Abstract
We study shifts in the ideal worker culture as experienced by working mothers across organizations in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences of 53 interviewees who attended to increased responsibilities across both work and family domains revealed an entrenchment of the ideal worker culture across nearly all organizations and professions. This manifested in three levels: as (1) a reinforced ideal worker culture in the workplace through work intensification, increased competitiveness, and surface-level support; (2) the reinforcing of organizations’ ideal worker norms at home, with gendered division of space and labor; and (3) experienced internalized ideal worker norms in the expectations working mothers maintained for themselves. These findings offer insight into the lives of working mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges which have pushed many mothers to reduce work hours or leave the workforce. Highlighting the intricate nature of the entrenchment of the ideal worker culture informs implications for theory of gendered organizations and for organizational practice.

KEYWORDS
Covid-19, gender, gendered organizations, ideal worker, work/family scholarship, working mothers
We investigate how working mothers in the United States experienced the evolution of ideal worker norms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have identified the unequal social and economic impact of COVID-19 on women and working mothers in particular (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Between February and October 2020, the American labor market lost 2.2 million women (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). Mothers reduced their work hours during the pandemic more than fathers, increasing the gender work hours gap by 20%–30% (Collins et al., 2020). The pressure to balance work and family responsibilities and resort to gendered norms in the home contributed to this substantive loss (Shockley et al., 2020). These alarming trends raise the question of how organizational norms during this crisis shaped how working mothers attend to their work and family responsibilities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was well-documented how norms within work cultures often betrayed mothers (Correll et al., 2007). The dominant work culture idolizes work primacy and values an ideal worker “whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and children.” (Acker, 1990, p. 149). This worker is constantly available to work and to prioritize work over personal obligations (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). That “ideal” image was found to be illusive, often projected and not realized by men (Reid, 2015), while penalizing mothers who navigate between work and family identities so as to maintain a professional image that meets ideal expectations (Ladge et al., 2012). In the United States, work culture exists within a larger social context that lacks the infrastructure to support parents. The United States is one of only two countries without federal paid parental leave (World Policy Center, 2020). The repercussions can be seen in mothers’ labor force participation: only 63.3% of women with children below 3 years are employed compared to 93.5% of men with children below 3 years (DOL, 2020).

Yet as working mothers have “always battled shame, the pandemic just made it worse.” (Vroman et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, boundaries between work and home collapsed. As of summer 2020, close to half of the US employees were telecommuting, and one in four workers reported working entirely from home (Gallup, 2020). Reports on parents’ and mothers’ burnout emerged, along with accumulating evidence of long-term impact on female employment and gender equity (Collins et al., 2020; Pinsker, 2020). The “second shift” transformed into a simultaneous triple shift. Newfound responsibilities that were previously outsourced, keeping up with public health guidelines, and helping children distance learn left many working mothers depleted and overwhelmed.

We seek to understand how organizational norms evolved and shaped the experiences of working mothers during this time. On one hand, pandemic-related work disruptions could have decreased ideal worker norms in organizations, as working from home affords flexibility and viewing home backgrounds of colleagues during video calls could engender empathy and understanding. On the other hand, amid economic crises and industry disruptions, ideal worker norms may become engrained. Thus, our study explores how women navigated their work and family responsibilities, guided by the following research question: how did organizational ideal worker expectations evolve during the COVID-19 pandemic, as women experienced novel work arrangements—working from home, with children— during this time? To address this, we examined how mothers in the United States navigated working from home with children in 2020, to see if their qualitative experiences reflect a reduction or enhancement of ideal worker norm expectations. The inductive nature of the study builds understanding grounded in working mothers’ lived experiences, which complements other quantitative studies that have noted alarming trends, such as reduction in work hours and deleterious effects on well-being (Yan et al., 2020). Next, we discuss literature on gender and ideal worker norms, and how COVID-19 shaped the nature of work during this time. These are the theories that, during data analysis, we identified as most relevant to the themes which emerged from the data.
2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Gender and the ideal worker

The sustainability of the “work-first” organizational culture in the United States has long been questioned (Kanter, 1977; Williams, 2000). With increased female labor force participation (Padavic et al., 2020) and families moving beyond past assumptions of the male breadwinner and female housekeeper model (Ladge et al., 2015), companies have adapted by timidly embracing family supportive policies (Galinsky et al., 2010). Despite a lack of federal-level support for paid family leave, access has generally increased over the past 2 decades, such that an estimated 23% of American workers have defined paid family leave benefits through their employer as of 2021 (BLS, 2021). Researchers have also identified organizational culture as an important determinant of decreased work/family conflict and how work cultures impact men and women differentially (Allen, 2001; French et al., 2018).

However, these conversations have tended to not fully take into account Acker’s Theory of Gendered Organizations (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). In her seminal research on the gendering of organizations and their systemic gender-based inequality, Acker (1990, 2006) explained how terms such as job, performance, work, and task are embedded in a culture that reinforces particular norms of what is or is not acceptable. As such language and understanding were developed mostly by men, the norms tend to match with the needs of a man unencumbered by nonwork responsibilities. Such norms perpetuate divisions of labor, reward, and performance assessment processes, and job designs, which end up excluding nonconforming employees from promotion or leadership opportunities, translating into gendered hierarchies (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). Acker (1990, 2006) argues that organizations are not gender-neutral spaces where both men and women can be similar players. Rather, organizations are regimes of inequality, wherein systems of policies and programs are designed to accommodate ideal workers (Williams et al., 2013). That image is based upon the availability and capabilities of a typical man, and yet in practice, is not realistic for any gender and is often gamed. Reid (2015) investigated this work-first culture in a consulting company, with expectations of presenteeism and continuous availability for work. She found that men who were considered high performers masqueraded an image of an 80-h workweek. Maintaining such an image, along with an outwardly acceptance and propagation of work primacy, can effectively hide other nonwork roles, such as parenting and personal time.

