

The Future of Work:

Will Remote Work Help or Hinder the Pursuit of Equality?

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The Future of Work: Will Remote Work Help or Hinder the Pursuit of Equality?

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Table of Contents

1	Executive Summary
2	Introduction: Remote work and inequality after the pandemic
3	Results: How remote work can amplify or mitigate inequalities
3	Access to remote work is not equal
3	Remote work has mixed effects on well-being
4	Remote work may increase work-family conflict without other supports
6	Remote work can increase economic opportunity, but its stigma may disadvantage some workers
7	The impact of remote work on the environment is equivocal
9	Implications for the future of work
12	Conclusion
13	References

Executive Summary

The widespread shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many questions on the future of work. A recent survey by Microsoft of 31,000 workers in 31 countries suggests that 52% of employees are somewhat or extremely likely to prefer hybrid or remote work in the year ahead, and 53% of employees are more likely to prioritize their wellbeing over work than before the pandemic.¹ The way that people perceive and experience work has changed drastically over the last two years. But how have marginalized workers specifically been affected by the shift to working from home? And what types of work design will best facilitate equity, well-being, and opportunity for workers moving forward?

Analyzing the dynamics of remote work with an intersectional lens allows us to understand how different groups may be experiencing this transformation in labour. Research suggests that remote and hybrid work models have improved many workers' lives, but it has also been associated with career penalties, work-family conflict, higher stress, and other mental health challenges—particularly for those who already experience inequity. Many of these disadvantages come about not because of anything inherent about remote work but because of bias, stereotypes, and social norms surrounding paid and unpaid work. Through a review of recent scholarly literature on remote work and worker outcomes, we discovered the following key findings:

Effects of remote work:

- Access to remote work is not equal. The ability to telecommute disproportionately belongs to higher-income, white-collar workers who are predominantly white and male. Those with poor access to housing and high-speed internet or who experience unsafe situations such as domestic violence cannot readily work remotely.
- Remote work has mixed effects on well-being. It can reduce stress and exposure to microaggressions, increase motivation and job satisfaction, and allow for more time spent with family. However, it may also contribute to increased exhaustion, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and other mental health challenges, particularly during crises such as the pandemic, and especially for people with caregiving responsibilities.
- Remote work can increase work-family conflict without other supports in place to prevent it. Primary caregivers, who tend to be women, may particularly experience an erosion of boundaries between work and care responsibilities while working from home, leading to an unsustainable amount of paid and unpaid work. This comes about partly because of gender norms and stereotypes that result in women taking on disproportionate domestic and care work when compared to men.
- Remote work increases economic opportunity, such as by allowing workers with other responsibilities such as caregiving to remain in the workforce and by allowing workers to move to less expensive regions. However, although many workers of different social identities use flexible work arrangements, women and racialized people tend to experience disproportionate stigma and bias for using them, resulting in significant career penalties such as wage reductions and fewer promotions.
- The impact of remote work on the environment is equivocal. Although an increase in remote work has the direct effect of reducing carbon emissions due to reduced commuting, increased energy use in homes, increased car use due to workers moving away from urban locales, and other indirect impacts may negate reduced emissions.

Implications for the future of work:

- Remote work policies must be matched by public and organizational policies that address gendered structures. Such structures contribute to increased work-life conflict and mental health issues for caregiving women while working from home. Public policies such as affordable childcare, adequate paid family leave, and a range of options for flexible work can facilitate more egalitarian relationships and households.
- Both workers and organizations benefit from policies that remove stigma of remote work because it increases worker motivation and job performance. Organizations can offer these options on a regular basis and ensure that they are accessible for everyone and universally appealing to people of all genders and backgrounds.
- Office workspaces and work design can be transformed to facilitate different forms of work. Studies indicate that some forms of work practices and routines (i.e., more traditionally bureaucratic arrangements) facilitate the use of remote work and flexible work policies more than others. Flexible work stigma can also be reduced by ensuring information is accessible online, and creating team-building opportunities for hybrid- and remote-working employees.
- Organizational initiatives can decrease work-family conflict, such as by ensuring reliable and consistent communication to all employees, establishing that workers know they do not have to work longer hours at home, and eliminating employee monitoring.
- Remote work needs will not have a major impact on the climate crisis unless accompanied by other policy measures, such as ensuring widespread availability of quality public and other low-carbon transportation and affordable housing in urban areas.



Introduction: Remote work and inequality after the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people work. In March 2020, with the onset of lockdown and quarantining measures, many workplaces were forced to shift to remote work models. According to Statistics Canada, in 2016 only 4% of employees aged 14-69 worked most of their hours at home. As of the beginning of 2021, this figure had shifted to 32%. While many jobs cannot be performed remotely, for knowledge workers, it is likely that remote and hybrid work models will continue after the pandemic: 90% of those working remotely in Canada have reported being as or more productive as they were in the office,² and recent Canadian polls show that 38% of respondents prefer to work at home full-time, while another 38% prefer to work at the office only a few days a week.³ For many, the shift to remote work has improved their lives and livelihoods. Working from home can, for instance, eliminate time-sucking commutes, allow workers to feel more at ease, increase their job satisfaction and productivity, and enable them to remain in the paid labour force when they have unpaid work responsibilities such as caregiving.

