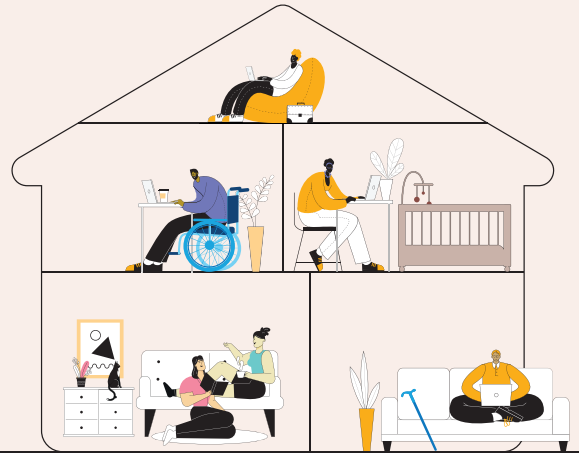# Gender Inequalities and Proposals for the Promotion of Equality in Reconciling Telework with Family and Cohabitation

Policy Brief | January 2024

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in teleworking from home, which is here to stay. Previously, only 6.5% of workers in Portugal teleworked[1]. During the pandemic, the national figures for teleworking were around 21.6%, a peak recorded in the first quarter of 2021[2]. In the post-pandemic period, there was a new peak in the 2nd quarter of 2022, 20.6%[3]. Currently, 17.5% of workers in Portugal are teleworking[4]. Despite the slight decrease in the percentage of professionals, they still prefer to work from home[5][6].

Studies are unanimous in identifying that the impact of teleworking is not gender-neutral[7][8][9]. It can improve work-life balance by providing more independence, autonomy, and flexibility. However, as has been the case during the COVID-19 crisis[7][8][10], it can also perpetuate traditional gender roles at home and family reconciliations, reinforcing greater responsibilities for women at these levels[8][10].

This policy brief aims to help promote gender equality in the field of teleworking from home, taking into account family and cohabitation reconciliation. Here, we present proposals for improving organizational practices, the legal framework, the Portuguese state's public policies, and the social partners' actions.

Teleworking is a type of work in a context of legal subordination in which the worker is not, at least for most of the time, working on the organization's premises and uses information and communication technologies to carry out their tasks and functions. It can take place at the worker's home, in shared centers or offices, on a mobile, or it can take place on a full-time or part-time basis[5][10][11].

Hybrid teleworking is a dynamic in which the worker alternates work days on the company's premises and other days working remotely[5].

This project refers to **teleworking** (hybrid or total) **from home**.

STATE OF THE ART

Teleworking was included in the Portuguese Labor Code in 2003 and was provided for when the General Law on Work in Public Functions was approved in 2014 with regulations that sought to equalize working conditions at a distance and in the company[12]. However, recent studies show the differences in working conditions between the two have become more pronounced, especially during the pandemic and concerning working time, work-life balance, health, safety, and well-being[5][7][8].
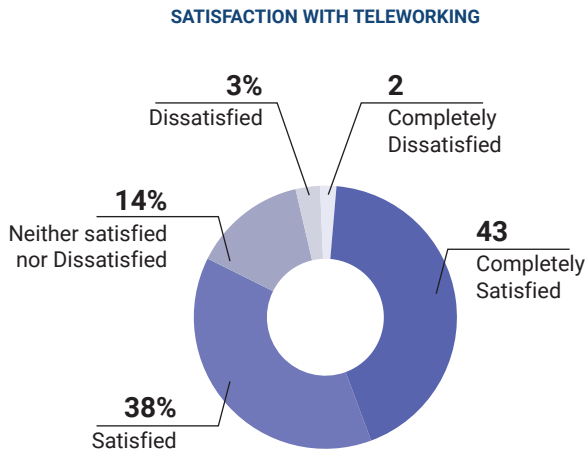
Several authors present the two sides of teleworking[7][9]. On the one hand, teleworking can promote individual and occupational well-being since it reduces commuting, which has an economic and temporal impact; it provides greater flexibility and availability for family, friends, and leisure; it increases motivation and productivity; and it promotes an overall improvement in quality of life. In companies, the growing prevalence of teleworking has significantly impacted human resource management[13], and currently, recruitment processes in Portugal may depend on teleworking and/or flexibility proposals[6]. On the other hand, teleworking can increase working time, stress, anxiety, and fatigue through anxiety and fatigue through presentism, work-family conflicts, social isolation, and a decline in physical activity. In addition, it can have implications for working hours, pay, safety, work demands, training, employee relations, etc. training, working relationships and the possible deterioration of collaborative spirit and teamwork[14], but also on rest periods, privacy, and the right to disconnect[5]. It is also essential to understand the impact of gender on the teleworking experience and family reconciliations[7][8][9]. There is an urgent need to access, through a gender lens, the personal and organizational experiences of reconciling teleworking with family and cohabitation in a post-pandemic period in Portugal.