These norms have shaped how underrepresented individuals respond to their work obligations and interpersonal work processes. In a “masculinity contest culture” that reinforces competition (Glick at al., 2018) and where inequality regimes perpetuate gender-based inequality (Acker, 2006), selective disclosure is an approach that underrepresented groups employ in order to be included (Phillips et al., 2009). In such organizational cultures, employees feel they cannot show weakness or lack of dedication to work. They typically refrain from asking for help and discount or hide details about their personal lives.

This makes it more difficult for women, and for working mothers in particular, to hide truths about their nonwork role needs. Pregnancy, for example, is not easily hidden. Women are penalized for pregnancy and motherhood (Correll, et al., 2007; Ladge et al., 2012). Even if organizational family leave policies exist, informal norms often discourage working mothers from taking advantage of them (Williams et al., 2013). Motherhood in such work cultures is viewed as misaligned with the image of the ideal worker. As a result, working mothers often manage identities and work/family boundaries in a way that reduces the visibility of their motherhood role. They avoid asking for support, so that they are not stigmatized as insufficiently committed to their work (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

As women’s work success often encourages them to forego their motherhood identity, we now discuss the impossible scenario that working mothers were subject to in 2020. The COVID-19 work from home mandates integrated work and family at home, which could have led toward either a moment of reckoning for or a reinforcement of ideal worker expectations.
Local context: COVID-19 in the United States

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust these conversations to center stage; as in March 2020, the declaration of a national health emergency prompted the closings of most schools and daycare facilities across the United States. Millions of employed adults shifted immediately to working from home. Simultaneously, millions of children were suddenly unable to physically go to school, daycare, or before/after-school programs. External helpers such as nannies, babysitters, or family members were unable to help with childcare needs, as households were locked down under “safer at home” orders prohibiting the mixing of households (Zhang & Warner, 2020).

We focus here on working mothers who shifted to working from home, with children at home as well. Those shifts created a situation that made it more difficult for women to hide or suppress nonwork role responsibilities, given that newly normative video work meetings provided enhanced visibility into what work from home experience was like during this time. Interruptions from children on video work calls became common, sometimes met with laughter or smiles, while other times met with frustration laden with gender-based stereotypes (Cooper, 2020). Resources and systems that had been relied upon to help navigate both home and work responsibilities were no longer available. Moreover, as work came home, physical boundaries between work and home were eliminated. The responsibilities of both home and work roles needed to be completed in the same space and often at the same time. This combination led to working mothers being placed in a seemingly impossible position, where they needed to manage their reputations and external identities, while working from home with children.

During the summer months of 2020 when this research was conducted, many in the United States continued to work from home. As of May 2020, most states had only just begun their initial phases of reopening (Zhang & Warner, 2020). Schools and a considerable percentage of childcare facilities remained closed for in-person learning (Lee & Parolin, 2021). Even in the summer months, when school is not in session, we noted a consistent lack of availability of child care and in-person schooling for the majority of our participants. Additionally, even though some childcare facilities and schools or summer programs had opened to be in person during the summer, the majority of our participants still had their children at home with them during some or all weekday work hours. This is for numerous reasons, including (1) the lack of availability of in-person care, schooling, or camps; (2) some participants had to move from their homes (e.g., moving from a city to a suburban home with relatives); (3) some participants did not feel comfortable placing their children in an in-person setting due to health and safety concerns; (4) even if childcare was available and their children were enrolled, it could be closed at any time due to quarantine protocols. One participant expressed this as follows:

Please, is it summer break? It wasn’t even a vacation. It was like just everyone on the edge of their seat waiting for [the school] to make a decision. Are we going back, are we not going back?... So it was like from March until now, we’ve just been on this roller coaster, just struggling along... I’m tech support, I’m emotional support, I’m the teacher, I’m the psychologist. It’s exhausting.

(P53; project manager; children seven and six years old)

In addition to limited childcare options, workplaces in the United States often offer limited paid leave options for caregiving employees. At a national level, the United States does not have paid family or sick leave. Rather, there exists a patchwork of policies decided upon by organizations, state or local laws, or determined by negotiated union contracts. Although the 2020 Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided some paid leave for COVID-related illness, quarantine, and child care needs, workers across the United States still faced different constraints regarding taking leave when workers got sick, had to help care for sick family members, or needed to quarantine after an exposure (Ranji et al., 2020).

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic put our participants’ families in unfamiliar situations, where they had to quickly learn how to navigate the new reality of working and parenting during a global health crisis. We have some early
understanding of how the pandemic impacted women differently than men. Petts et al. (2020) analyzed surveys from 989 parent partners in the United States and found that the lack of access to childcare and increased distance learning responsibilities negatively impacted mothers’ employment, but not that of fathers. In a sample of 274 dual-earner couples with young children, Shockley et al. (2020) found that 36.6% of the couples employed gendered strategies for working from home, with 18.9% employing strategies neither gendered nor egalitarian, and 44.5% adopting a clearly egalitarian approach to work and childcare.

We extend these contributions by employing the lens of ideal worker norms in examining how gendered norms evolved for working mothers. This setting amid a deterioration of boundaries between work and family, and lack of ability to separate the mother and professional identities, provides an opportunity to explore how ideal worker norms can manifest not only in organizations and in individual responses but also in the home. The ideal worker concept was developed in the context of the organization (Acker, 1990). While understanding how an organization’s culture can impact work/life choices made in the home has been identified in work/family literature (e.g., Allen, 2001), this has yet to be understood through an ideal worker theory lens (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019).

