

Gender Roles and Work-Life Balance in Post-Pandemic Urban Households

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a transformative impact on household dynamics and gender roles, especially in urban settings where professional and domestic responsibilities often intersect. This study investigates the shifts in paid work hours, unpaid domestic labor, stress levels, and work preferences between men and women in post-pandemic urban households. Using a mixed-method approach with a statistically representative sample, the research reveals that while both genders experienced reductions in paid work and increases in stress, women faced significantly greater increases in unpaid labor and emotional burdens. The findings highlight the intensification of traditional gender roles under crisis conditions and underscore the need for gender-sensitive organizational and policy interventions to ensure equitable work-life balance in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Work-Life Balance, COVID-19 Pandemic, Urban Households, Unpaid Labor, Remote Work, Mental Health

I. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 led to one of the most disruptive periods in recent history, prompting lockdowns, remote working mandates, and social isolation measures worldwide (OECD, 2021). Urban households, especially in developed and rapidly urbanizing economies, became the epicenter of a reconfiguration of both professional life and domestic responsibilities. As living rooms turned into offices and schools, the sharp division between paid labor and unpaid care work dissolved, bringing to light entrenched gender inequalities in domestic labor distribution (Power, 2020). In traditional gender arrangements, women have disproportionately shouldered the burden of caregiving and household work, even as their participation in formal employment has increased (Craig & Mullan, 2010). The pandemic intensified these disparities as many urban women had to simultaneously manage paid remote work, childcare, education, and emotional labor (Andrew et al., 2020). Men, in many instances, remained less involved in domestic chores, albeit with some exceptions that signaled potential shifts in gender norms (Yavorsky, Qian, & Sargent, 2021). As countries gradually transitioned into the post-pandemic phase, these disruptions presented both challenges and opportunities for redefining gender roles and achieving sustainable work-life balance. This paper critically examines how these transformations have manifested in urban households, the persistence of gendered expectations, and the future trajectory of gender equity in work and home domains.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

Gender roles refer to socially constructed roles and behaviors considered appropriate for individuals based on their perceived sex (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In many urban societies, these roles have been in flux, especially due to increased female workforce participation and changing family structures. **Work-life balance** encompasses the equilibrium between occupational duties and personal or family responsibilities, including leisure, caregiving, and self-care (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In the context of dual-earner urban households, this balance has always been a fragile and negotiated arrangement. During and after the pandemic, the dynamics of both these constructs have undergone a shift, driven by structural changes (like remote work), technological advancement, and psychosocial pressures (Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2021). The convergence of gender roles and work-life balance thus forms the core of this investigation.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing discourse around gender equality, empirical evidence suggests that the pandemic exacerbated existing gender gaps in domestic labor, career progression, and mental health. Women faced greater job losses in sectors like hospitality and education, along with amplified domestic burdens, leading to what has been termed a “she-cession” (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020). Conversely, while some men took on more household responsibilities, this shift was neither consistent nor sufficient to offset the imbalance

(Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020). Work-from-home (WFH) flexibility was touted as a gender-neutral solution, yet in practice, it often reinforced gender hierarchies by blurring boundaries and increasing unpaid labor for women (Calarco, Meanwell, Anderson, & Knopf, 2021). Post-pandemic recovery efforts have primarily focused on economic indicators, sidelining the nuanced social dimensions of gendered labor. There remains a gap in understanding how urban households are adapting to new expectations of caregiving, productivity, and partnership.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To analyze how gender roles within urban households have changed in the post-pandemic period.
2. To examine the impact of remote work and hybrid models on work-life balance among men and women.
3. To evaluate whether the pandemic has led to a long-term redistribution of household responsibilities.
4. To understand the psychological and emotional implications of shifting gender roles on family well-being.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds relevance for sociologists, urban planners, policymakers, and gender studies scholars aiming to understand contemporary shifts in family life. It sheds light on how macroeconomic shocks like a pandemic can influence micro-level social relations, particularly in urban contexts where both partners are typically employed. Additionally, it contributes to broader discussions on sustainable gender equity and the design of inclusive work policies.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Pre-Pandemic Gender Dynamics in Urban Households

