction of employees working under this new mode (Bhattarai, 2020; Feng and Savani, 2020). But little has been said about the impact of these technologies on people's lives when the spheres of work and home intermingle during the strict confinements.

As we know, the benefits of teleworking have been brought to the foreground as an essential measure to stop the transmission of the virus and help families to support themselves. This type of rhetoric was already being used before the pandemic. Gregg (2013) points out that for some years now, new technologies have posed as the solution that gives us the freedom to make

flexible work arrangements, that is, to work from where we want when we want under conditions that are apparently fitting to a modern office (Gregg 2013, p16). But she also cautions that very little has been written about the consequences of this development. Matusik and Mickel (2011) explain that although new information technologies provide greater flexibility in terms of work and way of living, they also represent an added pressure on knowledge workers to remain in constant connectivity.

For Ling (2014) one of the greatest scopes of mobile communication is the capability of these devices to keep us continuously within the reach of others. He points out that the “mobile phone or other mobile communication device makes us individually addressable” (Ling 2014, p 33). This means that anyone who has a mobile phone with them has the ability to call and be called regardless of their situation (Ling 2014, p 33) even when they are not using the phone. The recent generations of mobile phones, i.e. smartphones, have certain inbuilt capabilities that not only allow us to make phone calls, but also to connect to the internet and stay 'online' in many portals while going out and about. Having one of these devices implies that it is possible to carry on with daily activities without really 'disconnecting' from others.

This permanent connectivity can be a double-edged sword. In one hand, it allows individuals to reach others at any time when desired. On the other hand, that means that others can do the same. In their study of surveys on teleworking and Covid-19 in European countries, Sostero et al., (2020) found that the drawback most frequently mentioned by their informants was the inability to “switch-off” from work (Sostero et al., 2020 p 27). This could be partly caused by the culture of constant connectivity that has been facilitated by the use of social media. This culture of "confusing work and friendship"(Gregg, 2013 p 22) has proved to be an extended practice in middle class offices.

On another study about the impacts of working from home during Covid-19 on workers physical and mental well-being, the participants expressed the difficulty to detach mentally from work when the work-life boundaries are blurred. This heightened their stress and anxiety (Xiao et al., 2021 p 181). The inherent affordances of new technologies can blur boundaries, since they are no longer dependent of time and space. Furthermore, when boundaries are not well defined, conflicts may arise. Gregg (2013) explains that “Communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence” (Gregg, 2013

p17). She describes this process as “presence bleed” where the clear boundaries of professional and personal identities are no longer well defined (Gregg, 2013 p17). ICT’s allow the intrusion of work into other areas of the private life including the home, which can cause a feeling of lacking privacy.

Arguably, it can be difficult to distinguish the workplace from the home when working through new technologies because they enable both settings to take place at the same time, what Moores (2012) refers to as the "doubling of place". We occupy a physical space and a virtual space simultaneously and we are constantly juggling with both. Moreover each setting comes with a set of rules and expectations that make us to adapt our behavior appropriately. Miller et al., (2016) refer to these physical and virtual settings as online and offline “frames”. The authors formulated the theoretical concept of 'framing' which "helps to set the boundary, establishing rules and expectations to guide behavior” (Miller et al., 2016 p103). For instance, we do not behave in the same way in a theater as in our home; likewise we do not behave the same online and offline. Being aware of the frame in which we find ourselves will be the guide to act accordingly.

Along with the situational frame, actors also can adjust their behavior according to the affordances of new technologies when having social interactions. Faraj and Azad (2012) describe technology and affordances as the opportunities and potentialities of action that arise when individuals interact with a certain technology (Faraj and Azad, 2012 p 238). Sharing pictures, tweeting, commenting on posts are only some examples of social media possibilities. In addition different affordances may arise from the same technology depending of its use in a given situation (Leonardi 2013). Following this train of thought the same could be said about a physical environment, meaning that it could also have its own affordances. The physical space enables the interaction face-to-face to take place in which people could take advantage of other forms of communication such as non-verbal and social cues for instance.

The lack of face-to-face communication at work can also create conflicts and even a knowledge gap between workers. In a research about team collaboration and enforced work from home during Covid-19, Bhattarai (2020) points out the added work of managers to know their employees and how they perceive their job in the absence of workplace socialization, para-verbal communication and body language cues (Bhattarai, 2020 p 17). He also mentions that employees

with less technical skills may have a harder time than the technically knowledgeable ones (Bhattarai, 2020 p 17).

To conclude with this section, it is important to note that the presence of new technologies has in a certain way allowed the social world to continue. Nevertheless, the absence of face-to-face communication brings with it another set of challenges. Although the aforementioned consequences may apply to men and women, it is necessary to note that the latter have other burdens already added which further impact their perception of having a WLB. Since Telework points to a work trend that will persist even after the pandemic, it is necessary to recognize its possible negative aftereffects.

## **2.2 Telework before the pandemic.**

Telework or Home office is not a new trend. Jack Nilles and Allan Toffler anticipated back in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s a new work mode that they called 'Telework'. According to them it would be possible to work remotely from home or close to home with the help of new technologies (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016 p 195). Initially, this idea arose to solve the long commuting problem of Silicon Valley workers in California and in addition it was being laid out as a way of caring for the environment (Messenger and Lutz Gschwind, 2016 p 197). Moreover, it was repeatedly marketed as a flexible work arrangement that would specially benefit working mothers (Duxbury et al., 1998; Kornbluh et al., 2004; Swan and Cooper, 2005). Policy makers and workers have constantly indicated that among alternative work arrangements, Telework was considered as an efficient response to the challenge of combining a professional life with the home (Swan and Cooper, 2005).

There are still debates about the use of the term 'Telework', some academics believe that is an outdated term (Towers et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2007) because it is associated with faxes, personal computers and stationary telephones or with some other type of work done from home. Others consider it as different modes of the same work, that is, mobile, virtual or the traditional office work (Di Martino and Wirth, 1990; Kurland and Bailey, 1999). It is important to note that currently, when academics talk about devices such as laptops, smartphones, tablets, new generation personal computers, internet and the use of various software and social media among others they are referring to new technologies or ICT's.

According to Belzunegui Eraso (2002) teleworking must meet three characteristics: it is carried out in a place other than the location of the work, it must use new technologies and remote work should be a regular activity not a sporadic one. Although there is no international agreement on a single definition, Telework is mostly considered as work done remotely by employees that involve the use of ICT's (Sostero et al., 2020). Similarly, The European Framework Agreement uses a definition that covers those three characteristics:

Telework is a form of organizing and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis (European Framework Agreement on Telework, 2002, p. 15)

On the other hand Martinez (2010) is of the idea that Telework can be classified depending on the employee's contract agreement, the duration of the shift and the place where the work is carried out. There are several definitions of the terminology, nevertheless more recent definitions of Telework and teleworker point to the use of new information technologies as an essential part of this arrangement, thus differentiating itself from its initial representation. The Federal Labor Law (Ley Federal del Trabajo in Spanish) in Mexico approved a new policy in 2020 where it establishes the following:

Article 330-A. It will be considered as teleworking to the labor organization form that consists of the performance of paid activities, without requiring the physical presence of the worker in a specific workplace and using information and communication technologies as a support for contact between the worker and employer" ( Ley Federal del Trabajo, 2019).

Sostero et al., (2020) make a more delineated distinction about "remote working", "teleworking" and "working from home". Each corresponds to the place from where it is performed, although they overlap to some extent. The authors indicate that remote work can be done from any place and the worker can be dependent or independent. Telework is carried out from anywhere outside the work place premises, the worker must be an employee (Mandl et al., 2015; Messenger et al., 2017) and uses new information technologies to carry out the activities. Working from home as its name suggests, refers to working remotely from home, workers can be dependent or independent and they can also make use of ICT's or can engage in some other manual labor such as artisanal production (ILO, 2016) (Sostero et al., 2020 p 7). Based on the aforementioned

distinctions, it could be said that the Home office is a version of Telework in which the only distinctive feature is the employee's home as the work place.

Currently the term Telework seems to be used mostly by academics and policy makers as a formal way of referring not only to the Home office but to other forms of remote work. On the contrary, it is evidenced that the media uses the term Home office more frequently as well as people in their daily lives. Some examples of the use of Home office as a synonym of Telework can be found in high-circulation newspapers such as *El economista*, *Forbes Mexico*, among others. Since in both the academic field and daily life, Telework and Home office seem to be a conflated term I took the liberty to use them interchangeably.

Although Telework has been around for over four decades and despite being generally presented in a very positive light emphasizing its flexibility, saving of expenses and environmental friendly side it was not a widespread practice. It is possible that the hindering of remote work implementation on a large scale was due to the fact that in its early days the technology was not sufficiently avant-garde to make tasks more efficient. While it is true that the arrival of new ICTs such as smartphones and laptops have made it possible for work to be mobile and independent of a physical space namely a traditional office (Messenger and Lutz Gschwind, 2016 p 196) and it has helped Telework to become a more popular option in the last two decades, its usage was not extended.

Data collected through representative household surveys of EU workers in 2018 indicated that less than one in twenty employees were teleworking permanently and fewer than one in ten did so occasionally, this indicates that Telework represented a relatively minimal proportion of the paid jobs in these countries (Sostero et al., 2020 p5). As for Mexico, there are no official figures on Telework, nevertheless according to the survey 'Telecommuting in Latin America' published by 5G Americas back in 2014, "Mexico had 2.6 million teleworkers, which made it one of the markets with the largest share of this kind of workers in Latin America. However, when compared to the entire Mexican working population, telecommuters barely reach 5%" (staffingamericalatina, 2021) all this changed with the abrupt arrival of Covid-19.

The vast majority of jobs did not have the option of working remotely until the pandemic, when it became mandatory ergo there were no proper guidelines and techniques to adapt various types

of labor to the new work scheme. Most employees and companies had very limited or non-existent experience working in this manner (Sostero et al., 2020 p 5) and for many it was their first time (Peiró and Soler, 2020 p 2). The lack of regulations and a work scheme can result in difficulties for companies and employees alike. The Remote Work Association warns that poorly managed telework can lead to a decrease in productivity or employee isolation (Remote Work Association 2020).

On the contrary, in the Western world, government regulations have shifted from just promoting Telework to creating policies that could solve “controversial debates around working time regulations, working conditions and occupational safety and health” (Messenger and Lutz Gschwind, 2016 p 199). The United States and some European countries already had rules for the regulation of Telework, such as the EU Framework Agreement on Telework created in 2002 and the Telecommuting Advisory Group in California that still exist in some other states. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of countries, the adjustment was abrupt, forced and improvised (Peiró and Soler, 2020; Rodriguez 2020), thus the pandemic forced upon us a reality that we were not prepared for.