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Sample and procedure

We employed a phenomenological qualitative methodology to gain insights into less-understood organizational phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), describing the commonalities of a phenomenon among the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994) and eliciting multiple socially constructed realities that we could analyze holistically (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Our inductive approach allowed us to move from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. This enabled us to uncover how women construct meaning from their lived experiences, which can be drawn from, to generate theoretical insights connected to that lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). We leveraged our participants’ expertise and observations of their organizational context. Finally, qualitative methodology is well-suited as the research question concerns a group that is underrepresented or disempowered within the phenomenon under investigation (ideal worker norms), and theory pertaining to these questions is underdeveloped.

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 53 working mothers. We recruited our participants using personal and professional networks, parenting listservs, social media groups, and snowball sampling. Participants in our sample worked across 10 states in the United States and in a variety of occupations and industries, including retail management, education, consulting, and information technology. All participants identified as White and 39% identify as women of color (Hispanic/Latina, Black, Middle Eastern, Asian, or South Asian descent). Our participants all experienced stay-at-home mandates starting in March 2020 when schools and daycare centers closed.

We conducted all interviews virtually using audio and video. The interview questions asked about well-being, division of labor at home, typical workday responsibilities, and organizational culture and support. In order to better understand pandemic-driven shifts, our questions focused on experiences prior to COVID-19 and then following the COVID-19 response. After the first two interviews conducted by each of the researchers, we met to review the interview protocol and discuss edits. For example, we added new questions asking participants to elaborate on how phases of the pandemic changed over time. After the first 15 interviews were completed, we further refined the interview protocol. Our interviews averaged 61 min in length, accumulating into a total of 3303 min recorded.

The data collection occurred between 1 June and 28 August, 2020, allowing us to collect data at an important juncture after the initial shock experience of the pandemic. Organizations had adjusted and proceeded with a new way of business, allowing us to capture shifts or changes in policy. During these summer months, stay-at-home
mandates varied across states and counties, but working mothers continued to face obstacles regarding child care availability and family choices regarding pandemic-driven safety norms. For those with school-aged children, the summer offered an evaluative period for our participants who were transitioning between two uncertain school years. Responding to questions about their experience allowed participants to compare across three time periods: spring (pandemic lockdowns), summer (in between school years), and fall (planning for the upcoming school year and potential next waves of viral spread).

Given the pressures that our participants were experiencing, we were mindful and respectful of their time and emotional well-being. We discussed confidentiality and took measures to protect their identification. Many of our participants stated that they appreciated the opportunity to express and process their experiences, with several describing the interview as “therapeutic.”

3.2 | Reflexivity

We demonstrated reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009) by engaging with the participants and with the data both as researchers and as working mothers ourselves. Our personal experience helped us strengthen the theoretical insights which emerged from our analysis (Greenberg et al., 2021). As we had experienced similar situations in working from home with children at home, we were able to relate with our participants in an informed way. We also engaged this lens throughout our analysis, as we continuously examined and discussed our own beliefs and practices. We engaged in analytical techniques such as theoretical comparison, constant comparison, and looking at negative cases to help us question our own assumptions and biases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We paid special attention to and explicitly discussed about participant experiences, which were dissimilar to ours, so that such examples could mitigate potential bias.

3.3 | Data analysis

Our data consist of the interview transcripts as well as notes and analytical memos that we captured during data collection. We analyzed our data inductively (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Miles et al., 2019), allowing for themes to emerge from how participants described their work experiences during this time. We first read through the interviews and notes to identify and discuss emerging themes. The first author then started coding the data using Nvivo software, creating codes and developing code definitions as themes of interest emerged. Based on emergent themes, the second author then coded the full dataset, adding new codes and definitions that emerged and refining definitions of existing codes. Both authors then took turns with the data through additional coding stages, meeting frequently to review codes, subcodes, and definitions. Any time there was a difference in coding, the authors would discuss and reach a consensus. At this time, numerous codes emerged, including “self high expectations,” “manager support,” “organization support,” “gender differences,” “worried job security,” and “job intensification.”

As the coding process clarified the emergent themes, both authors iterated back and forth between the data, relevant theory, and the data structure as it emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Miles et al., 2019). We focused on themes related to experienced ideal worker norms, masculinity contest work culture and family-supportive work culture. This allowed us to generate and refine the coding definitions based on relevant research, which resulted in combining some codes and adding others. For example, we aggregated the open codes of “work intensification,” “masculine work culture,” and “lack of org support” to the axial theme of “experienced ideal worker culture in organizations.” We then discussed and chose how the emergent data structure developed into conceptually meaningful themes, which we share next.
4 | FINDINGS

We report the findings of our analysis of participants' experiences that they shared with us during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, discovering how experienced ideal worker norms manifested at three levels: the organization, the home, and internally. Overall, our findings suggest an entrenchment of the ideal worker norms and a persistence of the ideal worker culture. By “entrenchment,” we refer to how individuals experienced ideal worker norms as becoming more firmly established or fortified within organizational systems and experienced by organizational members (Figure 1). While these experienced ideal worker norms represent the most prevalent experiences in our data, we also describe particular participant situations that serve as counterexamples.

4.1 | Experienced ideal worker culture in organizations

Women described how they experienced the effects of an ideal worker culture in how they worked with others in their organization during this time. Three themes emerged in how ideal worker norms and expectations were reinforced within organizations: through the intensification of work, a reinforcement of the masculine aspects of their work culture, and the temporary nature of support in the absence of meaningful support policies.

