

# Managing Emotions while Working from Home During COVID-19 Pandemic: Working Mothers with Young Children Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

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*The struggle to balance work and family can be a major stressor for women with young children as it can negatively influence their emotional well-being. Studies have found that employed women experience greater difficulty than men in balancing between work and family as they have greater demands. Besides that, women tend to experience low psychological detachment from work while at home, and the emotions they experience at home have negative implications for their work engagement. This study aimed to investigate how working mothers with young children between 0 to 5 years old regulate their work-generated emotions while working from home during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The pandemic forced workers to work from home to curb transmission of the virus. By utilizing the qualitative research method, this study gathered the perspectives of 20 Malaysian working mothers from various public and private organizations who were required to work from home due to the pandemic. They were chosen by using the purposive sampling method, and all transcribed interviews were coded thematically. Qualitative analyses revealed that working mothers often find it difficult to manage their emotions while attempting to balance childcare and work. Some discussed the possible problematic outcomes caused by working from homes, such as stress, anxiety, and social isolation. We conclude that working mothers struggle emotionally when working from home and the impact can vary depending on the age of their children and, their marital status. The study provides some initial evidence that the impact of work from home with young children on emotions is worthy of further investigation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Working from home is not a new phenomenon. Many studies in the early 2000s have attempted to understand the experiences and ways on how workers work from home as compared to working physically from the office (Anderson et al., 2015; Tietze, 2002; Tietze & Musson, 2010). However, the term “*work from home*” has become increasingly popular in various organizations across the world, especially in the recent years of the coronavirus pandemic. This pandemic forced many businesses to run remotely and transition their activities from home (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). The shift in the environment disrupted the global workforce at an unprecedented scale and speed. Hundreds and thousands of workers were laid off or put on unpaid forced to leave, while others were ordered to work from home to slow down the spread of the coronavirus (Arntz et al., 2020). The school closures forced many parents to work from home and, at the same time, care for their children (Bouziri et al., 2020).

Some studies revealed that employed women experience greater difficulty than men when it comes to working from home (Gálvez et al., 2018; Kinman, 2016). For instance, in a study conducted by Newcomb (2021), she found that female academics who also plays the role of parent experience tension due to the requirement of meeting the physical, temporal, and emotional needs of both students, colleagues, and their own children. This is because fathers often rely on their partners to be responsible for childcare tasks (Derndorfer et al., 2021). Many of these studies have been conducted in Western countries such as Australia (Newcomb, 2021; Powell & Craig, 2015) and United Kingdom (Van Der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018), whereas research on the patterns of women working from home in Asian regions remains scarce. Studies have suggested that Eastern culture imposes many family responsibilities on women (e.g., Khokhar, Nas & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2020). Furthermore, past studies on working from home in Asia have predominantly looked at the perceptions of men and women (e.g., Suarlan, 2017), yet women with young children's experiences and perceptions in the Asian context yet to receive much attention. Literature has consistently neglected the important aspect of work from home, which is the pressure of a woman who works remotely while trying to balance work and everyday life (Gálvez et al., 2018).

This study is set to find out how work-generated emotions are regulated while working from home during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It draws upon findings of exploratory research with mothers of young children (0 to 5 years old) working in various organizations in the state of Selangor in Malaysia. The purpose of the present study was twofold: 1) To understand why working mothers with young children face difficulties managing their emotions, and 2) To discover how working mothers with young children manage their emotions when working from home.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Working from Home*

Working from home or teleworking can be considered a double-edged sword (Farrell, 2017). There are many definitions of working from home, but studies broadly defined it as “*any paid work that is carried out primarily from home (at least 20 hours per week)*” (Crosbie & Moore, 2004, p. 224). It is argued that working from home enables workers to achieve work-life balance by making it easier for them to juggle work and home demands as there is no need to commute to work (Crosbie & Moore, 2004; Gálvez et al., 2018; Kossek & Thompson, 2016; Powell & Craig, 2015). Working from home may also increase work productivity (Bloom et al., 2015)

and enable workers to manage their spouse, children, older people, or disabled relatives (Crosbie & Moore, 2004).