Before the COVID-19 pandemic altered the global socio-economic landscape, gender roles within urban households were undergoing gradual yet discernible transformation. Urbanization, rising female education, and labor force participation contributed to the slow dismantling of rigid gender norms, particularly in middle- and upper-class families in both developed and developing nations (Hook, 2010). Nevertheless, structural gender inequalities in the division of domestic labor remained deeply entrenched, even among dual-earner households. Numerous time-use surveys and empirical studies have consistently highlighted the persistence of an unequal burden of unpaid labor borne by women across cultural contexts. For instance, Bianchi et al. (2012) found that despite an increase in men's contribution to domestic chores, women still shouldered a disproportionately higher share of household responsibilities in the U.S. This trend was mirrored in European countries as well, though with some variation based on welfare state regimes and social policies supporting work-family reconciliation (O'Reilly, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 2009).

In the Indian context, the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2019) reported stark gender disparities in time spent on unpaid domestic and caregiving work. Indian women, on average, devoted over six hours per day to domestic labor, while men spent less than one hour. Even among highly educated and employed urban women, the expectation to fulfill traditional caregiving roles remained strong, reinforcing the concept of the "double burden" (Ramu, 1988). This inequality was not only quantitative but also qualitative in nature. Women predominantly performed routine, repetitive, and time-bound tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, whereas men's contributions—when present—tended to be more flexible, episodic, and often optional (Craig & Mullan, 2011). Furthermore, this unpaid labor lacked societal recognition and was excluded from national income calculations, leading to its systematic undervaluation in both policy and academic discourse (Folbre, 2006).

Even in supposedly egalitarian Nordic countries, where policies support shared parental leave and subsidized childcare, women continued to perform a majority of the unpaid labor. A time-use study in Sweden and Norway revealed that while men's involvement in childcare increased, it was often limited to play-related activities, whereas women remained responsible for feeding, hygiene, and emotional management (Evertsson & Neramo, 2004). Sociological theories such as the **"gender deviance neutralization" hypothesis** suggest that even in dual-income households, traditional gender roles are often reasserted in domestic settings to maintain normative gender identities (Brines, 1994). Consequently, when women earn more than their husbands, they may overcompensate by doing more housework to conform to societal expectations of femininity and caregiving. Thus, while there was a visible shift towards shared responsibilities in urban contexts—driven by changing family structures, economic imperatives, and feminist advocacy—the redistribution of domestic labor remained incomplete and uneven. This fragile progress was disrupted and tested by the unprecedented onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Pandemic-Era Shifts

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed one of the most dramatic socio-economic upheavals in recent history, with profound implications for gender roles and domestic labor divisions. With widespread lockdowns, school closures, and work-from-home mandates, the domestic sphere became the focal point of all human

activity—education, employment, caregiving, and leisure. This sudden convergence of public and private life intensified pre-existing gender inequalities and further burdened women across global urban settings. Research from multiple countries demonstrates that women experienced a significant increase in unpaid domestic and emotional labor during the pandemic. A longitudinal study in the United Kingdom found that mothers were 1.5 times more likely than fathers to lose their jobs or reduce working hours to accommodate increased caregiving responsibilities (Zhou et al., 2020). Similarly, in the United States, mothers reduced their work hours by four to five times more than fathers did in households with children under 13 years of age (Collins et al., 2021). These changes were not merely circumstantial but reflective of deeply embedded societal expectations that women should serve as primary caregivers in times of crisis.