First, most participants reported a workload intensification following pandemic-related disruptions. Businesses required additional work as they adjusted their operations to face both the impact of COVID-19 on the changing nature of work (such as shifting to work from home) and the turbulent economic reality of the pandemic's effects on particular industries and occupations. This quickly increased workload. Exemplifying this, Participant 2 is a mother of two children, who were 7- and 5 years old, and an executive at a large retail organization. As an 11-year veteran of the industry, she described how her entire industry was in crisis mode, since customers were not going to stores to shop. She explained that before COVID-19 she worked at her office for about 8 h each day. Yet once her company shifted to crisis mode and she began to work from home, she shared:

I worked for a large corporation that was going through a very difficult time because of Covid-19. And the negative impact to the business required me, being in the role that I was in, to basically be in meetings like all day, every day. And it almost felt like because it was such a crisis situation, there was even more of a focus and emphasis on meeting more, dealing with crisis type work streams... It was almost

![Figure 1](image-url)
as though the company was creating more meetings and more structure, more control and oversight, because we no longer work together physically and we need to over-compensate for that. (P2)

She then went on to specifically outline the overwork she experienced:

I was required to be in meetings all day, every day. Because it was such a crisis, I was dealing with crisis-type work streams... Work got really crazy. It wasn't an eight hour workday. My meetings started at 8:30 and didn't end until 7:00 p.m. Even after the meeting ended, 7:00 or 7:30, I was still having to do some work at night. (P2)

This woman's experience illustrates a common one for working mothers during this time. Her two children were both distance learning at home in the spring. During this time, her work intensified and her organization's expectations of her work time and commitment intensified as well such that she was unable to balance her work and family roles in ways that she wanted. Her company also exerted pressure to maintain this commitment, as she phrased that her overwork was to "all save the sinking ship, conserve all the cash we can, and try to survive"—reinforcing the expectations of commitment to help her organization. This work intensification was especially exacerbated in businesses that experienced layoffs, as women took on work left by downsized employees.

Another participant (P14), who worked in an executive communications role in an IT organization and had a 2-year-old child, described how prior to COVID-19, they lived in the city, where she and her husband and a full-time nanny "worked as a team" so that they could all attend to their jobs and their child. Then when COVID-19 struck, they moved out of the city to a suburb in a home with their parents who needed full-time care. Their nanny was no longer able to help, and they all worked at home. Then, "In April, we laid off 50% of workforce, including my entire department. So I'm the only person left in marketing and communications... And now I work with nobody, no department, no colleagues." (P14) She went on to describe how she took on the work of her downsized colleagues and pursuantly felt "perpetually tired," that "this is not sustainable," and that "we're failing at everything." Whether spurred by industry crises or downsizings, such descriptions of work intensification were reported by participants across different industries. Many businesses were in a crisis, navigating a high level of uncertainty that trickled down to employees. For others, work intensification resulted from unfamiliarity with working from home, where organizations were not accustomed to managing teams remotely. Despite these challenges, managers still encouraged or expected immediate responsiveness and constant availability of their employees, reflecting the expected constant commitment of an ideal work culture.

Second, our data suggest that organizations were reinforcing aspects of masculinity contest culture, for which Glick et al. (2018) identify four dimensions: (1) show no weakness; (2) strength; (3) put work first; and (4) hyper-competitive environment. Indeed, our participants talked about working from home as a time to "prove your worth." When jobs are threatened, many participants felt compelled to put work first, to avoid what could be perceived as weakness or lack of commitment. Their organizations expected them to continue to work with little consideration of parenting responsibilities—even though, paradoxically, parenting responsibilities had intensified during that time. We particularly noted these norms exacerbated in participants working in the industries of oil/gas, financial services, and those who were working independently as consultants (observed in the expectations of their clients). These participants shared how if they signaled concern over family responsibilities, they felt they would then be perceived as insufficiently focused on their jobs. One woman, a human resources professional with a young baby, stated:

Working from home, you're never leaving work... I wish there was a different expectation. My boss sent me a message this morning at 5 a.m. I'm committed to strong job work ethic. You want to show up and perform, but I think it would be nice if we could say 'nobody send emails before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m.' If we could build that in as a hard and fast rule. I wish that could be a stigma. (P21; Senior Recruiter; 5-month old baby)
The expectation to put work first became more prominent as some lockdown mandates lifted and organizations began encouraging employees to physically return back to the office. The mother of a toddler and a talent management professional, Participant 35, described how her community environment became polarized, as it "became 'us versus them' of people who were saying it's {the pandemic is} not that big of a deal, versus others saying this is crazy." It was at this time that her company initiated a "volunteer" phase of employees returning to work in the office. She explained "I remember telling my boss at that time, "I am wholly against coming back into the office. We are taking this seriously. We aren't even putting our kids back in daycare." Yet in response to this acknowledgment of her personal needs, she expanded on how she truly felt:

The unspoken rule was "If you care about your job and care about your future, you'd better be there." I heard from senior leaders, "If you think you can just continue working from home, you don't care about your job." Then we learned we can't even social distance safely at work in June... There was still this overtone of we have to get a lot done. It's not as good as face to face, so you've got to come back in. (P35; HR Business Partner; 2 year-old)

Her description portrays how she perceived her organization's culture as expecting commitment to work as a priority, even above personal health and safety concerns during a pandemic. This working mother went on to describe how:

If you're a current leader, and expect to progress, you've got to come back in face to face. At that time, that's probably when it shifted for me, in I don't feel comfortable saying 'I can't make that meeting because I need to do a craft with [my child] because she's home'. I stop saying stuff like that. I accept every call. I do everything I can to pretend [my child] is not with me.

Such clear expectation of sacrifice and dedication to making work a priority, while discounting the needs of her role as a mother, represents how many women experienced a reinforcement of masculinized work cultures during this time.

Though that work culture had existed previously for some participants, our analysis reveals how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and raised the prominence of this type of culture. Participants described how this was prompted by the shift to working from home, particularly in organizations and by managers who resisted this shift. Wanting to continue to work from home was deemed as being insufficiently committed to the job. Work-first expectations were brought to the forefront through video meetings, expected responsiveness around the clock, and the need to "make up" for working from home.

