

Is telework a female work organization?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some results of an empirical research that analyzes the reorganization that telework introduces in the worker's work, family and personal life. The theoretical background is based on gender studies, social studies of science and technology and studies of work. The empirical data has been obtained from 24 personal interviews and 10 focus groups to Spanish telework women with familiar duties.

Most of the researches show the existence of a gender digital divide according to what women are underrepresented in technological fields in western societies: they use ICTs less than men [8]. However, our study has found that telework reverses this gender digital divide because it is mostly adopted by women, although the companies and public administrations in Spain offer telework programmes without making distinction between genders. Moreover, we will argue that telework could reinforce the women's traditional role as a householder.

Keywords

ICT, telework, gender, gender digital device.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some preliminary results of an R+D for the Women's Institute of the Work and Social Affairs Ministry of Spain carried out by professors and researchers of the Psychology and Pedagogy Faculty of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). It analyzes the reorganization that telework introduces in the worker's work, family and personal life. The theoretical background is based on gender studies, social studies of science and technology and studies of work. The empirical data has been obtained from 24 personal interviews and 10 focus groups to Spanish telework women with familiar duties. The total represents 73 women teleworkers.

A qualitative approach was chosen since such a methodology allows for the key theoretical directions to emerge from the interviews themselves. The lives of women teleworkers provide an entry into a closer examination of the work-life balance's mechanisms. This approach allows for the daily experiences of teleworkers to inform theoretical understandings of the workings of the public-private dichotomy and the transformations of the division between workplace and home into a division between paid work and unpaid work.

To generate a heterogeneous set of individuals who met these criteria, a snowball sampling method was used [12]. In order to initiate the snowball, we contacted individuals in companies and public bodies that we knew had telework programs, and distributed e-mails to colleagues about our search for teleworkers. Interviews and focus groups were taped and transcribed verbatim. A qualitative analysis program (Atlas.TI) was used to assist in the later part of the data analysis.

The teleworkers interviewed worked within a wide variety of organizations (30% in the public sector and 70% in the private sector). Individuals from fifteen different organizations were interviewed. Teleworkers in the present sample are clustered in four main occupational categories –management (e.g. business managers, project managers); teaching; business, finance and administration (e.g. researchers, computer programmers, system analysts), and self-employed (mostly in sales and services).



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THE ICT AND THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

By the end of the 90s, at the height of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their massive implementation in the labour market some authors [4], [14] saw great possibilities to conciliate the demands of both labour and the family. In fact, the current Information and Knowledge Society, and the ICTs which made it possible, offers a great opportunity to fix the existing imbalances and inequalities in the society and raise the participation of women in all levels. In that sense, the ICTs may result in a useful tool to aid the conciliation between work and family life, as they solve two of their main problems: time and distance.

Effectively, all studies demonstrate that ICTs allow for work to be done in less time and, furthermore, they offer the possibility of being connected to work through the net, to look for information, send it out, communicate or even have meetings.

In that sense, nearly 30% of the women in Spain frequently use computers on a daily basis, although according to the "Community Survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals", published by Eurostat in 2007, there is an 9% difference of frequency of use between men and women in the European Union countries, and in the case of Spain such gap grows to 10%. And there is also a significant gap (10%) between the portion of men and women using Internet. This gender difference observed in the use of ICTs is what has been called the "gender digital gap" or "gender digital divide". Several authors [2], [1], [7] consider that it is not a coincidence that computers are emotionally and culturally associated with men, whereas women have rejection attitudes towards technology and have to adapt to a culture that is imposed on them and with which they do not identify.

Therefore, in spite of the gender differences regarding the use of the Internet or computers, it is interesting to analyse the use that women do of ICTs and how it can be an instrument to save working time in order to help them to balance work and family. In fact, after the developments that some technological changes in the house have implied, such as the appearance of domestic appliances, ICTs should also represent another source of liberation from domestic work for men and women, since they allow people to do more work with less effort and training. Furthermore, as Judy Wajcman affirms, when ICTs entered homes, just like it happened in offices, they changed the meaning and nature of tasks, and created some new ones; for example, both domestic mechanisms and ICTs allow for multitasking and time reconfiguration, accomplishing its restructuring [16].

TELEWORK IN SPAIN

The origins of the concept of telework can be traced from 1973, when it was used for the first time by the

consulting and former NASA engineer Jack Niles, who used "telecommuting" to refer to the use of informatics and telematics as a way to avoid the displacement of workers from home to workplaces and, consequently, traffic jams and atmospheric pollution [13], [15].