### **2.3 The work/life balance discourse and discussion**

One of the main issues that have been frequently discussed in the media is the effect that confinements have on various aspects of daily life and how it has affected men and women in different ways including their families. What has attracted attention lately is the disparity in the increase of work, which is disproportionately performed by working mothers. Having a balance between work and home while living under a strict lockdown in which technologies have played an essential role has been a complicated task, since the boundaries of these two spheres become blurred. Under these conditions, more than ever, the issue of balance becomes relevant and deserves to be addressed to prevent the gender inequality gap from continuing to widen. Thus to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to learn how it has been taking place historically, culturally and what is the debate around it.

The discourse about work/life balance (WLB) is not a new issue, It can be traced back to the decade of the 1960’s when women started to increasingly join the workforce especially mothers. Clark (2000) describes work–life balance as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict” (Clark, 2000 p 751). Nevertheless, the study of the WLB

does not obey a single trend, its focus has been changing over time according to new developments and the social and economic needs of an specific period of time (Lewis et al., 2007 p 360), thus its research is being adapted to the context of the cultural ethos in which is being carried out.

Crompton (1999) points out that WLB remained fairly unquestioned until the end of the 20th century; this is due to the sustained belief that the male employee working full shifts was the canon while females had to dedicate themselves to domestic work and family care which was not remunerated. Despite the influence of feminist movements in the 1960s, the increase of women in the workforce was not only the consequence of changes in women's beliefs and aspirations but was also caused by more profound changes in the economy. The role of men as the main providers was eroded by de-industrialization and the replacement of certain economic activities such as mining, engineering and metalworking by jobs focused on services, which are not very well paid. The increase in unemployment in addition with the aforementioned occurrences forced families to adopt a dual-earner model in order to satisfy their economic needs (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006 p 379-380).

Very often it is said that a 'balance' has been reached when dual-earner couples manage to combine their work and care responsibilities (OECD, 2001; Taylor, 2001, Crompton and Lyonette, 2006). However, in order to combine employment and home duties, individuals and their families must navigate numerous stresses and tensions (Crompton and Lyonette, 2007p 380). In the work of Hochschild and Machung (2012) it is shown how this problem is experienced and handled differently by men and women according to their attitudes towards marriage and the individual's beliefs regarding gender roles. This issue will be addressed later in the research.

In the 1980s and 1990s, research about WLB experienced a shift, it was no longer focused primarily on 'working mothers' or dual- earner families, but instead the attention was leaning towards the 'work-family conflict' caused by the stress and burnout that was generated in individuals as a consequence of changes in the workplace (Lewis and Cooper, 1999). Roehling et al., (2003) defines work-family conflict as the consequence that results from the incompatibility that exists between an individual's work and family roles. This conflict varies depending on the sociocultural and family context.



Moreover, in the same decade of the 90's, the discourse focused on work / family faced reactions against it because it did not take into account single men and women without children, which is why the term of the WLB was modified to be more inclusive (Lewis et al., 2007 p 360). It has been increasingly difficult for individuals to catch up with the rapid changes in the economy and the constant demands and increased work, which causes them feelings of stress, lack of time and imbalance in their lives. Metaphors such as the 'speed up' and 'time squeeze' have been used by scholars such as Hochschild (2012) to describe these fast paced working practices that affect every worker. These concerns are reflected in most recent WLB discourses, since there is a need to stop work from permeating other areas of personal life (Lewis et al., 2007 p 361).

Academics are also of the idea that there are currently two speeches about the WLB that overlap. One of them focuses on 'personal choice' and the other on flexible work arrangements (Caproni, 2004; Lewis, 2003). The discourse about personal choice or "personal control of time WLB discourse" (Lewis et al., 2007) centers on the employee obtaining the 'right balance' based on their individual decisions and is aimed at male and female professionals positioned in the knowledge industry who have difficulties to have free time due to their work activities (Caproni, 2004; Lewis , 2003). The discourse about flexibility at work or workplace flexibility WLB discourse refers to the characteristics of the work spaces and available policies that provide work arrangement choices. Although the discourse on the WLB has changed over the years and has become more inclusive and gender neutral, it continues to focus largely on women (Lewis et al., 2007 p 364).

During the pandemic, there have been frequent discussions about the impact of Covid-19 on women's WLB. There have also been conversations about how the Home office is perceived by this group. However there is much less discussion about the impact of new communication technologies on the WLB of working women. As in the past, the discourse and policies around the WLB must change and adapt to the new circumstances that we currently live in. It is not enough to pay attention to work and to the care of the family and the home, occurrences such as the global economic slowdown, the intensification of the presence of technologies, the increasing demands of work to adapt to a new model and the emotional exhaustion produced by the confinement must also be taken into account. It should be understood that the 'balance' includes

other areas of an individual's life, for that reason this research explores three aspects of existence: the self, place and time under the current context and the ever presence of new technologies.

#### **2.4 Working mothers and ‘the stalled revolution’**

Work has always been an essential activity for the development of society; it not only provides sustenance for people but also creates a sense of identity and personal fulfillment. However, the disparity when obtaining income and wealth can affect certain sectors of the population and make them more vulnerable. The growing participation of the female population in the labor market contributes to their economic autonomy, since it allows them to generate their own resources to meet their needs (INEGI, 2019 p 105). The economic empowerment of women has been promoted by numerous international organizations as it reduces gender inequalities and contributes to their economic growth and minimizes poverty (INEGI, 2019 p 2) (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Esping-Andersen et al., 2002).

In Hochschild and Machung (2012) studies it is reported that women have been joining the work force at a regular pace before the beginning of the last century, but it was in the 1950’s when the increase was dramatic. In that same year 30% of American women were part of the work force and by 2011 it increased to 59% (Hochschild and Machung, 2012 p1). They indicated that in 2011 more than two-thirds of married or single mothers were working and made up half of the labor force. At that time, two-thirds of all marriages with children were dual-income families (Hochschild and Machung, 2012 p 2).

In 2009 the Center for American Progress released a chapter in The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Changes Everything called “The New Bread Winners”. This report explains how the integration of women into the workforce has greatly changed the way families live and work (Glynn, 2012 p 1). Back in 2010 there were more female bread winners in that country than in all the years in which information on this topic has been collected (Glynn, 2012 p5). In Mexico, official population and housing surveys from 2018 indicated that of every 100 people who contributed to the production of goods and services on a salaried basis in activities such as industry, commerce and services, 42% were women and 58% were men (INEGI, 2019 p 110). The same study revealed that in the state of Sonora 49% of heterosexual nuclear-type households were headed by women and 66% had a male figure as the head of the family (INEGI, 2019 p102).

Despite the progress of women in the path of their economic independence and labor participation, many authors are of the idea that the institutions around us have not caught up with the changes (Glynn, 2012 p1) which has caused a stagnation in the movement (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). Some of the causes that hinder the aforementioned movement are exposed in the following excerpt from the book 'The second shift':

The influx of women into the economy has not been accompanied by a cultural understanding of marriage and work that would make this transition smooth. Women have changed. But most workplaces have remained inflexible in the face of the family demands of their workers, and at home, most men have yet to really adapt to the changes in women. This strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me to speak of a stalled revolution (Hochschild and Machung, 2012 p 12).

On the contrary, there is evidence of changes in institutions and in men's participation in the home. The growing number of working mothers led governments and private institutions to create maternity supportive policies and day care centers. However, these transformations vary according to each country, social class and attitudes towards gender stereotypes. Korpi (2000) explains that all Nordic countries have a high rating in terms of the support given to the families of dual-earner models, providing them with good childcare services, care for the elderly as well as paid parental leave, which is facilitated by their welfare system. Crompton and Lyonette (2006) mention that countries such as Norway and Finland also offer direct payments to parents in cash, what it is called 'cash for care'. It is said that these policies are sometimes seen as more traditionalist due to the fact that the person benefited is frequently the mother. Additionally, in these countries, family policies are not directed only at women, but also at men. For that reason, in the Nordic countries the support provided to dual-income families has been characterized by attempts to encourage men in taking a more active role with respect of domestic work especially in their children's care (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006 p 381).

In neoliberal societies such as Britain the topic of WLB focused on labor flexibility has gained popularity, nevertheless its government has contributed to a lesser extent to the provision of childcare, an activity that has been absorbed mostly by the private sector (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006 p 382). On the other hand, in southern European countries it is more common to find a 'familistic' welfare system, which Esping Andersen (1999) refers to as the overarching responsibility of the family to provide care and support for their children or dependents. Just like

in the southern European countries, Mexico presents a familistic model that falls short in its efforts to support mother's employment. There are also day care services for working mothers, however, according to official statistical figures for the first quarter of 2019, 77.7% of subordinate and paid working women did not have these services and only 22.3% had access to them (INEGI, 2019 p 115). Moreover, while mothers have 12 weeks of parental leave, fathers only have 5 days, and this can be troublesome if the newborn requires additional care (OCCMundial, 2021).

Men's participation in household chores has also increased, mainly in childcare. Studies in Mexico and Latin America have shown that the time and attention destined to childcare by males has increased, on the other hand, parental obligations related to protection and supply have been relaxed (Martínez Salgado and Rojas, 2016 p 637). In the specific case of Mexico, Martínez Salgado and Rojas (2016), found that these changes can be seen more frequently in recent generations of males who live in urban communities and come from middle and privileged social classes; yet caring for the home is mostly a female task still. The authors are of the idea that the modernization process in the Latin American region has not been linear, uniform or generalized since there are several factors that influence this change. Nehring (2005) explains that in reality emerging and traditional sociocultural patterns coexist, these influence the transition to new family and conjugal dynamics in which dichotomies in generalities, behaviors and gender relations still persist. These patterns are not exclusive to Latin American countries, since they occur around the world at different levels.

Connell (1987) reported that although women's participation in the work force has grown exponentially in several countries, women continue to be closely linked to domestic work and family care, which is associated with externalizations of a gender order. Crompton and Lyonette, (2006) believe that the distribution of housework based on gender assumptions is today a practice that persists in all societies. Therefore unpaid domestic work and family care continue to be a disproportionate burden for women and limit their possibilities for development and leisure.

As we have seen, there have been changes but a satisfactory transformation has not been achieved, in addition the policies have been mainly to support motherhood but there is no real effort to achieve gender equality as such. Under these circumstances and prior to the pandemic, several academics from different disciplines had pointed to teleworking as a flexible work option

that would allow working mothers to have a balance between work and home, but this question is still debated.

## **2.5 The struggles of women during the Covid-19 lockdowns.**

The mandatory lockdowns brought by the Covid-19 have been criticized by numerous scholars since they carried with it additional tensions that aggravated the well-being of the population. The loss of jobs, the increase in physical and mental health problems and the closing of educational institutions and companies that affected the economy in general are just some of the consequences. To reduce the impact of the crisis, governments and health institutions from around the globe envisioned working from home as a sensible measure that would help people to preserve their livelihoods and lessen the risk of infection.