Third, even as working mother employees faced escalating home and family responsibilities, we found consistent evidence of organizations providing insufficient support. There was sometimes demonstrated intent to help. Some participants shared how their organizations sent emails acknowledging the extra load that parents had to take on, offered expanded leave policies, or encouraged managers to support their teams and keep meeting-free periods during the day. However, this did not always translate into actionable support. Participant 5, a sales manager with two school-aged children (8 and 9 years old), shared how leaders announced in a meeting that they intended to support parenting employees, such as having the flexibility to take longer breaks during the day. Yet in reflecting on this meeting in comparison to her experiences, she stated:

There is a genuine concern for supporting parents, but there is a misconception of how easy it is to ask for help, ... The policies are kind of given, but there isn't encouragement. You cannot blame employees for not asking for help. There has to be more frequent check-ins from managers on people.... They overestimate how much support they give their employees. (P5)
This participant’s description targets the gap between superficial support and authentic support. Ideal worker expectations prevent women from feeling comfortable in taking advantage of structural support. This was frequently mentioned throughout our data. Participant 5 went on to give examples of two conversations she had with coworkers about needing support or accommodations, after which she “felt guilty asking for more as I had already asked two days in a row to re-couple things” and that in general, “people have that constant guilt that ‘I don’t want to keep asking for flexibility.” Organizations instill formal support policies with the expectation that working mothers will ask for help when they need it. Ideal worker cultures, however, typically discourage asking for help (Williams et al., 2013). What we heard from our participants underscores the idea that many women felt that asking for help signals weakness and lack of commitment. These work expectations and norms of limited support were reinforced, rather than challenged, as the emergence of work from home as a new norm eliminated the boundaries between the professional and family domains. Many organizations reacted with superficial support, such as general policies or expressed messages acknowledging challenges. Yet from the perspective of working mothers, it was business as usual, as they suspected they would be discriminated against if they used such policies (such as requesting a caretaking leave). They also often found that organizational support did not align with how their individual managers behaved toward them. As a result, working mothers often sought to find their own solutions at home.

4.2 | Experienced ideal worker culture in the home environment

Family solutions to organizational role demands tended to reinforce the ideal worker culture in participants’ homes, through a reemergence of a gendered division of labor in households with heterosexual parenting partners, where the man’s work is often protected. As our participants worked from home with children, they described different arrangements regarding their male partners. Some partners also worked at home, while others worked outside the home. Generally, we learned how each working mother approached her work choices that stemmed from how she perceived those choices and how she would be judged in her organizational culture. In many cases, these cultures expected commitment and overwork during this time in a way that neglected family related needs. Three themes emerged in how ideal worker norms manifested at home: gendered arrangements of household responsibilities, finding solutions when external support disappeared, and the gendering of how partners navigated physical work space at home.

First, our participants shared how their home environments were disrupted during this time, and how their partners responded to increasing home and family needs. For many of our participants (42 out of 53), there was a reemergence of a gendered division of labor at home, where the man’s work was protected while the woman was responsible for the home and children (Padavic et al., 2020). This also manifested as mothers felt it necessary to hide their mother role demands to protect their image of professionalism, enabling them to pass as an ideal worker (Reid, 2015). This was particularly frustrating for participants who, before COVID-19, felt they had established amenable arrangements of household responsibilities with their partners. The data revealed an emergent theme of participants sharing that, during this crisis, there was a pattern of partners reverting back to gendered norms. A program coordinator for a nonprofit and mom of a 3-year-old, who is also pursuing a master’s degree evening program, explains how she faced ideal worker norms in her job:

My job was using that to their advantage. They would see that I would send out emails later in the evening, because I would work partially in the day and some at night. So then they started sending out emails at 10pm at night, and I was responding to them. It was just starting to get out of hand. I was like, “I don’t want you to always expect me to respond! Nobody’s going to sleep!!... My job also knows I am going to school too. I got in trouble twice for choosing to spend time with my daughter than work. (P51)
As a result of how her organization has responded to her needs during the pandemic, she expressed the desire to turnover: “I’ve learned over the years that if I have to choose between my family and job, I’m going to choose my family. So I want to work somewhere where I don’t have to choose. I want somewhere that has support for moms.” She then relates how gender-based role expectations emerged at home with her husband:

It was [before Covid] much more balanced, compared to now– we’ve gotten right back into “I’m doing everything”. Now, I cook, I clean. He still does the grocery shopping every other week, but we’re back to “I’m doing everything for our kid”. We’re having that argument all over again. And it’s really annoying... The biggest difference is we went from, “we are balancing things,” and then it became “I was home all day.” It switched. I’m my daughter’s caretaker, and I’m taking care of the whole house by myself. And he doesn’t even notice that he doesn’t do anything... I just recently had a conversation with him saying “We need to get back to more of a balance.” I can’t say much progress has been made. (P51)

Because of the nature of how their jobs were disrupted as a result of the pandemic—as her work role demands became deprioritized—their arrangement of home responsibilities had reverted back to traditional gender norms.