At the same time, research has associated remote work with career penalties, work-family conflict, higher stress, and other mental health challenges—particularly for those who already experience inequity. Many of these disadvantages may come about not because of anything inherent about remote work but because of bias, stereotypes, and societal norms surrounding paid and unpaid work. Analyzing the dynamics of remote work with an intersectional lens allows us to understand how different groups may be experiencing this transformation in labour.

Important to note here is that there has been a disproportionate economic and health toll of the pandemic on many marginalized groups: women, racialized communities, immigrants, and others facing marginalization. Women experienced the majority of job loss at the beginning of the pandemic, and as schools and care services closed, many were pushed out of the labour force because of care responsibilities.⁴ Economic circumstances were

especially precarious for racialized, immigrant, and low-income women and families.⁵ Relatedly, the pandemic was particularly damaging for women's mental health and wellbeing, relative to men;⁶ a survey in late 2020 suggested that a quarter of adult women in Canada are experiencing moderate to severe anxiety and loneliness, compared to around 17% of men.⁷ It is therefore important to explore not only the effects of remote work on marginalized groups but also what organizations and governments can do to create more supportive, inclusive environments for the future of work.

Here, we use scholarly research to investigate how the rapid transition to remote work may be affecting social, economic, and health inequalities. We provide readers with a synthesis of current research on this topic mainly from the last seven years⁸, outlining key scholarly debates and issues, and exploring implications and considerations for organizational and public policy as well as for future research. Our specific focus in our analysis of this rapidly evolving field of inquiry is on the effects of remote work on individual well-being, economic and career outcomes, and its potential impacts on the climate crisis.

Our analysis is limited to the scope of academic literature, and this literature does not focus on all (or even many) social identities. Marginalization occurs based on numerous social locations and their intersections, including but not limited to gender, race, caregiving status, Indigeneity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and ability. We acknowledge that shifts towards remote work affect different social groups in varied ways, and that further research is necessary to understand these impacts more comprehensively. Thus, this report investigates questions about remote work and inequality in a way that is generative and informative recognizing that there are still many gaps in the research.



Results:

How remote work can amplify or mitigate inequalities

Access to remote work is not equal

Remote work is not equally available to everyone. The ability to telecommute belongs primarily to those who are higher-income and work in white-collar jobs. In the US, the average income in telework occupations is \$51,000 a year, compared to \$32,000 in occupations that cannot involve telework. US data also show that among those in telecommuting occupations, 74% are white, compared to 67% of all workers. Hispanic and Black workers comprise 9% each of workers in telework occupations, compared to 14% and 11% of all workers.⁹ Further, during the pandemic, the jobs with the highest risk for COVID exposure were in-person services, such as care work, food services and retail, and the majority of these jobs are held by women.¹⁰ Jobs that do not offer telework also tend to afford workers few protections such as paid time off. Some scholars have noted that research often overlooks the differences in access to flexible work (such as flextime and telecommuting) based on occupational groups, which intersects with other social identities such as gender, race, and immigration status. Those in high-status occupational groups such as lawyers or technology workers will also have different outcomes from flexible or remote work than those in lower-status jobs.¹¹

Many assume that everyone's home is amenable to effectively working remotely, but researchers have noted this view is based on an understanding of a worker as a young, single man who lives alone in an urban area, and ignores the realities of domestic violence, lack of access to good housing and adequate technology, and the needs of dependants who may also be in the home.¹² For example, in Canada and many other countries, those living in rural areas may be unable to work remotely due to lack of access to high-speed internet: data from the Public Policy Forum on the digital divide in Canada shows only 46% of rural households and 35% of Indigenous households have access to reliable and affordable internet access.¹³ Even for those in urban areas, the costs of high-speed internet may be prohibitive: a

study from the Brookfield Institute reports that in Toronto, 52% of low-income households have inadequate internet download speeds (less than 50mbps).¹⁴ Further, workers who do not have adequate space in their homes have reported that working from home is not an effective or productive option for them. This barrier connects to affordable housing crisis that is affecting many cities and communities worldwide.¹⁵

Further research is needed to better understand "work-life inequality"—the phenomenon where workers in different occupations have unequal opportunities for work-life supports such as telecommuting—and how this inequality is linked to social demographics.¹⁶ Although it is not the focus of this review, the question of who has and will continue to have access to flexible, hybrid, and remote work arrangements in the post-pandemic recovery remains an important area of scholarly investigation.

