



## **‘Working from Home’ during COVID-19 Pandemic: Life of Employed Women in Colombo District, Sri Lanka**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study is conducted to explore, ‘how employed women have encountered work-life balance during the pandemic in Colombo District, Sri Lanka’ by taking married and unmarried employed women as the sample. Qualitative approach has been used with judgemental sampling to conduct the study. Three married, employed women and three unmarried, employed women have been interviewed and analysed data thematically to present findings. The researchers has extracted four major themes; ‘Challenges faced by employed women during COVID-19 pandemic’, ‘Distractions encountered by employed women’, ‘Benefits of WFH’, ‘Support of family members and company to the concept of working from home’. The findings have been presented by contrasting on two groups of married and unmarried employed women. The concept ‘Working from home’ has differently influenced married and unmarried women during COVID-19 pandemic. The efforts of the study is to understand the differences. The modern workplace should cater the changing needs of the environment. COVID-19 has created new realities which has become a root cause to new threats and opportunities. In this context, businesses should focus on catering the changing environment. This study supports the modern workplace by analysing COVID-19 influence on married and unmarried working women in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** *Working from Home, Employed Women, COVID-19 Pandemic, Sri Lanka.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has numerously affected people's lives around the world[1]. In this era, women and men have been differently affected by COVID-19 restricted movements. Working from Home (WFH) approach has been practised by many companies differently in various industries; however, it has gained popularity in the recent outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019[2]. Employed women have been encountering major changes and disturbances due to the global pandemic [3]. The choice of terms ‘employed women’ is wilfully used in this article instead of ‘working women’ to refer to productive labour [4]. It can be observed that the modern employed women want to achieve a blissful family, a satisfying career and personal space for themselves [5]. Studies based in China, where COVID-19 first started, have found that the female gender is significantly associated with higher self-reported levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress symptoms and more severe overall psychological impact [6].

An occurrence of pneumonia of unfamiliar reason was first reported on December 31, 2019 from Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. WHO (World Health Organisation) has named it as 'Novel Corona Virus' On January 7 2020. On January 30, they declared it as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). On February 11 the WHO renamed the disease as COVID-19. Eventually, it spread across the world and WHO named it a "pandemic" afterwards. When contrasting on Sri Lanka, as of current statistics (March 21, 2022) there are 658,197 total confirmed COVID-19 cases, 624,676 Recovered and discharged from hospitals and 16,431 deaths. Currently, Covishield vaccine, Moderna, Pfizer, Sinopharm vaccine and Sputnik V vaccinations are being practised at a national level in Sri Lanka. Further, 32 hospitals are treating patients all over the country. Consequently, the country is passing a critical time period when considering the statistical background. Unlike lockdowns in most other countries where citizens have the luxury to enjoy the limited movement, Sri Lanka's curfew, which is managed by the police with a zero-tolerance policy, helps to keep people inside their houses. The country has undergone many phases starting from March 20, 2020 in order to fight with the spread of Corona virus [7].

The labour force survey of Sri Lanka for the first quarter of 2020 put the number of employed women at 2,639,227, which amounted to 32.9% of the total employed population [7]. The current setting provides that women are working from home; it is important to explore whether their marital status is playing a role or not during the prevailing situation. Studies in the past have shown that employed women who are married are likely to have more stress compared to

unmarried women, and that could be because married women have more responsibilities over them [8]. Therefore, it is essential to look at the Sri Lankan context regarding the WFH practice of employed married and unmarried women. The study sheds light on 'how employed women have encountered work-life balance during the pandemic by comparing lives of married and unmarried employed women in Colombo District'.

### **Literature review**

In ancient times, women had the sole responsibility of taking care of children and providing domestic support for their partners, and they had a narrow interest in paid employment. Literature divulges that there are continued gender gaps in the workplace and at home. At work, women get paid less and receive a smaller number of promotions than men; there is also a lack of women in corporate leadership positions. At home, women spend more time on domestic work such as housework and childcare [9]. A report of the International Labor Organization presents that a woman spends four hours and 25 minutes per day performing domestic and care work compared to one hour and 23 minutes by their partner[3]. When considering this phenomenon, there is always an imbalance of work and family balance of women compared to men, which stems from uneven role distribution[3]. This unveils; women perform extra duties exceeding their work roles. Due to this unequal distribution of household work, women cannot equally contribute to their paid work, where socio-cultural norms consider women's professional duties to be secondary to their spouse's family and work[3]. It is debatable how "the pandemic and shift of office work to home" has influenced the above-mentioned facts.