Nevertheless, since last year, professionals from diverse disciplines have been indicating that Home office during the pandemic differs considerably from how we knew it since confinements add an additional layer of complexity to people's dynamics. Rodríguez García (2020) emphasizes that living under compulsory isolation means that there are no visits or socializing, no outings and no changes of scenery which implies that people who live alone are lonelier and people who live with others are permanently in the presence of their group, sharing resources, spaces and tasks. In either scenario, Home office can cause several problems (Rodríguez García, 2020 p 95).

Studies in Latin America reveal that the creation of hostile environments is the result of the difficult moments that parental figures experience caused by despair and concerns (Medina et al., 2020 pp. 261). Several academics (Corral and Verdugo, 2011; Capano and Pacheco, 2014), among others, explain the link that exists between crises that maximize pressure and cases of domestic violence. Under this scenario, those who are particularly vulnerable to the risk of domestic violence are children and their mothers (End Violence against Children, 2020). In a UN Women report it was published that women and girls face more severe challenges during the pandemic such as increased work at home, unemployment, poverty, domestic violence and unpaid care (UN WOMEN, 2020).

Moreover not all types of work can be performed remotely. Sostero et al., 2020 indicate that a job is not "teleworkable" when the task at hand strongly requires the handling of people or

objects (Sostero et al., 2020 p 30). This situation affected women due to their over representation in pink collar positions because these jobs are little to not teleworkable . Non-governmental organizations such as OXFAM revealed that the consequences of the Covid-19 have cost women around the world 800 billion in lost income only in the year of 2020 (OXFAM, 2021). Therefore, Telework during the pandemic seemed to benefit mostly those employees in the knowledge industries, thus creating a wider income gap among workers.

In this context, it has come to light in recent reports that the boundaries between work and family have been blurred and that the distribution of home duties according to gender has become more noticeable (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020) since the mothers are typically the main care providers. Working from home allows the demands of work and home to coexist and, in turn, the burden of handling both settings at once becomes overwhelming for them. According to Fleetwood (2007) this double burden represents a hindrance towards work and life balance since the consequences of dealing with paid employment and housework impact women severely. Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) argue that this dynamic has worsened due to the lockdown caused by the pandemic.

In their study on the differential impact on the working conditions of academic men and women during the confinement, Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) demonstrated that having children is one of the factors that reduce the productivity of academic women even in dual income families, whereas the men in the study did not show significant changes. They speculate that the lockdown may have pushed women to prioritize their role as caregivers and traditional mothers. Other authors have also reported that the pandemic has led women to allocate more time to childcare and homeschooling while men have been fairly unaffected (Andersen et al., 2020).

Despite the fact that women have been absorbing most of the housework and childcare, the literature suggests that prior to the pandemic there were no significant differences in productivity and job satisfaction between genders (Aryee et al., 2005; Banerjee and Perrucci, 2010). In a study of teleworking mothers from a Canadian financial corporation, Hilbrecht et al., 2008 found that women viewed working from home positively because they believed that this allowed them to have more control over their time and flexibility to better manage their home and work. However, it was also evident in the same research that there was an imbalance in their personal life, that is, even when women would like to have time for leisure or to pursue other interests,

their time was consumed by the great demands of the work and home spheres. Likewise, the literature demonstrate the existence of inequalities in gendered time usage (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Scannell, 2014; Szameitat and Hayati, 2019;Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021) exposing a leisure gap (Hochschild and Machung, 2012) that mostly affects women.

To date there are few studies on the relation between working from home and WLB of women during the confinements, and even though there is evidence that shows the disparity in workload between genders, teleworking during the pandemic is still perceived positively. In a survey conducted for the research of teleworkability and the Covid-19 crisis in European countries, Sostero et al., 2020 found that although negative aspects were exposed, the experience of working remotely was rated favorably with 85% of those surveyed expressing their interest in continuing to work from home once the health contingency has ended.

People in other developing countries also hold similar views. In a study about the gendered perception and preference for Home-Based Telework in the Covid-19 in Hanoi Vietnam, Nguyen and Armoogum (2021) conducted a survey among men and women where their main finding was the greater preference of women for work based Telework in comparison to men and their desire to continue in this work mode after the end of the pandemic. Women also indicated that working from home could be the solution to solve the conflict of juggling family and work duties. In the same way, a survey carried out by the OCCMundial in Mexico revealed that whilst women work more during the home office, it is still the preferred work option for a large amount of the workers (OCCMundial, 2020).

For all the aforementioned, it can be seen that the study of the WLB issue of working mothers during the Covid-19 lockdowns has focused on exploring the issues of “intensive mothering” (Hilbrecht et al., 2008) and the inequality of the uses of time according to gender during the crisis. Nevertheless, another fundamental issue that has been left aside is that of women’s “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1979) since it implies an added effort that impacts greatly their emotional health and their perception of well-being.

For some academics, emotional work refers to activities that pertain to the emotional well-being of the other members of the family group and provides emotional support (Curran et al., 2015). For Hochschild (1979) this type of work entails the “management of emotion” which requires a

set of rules. She describes “feeling rules” as the guidelines of what is appropriate to feel or not to feel according to a given situation (Hochschild, 1979 p 566). She argues that our emotions can be managed since the “individual often works on inducing or inhibiting feelings so as to render them ‘appropriate’ to a situation” (Hochschild,1979 p 551). More importantly, she points out that the aim of managing emotions is to “to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 2012 p7). This allows individuals to maintain a befitting social interaction to avoid conflict and to protect their ontological security.

In sum, most of the limited research on the subject of WLB of working mothers during Covid-19 has been done through surveys and quantitative methods. Interviews have been conducted to a lesser extent but quite a few of these have also been quantified. In addition, the interest in investigating this issue differs between countries; some might allocate more resources for its examination while others go at a very slow pace. Therefore the significance of this work lies in the fact that this is one of the first writings of its kind on developing countries such as Mexico. Also its focus is qualitative what differentiates it from other studies. Furthermore, probably due to the novelty of the matter at hand, the literature regarding qualitative studies about the impact of new communication technologies on work and the home spheres during Covid-19 is very minimal.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 The case study and the research methodology**

In the recent year more than any other, working Mexican mothers have been experiencing alterations in their way of life and WLB due to the introduction of their ‘work’ into the private setting of the ‘home’. The sudden change brought by the Covid-19 pushed many companies to take measures abruptly, implementing the Home office strategy without considering rules or work guidelines which are now at the discretion of the employees. In Mexico very few companies provide courses for employee’s well-being or some oriented to ‘stress management’, ‘dealing with change’ or ‘time management’. Employees are also forced to keep up with the use of new technologies to be able to continue with their work as ‘usual’. People in managerial positions keep asking and/or demanding their workers to master the aforementioned abilities pushing them to be the embodiment of the ‘role model’ employee without providing a set of



tools or making this knowledge more accessible for them. To a large extent, it seemed that the responsibility of figuring out how to achieve work/life balance rests solely on the capabilities of the worker.

Furthermore the drastic changes in their family life and increased housework have been detrimental to these women since they keep enacting traditional values in the private sphere. Gender roles and gendered uses of time have been reported to play a role in the dynamics of dual- income families. The closing of daycares and schools have left women with the added burden of homeschooling and full time care of children while trying to fulfill other duties at home and work. Moreover due to the absence of direct interaction with the social world the already embedded presence of new technologies became essential to the continuity of people's daily lives which has resulted in added strains.

The issue just mentioned serves as a case study as it makes it possible to examine in more detail the matter of working women's WLB in a specific context and place. It perfectly serves as an example because it illustrates the struggles of working women when trying to achieve a balance. According to Flyvbjerg (2001) a case study generates practical, concrete and context-dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001 p 70) which is at the heart of expert activity in social sciences. He explains that they are very significant due to their closeness to real life situations and its array of nuances allows researchers to obtain a more detailed view of reality. Flyvbjerg (2001) is also of the idea that case studies enable researchers to see that human behavior does not obey universals nor is it bound to a set of rules.

Since the purpose of this study is to understand the reality of working women through their emotions and lived experience a phenomenological approach was highly suited. Teherani et al., (2015) are of the idea that the aim of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of experience from what was experienced and how it was experienced. According to Alfred Schutz (1973), this perspective seek to explain the world through people's interpretation and creation of meaning based on their experiences of being in the world. These meanings are not arbitrarily or independently created, rather they are relational, meaning that they are constructed from the interaction with others and a given situation. For Heidegger (1927) the meaning of life unfolds when we explore the everyday life in the cultural ethos of the 'time' in which it is situated. He

focused in the relationship of the individuals and their “lifeworld” this means that people’s lives are permanently affected by the world in which they live.

In addition to a phenomenological approach an abductive analysis was carried out. This type of analysis was inspired in the work of Charles S. Peirce who views research as moving back and forth in a recursive manner between theory and observation (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014 p5). According to Tavory and Timmermans (2014) “Abduction occurs when we encounter observations that do not neatly fit existing theories and we find ourselves speculating about what the data plausibly could be a case of. Abduction thus refers to a “creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypothesis and theories based on surprising research evidence” (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014 p 6).

To unveil the meaning behind the actions of the participants in this case study a semi structured qualitative interview was employed (see Appendix 1). In my view the flexibility of this type of interview allows some level of reciprocity or two-way communication between the interviewer and the participant, creating a sense of having a 'conversation' and not a merely 'interrogation'. In these conversations one can modulate the level of formality and adjust the questions to make the interviewee feel more comfortable when talking about a topic, all this in aims to obtain the most (as far as possible) reliable account.

Bridget Byrne (2018 p 465) is of the idea that is in these conversational types of interviews where we share a “greater or lesser depth” of feelings depending on the levels of intimacy with different individuals, context, emotional state and the situation. The apparent informal nature of these “conversations with a purpose” (Burgess, cited in Mason, 1996 p 38) form an environment where the participant can feel motivated and encouraged to talk about whatever they think is of importance (Byrne, 2018 p 466). Furthermore, the advantage of a qualitative interview over others lies in the fact that it obtains first-hand outlooks and values that cannot be observed and that are not manifested in formal questionnaires. The explanation of the facts comes from the 'voice' of the interviewee, which from an ontological stance is “worthy of exploration” (Byrne, 2018 p 469).

The present study does not seek to generalize about the object of study, but rather seeks to contribute to the body of literature and to 'know' rather than 'predict' the problem.

### **3.2 The sample**

For the sample a snowball method was chosen due to its practicality. According to Seale the Snowball sampling or network sampling consist in finding participants through the references of known people or acquaintances who share certain characteristics (Seale, 2018 p 365). This method allows finding people with the desired characteristics who are ‘close’ enough to be able to arrange an interview with but whose level of ‘closeness’ is not enough to interfere with the result of the research. However one of the risks of this method is that it is possible to obtain informants within the same "network" which increases the chances of obtaining the same answers (Seale, 2018 p 365). As Seale suggests a way to solve this problem is to find “multiple starting points”, my plan was to ensure that the people that I ask for referrals are not in the same network or group of acquaintances.