Remote work has mixed effects on well-being

The impacts of remote work on employee well-being are particularly important to understand, considering that a recent global survey by Microsoft found that over half of employees report that they are now more likely to prioritize their health and well-being over work than they were before the pandemic.¹⁷ Scholarly research on remote work shows mixed effects on well-being and suggests that organizations can play an important role in how their employees experience it. Some research on part-time teleworkers has found that when they work from home, they have a higher ability to concentrate and require less recovery from stress after work, compared to when they work in-office.¹⁸ In fact, numerous studies have found that working at home generally tends to decrease stress.¹⁹ Other research has linked remote work to increased positive emotions such as feeling at ease, enthusiasm, and happiness.²⁰ Studies have also suggested that it may result in higher job satisfaction,

organizational belonging, job performance, motivation, and productivity, as well as a significant reduction in attrition.^{21,22} Some of these results may come about partially because eliminating commuting allows workers to save time and energy.²³ Home offices may also provide a more comfortable working environment; e.g., a study of customer service workers in China showed that employees worked better from home because it was quieter than in crowded call centres.²⁴

On the other hand, research has also linked remote work to higher stress and other mental health challenges.²⁵ In one study, remote workers reported feeling less able to disengage from work, as well as increased exhaustion, fatigue, and physical inactivity, when compared to those working onsite.²⁶ Remote work has also been connected to feelings of social isolation and loneliness due to less opportunity for spontaneous communication and collaboration, and a lower frequency of interactions with others.²⁷ In the Microsoft survey mentioned above, 43% of remote workers report that they do not feel included in meetings, 56% report that they have fewer work friendships compared to before they worked remotely, and 50% feel lonelier.²⁸ Other research suggests that workers who receive various forms of social and organizational support (e.g., being able to informally chat with colleagues online, receiving regular communication, having access to human resources support) are likely to have better experiences working from home than those without.^{29,30,31} Even having strong social connectedness outside of work and work colleagues is linked to better experiences when working from home.³²

A less explored area of research on remote working is its effects on employees who continue to work onsite because their job may require it, or because they may prefer to be onsite to meet social needs, collaborate more easily or because their homes are not conducive to working. As remote work becomes more popular, onsite workers may feel isolated or lonely as the office stops becoming a place for social connection. This may be particularly true for young workers who historically have used their workplaces to form important networks of friends that can often last through people's careers. These changing dynamics are important to explore in the context of shifting post-pandemic work environments.³³ Indeed, it is important to ask why people's workplaces were their primary source of social networks prior to the pandemic – and whether this should continue to be the case.³⁴

Analyzing the impacts of remote work by gender suggests that women may be more susceptible to a decrease in well-being when working from home, especially during the stressful circumstances of the pandemic. A US study during the pandemic showed that 62% of telecommuting women compared to 43% of telecommuting men reported two or more mental health issues after beginning working from home, including depression, loneliness, anxiety, and stress, as well as increased fatigue.³⁵ Research focusing particularly on caregivers found that mothers who telecommuted during the pandemic reported significantly higher anxiety, loneliness, and depression than fathers who telecommuted (there were no statistically significant differences between genders for those who did not telecommute).³⁶ Still, for many women, the advantages of remote work may outweigh the disadvantages, and in fact women remain more likely than men to want to work remotely.³⁷ Recent polling data in Canada show

that 91% of women want to work remotely at least part time, and 45% of women report that they will quit their jobs if they are not able to do so.³⁸ Women's desire for flexible work arrangements, in addition to their increased tendencies towards reporting mental health issues, can be attributed to their disproportionate unpaid and care work burdens, discussed in more detail in the next section.

Other workers who are outside the stereotypical "ideal worker" norm also prefer remote work. In a small-scale study during the pandemic, persons with disabilities working remotely reported that the majority found it reduced their stress in part because it increased their ability to work; although some discussed experiencing distractions at home, telecommuting was still their preferred option.³⁹ Research suggests that women are less likely to experience everyday gender discrimination such as slights and offenses occurring in interactions with colleagues or clients (such as being asked to clean) when they work remotely than in the office.⁴⁰ And although scholarly research has not yet been released on similar racial impacts, a 2021 study by the non-profit Future Forum found that only 3% of Black professionals report wanting to return to work compared 21% of their white peers, because remote work has allowed them to avoid microaggressions and other demeaning remarks in the workplace, as well as an increased ability to manage stress.⁴¹ Further, it is not only worker well-being that is impacted by remote work, but also that of their families. For example, research has suggested that flexible work arrangements can improve sleep for both workers and their children, who face sleep interruptions if they have to wake early so parents can commute or drop them at childcare or school.⁴² Overall, remote work can provide significant benefits for the well-being of marginalized groups, particularly if there are supports in place to facilitate workers' socialization and mental health.

Remote work may increase work-family conflict without other supports

For some workers, having access to remote work means an improvement in work-life balance. Recent research in Canada found that having both flextime and flexplace arrangements (i.e., having the ability to work chosen hours and work at a chosen location outside of the office) increases work-life balance satisfaction, but they found this association was strongest for people without children.⁴³ It is possible that some workers with children may feel the same way: a recent Bloomberg article on women working from home mentions how remote work means women "might just be able to reach that mythical place of having it all...Hard-charging working mothers love that they can arrange their days to volunteer for their kids' bake sale between Zoom meetings, dissolving that invisible line with the stay-at-home crowd."⁴⁴ However, the article goes on to explain that for other caregivers, especially during the pandemic, remote work came with increased work-family conflict, and mothers have been particularly affected due to the gender norms and roles pertaining to caregiving and domestic work. These analyses also perpetuate these gendered norms of who does caregiving by assuming that it is women who would want to take advantage of the use of remote work to "have it all."

