

# GEST ALUMNI SNAPSHOT

SOCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

## THE BALANCING ACT: GENDER DYNAMICS OF REMOTE WORKING IN SRI LANKA

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Care work is an essential – often unquantified – service that ensures the physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of adults and children, and contributes towards the reproduction of the future workforce, through the meeting of needs (Addati, Cattaneo, Esquivel & Valarino, 2018). It is recognised that women and girls across the world perform three-quarters of the total unpaid care work, while two-thirds of the care work providers are women (ILO, 2018).; with women residing in middle income countries found to experience a higher burden of unpaid care work (ILO, 2018). This is due to gendered, social, and cultural norms that view unpaid care work as a female prerogative, deeming that women across different regions, socio-economic classes and cultures spend an important part of their day meeting the expectations of their domestic and reproductive roles, even when they have a paid job outside the home (Ferrant, Pesando & Nowacka, 2014; Razavi & Staab, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore discussions on the role and responsibility of care work during the lockdown as work from home measures were introduced as a means of controlling the spread of COVID-19. Sri Lanka was no stranger to the impact of the pandemic, and its citizens continue to experience the ripple effects nearly a year after the first identified case in early 2020. The onset of the pandemic resulted in changes to how individuals went about their regular activities in almost every aspect from learning, working, and even socializing. With schools shut for extended periods, households with young children not only had to navigate the challenges associated with movement restrictions and remote working, but they also had to take on the responsibility of adapting to new learning methods. This study sought to understand the impacts of the changes in terms of opportunities as well as the long-term consequences, particularly regarding household dynamics and responsibilities, while attempting to understand the impacts on gendered responsibilities from a Sri Lankan context. Although challenges are expected when adapting to the 'new normal' there is also a need to delve deeper to understand the intricacies of these challenges and what is necessary to ensure long term success or embrace the changes going forward. This paper presents a snapshot of the experiences of families with young children in Sri Lanka in the months since the first movement restriction was imposed.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Introduction to Care Work

The term 'care work', is characterised by direct and indirect care activities, and paid and unpaid care work. Direct activities, also known as "nurturing", care, includes feeding a baby, nursing a sick partner, helping an older person to take a bath, carrying out health check-ups or teaching young children; while indirect care includes activities such as cleaning, cooking, doing the laundry and other household maintenance tasks (Addati et al, 2018). Paid care work is work performed for profit or pay within a private household or care establishments such as hospitals, nursing homes, or schools (Addati et al, 2018). Unpaid care work is characterised by all the services provided within a household for its members, and is considered work because, theoretically one could pay someone to perform said services (Elson, 2000). Although care work is recognised as an important contributory factor towards ensuring economic activity and the wellbeing of individuals, it is often unaccounted for due to the misperception that it is difficult to measure, resulting in incorrect inferences about the value of an individuals' time, especially with regard to activities carried out within the household sphere (Ferrant, Pesando & Nowacka, 2014).

The unequal, and often large, amount of unpaid care work carried out mainly by women and girls globally constrains both their availability to undertake paid employment and the type and quality of jobs they can access contributing to low and reduced female labour force participation (Addati et al, 2018; ILO, 2018). The Sri Lankan context is no different, with female labour force participation rates being as low as 34.5% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020) despite higher levels of educational attainment by women

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compared to regional counterparts. The low female labour force participation rate in Sri Lanka is attributed to poor transport facilities, limited childcare facilities, negative social attitudes associated with women working outside the home, and the high burden of unpaid household maintenance and care work ((Ranaraja et al., 2016); a fact reiterated through the most recent Annual Labour Force Survey (2020) data which indicates that 62.4% of economically inactive females were engaged in housework, compared to 4.3% of males.

## **2.2. COVID-19 Pandemic and Gendered Implications**

It is within this context that women were faced with the added care burden brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating existing gender inequality. In fact, data collected globally suggests that the coronavirus pandemic could essentially wipe out 25 years of increasing gender equality (Lungumbu & Butterly, 2020).

A survey conducted by the UN Women's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ROAP) revealed that women face gendered consequences of the pandemic due to factors such as information asymmetry between sexes as a result of unequal access to digital resources such as cell phones and the internet, especially in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan. Women were also found to experience higher emotional and mental burden due to increases in unpaid care and domestic work, job and income loss, and the effects of the lockdown on gender-based violence (UN Women, 2020).