Regarding the selection criteria of the sample, 8 young Mexican middle class mothers ranging from 31 to 40 years old with white collar jobs and school-age children were selected (see Appendix2). Additionally, only habitants from the city of Hermosillo Sonora Mexico were chosen since it is the capital of one of the entities in which confinements and restrictions were stricter and it was one of the first locations to register cases of Covid-19.

### **3.3 Methods**

For this study one pilot and 8 interviews were conducted. This study was centered on Mexican mothers whose work was normally performed in a physical space but due to the pandemic it was transformed into Home office. This research focused on the account of their everyday life experiences and their attitudes towards work and life before and during the pandemic. The interviews were carried out in a period of two months, the first interview was on February 18, 2021 and the last on April 26 of the same year. Each interviewee was contacted through the social app Whatsapp to arrange a meeting. Then a consent form was sent via Whatsapp before the interview and the terms of the agreement were reiterated in the video call with the intention of clarifying any doubts and also to address the ethical aspects of the research as well as to safeguard the informant’s identity (see Appendix3). Due to the social distancing the interviews were conducted through the video conferencing app ‘Zoom’. Each interview averaged 60 minutes however there were exceptions exceeding this time. Each interview was recorded and

then transcribed. All of the interviews were in Spanish. While initially the analysis was being made in Spanish it was later translated.

Notes were taken during the interviews and also memos were made about the reflections when analyzing the data. Memos, note writing and carefully transcribed interviews helped in spotting atypical findings in favor of theorization. In addition memos and notes were used as mnemonic tools, i.e. as tools to aid the memory. According to Tavory and Timmermans (2014) precise notes and transcriptions function as a “check against faulty memory” so we can avoid misremembering our experiences and fit them into the narratives that we were adamant to say (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014 p 54). Once the data was collected a thematic analysis was carried out in light of an abductive approach. Because the size of the data was relatively manageable, the coding was done manually, that is, no software was used.

First, the text was arranged in a column leaving some space for notes and memos. It was necessary to read the transcripts line by line in order to give the whole text the same treatment and to label open codes (see Appendix4). These open codes function as labels for snippets of text that carry some of the literal nature of the data (Rivas, 2011 p 370). Sometimes I used short phrases as an open code some other times one or a couple of words that would reflect what was in a text sentence. Also, I occasionally used “in vivo codes” what Rivas (2011) describe as the terms taken directly from the data that are being used as metaphors or slang by the participants to name my codes. This helped to avoid an early interpretation and later develop a theme.

The next step was to compare the open codes and find similarities to group them into analytic categories. The preliminary codes were physically placed on a large surface to facilitate its visualization and then proceeded to group them. I kept refining my codes until I was satisfied with the result. This was done by comparing categories with others to see if new data would fit to existing ones or if a new category needed to be made. I also made a brief description of the code not to forget what it implies and paired it up with an extract from the text interview that could illustrate the code.

The third step was to develop themes. Some of the themes were already identified in the literature and some others emerged from dominant categories in the data. Once the themes were identified, I made a master table which includes the open codes, the brief description, the final

analytical codes, the categories and the themes (see Appendix5). The final step was to revise and refine the categories and themes until the desired result. Throughout the analysis some patterns and relationships were identified and compared to existing theories. The results are being presented in a “list” (Rivas 2011) format since it proved to be useful when showcasing how the participants make sense of the issue at hand and experience it by using their own words.

### **3.4 Methodological reflections and limitations**

In addition to the techniques employed, ethnography would have been a great supplementary method; unfortunately due to the current context of the pandemic, the direct observation of the participants was ruled out. I think the ethnographic method would have enriched this research because it allows direct observation, which can provide additional details and nuances that might be missing in people's accounts. This in-site observation could have also revealed whether the interviewees' stories really match their actions.

Another big limitation that hampered obtaining more data was the inability to get willing participants. Due to the distance between countries (The case study is physically located in Mexico but the research was carried out from Sweden) there is a significant time difference that made it very difficult to find/convince participants and make appointments. Furthermore, it was also very difficult to find willing interviewees since these women were already dealing with a very stressful situation. They were struggling with the uncertainty of a global health crisis and its consequences while taking care of their home and work. They already had a considerable load on their shoulders to commit to the additional task of spending time for an interview when time was their most scarce resource.

For the few who agreed to be part of the study, it was also challenging. Even when they tried to adhere to the agreed appointments it was difficult for them to follow, since being at home implied that always unexpected situations that needed their urgent attention arose. This set me in a constant cancellation and rescheduling cycle that affected the timeframe of the study and data collection. Also during the interviews I witnessed constant interruptions that in a certain way illustrated part of what was later revealed in the research findings.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 WLB as an existential question.**

As previously stated, this study arose from the observation of the continued struggles among working mothers to achieve a WLB in their lives in times of crisis. The opinions were divided however most of the informants stated that they do not have a WLB despite their constant efforts to achieve it. Several factors play a role in obtaining a WLB but an initial common challenge was the actual definition of what 'balance' means for each individual. There is no consensus between institutions and the population, much less from person to person. One may 'believe' to have a balance according to their own definition of it, even though in reality that is not the case or vice versa.

The path to obtaining well-being from the balance between work and life can be challenging since this 'balance' can have different interpretations depending on the motivations of the individual which are shaped by their existence and their concept of the meaning of life. To address the question of 'existence' or 'being' Heidegger (1927) reduced it to three main components: place, persons and time, referring to my "self in relation to others and their 'selves' in the places where I live in the times of my life" (Scanell, 2014 p 10), these same components are what everyday life is made of. Therefore people's ideas of what it is meaningful are directly influenced by the sociocultural context of the era in which they live, the places where they interact and their relation with others.

In the same way, it was observed in this study that the idea of the WLB of working mothers, although it is complex and can vary from person to person, it is still being shaped largely by the situational context and the cultural beliefs of their time. Before the pandemic most of the participants rarely stop to think about the reasons behind their actions. They generally concluded that it was from held beliefs that have been passed down for generations about what it was socially considered as right or wrong, other decisions were dictated by emotions. However, a phenomenon that I could notice in all the participants after having experienced a rupture in their way of life was the fact that they began to question their existence:

For me, an ideal balance in my personal life, work and home, is undoubtedly to be able to feel happy and satisfied with how I perform in the three areas. It has become very clear to me in the last year that if one of the three areas fails, the

others are greatly affected. For me, all this has resulted in questioning the decisions I made during my early adult life, such as having decided to marry at a certain age because that was "normal / common", having placed a bachelor's degree above my true passion because "it makes money" and having decided to be a mother because it is what has to be done once you are married (Monse 40, Administrative Assistant)

On a positive note, the context of a crisis has functioned as a 'catalyst' of change in the sense that the existential questioning can lead the person to make adjustments to all aspects of their daily life. This reevaluation could positively impact the WLB at a personal level because knowing what changes need to be done and what are the main priorities allow us to make the right adjustments not only in our routines but also in the way we use time and space more optimally. Existential questioning also makes us re-evaluate our identities and this could result in self-development.

Giddens is of the idea that a routine is necessary not only to manage time and space, but rather to maintain an ontological security since "They are constitutive of an emotional acceptance of the reality of the 'external world' without which a secure human existence is impossible". Additionally routines help us to develop a self-identity by creating a 'framework' from which we learn "what is not me" (Giddens, 1991 p 39-42). He argues that we learn to know who we are not only by our actions or interaction with others but rather the ability to "keep a particular narrative going". The daily interaction with others and the integration of external world events make the 'story' of the self. As Charles Taylor said, this story allows us to have a notion of who we are, who we become and where we are going (Giddens, 1991 p 54). The next example illustrates the importance of routines:

My routine before the pandemic was too structured. Always in a hurry so that the children were on time and by Friday I was exhausted. After the pandemic, I tried to maintain their afternoon activities virtually, especially to keep them distracted and physically fit. Apparently it worked for them. (...) We went from having a perfectly structured schedule and routine, to having zero time control, for example control over lunchtime, my exercise, my work, bedtime, I think that until august, after the start of the new school year, we were able to have a structure and I managed to organize my work spaces and continue with my workouts, which was the most important thing for me, and honestly it's what kept me sane throughout the year (Monse 40, Administrative Assistant)

All the women in the study noted the importance of having a routine or 'structure' in their day-to-day that allows them to have a sense of stability and control. Unfortunately, their routines were

abruptly interrupted by the health crisis. Although not exclusively, the participants expressed that the increase in their levels of anxiety and other disorders are largely attributed to feeling overwhelmed by changes in the 'structure' of their way of life and the difficulty to get on top of things. Therefore it is important to see how a crisis such as a pandemic is an event that has come to interrupt the continuity of all the components of our existence. The rupture in their work routines and the need to adapt to new dynamics then required intense physical, mental and emotional labor that we would explore in the next chapters.

#### **4.2 The challenges of mediated work during the pandemic.**

As mentioned previously, due to the pandemic, people whose jobs were not classified as 'essential' had to find alternative ways to continue with their activities. For most companies it was their first experience with the Home office therefore they did not have guidelines to draw from. The process of adjustment was naturally heuristic, meaning that they created and adapted to a new set of rules through trial and error until finally a new work canon was adopted. All of the informants corroborated this view, stating that the process of adapting to the new model was disorganized, improvised and full of obstacles to sort out, many times with little to no help from managerial positions. This was also substantiated in the work of Peiró and Soler (2020) and Rodriguez (2020). Participants pointed out that despite being almost directionless the discourse on pursuing a WLB remained a particular concern and absolved managerial positions for "the human resourcing decisions defining their employees' experience" (Gregg 2013, p 20).

The lack of specific guidelines on how to continue with the work flow left the task of managing job and forming a structure or work routine at the discretion of the workers. On the one hand it is flexible but on the other hand it allows for conflicts to arise in the work teams since not all employees work at the same rate. Ana, an administrative worker for a higher education institution comments that the workload has increased because not all workers fulfill their part in a timely manner and that in her words "you end up doing the work of others in order to comply with yours" which increases her workload and the hours she must dedicate to this activity during and after her shift. Furthermore, most of the work ends up being taken care of by those employees who are 'permanently connected' or more attentive to their devices and means of communication. This permanent connectivity, as noted in the studies of Gregg (2013), allows work to infiltrate and permeate other areas of personal life, causing them stress and anxiety.