Even before the pandemic, research suggested that for telecommuting heterosexual couples, gender differences in childcare decreased on telecommuting days (i.e., men and women tended to do more equal amounts of childcare), but their gender gaps in housework increased, with women doing more of this work.⁴⁵ Further, research from during the pandemic showed that when both men and women worked remotely, men's childcare and domestic work increased, but women's did as well. When only mothers worked remotely or when neither parent worked remotely, mothers again took on most additional caring and homeschooling.⁴⁶ Another study from the OECD suggested that over 61% of mothers with children under 12 reported doing most or all extra care work during the pandemic.⁴⁷ This research suggests that the gender gap in unpaid work was largely unchanged during the pandemic, even with the rise of remote work. There is also need for continued longitudinal analyses of the effects of remote work, because household arrangements during the pandemic may not last in the long term.

Intersectional research shows that the shift to remote work had different effects on working hours for women and men depending on factors such as caregiving status, race, and education. A study of remote workers in the US during the pandemic showed that women were more likely to change their work hours during the pandemic compared to men, whether this was an increase or decrease. Women in the "sandwich generation" (those of the age group who may have elderly parents and children to care for) as well as women with preschool aged children reported a significant decrease in work hours; on the other hand, women with older children or those caring for adults (but not both) reported an increase in work hours. It appeared that those with the most intensive caregiving responsibilities were forced to scale back on paid work, while those with more moderate caregiving increased work hours, potentially to make up for disruptions that came with caring and working simultaneously. Further analysis showed that Black women experienced a significant increase in hours worked (the authors were unsure why), alongside women with advanced degrees and women who are managers, who may have had caregiving responsibilities but were not able to scale back due to their high organizational positions. The analyses suggest the importance of further research on how different groups are experiencing remote work.⁴⁸

Unsustainable loads of unpaid work in combination with paid work are one explanation for the data suggesting the higher rate of mental health issues and feelings of loneliness among remote-working women. For instance, a US study of dual-earner couples with young children during the pandemic found that nearly 36.6% of households had women taking on most care responsibilities (44.5% had egalitarian arrangements and 18.9% used strategies that were not clearly gendered or egalitarian). When women were working remotely and doing all care work, they showed the lowest well-being and the lowest work performance compared to women in other household arrangements. In fact, men in this situation also showed poorer relative job performance and higher relationship tension compared to men in other arrangements.^{49, 50}



As such, scholars have suggested that remote work may be contributing to mothers' "role congestion" (the overlap and conflict between roles).⁵¹ Although it may have other disadvantages, working onsite can provide a space to separate paid and unpaid work, while working from home may lead caregivers to blend their work and personal lives to an unsustainable degree, where work from home "capitalizes on the total collapse of work-life balance."⁵² For example, they might be more likely to work on weekends or while doing unpaid tasks such as cooking or helping children with homework. Both men and women report experiencing these conflicts while working from home, but in one study, women tended to show a lower ability to disengage the two, which likely connects to gendered norms around who does unpaid work.⁵³ Working at home part-time may also affect the rest of one's work week: a recent study found that remote working reduces hours worked during that work day, but actually increases hours worked on the weekend and on other work days in the office.⁵⁴ Indeed, Microsoft's global survey of workers found that weekend work has increased by 14% and after-hours work by 28%. At the same time, working onsite full-time is not necessarily an approach to revive either; for instance, studies have shown that long commute times are also associated with work-family conflict and the gender wage gap.^{55, 56}

Creating clear boundaries between work and personal lives can help to reduce such conflict. A recent study of workers who experienced a mandatory work-from-home policy found that those with a higher self-efficacy in balancing work and family experienced less work-family conflict and work-based strain when working from home.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, establishing such boundaries can prove difficult for workers with competing pressures. The use of technology, such as mobile devices, facilitates remote workers to be constantly connected to work, even after regular working hours. Studies have shown that although workers may find such technology gives them peace of mind and autonomy over their work in the short term, in the long term it reduces their ability to disconnect and increases expectations that they will always be “on.”⁵⁸

Research has also found that when part-time remote workers have high levels of control over their worktime (defined as employee’s possibility of control over duration, position, and distribution of worktime, e.g., whether to work overtime), their stress was higher than when they had moderate control and their employers controlled more. The researchers suggest that cognitive overload, anxiety about poor decision-making, and feelings of obligation to work more than necessary occurred with a high level of autonomy.⁵⁹ The ability to work whenever and wherever might paradoxically end up reducing worker autonomy.⁶⁰ However, when remote-working employees have very low autonomy—such as when employers monitor their work at home—this also contributes to strain: research studying remote workers in China found that employer monitoring increased feelings of work-home interference, undermining their well-being.⁶¹ Indeed, throughout the pandemic, many media articles discussed the problems of employers surveilling workers through technology, such as using tools to check when computer mouses were moving or carefully watching emails.⁶²

The unequal distribution of care work at home may not be what all people desire, but may be the result of social and work structures and expectations that make it hard to break from gendered roles. An experimental study from 2015 showed that when respondents in the US—who were young and unmarried—were given the option of choosing an egalitarian relationship in the future versus traditional arrangements with a primary breadwinner and homemaker, they chose egalitarian relationships regardless of their gender.⁶³ When they were told they would have access to paid family leave, subsidized childcare, and flexible work options, women were even more likely to state that they would prefer an egalitarian structure. Men did not show the same responsiveness to supportive policy options, suggesting that men may continue to feel the need to adhere to gender norms of breadwinning regardless of work-family policies. The one exception for men was when they were also informed that their male colleagues wanted egalitarian relationships. In this case, they were also more responsive to the provision of supportive policies. In most situations, then, when given the option, it seems that people prefer egalitarian relationships—and that public and organizational policies can have significant impacts on this preference, particularly affecting women’s aspirations.

