

THE EFFECT OF CHANGING WORK ENVIRONMENT ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WELL-BEING OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ela Burcu UÇEL¹
Olca SÜRGEVİL DALKILIÇ²
Zeynep ÖZDAMAR ERTEKİN³
Bengü SEVİL OFLAÇ⁴

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how working from home, which started to be implemented due to the Covid-19 pandemic, affects the work-life balance and well-being of female employees. For this purpose, qualitative research method was preferred in order to understand the experiences, thoughts and feelings of working women about flexible working models. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 female employees between the ages of 29-48. Three main themes emerged as a result of the coding and analysis of the interviews: (I) The effect of the pandemic on perception of work time, (II) Pandemic and changing perception of workplace, (III) Pandemic and work-life balance, (IV) Pandemic and well-being/wellness. The findings of the study will be effective in understanding the hybrid working system, which is expected to continue after Covid-19, and in shaping the human resources policies and practices in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, remote working, work-life balance, well-being, wellness

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¹ Part time lecturer. PhD, İzmir University of Economics, İzmir, Türkiye, elaburcy@yahoo.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7210-9476>

² Assoc. Prof., PhD, Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business, İzmir, Türkiye. olca.surgevil@deu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7667-8104>

³ Assist. Prof., PhD, İzmir University of Economics, Faculty of Business, Department of Business Administration, İzmir, Türkiye, zeynep.ertekin@ieu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7365-5708>

⁴ Assoc. Prof., PhD, İzmir University of Economics, Faculty of Business, Department of Logistics Management, İzmir, Türkiye, bengü.sevil@ieu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8617-4284>

1. Introduction

The act of working has been shaped in the light of the conditions and the realities of the time throughout history. Before the industrial revolution, the production made by the individual producer at home and with his family, shifted to factories after the revolution and became a collective work. Then electricity, assembly lines, automation and today, the internet of things and artificial intelligence have been effective in production activities. The way the product, service or idea is produced also determined the working conditions.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which emerged at a time when efforts to keep up with the changes of the 4th industrial revolution have begun and affected the whole world, became the most dominant reality of the time, surpassing all other conditions. Controlling the rapid spread of the pandemic has become a priority. Therefore, the necessity to adapt the production and ways of doing business in a rapid and agile way to this “new” condition arose, and most of the employees found themselves at home with their computers. In this period, "workplace" and "home as a living space" were united, business and private life roles were mixed, employees became lonely and organizations started to search for new approaches. While this huge and unexpected change caused problems in many areas, it also created opportunities. These problems and opportunities have not been experienced at the same extent and level by male and female employees, in line with the historical reality of gender inequality.

In addition to the fact that women are affected more negatively by socio-economic difficulties than men (Fortier, 2020), it is seen that the Covid-19 pandemic has created more serious problems for women in terms of both business and private life (Czymara et al., 2021). The negative economic consequences of the pandemic expose women to short- and long-term economic and financial insecurities and lead to deterioration of their well-being (Farre et al., 2020; Fortier, 2020; Dang & Nguyen, 2021; Oreffice & Quintana-Domeque, 2021). It is observed that the inequalities between women and men triggered by social structures continue in different ways during the pandemic. Based on the existing gender inequalities, this study aims to examine the changes in working life from the perspective of women during the Covid-19 pandemic and to understand women's experiences of the changing and flexible working models required by the new conditions. In line with this purpose, the working environment and conditions of women during the pandemic were examined in terms of their effects on work-life balance and well-being. In this context, first a conceptual framework is presented where work models, work-life balance and well-being are discussed. The methodology section includes information about the qualitative research method carried out, and the results and recommendations are shared after the findings are discussed.

2. Conceptual Framework

The most widely used working model is the traditional one, where working 45 hours full time during the week for five days at the office, between 08:00-17:00 hours is prevalent. However, this traditional model is not suitable for many sectors, organizations and workers. Thus, it has become necessary to offer work arrangements that provide flexibility to employees. No doubt that, this is not only the choice of employers, but also the employees', who want to have flexibility, initiative and control over their working conditions.

Remote and flexible working arrangements that can be applied as the choice of employees and employers, or as a result of force majeure conditions like Covid-19 pandemic, emerge as the new working models for today (Öztürkoğlu, 2013). Working models that provide time flexibility are compressed work weeks, work sharing, part time work, flexible working hours, shift models and work on call. The models providing spatial flexibility are remote work, telework and workation. During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, a specific flexible work arrangement, remote work or working from home was widely used by necessity (Serinikli, 2021).

After a while, companies merged remote work systems like working from home and telework with the traditional working model and preferred hybrid work systems. Hybrid models which are seen as ways of creating sustainable business environments, are applied as a combination of working from home and at the Office. These models result in enhanced flexibility, autonomy and work-life balance and increase of employee performance (Babapour et al., 2022). Previous studies also show that remote working models positively influence efficiency (Golden & Veiga, 2008), job satisfaction (Karácsony, 2021), employee well-being (Tedone, 2022) and work-family conflict (Madsen, 2003).