Within the domestic sphere, effects of work from home orders and the closure of schools and childcare facilities have led to the unequal delegation of care responsibilities within the household. Although many studies report that men were contributing to care responsibilities, there was still a disproportionate effect on women. Activities such as cleaning, childcare, teaching children, cooking, and serving meals, and shopping for the family were engaged in more by women than men during the pandemic (Azcona et al, 2020).

## **2.3. Background On COVID-19 In Sri Lanka**

The first COVID-19 positive case in Sri Lanka was identified on the 27th of January 2020, and since several positive cases were identified in March 2020, the government declared a nationwide curfew, lasting two months, to contain the spread of the pandemic. Unlike lockdowns imposed in many other countries, the curfew regulations meant that no one was allowed to step outside their homes for any reason – not even for exercise or to purchase groceries – unless they had prior approval or were engaged in providing essential services. During this period, schools and businesses had to adapt to learning and working online; while households that had relied on support systems in the form of extended family networks or paid help had to quickly adapt to redistribute care responsibilities. As schools continued to remain shut for physical lessons, households with young children added home schooling to their list of care responsibilities, a task formerly carried out within the realm of schools, by teachers.

With almost no new locally transmitted cases reported within the country for three months since the end of the curfew, things began to slowly ease back into a semblance of normalcy, with COVID-19 related health guidelines in place. By September however, the emergence of a cluster of positive cases in an apparel manufacturing factory led to the development of the second wave of COVID-19 with cases subsequently being reported across the country. Instead of the implementation of a nation-wide curfew as in the previous wave, municipalities and smaller administrative locations with high incidence of cases were declared 'isolated' and movements to, from and within said locations were completely restricted. However, in a bid to minimize the economic impact and loss of wages, particularly for individuals engaged in daily waged work who were unable to engage in remote working, the regulations implemented during the second wave were comparatively lax amidst new cases being reported daily.

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### **3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it attempts to determine if COVID-19 has made a change in the gendered nature of household-based responsibilities in Sri Lanka due to the introduction of lockdowns and the new modality of remote working; allowing for a balance of household responsibilities alongside work commitments. Secondly, it seeks to deepen the understanding of how the changing nature of distance learning – particularly in households with young children – has had an impact on the existing gendered distribution of care responsibilities. Through these, this research will shed light on the conditions which contribute to or detract from successful navigation of the changes in living, learning and working in times of a pandemic as a consequence of the mobility restrictions introduced since the COVID-19 outbreak.

#### **3.1. Relevance of the Research**

In the span of less than a year, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted almost every aspect of daily life across the globe. While concerns have been raised about the extent to which the pandemic has contributed towards widening the gender gap, much is yet unknown. This research attempts to provide insights to the conjecture regarding the shifts and potential consequences of said shifts concerning the gendered roles and responsibilities within a household in the Sri Lankan context.

#### **3.2. Methodology**

This research used a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data was obtained via an online survey hosted on Survey Monkey and recorded reached a total of 81 responses (63 women and 18 men). The survey respondents were selected using a snowball sampling method with the link to the survey shared via online messaging platforms and email. The survey was complemented by 14 in-depth qualitative interviews with survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate and share their personal experiences and perceptions of the changes in personal household responsibilities since the curfew and subsequent movement restrictions imposed.

As part of the online survey, respondents were asked about their contribution to five common household tasks of cooking, washing up after meals, cleaning the house including the bathroom, grocery shopping, and paying utility bills to ascertain gendered distribution of labour within the household, as well as about their contribution towards childcare related tasks of feeding, bathing, help with homework, taking time off when the child is unwell, and playing with children. The survey asked respondents who in the household was responsible for the respective tasks both prior to COVID-19 as well as during the lockdown period in order to determine changes. While the data collection component of this study includes questions related to household responsibilities it had a greater emphasis on childcare responsibilities with a particular focus on distance learning for households with young school-aged children.

The analysis for this research paper draws on the survey findings conducted earlier in the year (2020) by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) during the first wave of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka when the country experienced a national curfew. While the survey results are not directly comparable, the findings will be used to understand if there was a shift in gendered nature of care responsibilities between waves of movement restrictions. The analysis of the data collected is supplemented by secondary literature available on the subject of care work and the future of work. To protect the identity of the respondents interviewed, where excerpts are included in this paper, their names have been anonymized and any identifying characteristics have been excluded.

#### **3.3. Limitations and Validity of Research**

The author recognizes that access to work and the resultant challenges are influenced by a variety of different factors which are not all captured through the scope of this research. It also recognizes that the survey methodology adopted only addresses the issues experienced by those engaged in formal employment opportunities and does not capture those engaged in informal employment. The data collected is based on individual perceptions of the respondents who chose to participate in the research.