Second, once COVID-19 hit and stay-at-home mandates began, many support systems disappeared. This was extremely prevalent in our sample. Prior to COVID-19, families had carefully crafted a web of support among various outlets, including schools, before or after school programs, paid caregiving, and external family member help. Yet when the crisis struck, in the face of persistent ideal worker norms and a lack of substantive support, families had to find their own solutions to the responsibilities associated with homeschooling, childcare, and working from home. Our participants worked with their partners to find solutions for schools and childcare, while keeping up with intensified work demands. When mothers face a workplace where motherhood is synonymous with lack of professionalism or where asking for help is a sign of weakness (Allen, 2001), they endeavored to find workable solutions that enabled them to work. For example, Participant 52, an executive manager of a retail brand, who hired a nanny to care of her 5 year old and twin babies, explains the financial and emotional strain she felt with her particular solution:

We ended up having my mom come up for the first two months, and she lived with us and watched the kids. And that was challenging for her. It was a lot of work and she did her best... Then we brought [a nanny] on, which was the best thing we’ve ever done... If I didn’t have her, I think that this would be a very different conversation, to be honest with you... We had to take a 15% pay cut. And so for me, you know, I was stressed... We had decided on the nanny. But I was apprehensive to have her start because I didn’t really know what was going to happen. And I didn’t want to put ourselves in a financial situation where we were paying all this money... So I was having panic attacks, waking up and cold sweats, feeling like I had a gun to my head to make a decision. (P52)

She describes the ideal worker norms of her industry and organization, providing the example of how her boss, after pressuring her to start to physically return back to work, “called me at seven AM. Asked me if I was on my way in. I was just so pissed that he asked me. I’m like, I have three kids, you think I drop them off at seven AM?” This woman’s description shows how families often reacted to the reinforcement of the ideal worker in the office by furthering that reinforcement at home. Working mothers created systems at home and outside of work to show up to their jobs virtually, as an image that is as close to the ideal worker as possible. Such home-support arrangements reveal how families were burdened with finding solutions to address the lack of organizational support and a work-first culture.

Third, we observed gendering of the use of space in the home. We noted a clear trend in households where both parents were working at home, where mothers tended to work adjacent to children while fathers tended to work in a separate space. As a result, mothers were often more subject to interruptions and distractions from children, working in tandem while attending to children’s needs. Meanwhile, the father was able to focus exclusively on work without
interruption. At the office, the ideal worker culture posits that the worker is a man who is not encumbered by family responsibilities (Williams, 2000). At home, we saw that arrangements have the unspoken assumption that home and childcare responsibilities fall on mothers’ laps. Many participants described how they work alongside their children, such as sitting at the same kitchen table with their work laptop in front of them and next to one or more school-aged children who are participating in their virtual learning at the same time. Participant 11, a non-profit president and mother of two school-aged children (5 and 7 years old), describes how “I was working from the kitchen table,” while her “[husband] has a dedicated office upstairs, he does so many Zoom calls and tv interviews.” She took the primary role of caregiving as her children were at home distance learning so that her husband could work uninterrupted. Describing his work circumstances further: “it's just been kind of like, just non-stop. It's good, but also exhausting, as I have to be supportive. I'm happy for him, but at the same time, but also I'm really tired of being like 'You guys, be quiet, daddy's on the phone!' I still have a job and I feel like more often than not, my job is second.” Working alongside children often entailed frequent interruptions to the mother’s work and cognitive interference as the mother could see and overhear the children during their school hours. Women with younger children also faced such interference. Participant 31, an accountant with a toddler describes:

I do not have a good home office. I can’t have one. Because [my 18 month old daughter] is around, and I need to watch her all the time. I’m using my tiny laptop and screen. I’m using a table that weights three pounds, just in case it falls on her I don’t want her to get hurt. It’s not a good height. I’m sitting on the couch because I had to get her a gate to not get inside rooms where I can’t see her... I don’t want her to feel like she’s in some kind of jail, so I sit inside the gated area with her. I’m sitting always in the same spot, and I’m leaning forward... It’s not comfortable ... I realize this isn’t a temporary thing, this is my life. My back is hurting. I don’t think the way I’m sitting is healthy at all, I’m worried my back is going to be crooked. (P31)

She elaborates on how she sets up the carefully crafted physical space, attempting to simultaneously attend to both work and mother roles, even experiencing physical discomfort as a result. Her husband worked in IT and was sometimes at home, sometimes going in person to work. Yet the constant expectation remained that she would be the primary caregiver for their young child, despite any effects on her ability to do her job.

There were some exceptions to this theme. Some of our participants (11 out of 53) did not indicate a traditionally gendered division of labor at home. For the vast majority of this subset of our data, this was because they had one or more of the following circumstances: their family role responsibilities allowed them to work in a separate room, they relied on the support of a live-in nanny or family member, their male partner’s job had reduced hours or commitments, or their partner was not working. However, the vast majority of our sample described remaining accessible to their children so as to more easily cross the boundaries between work and family domains.

4.3  |  The internalized ideal worker

Finally, the working mothers themselves set work expectations that align with masculinized external expectations. Our participants demonstrated internalization of ideal worker norms in three ways: by engaging in passing behaviors to hide their working mother status, feeling guilt or shame for not meeting ideal worker expectations, and sacrificing their own well-being in order to meet ideal worker norms. First, participants frequently hid their home and family responsibilities so that they would not interfere with their work, to pass as an ideal worker (Phillips et al., 2009). They did so even while they had to work with children at home—a novel and challenging experience as described by our participants. Even the few who had worked at home previously, now had to adjust to working at home with their children there as well. For those who had young children or babies or children of any age who had special or mental health needs, this made for a nearly impossible situation of trying to work while attending to the needs of their
children. A mother of a baby and a purchaser for an e-commerce organization, Participant 22 describes how she hid her mothering needs from her coworkers:

I've been on plenty of calls, where, thank god for the mute button. If I unmute for one second, (the baby) is screaming in the background. There's a part of me that thinks, if I'm on the phone with my boss, is he thinking "god that kid is crying so much, how is she getting anything done??"... there's a little bit of "let's make it look like nothing is happening here." Maybe I need to turn off my camera if I should be on a call. I'm downstairs on my computer, I log in for a meeting, and showing my face like I'm supposed to. And I know I need to put (the baby) down. So I'll turn my camera off. I'll log in on my phone. I'll run in upstairs, so I can still hear the meeting while upstairs, and then I'll come back down. It's like smoke and mirrors! Make it look like it never happened. (P22)

Her description of her concern over how her manager will perceive her if he hears her baby, as well as the lengths to which she goes to hide her mothering duties, indicate her internalization of her organization's ideal worker norms.