Remote work can increase economic opportunity, but its stigma may disadvantage some workers

Remote and flexible work arrangements can facilitate women’s return to work after childbirth and help them remain in the workforce, leading to economic benefits not only for women but also their families and the economy overall. For example, a recent study in the UK found that women with access to flexible work hours and remote work are less likely to reduce their working hours after having children.⁶⁴ Another found that mothers who telecommuted during the pandemic were able to maintain paid work to a greater extent than mothers who worked onsite (while fathers’ work hours did not differ).⁶⁵ Note also that remote and flexible work arrangements can benefit people’s careers even if they are not mothers: research in Germany has found that such policies reduced turnover not only for mothers but also young men and young women, as well as low-wage workers.⁶⁶ Research with workers at a travel agency in China similarly found that working from home decreased attrition.⁶⁷

Another potential economic advantage of remote work relates to the benefit of being able to work from anywhere—including outside of expensive urban areas. A study conducted in the US investigated home ownership and telework and found that nearly two million households in the US are at a “telework tipping point” for home ownership. That is, their jobs have a high likelihood of telework and they could afford to buy a home in a less expensive nearby locale (e.g., in the suburbs) if they could have access to permanent telework. The researchers found that nationwide, Asian and Latinx renters are most likely to be in this tipping point; in metropolitan areas, Black renters are most likely. Considering that home ownership is related to generational wealth, access to remote work could significantly benefit racialized families.⁶⁸

But remote workers may also face economic disadvantages because of bias and penalization of remote work. This is because remote work does not fit within the pervasive and stereotypical “ideal worker” norm, where employees show that they are completely dedicated to work, such as through face time in the office.⁶⁹ Remote workers indeed have decreased visibility, which can lead to incorrect perceptions that they work less hard than their in-office counterparts. It may also be more difficult to maintain important network ties through virtual connections.⁷⁰

This bias against remote workers existed before the pandemic. The “ideal worker” norm is not easily met by people whose identities conflict with complete devotion to work—which includes not only women but all types of workers. Indeed, research has found that workers of all social identities often stray from the ideal worker image, not only by working remotely but also by setting boundaries on their work schedules, asking for formal accommodations such as leave, or making other work alterations.⁷¹ It follows that a 2018 study discovered that when workers perceived their organization has bias against flexibility arrangements, their job satisfaction and engagement decreased and their turnover intentions and work-life spillover increased. This result applied to all workers, including men without children who are the ostensible “ideal workers.”⁷²



However, bias against those who do not meet “ideal worker” norms seems to affect women more than men. This is partly because women tend to make use of formal accommodation policies (which are often targeted towards mothers) while men take on more informal and less visible strategies, allowing them to “pass” as an ideal worker. In turn, women face more career penalties, even though they are not the only ones deviating from the “ideal worker” norm, while men making informal accommodations are don’t have the same penalties.⁷³ In fact, when organizations have formal flexible work policies in place, its leaders may use these policies as a “defense” that they are progressive and not responsible for women’s stalled advancement. They can then deflect away from the idea that unconscious bias or discrimination may continue to affect women’s advancement even with such policies in place.⁷⁴

Motherhood itself is also penalized in workplaces more than fatherhood. A 2014 experimental study examining consequences of requesting flexible work found that participants evaluated workers requesting flexible work more negatively than those who did not request it, particularly those who requested to telecommute (rather than just having flextime). When the request was related to childcare, the evaluation was more positive than for when the request was unrelated to care. However, they rated men with childcare flexible work requests higher than women with the same request.⁷⁵ This finding links to the idea of the “motherhood penalty,” the theory that when

women have children, bias and lack of organizational support stymie their careers, while the same does not occur for fathers.⁷⁶ Indeed, a 2021 media article called “You are Mommy Tracked to the Billionth Degree” describes how the rise of remote work during the pandemic may be significantly harming women’s careers, putting them on a “mommy track” where they are less likely to advance at work.⁷⁷

This bias can manifest in the form of wage penalties and fewer promotions. Note that some research has suggested that those who telecommute do not differ from onsite workers in the number of promotions they receive⁷⁸, although having a workplace where remote work is a norm and having more face-to-face contact at work (e.g., working hybrid rather than fully remote) results in a higher likelihood of promotion and more salary growth for telecommuters.⁷⁹ Intersectional analysis reveals disadvantages based on race, gender, and caregiver status. In the US, a study found that pre-pandemic, in occupations where remote work was common, mothers working at home most days of the week earned less than mothers working onsite.⁸⁰ Another study showed that compared to fathers, mothers’ earnings are more sensitive to reductions in hours worked onsite: with each hour worked offsite, their earnings decreased more than those of fathers.⁸¹ Research in the US has also found that remote working led to an 18% decrease in the mean hourly wages of Black women, compared to an 8% decrease for white women.⁸² The researchers suggest that Black women were more likely to be subject to bias for teleworking—they may have been allocated less valuable assignments, for example. We found little other research on impacts of remote work on careers of marginalized groups, which suggests an area for scholars to continue investigating as remote work becomes more normalized.

