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

Sandra Burchi, University of Pisa, UBIQUAL Research Centre

Sahizer Samuk , University of Pisa, UBIQUAL Research Centre

Introduction

Home is one of those places where inequality starts. To a greater extent, it is the place where gendered inequalities manifest themselves in a clear-cut division of labour and rationalised inequality especially for dual career heterosexual couples (Van Hoof 2011). Patriarchal structures have dominated domestic lives (Lasio, Putzu, Serri and De Simone 2017) despite changing family patterns, and shifting gender roles (Ruspini 2013). Historically, cultural institutions such as the church have been supportive of the idea that a woman's place is home (Walby 1989), women have been associated with house and housework in a feminine manner since childhood (Oakley 2018). Currently, the social construction of "women and making home" dichotomy has become more accentuated when the house became a workplace during Covid-19. Especially since March 2020, Covid-19 has demonstrated that inequalities in the gendered domestic spaces are even more evident (Manzo and Minello 2020, 2).

How did Covid-19 affect Italian women who had to work from home? As a method, focus group (Morgan 1988, Corrao 2000) interviews were used, with more than fifty women who work in the public and private sector in Tuscany. This method allows the researcher to understand how a group makes sense of a phenomenon collectively (Bryman 2016, 502). Before, during and after the interviews, gender-sensitiveness was respected in all steps of the research (Decataldo and Ruspini 2018, 25). The average age of the sample was 45, the majority of the women were married with kids (kids' ages varied) whilst there were also divorcees with kids. The connection with the women was established through CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour). The interviews were semi-structured. An average interview took one and a half hours. During the interviews, researchers took notes, and they also recorded the interviews upon the interviewees' permission. The interview places were mostly offices or the workplaces. We used Atlas.ti to code the interviews. The analysis has been mostly data-driven rather than theory driven (Decataldo e Ruspini 2018, 39). In his paper, we focus more on women's responses to the difficulties of working from home in the context of time and space pressure. The themes of analysis were related to feeling isolation and invasion whilst achieving "productivity" at home. The data collected is extremely rich and diversified confirming the fact that the women interviewed do not form a

homogeneous category (Decataldo and Ruspini 2018, 43) in terms of attitudes and responses to Covid-19.

There is a strong spatial dimension (Massey 2013) we need to take into consideration during Covid-19. Home has become the workplace, and the work is disconnected from the real place of work (e.g. office, company). In the aftermath of Covid-19, every place could become a workplace and there is almost no excuse not to be connected, as before Covid-19, home allowed people to disconnect from work. It is also argued that working from home has its advantages, such as flexibility (Sullivan and Lewis 2001). Nevertheless, lockdown and smart working perpetuate many problems from a gendered division of labour perspective. Therefore, gendered home working overlaps with time and space constraints, causing a-socialisation, intensive multi-tasking and constant struggle to "defend work" from "invasion", despite all odds, not having a room for one's own[1], being a nomad in one's "own" space.

This paper will examine all the strategies and manoeuvres of women within accelerated time and limited space. To achieve that, we first focus on the literature, which is useful for our research, and second, we elaborate our analysis of the interviews. Finally, we finish with our findings paying tribute to the previous literature on gender, time, space and Covid-19 crisis.

The Context of the Gendered Pandemic: Literature in a Snapshot

During Covid-19, the focus of many scholars has been negotiated time, space and relationships (Carreri and Dordoni 2020). Authors note that "a large part of gender inequality in the labour market is related to unequal division of labour in the household" (Alon et al. 2020). Carreri e Dordoni (2020) and Power (2020) talk about the unequal consequences of Covid-19 for women working from home. Another study shows that "many women, meanwhile, have stopped working during Covid-19 through no fault of their own. Since they are over-represented in insecure, hourly employment and in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic (such as hospitality, leisure, retail and tourism), female workers have consequently lost their jobs or been furloughed at a higher rate than men."[2] Grown and Bousquet (2020) suggest that the pandemic has made many social inequalities more visible amongst which there is gender inequality[3]. Malish et al. (2020) draw attention to the fact that gender equity is not present during Covid-19, and they discuss how the Covid-19 has caused barriers to women's advancement in an academic career. The percentage of academic women who submitted papers decreased 4 to 7 percent (changing according to authorship order) compared to the previous year during the Covid-19 (Kibbe 2020). Hence, they conclude that, there should be more investment in gender equality in academia (p. 15380). Similarly, Carreri e Dordoni (2020) focusses on the unequal consequences for the researchers during Covid-19 and find out that women academics who were already having difficulties are facing more significant struggles to concentrate on their work after the pandemic (p. 826). They suggest that the interviewees either talk about "conquering time" or "extreme neoliberalism" (p. 829). Women admit that they had more difficulty writing academic papers during the pandemic while dealing with domestic and care work, as mothers perceived anxiety, stress and tiredness (p. 835).

