Challenges of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic for women in the UAE

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1| INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus Disease (COVID) has become the most devastating global pandemic of the 21st century (Harris & Moss, 2021). Findings show that the earliest reported case was in November 2019 from a 55-year-old man in Wuhan, China (Sirajudeen et al., 2021). Although Chinese authorities first communicated the nature of the disease to the World Health Organization (WHO) by December 31, it was not enough time to fully grasp the virus’s dynamic nature or to clearly distinguish what it is from what it is not. Within a short time, the virus began to spread through the community geometrically, then exponentially. By January 13, the WHO confirmed the first COVID case outside China, in Thailand. Since then, there have been 27.2 million cases worldwide, with 18.2 million recovered and 890 thousand recorded deaths (WHO, 2020a, 2020b).

In addition to claiming hundreds of thousands of lives up to nearly a million lives worldwide, the global pandemic has wrought devastation in many economies (Moss & Harris, 2020). Following a ban on international and local travels and business closures, clamp down on all economic activities within countries from corporate institutions to manufacturing, education, religious activities, transportation, construction, and every facet of the economy.

Like most parts of the world, the work-life in the UAE was immensely affected by the pandemic. Towards ensuring the job security of workers, the UAE government thrust out policies geared towards ensuring job security for Emiratis and foreigners. According to Hogan Lovells (2020), the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE) issued policy directives that mandated employers to adopt the following measures as a coping strategy during the intensity of the pandemic: remote working arrangements, grant paid leave to employees, unpaid grant leave to employees, temporarily reduce employee salaries, and or permanently reduce employee salaries.
However, in practice, workers in the country have been met with varying degrees of harsh economic conditions and several workers lost their jobs as example. From their side, women workers have been hard hit as well. As example, some of the female migrant domestic workers’ implications under the Kafala system include extended hours of domestic work without a commensurate increase in remuneration (Aoun, 2020). As a result, this research aims to investigate and understand the impacts of females working from home strategies on UAE families and women’s rights. Specifically, the research question is, what are the challenges and benefits associated with working from home on women in the UAE? The research aims also to explore the effects of this new job switch reality inside an Arabic society that is mainly characterized by a dominant patriarchal culture. Thus, it becomes interesting to investigate whether this comes back to home through new modes of remote working constitutes a regression of female’s rights.

Performing such research in UAE society characterized by Arabic culture and dominant patriarchy spirit would distinguish this research from the previous ones. Militants of women’s rights are still defending the rights of Arabic women to work and emancipation. For long years researchers and Human rights defenders called for the necessity of having more gender equity in the labor market. With this pandemic, Arabic females are applied to get back home and from home. Does this new context constitute a regression of Arabic female rights? This original research will focus analysis on this new aspect.

The paper proceeds as follows. After the introduction, we make an intensive literature review. After that, we describe the research methodology followed by the presentation of the data and main findings. The discussion of results is accompanied by conclusions and recommendations.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

At this point, the study will look at the underlying theoretical structures that border around the challenges of women in the workplace, concerning the UAE environment. Some key features to be examined under this section would include the reformatory transition in the global space that created more room for women in the workplace, the theories that back female workforce participation, an insight into the obstacles faced by female workers in the United Arab Emirates and the nature of the country’s policies and regulation towards women workforce participation. It would also consider how much impact the global pandemic has wrought on workers and review the advantages and challenges of remote working for women.

2.1 | The global transformation work and the access of female workers

The role of women in society and nation-building has been experiencing firm revolts since the last century. People are beginning to redefine the role of caregivers to real contributors to the workplace and enlighten them on equal opportunities for women in every sector, from education to workplace environments. In the middle East, the misconception in women’s perception and their roles has continued to thrive based on religious doctrines and traditions. In alignment with the United Nations’ 2030 SDGs on gender equality, the UAE’s Vision 2021 targets to set UAE among the top 25 countries in the world for gender equality (Gouveia, 2016). With 2021 around the corner, the country already trumps the middle East in gender equality and has the highest female literacy level of 95.8% (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Inquiries from researchers on the nature and structure of labor force participation from the past centuries have contributed to today’s advocates for equal opportunities. The emphasis on the utmost relevance of women’s empowerment as a catalyst for effective economic development gave rise to the movement for gender equality (Kooli & Mutfah, 2020). The theories that promote gender equality are generally the same that support the need for equal opportunities for women in society and the workplace. Gender-sensitive theories that have been developed by scholars are usually categorized into a rather cumbersome category of ideologies that are often vague and overlapping with each other.

To some researchers, gender equality theories can come in the form of biological, psychological, anthropological, sociological, and economic theories, or it can come in the form of socialist, liberal, and radical feminist theories (Agassi, 1989). However, Agassi (1989) attempts to classify gender equality theories’ cross-disciplinary complexity in line with the themes they convey. Four themes encompass the theories of gender equality; production and property relations; family structure and household; social roles, especially occupational work roles; and sexuality.