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As the geographic concentration of the respondents was primarily urban, it is not possible to generalize the findings across the country due to distinctions in access to resources, infrastructure, and varying resulting experiences. Furthermore, it is recognised that the interpretation of data and the findings from this study cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. The use of qualitative data collection methods is identified by Etz and Arroyo (2015) and Henry et al (2015), as a tool to address the analytical challenges presented by small sample research, which this research study has adopted through its mixed methods approach. It is also expected that the insights gained through this survey regarding changes in household responsibilities and dynamics experienced by respondents in Sri Lanka as a consequence of COVID-19 at the end of 2020, would provide the opportunity for further, more detailed research in the future.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section, the paper presents the research findings from the survey complemented by the qualitative interviews conducted and is supported by existing research to better understand the changes that have taken place within the household sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic. It takes into consideration how movement restrictions intended to curb the spread of COVID-19 have affected the distribution of responsibilities related to household tasks and childcare duties. It further considers the shift from physical working and learning modality to the digital realm, and consequences of that shift in a Sri Lankan context, with a particular emphasis on parents with young children, to understand how they are managing the unexpected transition.

### **4.1. Keeping House**

As a means of controlling the spread of COVID-19, countries across the world introduced varying forms of movement restrictions including directives to work from home and distance learning, resulting in increased time spent within the house. Existing literature on the topic highlight the increased time spent at home by entire families, corresponded with an increase in household care duties which was borne predominantly by women (Giurge et al, 2021).

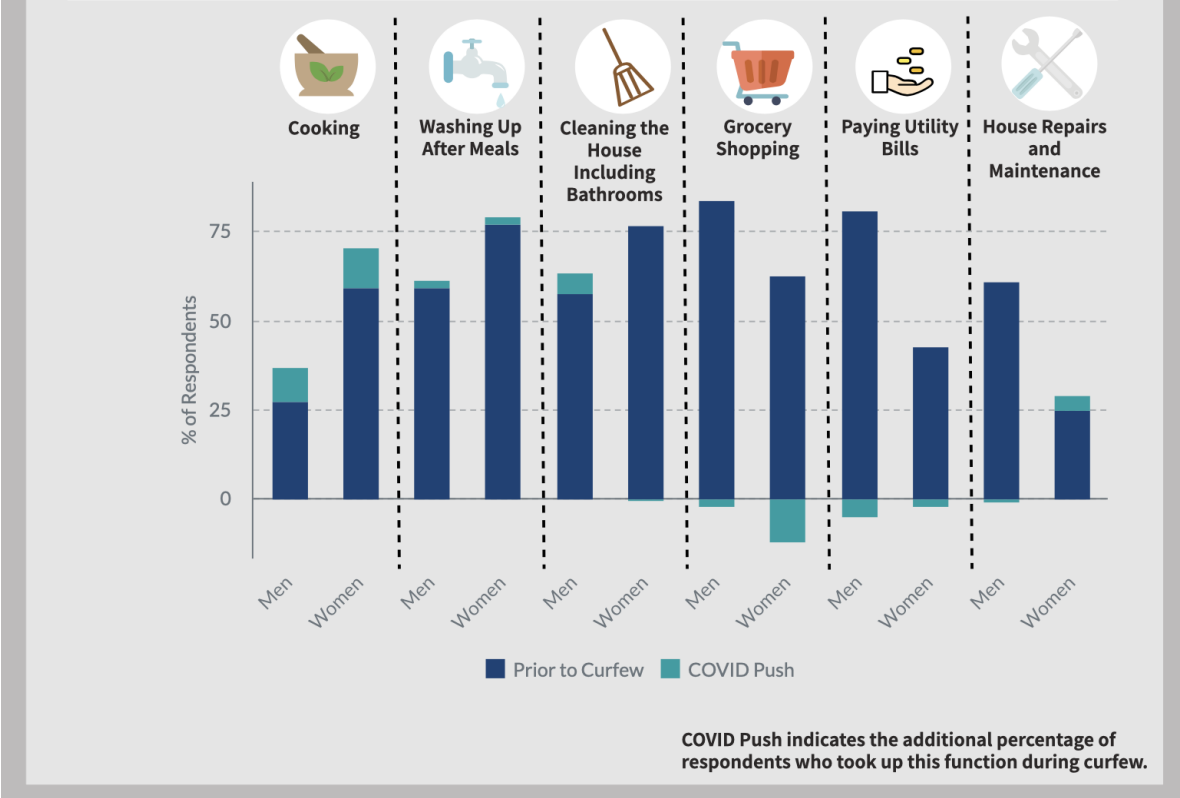
The survey conducted by CEPA during the first wave of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka also found similar characteristics of increased burden of household work being borne by women compared to their male counterparts. While recognizing that women were not impacted homogenously, and their experiences varied based on socio economic backgrounds, below are some of the key findings from the surveys in this research.