Collins et al. (2020) carry out a statistical analysis demonstrating that during Covid-19 mothers reduced their working hours four to five times more than the fathers. Furthermore, Collins et al. (2020) suggest that for the first-time fathers working from home could not ignore that the children need care at home

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[1] *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf.
[2] https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200630-how-covid-19-is-changing-womens-lives accessed on 29 December 2020.
[3] https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/gender-inequality-exacerbates-covid-19-crisis-fragile-and-conflict-affected-settings accessed on 29 December 2020.

(p. 2) while mothers are bearing the brunt of the pandemic (p. 3). Work at home had to be rethought and re-divided as the presence of children is not compatible with doing jobs that require great attention and hours of concentration (Lagomarsino, Coppola, Parisi and Rania 2020, 852). It is also observed that whilst women with children aged between 0-5 had decreased productivity, while women's productivity without children has increased (Krukowski, Jagsi and Cardel 2020; Cardel, Dean and Williams 2020). The second shift (Hochshild and Machung 2012) has become a third hybrid shift in women's lives where digital work and manual domestic labour are to be managed in the same space and at the same time.

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

Previous studies have emphasized the potential and the difficulties of working from home: Silver (1993) examines the negative sides such as exploitation, isolation and meeting the demand(s) by the family and the employer, in the case of women. Sullivan and Lewis (2001) further scrutinise the positive and negative sides of teleworking from home, suggesting that synchronisation of work and family, can be helpful in balancing work hours and family time, whilst it can also perpetuate traditional work and family roles. Massey (2013, 132) questions if the time out of work has ever been only "play", drawing our attention to the work outside the offices that had to be done. She perceptively reminds us that "those long hours (at work), and the flexibility of their organisation, is someone else's constraint" (p. 132). This information also confirms why the gender gap in work hours increased during Covid-19 (Collins et al. 2020).

"Spaces and places and our senses of them are gendered through and through" (Massey 2013, 129). Gendered negotiations and restructuration of division of labour in the domestic and public space change from context to context and region to region from a historical perspective (Flather 2013). Hence, the gendered spaces are negotiated, re-negotiated and in some cases reproduced along gendered lines. Much of the literature, valuable though it is, continues to concentrate much less on the women's relation with home as a space and in explaining how women respond to gendered Covid-19 times and gendered domestic work. In line with the absence of research, scrutinising women's responses to Covid-19, we aim to answer this question: How do women relate to space and time while working at home during the Covid-19 pandemic?

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

   1. **Home as a Prison and a Work Space**

After having been in different European offices of the company she worked for, Lara, a former manager, changed profession when she decided to adopt a child. Currently, she is a high school teacher. When she found herself teaching online at home with her husband, who has been working remotely for many years, she had to come to terms with the inequality regarding housework and childcare more than ever. She decided to create a colour-coded Excel spreadsheet that notes on a chart the different times that the child spent with each parent: "At that point we started again. When he saw that his hours were like blue dots in a sea of pink, he realised what was happening." She convinced her partner with this evidence. She added that he helped her with cooking more: "We ate carbonara most of the days and we put on weight, but I said okay, at least he helps". This change in his attitudes shows that men could not ignore anymore the emotional and care work that is a part of the daily life (Collins et al. 2020). What's important here is that Lara made the invisible visible and unseen seen.

The women working from home had to defend "their time and space", including inner self or consistency of place-work connection as all became very invasive, despite positive sides of smart working, where one benefits from being away from a competitive work environment. For instance, Lara, who had worked in the past for more than a few multinational companies with a competitive work culture, admitted that there is a great potential in smart working (Sullivan and Lewis 2001). However, when the quarantine is in place, it is another story. One has to distinguish between smart-working and obligatory work from home during the lockdown. Shifting all the burden of homeworking, child caring and housework on the individual, some have felt that the time for themselves melted into air. Accordingly, Lara says: "I want the ability to work from wherever I want, and it has great advantages. And that is priceless because of the freedom it gives you. The problematic side is that 'you're at home, take care of it!' Smart working increases the self-organisation of time, you are the one who has to defend the work from everything that looms. During quarantine, it is more so in particular."

Another interviewee, Barbara said that she had to do much more in the domestic sphere beside her own work: "If you have to do more, as others take it for granted that you do it all, staying at home turns into staying in a prison". Barbara's words are quite important to understand as the housework and the work-related duties leave no space for leisure time during Covid-19. The sensation of a prison also comes from the fact that the women's work is "taken for granted" and "naturally" she is supposed to do what she did before Covid-19, together with working professionally from home with no outdoor socialisation unless one has a garden and time to relax. Hence, home becomes prison-like: a place where there are only obligation(s) and repetitions of "penal labour".