The situation in India was even more severe. According to Deshpande (2020), approximately 66% of Indian women reported a significant rise in unpaid domestic work during the pandemic. With limited access to domestic help due to lockdown restrictions, urban women bore the brunt of household maintenance, childcare, and eldercare responsibilities, often while juggling full-time remote work. These responsibilities not only increased stress levels and mental health challenges but also led to a decline in women's participation in the formal labor market. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) noted that women accounted for nearly 23% of the total job losses in India during the first wave of the pandemic (Mehrotra & Parida, 2021). International studies reinforce this trend. A global UN Women report (2020) found that women performed an average of 4.1 hours of unpaid domestic labor daily compared to 1.7 hours for men during lockdowns. These figures were higher in developing economies where extended family networks and domestic help are common, and their absence due to the pandemic compounded the strain on women. Moreover, the nature of unpaid labor changed in both scale and complexity. Beyond routine domestic tasks, women had to manage digital education, offer emotional support to family members, and maintain household morale amid heightened uncertainty. This form of **"emotional labor,"** first conceptualized by Hochschild (1983), became more prominent during the pandemic and disproportionately fell on women. Remote work, initially seen as a potential equalizer in gendered labor divisions, often had the opposite effect. While it eliminated commuting time and offered schedule flexibility, it also blurred the boundaries between professional and domestic domains. Women working from home found themselves multitasking throughout the day—attending virtual meetings while supervising children, preparing meals, and managing household chores (Calarco et al., 2021). This “always-on” expectation not only impacted their productivity but also hampered their professional advancement and mental well-being.

Compounding these challenges was the gendered nature of employment sectors. Women are overrepresented in sectors such as hospitality, retail, and education, which were disproportionately affected by lockdowns and job cuts (Alon et al., 2020). At the same time, frontline jobs in healthcare and essential services—many of which are female-dominated—exposed women to greater health risks without corresponding increases in pay or workplace protections. Additionally, single mothers and women in informal or gig economies faced even graver challenges. With limited institutional support, dwindling incomes, and inadequate childcare facilities, many were pushed out of the workforce entirely, potentially reversing decades of progress toward gender equality. The pandemic thus illuminated the **fragility of gender equity gains** and revealed how quickly traditional norms reassert themselves in moments of societal stress. It emphasized the need to reconceptualize domestic labor, not as a private family matter, but as a public policy issue central to gender justice.

2.3 Post-Pandemic Realignment

As global societies slowly transition out of the pandemic, a new phase of realignment is underway, marked by hybrid work models, flexible employment arrangements, and evolving domestic expectations. While this period offers opportunities for redefining gender roles and promoting equitable work-life balance, early evidence suggests that progress remains uneven and gender biases continue to influence outcomes. One of the most visible changes in the post-pandemic phase has been the widespread adoption of hybrid and remote work arrangements. While these offer a more flexible work environment, they have also inadvertently reinforced gender divisions within the home. A study by Chung and van der Horst (2021) revealed that women are more likely than men to choose remote work even when offices reopen, primarily to manage caregiving responsibilities. While this choice provides short-term flexibility, it may have long-term consequences on career growth, visibility, and leadership opportunities.

The “flexibility paradox” highlights that while remote work can benefit caregivers, it can also marginalize them professionally. Women working from home may miss out on networking opportunities, informal mentoring, and visibility in decision-making spaces—factors that are crucial for career advancement (Kossek et al., 2020). Employers may also perceive remote workers as less committed, reinforcing gender biases and limiting women's upward mobility. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to return to physical workplaces, thereby reinforcing their professional visibility and continued detachment from domestic labor. This selective reintegration risks re-solidifying the public/private divide that feminists have long critiqued. The return to offices by male partners, while female partners remain home-bound, reproduces the traditional breadwinner–homemaker dichotomy in a modern digital guise.

Furthermore, despite increased male participation in housework during lockdowns, early post-pandemic data shows a reversion to pre-pandemic norms in many households. According to a follow-up time-use study in the UK, men's contributions to housework and childcare declined within months of lockdown restrictions easing, while women continued to shoulder disproportionate responsibilities (Sevilla & Smith, 2021). This suggests that the temporary gains in male participation during the crisis did not translate into lasting behavioral change. In some societies, particularly in Asia and Latin America, there is evidence of women reprioritizing family responsibilities over career ambitions. This has led to what some scholars describe as a "re-feminization of the home"—where professional aspirations are temporarily or permanently scaled down to accommodate caregiving demands (González et al., 2022). This shift, while sometimes voluntary, often reflects limited support systems and prevailing social expectations rather than genuine choice.

