

## **Work Life Balance and Remote Working during the Pandemic: Assessment of Parents' Working Conditions in Polish Reality\***

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### **Abstract**

The study analyzes the issue of reconciliation of private and professional life during the COVID-19 pandemic. For some time now, problems in reconciling work and private life have been noted. The global lockdown has forced workers and employers to change the conditions and the manner in which they work. At the same time, many parents were confronted with the need to reconcile professional work with parental responsibilities in a situation where educational institutions could not provide direct childcare. Parents had to perform their family duties during standard working hours with additional tasks resulting from home education, the required social isolation and childcare. During the pandemic, a strong blurring of boundaries between professional and private life and problems of symbiosis of professional and family duties has taken place. The aim of the study is to indicate the importance of the idea of Work Life Balance in the perspective of changes in the labor market caused by the Covid-19

**Keywords:** Work Life Balance, COVID-19 pandemic, labor market, remote working

### **Introduction**

The global problem that modern organizations face is the extension and intensification of employees' working time. The problem at hand is subject to numerous analyses, including through the development of the Work Life Balance (WLB) concept; (Directive EU2019/1158). The WLB concept refers to the management of working and leisure time in order to maintain a balance between two aspects of human life – work and personal life. The imbalance between the various aspects of employees' lives has a negative impact on work efficiency and lack of life satisfaction, which in turn may have a negative impact on both the quality of professional duties performed and the way families function, which may lead to a conflict in combining professional and family roles. The pandemic challenged the working conditions and the way work is organized in all areas of the economy. Around the world, employers and employees have been adapting to the need for social distancing measures. The word flexibility (balancing, reconciliation) between work and family life has been redefined. The introduced WLB Directive was a major step towards a healthier way of life for workers at a time when technology was increasingly bringing work into the home. However, no one thought that the proposed idea would be implemented so quickly. The arrangements concerning work during the pandemic have shown how to balance work and private life by using technology that is already at our disposal. The question is, however, whether employees who combine work and parental roles have the right conditions for combining work and private life created for them? Here, the role of the state's instruments (tools) will be important in order to protect those who are most burdened with parental duties / tasks. At present, it is no longer just a matter

of ensuring a balance between private and professional life, but also of promoting new rules for functioning of the labor market. In the literature, you can know studies on remote work (telework)(Karczewska,2019; Lescevic & Kreituze , 2018) and a description of idea of Work Life Balance (Crompton & Loynette, 2006; Dolot, 2020; Piecuch&Szczygieł, 2019). However, there are no studies linking the importance of remote work with the performance of parental responsibilities. Additionally, in the new pandemic situation, the problem requires a new analysis and description. Observing the changes in the labor market and the pandemic, a research problem was identified, the aim of which was to determine how working parents combine childcare during a pandemic.

It is important to track the changes in the labor market from the point of view of the idea of Work Life Balance in the perspective of different countries, so that different experiences, instruments / tools used in the labor market can be shared.

Various research methods were used in the study, including mainly descriptive methods, comparative methods and the CAWI (computer assisted Web interview). The results of a nationwide survey, which was piloted and conducted among parents working remotely during the pandemic, are presented in Poland.<sup>1</sup> The main aim of the study is to indicate the importance of the idea of WLB in the perspective of changes in the labor market caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The article is a contribution to the global discussion on the problem of work-life balance, especially for employees who are parents. The query of literature, legal acts, analysis of publicly available statistical data and the results of own research made it possible to achieve the aim of the article and to draw conclusions.

## **Work Life Balance and Remote Working**

The contemporary problem of various organizations and the whole economy is the extension and intensification of employees' working time. There are changes in the labor market which are blurring the boundaries between professional and private life and the lack of free time related to family life, social life and leisure. People spend more and more time working, which affects the way people function in the private sphere. (Sadowska-Snarska, 2007). Work provides a person with a certain social and economic position so that they can meet different needs and experience recognition and acceptance in society. Many key decisions in a person's life, related to the choice of education or place of residence, are centered around work. It is often thanks to work that a person has the opportunity to establish social contacts and build interpersonal relations, which often go beyond professional relationships and are formed on a private level. But work should not be the only source of meaning in human life. Work life should be reconciled with the personal sphere, including family duties, but also free time used to regain strength and improve health, and for personal development.