In this study, remote working models that were widely used during Covid 19 pandemic are evaluated in terms of work-life balance and employee well-being. Additionally, the study aims to understand women's experiences of these new working models and the changes in business life from a gender equality perspective.

The classical management thought assumed efficiency and profitability as the most important organizational outcomes and ignored the "human" element. Neo-classical period research started addressing "human" and "business" together and the importance of the human element was increasingly accepted. Starting with this period, mainly as a result of the research on organizational behavior, job satisfaction and commitment were adopted as important outcomes. One of the most important factors influencing these outcomes is work-life balance of the employee (Korkmaz & Erdoğan, 2014).

Work-life balance is defined as the extent to which a person balances emotional and behavioral needs that arise from his/her paid job and family responsibilities (Hill et al., 2001: 49). It can be explained as the balanced distribution of an employee's time and labor on business and private life and employee's contentment with this distribution. This concept was put forth based on the fact that life is not spent only in a single context and different parts of it influence one another and is examined in two ways: subjective work life balance and objective work life balance.

Subjective work life balance shows person's satisfaction of his/her private life and work; and objective work life balance addresses the results and success that the person obtains in his/her private life and at work (Korkmaz & Erdoğan, 2014). If the person fails to have work-life balance, health problems arise, well-being deteriorates and negative implications like extreme stress can be seen. Related with these negative effects, person's efficiency in the workplace and organizational commitment may also decrease (Suvacı & Şimsek, 2021).

The early studies on Covid-19 pandemic show that the threats posed by the pandemic and the related anxiety and stress significantly affected work-life balance (Yılmaz & Sağlam, 2021). The effect that different life spheres create on each other is explained through the spillover, conflict, border and boundary theories in the literature (see Khateeb, 2021). The spillover theory argues that the boundaries of a person's life spheres are permeable; the different roles in these spheres are not isolated and stable experiences and experiences in one sphere influence attitudes and behaviors in the others. According to this theory positive and negative effects of business life and private life spread over each other (see Aslan et al., 2021).

Wellbeing, on the other hand, is based on a person's subjective evaluations of his/her life and involves emotions (like sadness, happiness, joy, anger), reactions and personal judgements about the life events (Gencer, 2018). Wellbeing addresses the person as a whole, thus, in addition to the physical and psychological factors, life experiences and life satisfaction, job experiences and job satisfaction and organizational commitment are also related to the concept. It covers all the psychological, mental and emotional experiences of the person (De Simone, 2014). Wellbeing is examined through hedonic and eudaimonic approaches (Ryan & Deci, 2001). From the hedonic perspective, it covers person's happiness and satisfaction; from eudaimonic perspective it means the person is using his/her potential and self-actualization (Fava & Riuni, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993).

Wellbeing has positive and negative effects on the person's physical and mental health and on different spheres of life. Research shows that high wellbeing positively influences health (Roysamb et al., 2003) and is related to longevity of life. Additionally, it improves person's income, job and social relationships (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Wellbeing is associated with success and career success (Graham & Pettinato, 2002; Marks & Fleming, 1999). Subjective wellbeing enables the person to love his/her job; be more productive and creative (Staw et al., 1994).

It is known that low wellbeing decreases productivity, increases absenteeism and negatively influences decision making abilities. These in turn, causes the invaluable employee contribution to decline (Price & Hooijberg, 1992). Literature shows that work-life balance and wellbeing are positively related to one another (Wong et al. 2021; Yerlioğlu, 2020). When the person has work-life balance, wellbeing is positively influenced and improved (Sparks et al., 1997; Guest, 2002; Magee et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2016).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the work and private life spheres merged in necessity and thus, job and family roles were blended. It became very hard and challenging to balance work and family responsibilities and demands; and to maintain a high wellbeing (Gorjifard & Crawford, 2021). This created rather serious problems in work and family lives of female employees (Czymara et al., 2021).

The last concept, **wellness**, is a deliberate and purposeful effort to improve wellbeing. The concept involves the person taking responsibility of his/her holistic wellbeing and striving to enhance it. The person adopts recommended life styles and behaviors for his/her mental, physical and psychological health (Hatfield & Hatfield, 1992; Kitko, 2001). Dunn (1961), who played an important role in making the concept known, argues that wellness is a method for maximizing one's capacity and realizing the potential (from. Lauzon, 2001). According to him, wellness has three dimensions: mental, physical and environmental (Dunn, 1961). Ardell (1977; 1985) on the other hand, defines the concept as a conscious approach aiming to improve physical and psychological health, and lists its dimensions as psychological, spirit, job satisfaction, physical relevance, free time, family life, relationships and stress management. Wellness models indicate that a functional change in any of these dimensions would influence the others (Palombi, 1992).

Work life and free time, which are among the dimensions of wellness, are closely related to person's satisfaction with life (Korkut, 2004). Working covers a huge part of life and completing a job, producing something or creating value provides significant satisfaction. Additionally, when the person has free time, he/she could use it for practices which would contribute and improve wellbeing like wellness programs, exercise, trekking and a healthy diet (Envick, 2012).