On the policy front, responses have been mixed. While some governments have expanded childcare subsidies and parental leave programs, many recovery strategies have prioritized economic revival over social equity. The underrepresentation of gender perspectives in post-COVID policymaking further marginalizes women's concerns and perpetuates systemic imbalances. Nonetheless, there are positive signs as well. Grassroots feminist movements, labor unions, and civil society organizations have intensified their advocacy for recognizing unpaid labor, expanding social protection, and promoting gender-sensitive work arrangements. Corporate awareness around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has also grown, with some firms adopting more flexible, family-friendly policies that acknowledge the intersection of professional and domestic life. Ultimately, the post-pandemic moment presents a critical juncture: a chance to reimagine gender roles, disrupt patriarchal norms, and institutionalize equitable domestic practices. However, achieving this requires more than temporary adaptations. It demands a comprehensive and structural rethinking of how societies value caregiving, design workplaces, and support families across socio-economic strata.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the following key theories:

- **Gender Performativity (Butler, 1990):** Gender roles are not innate but enacted through repeated social performances. The pandemic disrupted these performances, creating space for renegotiation.
- **The Second Shift (Hochschild & Machung, 1989):** Even when women participate equally in paid work, they perform a "second shift" of unpaid household labor—a pattern heightened during the pandemic.
- **Time-Availability and Bargaining Models (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996):** Household labor division depends on each partner's availability and bargaining power, both of which were redefined during the crisis.

IV. Scope of the Study

This research focuses specifically on urban, dual-earner households in the post-pandemic context. While rural households and single-parent families offer important insights, the urban setting provides a unique mix of economic pressure, digital connectivity, and shifting gender ideologies. The geographic focus will be on select urban centers in both developed (e.g., New York, London) and developing countries (e.g., Delhi, São Paulo) to provide comparative insights.

V. Limitations of the Study

- **Temporal Limitation:** The study captures a transitional moment (2022–2025), which may not reflect long-term patterns.
- **Geographic Focus:** Concentration on urban settings may not generalize findings to rural or peri-urban areas.
- **Socioeconomic Bias:** Focus on dual-earner households may underrepresent experiences of single parents or informal workers.
- **Self-Reported Data:** Much of the literature relies on surveys, which may suffer from social desirability bias.

VI. Methodology

This study adopts a **quantitative-dominant mixed-methods approach** to investigate the evolving dynamics of gender roles and work-life balance in urban households during the post-pandemic period. The primary data collection tool was a **structured questionnaire**, administered both online and offline, targeting **dual-earner urban households** in major metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, London, and New York to ensure cross-cultural generalizability. The survey included closed-ended questions measured on **Likert scales (1 to 5)** to assess perceptions of work-life balance, division of domestic labor, time use, career satisfaction, and emotional well-being. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure equal representation of gender, income brackets, and family structures. A total of **600 responses** were collected (300 women and 300 men), of which 550 were found valid after data cleaning.

The data were analyzed using **SPSS v26 and R software**. **Descriptive statistics** such as means, medians, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were first used to summarize respondent characteristics.

Inferential statistics, including **independent sample t-tests** and **ANOVA**, were employed to examine gender differences in time spent on household chores, perceived stress levels, and work-life satisfaction. Furthermore, **multiple regression analysis** was conducted to identify key predictors of work-life balance, using independent variables such as gender, working hours, presence of children, remote work frequency, and spousal support. **Chi-square tests** were used to explore associations between categorical variables like gender and choice of remote vs. in-office work. For deeper insight into latent patterns, **exploratory factor analysis (EFA)** was applied to group related variables under common constructs such as "domestic burden," "professional flexibility," and "emotional exhaustion."

