



The gendered impact of Covid-19 on work & lessons for the future

A special report for the ICTU
Women's Conference

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The Covid-19 pandemic provides an excellent opportunity to assess how significant and immediate changes to work patterns have changed the world of work

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Introduction

The world of work is never static. Changes in technology, trade and even tastes can significantly alter the industrial make-up of all economies. These changes seep into our labour market and can lead to significant shifts in employment, wages, terms and conditions. Very rarely do these changes impact equally across society and oftentimes the impacts are concentrated on groups who already at the margins of the labour market. Female workers are often impacted disproportionately by disruptions to the labour market.

Over the next number of years there are significant labour market disruptions on the horizon, and they're just the ones we can see. Automation is already having a profound impact on the world of work, from self-checkouts in supermarkets to online classrooms, significant shifts have already occurred. While the focus of much of the discussion is on the jobs that can be lost in these disruptions, more often than not the most profound change occurs in the quality of jobs. The challenges in adapting to climate change will also throw up many of these issues.

The best way to understand how these disruptions will impact particular groups is to look at how other significant disruptions have affected them. The Covid-19 pandemic provides an excellent opportunity to assess how significant and immediate changes to work patterns have changed the world of work. We can draw lessons from this experience and prevent disproportionate outcomes in the future.

While there has been considerable commentary and speculation as to the nature of the changes brought by the pandemic, it is important to reflect as to how and to what extent the pandemic has shaped and reshaped work in Ireland and the consequent effect on workers' job quality and well-being.

This report aims to summarise key findings of the impact of working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, with particular attention paid to the gendered implications of these impacts. This report will detail the findings of a seminal research carried out in the Republic of Ireland looking at this, alongside research carried out covering Northern Ireland based on data collected the long-standing Understanding Society.

Republic of Ireland

In the Republic of Ireland, a new study led by Professor John Geary of University College Dublin that includes Dr Maria Belizon of UCD and researchers from NERI has sought to address this gap in our knowledge by conducting a major survey of workers (both employed and self-employed) in Ireland.

The fieldwork for the UCD Working in Ireland Survey 2021 was undertaken by Ipsos MRBI between May and August 2021. A nationally representative sample of 2,076 of working people aged 16 and over participated in the survey. As it was not possible to carry out in-person interviews at the time, the survey was administered over the (mobile) phone by using a random digit dial methodology. Respondents were asked a series of screening questions to ensure they qualified for the research including age and employment status.

A series of research papers and reports have now begun to be produced by those involved in conducting the study and the findings produced in these reports to-date in relation to gender are worth summarising and reflecting upon here.

One of the papers looks specifically at the impact of working at home on employee well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper authored by Geary and Belizon (2022) examined a series of important questions including:

- How extensive was working at home?
- Which workers worked predominantly at home?
- Did working at home affect the conduct of employees' work? If so, in what ways?
- Were staff more or less productive, and for what reasons?
- Did the changes they experienced improve or impair the quality of their jobs?

- What effect did working at home have on workers' physical health and mental well-being?
- What are workers' preferences for the future? Do they favour a hybrid model?

The report states that between March 2020 and May 2021 23.4 per cent of the Irish workforce worked exclusively at home. A further 9.5 per cent worked the majority of the period (9 – 13 months) at home, 11 per cent worked 4 – 8 months, 6 per cent worked a small period (1 – 3 months), and 4 per cent worked for less than a month at home. The remaining 46 per cent of the workforce worked outside the home. To all intents and purposes, these respondents are those we came to term our “essential workers”.

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In examining the effects of homeworking on employees' work. The most striking finding on this showed that a large balance of respondents experienced an intensification of their effort levels, an increase in their hours of work and achieved greater productivity. The finding in respect of employees' productivity is particularly noteworthy: almost a half of respondents indicated that their output increased while working at home with only a quarter by comparison saying it had decreased. Smaller proportions (between and 3 and 10 per cent) recorded a decrease in their effort levels and working hours, and 24 per cent indicated their productivity had declined.

Furthermore, looking at these findings in a gendered context the results were particularly noteworthy. The results clearly indicate that female employees were more likely to have witnessed an increase in their work effort, hours of work and productivity levels than men.

Table 1. Work intensification and productivity – differences between genders

	% of males	% of females
Effort put into your work increased greatly	13	22
Working hours increased greatly	10	20
The amount of work you got done per hour at home increased greatly during the pandemic compared to when you were not working at home	16	21

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In examining the reasons put forward by workers themselves for the reported changes in their productivity levels while working at home. The predominant reason, by a considerable margin, is because employees reported they were able to concentrate better by working at home. For these employees, at least, this would suggest that the office may not always be the ideal environment for work that requires deep concentration and focus. The second factor was that people were not required to commute to work.

Other less prominent reasons included that it was more convenient to work at home in terms of the ease with which one could take breaks, and also the perceived requirement to undertake more work. The latter was particularly true for female workers, who reported this reason twice as often as their male counterparts.