EVIDENCE FROM THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY

To gain access to how teleworking and family interrelate in a post-pandemic context and explore the impact of this new organization on the general well-being of teleworkers, from March to July 2023, an online survey[1] was administered to 341 participants working from home and cohabiting (70.1% women; 29.9% men). The participants' age average is 41.01 years (SD= 9.54), and most work in a hybrid mode (68.3%). The main results are presented below.
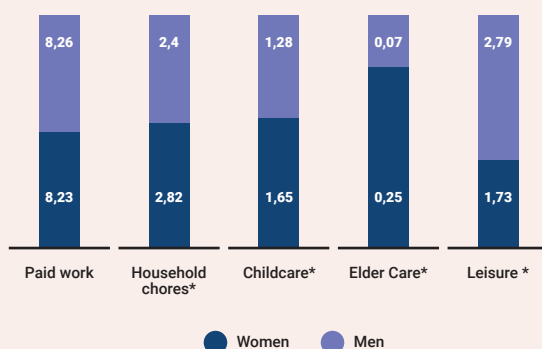
High satisfaction with teleworking

Most employees (81%), regardless of gender, report feeling satisfied or completely satisfied with the possibility of working from home.

SATISFACTION WITH TELEWORKING

- **3%** Dissatisfied
- **2** Completely Dissatisfied
- **14%** Neither satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- **43** Completely Satisfied
- **38%** Satisfied

Women spend more time on domestic and care work

Even when men are teleworking, this does not translate into more time dedicated to family and care tasks, with an unequal division of time dedicated to these tasks between women and men.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS PER DAY SPENT ON PAID WORK AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

|	Paid work	Household chores*	Childcare*	Elder Care*	Leisure *
Men	8,26	2,4	1,28	0,07	2,79
Women	8,23	2,82	1,65	0,25	1,73

● Women ● Men

Women perceive the advantages of teleworking for reconciling work and family life and family

Overall, the levels of negative interaction between family and work, and vice versa, are low. However, women report more positive interactions between work and family, and vice versa, than men.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY
ON A SCALE OF 0-3

|	Women	Men
Negative interactions between work and family	0,94	0,87
Negative interactions between family and work	0,59	0,53
Positive interactions from work to family*	1,02	0,88
Positive interactions from family to work*	1,27	1,09
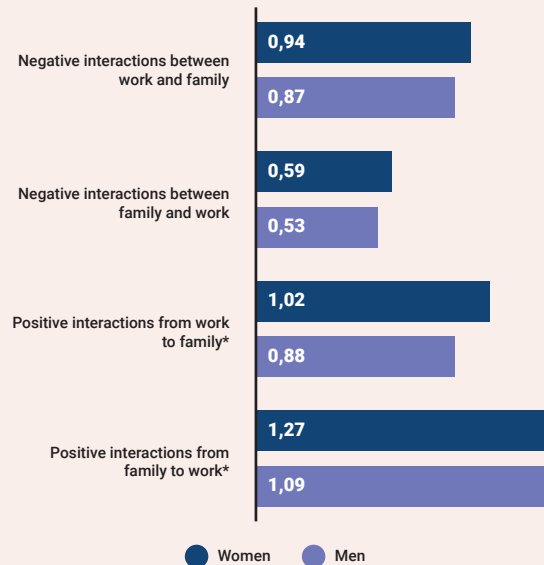
● Women ● Men

Women report lower levels of psychological well-being than men

In teleworking, women report lower well-being than men.

PERCEPTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
ON A SCALE OF 1-6

	Women	Men
Reported well-being*	3,81	4,06

● Women ● Men
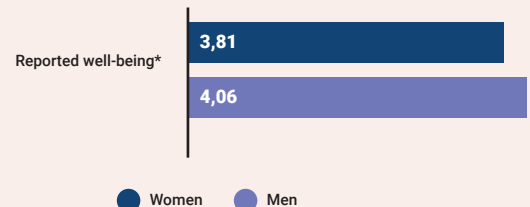
In teleworking, women spend the same number of hours as men in paid work, but spend more time on domestic and care activities. For women, **the benefits of teleworking seem to lie in the gains of reconciling work and family.** In contrast, men seem to derive individual benefits (for example, leisure) **that translate into a reinforcement of traditional gender roles, which is detrimental to women's well-being**.