Active professionals face many difficulties in combining family and professional roles. Employed women are in a special situation here, as they are still burdened by the stereotypical duty of caring for children. Traditionally and culturally, there is a conviction that the professional fulfilment of women should not take place at the expense of the family. Many women consciously choose to combine work and family life. There is a structural and cultural conflict that puts women at two polar opposites – from demobilization of women on the labor market to limiting procreation decisions. The structural conflict is related to the mismatch between institutional solutions and women's professional work. In turn, the cultural conflict results from a different understanding of the social roles of women and men, including the relationship between women's professional work and the family. (Urbańska, 2015, p.88)

For several years now, discussions have been taking place on the development of policies to promote reconciliation of professional and private life. The concept of human resources management has become popular, the main aim of which is to find a balance between work and private life. The background to this reflection is ensuring equality between women and men and economic and demographic change in the labor market. (Borkowska, 2011, pp.22-23) The work-life balance is a multidimensional phenomenon. This trend emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the USA and the UK, when regulations limiting weekly working hours came into force. It was then that attention began to be paid to the role of leisure time in the development of individuals, businesses and societies as a whole. The reasons for the idea are sought in social and cultural changes related mainly to the entry of women into the labor market and the need to apply a new division of household duties. The main idea behind this concept was to support employees in combining work and private life. It has been pointed out that a harmonious coexistence of both areas of human life allows to achieve better results than limiting one of them. A satisfied employee is more effective, enjoys work and private life, is resistant to stress, is less ill, but also has convenient conditions to perform family duties and improve the quality of their life.

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<sup>1</sup> Author of the study: A. Szczudlińska-Kanoś, M. Marzec, Institute of Public Affairs, Jagiellonian University. The research was conducted on a random group of 80 people between May 15 and June 15, 2020.

In 2019, the European Union developed a directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, known as the Work Life Balance Directive. (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) The regulation introduced aims at finding solutions useful for working parents and carers so that women and men have equal opportunities in the labor market and have the possibility to reconcile work and family life. The legal act regulates the issues of employees' access to flexible working conditions, and introduces and expands the existing legal regulations on the use of parental, paternity and partner leave and leave due to force majeure in urgent family matters caused by illness or accident. (Siemienkiewicz, 2020). The introduced regulations were designed to draw attention to the role of men in participating in part of their caring duties. Measures have been taken to change the perception of the role of a woman as a carer and a parent taking on a significant part of the parental responsibilities, with shaping a new model of a woman and new rules of functioning of modern families in mind. The aim of the work was also to prevent women from withdrawing from the labor market and to counteract the professional inactivity of women, in response to the demographic changes of ageing European societies.

One of the planes that helps to maintain a balance between the private and professional lives of parents and carers is flexible organization of work. Parents of children under 8 years of age have been given the possibility to benefit from flexible working time arrangements under conditions of protection against dismissal and discrimination. (Directive 2019/1158, Article 9) Flexible working time provides opportunities for remote working, as well as the introduction of variable working time schedules or reductions in working time (Labor Code Article 3 sec. 1 item f). So far, Polish legal regulations do not provide for special rights for working parents to introduce remote working, only the regulations concerning teleworking, which are part of the idea of flexible organization of work performance, are in force (Labor Code, Article 67; Siemienkiewicz).

During the pandemic, both companies and employees quickly adapted to the new working conditions. The imposed requirements for social distance have led to the use of remote forms of communication using different tools in all possible areas of the economy and the society. In many areas, remote working on a permanent basis became necessary and required the development of new rules for fulfilling professional duties. Parents were faced with the difficult task of reconciling work in the new conditions with childcare. The idea of WLB requires a redefinition and a new look at the possibilities of reconciling professional and private life. It is interesting to point out how working in new conditions – during a pandemic, can affect the symbiosis of work and private life.