The first theme of production and property relations addresses the theories that point out both genders’ social and economic divides. It references foundational theorists like Marx and Engels. To Karl Marx, the class system in a society where there are the rich (bourgeoisie) and the poor (proletariats) is a result of capitalism, and this is the root of all forms of inequality. Engels continues this argument noting that the class structure gave birth to the patriarchal system that treats women as inferior and relegates their societal relevance to reproductive uses. At the same time, the men oversaw the production factors. Hence, women must become an active force in the productive segment of society.

According to Agassi (1989), the second theme points to the family structure of role allocation as the bane of inequality. Engels’ (1972) argument on the family composition questions the role allocation of women as primary and principal caregivers. He argues that unpaid domestic works for which women are deprived of societal relevance also reflect on their financial status as they become solely dependent on men for money. To Engels (1972), gender parity can only be achieved on the labor division within the household. On this ground, the foundation for income inequality and societal gender discrimination be resolved.

Social roles emphasizing occupational roles are the next phase to consider in the quest to bridge the gender-sensitive gaps in society. It preaches equal opportunity in the workplace and abolition of
gender stereotypes in jobs. Modern liberal feminists posit that these stereotypes in job qualifications and job types, often, portray women who eventually get into roles classified as “male roles” as lucky and compensate them with lesser pay. In other cases, women collectively earn less than their male counterparts for similar job roles.

2.2 | The challenges facing uae female workers

The government of the UAE is championing a cause to achieve gender equality in the country. This environment is completely safe and accommodating for women to scale the heights in any profession. Although studies show that women and Emiratis, in general, prefer to work in the public sector, the reasons vary from its efficiency in the pursuit of equal opportunity for all to include other determinants like the degree of workplace flexibility for women, higher salaries, patriotism, and job securities (Smith, 2020). However, Ernst and Young’s (2017) report identified the challenges women face in the UAE workspace as visible barriers, hidden barriers, and external and societal pressures. Visible barriers here often refer to issues like presenteeism and how insensitive the workplace could be to women’s various needs like nursing and caregiving. The hidden barriers mostly include the religious and cultural undertone that is rarely ever mentioned but depicted in every conversation. This could include women’s role in day-to-day business interaction, negotiation, and conversation with clients who are predominantly male.

2.3 | How the uae encourages and facilitates females to access the market of work

In the UAE, there are stringent rules from the government arm to ensure job security. According to the directives of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE), employers of labor within the UAE are mandated by policy to adopt a flexible working scheme to ensure job security for all during the pandemic (lockdown) (Hogan Lovells, 2020). The flexible working conditions options include granting paid leave to its employees, planning for remote work, granting unpaid leaves to employees, and or a temporary (permanent) deduction of employee’s salaries as the case may be (Hogan Lovells, 2020). All these alternatives are available to stakeholders to choose from, as opposed to having job losses.

In addition, the government of the UAE made provisions for easy and swift access to healthcare for women, with emphasis on pregnant women, nursing mothers, and aged women. Some medical services like the COVID tests were made accessible and free as well. The UAE is in a leading position to achieve gender equality and allows women opportunities to participate in economic activities fully. For instance, 61% of the workforce in the health sector are women, over 75,000 work in health-related activities, up to 10,300 women work in the police force - which is more than half the total population of the workforce, and more than 50,000 workers in the education sector (The Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority, 2020).

2.4 | Impacts of covid-19 on the reality of workers and females

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic cuts across all areas of human endeavor and touches every country on the planet (Kooli, 2021a). It greatly affects and still affects how we live, communicate, and trade.

Several researchers studied the effects of the COVID-19 pandemics on female workers and were able to conclude that women were severely affected. Thus, they quit jobs (Baburajan, 2021), got less salaries (Guha et al., 2021; Maqsood et al., 2021), faced severe stress (Kooli, 2021b) because of the combination of work and family life. Also, Ahuja et al. (2021) admitted that women were severely impacted by the pandemics because they are more vulnerable to stress and have more chances to develop post-traumatic stress disorder than men. These researchers also justified the observed increased levels of stress among females by their increased domestic and social responsibilities.

Cross-sectional descriptive research conducted in Saudi Arabia, quantified the impact of COVID-19 on the individuals (Arnout & Al-Sufyani, 2021). It concluded that the crisis married females faced economic and financial stresses that radically changed their lifestyle. On another side, Abdel Rahman (2021) observed an unprecedented increase in the levels of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemics. He admitted that females were trapped inside their homes and several of them were battered especially in contexts with a history of family violence.

Inside this new context and reality, studies show that up to 88% of organizations worldwide have embarked on a work from home policy, even for companies that did not have an option for remote work in their original plan (Miller, 2020). Often, moving to a remote system meant changing the mode of communication, meetings, seminars, and training from physical to virtual using video conferencing services and cloud software. This has translated to an upsurge in investment and usage of Software as a Service (SaaS) and video conferencing usage. For instance, apps like Zoom saw a surge in use from around 10 million in December 2019 to about 200 million by April 1 (the early months of the lockdown) (Miller, 2020). Three weeks later, it experienced a 50% increase to 300 million and has continued the same geometric trend ever since (Oliash, 2020). Similarly, other video conferencing apps. In March, the total video calls on Microsoft’s Team application increased by more than 1000%. Following this first part of the literature review, our first assumption assumes that: H1: Like globally, UAE female workers faced several challenges during the pandemic lockdown.