With lockdown, people could not leave their houses, and could not socialise with others, it has become worse than a prison as full-time service is expected from women in most of the stories we heard. In contrast with this situation, if one is in the office, with colleagues, it is a different story, as Olivia suggests: "When you're in the office, you live with your colleagues who know you're there to work, when you work from home you live with people who don't know you're there to work, not to serve them. So not only do you have so many jobs in one day, for example, I haven't had lunch out since I've been staying at home, which I used to do at work. I used to love leaving the house when I went to work, now I'm an employee and a homemaker. I used to do this housewife thing only at the weekends." Olivia's words

prove that the social construction of "being a housewife" is still the patriarchal expectation from women in some cases (Kynaston 1996, Becker 1999, Rutherford 2001, Mavin and Yusupova 2020).

Rachele was also distressed about another type of "invasion" in which she was talking about the fact that the home space becomes the place of work, one cannot disconnect mentally if the labour at home is not divided equally amongst the members. When the spaces of different emotional and professional work merge, it feels like home is a place for all kinds of anxieties and "lucidity" of mind is a distant possibility:

> Then you are at home, and they call you, mom calls you, I have an elderly mom that I hear from a lot, that I'm always in touch with. However, when I'm at school, I had saved the hours she does not call me, instead of when I did DAD (didattica a distanza) she called all the time, she didn't know any boundaries anymore. Plus, you're at home, you have a moment you get up, turn on the water, load a washing machine. We are always a little bit multitasking but this way we have become even more so. And that is not good. I'm not saying that to do things well, one has to do them one at a time, but every world has its rules, every world has its things. Doing all things in the same place never gives you the right distance, it is the detachment that gives lucidity.
> It bothers me that the house is also where you refresh yourself, but now it loses this quality if it becomes a workspace. It's another place where you carry all kinds of tensions.

As a working woman, being at home, doing everything in one space does not let people distinguish from one "world" to another. The other members of the family are assuming that if "mom, daughter, partner" is at home, she needs to do something about housework as "being home" is equated with "availability". For instance, the other family members of Rachele cannot accept that she is working and she has to be present online for her work-related exigencies. The women who were working normally from offices, were bothered by the fact that home became a work place during Covid-19 as their constant availability in this so-called "private" space is presumed by the other family members.

2. Being a Nomad in Ones' Own Home

It is observed that women assume the burden more than men in the house and in terms of spaces they give more priority to their children and partners when they need to choose a space to work, which surely affects how they work. For instance, they might pick the smallest room to give more space to others. This was the case for Maria who shared the room with the cats and cat litters, as the living room was taken by her son, who is an engineer, and her partner took another room. If the spaces are not available, if the houses are not big enough, women feel more constrained in a smaller space that was not prepared as a workplace before. Besides, her workplace has not passed to digital signatures yet, so she had to do many things with the printer, fax machine which were not available at home. In addition to the rearrangements and restrictions in space, Maria had to do the errands around the house for others within the work time. These errands, such as cooking and preparing all for the men, was a "normalised" part of her domestic work. Maria wanted to go back to the office as she was not very comfortable with the situation. Even when she started to work after three weeks from the office, she woke up early and prepared food for the family's males as the others were working from home.

It is true that women can bring equality to the house and make homes less gendered spaces. Alternatively, they adapt to harsher multi-tasking as they feel that they still need to care for others. There are different mechanisms of collaboration in different houses, and yet, everything done at home becomes a matter of

productivity and keeping track of time. For Pamela, time was mostly for work and others for whom she felt obliged to take care. Besides, the time that she attempted to recuperate was the time spent helping other members of the family. For her, when work starts and finishes, was not clear. From time to time, her partner helped her, but his help had limitations as well.

If there is a conflictual position between women and men with more than one child, they will start to have difficulties. For instance, Pamela had to lock herself into a room and did not have a proper internet connection at home, so she had to work whilst her head was out of the window to get the internet connection. It took her a long time to convince the family members that she was there but "not there":

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

The invasion of work in the private space becomes the invasion of the female workers' space by the other family members. It is true that when someone is at home, it is thought that that person is entirely available to help or do things for others; in the case of women, this assumption is more readily accepted than the case of men, where they tend to impose their time and space boundaries more strictly. As a result, women become nomads in their own homes.