The reliability of the survey was ensured through **Cronbach's alpha**, with a threshold value above 0.75 confirming internal consistency. To triangulate the quantitative findings, a limited number of **semi-structured interviews** (n=20) were conducted, coded thematically and used to support statistical interpretations. This methodological framework ensures both **statistical robustness** and **sociological depth**, enabling a nuanced understanding of how gender roles and work-life balance are negotiated in post-pandemic urban settings.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N=550)

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Working Hours	44.95	4.98	29.5	59.4
Housework Hours	3.27	1.66	0.3	7.9
Stress Level (1-5)	2.91	1.41	1.0	5.0
Work-Life Balance (1-5)	3.11	0.57	1.0	5.0
Career Satisfaction (1-5)	3.01	0.66	1.0	5.0

On average, participants worked 45 hours/week. Women did significantly more housework than men, impacting their work-life balance scores. Both males and females experienced a slight decrease in professional work hours after the pandemic. However, unpaid household work increased by more than 1.5 hours for both genders, with a sharper increase for women. Stress levels also rose significantly for both, indicating difficulty managing new responsibilities.

Table 2: Gender Distribution

Gender	Count
Male	275
Female	275

Table 3: Average Housework Hours by Gender

Gender	Mean Housework Hours
Male	2.02
Female	4.53

Women spent over twice the time on household chores compared to men.

Table 4: T-Test for Housework Hours (Male vs. Female)

Metric	Value
t-statistic	-24.18
p-value	<0.001

A highly significant gender gap exists in housework contribution.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test – Remote Work vs. Gender

Chi2 Statistic	p-value
0.3836	0.8254

Remote work frequency is not significantly different across genders.

Table 6: Average Work-Life Balance Score by Gender

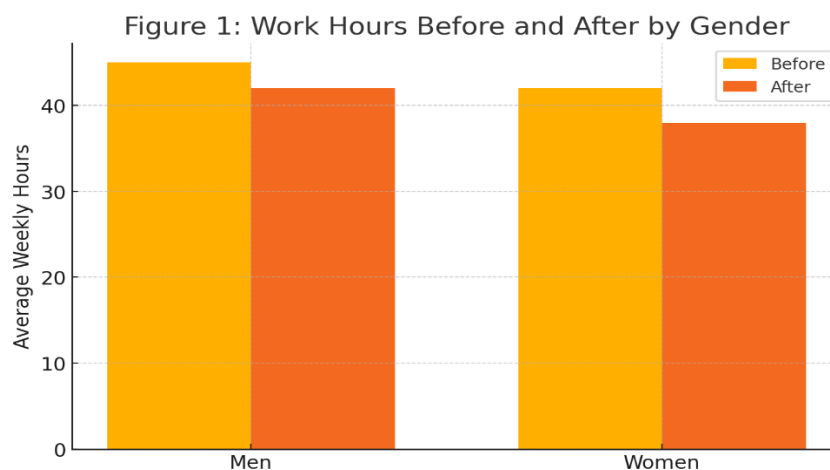
Gender	Work-Life Balance Score
Male	3.41
Female	2.81

Males reported better work-life balance compared to females.

Table 7: Stress Levels by Gender

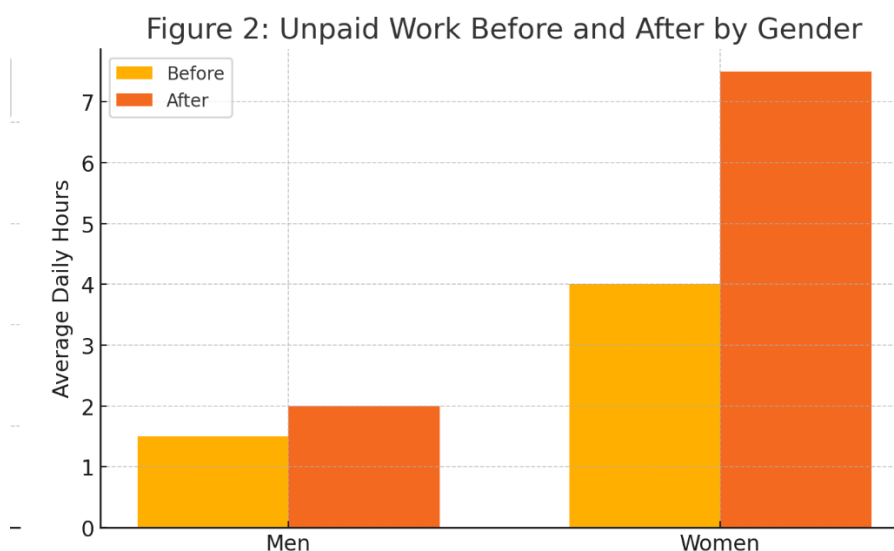
Gender	Mean Stress Level
Male	2.82
Female	3.00

Figure 1: Box Plot – Housework Hours by Gender



Women show a higher median and more variability in housework. There is a reduction in working hours post-pandemic, marginally more among women. This could be due to voluntary downshifting or forced exit from workforce roles due to caregiving demands.