### **Working Conditions During a pandemic.**

The development of modern forms of communication has led to changes in the scope of work performance. Today's workforce, equipped with modern technologies, is ready to work anywhere. For some time now, literature has described the concept of remote working or telework. In 1997, the European Commission recognized that teleworking will become a part of professional life and initiated the European Telework Development to raise awareness of teleworking issues and support development in Europe (Nojszewski, 2004; Belzunegui-Eraso, Erro-Garces, 2020). There is a wide range of new, flexible ways of working, including the possibility of partial relocation outside the traditional office. There is no commonly accepted single definition of teleworking, it can be defined as a type of work and/or service provided remotely, at a distance and online using a computer and telematics technologies (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces & Pastor-Gosálbez, 2013). According to the International Labor Organization, teleworking is work that utilizes information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and/or desktops to perform work outside the employer's premises. (Telework in the European Union, 2010) In practice, teleworking enables employees to work from home or other premises using appropriate information technology. (Hraskova & Rolkowa, 2012, pp. 39 -42). According to the European Commission, remote work is “the form of organization and / or performance of a work, whereby an employee can carry out work that could also be carried out at the employer's premises regularly out of these premises through the use of information technology” (Lescevic & Kreituze, 2018, p. 174).

Today, many workers, but also employers, appreciate the possibility of flexible working hours and remote working, paying more and more attention to the possibility of reconciling work and family responsibilities. (Olson, 1983) In the current conditions of the pandemic, no one is able to accurately estimate the changes that will occur as a result of the popularization of work using various tools of modern communication and information transmission.

In Poland, WLB is slowly being popularized and tools for reconciling professional and private life are being introduced. Poles work a lot and feel overburdened in quantitative and qualitative terms. In addition, they often work overtime and admit having problems related to reconciliation of work and private life. (Pieluch, Szczygieł, 2019, p. 16; Bartkowiak, 2009, p. 47; GUS 2020, Liszka, Walawender, 2019). During the pandemic, Polish parents had the opportunity to use different tools applying the WLB idea.

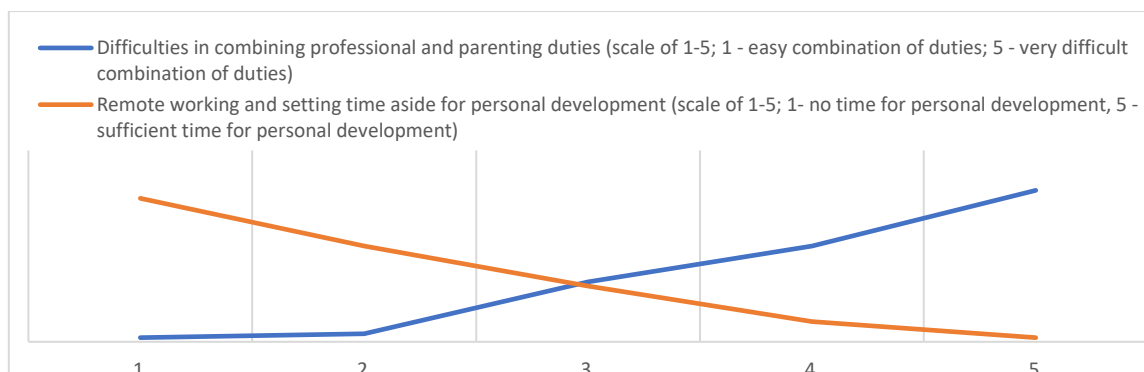
The COVID-19 epidemic began in November 2019 in China. Initially, it seemed that the problem only affected one part of China. However, in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a state of pandemic, seeing that the virus was spreading worldwide and the number of people affected was increasing. In Poland, in mid-March, all educational institutions were closed down and restrictions on the functioning of many areas of the economy were introduced (shops, cultural institutions, state and local government offices, etc.), and regulations on maintaining social distance were introduced. An attempt has been made to adapt working conditions to the new conditions. According to Polish analyses from June 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic brought negative effects in the sphere of employment. One fifth (20%) of those employed are working reduced hours and three in a hundred (3%) have lost their jobs during the pandemic. Moreover, one fifth of Poles (21%) worked remotely (from home) (CSO Report from June 10, 2020). Only one twentieth (5%) of the employees used the care allowance to take care of children. Due to the epidemic, 7% of people lost or closed their own businesses and a quarter (25%) experienced unfavorable changes in their earning opportunities due to reduced working hours or reduced activity of their company. (CBOS NEWS Newsletter 19/2020)