Since then, numerous definitions of telework have been proposed. Nowadays, researchers agree that one of the main difficulties of studying this kind of work organization is the lack of an agreed definition. Still, through the bibliographic review of the main references that have focused on the study of telework, we have found that all proposed definitions have three common elements:

- Location: work is carried out in a different physical place where the results are needed,
- the use of ICT, and
- the communication link between the employer and the employee

In terms of the use of telework in Spain, it is necessary to highlight that even though there are some indicators about telework, our current data is insufficient and too generic.

Globally there is also a huge indeterminacy regarding the real use of telework and, specifically in Europe, the only official data comes from a survey carried out by the European Commission in 1999. According to this data, it is important to highlight the diminished use of telework in Spain, with only 357.000 teleworkers, which is higher than just three countries; Ireland, Denmark and Finland.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Our work is framed by gender studies, more specifically by studies focused on the relation between gender and technology. This means that the concepts of gender and ICT, or gender and technology, cannot be explored separately because they are intricately interwoven. Leaning on these traditions, a focus on users will be predominant in this presentation, as well as concepts of co-construction or mutual shaping of gender and technology; scripts and users configurations; and construction of identities in relation to gendered discourses and available subject positions will be applied.

The mutual shaping of gender and technology can be studied in design and also during the cultural consumption of a new technology. Here we follow the traditions of social shaping [11] or social construction of technology [6], [5]. In terms of gender and technology studies, the two are mutually shaped or co-constructed, implying that gender and technology are constitutive of each other and that they are produced simultaneously. In this sense, designers, and intermediaries can be said to share a technological

frame associated with a particular technology, for example, that which makes telework possible, and with a particular cultural notion of gender.

So during the process of design of a technology, not only the machine is produced, but also gender, although the process is not completed by design. The co-production goes on during all stages of a technology's "life cycle": design, manufacturing, marketing, and consumption, thus also in interaction with users.

The visions of designers are inscribed in the products, in the sense that "like a film script, technical objects define a framework of action together with the actors and the space in which they are supposed to act" [3: 208]. Such scripts can be deduced from the technical products, and differences that habitually are recognised as feminine and masculine may be identified in the design.

Thus the design of technologies is only one step in the process of its cultural construction. Even after a piece of technology has assumed a particular form, it still retains interpretative flexibility; that means that different social groups, including user groups, could construct radically different meanings of a technology. In this sense, users contribute to this process through the various ways they domesticate technology, in effect "taming" it by adjusting it to their own needs and lifestyles.

OUR WORKING HYPOTHESIS

In this field, several authors have explored the gender-technology relationship to analyze how women have been excluded from technological fields and how gendered perceptions and values shape design as well as use of technologies [9], [17], [18]. In this sense, this paper considers how a more nuanced analysis of the mutual shaping of technology and society might inform studies of the ICT and work and also how gendered hierarchies and masculine and feminine subjectivities and practices are created along with workplace technologies.

Within this frame, through our research we would like to know if telework has a gendered script. In the case of telework, the co-production between technology and gender is produced during its whole life cycle: in its design (how the different organizations design the machines, the programs, the data bases, etc.); in the process of implementation and installation at home; in the way the organizations promote and advertise the telework at the organizations (communication within an organisation and externally), in the selection of the worker's group likely to make use of telework, in the interaction between teleworkers and in the process of teleworking (how teleworkers perceive, conceptualize and develop telework).

Among these phases, we have already analysed the last one, consumption, cultural construction and domestication of telework by means of, as we said above, personal interviews and focused groups with women teleworkers. From our results since now, we have to highlight the following:

1. Despite the fact that there is no data about Spain regarding gender implementation of telework, according to the 15 companies consulted by our study, in all of them it was women who have massively adopted telework programs, in some situations with percentages much higher than men.
2. It seems that to change the place of paid work and to locate it at home does not allow of any way to do the paid and the domestic work at the same time in order to satisfy the familiar responsibilities. The approach according to which to work at home allows the workers to manage better their work and familiar responsibilities contains the false premise that all workers have resources for the care of the dependants.
3. Whereas both genders, men and women telework at home, their respective experiences are based to a great extent on the fact that women continue having the main responsibility of the family and domestic work, and by the agreement of which work at home or at the office is defined in opposition to the family. So, sometimes, the teleworker can feel the damage that can be caused to their legitimacy to work at home. This legitimacy can be questioned by the fact to have also to take care of the dependants and the house.
4. It seems that to work at home raises some challenges that have the division of the domestic work. In many cases, the greater proximity of the women to the home reinforces the divisions of familiar and domestic work. Whereas the presence of the men in the familiar sphere can facilitate a more egalitarian distribution of domestic work, it is clear that the greater proximity of men by itself does not mean automatically a change in such distribution.
5. In our study we have also analyzed the advantages and disadvantages that female teleworkers have while working partly or fully at home. Three positive aspects were highlighted. Firstly, time saving; secondly, the increase in work productivity owing to improvement in concentration at home, but above all women stated that the greatest advantage of all was the possibility to self organize their time and their daily life and, thus, have more time to dedicate to taking care of their children (taking them to school, playing with them, going to parents' meetings and activities at school, etc).
6. The main negative aspects of telework were isolation, or, in other words, the lack of contact with people in the office and, in many cases, the

difficulties of getting a promotion, since in Spain there is still a culture that values the high amount of working hours in spite of the productivity. In this sense, the majority of women interviewed were prompted to disregard the opportunity of promotion in their careers in favour of the availability of time for their home and family.

7. Finally, contrary to the futurist predictions that we have seen in telework as liberation of the space-time restrictions and a change in the types of work organization, it seems that telework can reinforced a notion of work little emancipated and very oriented to the labour productivity. In this sense, teleworkers very conscious of this conception of the work of their bosses usually are very careful because they feel that the opportunity of telework can be denied by them at any moment. As it happens with the well-known precarious workers, teleworkers occupy a position of vulnerability in relations with their bosses and with their jobs. In many companies teleworkers are perceived as privileged workers, above all by the workers who do not rely on telework. This generates in the teleworkers a feeling of personal gratitude with their bosses can pressure.

In conclusion, despite the risks telework can imply, the results of our research show that telework is highly valued by 96% of women interviewed and they would not renounce it, as they consider that the benefits are higher than disadvantages. Most women still consider themselves the main person responsible for the education of children and the care of dependants, as well as domestic work. Therefore, they consider telework as an appropriate strategy to have a paid-job but also to continue developing their traditional role at home.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite most of the researches show the existence of a gender digital divide according to what women are underrepresented in technological fields in western societies and they use ICTs less than men, our study has found that telework “reverses” this gender digital divide because it is mostly adopted by women, although the companies and public administrations in Spain offer telework programmes without making distinction between genders. So, the question could be how can such seemingly gender-neutral technology embody a gendered kind of work organization? This can only be understood if we take into account that we live in a gendered society in which forms of behaviour, resources, symbolical connotations and patterns of locations follow gendered patterns, which consequently shape technological developments.

And it is because our society and its productions are not gender-neutral that we can argue that the fact that most

of teleworkers are women and these women choose telework in order to have more time to dedicate to taking care of their children and their home means that telework can reinforce these gender inequalities in society and it can normalize stereotypical male and female behaviour. By instance, as we have said, telework could reinforce the women’s traditional role as a householder.

Therefore, we think that a number of requirements need to be in place for telework to become a real tool for work-life balance without any gender distinction. Some of those are the following:

- Both men and women should have the opportunity to telework.
- Not only workers with dependants but also those without should be eligible for telework.
- There should be an equitable distribution of domestic and family work among men and women.
- Business culture should stop rewarding time spent ‘at work’ over performance.
- Organizations should plan every worker’s tasks based on objectives to allow the evaluation of real productivity of workers by means of performance.

If we want these changes to take place and be sustainable, a collaboration of individuals, groups, public bodies, policy makers and economic actors is necessary. Work-life balance is a social problem with clear structural origins. Therefore private agreements established at domestic and family levels should be accompanied by a rethinking of those conservative principles based on the segregation of spaces, distribution of tasks and responsibilities depending on the fact of being men or women.

The problem presented is not only a specific issue for women, but a complex problem that affects the whole society and the organization of our daily life. The response to this problem does not only imply adjustments at technocratic and legal dimensions, but is directly related to the model of society and welfare state we want to build. ICTs do introduce a crucial technological change in our daily lives by means of forcing us to undertake new training and offer the opportunity for a new model of work organization. But if we do not start with the collaboration we mentioned above, women can find themselves in a situation in which, as one character in the novel “*El gatopardo*” states, everything has to change for the change of nothing. That’s to say, we are under the risk that ICTs can become another mechanism of reproduction of the traditional segregation of roles based in gender and, therefore, of deepening the gap that separates men and women in the issue of work-life balance.

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