In the survey, respondents were asked to report their engagement with regard to a particular task prior to and since the pandemic related restrictions, with the reported change referred to as the 'COVID push'. As can be observed from tabulated data below, it is predominantly women who have a higher representation of responsibility in the household related to more frequent and regular tasks of cooking, washing up after meals, and cleaning the house, while male household members indicate a higher responsibility for tasks such as grocery shopping, paying utility bills and house repairs which occur on a less frequent interval.

It can be observed in Figure 1 that overall, both men and women took up more household tasks during the curfew. This is attributed to the inability to access the support services of paid domestic helpers or extended family members who would usually carry out the identified tasks. Even though men were spending more time at home than before, the gendered division of labour responsibilities is seen to remain largely unchanged. In the area of cooking for example, where the COVID push for both men and women was highest concerning increased responsibility, the COVID push for women (11.2%) was still higher than that for males (9.5%). In the area of cleaning the house, female respondents indicated no change in their level of responsibilities while male respondents reported a COVID push of 6%. Concerning the task of grocery shopping, it was possible to observe a decline in both male and female responsibilities (i.e., a negative COVID push) which is attributed to grocery stores being shut during this period of curfew and

households having to rely on mobile vendors to procure food/groceries. Similarly, the responsibility associated with the payment of utility bills also saw a negative COVID push as service providers were unable to prepare the bills as meter reading was suspended during the curfew.

**Figure 1: Changes in contribution to household tasks – wave I**



Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)

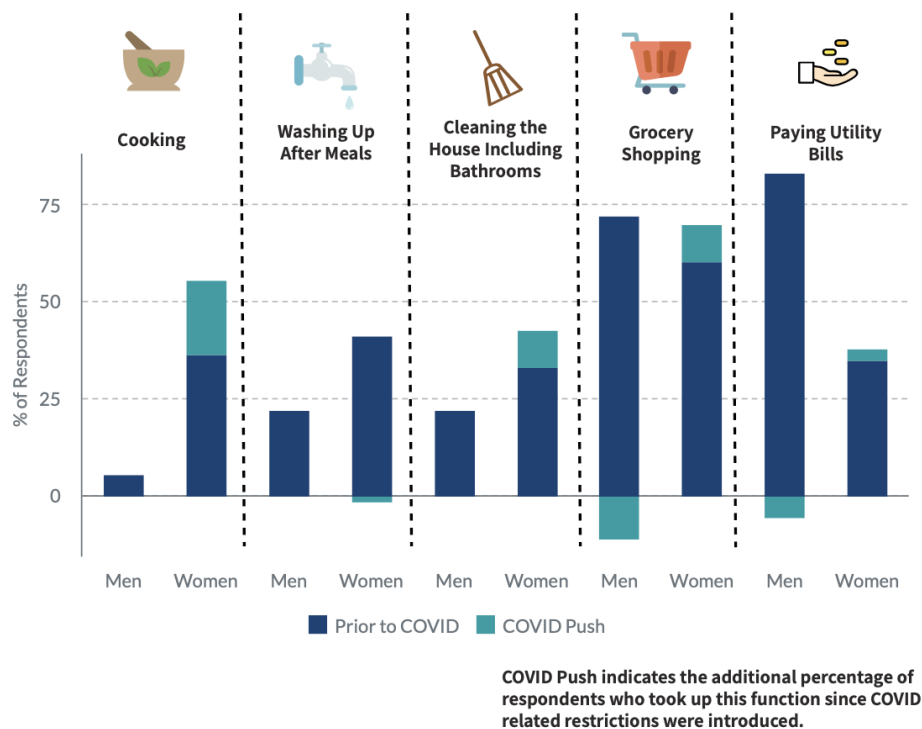
The COVID-19 push among men for the more regular, everyday tasks can be attributed in part to the increase in time spent at home, thus presenting male household members a greater opportunity to partake in the sharing of household responsibilities. Therefore, it could be argued that COVID-19 has allowed household members to gradually transcend the gendered divide of household responsibilities. This argument, however, would only stand if increased participation by males towards household responsibilities continued beyond the period of curfew which severely restricted movement outside of the house.