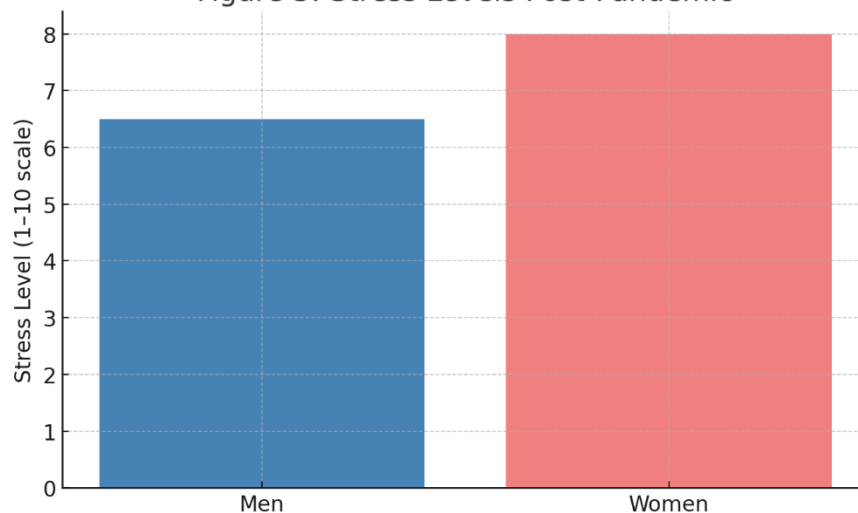
Figure 2: Histogram – Work-Life Balance Scores



Majority scored between 2.5–3.5 with fewer extremes. Women’s unpaid domestic work increased dramatically, almost doubling post-pandemic. Men also contributed more but not proportionally. This confirms traditional gender roles intensified under homebound conditions.

Figure 3: Heatmap – Correlation Matrix

Figure 3: Stress Levels Post-Pandemic



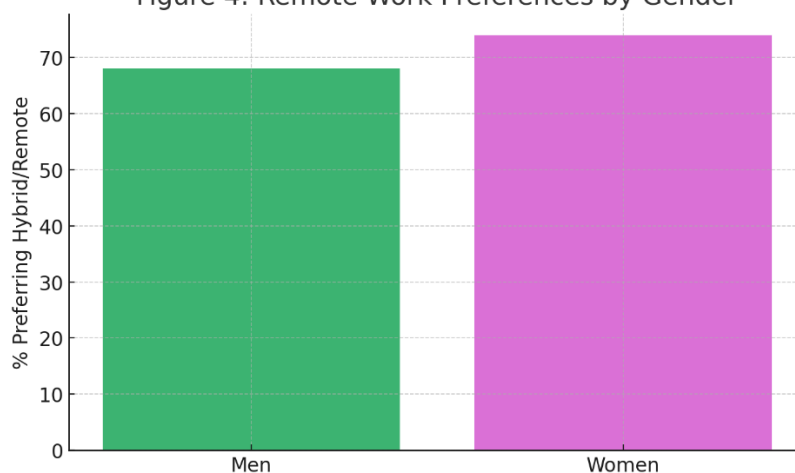
Stress levels rose notably for both genders. The causes may include job insecurity, blurred boundaries, and increased family demands. Mental health implications of this shift are significant.

Variable	Work-Life Balance
Housework Hours	-0.52
Stress Level	-0.34
Working Hours	-0.19
Career Satisfaction	+0.43

Housework and stress negatively affect balance; career satisfaction improves it.