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[1] Using the Survey Work-home Interaction - NijmeGen (SWING) scales[15], [16] and the Psychological General Well-Being Index - Short Version (PGWB-S)[17], [18].

* p < .05

EVIDENCE FROM THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

The main aim of this study was to find out how teleworking practices were implemented and developed in the post-pandemic period. From July to September 2023, we carried out a case study in a national company, which included semi-structured interviews with 11 of the institution's managers, aged between 38 and 61 (fictitious names). The following main results emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis[19].

Teleworking is here to stay, and the hybrid regime is here because it reconciles the company's interests with the workers.

"I would say that the rules in place (...) will be in place for a while. Some time. I can't hide the fact that from the point of view the managers... the subject is a bit of a nuisance (...) on the contrary, the people in the less qualified areas see huge advantages, both for savings and for managing family life (...) in the end, it's a question of basically, it's a question of reconciling interests, isn't it?" (Ivo)

"I think [the hybrid teleworking option] is about not losing competitiveness because it's something that people value a lot nowadays." (André)

The two sides of teleworking: it can be as advantageous as well as harmful on an individual level...

"People, employees, are undoubtedly more satisfied. Because... taking into account the two reasons most often cited by people for teleworking (...), supporting their children and financial issues, teleworking solves these issues." (João)

"There were times when I felt profound loneliness at home. I was alone. Alone. And this aspect I think maybe having effects, as yet unmeasurable, on people's mental health." (André)

... But with no impact on the company's performance because:

"There is no loss of productivity with teleworking. (...) People who already perform well in person will continue to perform well remotely, and those who have problems performing in person also have problems performing at home. We haven't found any case yet that makes us doubt this conclusion." (André)

The main limitations of teleworking for the company are the difficulty in solving problems quickly and the danger of "forgetting" people who work remotely.
"Managers complain that teleworking affects the availability of resources and therefore the ability to respond in time." (Ivo)

"There are even situations in which we hold meetings and forget to call the person working from home. No mindset has evolved enough to avoid the idea that 'He who is not seen is forgotten.'" (André)

Teleworking and structural gender inequalities

"Of the requests we have for flexibilization (...), it's always the woman who is responsible for the child, for the school, for monitoring and, therefore, normally the request for flexibility always comes from the woman and never from the man (...). In 20-something years of experience, I can't remember one request from a man (...), there's still an imbalance here." (João)

Counterproductive presentism and the difficulty to (right to) switching off

"People still think that presentism is work, and it's not. I see people here until 9 pm (...), and they're not working. And I see people who leave at 5 pm to pick up the kids, and they did miracles that day!" (Diana)

"I get a lot of calls at 9 pm. I try to avoid them, don't I? Or I say 'I'm having dinner, I can't now, is it too urgent?" (Diana)

The cultural conservatism of mistrust and the rigid work control procedures inhibit worker autonomy and, therefore, flexibility.

"There is still a view that in teleworking people (...) won't be working. They'll be watching television, and then they're going to work on something. There's that prejudice." (Bruno)

Flexwork: a flexible type of work, adapted to each person, formally designed for each person, with the necessary structural and organizational structural and organizational framework, but with permeable barriers.

"It's a practical case. Several people say, 'Oh, this afternoon I needed to do this or that activity, I'm going to telework' (...) That's flexibility... 'I have to take my mother to the doctor today'. In terms of traveling alone, you'll lose almost the whole afternoon (...). You don't have the time to travel at home, which benefits both parties." (Leonardo)

"I think it has to do with cost issues so that people can reduce their travel costs... it has to do with reconciling personal life on some days, issues with children, issues with dependent family members (...) and then a bit of that quality of life logic, where in which I reduce a journey and the wear and tear that this [hours spent traveling] causes people. So, in some situations, the justification isn't really costly; it's not any. it's not children; it's not parents, it's not dependents, it's quality of life." (João)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented here result from a literature review, an analysis of international practices, and the conclusions of the two empirical studies carried out as part of this project. They are aimed at three levels of intervention: work contexts, including public and private employers and their workers; the state, through its legal framework, public policies, and the intervention of its various bodies; and the social partners, through their intervention in collective bargaining and defense of workers' interests.