When the survey for this research was conducted it was within a context of relatively less severe movement restrictions. As can be observed in

**Figure 2**, the survey responses recorded during this period indicate that the distribution of daily household responsibilities continued to be higher for women than male household members overall compared to pre-covid times. The COVID-19 push with regard to household tasks of cooking and cleaning the house is observed only among female members of the household with no change recorded among male household members. The survey responses also recorded an increase in women’s responsibility related to grocery shopping and payment of utility bills, which can be attributed to the introduction and adoption

of online shopping and payment platforms which have emerged since the pandemic, limiting the necessity to visit a physical store while the second wave was ongoing.

**Figure 2: Changes in contribution to household tasks – wave II**



Although there was an increase in male contribution towards household tasks during the first wave, it is possible to observe that overall, women continue to bear a higher responsibility with regard to these tasks, and in some instances even taking on more responsibilities facilitated by digital platforms. The potential for COVID-19 related movement restrictions to contribute towards bridging the gender gap of household-based care responsibilities, therefore, can be deemed minimal overall, limiting the opportunities for women to consider venturing into the formal labour force.

#### 4.2. Childcare Responsibilities

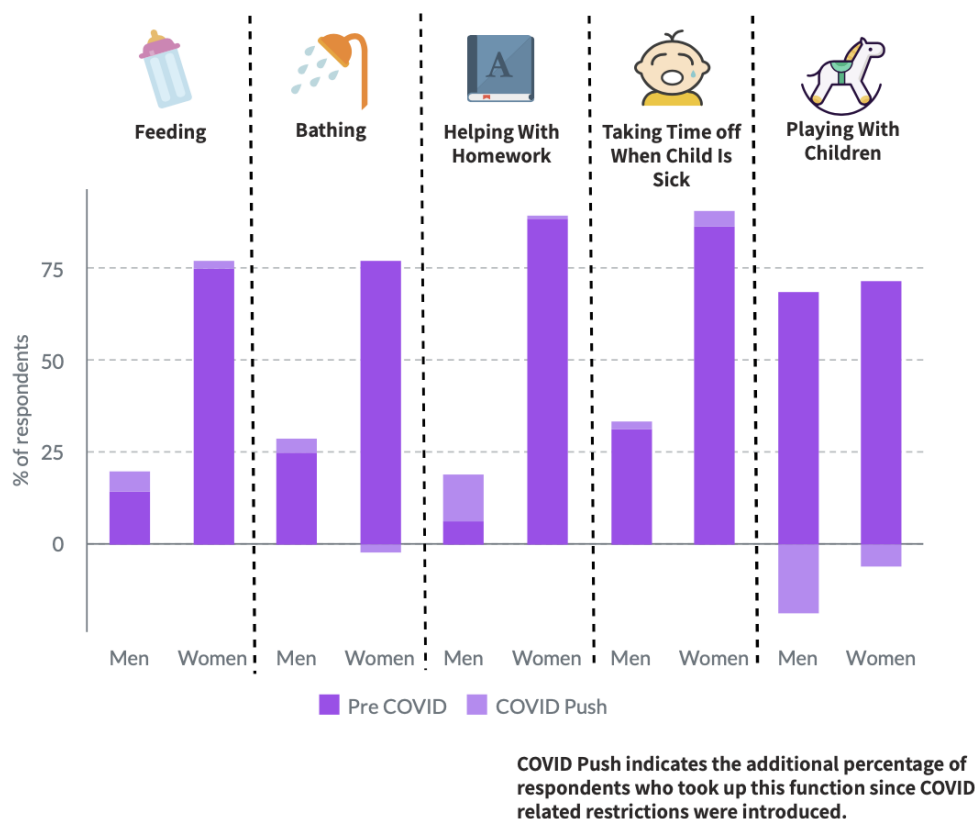
As in the case of household responsibilities, the survey findings for this research indicate that childcare responsibilities are disproportionately borne by women, with the gender gap observed to be much larger among the surveyed respondents. This is despite over half (56.4%) of the respondents belonging to dual income households. According to the survey responses recorded, women were observed to bear the highest level of responsibility with regard to childcare related tasks of feeding, bathing, helping the child with homework, and taking time off when the child is sick (see Figure 3). In comparison to a pre-COVID-19 era, helping children with homework recorded the largest covid push among male household members (12.5%), although women recorded the highest level of responsibility in this task.