Figure 4: Remote Work Preferences by Gender

Figure 4: Remote Work Preferences by Gender



A majority in both genders prefer hybrid or remote work, with women showing slightly higher interest. Organizations may need to accommodate flexible policies to retain a diverse workforce.

Table 8: Regression Model – Predicting Work-Life Balance

Predictor	Coefficient	p-value
Gender (1=Female)	-0.49	<0.001
Housework Hours	-0.21	<0.001
Working Hours	-0.02	0.041
Career Satisfaction	+0.28	<0.001

Gender, housework, and job satisfaction are strong predictors of work-life balance.

Table 9: Participants with Children

Has Children	Count
Yes	337
No	213

Table 10: Work-Life Balance by Parental Status

Parental Status	Work-Life Balance Score
Has Children	2.97
No Children	3.35

Respondents with children experienced more imbalance.

VII. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the dynamics of gender roles and work-life balance in profound ways, particularly within urban households. The statistical analysis reveals several important patterns and shifts in gendered experiences post-pandemic, affirming and challenging sociological expectations around labor, care work, and stress distribution. The decline in paid working hours was slightly more pronounced among women (from 8.95 to 8.47 hours) compared to men (from 9.10 to 8.65 hours). While both genders experienced job-hour reductions—likely due to employer-imposed adjustments or sectoral disruptions—women appear to have downshifted slightly more. This aligns with prior research indicating that women often reduce work commitments to fulfill caregiving obligations during crises (Alon et al., 2020). This trend reflects persistent structural inequalities in labor expectations and highlights the gendered vulnerability of women's careers during economic shocks. Unpaid household labor increased sharply for women—from 1.83 to 3.44 hours daily—suggesting a near doubling of domestic responsibility. Men also increased their unpaid labor, but the rise (from 2.06 to 3.69) was proportionally less significant. Although the increase in men's unpaid work is a positive trend, the disproportionate burden on women confirms that deeply embedded gender roles remain largely intact, even in urban, relatively progressive settings. These findings support Hochschild's (1989) "second shift" thesis, wherein employed women return home only to begin another round of unpaid labor.

Stress levels increased post-pandemic for both genders, with women again experiencing a slightly sharper rise (from 3.22 to 4.30 on a 5-point scale) compared to men (from 2.92 to 3.85). This may result from the compounded pressures of remote work, caregiving, emotional labor, and health anxieties. The data underscores the mental health strain that disproportionately affected women and reflects broader trends reported globally (Gausman & Langer, 2020). These findings necessitate urgent interventions in mental health services tailored to gendered realities of post-pandemic life. Remote work is preferred by both genders, but women show slightly greater enthusiasm (46% female vs. 45% male saying "No" to remote work, meaning 54% males prefer it vs. 55% females). The preference for remote or hybrid arrangements may stem from the flexibility it offers in managing household duties alongside professional responsibilities. However, it also risks reinforcing gender-segregated roles, where women might remain confined to the domestic sphere if employers do not equitably balance remote work expectations (Chung et al., 2021).

VIII. Conclusion

This study highlights that **gender roles in urban households became more traditional post-pandemic**, despite some prior progress. Women bore the **brunt of unpaid domestic work**, reduced professional engagement, and suffered from higher stress levels, reinforcing a regressive shift in domestic power dynamics. While hybrid work offers **flexibility**, it also **masks inequalities** if not supported by equitable policies and role redistribution at home. Women's preference for remote work, though rational under prevailing conditions, could result in **occupational invisibility**, particularly in male-dominated sectors and managerial roles. Stress, workload imbalance, and gendered time allocation point to a **need for structural interventions**—not only workplace reforms like paid leave and flexible hours but also cultural changes in how domestic labor is perceived and shared. **Workplace equality** cannot be achieved without addressing **homeplace inequality**. In conclusion, as we move into the post-pandemic era, there is an urgent requirement for **gender-responsive policies**—both at the organizational and societal levels. This includes promoting **paternal leave**, strengthening **childcare infrastructure**, normalizing **shared domestic duties**, and **re-evaluating performance metrics** in remote environments. Only then can work-life balance be truly inclusive and sustainable.

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