2.5 | Females work from home advantages and challenges

Working from home has been prioritized by most workplaces and institutions within the pandemic and lockdown period. To continue
business and organizational activities, numerous businesses and institutions worldwide remodeled their working schedule into a more flexible and adaptable work model that allowed people to work remotely. It is not just enough for businesses in the UAE to decide to settle for remote work for continuity, but the government mandates so (Hogan Lovells, 2020).

Although flexibility remains one of the key advantages of working from home, especially for women looking to balance work and personal life, women derive many more benefits from working remotely. According to research, remote working allows for a more comfortable work-life balance for women and increases their chances of making professional advancements (Ultimate Software, 2019). It enables mothers to continue their work after childbirth and greatly reduces the gaping hole that follows a career break for a caring period.

Unbeknown to many people, studies have found another type of workplace discrimination attributed to physical stature - precisely height. According to the National Health Statistics, given that men are taller than women on average, they stand a better chance of getting the benefits in a work environment (Fryar et al., 2018; Pinsker, 2015). Remote working, however, neutralizes the relevance of height differences and puts everyone on equal ground.

In contrast, however, researchers have found many associated challenges that come with working from home, which should make it less desirable. In most of the cases of remote work, studies found an increased tendency of work–family conflict. According to Ibarra et al. (2020), remote working only favors men (with or without children) and women without children, given that they have greater control over their schedule and can easily prioritize their tasks (Ten Brummelhuis & Van der Lippe, 2010). On the contrary, it brings more mayhem for mothers as it often results in more time for domestic activities and caregiving against their counterparts, which slows down their career progression. Other researchers argue that flexible working conditions like remote working would lead to a blurred boundary situation that often brings about overlapping roles - works overlapping to domestic roles and vice versa (Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Schieman & Young, 2010).

Another challenge that comes with remote working for women (especially mothers or caregivers) is that it reduces the degree of effectiveness and communication as opposed to a face-to-face or physical office. It reduces rapport in the workplace (Ibarra et al., 2020) and interpersonal connectivity. This cannot be offset by emails, zoom calls, or online meetings. At a point, Yahoo CEO Marriser Mayer canceled the work from home flexibility option for Yahoo workers because she perceived it reduced the level of communication and collaboration needed for a healthy and progressive work environment (Goudreau, 2013). This stands in contrast to working side-by-side. The new global reality of female workers through the pandemics generated a new wave of voices calling for the adoption of the principle of work from home among UAE citizens female workers. Thus, our second assumption supposes that: H2: Working from home has positive effects on Female workers.

2.6 | Alternative approaches to a full-blown remote working

Remote working is just one way to make the workplace more even for both men and women, removing a large chunk of gender bias inherent in the system. There are other mediums that companies could adopt in the post-COVID-19 period, which would enable it to give equal opportunity to its employees like Flextime that puts ease on the rigidity of the time stamp. This flexibility would allow women to meet up with family-related activities that may be clashing with the conventional office time. Employers could also offer reduced hours of work or Part-time jobs. In this situation, companies can allow employees to switch their time commitments on the job and allow for a part-time option. As opposed to taking maternity leave, women could preferably reduce their number of working hours.

Employers could also rely on leaves and Sabbaticals which constitute legal provisions in an employment contract often permit the employee the right to an annual leave period (Kooli & Muftah, 2020). They are granted a personal work relief period and can either be paid or unpaid leave. In this case, leave also includes specialized leaves like maternity or paternity leaves. Whereas company policies should be regulated to ensure that maternity leaves are compulsory and strictly adhered to the component of their contract, a (female) employee should also have the right to choose if to also carry on with her stipulated annual leave after supposedly taking maternity leave. Taking sabbaticals is also another means to afford women the opportunity to have a balanced life without risking their career growth chances.

The third assumption supposes that: H3: UAE citizens female workers are keen for a work-life balance.

3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research explores the challenges of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic with UAE working women's focus. According to Saunders et al. (2016), research designs and methodologies serve as roadmaps to actualizing defined objectives and research purposes. In this study, the researchers take on a deductive research method. The deductive approach promotes combining existing theories with inferences from the data to provide rich insights into the studied phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Hence, this method is adopted to draw inference on the challenges of remote working on UAE female workers during the pandemic. The data collection technique adopted a qualitative method, with a focus on primary data through semi-structured interviews. Hence as a data collection technique, interviews were randomly conducted with female workers across different work fields from top professional positions to homemaking and caregiving professions in the UAE.