In the survey conducted by CEPA (2020) during the first wave, the COVID push for men is relatively higher for the tasks of feeding, and bathing children at 12.5% and 9.5% respectively. In both survey waves, playing with children recorded a decline among both men and women compared to pre-COVID times, with men recording a decline of 18.8% during the survey conducted during the second wave. This decline is attributed in part to the increased care responsibilities being borne by household members



which takes precedence over the leisure time available to engage in activities with the children due to competing responsibilities that must be carried out to ensure the smooth functioning of a household in the midst of a pandemic.

**Figure 3: Changes in contribution to childcare tasks – wave II**



As the lockdown guidelines issued during the second wave of COVID-19 in the country had less movement restrictions, certain organisations encouraged employees to return to the physical workspaces. After months of being confined to their homes, many were eager to return, even if it was only a few days a week. However, as schools continued to be closed, parents with young children who could not be left unsupervised were compelled to continue working remotely. Among the respondents surveyed, 55.1% indicated that either the respondent or a spouse continued to work from home to mind the children. COVID-19 therefore, may be attributed for encouraging organisations to introduce and continue remote working, allowing parents with young children in particular to balance care and work responsibilities.

### 4.3. The Shift from Physical to Digital

In a webinar which brought together representatives from some of the largest corporate entities in Sri Lanka to discuss the future of work, it was stated that COVID-19 presented businesses the opportunity to introduce and implement remote working beyond the duration of the pandemic (Million Spaces & PWC, 2020). The general consensus was that as long as one had an internet connection, they should be able to engage in work and by extension learning. Sri Lanka’s national statistics however, which indicate that only 44.3% percent of Sri Lankas are digitally literate, and thereby able to use a computer, laptop, tablet and/or smartphone on his/her own, appear to defy this assumption of a smooth transition to working

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remotely (Palansuriya, 2020). Existing data further states that only 29% of the population aged 5 to 69 years used internet facilities at least once in 2019, while only 22.2% of households owned a desktop or laptop (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019).

Despite the concerning national level statistics, among the survey responses recorded as part of this research, 82.1% of the respondents who were engaged in full time employment indicated that they worked remotely at the time of the survey; a significant increase from only 39.3% of the respondents indicating that they had utilised the work from home option prior to COVID-19. It must be reiterated however, that the survey respondents resided in urban locality and therefore do not represent the challenges experienced by individuals residing in rural or estate locales.

#### **4.4. School Comes Home**

Digital learning is a relatively new phenomenon in the Sri Lankan education context, particularly at the primary and early secondary school level. As such, the transition to distance education presented a steep learning curve for the students, teachers and the parents alike. Prior to COVID-19, children spent an average of six hours a day at school in the care of a teacher, with parents supporting the child's learning when they had homework, projects or assignments. Due to the gathering restrictions and concerns associated with the spread of COVID-19 through schools, learning now takes place within the home.

For parents with young children, this research revealed that the transition to distance learning has resulted in an increase in parental involvement and time spent on learning activities, with at least 30 minutes spent daily for an average two-hour lesson online. This entails helping the child connect to the link shared by the teacher to log-in to the learning platform, ensuring there is a dedicated space for learning to take place where the child will not be disturbed, or sitting with the child while the lesson is ongoing to ensure engagement. In households with more than one child or where the device used for learning is shared by a parent or sibling, it was also necessary contend with ensuring non-conflicting schedules.

According to the survey findings, only 30% of the respondents indicated that their children had a device dedicated for their learning activities prior to COVID-19 and the shift to distance learning. While a few respondents (24%) indicated that they had purchased a device to facilitate the child's learning, since the first lockdown, most respondents indicated that the device used for learning – either a laptop or smart phone – was shared with either a parent (55.1%), a sibling (26.9%) or another member of the household (9.0%). Another factor households had to contend with due to the shift to digital learning and working from home was the additional cost incurred as a result of higher internet/data usage. For virtual or distance learning to be successful and the pivot to occur seamlessly, and be inclusive for all students, there is an underlying assumption that teachers and students had access to equipment such as personal computers/laptops or smart devices such as phones or tablets together with reliable internet connections.

As an alternative to online lessons, during a qualitative interview one respondent indicated that his child's school had developed daily lessons and activities which were shared with the parents via a Whatsapp group chat since not all the students at the school had the facilities to participate in real-time video-based learning. Since it was not possible to do the assigned activities on the phone, the parent would print the daily activity sheets, ensure they were completed, and share an image of the completed activity with the teacher via the group chat; all of which required additional time spent on learning activities.