Further, literature shows women's employment changes less over the cycle while men's employment is on average more focused on sectors with a high cyclical exposure like manufacturing and construction (highly affected by the pandemic), while women are occupied in sectors that have stable employment over the cycle such as education and healthcare (not highly affected by the pandemic)[10]. This depicts women can enjoy the luxury of stability of the occupation while dealing with increased household work. However, studies conducted in Spain [11] and in the UK [11] show that there has been a shift towards an equal distribution of care-work between men and women, but most of the extra work caused by the pandemic has fallen on women.

International Labour Department defines WFH can be based at home or just occasionally working outside the office [2]. During COVID-19, many countries have imposed various degrees of WFH policies to minimise virus contraction amongst colleagues. Researchers pointed out that jobs like agriculture, hospitality and retail are unlikely to be completed at home. However, Baker [12]found that 75% of American workers ( in healthcare, manufacturing, retail and food catering) cannot work at home, while only 25% (usually in technology, computer, management, administration, finance and engineering) can do so. Employees may experience 'telework exhaustion' related to information, autonomy and isolation. Employees need to handle ad-hoc tasks; in the meantime, they may lack sufficient support such as instruction, feedback and social interaction [2]. However, there are associated advantages as well Martin and MacDonnell [13]claims that WFH helps boost productivity, retain employees and enhance their commitment and performance. Other benefits include emission reduction due to reduction in commuting, office cost reduction and work-family balance. A study based in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic claims that most workingmen encounter stress and anxiety due to not having access to food and essential services while women encounter stress due to the spread of the pandemic. Women spent more time on conducting housework and childcare when compared with male counterparts. The only areas where men have started spending more time can be considered as childcare and homeschooling; they have not contributed more time to doing the housework as women did [11].

When considering the distractions while WFH, married employed women claimed increased daily chores of the house and other family commitments act as a notable source of distraction while unmarried women distracted by sleep/relaxation[7].Even though there are many studies that discuss the work-life balance of employed women, the current setting of COVID-19 provides that there are particulars to uncover about the work-life balance of employed women in Colombo District, Sri Lanka, during COVID-19. The study is conducted with the motive of unveiling how employed women have encountered work-life balance during the pandemic by contrasting on lives of married and unmarried women.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study is conducted using a qualitative approach, and it has provided an appropriate background to get an in-depth understanding of the subject. Judgemental sampling has been used to find participants (working, married and working, unmarried women). When selecting employed married women, researchers have chosen 'employed married women who have one or more than one child'. When selecting unmarried employed women, researchers have focused on women who are currently staying with their [participants] parents. Gaining access to the sample was difficult due to the current situation in the country. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone in order to gather data.

The interview structure is prepared by going through empirical findings of other countries and Sri Lanka. The attempt of this study is to contextualise the findings. The study has carried out by interviewing three married, employed women who have children and three unmarried, employed women in Colombo District. Sample size is not an issue when using a qualitative research approach. What is important is data saturation which informs us that the study has reached a stage at which further interviews are not generating new themes [14]. The interviews were conducted in English. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was recorded under the permission of the participants. All women are within the age of 25 to 35, and all are serving the private sector of Sri Lanka. Thematic analysis is used in order to analyse gathered data. Recorded interviews were transcribed in order to analyse and identify codes. Developed themes and acquired expertise comments to increase the reliability of the study. The researchers have followed strict ethical practices in order to accomplish the objective.

## **ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study is conducted with the motive of evaluating the 'working from home' method comparing married employed women and unmarried employed women during the COVID-19 pandemic. After conducting the interviews, the researchers have built four major themes in order to carry out the analysis. 'Challenges faced by employed women during COVID-19 pandemic', 'Distractions encountered by employed women', 'Benefits of WFH', 'Support of family members and company to the concept of "WFH"' are the main themes of the study.

### ***Challenges faced by employed women during the COVID-19 pandemic***

Helping workers to improve their work-life balance is increasingly viewed as a centric benefit from the successful implementation of WFH practice [2]. However, employed women in Colombo District has undergone many difficulties during COVID-19 while working from home. Difficulties in decision making and problem-solving, increased time to make decisions, working during weekends, increased time to complete work, lack of social relationships, waking up early in the morning to work, lack of mental freedom at home, lack of separation between work and personal life and disturbing the lives of family members can be taken as challenges faced by the participants.