They also consider a gender perspective on the relationship between teleworking and reconciling professional, personal, and family life in the post-pandemic context. As such, they aim to address the adverse effects of teleworking that fall disproportionately on women, identified in the previous sections, and to promote gender equality in teleworking. As such, these measures are not a substitute for other general good practices relating to teleworking, as well as compliance with all the legal guidelines already established, particularly concerning access to the regime, regulation and contractualization, working conditions and instruments, hygiene, health and safety, privacy, data protection, among others.

WORKPLACE

One of the advantages of teleworking is that it allows workers to be away from their usual place of life, including their home, for example, to provide care for dependent people.

It is recommended that there be more than one teleworking location indicated in the teleworking agreement so that the worker can alternate according to their convenience and preference while safeguarding the review of the insurance contracted to cover the different locations in the event of workplace accidents.

Although the Portuguese legal framework includes the right to telework in some specific situations, when this is compatible with the activity performed, in many others, this right is not contemplated (e.g., a worker with a child over eight years old).

It is recommended that employers extend the possibility of teleworking to other workers not covered by the legal right to request it, depending on their preferences and personal and family circumstances.

Isolation and mostly virtual interpersonal relationships can make it difficult for workers to maintain a sense of belonging to teams and the employer.

It is recommended that team-building strategies be reinforced in a virtual environment while guaranteeing teleworkers access to face-to-face socializing/institutional sharing initiatives.

Teleworking can allow the employer and/or colleagues to inadvertently have greater access to information about the workers' living context and can detect the occurrence of crimes in the domestic sphere (e.g., marital violence) that should be reported.

It is recommended that information be disseminated on the duty to report public crimes and procedures for acting responsibly in case of suspicion of their occurrence.

The teleworker may not notice the passage of time and work excessive hours without interruption in the same position (increasing the risk of 'screen fatigue' and a sedentary lifestyle).

It is recommended that reminder systems be used for taking breaks and warn when the number of working hours planned for the day has been exceeded.

It is also recommended that the risks of teleworking be addressed, and employers should suggest activities to be carried out during workers' breaks (e.g., stretching sequence, drinking water, etc.).

With teleworking comes the risk of face-to-face workers being more readily recalled for involvement in projects, training activities, or other professional development opportunities.

It is recommended that teleworkers be guaranteed access to rights already enshrined, such as pay, training (including distance training), and other professional development opportunities, on equal terms with face-to-face workers.

There is a set of professional skills required for teleworking that are different from those needed for face-to-face work, starting with implementing measures to mitigate the risks of teleworking (e.g., isolation, sedentary lifestyle, burnout).

It is recommended that specific actions for teleworkers be included within the scope of employers' training plans, covering issues related to occupational health and reconciling personal, family, and professional life.

For workers in leadership and team management positions, there are additional difficulties related to the remote management of workers and team dynamics.

It is recommended that leaders be trained, through specific training, to manage mixed teams remotely and reinforce their digital skills.

The reasons that lead workers to request teleworking change over time, mainly due to changes in their life circumstances.

It is recommended that workers be consulted periodically about their perceptions of teleworking and that their contributions be taken into account when re-evaluating the model implemented.

The advantages of teleworking, particularly in terms of conciliation of work and personal and family life, are enhanced when combined with the autonomy of workers to manage their schedules.

It is recommended that, in teleworking, a work-by-objectives model be adopted with flexible working hours, even if specific periods of the working day are established in which the worker must ensure that they are available for interaction (e.g., to be contacted, to have meetings).

One of the employers' main fears about teleworking is the lack of confidence that the workers will do the work, as they will not be supervised in person.

It is recommended that a culture of trust be fostered, with autonomy for workers to manage their work while holding them accountable for meeting agreed targets and objectives.

In teleworking, there is a risk that communication will be less regulated, and possible situations of moral or sexual harassment at work may take longer to detect.

It is recommended that each employer draw up a code of conduct on teleworking and include it in their internal regulations. They should publicize it and the channels and rules of communication to be used when teleworking. They should explicitly identify limits on interactions (including the taking of images) and mechanisms for reporting and taking action in the event of non-compliance.

STATE

One main advantage of teleworking is the possibility of working from different locations. However, the current legal framework requires the clear identification of a workplace.