In the data collection process, the researcher employs the snowballing technique of data collection to ensure that information is gathered in the most random way possible. Given that interpretivism gives room for interference, the researcher adopts a probability sampling technique that offers all the samples the same opportunity to be
selected. According to Abedsaedi and Amiraliakbari (2015), the snow-balling sampling technique grants the researcher the opportunity to access the target sample when it is difficult to reach them. It allows the researcher to communicate better with the right respondents to a research exercise and eliminates the chances of sampling non-affected respondents. In short, it is time-saving and more precise. In this study, the target respondents are UAE citizens working women who have family duties. To answer the research questions, the following assumptions are generated:

Furthermore, to analyze the data collected, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed through open coding to deduce the conceptual connotations and verbatims that emanated from the interview extracts. For coding, the study uses the Nvivo version 11 software to categorize the data into relevant themes. The themes were geared towards ascertaining the different challenges that have been encountered and are an ongoing challenge for UAE citizens female workers.

4 | DATA COLLECTION

As described in Table 1, a total of 16 actively employed women were interviewed for this task. Their employment sectors are both in public and private sectors, including education, healthcare, manufacturing, aviation, engineering, and so forth. Forty-three percent of the respondents identified themselves as married women with at least one dependent child. From the data, there was an average of 7 years of work experience among the respondents. On questions about their preference for their jobs, all the respondents interviewed affirmed their love for their jobs and recalled being told to work from home by their respective employers during the lockdown. This confirms with the selection criteria of choosing women that were working from home. Following the data extracts, the findings were grouped into the following themes.

5 | EFFECTS OF WORKING FROM HOME ON WOMEN

The respondents were asked to describe their experiences of working from home since the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. From their comments, working from home has both positive and negative influences on women. Hence, we divided the theme into two sub-themes to reflect on these inferences.

5.1 | Negative experiences of working from home

From the responses given to reflect the major challenges encountered while working remotely, many of the respondents indicated that they had issues with their work roles' spillover effect over their family time. For them, combining work and familial duties within the same space generated some consequences, as illustrated by the following quotes:

“From my point of view as a mother of young children, they need me to assist and help them with doing their online classes, so that sometimes lead to lessening of my work.”

“When my child wants something, I attempt to stop working and apply his needs. This has an effect on my concentration to work and is sometimes stressful for me.”

Consistent with previous studies, combining work and family duties could be a threat to employees’ work-life balance, particularly those working from Home (Grünberg & Matei, 2020; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). Besides, the respondents also expressed their

| TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic profile of the participants |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Respondent 1 | 22 | High school | 0 | Full-time | Private | 2 |
| Respondent 2 | 25 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Public | 2 |
| Respondent 3 | 33 | University degree | 4 | Full-time | Public | 10 |
| Respondent 4 | 23 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Private | 1 |
| Respondent 5 | 38 | University degree | 5 | Full-time | Public | 16 |
| Respondent 6 | 40 | University degree | 4 | Full-time | Public | 13 |
| Respondent 7 | 26 | High school | 1 | Full-time | Private | 8 |
| Respondent 8 | 40 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Public | 15 |
| Respondent 9 | 31 | University degree | 3 | Full-time | Private | 10 |
| Respondent 10 | 31 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Private | 9 |
| Respondent 11 | 33 | University degree | 5 | Full-time | Public | 10 |
| Respondent 12 | 25 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Public | 3 |
| Respondent 13 | 29 | University degree | 3 | Full-time | Private | 8 |
| Respondent 14 | 30 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Public | 7 |
| Respondent 15 | 26 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Private | 3 |
| Respondent 16 | 25 | University degree | 0 | Full-time | Private | 3 |
conflicts between roles (Chanana, 2021). In addition, some of the respondents reported that the main challenge they faced was technology-related, such as internet disruptions, computer malfunctioning, and deficiency in technological know-how. These technical challenges exacerbated the issues faced while working from home. The following reflects the comments of some of the respondents:

“I am working for longer hours now...the work has increased because they think that if we are working from home, we are available 24 hours to do the job.”

“When we are at the workplace, the staff can call me from 7 am to 3 pm, but now when we are working from home, they call me anytime even sometimes they call me at 8 pm which is not suitable for me...that makes me very nervous.”

According to Guillaume and Pochic (2009), increased workload or work intensification could lead to work–family conflict. Individuals struggle to cope with their work and family responsibilities, leading to conflicts between roles (Chanana, 2021). In addition, some of the respondents reported that the main challenge they faced was technology-related, such as internet disruptions, computer malfunctioning, and deficiency in technological know-how. These technical challenges exacerbated the issues faced while working from home. The following reflects the comments of some of the respondents:

“The internet connection because you are doing work on your device is needed to be a good quality...but I sometimes find the connection frustrating especially when I have deadlines to meet.”

“First, the internet often turns off during the meeting, the computer restarts and that is the reason for the delay in the delivery of work, the meeting was faster at work, now from home takes longer and we need more preparation...the technology is a critical challenge.”