When analysing the interviews, 'decision making and problem-solving have become the main difficulty for all the participants, married and unmarried during WFH. Scholars have shown that limited access to internal resources is a challenge that arises due to WFH [15]. The time taken to make a decision is long during WFH because the related parties need to contact the particular person online. However, when they were working at the office, the parties related to decision making were available when needed within the office premises. *'When I have a question, I call my supervisor through 'Teams' if he does not contact me I'm struggling to continue that task'*; participant shared her views regarding the issue. While working, it is mandatory to contact other people such as managers and co-workers. During virtual working, when the participants need the assistance of these parties, they have faced difficulties. This has become a problem for all participants, irrespective of their marital status.

It is assumable that office work is all about solving problems. Due to the above mentioned time consuming contacting methods, the time taken to make decisions and solve problems has been increased. The additional time taken to make decisions adds up to the working hours of workers. This has led to an increase in the overall working hours per day of both married and unmarried participants. Another challenge faced by participants is they have to work extra during the weekends in order to catch up with the work they missed during weekdays. Participants have faced difficulties due to distractions, technical failures, and household work, and these things have made the participants sacrifice their weekends to cover up the backlog. A study based on Germany reveals that compared to their partners, employed women bear the brunt of the increased time needed for household responsibilities and childcare [11].

Married women claim that they have to look after the family and to do the work at the same time. This has led to the consumption of office working hours to conduct personal care work. Then, they have to work more than usual. This proves that there is a dilution of work and home boundaries. Some participants elaborated that there is no increase in the workload they are handling, but the remaining participants claimed 'managers are allocating more work because they know that the commuting time has been decreased and the participants are readily available always'. This can be considered a challenge for both married and unmarried women. However, Meegaswatta [7] claims that women, in general, seem to have met the challenges of WFH quite successfully, allocating enough time to professional work in spite of the burdens of domestic labour.

When directing questions regarding connectivity, two participant groups brought up that they do not have mandatory issues regarding Wi-Fi and electricity. One shared; *'we are sacrificing our weekends now, those days [before COVID-19] we were free during weekends'*. If there are power cuts or Wi-Fi failures, participants have managed to work during weekends and extra hours on weekdays to catch up the remaining work. However, for a few participants, this has acted as a stressor because the workload they have to finish is getting increased due to this condition. Unmarried employed

women are concerned that they couldn't attend office celebrations and office gatherings because of the prevailing COVID-19 situation, while married, employed women gave no comment regarding this.

When the participants were working at the office, they had separate time to work and to conduct other activities, which depicts there is a clear division between work and personal life, at the same time, there was a fixed time to work (usually between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.). *'Earlier, we stopped working at 5 p.m., and we enjoyed our personal life, but now we always work, there is nothing new and different in my life'*, an unmarried participant shared. Both married and unmarried employed women claimed that they did not have a fixed time to work during the prevailing situation. National statistics in the UK, have shown that women spend a tremendous amount of time on dressing, feeding, washing, supervising, and educating children [3]. This provides that employed women had to engage in productive labour while balancing increased reproductive labour during the lockdown [7]. Married women usually have waked-up before 4 a.m. in order to start work while their children are sleeping because when the children are awake, it is hard for them to conduct office work. Married participants who handled paperwork within the house wake up early, in order to protect the documents from their children. Further, married women have managed to wake up early in order to cook breakfast and to do other household work.

Both married and unmarried employed women have prepared a separate place to work within their bedrooms. During meetings and other critical activities off work, married women have managed to close the door of the working room and to play cartoons by turning on the television in the living room to distract their children. According to the findings of the study, married women have encountered more problems than unmarried women while WFH. Married women always appreciate freedom at the workplace because they can concentrate on work to a great extent. Simultaneously, participants mentioned that they had mental freedom at the office because they were working with colleagues. They shared, *'We [married employed women] get time to chat with colleagues to enjoy the tea time'*. However, the WFH situation has taken away the time participants used to get social. Accordingly, Meegaswatta [7] shows negative aspects recorded by female respondents of her study on employed women in Sri Lanka, including stress and anxiety and restrictions on travelling and socialising.

All the participants were worried that the freedom of their family members would be affected by bringing office work home. Participants have always asked their parents and other family members to not to make any noise while they are working. As they claimed, they had evaded the freedom the other family members had, before bringing the office work to home.