Remote working during the pandemic made it possible to reconcile work and family responsibilities, but at the same time the boundaries between private and professional life were blurred. It is important to follow developments in the labor market and to continuously monitor the tools for reconciliation of work and private life in line with the WLB concept.

### **Evaluation of working conditions during the pandemic. Analysis of own research.**

On the basis of the literature query and in the new situation of the labor market during the pandemic, it was decided to conduct pilot research. The main aim of the research was to assess and analyze selected aspects of the WLB concept in families with children during a pandemic. The research conducted was of quantitative nature. The selection of the test sample was deliberate. The research was addressed to people working remotely, who looked after children and performed their professional work during the pandemic. The research was anonymous and participation was voluntary. It should be noted that the research was carried out in the form of an internet survey (CAWI) between May 15 and June 15. In total, 80 people participated in the study, including mainly women (92%), people between 31 and 50 years of age (31-40 years of age – 34% and 41-50 years of age – 58%), residents of large cities (100,000 and more – 70%), taking care mainly of two children between 2 and 15 years of age and working professionally for 10 to 20 years (work experience from 11 to 20 years – 69%, work experience from 21 to 30 years – 22%). The characteristics of the research sample do not give grounds for conclusions for the whole population of Poland, as it is not representative. However, the selection of the pilot sample provides the basis for demonstrating general trends and describing the problems of combining remote working and family life in the WLB perspective during the pandemic. In recent years, remote working has been gaining in popularity and has been a privilege for many employees, but it turns out that for most of the respondents such a system of work was a new experience. Only 10% of the respondents were working in a remote system, while 56% of them had no experience with working at a distance using various forms of communication. Such an arrangement of answers characterizes the Polish conditions of remote working well.

WLB promotes work in such conditions that employees can freely reconcile work and private life. The survey asked the respondents to assess the difficulties in combining work with parental duties during the pandemic. A scale from 1 to 5 was used to allow working parents to freely assess the situation. The majority of the respondents assessed reconciliation of professional work and childcare as difficult, with 48% indicating it as very difficult and 24% as difficult. A negligible part of the respondents, because only about 4% of them, assessed the combined professional and private life as easy and very easy. In order to check the symbiosis of work and private life, a question was prepared concerning the possibility of separating working time from private time. The majority of respondents assess the possibility of separating work from private life during the pandemic as definitely impossible (39%) and as rather impossible (36%). Only every 5th employee is able to clearly draw a line between time spent at work and private life. Professional work requires continuous improvement, training and adaptation to the environment. Employees in a highly competitive market and in fast-changing conditions have to take constant care of their professional development. Therefore, the study asked whether the current situation creates opportunities for professional development. A scale was used to determine the issue, so that the respondents could freely assess the situation. A significant proportion of working parents assessed the conditions for professional development during the pandemic as very unfavorable. Three quarters (75%) of the respondents do not have time for professional development, only 7% have enough time to improve their qualifications.