Without a doubt, digital-assisted technology such as information and communication technology (ICT) systems are needed to facilitate working from Home (Fogarty et al., 2011). Many of the respondents found the connectivity problems as one of their significant challenges with working remotely.

Another finding from the study was the issue of distractions, which tend to have affected employee engagement levels among some of the respondents. The distractions were mainly attributed to the need to multitask and combine work with non-work duties (e.g., caregiving and domestic chores):

“The challenges that I was faced is how to reach the balance between my children and work and to try to be successful in all of it...my children come in during work, and that distracts my attention, but I cannot resist attending to their needs if not I won't get any work done.”

“The distraction from family demands generates problems...some people are not taking the work serious from home, and that results in some mistakes in the work because they lost concentration at some point....so that's a problem because my husband cannot help most times, so I have to do all the domestic work.”

The struggle to combine work and non-work responsibilities can be taxing for women, particularly in a less egalitarian environment. Consistent with the previous studies, patriarchy’s issues pose a threat to the work-life balance and general well-being of women in these societies (Adisa et al., 2019). The dominant patriarchal culture aggravated the situation of UAE female workers. Moving offices to home and cumulating job tasks and domestic daily responsibilities did not change the perceptions of the Arabic men. Interviews revealed that female workers continued assuming house responsibilities without getting any consideration from their husbands. The last facts are quietly annoying especially once we know that the Majority of UAE citizens could afford the hiring of one or more housemaids that could help them in executing daily domestic tasks. Despite that, some of the interviewees complained about the increasing load of family responsibilities. The interviews also revealed the non-respect of the privacy of the female workers through assigning them extra duties at different times of the day under the pretext of the availability for working from home at any time. The lack of respect for privacy is also a dominant aspect of the Arabic culture where some people give themselves the right to make professional contact or ask for extra duties at any time of the day or the week. This late aspect was aggravated during the pandemics and employers gave themselves the right to breach the privacy of female workers under the pretext of the availability for WFH. Finally, it is interesting to notice that despite only 47% of the interviewees having children, almost all of them complained about the family issues created and aggravated by the adoption of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemics. This affirms that not only the presence of children creates extra duties. Also, the presence of the partners on a permanent basis could generate conflicts and family disputes especially once these partners are not collaborative in assuming domestic tasks or once then do not take into consideration the extra duties created by cumulating employment and house duties and responsibilities.

5.2 | Positive experiences of working from home

Despite the challenges faced while working from home as previously examined, the respondents also identified certain advantages associated with working from home. The predominant finding was that working from home facilitated work flexibility for many of the respondents. Consistent with previous research investigating the benefits of working remotely, this study finds that flexibility is pertinent to achieving work-life balance (Fogarty et al., 2011; Halford, 2005). The following comments reflect the respondents’ positive feelings:
“Flexibility in working hours, meaning that we can extend working hours while doing some other things not work-related is a plus for working from home.”

“You are in the comfort of your home, and you’re not dressing up not preparing to go outside… I can do whatever I like at home and spread my activities as I feel comfortable and as long as I can meet my daily or weekly targets.”

For some of the respondents, the preference for flexibility is also associated with their ability to work from their homes’ comfort. In addition, some of the respondents opined that the opportunity to spend quality time with family is their most preferred advantage of the remote working policy. The following comments exemplify this experience:

“Being with my children while working from home gives me joy… although they disturb me but my closeness to them is what I derive happiness from.”

“Sitting with children and following up on their studies, having time to sit with the family and discuss pending issues are the positive sides for me.”

Following the ability to cohabit with their children at the same time while working and fulfilling their caregiving roles, some of the participants also expressed how working from home saves from the considerable cost of paying for childcare services and getting nannies to look after them, which also comes with some security and trust issues. The following quotes illustrate the experience:

“I am saving a lot of money by looking after my children by myself… I pay a huge sum of the money to hire a nanny and at the same time I might be scared of the nanny kidnapping my children one day.”

“For me, it’s the fact that I can be sure about the safety of my children because I pay so much to keep them at daycare centers when at work… so it also saves me some money.”

For many of the respondents, working from home is a health and safety measure that prevents them from contracting the Coronavirus. They felt it was good to facilitate remote work to avoid health challenges that may affect staff and the overall productivity of the organization. The following quotes exemplify the responses:

“Due to Coronavirus, we were asked to work at home to keep us safe… I think it is also good for the company because if we get sick, it will affect the production and they may need to struggle to get replacements within the short time.”

“My company had to instruct me to work from home… they want to make sure that we are safe and healthy.”

Working from home reduces the tendency to contract the virus, which might lead to a significant negative effect not only on the health of the employees but also on the organization’s productivity levels. The work from home policy, therefore, does not only serve as a positive impact for the organizations, who also benefit from cost reduction as a result of reduced usage of office facilities but also avoiding health casualties and death for their employees.

