



**RESISTIRÉ**

Reducing gendered inequalities  
caused by COVID-19 policies

# Telework as a Double-edged Sword: Risks and Opportunities

Recommendations to policymakers and employers to mitigate the gendered impacts of Covid-19, based on RESISTIRÉ findings.

20 December 2021

The COVID-19 crisis led to the rapid and widespread adoption of telework in a multitude of sectors to curb the spread of the virus, while also allowing organisations and companies to continue their activities. This sudden imposition of telework strongly impacted the relationships of people with regards to their jobs and their work-life balance, though these effects, both positive and negative, were not experienced in equal measure across all societal groups. However, while telework can, for instance, reinforce existing gender care and labour gaps, it can also serve as a catalyst for narrowing these gaps.



## › Background Information

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend towards more teleworking. Teleworking can be beneficial by allowing more flexibility to workers and households: people can use their time more efficiently and reduce their time spent commuting, which, in turn, helps them achieve a better work-life balance. However, this doesn't necessarily apply to everyone and telework may not be in the best interest of some workers for a variety of reasons. For instance, telework can be challenging for employees because the boundaries between the professional sphere and the private sphere can become blurred. This leads to an increase in the number of working hours and difficulties for workers to disengage themselves from their professional responsibilities.

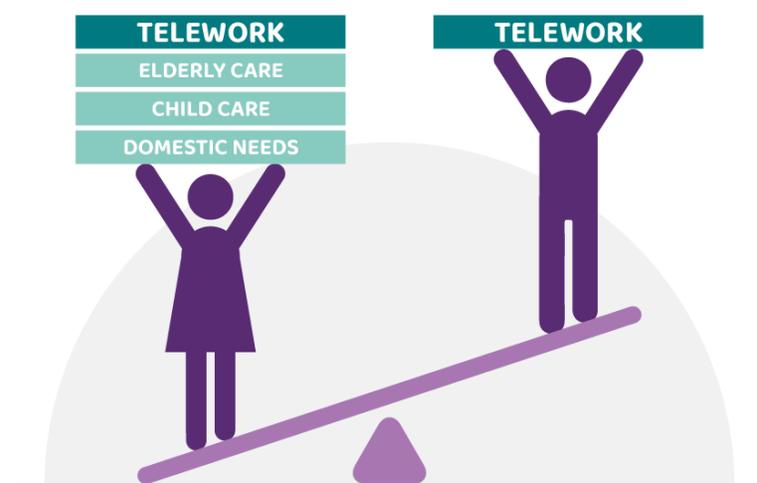
The structural gender inequalities in the labour market have largely affected the unequal experience of teleworking between men and women. While more time at home might have made less involved caretakers (most often male partners) more aware of the importance of shared responsibilities within the household, the existing gender care gap in Europe meant that the immediate increased burden of care due to the movement restrictions almost exclusively fell on women. In addition to this, the gendered labour market segregation has crowded women's positions primarily in the care and hospitality sectors, which were hit the hardest during the pandemic-induced economic crisis, as well as the least able to transition online, meaning that women likely experienced the fewest gains from the telework transition.



## > Quantitative data: main findings

Within the analysis of quantitative data from the RESISTIRÉ project<sup>1</sup>, we have identified several examples of the dynamics described above, for instance: "A French Rapid Assessment Survey (RAS) conducted among a representative sample of 2002 salaried office workers found that women were 1.3 times less likely than men to have an isolated space to work (62% compared to 71% of men) and 1.5 times more likely to be frequently interrupted when teleworking (28% compared to 19% for men)."

Regarding the gendered division of care/domestic work in light of new telework arrangements, the analysis of quantitative data found that "further research should investigate whether increased teleworking among fathers has had positive effects on norms and the gendered division of labour. National level RAS showed that fathers increased their contribution to childcare during the pandemic as a result of working from home."



While the forced, almost overnight shift to working from home has opened up new possibilities of organisational arrangements for working parents, it has also accentuated the already existing economic inequalities between women and men in Europe, and risks worsening them without the necessary systematic change that needs to happen alongside it.