Not all the employees experienced anxiety by not being able to carry on with their work due to the lack of tools or guidance. Participants that belonged to bigger companies stated that their employer outsourced computing and telecommunications consultancy firms so their employees could receive the necessary training and guidelines. Furthermore, these employees reported having less job related anxiety and stress when they know what to do and the rules to follow. These larger companies also implement systems where it is necessary to 'log in' at certain times, that allows them to know who is online and if they are complying with their hours. This strategy solves the problem of constant availability since the worker can disconnect without problem at the end of their shift and are not required to be alert on the phone after hours:

I didn't have the same experience of other people. I mean, I turned on my laptop at 8am and turned it off at 6pm just as my regular workday, only now it was from home. Because we have the tools for HR to check who is working. For example, we have our own system with our user, almost everyone has access to something called RP where you create invoices and work related things for the company, so there you also see who are working. This platform is where work orders and purchase orders are uploaded. Things are always being uploaded to the portal so you can see who is working. In addition, I know that at a certain time of the day I have a video call meeting or if I do not answer an email they call my work cell phone and I always answer them. In my case everything has been the same only that I was at home. (Lupita 33, CEO's Assistant)

The increase in absenteeism was also pointed out by the participants who believe that it has been partly facilitated by new technologies and the circumstances of the crisis. Unlike the last example, most of the participants commented that it is very difficult to know if others are really working because of not being able to 'see what they are doing'. Even during online meetings there are many ways to 'appear' busy when it is not entirely true. It becomes more complicated to verify that a person is really doing their job when working remotely, even when they show 'online'. Companies should take note of this to create strategies that allow them to measure the actual productivity of their employees in a better way:

Yes, I have seen it (she was talking about absenteeism at work) and heard it from other people. For example we have a whatsapp group where the whole school is. We are 40-50 staff members because they are both shifts and yes! There are many who are infamous by their absences, those that were never there and those who rarely answer. So us, the ones that we are 'always there' get always asked if we could do the job. 'Adriana can you do it instead?' In case it is something that is not my job but the assigned person is not answering. They ask me or other colleagues, the ones who are always there. We are like 3-4 workers who are

always answering and then we are the ones that ‘Oh! Well, you should do it because you are answering us, we do not know what is happening with the other person’. Since they cannot put an absence in their record or scold them because we are in a pandemic it is very easy for others to get rid of work (Adriana 31, Administrative Assistant)

The informants expressed that the non-fulfillment of tasks on their coworkers part can originate in the inability to form an appropriate work routine or structure. The participants stated that coworker’s low performance was being caused by apathy derived from the crisis uncertainty in addition to other factors such as the level of commitment to their jobs, personal aspirations within the company and feelings of being overwhelmed by the changes:

This pandemic totally demerits everything (she was referring to work experience). I mean, I have asked myself, what is going to happen? And I have also asked others, what if this continues? Why having a house if no one can visit it, or why keep doing theater if our main purpose of connecting with the public is not really being achieved? And everything is in the air (Azucena 35, Director of Cultural Center)

The uncertainty of the scenario in addition to the ‘impersonal’ nature of dealing with others through a mediated communication has been diminishing the sense of having a meaningful job for most of the participants. According Lips- Wiersma (2016) et al., for a job to be perceived as meaningful it must be constituted out of four dimensions: the first one comprises belongingness, support and shared values. The second one is to be able to use one’s full potential, creativity and gain a sense of achievement. The third one refers to being able to provide a service to others, helping them to achieve well-being. And the fourth touches upon a sense of moral growth and a sense of developing self-awareness/ knowledge in other words it must help to develop the inner self (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016 p 536). While it is true that people can experience meaningful work at different levels depending on the type of job they perform, meaningful work is universally desired (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016 p 537).

Changes in some of the four dimensions of meaningful work were identified in the informants. They reported not having the same sense of belonging with their job after spending a certain amount of time in the confinement. This pointed to be caused by a lack of conviviality, i.e. an absence of a friendly social interaction which in this case, it was carried out in the real world. They argued that sharing the same place every day ‘pushed’ them to engage with others and while they confessed not missing one or two coworkers most of them were longing to go back to

work as they used to. Others expressed being able to solve problems at work in a creative way, even helping the management to adapt their activities to a form of remote work such as developing a better website, creating social media groups exclusively for clients, etc., however they did not obtain the recognition they were expecting.

Another dimension of meaningful work that was diminished was the ability to provide a service to others. The participants expressed the difficulty and frustration of not being able to deal well with clients and colleagues through ICT's and give them the appropriate service. What stood out most in their observations was the impossibility of 'reading' or interpreting the emotions of others. The lack of other 'clues' such as paraverbal and non-verbal communication, in text messages, the lack of visuals in phone calls, delays and disconnections in video calls, among others, are some of the complications that affected and sometimes made it impossible to accurately interpret others emotions. Based on Hochschild's (2012) theories about "feeling rules" we can say that identifying the emotions of others allows us to know which ones are appropriate at the moment and thus adjust our behavior according to the situation. However, if a good reading of others emotions is not possible, there will be a risk of having misunderstandings and worse, conflicts:

Yes, it is very different (communication), for example if it is by text such as whatsapp or text message you cannot see the emotions, I mean I cannot tell - Oh! The person is upset or something, then I don't know how to treat them right. When a person is upset, you first try to calm him or her down a little, and then give them a solution, right? And in the other way ... it is much easier for me to do it in person. Because it is a dialogue, the solution is sought on the spot and it is faster, at least it is to me. Otherwise I also have to "guess" if he is upset, if he is asking me in a good way or there are times that we also misunderstand. There he is asking me that I have to do a job now and it is urgent, I do not know, and at the time of talking on the phone it was not so urgent. But I interpreted it that way because of how I read the text. So yes, I would prefer a thousand times to do it in person (Janet 33, Administrative Assistant)

Poor communication between customers and workers showed to hamper productivity and increased the time that must be spent solving a problem. On many occasions this forces workers to invest more time in problem solving after their shift and their own time ends up being consumed. Unsurprisingly, dealing with work issues after hours is also seen as a form of professionalism. Permanent connectivity or in the participants words 'being always there' has become part of work culture and synonymous with professionalism. For several informants, it

was not enough to complete their work in a timely manner, but also to demonstrate their professionalism by taking risks during the crisis.

The way in which I demonstrate this (professionalism) is by complying in a timely manner with the reports or requests of my bosses, reporting my progress and seeking support in case of any problem (...) always answering and paying attention (...) It was necessary for me to travel outside the city during July - when the lockdowns were the strictest - and although I was very afraid, it was my way of reaffirming that I remain committed to work despite what we are going through (Monse 40, Administrative Assistant)

As in the theories exposed in the literature, the process of adaptation to remote work has been gradual and improvised. The workers have had to adapt to a new work scheme in which permanent connectivity and the display of professionalism through a myriad of electronic devices has become the norm during the crisis. However, the challenges of adaptation and management of professional identity are not the only obstacles that working women had to face, as will be seen in the following chapters.

#### **4.3 Additional costs and obstacles of mediated work.**

Without a doubt, one of the biggest obstacles that women had to overcome was not having full control over their space. The domestic space differs greatly from the work space not only in its characteristics but also in the events that happen in the home. The domestic space is unpredictable and it is not subject to the same rules of the traditional office work culture. The constant noises and unexpected interruptions that were beyond the informant's control, not only hinder their work but also that of their peers, which was a source of frustration:

The work CAN be completed at the end of the day but it is slower because you do not have the tools at home. I have a laptop but I also need a scanner, a printer, even the most useless things like the stapler, all that is needed daily and sometimes you have to get it yourself. We have to understand that our house is not really a work station. My boss was very desperate because there were a lot of interruptions. Even though I was locking myself in my bedroom the noises never stopped. And they were from common things, like when my boss called me on the phone, my dogs seemed to sense it and they started barking. And it also happened to me that my husband interrupted me, just because I was in the house, it was easy for him to ask me a thousand things 'so, what are we going to eat?' while I was busy. I had to tell him to pretend that I wasn't there. I do not know why but everyone, even my boss thinks that because you are at home you are not working (Janet 33, Administrative Assistant)

Since the 'home' space is not designed to be a work station, it is understood then, that it is not a controlled environment. Furthermore, there is a common belief that 'home' is an idyllic place where one can retreat to relax and rest. Cultural texts have been depicting the 'home' as the safe place where we always go back (Andersson 2006 p 169) that keeps you away from the hardships of the outside world. These connotations that are attributed to the domestic setting make individuals assume that everyone else is enjoying leisure practices when the opposite could be the case.

Another obstacle that was encountered when adapting to the new work scheme was the generation gap in technological literacy. Technological literacy is defined by Dyrenfurth and Kozak (1991) as a term that comprises three dimensions: practical, civic and cultural. The first dimension comprises the ability to use technology, the second refers to the understanding of problems that arise from the use of technology, and the third dimension focuses on the appreciation of its significance (Dyrenfurth and Kozak, 1991 p 7). All of the interviewees belong to a young adult generation that is pretty well acquainted with the use of technologies i.e. with the first dimension of technological literacy at least at a consumer level.

The problem that they faced was dealing with bosses and other coworkers from older generations whose media skills were precarious. This problem is aggravated when senior staffs do not have these skills as it can hinder the development and implementation of strategies that allow the fulfillment of tasks through new technologies. In other words they could delay their own tasks and that of others, which could result in dismissals. The research showed that all the participants voluntarily acted as a support network in the learning process of senior coworkers. On the one hand, the motivation was to reduce the additional work and maintaining the workflow. On the other hand it was also due to moral principles under the sentiment of 'we are all together in this' in times of crisis. This behavior was more visible in workplaces whose workers were not so numerous:

At first all the work was done in an improvised way. And in our case, as administrative staff, most of us understand it, but we have a person in the office that is a little older, a woman, and she doesn't understand much about computers or anything like that. So we have been helping her with assignments, like when they request graphics in Excel, and she does not know how to use it, all of us together we have supported her. In reality we didn't have a proper training or

some format of what we were going to do. I mean they threw us to work and well ... we had to do it (Lily 38, Administrative Assistant)

The informants also stated that the situation regarding technological literacy in Mexico improved in later months, as the companies gradually solved their problems. Also certain progress was being achieved through the efforts of governmental and private institutions that began to educate workers. As an example of this, some of the informants stated that public school teachers received training on September 2020, nevertheless administrative school workers and other type of employees did not receive any formal instruction until January and February of 2021, at this point most of them had already been working remotely shortly after the beginning of the pandemic.