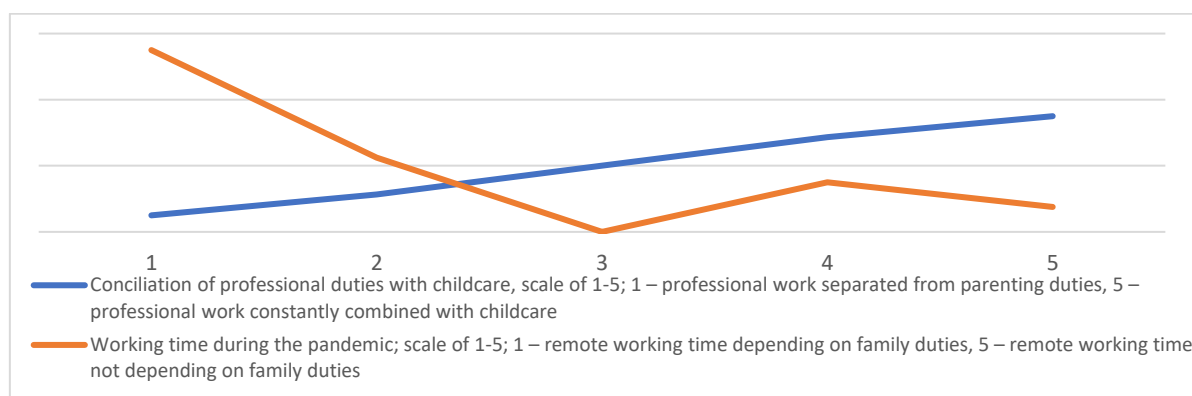


**Fig. 1. Combining remote work and parental duties vs. possibility of professional development during a pandemic (data in % at different scale levels)**

Source: own study based on research results.

The EU Directive aimed to change the roles played by women and men in modern Europe. In the study, an attempt was made to determine whether there was a change in the performance of family members' duties during the pandemic and the remote work. The pandemic triggered minor changes in the distribution of responsibilities within families. Almost half of the respondents (48%) indicated that there was no change in the division of roles and tasks in the family. Every third working parent (31%) reported that part of the duties were taken over by their spouse or partner. An interesting observation is also the fact that about 8% of the respondents each indicated that children or other people, e.g. grandparents, took over some duties or tasks at home.

The flexible working methods introduced during the pandemic were to ensure, on the one hand, that work would be carried out in new circumstances and, on the other hand, to create conditions for childcare in situations of closure of educational institutions and forced social isolation. The research was summarized by asking a question, the aim of which was to determine the relationship between the reconciliation of work and the performance of parental duties. Respondents had the opportunity to assess their situation through the prism of indicating how their professional and parental responsibilities are adapted to each other. Half of the respondents indicated that “remote work is adapted to childcare”. One fourth (24%) of the respondents indicated that “childcare is adapted to the conditions of professional work”. 18% of the respondents each indicated that the working time is adjusted to the conditions of functioning of schools and other educational institutions and to the working time of other people who take care of the children. Here we can see that the pandemic work system has made it possible to reconcile private life with professional duties. The manner of working was mainly adapted to childcare, not the other way around.



**Fig. 2: Reconciliation of professional and family duties vs. remote working hours (data in % at different scale levels)**

Source: own study based on research results.

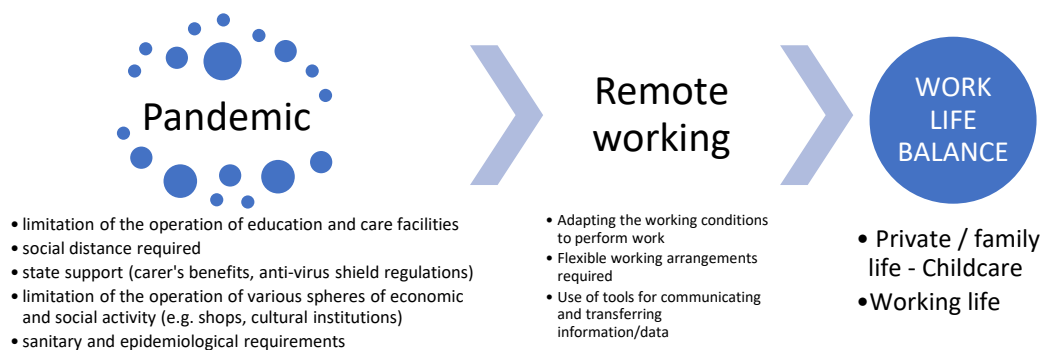
The study also asked to identify improvements / facilitations that could help in the performance of work and parental duties. On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1- indicated low importance, 5 meant help to a significant extent), the highest grades were given to such determinants as: working time, use of various IT tools, working methods and scope of professional duties. Working parents also pointed to other important elements related to WLB, such as: openness of supervisors to taking days off and holidays, flexible work schedules, support in taking advantage of government benefits, as well as psychological support for those who have difficulties in combining professional and private roles,