Second, participants tended to internalize sacrifices made toward attaining the ideal worker image in feelings of failure or guilt. They expressed these feelings when they were not able to meet these expectations, or in what they had to do to try to meet such expectations. This included when they were not able to put work first, be available or "on call," or respond to meeting requests with no hesitation. As a result of these expectations that originated from the workplace, we observed how women internalized and accepted these expectations. This meant that when they failed to meet those expectations, or when they overly sacrificed family responsibilities to do so, they directed negative feelings inward. Our participants did share frustration over these expectations, but also characterized them as a matter of fact and business need, often expressing a sense of helplessness in striving to reach them. Participants indicated the importance of being “committed to my job,” having a “strong work ethic,” wanting “to show up and perform,” that “I have to be the best worker in the world”—indicating their decisions to prioritize work. The few participants who had their male partners take more of a primary role with childcare needs and who were able to separate their work space from their children, reported feeling guilt and shame or feeling like a “failure” in their role as a mother. Participant 32, who runs a marketing agency and has two school-aged children (5 and 6 years old), describes: “I feel stressed with trying to manage everything. I feel like I'm not doing a good job at work, and I'm not doing good job as a mother, so that I have a lot of motherhood guilt.” (P32). Another participant, a sales director who was able to work in a separate space from her toddler son and (nonworking) husband, shared:

I can hear [my son]. When he's happy, it bugs me, and I go out there. Total guilt! But no interruptions. Now I just wish I could go to Starbucks down the street and crank out five solid hours. Now I resent the family a little bit now, whereas I used to resent the job. I don't want my performance and team to suffer. So now, home life is more demanding, and work life is more demanding. (P10)

Participant 10 felt guilty when she could not engage with her young son, as she felt she should be working. She felt this need particularly at this time during the pandemic, as she worked in an industry that was under duress and in an intensified role. She described feelings of resentment and guilt over these tensions throughout her interview. As mothers, women are expected to be engaged in intensive mothering in a child-centric world (Hayes, 1996). These intensive mothering norms contradict the norms of an ideal worker, who is expected to be fully devoted to work in psychological, emotional, and time-based ways (Williams, 2000). Together, these organizational and societal norms create unmanageable pressures and work/family images that threaten women’s ability to meet expectations in either domain.

Third, all of our participants communicated how they experienced higher levels of anxiety and stress as compared to before the pandemic. Many expressed how they felt they needed to sacrifice their own well-being in order to meet expectations. This is not surprising given the stresses associated with a global pandemic. However, we note a
common pattern of their feeling compelled to meet ideal worker norms amid a heightened level of work and family role intensification: simultaneously struggling to attend to responsibilities of their children, partners, and homes. These working mothers slept less, extended their work hours well into the evening, or woke up before the children to access uninterrupted work time. Participant 20, who works in development at a religious nonprofit and is the mother of a 3-year-old, demonstrates this:

My wellbeing? Generally, not so great. Sleeping is a struggle... I'm not exercising. I can't seem to find the time in my schedule to go for a walk, or run. No gyms are open, and I'm not doing a dance class in the living room, with everyone here around and with my kid who is attached to me. I'm physically healthy and grateful to have roof over our heads, food on table, diapers on kids bottom. Essentials are met. But other things are hard to get to, like exercise... I'm definitely working a lot of nighttime hours after my son is asleep in bed. (P20)

This woman explains how her employer was generally forgiving of family needs, but that because of the “disjointed” times that she has to work during the day given the caregiving needs of her son, she is able to get less work done overall, the quality is low, and as a result, she feels overly stressed—“not good for sleep or health.” One of our participants had lost her job right before the summer interview took place and her reaction was actually relief—because of the stress that had come from working and parenting during COVID-19. While losing a job would normally compel feelings of loss, this working mother felt relieved to no longer face the stress and burnout that she had incurred from her unworkable organizational culture and job expectations.

### 4.4 | Pockets of resistance to ideal worker norm entrenchment

While ideal worker norm entrenchment captured the experiences of the majority of our participants, we also note some counterexamples of participants who did not strive to meet such expectations. Rather, in the face of escalated work and family demands, they reduced work hours, or withdrew from their jobs and careers.

Of the women who demonstrated such resistance to ideal worker norms, we identified two broad themes that shaped how and why they were able to do so. First, several women worked in an organization or industry that was not male-dominated and that was authentically family friendly. For example, Participant 1 oversees training for a non-profit organization that focuses on child welfare and has children, 6- and 4 years old. She shared how she and her colleagues discussed working remotely at home:

We actually have these discussions a lot. It’s very, very outward conversations... We mentioned the arena of having the working moms conversations and welfare of the children... Our agency is quick to identify working parents as having this additional challenge. And then my co-workers and peers, including my boss, who don’t have children, will say things like, “Man, this is tough because... I don’t even have children, and this is a challenge for me... we kind of voice that as women to one another.”(P1)

Her organization provided the support—including equipment, training, and flexibility in work hours—to accommodate sustainable work from home:

In terms of supplies or electronic needs, anything— they sent it home to us... for all intents and purposes we can work from home moving forward. Indefinitely. Which is a super plus, because our schools are uncertain about what they’ll look like... My direct supervisor said, "Please follow up with your direct reports and really, all of us, we want the feedback, what is your home life looking like." (P1)
She went on to explain how she would limit her work hours so that she could attend to household responsibilities and direct the distance learning efforts of her two elementary school-aged children. Her employer was responsive, provided support, and allowed her to have flexibility to accommodate her family and non-work demands—representing a different perspective on what is means to be an ideal worker.