6 | PERCEIVED PREFERENCE FOR HOME WORKING

Having examined the respondents’ experiences regarding the effect of working from home, the study also inquired to understand the degree of preference of these respondents for working from home as opposed to working from the office. From the responses, there was a mixed feeling among the respondents after weighing the benefits and consequences of working from home. The data shows that only a few of the respondents were firm in their preference for working from home and would not mind continuing from home for as long as possible. The following illustrates these feelings:

“I think women will be happier if they work from home because I enjoy it myself despite the negatives… I can give time for their jobs and my home duties at the same time.”

“There are many advantages with working from home, so after the pandemic, I want to be given a choice to work from home on a couple of days… I have more time to do what I can do and even spend a lot of time with my family.”

Some other participants talked about liking the idea of working from home, and they would attempt to cope with the mixed feelings if allowed to work remotely:

“I will try to find a way to solve difficulties because even I faced all these challenges because to have a comfort zone is very important for me.”

“Even it needs double effort to finish all the things required from me as a mother, wife, and employee; I still prefer to work from home.”

On the contrary, a majority of respondents refuted the preference to work from home continually. These feelings were attributed to the negative effects on their experiences of working from home, as the following quotes illustrate:
“I don’t want to continue working from home because there are things that require a direct presence at work and meet remotely. You feel that something is not complete. We do not see the person we are talking with and this is a barrier.”

“My job is never beneficial to work from home forever, but during the training period, it is possible. Then I have to be in the factory because the job requires it.”

These varying responses also come from the fact that they prefer to be in physical contact with their colleagues instead of using virtual platforms. Some respondents also said:

“I miss my work, and the interaction with people face to face...before, I only need to knock on the door to ask my questions but now it takes time to get responses, and it affects my work rate...the social interaction is missing.”

“I miss my colleagues and the environment and our manager...the workplace gives me positive vibes.”

For many of them, the job requires their presence to ensure work efficiency; hence, working from home is not an option for consideration. Some of the respondents’ preference is induced by the need to build social relationships, which they feel is declining while working from home.

7 | WORKING FROM HOME AND WOMEN’S CAREER PROGRESSION

Finally, the study inquired from the respondents to share their opinions regarding how working from home affects women’s chances to progress in the workplace. The findings reveal some mixed feelings based on the variety of needs and personalities of the women. Some of the respondents were clear on their stand that it is beneficial for women in general as they have the opportunity to perfectly blend their work life and personal life, thereby attaining work-life balance for themselves. The following quotes express these views:

“For me, it’s a gain because I feel that I can do many things working from home than before...I believe that this change will increase the productivity of all female workers judging from my experiences.”

“I think that will be a good opportunity for me...since I won’t be travelling far to get to work, I can use that time to do some online training to increase my knowledge on the job.”

On the contrary, many of the respondents think otherwise. For them, the experience of a workplace transcends beyond task assignments and deliveries. Physical human-to-human communication in the workplace, relationship building, and communication are things that develop a person’s work and life experiences. The following quotes illustrate their concerns regarding working from home on their career progression:

“It’s a loss for female workers because again working for hours longer than the normal working hours, we have to realize that women also need to take care of their families, they need to cook, they need to take care of their house, and they need to shop as well – in addition, they help the study of their children. All of these things will stop women from getting to the top position at work.”

“Working in an organization gives me more knowledge and culture more than at home. How do I learn from my colleagues and senior-level officers when working from home...it will stop me from getting promoted.”

A few of the respondents believe that it is both a gain and a loss for women to resolve to remote working, as the following quotes illustrate:

“From my point of view, I think it’s both a gain and loss. Because if we continue working from home, we will lose a lot of experiences at the workplace. On the other hand, the gain is to do everything at the same time, and also, I will not need to take permission when I need to go out because I’m working from home.”

“As a married woman, it is a benefit for me. I can save time, and I will not spend time going to work. It allows me to give more attention at home and when I multitask, my work gets done at the same time.”

The analysis shows that most women feel that their work is threatened while working remotely because of the lack of on-hand knowledge and on-the-job training, which seems to be more effective while in the physical working place. In comparison, some of the participants argue that working from home increases their ability to increase their human capital to fulfill their job demands and influence their career progression chances. Others argue that working from home reduces the knowledge transfer from their senior colleagues, which they perceive to be more effective during direct physical contact. The interviews show that UAE female workers are so attached to their work and perceive it as highly valuable. However, they are also too attached to their family life. The success of their marital life is as important as their professional career.
8 | DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The research results give cause for inference on the experiences and challenges women face in the UAE with the processes of working from home due to the coronavirus pandemics. Given that the study’s central focus was on investigating and understanding the impacts of females WFH strategies on UAE families and women’s rights.

According to the findings, most of the UAE women were challenged by their social roles (i.e., caregiving and domestic duties), which resulted in spillovers following the remote working experiences. This challenge is consistent with the popular discourse on work-life balance and theory that centers on the spillover effect as a derivative of work-life conflict.