Alice's situation summarises how women who have children and who are working from home feel the obligation to gain the respect of the household to dedicate more time and space to her work:

> And by the way, there was the whole domestic thing. I had everyone in the house; everyone was eating; everyone was dirty... It was a constant alternation from one thing to another for the house. I used to use these tricks: "I'll take off the camera and peel the onions. I was happy to have everyone at home, but I had much work to do, so they all started to understand and respect me after a while. It always seemed that my work, because I like it, was neither arduous nor difficult, there are many studies, which made everyone say "so you read ....". There was a lot of stuff to study, and I had many delegations, all to be invented—especially security. So much stuff arrived, the constant feeling of inadequacy… I felt guilty for not being there physically, so I was always working to make up for it, I was working at home even before, it only got worse. The job of caring for the elderly was the hardest because my mom was completely unpredictable; you never knew what she might do. In short, a big mess. Solved, but difficult. In all this bailamme[4] the only one who gave me a hand was my husband, but a hand eh…

As indicated above, the women had to do more and more multitasking. Moreover, as seen above, Pamela was saying besides cooking and taking care of children, she also had to take care of the elderly. When everything becomes work and care for others, home can become an alienating place for many. The positive side was that the other family members noticed she had to work hard. On the negative and more

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[4] Confusion.

difficult side, the professionality of jobs does not exactly align with the emotional care work one does at home (Burchi 2017).

Paloma shared the room with the iron and ironing table. That was the only place where she could isolate herself: "I worked in a disused room in my house, in the ironing room. That's my workspace and that helps my experience not be a B-list experience. It was important to have my own space there. This strange mixture of a private environment and a more professional one, being careful not to make the connections too invasive." Therefore, there was a negotiation of time and space. Since the home is a place where professional boundaries do not exist, women had to carve the space for themselves at the cost of staying with cats, ironing table, or a corner of a kitchen table.

Laura admitted that "working in a house is cumbersome, despite the square footage". Many of the women were moving around, looking for space for themselves. Rachele said that she was the most nomadic; she would find the empty spaces if the others left any. She adds "one in the living room, one on the terrace, one in the kitchen, one in the bedroom. I work in shifts and so at 8 o'clock when I leave, someone must have already used the kitchen." She was changing spaces according to the exigencies of other members of the family. Even though it might sound stimulating, it was interrupting her work and her routines. She was a nomad in a place she could nonetheless call her own home, which is contradictory in a way. Similarly, Marina denoted that she had to change many places in the house, too. "It took me a while before I found my optimal location, I started in the kitchen, but realised others were spinning as well, I tried the bedroom, the problem was my back. I needed privacy though, or video conferencing or phone calls were just plain invasive. I finally found the attic room. We have a big house and are in the country. I have done everything from my mobile phone."

Concluding Thoughts on Working Women's Responses to Covid-19

To conclude, the house was perceived as a prison by some women due to the continuous housework and smart working exigencies. The availability of the women was assumed by the family members and the work done at home felt like penal labour. For the public workers, lack of digitisation at work also affected smart working practices negatively. For instance, in a few of the cases women asked to go back to the office to be able to finish their work. Those who did DAD and worked in private sector did not have similar request to go back to the offices. Some women chose to show inequalities in time spent with their children to their partners leading to a moderate change in gender roles. Some partners were helpful but not to the extent that the division of work fifty-fifty (Collins et al. 2020). Equal labour division was not the majority of the cases (Blair and Lichter 1991, Coltrane 2000, Hochshild and Machung 2012).

The fact that there was no face-to-face interaction with colleagues during the lockdown, affected women negatively. Before the lockdown, they would go out for lunch with their colleagues and would have a scenery change outside their office. Even this short lunch time was missed as it meant transcending work stress for a moment. Space was another problem like time. Some women shared space with the ironing table, or cat litters or they used the edge of the kitchen table. Some of them had to move around the house depending on who uses which room. One found a solution locking oneself into the room and trying to get the internet from the window, which meant that the infrastructures at home was not at its best. Even those with more spacious houses felt that it is not a matter of square footage but it is more problematic being closed with so many overlapping exigencies. Most of the care work were still on females than males, as kids and elderly required more attention, which conflicted with the serious time devoted to work. Women who felt that they had to multitask thought that they did not do their best at

work and they overworked instead. Working extra office hours to compensate for piling work was also amongst the responses to Covid-19.

This research provides some crucial insights in relation to "home" as a gendered space: First, it can become a prison if one has to work all the time for herself and for others (Sullivan and Lewis 2001); second, women can become nomads to adapt to the circumstances in which they need to find a quiet room to work. The latter proves that not everyone is on the same boat in terms of home quality (Boccagni 2020). Furthermore, even if everyone is on the same boat, during Covid-19, women have had a very active and non-possessive relationship with home. The positive sides such as flexibility (Sullivan and Lewis 2001) and having a good family time were present but they were overshadowed by the difficulty of multitasking and space seeking. Home became a place of constant movement and action like a battlefield (Burchi 2017). During Covid-19 women could not find the leisure time and space out of work and housework (Massey 2013). In short, Italian working women, during Covid-19 lockdown, had to defend their work space; to multi-task in between family related chores and work lives and had to show evidence for inequality whilst negotiating with their partners. Being a nomad in one's own home was also a consequence, but it was also a strategy to use the space in order to finish the work efficiently.

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