#### ***Distractions encountered by employed women.***

When going through the interviews, distractions have acted as a major challenge for the participants. Some of the participants have managed to work by not distracting themselves from office work, while the majority has failed. The difficulty of focusing, siblings, relatives, social media, household work, children has acted as significant distractions for the participants.

The majority of the participants brought up that it is hard to focus only on office work while WFH. They are involved in many different kinds of activities during working time. Unmarried employed women mentioned that they have 'their siblings' at home and they are participating in online classes. Furthermore, they mentioned it is hard to maintain focus because they can hear the sounds of these online classes. Conversely, married employed women have not encountered this distraction.

Another distraction can be considered as the 'arrival of relatives' to the houses of participants. Participants claim that they cannot stay inside a room when there are guests at home. At the same time, when there are relatives at home, the noise has acted as a distraction for the participants. When the participant is married and staying with the mother-in-law, one participant shared that *'they give looks [looking in a judgemental way] when I'm locking my door'*. They claim that the relatives and the family members who live in that [husband's] house question them when they lock their room for work. Further, they claimed that they missed the support they had from their mother when they were unmarried. Socio-cultural gendered expectations often assume that women will be responsible for household work, and hence, they perform extra duties exceeding their work roles[16].

Another major finding of this study is the distraction occurred due to 'social media. Social media has become a barrier only to unmarried employed women. The sample of unmarried employed women is composed of women between the age of 25 and 30. Lack of social relationships with friends during this season has led them to use social media vitally. An unmarried participant shared, *'If I took my phone while working, I do not feel like keeping it aside and work, I use Facebook, Instagram and Youtube a lot'*. Participants mentioned that they use social media during working time as there is no one to supervise them. Moreover, the time is taken to finish the office work has increased due to this. In Contrast, some participants were there, the issue of social media has not influenced them to a great extent. Complying with this,

Meegaswatta [7] elaborates single women's reasons for distraction were markedly different from that of their married counterparts; they were primarily distracted by 'relaxation' (ex. sleep) and entertainment and found daily chores to be the second least distracting element.

Another finding was regarding the household work, and this finding is only associated with married, employed women. They claim that when they are at home, they do household work such as cooking, washing clothes and cleaning the home during their office hours. Scholars have found out that the prevailing WFH practice has caused issues in home management due to role conflicts [16]. Therefore, it has been acting as a major distraction for married women as they are responsible for all the household work. For unmarried employed women, household work has not been acted as a major responsibility.

Another considerable distraction for married women was 'kids seeking attention' while they [women] were working. Seeking attention from parents can be a characteristic of children when their parents are working. The feeling of neglect has made the children seek attention from their parents. Then the women have managed to stop their office work for a while and to spend a little time with their children. During interviews, the researchers heard the voices of children. One married participant locked herself in a room to avoid the disturbance of her child. Adisa et al., [17] have found out that the WFH practice has led to increased childcare duties as the children try to depend on their parents all the time. Further, when making appointments with married women, they tried to postpone the interview, even if the researchers started the interview, two married participants stopped the interview in the middle asking to resume the interview later saying '*the child is asking for food*', '*a relative of mine came to the house*', '*It is raining, I have to take clothes inside*' [she had put washed clothes outside to dry them]. Moreover, there was a rush when they were talking, and because of that, all the interviews of married, employed women were shorter than unmarried employed women. This provides that married women have more tasks (household and office work) than unmarried women.

Additionally, 'food delivery' has become a distraction for unmarried employed women. '*I order food through Pick me [a fast food delivery service in Sri Lanka] at least twice a week*' one unmarried participant shared. They mentioned that they spent time on food delivery apps to find food and to order them, as they see this as a method to release their stress, and this has eventually represented a major part of the expenses of unmarried employed women. However, participants have managed to do their office work with all the above-mentioned distractions. The focus for the office work is mainly tied with the personality of the participant. Another unmarried participant shared, '*I do not usually get distracted by anything; if I have work on my list, I can only entertain myself after completing them*'. Some participants are self-motivated to finish their office work without distracting themselves, while some have failed to maintain focus for an extended period of time.

### ***Benefits of WFH***

There were some positive aspects of WFH practice when going through the interview of the participants, which depicts the current situation has acted positively for the life of the participants.