<sup>1</sup> <https://zenodo.org/record/5541035#.YaT-DtDMKUK>

## › Narratives: main findings

Narratives collected by the RESISTIRÉ project<sup>2</sup> have indicated some examples of how the adoption of telework during the pandemic has impacted and continues to influence people's lives. Below are two examples:



A working middle-aged mother living in Germany (along with her husband) had to devote more time to taking care of her two small children when the pandemic started, since the children would normally spend two days per week with their grandparents. As a result, she had to work longer hours to be able to care for them during the day. Her employer granted everyone ten days of special leave, which was useful in the beginning, but what really helped was her husband being able to work from home - with the agreement of his employer - and sharing caretaking responsibilities. This allowed them to truly balance their domestic

and care tasks.

*"My husband has taken the liberty to work from home to take care of the children. (...) His employer played a huge role. This would not have been possible if his employer did not offer this flexibility."*



*"Another main problem I faced both during the lockdown and now, is my working condition. I have to telework since I cannot go to work due to my health problem. My employer was and still is ok with me teleworking. I managed to secure a laptop from my work during the first Covid wave, but it took months to get a printer at home."*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://zenodo.org/record/5595815#.YbDU4r3MKUK>

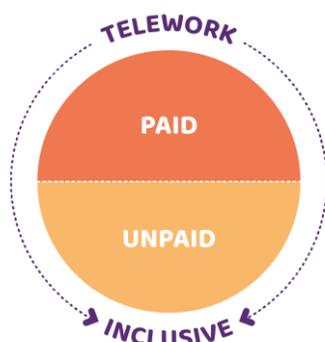
## › Better Stories

Within RESISTIRE, we identify “Better Stories”, a term taken from Dina Georgis for promising practices that identify how a given societal situation can be ameliorated to improve existing practices.

- The Luxembourgish Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Economy introduced a voucher targeting workers in temporary (short-term) unemployment schemes that allows them to take part in online training courses to brush up on their digital skills. It covers up to €500 euros in costs and was specifically adopted to support workers impacted by the pandemic.
- In Belgium, a national interprofessional collective agreement instituted a number of stipulations with regards to telework (albeit only for a limited period of time). These stipulations ranged from the provision of equipment and technical support, to the organisation of telework and working hours, to how employers may exercise control over their employees’ work, among others.

## › Recommendations

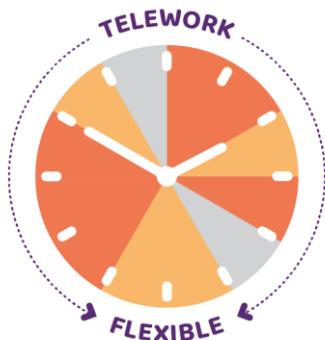
### 1. Unpaid Work is Work (See “Care and Crisis” factsheet)



The increased prevalence of telework provides an opportunity to improve the general position of women in the labour market. In this regard, however, it is crucial to recognise unpaid work as work, to allow sufficient time for unpaid work when an employee works from home, and to actively fight gender stereotypes in order to ensure that women - who bear the brunt of unpaid domestic & care labour - do not see this burden increase and to help enable a closing of the gender care gap. It is essential for policies to incentivise a more equitable distribution of caring duties and a fairer division of labour when working from home in order for telework to have a positive impact on gender equality. A number of hours of required care/domestic work during the day could be recognised as part of the working hours for every employee working remotely, outlined within the framework of a telework arrangement (as recommended above).

Furthermore, men could be actively encouraged and incentivised to make use of this arrangement so that traditional gender roles are not reinforced. Policies like these, that trust employees and recognise the role of care work in day-to-day life, can actually create more equitable household divisions of labour and, potentially, push for cultural change around the issue of care work.