It is recommended that the workplace concept be legally flexible, allowing it to change and/or creating a framework for itinerant remote work.

There is no exact legal definition of the 'right to disconnect,' despite its protection through regulations in the Labor Code and other legal norms, which determine, for example, the employer's duty to refrain from contacting the worker during the rest period.

It is recommended that the right to disconnect be expressly enshrined in law and that mechanisms be established to monitor compliance.

Given the rapid rise of teleworking, some of the legal requirements for its implementation, particularly the most recent, may still need to be widely known.

It is recommended that, as part of the inspection of working conditions, monitoring of compliance with the legal requirements for this should be strengthened, and that occupational medicine should begin to assess aspects relating to occupational, physical and mental health (e.g. visual fatigue and isolation, respectively), for which teleworking is a risk factor.

Teleworking brings challenges related to the individual and autonomous organization of work, team dynamics, and establishing boundaries between home and workspaces.

It is recommended that a specific training framework on teleworking be created, covering gender, reconciling personal, family, and professional life, intersectionality, and multiple discrimination.

There are many reasons why workers prefer to work remotely (e.g., reduced travel time and costs), although the home space is only sometimes conducive to getting work done.

It is recommended that public teleworking/coworking spaces be created, with free access or reduced rates, internet connection, and hygiene and safety conditions for teleworking, including meeting rooms.

Gender-segregated statistics are crucial for monitoring the unequal impacts of teleworking, including costs and benefits and teleworker preferences.

It is recommended that data collection on teleworking be maintained in a post-pandemic context, with the variables segregated according to gender being extended.

The challenges of reconciling work and family life while teleworking differ according to gender and can condition workers' choices, as well as aggravating situations of domestic violence.

It is recommended that the issue of teleworking be integrated into materials and programs to promote gender equality and prevent violence against women, addressing the risks and benefits of this type of work.

SOCIAL PARTNERS

Teleworking is an option for the first time for many workers, who must be aware of their rights and duties and other system-specificities.

It is recommended that information materials on the rights and duties of teleworkers be produced and disseminated.
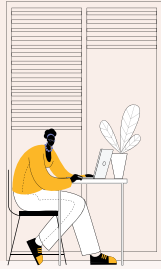
Teleworkers face challenges different from face-to-face workers in the various areas of activity in which they telework. Trade union movements themselves may need help accessing and communicating with them.

It is recommended that trade union movements draw up guidelines for establishing and maintaining communication with teleworkers in the various sectors of activity, as well as promoting the training of trade union representatives to defend the interests of teleworkers.

With more workers teleworking from home, there are new challenges for inspecting working conditions and practicing occupational medicine.

It is recommended that trade union movements mobilize around the discussion of new models for inspecting working conditions and advocate for the adaptation of occupational health practices to include assessment and intervention in occupational, physical, and mental health specific to teleworking.

The option of teleworking can be conditioned by the unavailability of suitable spaces for regular teleworking or for sporadic use due to the need to meet face-to-face with third parties.

It is recommended that municipalities and/or other local partners negotiate to provide free and certified (legally required) spaces for teleworking, including meeting rooms that teleworkers can use.
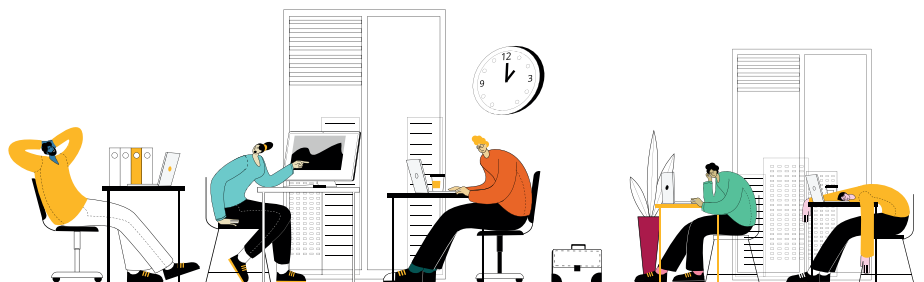
Teleworking dynamics have undergone profound changes during the pandemic and continue to transform post-pandemic, with changes in workers' experiences and needs. Collaboration between academia and state agencies to monitor the evolution of these processes is critical to detecting needs and testing solutions.

It is recommended to regularly collect quantitative and qualitative data, segregated by gender, on the experiences of teleworkers, including experiences of abuse (e.g., workplace harassment) in these contexts.

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