The interaction between wellbeing and wellness originates from the fact that both concepts are addressed as components of health (Holdsworth, 2019). Both are closely related to person's happiness and positive functionality (Tuzgöl, 2005). In this study, wellbeing and wellness are used together based on the idea that they strengthen each other. /Consequently, it is observed that, remote work and work from home practices which were applied in necessity during Covid-19 pandemic provided flexibility and other advantages, both for employees and for employers, but in different times and ways. With working from home it became easier to ensure work-life balance for some employees whereas it became even harder for others. From a holistic perspective, it is seen once again during this period that, wellbeing and wellness are extremely important for productivity, happiness and satisfaction.

Taking all this into account, it is apparent that gender inequalities continued during the Covid-19 pandemic. Related changes are experienced differently by men and women and women's wellbeing has worsened (Farre et al., 2020; Fortier, 2020; Dang & Nguyen, 2021; Oreffice & Quintana-Domeque, 2021). In this regard, the aim of this research is to understand how women experienced the new working conditions and order, work-life balance and wellbeing. Next section on methodology will present the details of study, data collection and analysis.

3. Methodology

The study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of pandemic-driven work-life changes on working women's work-life balance and their wellbeing. Therefore, a qualitative perspective was employed since the method is a highly appropriate and a commonly utilized one for the exploration of new phenomena in a deeper sense (e.g. Yıldırım, 1999). In this respect, by adopting a qualitative view, in-depth interviews were conducted with the working women living in different cities of Turkey. The sample consisted of 16 female employees between the ages of 29-48.

The women we interviewed were working in diverse industries involving pharmaceuticals, banking, petro-chemistry, textile, education, durable goods, advertising, transportation, energy, manufacturing, and construction. To provide rich data, we purposively selected working women from a variety of industries, at various positions with different responsibilities, such as procurement specialist, logistics director, human resources manager, sales manager, supply chain planner, vice president, medical representative, accounting specialist, professor, budget and reporting specialist, import specialist, architect and secretary-general.

In line with the social distancing and isolation requirements of Covid-19, online interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform. We informed the participants regarding the aim and content of the study in advance by sending the consent and participant information forms and asked their consent by providing assurance on the confidentiality of the gathered data and that the data would only be viewed and analyzed by the research group solely for academic purposes.

The contact information of the researchers was provided in case the participants would have any questions or comments. The interviewees were also informed that the participation was on a voluntary basis, and at any point, they had the right to quit the study. All 16 participants confirmed their participation before the data collection process by filling out the consent forms with the provided details. The interviews were recorded with permission. By using pseudonyms, a specific coding scheme was employed to assure the anonymity of the participants.

During the interviews, we asked the following questions to the participants: “How would you describe your job and responsibilities?”, “Can you tell us about a regular work day and your daily work routine?”, “Since the beginning of Covid-19, has your working environment and routine changed? What are these changes? (flexible working/ working from home/hybrid model)” “How do you feel about these changes? (Can you share your positive and/or negative feelings and thoughts?)”

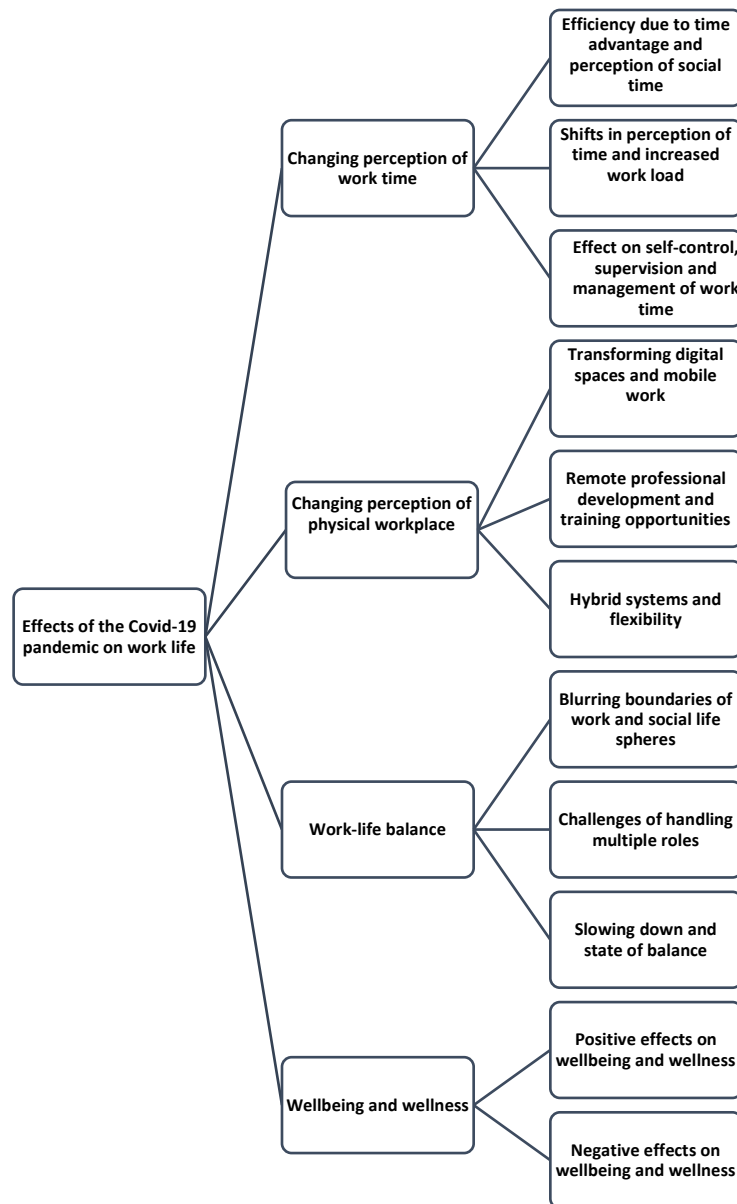
Grounding on the data saturation perspective, the data collection process lasted until the revealed categories and responses started to iterate and we were convinced that we could make meaningful comparisons and groupings (Carson et al., 2001; Mariampolski, 2001).