Second, women who were running their own small businesses as consultants or working independently as writers chose to significantly reduce their work hours. For example, Participant 44 is a leadership consultant and executive coach with two children (8 and 5 years old). Her husband’s job had inflexible demands, so she led her two young children’s distance learning. She adjusted her client meetings to accommodate her children’s Zoom school. As a result, her reduction in work hours was drastic:

Now I maybe do an hour and a half of work a day, and I used to {before COVID} do five or six hours of work a day... I mean, I feel lucky that I can just tone down my work... I’m not taking new clients right now, I’m not looking for new clients, and I’m very lucky that I’m able to do that- even though I don’t want to do that...I just need to kind of stay above water a little bit. (P44)

In making the choice to "tone down" her work, she attended to her family responsibilities in a sustainable way. However, she notes implications for her work opportunities: "It’s forcing me to seek out less work, and to feel like I can’t give my existing work my full time... I feel like it’s so hard just to make any work progress... I’m frustrated by the work that I don’t get to.

(P44)

The few participants who chose to not tackle job responsibilities in the face of ideal worker expectations, and prioritized nonwork responsibilities by decreasing work hours, often felt frustrated or guilty for doing so, acknowledging potential negative career effects.

5 | DISCUSSION

Nearly 3 decades since Acker’s seminal 1990 publication, a disruption as dire as a global pandemic was a critical opportunity to re-examine the ideal worker culture and generate updated responses to the gendered nature of organizations. Acker’s theory of gendered organizations (1990) continues to capture the unspoken underlying assumptions of ideal worker expectations built upon the needs of a man unburdened by nonwork responsibilities. Sadly, rich evidence from 53 working mothers in the United States suggests an entrenchment of the ideal worker during 2020, following the initial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We develop here a conceptual understanding of the recursive influence of organizational norms, household dynamics between partners, and internalized norms amid a context of constrained external support structures. There are several implications of this research. First, while pre-pandemic research calls suggested that scholars should steer away from providing further evidence on the gendered nature of organizations and women’s struggles within them (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019), we argue that the nature of this global crisis as a pivotal moment in history makes it essential to document working mothers’ experiences. Our evidence of an entrenchment of ideal worker norms at that time has the potential to inform our understanding of what could be COVID-19 pandemic’s lasting impact. By “entrenchment,” we refer to how individuals experienced ideal worker norms as becoming more firmly established or fortified within organizational systems. Such norms pressured women to find personal solutions to systemic problems, which led to increased stress, lack of sleep, and burnout in addition to reduction of work hours and other indicators of career disruption. Seeing this evidence from the pursuant labor market’s “great resignation” (Cook, 2021) trend, we highlight the importance of documenting the unfolding of post-pandemic organizational culture and policy changes. Such documentation affords lessons for organizations to prevent these effects in a next crisis. Previous research (e.g., Hill et al., 2004) suggests examples of how jobs can be better structured with more flexibility for working mothers, such as 6-hour days, shortened work weeks, or control over scheduling. Rather than expecting working mothers to figure it out themselves, organizations must maintain accountability for establishing sustainable
work practices. Organizational leaders also need to champion and endorse them, such as demonstrating their use or positively reinforcing employees who do so. Managers should be assessed in the extent to which their employees who use such support policies do so without retribution.

Second, we examine working mothers’ experiences across multiple industries, geographic locations across the United States, and career stages. This extends from how empirical studies typically conceptualize ideal worker norms, which tend to focus on one organization or a particular occupation (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). In this study, we identified reported widespread patterns of organizational responses rooted in ideal worker culture, providing evidence for the ubiquity of this problem across organizations and occupations. The data revealed the tension between organizations wanting to be supportive of employees (at least performatively) and the embedded assumption that work comes first. For most, the work primacy culture persisted. This inhibited women in particular due to their increased family role demands during that time, which will perpetuate systemic gender inequality or the “inequality regimes” theorized by Acker (2006) and which will cause women to “make adaptations to expectations that interfere with family responsibilities and with which they are uncomfortable.” (2006, p. 446) The ubiquity of those experiences directs us to examine nonorganizational systems that enabled the ideal worker image at work. Support systems (such as schools, daycares, and other external help) preserved the continuity of work expectations and working mothers’ labor force participation prior to COVID-19. Their sudden lack of availability revealed how fragile these solutions were and how dependent working mothers had been on them as resources and structures to facilitate their labor market participation. Such an understanding provides a strong case to ensure that those resources are shored up, funded, and made a priority, which should be noted for public and organizational policy.

Third, our data revealed how the ideal worker image manifested in many homes where stereotypical gender norms reappeared. This serves as an extension of ideal worker culture and acknowledges its broader impact. In examining what our participants reported on arrangements with their male partners before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, our analysis revealed how carefully crafted arrangements that had accommodated women’s work/life balance before COVID-19 were swept away during the pandemic and replaced with gendered routines and arrangements. As a result, the mother’s career often suffered. These findings help explain recent research documenting the negative impact of COVID-19 on the well-being and employment of mothers. Petts et al. (2020) found that the lack of access to childcare and involvement in homeschooling negatively impacted mothers’ employment, but not that of fathers. Our study sheds light on the experiences of working mothers and why we see these outcomes. Future research can help to further unpack the different experiences of mothers versus fathers, to better understand the nature of gender roles at home, and how they resulted in different opportunities and constraints in working from home. It is important to note, however, that these home systems typically revolve around the demands of each partner’s job and organization.

While the pandemic may have exacerbated the corrosion of many work/family support systems, it did not initiate it. As working from home becomes more common, boundaries between work and family will continue to blur. Underlying assumptions about work must be interrogated, as these work/family and working mother challenges are systemic and necessitate systemic solutions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.
DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE

1 Complete interview protocol is available from the first author.

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