Technological literacy was not the only disparity that was identified in the research. The economic affordances of companies can also increase disparities among employees and make their work a different experience. The participants that belonged to small and medium-sized companies reported that it was difficult for the employer to provide their workers with the adequate equipment to continue their work from home, thus prompting employees to get their own. Therefore, working from home brings some other unexpected expenses to the households that might affect their economy. Although the informants reported spending less on gasoline and leisure activities, that money was used for other household expenses such as an increase in food expenses and electricity, mostly used for air-conditioning:

I have noticed it more than anything in the cost of electricity because having a computer on certain hours, and air conditioning all day, although sometimes I think it is not so much, actually it is a lot. At least here in my house in the last electricity bill I could notice an increase in December when we used to pay much less, we got 400 pesos at most for two months and this year I got 1,400 for the same period. So yeah it was too much. I thought –great! I'm not going to spend on gasoline anymore because, as I told you, my work is far away. But since we are always in the house, the children are a 'black hole of food'. They already had breakfast and after 10 minutes 'I want to eat something else!' (...) I try to control what they eat (...). In these two aspects (food and electricity expenses) I have realized that there are more and in that case I would prefer to go to my work because there I wouldn't have to spend (Adriana 31, Administrative Assistant)

The city of Hermosillo is located in the middle of the Sonora desert which can reach average temperatures of 38 degrees Celsius and its maximum registered by the Hermosillo Meteorological Observatory registered a temperature of 49.5 degrees Celsius in the shade in June

2014 (excelsior 2014). As it was already mentioned, Telework was also marketed as a strategy that would benefit the climate. This raises the question of how beneficial teleworking really is for the environment when there is higher consumption of energy in homes. Since Hermosillo is such an arid and hot place the use of air-conditioning or other devices that lower the temperatures are not a commodity but a necessity.

Despite finding divided opinions about the appeal of working from home, participants enjoyed the idea of having certain flexibility under this work mode. The Home office enables increased work autonomy (Waizenegger, et al., 2020), meaning that women can decide how to distribute their work in the time when they are most productive and avoid distractions. It is undeniable that this flexibility has been facilitated by the affordances of new technologies, although the learning process has been treacherous. To find the right strategy when working through ICT's help women to improve their WLB. Some even mentioned their intention to continue working remotely or requesting a mixed work scheme when the pandemic is over. However, the decision to continue working remotely is not based only on the experience obtained from paid work, other factors of the private sphere that are explored below must also be taken into account.

#### **4.4 The challenges of juggling work and the second shift during the lockdowns.**

To a large extent, women's dissatisfaction with the Home office and lack of WLB during lockdowns seems to lie in the overwhelmingly increased duties at home and the process of reorganizing different aspects of life. To be more specific, their dissatisfaction stems from the struggle of catching up with the demands of a new work scheme and meeting daily job goals while taking care of children and doing house chores simultaneously in a context of a crisis. Scholars have found that current narratives show a blurred demarcation between work and family life, additionally the division of labor among genders is more visible (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, the double burden or second shift has been documented by several authors (Szalai, 1972 ; Hochschild & Machung, 2012) in whose works a clear distinction is seen in the uses of time with respect to gender of married couples. Hochschild and Machung (2012) explain that typically working women handle three different spheres: work, home and children, while men only focus on two: work and children. Even when couples share housework more equitably,

women end up doing two-thirds of the daily housework such as cleaning and cooking, tasks that keep them in a strict routine (Hochschild & Machung, 2012 p 8).

Moreover the traditional view of the woman as the 'domestic manager' still persists today. These inequalities are also illustrated in the work of Hochschild and Machung (2012). The results of this study concur with the findings of the aforementioned authors. However, in this study it was found that the role of the household 'manager' is not only influenced by external factors, but it is exercised by choice because women seek to 'be in control'. Although husbands offered their help in household tasks that are not traditionally performed by men, on many occasions the women rejected their offers under the idea of 'I do it better'. In their attempt to have control, women could also be affecting their WLB because instead of delegating or sharing tasks with their partners, they prefer to hold the responsibility:

My husband never stopped working (in the office) he rests only on Saturdays and Sundays. Well, everything falls more than anything on me. When he arrives, he helps me the most with cleaning the patio because we have a dog and it makes the patio very dirty. And I tell him - that is your job! I have a friend who is a psychologist and I tell her 'I know I'm wrong! But I can't help feeling that I need to have control of everything' and she tells me 'don't do that, you have to relax because we are in crisis'. For example, he tells me 'I'm going to help you wash the dishes', but I tell him 'No, don't do it because I already know how you do it and you leave more mess than what you cleaned'. So I think it's more like I want to be in control of it. Yes, he helps me, he tells me 'I help you with the children's homework' and I'm like 'No! I'll do it' (...). And he tells me 'see? I try to help you and you won't let me! Either you scold me or you tell me not to do it because... I don't know'. It's not that there is only one correct way. We just do it in different ways, I just don't like the way he does it. And with the children's room, yes he helps me a lot. When it comes to moving things (heavy furniture) he helps me. Also I feel bad to ask him to do things when he comes back home tired from work, while I have been at home all day (Adriana 31, Administrative Assistant)

In accordance with Hochschild and Machung (2012), the type of work that each gender does impacts their uses of time. As seen in the last example, men do jobs that require physical strength (such as moving furniture), some technical skill (car or computer repair) and risky activities (handling hazardous materials or disposing the dog's droppings). Hochschild & Machung (2012) affirm that the tasks that men perform are not fixed to a certain time, which is why they have more control over when to make their contributions in comparison to women. For example, dinner should be ready at a certain time every day, alternatively some repair (a task that is



usually done by men) does not need to be carried out daily nor does it have a fixed time frame for completion. This was also observed in the research. Therefore the ritualistic and unequal burden of the daily housework and childcare are believed to be some of the main causes of working women's strain.

Hochschild and Machung (2012) also mention that another possible reason why women feel more exhausted in comparison to men is the fact that more often they do two things simultaneously, for example answering mails while keeping an eye on an infant. It's no surprise that women regularly 'multitask' in an effort to be on top of things. Scholars such as Szameitat and Hayati (2019) refers to polychronicity as the preference that one has to carry out one or more tasks simultaneously, that is, multitasking. They mention that continually people assume (wrongly or not) that multitasking saves time, meaning it allows to finish sooner or do more in the same period of time (Szameitat and Hayati, 2019 p 2). In their study about gender differences in polychronicity, the authors found "that women show relative higher polychronicity than men and that more women explicitly prefer multitasking than men" (Szameitat and Hayati, 2019 p 6). However they did not find enough evidence to affirm that women are better at multitasking or that they do it more frequently than men.

The women in this study also showed polychronicity in their behavior. They have expressed that it was common to find themselves doing housework in addition to paid work since 'housework never ends' and it is better to do something around the house to mitigate it as much as possible even if it is during their shift. This situation intensified with the lockdowns because it has been more difficult to be in control of cleaning when all the members of the family are constantly messing rooms and dirtying dishes which adds to the frustration of the women who can never get on top of things. And it is under these conditions where portable devices really shine.

The portability of electronic communication devices such as laptops and smartphones provides flexibility when setting a workspace because it is easy to relocate to other areas of the house and allows mobility. It is precisely mobility in conjunction with other inherent characteristics of current smartphones that allow women to do several things at the same time not only on the device itself but also at home. For example Ana, while talking to me on the phone (without the video camera activated) proceeded to do other things without mentioning it, however the

symphony of dishes colliding with each other and the noise of the blender in the background made me think that she was cleaning and cooking while talking to me:

Well, I always tried to do some house chores in advance because there is no end to it. I confess that sometimes when I had a meeting I put the video call on mute and turned off the video and ran to set the washing machine, make breakfast and even several times I listened to the meeting from the shower. Many times you have to use “gimmicks” to complete work because if you don’t the work accumulates and it gets harder later. More so with children who are always making things dirty and they always interrupt me. So, yeah I feel more tired and it gives me anxiety at night, sometimes I am thinking about what is needed and what I have to anticipate for the next day...also there is the fear of contagion so I cannot sleep (Lily 38, Administrative Assistant)

Similarly, other authors are of the idea that the polychromic, cyclical and domestic time corresponds to the ‘feminine’ and the monochromic, linear or industrial time corresponds to the masculine (Daly, 1996; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). In her concept of 'continuum' where work and home represent the same category of social existence, Nippert-Eng (1996) suggests how women who resort to polychronicity tend to position themselves towards the 'integrating' end of the spectrum while men, who lean towards monochronicity tend to be placed towards the opposite 'segmenting' end. She explains that for the ‘integrating’ extreme all time and space is multipurpose (Nippert-Eng, 1996 p 171) whereas for the ‘segmenting’ end of the continuum there are clear and separate boundaries. These distinctions were made clear in the way the women in the study used their time and space as a whole while their husbands tended to set boundaries and allocate time and space for specific situations:

It's what everyone, I mean, all my colleagues also complain about: the schedule. Because we are not just workers, we are also mothers and most of us have small children who demand more attention .So it's been complicated for us. At the beginning I was answering more and always checking the phone until my husband scold me and he was like ‘you have to have your schedule, even if you are at home, it is your schedule, right? They have to respect it too’. And I thought, well it is true and now I know until what time to answer and what things to answer. But it was very difficult at the beginning; it was very frustrating for me to think – Oh my god! I have things to do in my house but at the same time I also have things to do at work but also the children have class and they also have needs ... I have to be there (Adriana 31, Administrative Assistant)

Although there are more socio cultural aspects to take into consideration, the gendered experience of time play an important role in creating boundaries and flexible time structures

when combining work with home. Additionally, the uses of time according to gender can also impact the perception of having (or not having) a life work balance. Furthermore, the research results are consistent with Arlie Hochschild's studies in which she reveals the existence of a leisure gap. Women, more than men, were trimming down their own time in order to accommodate pressing issues that require their immediate attention at home. Some cut corners in the housekeeping and others had to ignore certain tasks all over.

Moreover it was impossible to escape daily chores and have alone time while living in a small space 24/7 and always in the presence of others. Naturally the entertainment activities, for the most part, were in group. None of the informants said having hobbies of their own due to lack of time, lack of privacy and unexpected occurrences. Several wanted to resume their hobbies such as reading but the constant interruptions made them give up. Others snuck out in the middle of the night to an area of the house where they could enjoy light entertainment. However the mental wear and tear was such that it prevented them from concentrating on a hobby, which also affected their hours of sleep. For all the reasons mentioned, it can be deduced that the women in the study have less control over their WLB in comparison to their partners as we will see in the next chapter.

#### **4.5 Working Mothers and the additional strains of homeschooling and being part of a support network.**

Some other factors that have affected couples and the division of labor are the closure of schools and nurseries, predominantly impacting women since they are the main caregivers of children (Yildirim, T.M. and Eslen-Ziya, H., 2021 p 244). As in the studies of Collins (2020) and Collins et al., (2020) the participants reported that younger children are less independent and seek the attention and help of mothers by constantly interrupting their activities, which results in women experiencing time in a fragmented way. Unsurprisingly, all the women who claimed not to have a WLB are mothers of young children. Furthermore, women also showed to form strategies with the help of technology affordances to optimize their time in the domestic space. For instance women cut corners in the care of children when they are busy at work by 'entertaining them with the tablet':

My youngest son was the one who gave me problems the most, my oldest daughter didn't, she already know what to do. But the youngest one was always

interrupting my classes online ‘Mommy look what I did! Mommy I'm hungry! Mommy I need some things for school’. And he did not care that I was in the middle of the video call, he always interrupted me or very often something unexpected came out. So before I started my class I ran to put some cartoons on the television or in the computer or explained him something about the school, then I ran to my computer and continued with the lesson and in the middle of it I asked my students to do a short assignment so I could go to see what my son was doing or to solve something that arose. There were times when I didn't want to make my life more complicated so I pre-recorded many of my lessons (Erika 38, Language Teacher)

In addition to the interruptions and demands of young children, mothers also spent a great amount of time monitoring their children's academic performance. Many participants even mentioned strategies such as making their own ‘classroom’. Most of the informants expressed the importance of designating a specific area as a studying space for their children, especially when they are very young. They claimed that to have a fixed area that resembles a classroom will get them in the proper mindset for studying, as if the space was an extension of their school. The mothers also pointed out that, just like their colleagues, absenteeism raised and academic performance diminished during homeschooling. They observed how children used technology affordances to create strategies that allow them to obtain results or fulfill their tasks with the least effort.