While remote work may help women, caregivers, people with disabilities, and others to remain in the workforce and gain economic advantages they may not have had otherwise, these studies show that remote workers must still grapple with pervasive gendered and racialized norms that structure the economy. Even if organizations appear to encourage remote work, and even if both men and women engage in it, women (and particularly Black women) who work remotely tend to be viewed as less-than-ideal workers, which can significantly impact their careers. Notably, new research suggests that women workers whose organizational leaders are women see fewer career penalties when they make flexible work arrangements, suggesting that the context of the organization, and having women represented in positions of power, matters for this stigma.⁸³

The impact of remote work on the environment is equivocal

Some media and public discourse throughout the pandemic focused on how remote work may decrease harmful emissions that contribute to climate crisis, such as by reducing car use. Considering that climate crisis is closely linked to inequality, we focus here on what research findings have to say about the connection between remote work to carbon emissions and energy use.

The climate crisis is an equity issue. It disproportionately affects communities, regions, and countries who are poor and marginalized—and who contribute the least to carbon emissions. The climate crisis exacerbates financial precarity, such as through destroying crops and other ways of making a living and increasing food prices; it causes displacement due to increased emergencies; and it creates or exacerbates health issues, such as through extreme heat. Such effects can be analyzed through an intersectional gender lens. For instance, in North America, racialized and low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to unclean air and water.⁸⁴ With the destruction of homes and decreased access to resources and essential services, women become more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.⁸⁵

Remote work has the potential to reduce emissions, but this depends on a range of factors, such as whether remote workers choose to take more or fewer trips, the availability of low-carbon transportation, and whether offices close or remain open to accommodate hybrid arrangements. Statistics Canada released a report in 2021 that stated that “a complete transition to telework” (i.e., all jobs that can be done remotely are done remotely) could lead to a direct annual reduction of the equivalent of 8.6 megatons of carbon dioxide—6% of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada. However, the authors note that remote work can have many indirect effects that complicate this relationship. For instance, remote work may be increasing household emissions because of more heating and in-home energy use.⁸⁶ Indeed, calculating the impact of remote work on carbon emissions is a complex undertaking.⁸⁷ A 2020 review of 39 empirical studies on teleworking and energy consumption suggests that most rigorous studies find ambiguous results to the question of whether teleworking saves energy and decreases emissions. The authors state that remote work “may lead to unpredictable increases in non-work travel and home energy use that may outweigh the gains from reduced work travel.”⁸⁸ With widespread full-time telework, work travel evidently decreases, and so does direct energy consumption—but considering other factors means the effect is less certain. Energy consumption with telecommuting may be even further reduced if large offices close completely. But if organizations engage in hybrid work, they would need to maintain energy-costly office space while their workers increase energy use in their homes as well, increasing energy use overall. Increased use of teleworking technology and equipment, such as cloud storage and video streaming, would also increase energy use.⁸⁹

Remote workers may also decide to move further away from workplaces and would need to travel further if they have to work onsite. Studies from Finland, the UK, the US, and the Netherlands all find that part-time teleworkers have longer commute distances than non-teleworkers.⁹⁰ Again, here, full-time remote work would have a more significant impact on energy-saving than hybrid work. Non-work trips also play a role in energy consumption, especially if teleworkers move to areas that are less walkable, such as the suburbs, and now drive to run errands or do other tasks for which remote work has freed time. For example, research shows that in the UK, women with flexible work arrangements tend to increase the number of trips they take for caregiving or domestic tasks, while men with flexible work arrangements tend to increase their leisure and

personal trips.⁹¹ A study in the US also found that workers who telecommute at least 4 times a month were more likely to take more walking and transit trips during the week, but also had 27% higher odds of driving over 20,000 miles per year compared to those who did not telecommute.⁹²

It is important to note that governments play a significant role in this issue. Many workers have limited options for what transportation they can use or where they can live, especially considering skyrocketing housing costs and limited access to public transit in cities around the world.⁹³ Thus, an important area of investigation pertains to what infrastructure organizations and governments should provide to better support teleworkers to reduce non-work driving emissions, household energy consumption, and other drivers of carbon emissions that eventually contribute to increased inequality. More research is also needed to better understand the indirect effects of remote working on carbon emissions and climate crisis.





Implications for the future of work

Not everyone has the privilege of accessing remote work, but for those who do, it can provide significant advantages. It can increase access to jobs for those who cannot work regularly onsite, including facilitating women and/or unpaid caregivers to stay in the workforce; increase job satisfaction and performance; help workers feel more at ease, particularly those with disabilities or who are racialized; reduce or eliminate commuting time; and give workers the ability to relocate to less expensive locales, among other advantages. Unsurprisingly, then, polling data from July 2022 suggests that over 75% of those who worked from home during the pandemic in Canada want to continue working remotely at least part-time.⁹⁴

At the same time, because of pervasive bias and gender norms, remote work can contribute to economic disadvantages and decrease well-being, particularly for marginalized groups such as mothers and racialized people. This suggests the need for remote-work policies and practices that support both equity and wellbeing, and that aim to mitigate bias and other structural disadvantages for remote workers. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the transition to the “future of work,” with important implications for equity. Research suggests that remote work cannot simply be applied to the existing system but instead must be accompanied by a redesign of work practices and policies.