and the employer's organization of additional online activities for employees' children. Legal regulations were also indicated, which may enable greater flexibility of working time for persons performing parental and caring duties, without the need to take into account the current system of work in individual workplaces, i.e. changes in the Labor Code. Working parents also described social policy instruments such as care allowances, which can supplement family budgets in the absence of a permanent work benefit for the care of family members.

The proposed tools for assessing the use of Work Life Balance showed how difficult it is to reconcile working time and professional development with parental duties. Moreover, the adaptation of the professional duties of remote-working parents to childcare shows what is really a priority in the lives of parents, mainly women. The modern labor market should adapt to the prevailing conditions and not oppose it. The conducted research identified the problems of combining professional and private life during the pandemic and showed the conditions for the dissemination of the Work Life Balance idea in Poland. The conclusions of the research should be used for further analysis, especially for international comparisons and to further develop tools to facilitate symbiosis between professional and private life. Studies show that the pandemic has only made the implementation of WLB more difficult.

## Conclusions

Reconciling work and private life requires a comprehensive approach. The pandemic has triggered a process of changes in the functioning of the labor markets, which creates new conditions both for the employees, the employers and the institutions regulating the labor market. It seems extremely important to study and analyze the changes occurring on the labor market, to harmonize different spheres of human life and to set standards of implementable tools facilitating reconciliation of work and private life on different levels. Despite the many solutions available to the employees and the employers, it turns out that most working parents still encounter problems in maintaining their work-life balance. It should be pointed out that employees who enjoy a balanced professional and private life will be more satisfied with their work, will be productive, but also satisfied with their private life.



**Fig. 1: WORK LIFE BALANCE and remote working during the pandemic.**

*Source: own study based on research results.*

The WLB Directive gives Member States freedom to choose the tools and forms of implementation of ideas. European Union regulations have initiated deeper changes in the labor market and indicated possible trends. However, the Directive itself will not create favorable conditions for promoting WLB. The symbiosis between private and professional life can be reinforced by the actions of various institutions, which include the state, local authorities and individual entities (Borkowska, 2011, pp.22-23).

The global Covid-19 pandemic enabled remote work on a massive scale. Both employees and employers have been forced to adapt to the new conditions of the labor market and different areas of life. At the same time, the pandemic caused factors that hindered the daily performance of professional tasks performed before the pandemic. Working parents were confronted with the fact of reconciling professional work with parental duties under completely new conditions, restrictions of the operation of educational institutions, closing shops and the required social distance. Many parents declare difficulties in combining childcare and work duties. The improvements introduced, for example in relation to childcare benefit, have been used to a small extent by employees, mainly because of fears about the future of employment and the fall in wages. Only the flexible working model, implemented in the remote working system, has been successfully introduced on a mass scale. There is a lack of specific regulations for remote working, especially in the new conditions, but this system of work can reduce the feeling of variability, uncertainty, complexity

and ambiguity of the environment in which working parents will have to live after the pandemic. One might ask another question — how long will this be possible? Will employers not want to terminate employment in relation to employees – parents who put childcare before work during the crisis caused by the pandemic. Further research will be needed to find answers to these questions. On the basis of the literature review and the research, it can be concluded that it is extremely important to follow the trends (models) of work performance especially in view of the WLB idea. The presented research results are a contribution to the analysis of changes taking place on the contemporary labor market.

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