Well, with my son it is super simple because it is preschool. It is about learning the numbers from 1 to 15 and he already knows them, the geometric figures, the name of the colors in English, but you must reinforce that knowledge during the day. And it is a ton of work for the mother as well, to be there making sure the kids are learning. I let him do almost everything alone but when I see that he is distracted or not paying attention is when I have to go back there to adjust his conduct. But for example about high school boys... my mom teaches them, she works with high school students and they do not turn on the camera so it is another difficulty factor. And then when the evaluations come, my mother says that the exams are all copies, I mean, you can find the same information in Google and they didn't even bother to change anything they just plagiarized, they just used the first thing that appeared. If you ask me if they are learning, well, I would say no (Azucena 35, Director of Cultural Center)

Children’s distractions and a lack of interest in the lessons were part of the day-to-day life of the women who had to invest more of their time monitoring and supporting their kid’s studies. They also reported that the emotional state of their children deteriorated during the crisis. Under these circumstances, the mothers had to use emotional labor as a tool to maintain order and peace in

their homes and in the same way they were helping others in their community. The most common reasons why the children of the participants showed a decline in school performance were apathy, lack of face-to-face social interaction, boredom, disinterest, loss of significance, saturation of information or infoxification, lack of enthusiasm, fear and uncertainty.

Yes I have noticed that my children are doing worse at school because they are already fed up with homeschooling. It bores them to do it through the computer and they don't pay attention and that worries me, so I go and ask my youngest one 'what is going on?' And act as a psychologist (...) I understand them, because in the beginning you get very tired, you get overwhelmed, you are saturated with information, also with everything that is happening, you have to learn not to overwhelm yourself and learn that you have to set limits (...) Yes, you feel that your brain is saturated, it also happened to me at the beginning. Also after having lessons like this, only sitting down my children and I began to have back problems. (...) And it was very overwhelming because I had to make breakfast, I had to do my chores and we all had the stress of the pandemic. And apart from my work, I had to encourage everyone, including my students, because we all had the fear of the pandemic, so I always looked for a way not to lose our spirits, I tried to diversify the assignments to make them more fun. Just imagine it! it was all at the same time! (Erika 38, Language Teacher)

Due to the strict confinements, the emotional support that was provided was mainly through social media and phone calls. Platforms such as Facebook and whatsapp played a major role in keeping family and friends connected. Just as in the theory of "scalable sociality" (Miller et al., 2016) the informants engaged in social media interactions according to the degree of closeness with others as well as the affordances of the platform. Miller et al., (2016) refer to scalable sociality as a "scale of intimacy" (Miller et al., 2016 p 105) that individuals use to better control their social lives when using social media, although is not exclusive to these technologies. In addition, the asynchronicity of social media allowed individuals to have more control over when to communicate. This affordance enabled them to control when to send, read and reply to messages as well as when to share information:

You value the people around you more and before this maybe you didn't realize that they were there and you didn't give them the value or the recognition (...) now I notice it, also value those moments that I spent with the family when we are all got together, value that time and who knows when we will be like this again. (...) But for some time now I have valued the affection displays. I think to myself what if something happens to my mother? And I no longer have the opportunity to tell her? So every day I send her a message, 'how did you wake up? How are you?' She goes out to work so I worry about her. I am always sending her messages

every day or she makes a video call to see the children (...) But almost every day it is a video call to see the children, to see how we are and so on. (...) I am more of a message person. With my mother-in-law it's the same, I send her a message to see how she is doing. Yes, the daily communication has increased with her because before all this I knew she was there unlike now. Back then during the week it was like almost no communication, only by phone and from time to time. But now it is daily and up to two three times a day we exchange messages. I send them photos of the children by Whatsaap and I tell them 'look' what their grandchildren are doing and I send them photos or things like that."(Adriana 31, Administrative Assistant)

Just as in the previous example, all the women in the study declared having an increase in communication with close and extended family members through social media during the lockdowns as well as with certain groups of friends and colleagues. These behaviors were rooted in fear of losing loved ones and the uncertainty of life amidst the perilous context of the pandemic. Engagement through social media with intimate groups was not only to know about the condition of the others and build rapport but also to provide emotional support to foster resilience.

## **5. Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to examine how working mothers dealt simultaneously with remote work through ICT's and domestic life while striving for work/life balance amidst a pandemic. Based on the results of the qualitative analysis obtained from the interviews, it can be concluded that the main drawback of doing Home office was the inability or difficulty of dealing with two scenarios that interfere with each other all at the same time. Having to adapt to a new work scheme that mandates the use of ICT's and increased domestic duties while following a gendered division of labor affected women's WLB.

Both work and the home spheres presented their own set of challenges that many times overlapped making it difficult to manage them. In the work sphere there are two findings that stand out the most, these are the extra emotional work and the permanent connectivity or as I like to call it now 'the culture of *always there*'. The study revealed that women had a tougher time when dealing with others due to the impossibility of reading their emotions when communicating through ICT's, therefore doing additional emotional work in order to have appropriate

interactions. Poor communication due to misinterpretation was shown to hinder the work of women who have to spend more time solving conflicts.

The results also show that the 'always there' culture is one of the work related main causes of stress and anxiety in women since it allows work issues to interfere with other areas of private life. Additionally, permanent connectivity has also been shown to cause disparities between employees because most of the work ends up being assigned to those who are alert and 'always there'. Despite these strains, the study revealed that women demonstrate their professionalism and commitment by being 'always there', which has now been evidenced to be part of remote work culture. Companies could easily solve this problem by sticking to work schedules and establishing limits on how frequent the communication should be and what are the acceptable hours to request an extra assignment. By setting boundaries, working women can be more certain about their time and thus have more control over it.

Likewise there are several interesting findings in the domestic sphere, yet the results highlights the need for women to be in control over the household matters, the added burden of homeschooling, and the intensification of their role as a support network. In all these three aspects media and communication technologies proved to be an important tool for strategy development. This research demonstrated that participants actively choose to play the role of 'household manager' and that in their search for having full control they affect their WLB. Because of this role women showed polychronic tendencies, that is, they use multitasking as a strategy to stay on top of things and keep everything under control. It was found that the affordances and specially the mobility of ICT's enable women to multitask and even keeping their kids entertain to avoid distractions. Moreover, it was shown that the mobility and asynchronicity of electronic devices also aids women when they act as integrators, that is, when they use time and space as multipurpose.

Additionally, the study shows that although women frequently multitask, the time that they save is spent on others therefore they have the idea that they never have time for themselves. This is especially true in the case of caring for their children. Homeschooling was particularly time consuming for the women in the study. Despite women's efforts, it was discovered an increase in absenteeism and a lower academic performance in children. It was revealed that children form strategies to fulfill their assignments with the least effort with the use of technology. This is a

problem I did not expect to encounter but that needs to be investigated further as it raises the question: is online learning really working for students? I think it is important to pay attention to this issue since we are talking about the education of future generations and how this will impact them and the general society in the future.

The study also revealed that children's emotional state deteriorated during the pandemic for that reason mothers were more active in their role of support network, meaning that they had to do emotional labor more frequently. It can be observed in the findings that this support also extends to other relatives, friends and coworkers and it was mainly carried out through social media and phone calls. The increase in communication was found to be due to fear of losing loved ones to the crisis and the need to help others. The availability that women show to support others points towards another angle of being 'always there'. To me the 'always there' culture of working women reflects their caring nature. The 'always there' not only means being permanently available or always online, but also encompass being 'always there' for others; to be reachable and provide support.

It was also shown in the research results that the instability and uncertainty generated by the pandemic have affected the ontological security of the women in this study including their families. The stress and anxiety they experienced came as a result of a rupture in their way of living. Their everyday lives were undermined by the sudden changes and the lack of preparation to face these alterations. The disintegration of their work and home routines in addition to adapting to new dynamics that required intense physical, mental and emotional labor took a toll on them.

This study showed that all of the participants believe in the importance of having a routine or 'structure' in their day, this provides them a sense of stability and control. To achieve a balance, people must first feel stable and safe, and having a routine is essential for this purpose. Furthermore, the solution to achieve WLB can be found in a routine where work and home demands do not interfere greatly with each other. Each person must find the routine that suits them best and that is close to what is meaningful to them and the study revealed that existential questioning was aiding women in this regard.



One last important finding was that even though communication through electronic devices permit work to carry on, it was perceived as impersonal and diminished the experience rendering less meaningful. I think this highlights the importance of relating to others in the real world and shows that new communication technologies, while they are very practical tools, cannot replace face-to-face interaction. As the Home office becomes the norm, I think it is important to ask ourselves in what ways the experience of working online can become valuable and meaningful and also we must reflect on how beneficial it is for social cohesion and work commitment when there is no frequent conviviality.

The methodology used suited very well this study especially considering the limitations of distance, time and the serious context. The qualitative interview conducted through Zoom was the ideal tool since it helped to reveal nuances and details that could not have been captured with a simple questionnaire or survey. Being able to see their faces on camera gave me additional information through visuals and other non-verbal communication that enriched my interpretations and grasp of the issue. The use of a phenomenological perspective was ideal as it allowed me to immerse myself in the problem and try to see it from the point of view of the participants, so much so that after the analysis I was able to recognize similarities in my daily life.

Finally, based on the results, companies and individuals alike should form strategies to better handle the culture of the 'always there' of the office so that work issues do not invade family life, thus helping the WLB of working women. Adhering to a schedule and establishing boundaries around communication practices are only examples of what could work. Also I would suggest that companies and individuals look for ways to find meaning and value in remote work together and determine the work scheme that better suit their needs, this in turn may lower absenteeism and increase the motivation and commitment in the employees.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1. Interview questions and themes.**

Media and new technologies as a precondition of all the themes (especially mediated work)

Identity (existence):

What does it mean balance?

What are their ideals as a worker and as a mother?

What does it mean for women to be professionals, mothers and a good friend/coworker (support network)?

How do they perform their professional self through media?

Everyday life:

How were their routines pre-pandemic and how are they during the pandemic?