The researchers transcribed all the interviews and carried out the cross-coding procedure by following Spiggle’s (1994) qualitative data analysis process. The responses were grouped under categories; the keywords are grouped based on similarities; and through continuous comparison, data is grouped under subcategories, and themes forming main categories. The four researchers independently analyzed the transcripts and coded the data. The independently coded data is then cross checked and compared to ensure triangulation of researchers. . Additionally, using purposive sampling to choose working women in diverse industries with different positions enabled data triangulation. Both triangulation of data and triangulation of researchers in data collection and analysis helped to avoid biases and strengthen trustworthiness and integrity of the research (Denzin, 1970; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The findings that emerged as a result of the analysis are presented below.

4. Findings

Findings of the study shed light on how working from home was experienced by female employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participant reflections show the overlap of family and business responsibilities and roles, psychological changes caused by social isolation, the struggle to set a work order and discipline at home, the loss of time perception and an increase in self-awareness both in a bodily and spiritual manner as a result of loneliness.

Findings are presented under three main themes: working life in the pandemic context, work-life balance and wellbeing. Along with the understandings retrieved from the data, theoretical connections are also provided (see Coding Schema).



Coding Shema: Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on work life

Changing elements of the work life during Covid-19 pandemic are examined under the following main topics: *change in the perception of work time and work place, changes in work-life balance and wellbeing - wellness.*

(I) Effects of the pandemic on perception of work time

(Ia) Efficiency due to time advantage and perception of social time

In the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic, when the most common working model was remote and the workplace was home, participant comments on working

hours seem to be positive. As it is understood from the participant statement below, working from home is way more efficient in terms of time and output.

“The work that I used to complete in an eight hours work-day is finished in two hours at home.” (SB)

In addition to working hours being more efficiently used during the day, the time saved from commuting is also stressed.

“As I am working in a town, so I used to spend two hours a day commuting in traffic. Now I wake up, we have our breakfast and I directly start working. I am using the time spent on commuting for extra sleep in the morning and working for an additional hour in the evening. It is absolutely better this way.” (SB)

The participant statement above shows that time spent in commuting is now used to complete extra tasks or for additional sleep time, which enables the employee to start the workday well rested and fresh. For majority of employees, the greatest amount of time is spent working in a regular day. When overtime, social events related with work, representative duties and commuting time is added to the routine time spent working, only a small part of the day is left for private life. One of the participants summarize this situation as follows:

“Prior to the pandemic, I used to think that I had no time for anything else apart from work. For example, I wanted to exercise but I had no time. With the pandemic I happened to have time for myself... I started to have a healthy diet and have become more disciplined. Previously, work involved plenty of representative and hosting duties and dining out. When these duties decreased, my daily routine has changed. Moreover, I now have time to spend for putting my house in order. I no longer postpone things to do at home. This created a more peaceful and orderly life for me.” (FA)

As seen in these statements, with the pandemic, the time an employee can spare for herself and for her private life increased. Furthermore, the time spent for activities, which improve wellbeing, such as having a healthy diet and exercising, is better managed.

(Ib) Shifts in perception of time and increased work load

The findings show that for some the hours spared for work increased at home and this increase in actual working hours during the pandemic does not have the same effect on all employees.