Another respondent whose child received activity sheets through Whatsapp stated that she experienced difficulty in overseeing the child's learning while she was working as her job role afforded limited flexibility during the day. Furthermore, as the child did not have their own smartphone, completing the daily learning activity was relegated to the evenings after work, extending her 'work-day' further. This parent also recognised that as the evenings were dedicated to learning, she now had less time to play and interact with her child in a meaningful manner.

Children require supervision and guidance to successfully engage in virtual learning. This has meant that parents are now expected to don another hat, in addition to their existing roles and responsibilities and

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gain the skills of a teacher. In households where parents are engaged in full time paid employment and there is no extended family support, or other support systems in place, parents must navigate the challenges of working, teaching and care responsibilities.

#### 4.5. The Balancing Act

Technology facilitates the ability to work from anywhere provided you have the necessary infrastructure. As such, when movement restriction measures were introduced, individuals engaged within the formal workforce were able to work from their homes and continue to do so in the present context. This meant that individuals who previously spent long hours commuting to work could direct that time towards their families or leisure activities and generally achieve better work-life balance. Existing literature also presents an argument that the shift towards remote working since COVID-19 increased the opportunities for individuals to engage in freelance work which, in turn improves their ability to balance household/personal care responsibilities and work commitments. It is believed that remote working could improve access to employment opportunities particularly for women who were traditionally excluded from the labour force on account of bearing the higher burden of care responsibilities or social norms which restricted women from engaging in work outside the home (Bandaranayake, et al. 2020).

In a global survey conducted by Slack (2020), it was identified that although remote working presented a net positive effect, it was not suitable for everyone, with factors such as job roles, gender, and seniority level influencing the employees' perception. Existing literature further indicates that although women are privy to the benefits of digital work such as flexibility, convenience and are able to increase their labour force participation, they are still rooted in their domestic responsibilities, and as such women were more likely to carry out more domestic responsibilities while working flexibly, whereas men are more likely to prioritize and expand their work spheres (Ibarra et al, 2020). This was reflected in the survey findings conducted as part of this research study, with a higher percentage of female respondents (63% to 50% of male respondents) identifying that it was more challenging for them to work from home due to household chores and care responsibilities. A point reiterated through the qualitative interviews conducted as part of the study.

Sameeha is a lecturer at a university in Batticaloa<sup>1</sup> and she is also a mother of two young children. Prior to the imposition of the travel restrictions, she used to travel an hour away to the university every day. The children – who both attended school – would be picked up after school by her husband during his lunch break and dropped off at her parent's house until they both finished work and returned home. When the curfew was imposed, Sameeha began teaching virtually and had a separate room in which to conduct her lessons. One of the challenges of working remotely however, was that the children would periodically run into the room while the classes were ongoing, looking for her to make them some snacks or to play with them. She said that there were moments when she felt bad to chastise the children when they did not quite understand the fact that she was working from home, when the home had always been a work-free zone. Although Sameeha was unable to rely on her parents for support with childcare during the curfew, she stated that her children enjoyed spending quality time with both parents, a rarity in pre-COVID-19 times.

Aruni attributed having a separate workspace and living with her extended family as a contributory factor to successfully balancing her work and care responsibilities during the lockdown period. When she realised that remote working would be a long-term feature, her family helped her repurpose a room into a home office. As the room selected was located at the far end of the house, it was possible for her retain

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<sup>1</sup> A city located within the eastern province of Sri Lanka

a semblance distance, and by extension a work environment. As her husband’s work did not allow for remote working, she did not have to factor in sharing her workspace; a luxury for most households. Since her child was still in pre-school and only had learning online once a week for an hour and a half, she was able to adjust her schedule accordingly, while her mother minded the child during the rest of the workday. The support provided by her mother who was not engaged in paid work, ensured that Aruni was able to continue to work during the lockdown.