What is the role of new technologies in their daily habits at work and at home?

What are the technologies that they use to manage work and home?

What is the reasoning behind using a certain technology for certain activities?

Why do women justify the use of this technology?

Gender:

How are household chores distributed according to gender and how are they performed?

How is the work from home performed according to gender?

Emotional work:

What are the 'feeling rules' at home and at work?

What is the emotional work that women must do at home and at work?

How do they feel when working from home in contrast to the previous physical environment?

What is the emotional impact of the pandemic? (How do they feel about the current context)

How was their self-care and hygiene during while working from home?

Do they feel that technologies are facilitating their work or affecting it?



Place:

What are the cultural norms of the home and work?

What are the definitions or demarcations of a work space and a home space?

In which ways new technologies create a sense of place?

How women organize their space according to mediated practices specifically home office?

Time:

Is there a specific time when they work from home?

How do they allocate time for specific work activities or home activities?

Do they have leisure time or time for themselves?

Work/life balance

Do they consider that they have a balance between work and home?

Do they feel satisfied working from home?

**Appendix 2. Table1. Demographics of interviewees**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Children's age range (in years )</b>	<b>Experience working from home</b>	<b>Job position</b>	<b>Work life balance</b>
Adriana	31	2	5-10	No	Administrative assistant	No
Lupita	33	2	1-4	No	CEO assistant	Yes
Janet	33	1	1-4	No	Administrative assistant	No
Azucena	35	2	1-4	No	Director of cultural center	No
Ana	37	1	10-15	No	Designer	Yes
Erika	38	2	5-10/ 10-15	Yes	Language teacher	More or less
Lily	38	2	10-15	No	Administrative assistant	No
Monse	40	2	10-15	Yes	Administrative assistant	Yes

### Appendix 3. Consent form.

[Questions](#)   [Responses](#) **8**

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## Home office y la mujer trabajadora mexicana

Mi nombre es Alia Felix y actualmente estoy realizando una investigación sobre la mujer trabajadora y el Home office para el departamento de Medios y Comunicación de la Universidad de Lund. El propósito de este estudio es tener un mayor conocimiento sobre los retos que enfrentan las mujeres que trabajan o trabajaron desde casa durante el confinamiento por el Covid 19. El objetivo es obtener la mayor cantidad de información posible de una entrevista que puede oscilar entre 30 y 60 minutos de duración. Los datos recopilados se analizarán y compilarán en un trabajo de tesis el cual es posible compartir con usted si lo solicita. Las entrevistas se grabarán solo con fines de registro pero su identidad permanecerá anónima y no se mostrarán datos personales. Es posible negarse a responder preguntas y / o detener la entrevista en cualquier momento. Si acepta participar en este estudio, complete el formulario y confirme su consentimiento.

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Un solo nombre o pseudonimo \*

Short answer text

My name is Alia Felix and I am currently conducting a study on working women and the Home office for the Department of Media and Communication at Lund University. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by women who work or worked from home during Covid-19 lockdowns. The purpose is to obtain as much information as possible from an interview that can range between 30 to 60 minutes long. The collected data will be analyzed and compiled into a thesis work which can be shared with you upon request. Interviews will be recorded for later analysis only but your identity will remain anonymous and no personal details will be displayed. You can refuse to answer questions and / or stop the interview at any time.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the form and confirm your consent.

#### Appendix 4. Table 2. Illustrative quotes and coding

Quote	Codes
<p>In my case, it has increased, because before I did not have the children under my care all morning, and to be aware of their well-being it has reduced my efficiency and focus in my work. Many times the teachers request information and / or materials during class, and I have to be aware that the children comply, in addition to supporting them with the study for the exams, because now they are different and there are technical problems. Many times in the mornings or in the course of the day they appear emotionally unstable, sad, exhausted or anxious, and obviously I have to be very alert to attend to those crises, in addition to the issues of the organization of the house, which is now totally my responsibility, I feel that I have no excuse that something is missing or fails because I am 100% inside the house daily.</p>	<p>Increased work due to childcare.</p> <p>Decreased efficiency and focus on work.</p> <p>School demands and the role of the mother as an education assistant cause distractions.</p> <p>Technical issues and children's emotional problems (sadness, anxiety, and fatigue) cause a constant state of alertness.</p> <p>The organization of the home is the sole responsibility of the mother because she is fixed in the home.</p>
<p>At the beginning of this, I was still in "perfection mode", but there came a time when I had to give up and relax a lot, because I began to feel too overwhelmed especially with the uncertainty that I felt of not knowing what was going to happen with many aspects of my life and my routine, and of the children I can tell you that now, my way of thinking, seeing and doing things, complying with obligations and responsibilities is much more relaxed, really seeing the reality that, nothing is for sure, it has been one of the many beliefs that I had to completely come to terms with during this year.</p>	<p>"Perfection mode" pre pandemic.</p> <p>Give up and relax in the face of overwhelming work and the uncertainty of the course of own life and family.</p> <p>Current ideologies, views and completion of tasks are more relaxed when facing reality and the belief that nothing is for granted.</p>

**Appendix 5. Table 3. Theme's Master chart.**

<b>Open Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Analytical Code</b>	<b>Theme/category</b>	<b>Theory</b>
<p>“Before it was working, picking up the other child in the nursery and coming home. It was basically that, leaving work completely at work and it has changed a lot, for example, right now that we are at home, there are no hours. It's like they can send me a message 24 hours a day. It can be very early morning as well very late.”</p>	<p>Changes in routine with regard to commuting, organization, activities and schedules. Essentially changes in the structure of routines.</p>	Routines	Everyday life	Giddens Ontological security
<p>“Let's say that the dining room table is where we do everything. Where we all liked to do everything and there we are. I try to get everyone to do it on their own schedule. But all the time the computer is on. I have told my children several times that we are going to turn it off and use the tablet and the phone better.”</p>	<p>How the work space is created and negotiated. Also includes how the characteristics of the space influence human interaction.</p>	Space		<p>Andersson's Flexible home</p> <p>Moore's doubling of place</p>
<p>“I think the time I spend at home and my children lately is more than my work. I cannot say that this is wrong, but if the confinement continues for a longer time, it will greatly affect my work.”</p>	<p>How the time is managed and valued according to gender, personal beliefs and socio cultural aspects.</p>	Time		<p>Szameitat and Hayati, Gender differences in polychronicity</p> <p>Nippert-Eng integrator</p> <p>Segmentator/</p> <p>Hoschild's gender strategy and leisure gap</p>
<p>“For me, all this has resulted in questioning the decisions I made</p>	<p>It includes the cultural beliefs that are held</p>	Identities		Hoschild's gender strategy.

<p>during my early adult life, such as having decided to marry at a certain age because that was "normal / common", having placed a bachelor's degree above my true passion because "it makes money" and having decided to be a mother because it is what has to be done once married."</p>	<p>about gender roles as well as their own roles such as being a professional, home manager, mother, supporter etc.</p>			
<p>"I felt exhausted the first months, I consider that until October I was able to regain a little stability and sanity, until then I managed to understand and accept that this situation was not going to be over soon, and that I had to mentalize myself to be able to perform for me and for my family. But above all, my goal was to be focused on not infecting ourselves and keeping ourselves healthy and protected at any cost."</p>	<p>Making ones emotions fit to the situation. Provide emotional support. Also includes the work involved in guessing and interpreting others emotions and intentions.</p>	<p>Emotional work</p>	<p>Feelings/emotions</p>	<p>Hoschild's emotional work and feeling rules</p>
<p>"At the beginning of this, I was still in "perfection mode", but there came a time when I had to give up and relax a lot, because I began to feel too overwhelmed especially with the uncertainty that I felt of not knowing what was going to happen with many aspects of my life and my routine, and of the children."</p>	<p>Situations that cause stress, anxiety, depression and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Emotional strains</p>		

<p>“At first I did answer more and I always checked the phone and that was until my husband scold me and he was like - you have to have your schedule, I mean even if you are at home, it is your schedule, right? they have to respect that too. And then I said to myself, well, that's true. So I said -enough! And now I know until what time to answer and what to answer.”</p>	<p>Societal and personal reasoning behind being permanently online and how it permeates on other areas of life.</p>	<p>Permanent connectivity</p>	<p>Mediated communication</p>	<p>Gregg’s presence bleed.</p>
<p>“(communication) It is very different, for example if it is by text such as whatsapp or text message you cannot see the emotions I mean I cannot say, Oh! This person is upset or something, that’s why I don't know how to treat him.”</p>	<p>Deficiencies and challenges of communicating through ICT’s</p>	<p>Shortcomings (of mediated communication)</p>		<p>Gregg’s work intimacy</p>
<p>“I think that working from home has been the best opportunity I could have taken. The flexibility of working at home and the opportunity it gives me to accommodate my time, I don't change it anymore.”</p>	<p>Benefits of communication through ICT’s and its possible uses.</p>	<p>Affordances</p>		<p>Madianou and Miller’s Polymedia</p>
<p>“Now it is daily (communication with grandparents) and up to two three times a day .I send them photos of the children through Whatsapp and some videos so they can see how they are</p>	<p>The reasoning behind people’s choice of medium when communicating with others depending on their type of relation and</p>	<p>Closeness/distance</p>		<p>Miller’s scalable sociality</p>

doing”	closeness.			
“When he arrives (husband), more than anything he helps me the most with cleaning the patio because we have a dog and it makes the patio very dirty. And I tell him - that is your job! But the good thing is that the house is not very big and I have also started to ask the children to clean their rooms.”	How the work is distributed according to gender, societal and personal expectations	Work roles	Work/life balance	Hochschild’s second shift
“It was very difficult at first, it was very frustrating for me to say –Oh my god!! I have things to do in my house but at the same time I also have things to do at work but also the children have class and they also have needs ... I have to be there because The oldest is already in the second year of elementary school”	Those actions that led to adapting to the new work mode and how was the learning process	Adaptation to new work scheme		Gregg’s work intimacy
“In the morning I would do some things in advance that I had to do at home before the children started their classes but sometimes I would do everything at the same time.”	Strategies to juggle with work and family life simultaneously and the reason behind said strategy.	Work/life management		Hochschild’s second shift and gender strategies.
“I thought – Oh this is great! I'm not going to spend in gas anymore (...). But since we are at home, the children are a "black hole of food". “They already had breakfast and after 10 minutes they are like - I want to eat something	Additional costs of working from home and lockdowns aftermaths.	Additional/unexpected strains		Gregg’s work intimacy



else - and fruit or this and that.”				
“For me, an ideal balance in my personal life, work and home, is without a doubt to be able to feel happy and satisfied with how I perform in the three areas. It has become very clear to me in the last year that if one of the three areas fails, the others are greatly affected.”	Participant’s idea of the importance and meaning of the balance between work and personal life.	WLB subjectivities		Lips-Wiersma et al, Meaningful work