Access to remote work can increase with improved internet infrastructure

While remote work might be seen as an opportunity for inclusion of workers, such as Indigenous people living on reserves and those in rural areas, a lack of infrastructure may counteract this potential. People who do not have access to high-speed internet cannot access remote work even if they do the kinds of jobs that are amenable to it. This limits their work opportunities even as remote jobs have become more common. Considering gendered caregiving norms, increased internet access can also contribute to reducing economic gender inequality. For example, research in the US has shown that access to high-speed internet improves married women’s labor force participation by 4.1%.⁹⁵ The relatively high percentage of people in rural areas, Indigenous communities, and among marginalized people in city centres who do not have access to high-speed internet in Canada suggests that this should remain a public policy priority even after the pandemic. Otherwise, a future that includes more remote work may exclude already marginalized communities.

Remote work policies must be matched by public and organizational policies that address gendered structures

While remote work can enable women to stay in the workforce, it also can come with increased work-life conflict and mental health issues, such as isolation and fatigue—especially for mothers. If equal sharing in the household of domestic tasks and unpaid work was more prevalent, many of these issues for women may be mitigated. Research shows that individuals’ preferences for distributing household tasks are influenced by the presence of structural barriers. Both women and men prefer egalitarian relationships if given the choice, and women are especially likely to choose an egalitarian relationship if public policies such as

affordable childcare, adequate paid family leave, and a range of options for flexible work are in place. Such policies will not completely shift embedded gender roles, but they can provide important institutional support for gender equality within relationships and households, in turn making remote work more manageable.

Both workers and organizations would benefit from policies and practices removing the stigma of remote work

Although there is often a focus on how remote work benefits people who have caregiving responsibilities, disabilities, or other responsibilities outside of work, remote work has advantages for all workers, including increasing their job performance, productivity, and positive feelings. Research also shows that when workers (not just women and/or caregivers) perceive there is a bias against people who work remotely, they show less job satisfaction and engagement and are more likely to intend to leave their workplace. Unfortunately, bias against remote workers appears to especially affect career opportunities and economic outcomes for women and other marginalized groups.

It would therefore benefit both workers and organizations if organizations offer remote work options on a regular basis and ensure that these options are not stigmatized or attributed to specific groups. That is, remote and flexible work arrangements can be normalized for all workers rather than just considering them special accommodations.^{96,97} Leadership can also work remotely to set the example that it is acceptable, and organizations can give managers training on the benefits of these arrangements.⁹⁸ Organizations can further aim to ensure that promotions and raises are not based on face time, and that they provide valuable opportunities for networking even for remote workers.

Hybrid work has substantially different impacts than fully remote work

Hybrid and fully remote work models provide very different experiences for workers. As some commenters in the popular press have stated, hybrid work may be “the worst of both worlds.”⁹⁹ For example, research shows that families may be economically advantaged by remote work because they would be able to buy homes in less expensive locales that are further from their workplaces. However, this would make hybrid work more difficult because it would result in long commutes on some days, increasing work-life conflict. At the same time, hybrid workers are more likely to receive promotions than fully remote workers because they are putting in face time. There is therefore tension for workers who want to take advantage of working remotely, but who must still come into the office or else risk career opportunities. Employers may be able to resolve this tension by assessing which remote work circumstances work best for their employees as well as evaluate whether they are stigmatizing those who want to be fully remote.

Work design and workspaces can be transformed to facilitate different forms of work

Making remote work more equitable necessitates attention to work design; studies indicate that some forms of work practices and routines (i.e., more traditionally bureaucratic arrangements) facilitate the use of remote work and flexible work policies more than others because procedures are more likely to be standardized, and project documentation is accessible online. This reduces information asymmetry for those working remotely.¹⁰⁰ An additional aspect of work design to be considered in remote work and hybrid scenarios is fostering team member risk-taking, acceptance, and trust. Because communication among team members is more formal and scheduled when they work remotely, it can be more challenging to informally request help, or bounce ideas off of coworkers.¹⁰¹ This is especially the case for employees that are members of marginalized groups (i.e., racial and ethnic minority group members, and LGBTQ2S+ employees), who have may have ongoing challenges gaining acceptance and trust at work. In order to facilitate trust and reduce information asymmetry, managers of remote- and hybrid-working teams can be intentional about creating opportunities for team-building, and ensuring that policies, procedures, and responsibilities are explicitly outlined and accessible online. If remote or hybrid work is implemented without changes to work design, organizations risk reaping none of the benefits and exacerbating the costs.

Another consideration for hybrid-working organizations might be to change office spaces to encourage flexibility as a norm. Research has found that changing offices from assigned cubicles to unassigned, mixed workspaces (“hoteling”) can reduce flexible work stigma. That is, with unassigned and shifting workspaces, people no longer notice when their coworkers are arriving and how much face time they are putting in at the office, and employee monitoring reduces. With this format, an empty desk no longer means that an employee is not working.¹⁰² However, this may not be a perfect solution as many of the people who benefit from working at home are escaping open-plan offices that are too noisy or distracting.