“My working hours increased. I now have a busier and longer working day. I no longer have breaks or lunch time unfortunately. People send online meeting invitations whenever they want. Previously, we were at least able to finish working at 5 pm. Now there is no definite time assigned for work and no breaks. With the pandemic, it has become a very demanding system. The days are very exhausting. The biggest change has been in working hours and expectations. So, a typical work day is now very different from my workdays in the office: without time and hour

limitations. We have so many zoom meetings during the day. But, when the workday finishes, sometimes at 6 pm, sometimes at 7 pm, I prefer to turn off my computer and have some me time. Because we are at home and I am working at the same table all day long and I also have housework to do. If I do not turn off my computer and have some me time every day is the same like a vicious circle.” (SG)

As the above participant states, not having a particular time or set hours assigned for work, which was mostly prevalent in the early stages of the pandemic, is perceived as “an uncontrollable new working system.” From a work-life balance perspective, this can be described as different life spheres overlapping with each other, which signifies the blurring of the boundaries between different spheres (see Boundary Theory, Nippert-Eng, 1996). As a matter of fact, before the pandemic, employees were having lunch and coffee breaks and socializing during the day even in the busiest days. These were forming the social side of work and were supporting and fostering the technical side in return. With the pandemic and the changes that came along with it, only the technical side of work was the center of attention. Employees and the social dimension of work was ignored and thus, the employees had to cope with extreme workload and over time. One of the participants explain this situation as follows:

“I take my coffee; I sit and work without any breaks. My eating times changed. I was having breakfast, lunch and dinner before. Now, I don’t have breakfast, if I have a meeting at noon time, I eat something before the meeting, combining breakfast and lunch.” (BS)

Similar experiences were expressed by another participant:

“As a disadvantage, I can mention this. While we were working at the office, we used to have coffee breaks, we used to go for a lunch break for an hour and we were taking the company bus for commuting at a certain time, so we were going home at a certain time or when we were having overtime, it was planned beforehand. However, at home none of these is valid. I am not married, I am single and I do not even have to cook but I lost the concept of time at home. This happened to us with Covid-19. The variations in budget plans and the changes in inflation caused us to work extra hours to develop new scenarios. Meetings were added during lunch breaks and top management developed this new perception of work time: You are at home anyhow, you cannot go out, so let’s plan a meeting at 9 pm, let’s meet after dinner and just like this, it has become an exploitation.” (SB)

This statement emphasizes the disadvantages of a new working system that has no concept of time when compared to the old way of working, which had a preset and allocated time for work. It also shows that employees’ time and labor are used for the benefit of the company to such a level that can be perceived as exploitation. Another statement, which supports the same perception and addresses that employers’ changing perception of “working hours” and their expectation from employees to work for longer hours have become the new normal during the pandemic.

“The regular working hours are 8am to 5pm. This continues like this. Before the pandemic, I was staying at the office for overtime and I was coming back home at 10 or 11 pm. We used to have a week like that. Now, I get home from the office and I continue working from home.” (KB). The exhaustion and need, which arise from this situation is expressed by another informant as: *“This period lasted too long, so, sometimes I just want to sit and do nothing.” (BS)*

(Ic) Effect on self-control, supervision and management of work time

The other reasons of employee exhaustion and dissatisfaction are, the loss of control on and flexibility of jobs they used to have, and the feeling of being tracked closely and digitally with the online working system.

“Because there is no flexibility. There is Skype Corporate. The Microsoft Teams is set. They are over there watching how long I stayed online or if I go offline for ten minutes to eat something during an online training, all of these are followed. When they write to you, you should be online. All communications, messages are on Skype Corporate and we write on real time. It is not good to be offline, not being in front of your computer is not ok. There is no chance for being flexible or no chance to skip working.” (SB)

One of the participants underlines her struggle of maintaining the existing standard of “the minimum time an employee should spend working” or the “work routine”:

“It is 10 am, after breakfast and I feel stressed and say to myself ‘I should be working’. I feel guilty. I have the feeling of I have to be working for a minimum of this much hours every day.” (BB)

“We are managing the process ourselves completely. I planned the process as going to the office two days and working from home three days a week. Because my daughter was having online education at home and I had to organize it, too. From this perspective, remote working provided many managerial skills.” (FA)

As seen in these statements, people may develop an inner norm about the “time to be spent working on a daily basis” or they may use self-control to designate time for work and plan their work days. Advantages of the employee managing and controlling own personal time are not limited with work life, they also benefit private life.

(II) Changing perception of physical workplace

Covid-19 pandemic has changed the perception of physical workplace and it eliminated the notion of “distance” by removing the necessity of being present somewhere physically. With this change, the formats of daily workplace routine and long-distance business travels, which required time and money are reshaped. With the use of digital platforms, there were spatial changes.

(IIa) Transforming digital spaces and mobile work

Covid-19 pandemic caused a transformation by reinforcing the perception that one can work from everywhere and in every way. The following participant statement involves ideas about this transformation:

“It is so nice to see Turkey switching to remote work, to see this much transformation happening and to see that work actually continues this way, too. So, a person can work anywhere, we are mobile now.” (SB)

Employees and companies are adopting this change together and some companies speed up adaptation to remote working by establishing new systems. A participant statement explains this change:

“So, this is a huge change and I think it will influence the future of work. Now, face to face to meetings are very rare in our business life. Online meetings and online evaluations have become prominent. I now have online targets. I have online meeting targets and online meeting duration targets. How many topics I explain during a meeting, is another target. The company established an evaluation system through which they can evaluate all of these.” (FA)

(IIb) Remote professional and training opportunities

Time saved from commuting to work and to go to meetings can be used for professional and self-development. Furthermore, it has become easier to follow and attend training programs in different parts of the world and in different time zones as you can join them online. Consequently, one of the opportunities of working from home and working online is providing “learning and professional development opportunities” to employees. The following statement addresses this new opportunity:

“I started joining all the meetings that I normally could not have the chance to join because of my workload because I can carry on working while I am in the online meeting. Moreover, I don’t lose time commuting to the meeting place. I can say that this contributed a lot to my profession career. I started joining everything, learning a lot. It was very effective from this perspective.” (DY)

(IIc) Hybrid systems and flexibility

Working from home and/or in a hybrid system are now a choice of a working model for some employees.