The spillover theory, according to Grzywacz et al. (2007) explains how activities in two different roles (work and family) can interact with each other and often lead to the crossing of boundaries. According to Edwards and Rothbard (2000), mood swings and emotional changes from either the home domain or the family domain could interrupt activities in the other domain. For instance, a provocation from the workplace could be carried over to the home where family members suffer from transferred aggression and vice versa.

Another theory that attempts to explain why women had difficulty coping with work tasks at home while attending to family needs at the same time are the border theory (Akinyele et al., 2016; Clark, 2000).

To Bulger et al. (2007), the border’s strength determines the flexibility and how individuals move from one domain to another. The actual research reveals that the UAE female workers, although expressed both negative and positive experiences; however, these experiences were facilitated because of combining work and familial responsibilities within the same space.

Lastly, in situations where an individual learns to combine work and life, the integration theory is captured. At this point, there is no boundary or borders whatsoever between one or two spaces or domains in an individual’s life. At the point of integration, the individual attains a state where they blend their personal life and work-life together. Evidence of integration was dominant within the actual research, and while some women were able to cope with the situation, others found it extremely challenging.

Apart from the spillovers, many of the interviewees acknowledged that another factor challenging their ability to work from their homes is technology-related. For some of them, internet disruptions caused havoc to their efforts and lowered their deliverables’ intensity. In other cases, technological devices could not be trusted to be permanently hitch-free. As a result, from time to time, while working from home, computer systems may malfunction and will need the urgent attention of a technician - a service they would have been easy to access if they were working from their respective offices. Furthermore, some of the respondents’ challenges are the divided attention that comes from the expectations on their role in the two domains - work and family. The fact that they could not solicit adequate help from their husbands to deal with the increasing job and family demand exacerbated their experiences of work-family conflict.

The technological challenge observed in the actual research is an interesting surprise observed in a well-developed country like UAE. The observation of such technological obstacles in a country where technology is supposed to be a support for development makes the adoption of WFH on a worldwide base quietly questionable especially inside countries where technological and telecommunication infrastructure are poor.

Despite these challenges, the researcher also captured some notable advantages of working from home. From the findings, the majority of the interviewed female workers affirmed that their top priority was spending quality time with their families. This opportunity was afforded by the remote working policy, which allowed them to work from home while spending time with loved ones. It affords them enough time to dedicate to childcare without necessarily taking a leave from work for nursing mothers. In other cases of eldercare, most women reiterate how invaluable the opportunity to work from home was to help them meet the needs of their elderly.

Some of the respondents indicate that their home's comfort is valued over the hassles of the office place; hence, this is their most coveted advantage of the remote working policy from their respective companies. This comfort includes the flexibility in what to wear, how to wear them, the elimination of mobility logistics, and how or where to sit work from. Additionally, the respondents agree that another existing advantage is for health and safety purposes. With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and the growing information on the nature of its spread, it is only a matter of company policy to keep the workers at home to curb the spread. Although this was the ideal approach adopted worldwide, the UAE government ensured that this was a well-spelled out policy to curb job losses and provide job security. For some of the respondents, it will be advantageous for women to continue with remote work. This presents an opportunity for them to create a perfect work-life balance and maintain stable mental and physical health.

Furthermore, some of the respondents refute the claim of the preference to work from home as an advantage to women's professional career growth. The basis for standing strong against this opinion is the belief in the impact of the physical workplace on an employee's emotional development and stability, a non-replaceable human-to-human contact, and the chances of improved engagement in team works and organizational planning. However, a few of the respondents believe that working remotely as a policy to help women attain personal work-life balance is both a merit and a demerit. As an advantage, it helps women make out time to attend to personal family needs while also being actively involved in the company's activities. It also helps cut down job drawbacks like fatigue, stress, absenteeism, improves productivity and efficiency.

On the contrary, it is essential to have people at the business premises. It enhances employee relationships with management faster than a virtual relationship and helps employees connect.

The researcher observes a link between this paper’s findings to the three assumptions stated earlier in this paper.
H1. Like globally, UAE female workers faced several challenges during the pandemic lockdown.

The findings have recorded reasons to accept this null hypothesis. Among the challenges women face in the UAE during the lockdown period are; spillover effects of work on the family, technological challenges and divided attention.

H2. Working from home has positive effects on Female workers.

The study partially accepts this hypothesis. The findings show that working from home has several advantages on the social/ Family perspective. However, the research showed also that working from home affects female workers on the professional basis. The females desire to keep working from home remains divided between the advantages and disadvantages, threats for the family and social stability and opportunities of professional growth and success.

H3. UAE citizens female workers are keen for a work-life balance.

Although most of the respondents agree that it is a gain for women and its family to work remotely, many respondents are also interested in their professional growth as well. UAE citizen female workers are interested in working from home under a formula that protects their right for professional progress and success. As a result, the hypothesis is accepted.