The study based on data from the Working in Ireland 2021 survey also examined the effort people expended at work while working at home and the consequences for their health and well-being. It found that **men were considerably more likely to report that they worked in excess of 48 hours per week than were women. Women however were more likely than men to report that their working hours increased while working at home. Women were also more likely to work at very high speeds and to tight deadlines and, overall, had higher levels of work intensification than men.**

Further to this the survey found that workers with caring responsibilities reported high level of work intensification while working at home. And while levels tended in the main to decline as children's ages increased, those with children in early primary school reported the highest work effort levels.

In terms of the ensuing impact of this on worker's health and wellbeing the results on the effects on women's health are particularly stark: **43 per cent of women** reported an impairment in their mental health and well-being, in comparison to almost a third of men, which is also not an inconsiderable proportion. Women were also more likely to report that their physical health had deteriorated as had their relationship with those whom they lived. Women were also more likely to say that it damaged the relationship with those that they lived with.

Finally, the paper also explored whether the demanding and damaging effects of the increased work intensity required of working at home were moderated by other attributes of people's work. Here we included measures of line management support, training and job autonomy, the quality of management-employee relations and whether workers were represented by a trade union.

The results pointed to an almost uniform picture. **There was no correlation in the main between the provision of these identified job resources and the effects working at home had on workers' health and well-being, save for one exception – union representation.** For example, there was no relationship whatsoever between workers' mental and physical health and trust in management, or in the quality of the management-employee relationship.

Neither was there an association between workers' mental health and whether they received job training and also their level of job autonomy.

Neither was there any correlation between workers' experiencing work intensification and their trust in management, their levels of job autonomy, training provision, or the broader quality of the management-employee relationship towards employees.

There was one exception. That related to union representation. **The findings suggest – and the relationship here is a modest one – that where a union was recognised by management for the purpose of representing employees in the organisation, working at home was less likely to be associated with work intensification.**

The study concluded the following. For many employees – but particularly women - homeworking is associated with an increase in their work effort, long working hours, stress and an inability to disconnect from their work – all of which results in jobs which are emotionally and mentally demanding.

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Northern Ireland

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The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unparalleled increase in the proportion of people across the UK and more specifically Northern Ireland working from home. Before the pandemic, about 1 in 20 members of the UK workforce worked from home but this increased to more than 1 in 3 after the UK went into lockdown (Kolbas *et al*, 2021). Similar patterns were seen amongst people who lived alone and who lived in multi-person households. Although this rate dipped slightly when more of the country opened-up in late summer 2020, many more people continued to work at home throughout 2020 than had done so before the pandemic. Nevertheless, working at home was not a universal experience – the share of employees working at home exceeded 50 per cent only at two points of the pandemic (Marzec *et al*, 2021).

Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Study) is a large, nationally representative household panel study that interviews all members of randomly selected households. It includes a representative sample for Northern Ireland. All participants from wave 8 or 9 of the main survey (conducted between 2017 and 2019) were invited to take part in the COVID-19 study about respondents' employment situation and their mental health throughout the pandemic, and their responses were then linked to the main Understanding Society survey. Utilising the data collected in this study numerous briefing notes have been produced looking at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on working from home.

Before the pandemic there was no differentiation related to gender, however, during the pandemic employees working at home were slightly over-represented among females in comparison to males. Furthermore, some household characteristics are also associated with the likelihood of working at home: having children, higher household income, longer travelling time to the workplace, and more space per person in one's dwelling are positively related to working at home.

The overwhelming majority of those who worked at home during the pandemic would like to have an opportunity to work at home in future and this preference is largely uniform across different categories of respondents and households. That being said, females were found to be less likely to want to work from home always in the future than men, and prefer the option of working at home at least sometimes (Marzec, Nandi and Patel, 2021)

One paper examined this data with particular attention paid to **whether working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with increased mental distress amongst employees, and how this related to social isolation and financial difficulties.**

The study found that there had been a marked increase in mental distress for all workers. The largest increase in distress was seen among those who were living alone and working from home – these levels were persistently elevated through to November 2020.

Furthermore, Kolbas et al (2021) looked at the impact of working at home on risk of facing financial difficulties. The study found that prior to the pandemic, financial difficulties did not vary significantly according to peoples' living and working arrangements. At the onset of the pandemic, people who were unable to work from home experienced an acute increase in financial difficulties. This included women who were due to the nature of their jobs were less likely to be able to work from home than men.

Within this group, those who were living on their own were the most severely affected, reporting a 27 percentage point increase in financial difficulties by May 2020, with a smaller but still significant increase of 14 percentage points for people who lived in multi-person households. These financial difficulties persisted throughout the pandemic for people unable to work from home. Meanwhile, people who worked from home were relatively untouched by the financial impact of the pandemic.

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