“From now on, our company will have three options, working home office full time, hybrid working, and working at the office full time. Frankly, I am considering working home office. I love the idea of working from home. I don’t think that this working model is wrong, even when we go back to our normal lives.” (BS)

As seen in this statement, many companies are providing alternative working models to their employees in order to fulfill different employee expectations and because of the proven fact that flexibility positively influences employee efficiency. This forces companies and managers to evaluate which

working model is the right choice, considering both company efficiency and employee health and wellbeing.

(III) Pandemic and work-life balance

(IIIa) Blurring boundaries of work and social life spheres

When an employee solely focuses on work life and stays away from social circles and cheerful activities, this creates unhappiness and dissatisfaction in one sphere. That unhappiness and dissatisfaction spread over to other spheres and trigger unhappiness and dissatisfaction in these spheres. The spillover effect of a positive or negative experience in one sphere on other spheres influences a person's life satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing (Skurak et al., 2018). This phenomenon is explained by a participant, who expresses that she started experiencing concentration problems and lack of motivation to work.

“After a while, I started losing my motivation to work. Because I was deprived of all the activities, which would normally relax and recharge me. As I was isolated a lot and couldn't socialize, I started experiencing attention deficit. I realized that I couldn't focus on one activity. I am watching a TV show and checking my phone and doing something else. Many of us have become very lonely and very bored. We used to see our friends and have fun. We were going out once a week and letting off steam and sharing our troubles. We were letting all hang out, but we cannot forget anything now.” (DY)

As the above participant shares, Covid-19 pandemic, required isolation and working from home limited employees' social interaction and relationships. An employee who spends a whole day in her room, without interacting with anyone and deprived of talking to colleagues face to face, experiences negative psychological and social outcomes. Thus, “social isolation” and “loneliness” seem to be among the major employee experiences that mark the Covid-19 pandemic (see Banerjee & Rai, 2020). It is also stated in the literature that social isolation and loneliness created by the pandemic cause an increase in stress and a decrease in efficiency (Toscano & Zappalà, 2020). As the above statement shows, long lasting loneliness deprives a person from the social support mechanisms, which are very crucial to overcome daily problems and troubles. It also leads to problems in concentration, causes attention deficit, decreases motivation and efficiency.

“Now for example, my laptop is on the kitchen counter and this is my work space. I am both working and trying to have fun here. I am trying to rest here, but I cannot run away from work because it is over there, right in front of me, so my motivation decreased a lot, I cannot work as efficiently as I used to. I even have to push myself very hard to work sometimes.” (DY)

As a result, working from home has some advantages such as flexibility and saving time but as work life and private lives are all happening in one space, this causes a decrease in motivation and efficiency and losing the will to work, apart from the other physical and psychological outcomes.

(IIIb) Challenges of handling multiple roles

It would not be correct to evaluate “working from home as a personal choice” the same way as “working from home as a requirement or due to force majeure reasons.” Due to conditions of the pandemic, all roles and life spheres are united together enforcedly. Female employees are having more “multiple roles” compared to men during this period (see Parlak et al., 2021), and these roles are conflicting with each other in terms of content and time (see. Conflict theory, Greenhaus & Beutell, 1996). Hence, a participant who is a mom explained the challenge of fulfilling many roles at once:

“Well I am in a terrible condition when I am at home. I wake up, remind my child to set the computer for online education, check her regularly to see if she is online, then make breakfast, answer the calls from office. Sometimes I tidy the house at noon time. I mean I make my bed etc. Am I a working women, am I a mom? Then I realize its 13 pm, I feel hungry, I try to cook lunch. If there is no support, working from home is hard.” (KB)

Similarly, other participants reflect on the conflicts and difficulties arising from having multiple roles:

“It is so hard to work from home, the cargo guy came, the meal is cooked, the room is tidied up, did this, did that... My son became very attached to me. Mom is lunch ready? Mom did you do this?” (SR)

“I have many roles. Cleaning, ironing, cooking, serving, mothering, working... and all of them are in my bedroom.” (FA)

As seen in participants’ reflections, the multiple roles that women handle include working (visible labor), housework (invisible labor), child rearing and controlling and supporting child’s online education. During the pandemic, women’s work and family roles are mixed and both life spheres are merged. Female employees faced negative mental and emotional outcomes and the feeling of failing responsibilities and being inefficient (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). However, it would not be right to consider all of these as results of working from home. The unique conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic; all family members being at home, children’s education being held online, receiving no support for family responsibilities and housework, being deprived of social support mechanisms also triggered these negative results.