In a study conducted by Anderson and Kaplan (2015), they found that working remotely can also reduce negative emotions such as stress and anxiety and increase positive emotions such as joy and happiness. One of the reasons for this is that workers could set up their own workspace at home in their own creative ways (Anderson & Kaplan, 2015). Moreover, working from home allows workers to reduce spending (Barrero, Bloom & Davis, 2020). Other than that, working from home is linked with high levels of autonomy and the reduction of work-family conflicts (Madsen, 2003).

## ***2.2 Negative Impact of Working from Home***

While many studies have pointed out the positive effects of working from home, other studies have also found that this is not always the case, as working from home can also have negative implications (e.g., Arntz et al., 2020). Transitioning from work to home is not straightforward as, at times, achieving a good work-life balance is not easy (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Tietze & Musson, 2010). According to Clark (2000), organizations often expect workers to achieve a good work-life balance, and he defined this balance as “*satisfaction and good functioning of work and home, with a minimum of role conflict*” (p. 751). The lack of balance and stability between work and family can lead to stress (Dolcos & Daley, 2009). One of the major reasons some workers struggle to achieve this balance is because workers would often need to play multiple roles in their daily lives as an employee, spouse, and parent (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). Workers need to 'learn' how to cope by being at “*home and at work*” (Tietze & Musson, 2010, p. 149). Working from home may interfere them from performing any of these responsibilities, which also may lead to work-family conflicts (Kossek & Thompson, 2016; Van Der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018; Voorpostel, 2014).

Other than that, studies found that many workers experience low psychological detachment from work while at home (Sonnetag et al., 2008; Voorpostel, 2014). This is also the case when it comes to detaching emotions that come from home while at work. According to Edwards and Rothbard (2000) and Greenhaus and Powell (2006), emotions experienced at home can have a negative impact on a person's work engagement. Often those working from home can experience social isolation, which leads them experiencing stress (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). In a study conducted by Song and Gao (2019), they found that working from home may generate new sources of conflict and stress at home. Furthermore, various studies showed that workers find it difficult to set boundaries between work and family, thus leading to stress and tensions (Kossek & Thompson, 2016; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Van Der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018).

## ***2.3 Employed Women and Working from Home***

The inability to balance work and family life is one of the major factors that cause a negative impact on women's emotional well-being (Shepherd-Banigan, et al., 2016). This may be because household and work-related tasks are never-ending (Gurstein, 1991), and women spend more time dealing with chores than men (Manzo & Minello, 2020). According to Mann and Holdsworth (2003), women are often expected to combine other works when they work from home, such as daily domestic chores, compared to men. In a study conducted by Kinman (2016), she found that female academics have issues with achieving a good work-life balance. Female academics often find managing and completing the demands of work and home chores are challenging (Kinman, 2016). Besides that, a recent research conducted by Nash and

Churchill (2020) found that female academics faced the most challenges in terms of having to balance between academia and caring responsibilities during the coronavirus pandemic.

Many studies have pointed out that childcare responsibilities are not distributed equally between men and women despite both men and women being wage earners (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2012; Chesley & Flood, 2017). Working mothers are 28% more likely to experience burnout than fathers due to unequal demands at home (Leonhardt, 2020). According to a research conducted by Crosbie and Moore (2004), they found that women tend to get disturbed by their children while working from home. The disruption between work and family demands can lead to an increase in work-family conflicts (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). Furthermore, work-family conflicts are a source of stress and are closely linked to negative experiences of emotional and physical ill-health (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). These literatures suggest that women's role is more demanding than men and that women are pressured to conform to their gender roles.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents faced hardship due to the closure of schools and childcare centres (Arntz et al., 2020). They are required to do work and care for their children and focus on their homeschooling (Arntz et al., 2020; Derndorfer et al., 2021). In a recent study conducted by Derndorfer et al. (2021), it was found that the involvement of fathers in childcare during the pandemic increased only when their female partner was not able to work from home. A United-States Pew Research Centre survey conducted in October 2020 also found that working mothers struggled more than fathers when getting work done without interruptions (Igielnik, 2021; Murad, 2021). This is especially hard for mothers with children under 18 at home (Igielnik, 2021; Murad, 2021).