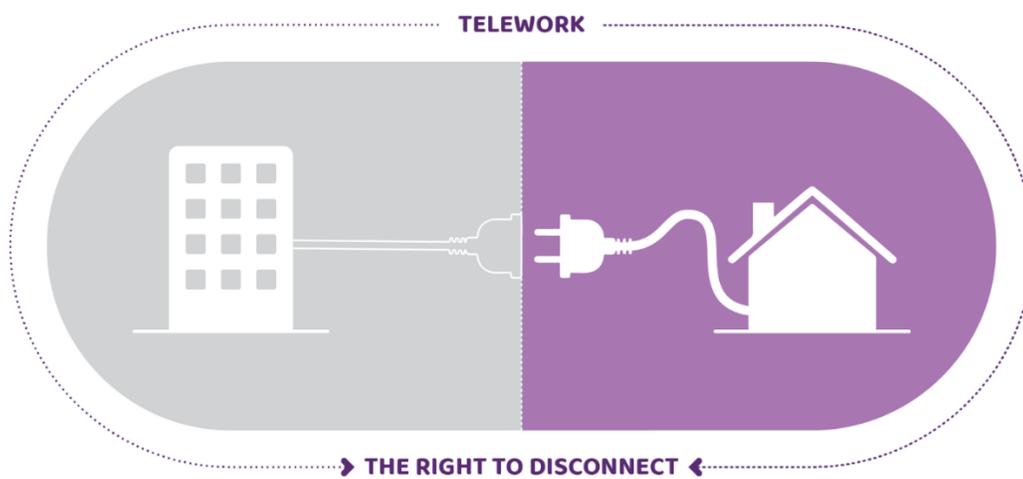
## 2. Right to Flexible Telework



Because telework might not be in all employees' best interests, the workers' right to voluntary telework should be guaranteed, and the concrete implementation of this right should be safeguarded through a legal and regulatory framework. To account for differences in teleworkability in different sectors, the legal framework could be arranged through collective bargaining agreements on a sectoral level. This would also ensure that telework becomes accessible to all workers, in some way or form, and prevent new inequalities from taking root.

## 3. Right to Disconnect

The 'right to disconnect' outside of working hours should fall under the fundamental principle of occupational health and safety for workers. The existence of this right should be clearly communicated and employers should encourage their employees to make use of it, in order to ensure a better work-life balance and greater productivity during working hours. Clear rules on when workers are expected to be online and available for collaborative work should be established and respected, as well as the freedom of workers to organise their work and their working hours as best fits their schedule. The concept of 'core hours', i.e., hours during which meetings and workshops can be organised and during which employees should be available for teleconferences and (video) calls, can serve as an inspiring example of good teleworking etiquette.



## 4. Telework is Work: Worker's Occupational Health and Safety

While teleworking, workers are still performing their professional activities. As such, all occupational health and safety regulations should apply as much at home (or when working from another remote location) as in the traditional workplace. The same principle holds for all other labour rights enshrined in law. The prevention of potential negative side-effects of telework on employees' physical and mental health therefore remains the responsibility of the employer.



## 5. Telework is a New Kind of Work: Creating a Culture of Trust and Support

A successful telework arrangement depends on an adapted approach to work by the employer. Overly controlling and monitoring working relationships present a detriment to the well-being and health of workers, as well as to their overall productivity. As such, a style of leadership that is based on support and trust between employers and employees, rather than one based on control, is essential. Concretely, the employer should adjust the expected working hours and productivity standards. Currently, teleworkers work longer hours than when they work in the workplace, while at the same time increasing their self-monitoring and putting more pressure on themselves than necessary or required. Therefore, employers should openly discuss with their employees about the expectations that exist with regards to remote work (i.e., how much work is expected of workers within a given timeframe). Allowing and encouraging employee input in the organisation of telework is absolutely crucial to ensure that a successful teleworking arrangement is put in place and adhered to. If done correctly and in a clear manner telework can be very beneficial to both employers and employees.

## > About RESISTIRÉ

This factsheet is based on data collected within RESISTIRÉ's first research cycle which ran from 15 May to 30 June 2021. 31 national researchers worked with the consortium to map policies and societal responses, together with qualitative and quantitative indicators, related to the pandemic in the EU27 countries along with Iceland, the UK, Serbia, and Turkey.<sup>4</sup> This research activity was completed with workshops and interviews with gender equality experts whose input informed the main findings from expert consultations.<sup>5</sup>

RESISTIRÉ is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project the aim of which is to 1) understand the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities in the EU27, Serbia, Turkey, Iceland, and the UK on the basis of a conceptual gender+ framework, and 2) design, devise and pilot policy solutions and social innovations to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders and actors in different policy domains.

Find out more about the project at <https://resistire-project.eu>.



**Discover all project outputs at** <https://resistire-project.eu>.

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