(IIIc) Slowing down and state of balance

The transformation created by global pandemic caused people to question their lives and life styles. The fear of missing out things, the struggle to catch up with everything and the exhaustion created by the speed of life is described by a participant as below:

“The feeling is the same. The feeling of catching up. In English, keep-up, not to lead but to keep up. All the time something happens and I feel like I miss something. There are concerts, shows, shopping, new restaurants. People gather. But all of these are consumption oriented and they are pressurizing us. I read a book during the pandemic, which provided a new perspective to me. Milan Kundera’s book titled “Slowness.” It says that there is a connection between the speed of remembering and the speed of forgetting. I mean I don’t remember the things that I lived in speed. I am running around so much for work. I don’t remember what I did and at the end I feel like I am doing nothing and I have not achieved anything. To avoid that feeling I am keeping a list of the things that I completed. Look I have done this and done that. Sometimes I check it and appreciate all the things I did. Because I forget what I did when I am in a rush. I think this applies to social relationships and I said to myself, the lockdown will be over, when it is over, I will not rush everywhere. I had rules like other normal people, I don’t go out one day in a week, I am at home. But now, I think that I should have more days at home.” (BB)

As the above participant points out, in speed of life we tend to overlook and stop appreciating a lot of things, including ourselves. Therefore, we need to slow down and the time a person spares for herself should be fairly balanced and effectively managed, as many of us are in need of a peaceful work-life balance.

(IV) Pandemic, wellbeing and wellness

Work and private lives being squeezed into one place, which was home during the lockdowns, created a significant impact on employee wellbeing and required reevaluating the concept of wellness.

(IVa) Positive effects on wellbeing and wellness

Lives squeezed into rooms caused people to reevaluate their lives and bodies. They realized the negative effects of social isolation, loneliness, pandemic anxiety and economic concerns on their wellbeing and understood that they have to make efforts on improving wellness. A participant reflection addresses this issue: *“When you sit and look at the screen you listen to your body.” (SG)*. The time spent in front of the screen and sitting all day resulted in people realizing their physical being and thinking of their needs. They faced their still bodies and anxious minds, while seeing their faces and bodies on screen during online meetings. This caused some employees to reorganize their daily routines and to diverge to activities, which would meet psychological, conceptual and physical needs as seen in a participant reflection *“If it is a relaxed work week, I try to have a walk during my lunch break”*. This reminds that wellness is an intentional process, as conforming with the literature. Another participant emphasizes *“intentionally reorganizing daily routines”*:

“With the pandemic I started to have time for myself. I tell my supervisor that I both do my job and go to gym three times a week. I started eating better and disciplined myself. Also, I have time to do things about my personal order at home. This made my life neat and peaceful” (FA)

The recent studies on keeping work-life balance and wellbeing (ex; Zheng et al., 2016; Wepfer et al., 2018; Shalini & Sreenivas, 2020; Wong et al., 2021) show that employee wellbeing and wellness are related to work-life balance. Wellbeing is accepted as among the most important factors directly influencing positive organizational behavior, performance and efficiency (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). In parallel with the ideas that personality traits cannot be ignored in the shaping of wellbeing (see Rossi et al., 2021), a participant reflection expresses the positive effects of wellbeing:

“I feel very good. It benefited me. I didn’t feel bad because I was taking care of myself. This period, although I worked very hard, has fed my soul, despite all the negativities. I worked during the regular working hours but I spent the 1.5 hours that I saved from commuting for exercising... In fact, I worked until 7 pm. I worked more, that’s for sure, but between 7 and 8, I walked, I did yoga. I was so good for me, personally.” (DD)

This time advantage saved from commuting to work, which became apparent during the pandemic enabled some employees to spare time for having a more healthy diet, exercising, caring for the details about the house, finding time for hobbies and other social activities and thus, makes it easier to balance work and life and improve wellness. As the last statement shows, even though the employees works as long as before and maybe even more, they can still have the chance to fulfill the feeling of wellbeing.

(IVb) Negative effects on wellbeing and wellness

Despite these positive effects on the well-being of employees, economic stagnation has occurred in some sectors due to working from home during the pandemic and the cost benefit calculations of the companies have deteriorated. Such situations have negative effects on employees due to loss of job security or fear of dismissal. As a matter of fact, although the government's intervention in enterprises by preventing "dismissals" makes employees feel safe for a certain period of time, it is seen that there is still fear of losing their job in the future.

"What will happen? I do not know. If it continues like this, dismissals will begin. But I don't know who or how. The company cannot afford the costs.” (KB)

As can be understood from the above expression, current conditions carry uncertainty about the future. The “compulsory leave” policies implemented by companies to maintain their cost balance reinforce this uncertainty and reinforce internal injustices.