#### ***2.4 Challenges of Malaysian Working Mothers during the pandemic***

In Malaysia, many published newspaper articles have highlighted the challenges of working mothers' experience during the pandemic, especially during the first phase of the Movement Control Order (MCO) announced by the Malaysian government (e.g., Mohd Said, 2020; Murad, 2021; Poo, 2021; Tang, 2020). The first MCO was in effect from 18 - 31 March 2020, and it had restricted citizens' movements and required more workers to work from home (Yusof, 2021). Furthermore, nurseries, government and private schools, public and private higher educations were also prohibited from opening (Restriction of Movement Order, 2020). A recent article published by The Malaysian Reserve indicated that mothers in Malaysia had expressed their "*grievances*" on social media due to the challenges working from home (Mohd Said, 2020).

Working from home can be physically and mentally taxing when women cannot manage their stress, which can lead to conflict with their husbands (Mohd Said, 2020). The article also indicated that failure to cope with responsibilities could cause stress which is unhealthy and harmful for their well-being (Mohd Said, 2020). According to the LinkedIn Opportunity Index 2021 survey, they found that 32% of working mothers in Malaysia expect organizations to provide flexibility in terms of work-from-home arrangements (32%) and offer the option for reduced schedules (30%) and part-time schedules (27%) so that they can balance their work and personal life (Ram, 2021).

Many studies have contributed to identifying the imbalance of work-life and the gender differences in childcare provision. This study anticipates finding evidence on how mothers with young children balance work and family during the pandemic. The use of open-ended responses and qualitative analysis, however, enabled us to explore further how they manage their emotions while balancing their lives. The research questions focused on the ways working

mothers with young children manage their emotions while working from home and how they balance work-life in general.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

This research was conducted in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. This research employed a qualitative approach and was conducted from December 2020 to early February 2021. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face online interviews with 20 working mothers who were forced to work from home by their employer at the time of the interview. The size selected was based on Creswell (2013), who indicated that the ideal sample size should be between 5 to 25. This qualitative technique was preferred as it provides an opportunity to attain a greater level of depth and detail to reveal the participants' full range of perceptions and feelings regarding the subject matter (Cresswell, 2013). Participants were chosen by using the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling enables an appropriate group, which is essential for the study, to be selected using a specific criterion (Tongco, 2007). To be eligible, participants were required to fulfil the following criteria: 1) female, 2) full-time paid employment, 3) a mother with young children, 4) working from home, and 5) working in public or private organizations in Selangor. All the interviews were conducted online using Google Meet, and the duration was between 45 and 90 minutes. University ethics approvals and informed consent from the participants were obtained prior to their participation in this study.

#### ***3.2 Interviews and Procedure***

At the start of each interview, relevant information about the study, the procedure and the data usage were given to the participants who agreed to be interviewed and recorded. Data collection was made voluntary and via video call (i.e., Google Meet). Face-to-face interviews were not conducted due to the Malaysian government's social distancing measures to prevent coronavirus transmission at the time. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences and managing their emotions with their small or young children while working from home.

The interview protocol started with a general question in order to get to know the participant. For instance, the interviewer asked questions such as "*Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?*", "*What do you do for living?*" and "*How many children do you have?*" Questions were then funnelled towards asking more specific questions about the topic, such as "*What do you do to keep yourself feeling positive while working from home with small or young children?*" "*How do you manage your emotions?*" Probes were used to elicit further elaboration on the strategies that they have used to manage their emotions. The participants were also encouraged to provide examples and elaborate on the issues when the interview deviated from the original protocol. A pilot study to check the suitability of the questions was conducted with two female workers working in a private organization, and few changes were made to the questions. The interviews were conducted in English.

It was made clear to the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were utilized throughout this article (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2). The collected data were transcribed, and each participant was asked to review the content of their transcript for accuracy via email. This was followed by specific interview questions, and answers were matched and annotated to answer the research questions produced. The responses were analysed mostly based on each working mother's experience in dealing with their emotions when working from home with small or young