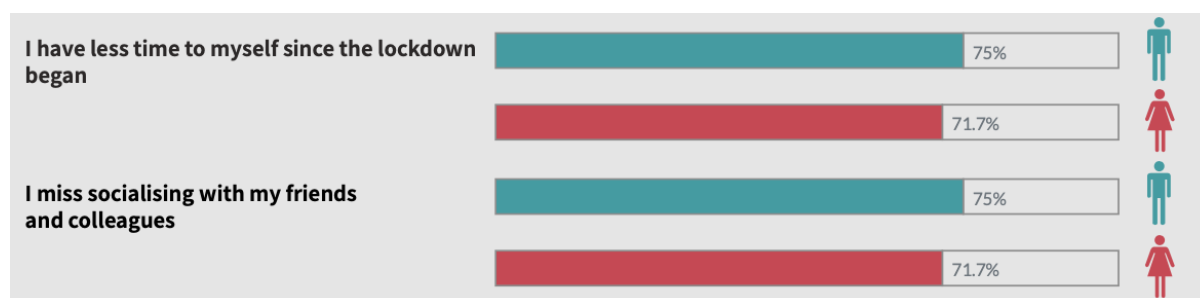
In households with more than one child engaged in distance learning, respondents stated that the childcare responsibilities multiplied. Ensuring schedules do not conflict, homework is completed, and occupying one child while the other is engaged in distance learning to ensure minimum distractions are all additional tasks to an already burgeoning list of tasks to be completed. A respondent engaged in part time employment stated that the added time dedicated to home schooling and household tasks since the lockdown were experienced more severely since their household had suspended the services of their paid helper due to concerns of the spread of COVID-19 as the helper used public transport to commute daily.

For families of working parents without a dedicated support system, responding to the increased childcare responsibilities due to distance learning while continuing to engage in full time employment has been exceptionally challenging, particularly in a trying economic climate. In addition to the challenges already identified, one of the respondents indicated that it was “difficult to keep children motivated and focused on online classes... (also) keeping them happy in the absence of peer interaction and extracurricular activities they enjoyed previously. As this takes priority, my work often gets delayed”. Another respondent stated that she found the distance learning modality “challenging since I am not a teacher and teaching requires a lot of patience”.

While some respondents indicated that they had adapted to the present conditions, the ability to sustain the physical and emotional toll of balancing multiple responsibilities is questionable. Citing statistics in the United States, Bateman and Ross (2020) state that a high number of women who have left the workforce amidst the pandemic have attributed the lack of childcare as daycare centres and schools remain shut. While it is still too early to determine if women are choosing to exit the labour force in Sri Lanka, as a pre-emptive measure, entities should take steps to facilitate flexible working arrangements to allow for sharing of household responsibilities.

As COVID-19 cases continue to be recorded, schools remain closed, and parents engaged in paid employment continue to juggle their work, household, and childcare responsibilities. While cognisant of the benefits afforded to those in a position to work from home, both male and female survey respondents shared that the increased care burden was taking a toll on their mental and emotional wellbeing due to limited opportunities for interactions and socialising with friends and colleagues (Figure 4). Interestingly, although female respondents in both surveys have shown to bear a higher burden of care responsibilities, both male and female respondents indicated similar response levels (75% male; 71.7% female) with regard to the perception that they have less time for themselves since the lockdown began.

**Figure 4: Perception related to selfcare during COVID-19**



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## 5. CONCLUSION

The sudden onset of movement restrictions and the subsequent shift to remote working has disrupted the traditional notions of the working, creating opportunities for those previously excluded to be able to balance competing responsibilities. Whether women can bridge the existing gender divide and increase their presence in the paid workforce, contributing towards a more equal post-pandemic society, however, is dependent on several factors. While each condition met can contribute to successful engagement in paid employment, the combination of the identified conditions will contribute towards the most successful achievement of a balance of responsibilities in the personal and professional sphere.

One of the conditions identified is with regard to the type of work engaged in and whether it is possible to complete/conduct the work remotely as certain job roles require physical presence and cannot be conducted remotely. Furthermore, a successful transition to remote employment would depend on an individual's digital literacy as well as access to the necessary infrastructure such as a computer, smartphone and most importantly internet connectivity.

Another contributory factor towards achieving a balance for individuals with household and childcare responsibilities is the necessity for flexible working hours. As long as the desired output is achieved within the agreed timeframe, a flexible working arrangement would allow individuals to attend to non-work-related responsibilities when necessary. In a non-COVID-19 context, this could entail picking the child up from school or taking them to a sports game. However, successful division of labour would require both parents to have similar employment characteristics in order to limit the burden of responsibility to one person. Other factors that are recognised to contribute to a successful balance of home and work responsibilities would be the existence of a support system to assist with the traditional unpaid care responsibilities encompassed within household and childcare responsibilities.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been a disruptor to our lives, it has shed light on existing practices and gender dynamics with regard to household and care responsibilities in particular, showcasing the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by women. The study has also highlighted the increased responsibilities faced by families – particularly those with young children – due to the shift to virtual learning allowing us the opportunity to reflect and to consciously bridge the existing gender gap with regard sharing responsibilities in the future.

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