“Compulsory leave is now, six or seven days a month for each department. But this month, April for our department is a period when we have to issue our annual statements and tables. That's why my compulsory leave was three days, which is unfair to other friends.” (KB)

As a result, although working conditions during the pandemic have positive effects on well-being, the uncertainties of the pandemic and the economic difficulties it brings also negatively affect well-being.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aims to understand how the work-from-home model applied during the Covid-19 pandemic affects the work-life balance and well-being of female employees. Findings show that working from home affects the time perception of female employees in different ways. Some participants stated that changes in daily time planning have increased their productivity, enabled them to find time for personal needs and created opportunities for activities such as doing sports and following a healthy diet that help to improve their well-being. Other participants, on the other hand, complained about the endless working hours and working days, the increasing workload, and the constant control and monitoring of the institution in the digital environment. These different experiences arise from various reasons such as the personality of the employee, family roles and family structure, the culture and policies of the organization, and the nature of the work done. When developing and shaping human resources policies and practices, it is crucial to consider these different experiences related to working from home and create models taking into account the personality of the employee, family life and the structure of the job to have a positive effect on employee well-being and work-life balance. Such human resources policies and practices can be used to prevent female employees from feeling stuck between traditional family roles determined by society and career goals and help to maximize their potential and competencies, and create employee commitment.

Analysis of participants' discourses also showed that working from home created a change in the perception of space. With all meetings being held from home, employees have the opportunity to attend meetings and trainings that they normally do not have the opportunity to attend due to location or time constraints. Thus, the opportunity for professional development has increased. Accordingly, it is possible to say that flexible working methods can enable to eliminate gender inequality in the workplace in terms of reaching professional development opportunities. It is a fact that there are structural inequalities in society and business life. The advantages of time and space created by working from home can reduce the risk of being away from work life due to family roles, and not being able to attain professional development and thus career opportunities.

Findings further indicate that working from home affects the work-life balance of female employees in different ways. Some participants complained about the isolation and loneliness caused by the necessity of staying away from social ties in the workplace, and social support mechanisms such as family and friends. The work context and home context merged into each other. This situation negatively affected work-life balance and well-being by creating additional stress, and mental and emotional overload (see Hjalmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). This outcome has important implications for human resources practices. The importance of preventing loneliness of the employee and establishing a healthy work-life balance should be considered in work-from-home settings. It is vital that the employees are not deprived of social ties in the workplace and that the social interaction between employees continue, as these social ties have a critical role in processes such as performance, creativity and problem solving (Hurst et al., 2013; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Schein, 1990).

Another finding of the study is about “slowing down.” Some participants stated that they were freed from the speed of pre-pandemic life and found the opportunity to slow down. Spending more time at home has caused the individual to listen to herself and discover her spiritual and physical existence. Accordingly, some employees had the opportunity to evaluate their well-being; realized that they should take care of their spiritual, mental and physical well-being. This has created the need to make purposeful efforts for the well-being of employees. As a result, both work-life balance and well-being were positively affected.

According to the work-life balance literature, there are some advantages and disadvantages of working from home (Morgan, 2004; Ipsen et al., 2021). According to the results of a study carried out by considering the Covid-19 pandemic period (Ipsen et al., 2021), along with advantages such as (i) work-life balance, (ii) more effective work, (iii) more control over work, there are also disadvantages due to (i) limitations of home, (ii) job uncertainties, (iii) inadequate tools.

As seen both in this study and in the literature, working from home has many positive and negative consequences for female employees. Even without the pandemic conditions, in our ‘normal-regular’ lives, there are many advantages offered by flexible working methods to women (Hayman, 2009). Therefore, female employees are more likely to prefer flexible working models than male employees (Ciarniene & Vienazidiene, 2018; Beatson, 2019). Women prefer flexible working models for reasons such as being able to coordinate work and family life demands in a balanced way, lower stress and positive effects on health (Ciarniene & Vienazidiene, 2018).

It is expected that female employees will increasingly prefer and demand flexible working models in the post-pandemic period (Beatson, 2019; Flexjobs Survey Report, 2021). As a matter of fact, the percentage of female employees who claim that “if working from home does not continue after the pandemic, I will look for another job” reaches 60%. In addition, the vast majority of female employees state that having the alternative of working from home will be an important selection criterion for them when evaluating future job opportunities (Flexjobs

Survey Report, 2021). In summary, many of the changes in working conditions are expected to continue after the pandemic.

The findings of this study can help businesses to shape human resources policies and practices. It is seen that flexible working models offer important opportunities for organizations that understand the need to be inclusive. Work-life balance and well-being are expected to improve when the female employee, who is stuck between family responsibilities and career requirements, is given the opportunity to work from home or in a hybrid work system or is at least offered the option. This way, the organization will be able to appreciate and make the best of the talents and skills of female employees and transform their competencies into contributions. Moreover, when training and similar employee development programs are organized in a hybrid way, female employees will be included and equal opportunities will be offered to all employees.

Predictions that flexible working models will be adopted in the future and the working week will be shortened can be made by evaluating today's conditions. It is possible to say that the common purpose of these changes is to establish the work-life balance of the employees. Organizations that understand the importance of inclusiveness and employee well-being and work-life balance can lead the way in the future and set an example for other organizations by arranging their working conditions and human resources policies in line with employee expectations.

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