Organizations can set up initiatives to decrease work-family conflict and improve social connection of remote workers

Initiatives for organizational and social support can improve the well-being of remote workers. Not all workers have strong social networks outside of work, which can make remote work feel particularly isolating. Organizations can facilitate social groups at work, including those that allow for marginalized groups to maintain important networks, such as employee resource groups for women, racialized groups, and people with disabilities.¹⁰³ These social and networking activities should have purpose and aim to create meaningful interaction, because virtual social interactions can feel forced or like a “chore” compared to in-person socialization.¹⁰⁴



To reduce strain and work-life conflict, particularly for caregivers, organizations can also ensure reliable and consistent communication; train managers on effectively supervising remote workers¹⁰⁵; and ensure that workers know they do not have to work longer hours at home.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, many countries, including Canada, have enacted policies whereby workers have the right to disconnect after work hours.¹⁰⁷ Organizations can adhere to these boundaries and further, eliminate stress-inducing actions such as monitoring employees' actions while they are working from home.

Remote work will not substantially impact environmental footprints without complementary policies

Shifting to remote work may directly contribute to decreased energy use and carbon emissions, but the net effect when considering increased energy use in homes and increased non-work travel means this reduction is likely not significant overall—particularly with hybrid work as opposed to full-time remote work. Thus, we cannot rely on remote work as a means for employers to reduce their environmental footprint without other policy supports, such as ensuring widespread availability of quality public and other low-carbon transportation or assuring affordable housing that is close to workplaces.¹⁰⁸

Further research on the intersectional impacts of remote work is needed

Although there exists a substantial amount of research on how workers experience remote work and flexible work arrangements in general, there is less research that undertakes intersectional analyses, particularly beyond gender and caregiving status. This review has shown that there are many avenues of investigation that remain to be explored surrounding the shift to working from home, including the career penalties of remote work on people experiencing different forms of marginalization; the policy measures that facilitate more gender-equitable relationships in telecommuting households; how remote work policies affect occupational groups differently; and so forth. The rise of remote work during the pandemic means this is an area replete with opportunities for investigation.



Conclusion

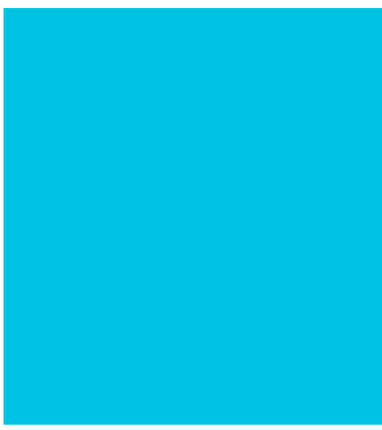
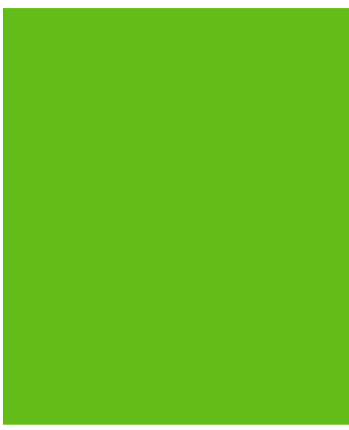
The COVID-19 pandemic provoked a host of transformations for both paid and unpaid work. For many workers, particularly those in white-collar, knowledge-worker professions, it provided the opportunity to experience working from home full-time. While some remote workers found that this change allowed them to become more productive, more at ease, less stressed, and able to experience more freedom in where they lived and worked, for others—especially those in marginalized groups—the shift may have come with increased social isolation, strain and work-family conflict, as well as the possibility of experiencing increased bias that could lead to, or has already led to, reduced career opportunities. This review of recent scholarly literature on remote working and its impacts on social and economic inequalities suggests that it is important for both organizational and public policy makers to address this transformation of work with an intersectional lens, and to create policies and initiatives that prioritize well-being and prosperity for all remote workers, not just those who fit the “ideal worker” norm.

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- Our research method involved investigating the following questions: 1) How might remote work facilitate more equitable and healthy societies? 2) How might remote work contribute to existing inequity and inequality? 3) What implications does academic research on remote work and equity have for organizational and public policy? To identify the literature to review and synthesize, we conducted searches for empirical studies in the social sciences on the databases JStor, EBSCOHost, Project Muse, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The terms included the following: "hybrid work", "remote work", "flexible work", "telecommuting", "telework", and "flexplace." Using Boolean searches, we added these words to selected terms relating to equity and equality: "gender," "race," "disability," "caregivers," "income," "inequality," "climate," "health," and "wellbeing." We then collected resulting research articles that focused on outcomes of remote work, especially for marginalized groups. Due to constantly changing remote work technology and the significant increase of remote work during the pandemic, we synthesized recent findings, limiting our searches to the previous seven years (2015 – 2022). We did not include law, natural science, or medical journals in our review. To contextualize these recent academic findings, we occasionally also refer to earlier scholarly articles that contributed foundational research to the topic. We also refer to policy literature and media articles throughout the report, mentioning when they are not from scholarly research.
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