When considering the positives of WFH, every participant mentioned that there is a significant reduction in the cost of transportation, expenses they make in order to buy dresses and expenses they make while going out with friends. '*We spent a lot n unnecessary things during that[before COVID-19] time*'; they shared. Contrastingly, now, they are spending money only on essential items such as food and bills. As well as, organisations are giving allowances for employees because they are working from home. But, some participants mentioned that their salary has been decreased because the company is not paying for the transportation allowance anymore.

Participants shared that they enjoyed the freedom at home because they get time to spend with their family as all the family members are at home. Studies have unveiled that employed women gained family togetherness while WFH [17]. Some participants preferred home over office because of the freedom they have within their homes. Participants claim that it is better to work from home because when they are at the office, idle time is spent without doing any work but now they can conduct personal activities during that idle time. Another plus point in WFH can be considered as; people do not need to commute daily in order to go to the workplace. Guyot and Sawhill [18] mentioned emission reduction (due to reduction in commute), office cost reduction and work-family balance are benefits of WFH practice. This has saved time for the participants, and Married women mentioned that they could spend the time with their children by taking care of their studies during this time.

### ***Support of the workplace***

When conducting the interview, participants shared that the organisation they work for has helped them a lot to reduce stressors arising from WFH. Two participants shared that their company has offered financial aid to prepare the workplace within their homes. Another participant shared that colleagues support a lot when they come up with a question regarding the work system. Furthermore, in order to minimise the knowledge gap which may arise due to

distance working, companies have established knowledge sharing systems to support people who lack knowledge regarding different subjects.

### ***Support of the family members***

It can be assumed that women tend to experience more stress and distortion of work-family interfaces. This may be due to increased time pressure for multitasking requirements, including gendered roles [3]. It was observable that unmarried employed women have the support of their parents at home when they are working. When the employed women are at work, family members have managed not to make any noise. One of the biggest strengths of unmarried employed women was the support of their parents to do their personal activities such as washing clothes and cooking. This has supported them to keep focus only on office work. Utility bills of the house have been paid by the parents of working unmarried women. But, they [unmarried women] have somehow managed to contribute to pay utility bills of the house to reduce the burden on their parents. But for the married, employed women, the situation was completely different as they have conducted the household work. Married employed women claimed that their husbands are supporting the household work, and that is the reason for them [women] to continue working for a company.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study is conducted with the motive of identifying how WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic has differently influenced married and unmarried employed women in Colombo District, Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach has been used to conduct the study while gathering samples using the 'judgemental sampling' method. Gathered data is analysed using 'thematic analysis'. The study has been built with the help of four major topics.

It can be concluded that as 'challenges faced by employed women during COVID-19 pandemic', Difficulties in decision making and problem-solving, increased time to make decisions, working during weekends, increased time to complete work, disturbing the lives of family members, lack of social relationships have influenced all the participants irrespective of their marital status. Waking up early in the morning to work, lack of mental freedom at home, lack of separation between work and personal life have mostly influenced married women. Under 'Distractions encountered by employed women'; Difficulty of focusing and relatives' arrival have become distractions for all the participants irrespective of their marital status while social media and siblings have distracted unmarried women, children have become the major distraction of married women. As 'Benefits of WFH' researchers have identified as a reduction in the cost of transportation, reduction in expenses they make to buy dresses and expenses and the possibility of staying together with family. These benefits have occurred irrespective of marital status. Further, findings prove that 'family members and workplace have supported variously for the concept of WFH'. The study is conducted while the country is adhering to strict movement restrictions. Due to that, the researchers were unable to conduct interviews by meeting participants, and most of the interviews were conducted through phone calls. This act as a limitation for this study because of the influence it has on the observations of the study.

Even though there are many studies focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a lack of research done related to 'employed women', particularly in Sri Lanka. This study is contributing to literature by unveiling how these concepts [COVID-19 and Working from home] affect married and unmarried employed women differently in Colombo District, Sri Lanka. Moreover, for modern workplaces, this study provides new insights by providing 'what makes the employees dissatisfied' and 'what makes the employees satisfy'. This will eventually help organisations to identify 'how to retain and motivate employees who are struggling with the prevailing pandemic. The challenges identified through the study can be addressed by organisations to keep working women productive.

Future researchers relating to this area can explore 'how the WFH is practised by taking different industries during pandemic'. At the same time, this study is comparing married and unmarried women. Future researchers can conduct comparisons between men and women or take different age groups. Further, future researchers can extend the research using quantitative approach to check the impact of different variables on 'working from home'.

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