9 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the findings and discussion of the results, the study captures women in different economic sectors to understand how working from home affected them in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The study concludes that, whereas most of the problems women were faced with were the spillover effect, they enjoyed a good degree of job flexibility and health safety. There were a variety of mixed feelings regarding the experiences of working from home. On the one hand, the positive impact seems to be induced by the amount of quality time to non-work responsibilities, increased savings, work flexibility, and health and safety concerns. On the other hand, spillover issues, technical challenges, work intensification, and distractions from working from home were caused by spillover issues. Consequently, it is essential to note that working from home does not directly equal career success. In some cases, it may result in delayed career progress and stagnancy, while the employee supposedly enjoys some degrees of work flexibility.

Based on the findings (Table 2) of how working from home affects the chances of women moving up the hierarchy, the mixed feelings from the preference to work from home and impact on career progression have its implication for human resource management in generating a strategy that makes working from home effective and efficient to alleviate the fears of most women. While some job roles are convenient to work from home, the policy should not be considered by roles that steadily require human-to-human interaction (like teaching and education) and roles that require an in-person to control machines and constructions. Hence, an individual needs to read through and understand the unique cases of their workplace and weigh the options of working from home alongside their career growth path. It is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach; whereas certain workplaces pose no threat whatsoever to female careers, some others require an evident physical presence.

One of the things people who find themselves in-between the two paths could do is to adopt other flexible working conditions in agreement with the company’s management. Some of these other flexible working conditions include; flex time, reduced working hours

| TABLE 2 Females working from home advantages, disadvantages, and recommendations |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Advantages of working from home               | Disadvantages of working from home             | Recommendations                               |
| • Flexibility                                 | • Tech knowledge deficiency                    | • Adopt other flexible working conditions in   |
| • More time for family                        | • Spillover                                    | the agreement with the company’s management e.|
| • Fast & Efficient                            | • Tech malfunction                             | g., flex time, reduced working hours or part-|
| • Hitch-free mobility                         | • Distractions                                 | time, compressed workweek, telecommuting, job|
| • Ease, health safety                         | • Communication barriers                       | sharing, leaves, and Sabbaticals.             |
| • Adventurous                                 | • Time discipline                              | • Government agencies and policymakers need  |
| • Multitasking                                 | • Boredom                                     | to draft out policy documents that ensure     |
| • Comfort                                     |                                              | the inclusiveness of UAE women in the        |
|                                              |                                              | workplace in this post-COVID era.            |

...
or part-time, compressed workweek, telecommuting, job sharing, leaves, and sabbaticals. With these options, women in the workplace can negotiate better deals in their work culture while also maintaining a balanced family life. Organizations and HR managers have a crucial role in ensuring that employees are supplied with the necessary job resources to fulfill their job demands. Providing flexibility is not enough in itself but ensuring that employees can navigate work responsibilities without any detrimental effect on their lives is important.

Finally, this study recommends that government agencies and policymakers draft out a policy document that ensures UAE women's inclusiveness in the workplace in this post-COVID era. One way it can do this is to draft out legislation addressing the work-life balance of women in the country, for both Emiratis and expatriates, that mainly guarantee their rights for career progress and professional development. Next, it could set up an investigative committee that would inspect privately owned business enterprises to ensure compliance with the legislation. By this, the gap between policymaking and policy implementation regarding workplace practices will be bridged. Policymakers are also encouraged to adopt policies and regulations that encourage working from home especially for female workers. For example, the government could set laws and regulations that allow females to work on a part-time basis and get prorated compensation. The government could also set policies that allow female workers to fully or partially work from home whenever it is possible and under demand. Adopting such laws and regulations will offer more flexibility to female workers and will protect the wellbeing of families inside a society where family relations are still important inside the Arab society and in which females still play an important role in maintaining and guaranteeing prosperity of the family. In case of success, then, gradually the government could extend this experience to cover also male workers.

10 | IMPLICATIONS

This research has implications for researchers and policymakers. This research opens doors for future research that focuses on exploring the opinion of the employers about the outcomes of working from home and especially the productivity and motivation of female workers. We would also recommend similar research that takes into consideration the whole components of the Emirati society by enrolling citizens and immigrants. Also, comparative research on a regional and international scale is highly desired. There could be collaboration among academic research institutions to explore the topic researched here further and do comparative studies among several countries in the region. Similar research on a quantitative basis could generate better outcomes. The findings of this research contribute to the existing literature by reporting the WFH experiences of females living in an Arabic society characterized by dominant patriarchal culture. Such findings can help to better improve the reality of female workers. It could also help policymakers in designing better programs that balance the females’ need for self-esteem and self-realization dominated by strong cultural barriers and at the same time preserve the well-being of family relations.

11 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research would have been strengthened further had there been probing through surveys additional to the online face-to-face interviews. The actual pandemic context limited our capacity of conducting questionnaires on a large scale. Future research could overcome this methodological weakness. Also, it would have been better to see an increased sample size of interviewees. This research included only Emirati citizens that reflect only almost 20% of the population. Researching a larger scale could generate better outcomes in terms of representativity. Future research needs to address this limitation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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