

# Post-pandemic remote work and the Italian care model: constraint or opportunity?

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19

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Building on Mary Daly’s typology of care policies, this article explores whether and to what extent remote work in post-pandemic times is still considered a tool to cope with the limits of care measures, despite the exit from the emergency phase. We argue that in countries characterised by a familialistic care regime, such as Italy, there is a risk that the adoption of remote work may be distorted by limited conciliation tools and care provisions and fosters gender inequalities.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article is based on a case study on Milan, which is an interesting context for multiple reasons. Italy is characterised by limited conciliation tools, weak childcare provisions and significant gender inequalities in the labour market, but in Milan female employment is well above the national average and remote work is more widespread. The research is qualitatively driven, as it is built upon interviews with remote workers, HR managers and union officials. These data are completed with a survey that involved 285 remote workers.

**Findings** – Remote work continues to be used by parents as a substitute tool to compensate for underdeveloped public care services and employment-related provisions. Moreover, this practice affects gender inequalities, as women are more inclined to perform their tasks remotely overtime and in spaces not dedicated to work.

**Originality/value** – While several studies have stressed the impact of remote work on work-life balance and the unequal gender distribution of care work during the pandemic, there is little knowledge about what is happening in the post-pandemic period.

**Keywords** Remote work, Work-life balance, Care policies, Gender inequalities, Welfare State

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, a growing body of literature has examined the changes in work brought about by advances in technology, including how digitalisation is transforming job organisation, working conditions, and employment opportunities (Degryse, 2016), but also how it is reconfiguring social risks and needs (Busemeyer *et al.*, 2022). A crucial aspect of this transformation is the rise of remote work (Bick *et al.*, 2023), which have several implications on work arrangements, household organisation and work-life balance (Mazmanian *et al.*,

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2013), as many recent studies on to the pandemic have emphasised (Chung *et al.*, 2021; Hipp and Bünnig, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote work worldwide, even in firms and households where it had never been practiced before (ESPN, 2021).

This was largely the case in Italy, where the pandemic has represented a turning point, as the country transitioned from having one of the lowest percentages of remote workers in the EU (Milasi *et al.*, 2021) to over 7 million remote workers in 2021 (INAPP, 2022). Although the number of remote workers has since declined, in 2023, more than 2.8 million individuals were still working remotely (ISTAT, 2024). Additionally, the demographic composition of remote workers has changed; it has shifted from being predominantly male to including a higher proportion of women (OECD, 2021a).

Studies on the pandemic have stressed that remote work in the emergency phase was considered a substitute to care policy tools, to the extent that in Italy remote workers were excluded from accessing the extraordinary parental leave available for school closure and quarantine (Scalise, 2022). The assumption was that having the option to work remotely would enable parents to continue working while caring for their children. However, the literature has documented the challenges arising from the overlap between remote work and caregiving responsibilities, underlining workers' hardship and the reinforcement of the traditional divisions of labour, with caregiving roles disproportionately falling on women, thereby exacerbating gender inequalities (Chung *et al.*, 2021; Romens *et al.*, 2024).

The traditionally weak and fragmented social policy tools of the Italian welfare regime (Ferrera, 2005) exacerbate the asymmetries between genders in the division of care work and work models (Naldini and Saraceno, 2022) and make Italy a relevant case for testing the nexus between the use of remote work and care regimes. Building on this background, we inquire what is happening in the transition to the post-pandemic period, and whether the features of the Italian care provision model affect the use of remote work also in non-emergency times. Although a hybrid form of remote work is likely to be one of the lasting legacies of the pandemic (OECD, 2021b; Eurofound, 2023), we still have little empirical research on the relationship between remote working and care regimes, and how they influence each other in the post-pandemic period.

Using Daly's (2002) typology of care provision as our analytical framework, we investigate the interplay between remote work and Italian care policies. Italy represents a context where gender inequalities are deeply embedded in the labour market and closely tied to welfare and care arrangements (Naldini and Saraceno, 2022). To enhance our understanding, we conducted a case study on Milan, a city that serves as a valuable observatory for examining the intersection of remote work and the Italian care regime. This allows us to expand our analytical framework by incorporating the local context and assessing how national policies interact with urban care infrastructures. Milan differs from the national average due to its higher female employment rates and a more dynamic labour market. However, the fact that women participate in the labour market at higher rates does not make the care regime less relevant, rather, it intensifies work-care tensions, making challenges and adaptation strategies more visible. With a high concentration of workers in digitalised and quaternary sectors, Milan is one of the Italian cities where remote work is most prevalent. Even though the city's resources exceed the national average, local public childcare services remain insufficient to meet the demand. National policies, such as parental leave and cash transfers, still shape work-care arrangements, and the city remains embedded in the Italian care regime.

Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, our analysis sheds light on the multifaceted relationship between remote work and care provision, exploring mothers' and fathers' approaches towards it, and the advantages and pitfalls that it poses to the sustainability and equity of care policies. We demonstrate that remote work continues to raise complex questions intersecting and reshaping the contours of work-life balance and the complex web of care provisions. We argue that, within a familialistic welfare regime, remote work not only remains a mechanism to compensate for inadequate formal care provisions but also risks

becoming an informal and unregulated care arrangement that reinforces traditional gender roles in the division of care responsibilities. Due to the structural weaknesses of the Italian care provision model, remote work is at risk of being instrumentalised as a substitute for formal care solutions, leading to a distorted form of adoption that exacerbates gender inequalities rather than fostering work-life balance.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section draws on the debate on care provision and gender inequalities in Italy. Section three discusses the nexus between remote work and care policies before and during the pandemic. Section four explains our methodological approach and section five reports our findings. Section six concludes and reflects on possible ways out of the Italian stalemate.

## 2. The nexus between care provision model, work-life balance, and gender (in)equalities

The question of combining paid and unpaid care work has been greatly problematised in the debates on work and welfare over the past decades (Crompton, 2006). Many scholars have discussed the social expectation that sees women as the main responsible for providing care (Sørensen, 2017) and the female double burden, comprising paid job in the labour market and unpaid domestic care work. Although the gender distribution of care work is context based and has changed overtime, unpaid care work continues to rely mainly on women's shoulders worldwide (ILO, 2018).

This is certainly the case in Italy, where despite recent advancements in social policy, care work remains largely family-based and disproportionately carried out by women, reflecting the characteristics of a familialistic welfare model (Ferrera, 2005; Naldini and Saraceno, 2022). Italy remains one of the European countries with the lowest percentage of female employment (around 60% in 2023) and highest involuntary part-time, which involves 16.5% of working women (ISTAT, 2022a). Having children – especially more than one – increases women's probability to stay out of work: in 2021, 73% of women without children were employed, whereas the employment rate for mothers with children under the age of six was significantly lower at 53% (INAPP, 2022). This picture reflects the tangled relationship between gender inequalities in the labour market, the division of responsibility within households, and care provision tools that do not adjust to women's needs nor reverse the unequal share of unpaid care work.

Comparative research highlights different care regimes in Europe, which correspond to diverse types and intensities of public policies and private tools to support family care, with country-specific models that are shaped by domestic economic and political institutions, and by ingrained ideological and cultural norms (Pavolini and Scalise, 2021; Bariola and Collins, 2021), reproducing the gender division of paid and unpaid work (Crompton, 2006). Work-life balance ideal-types are positioned along a continuum, with Nordic countries at one end, having transitioned toward a dual-earner, dual-carer ideal type, characterised by high female employment rates, voluntary part-time, and a more equitable division of care responsibilities within couples (although women still perform most of the domestic work also in this context, see Nordenmark and Nyman, 2003). At the other end, Southern European countries tend to maintain a polarised structure, oscillating between a dual-earner model and a male breadwinner–female carer model (Lewis *et al.*, 2008). This polarisation is driven by factors such as long working hours, rigid work organisation and insufficient care services (Gaiaschi, 2014). Although this typology is ideal-typical and intra-regime differences exist, as evidenced by recent studies on the Mediterranean model highlighting distinctions between Spain and Italy (León and Pavolini, 2014), the Italian family-based care regime (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004) aligns closely with this framework. It reflects the persistent weakness of public policies, which places the burden of informal care primarily on parents and relatives, particularly mothers and grandparents (Zamberletti *et al.*, 2018). Due to the progressive devolution of power to decentralised levels of government, in Italy the state has assigned key responsibilities for care services and social policies to regions and, especially, municipalities. This governance

structure means that the availability and quality of care provisions vary significantly across different territories, further exacerbating territorial inequalities (Scalise, 2022).

The four types of care provision conceptualised by Daly (2002), who highlights the different ways societies organise care distributing responsibilities between the family, the market, the state, and the community, are particularly useful to show that the Italian care provision model is underdeveloped, especially on three policy measures: (1) *monetary social security and taxation benefits*, such as cash payments and tax allowances; (2) *care services*, such as child-care provisions and residential places for the elderly; (3) *incentives towards provision in the market*, such as vouchers and subsidies for private care. The fourth type, (4) *employment-related provisions*, is more developed but some limits still emerge, as further explored below.

In terms of (1) *tax deductions and direct financial assistance* provided by the government to help families to cover expenses related to care, these have been traditionally very limited and unsystematic (Naldini and Saraceno, 2022). Following EU recommendations, the legislative decree n. 230 of 2021 expanded and re-organised financial assistance to families through the adoption of the universal single allowance (the so-called “assegno unico e universale”), which replaced previous patchy deductions for children and bonuses entitled to families. Despite that, tax deductions for expenses related to education, for young couples, single parents, persons with disability and for domestic services or assistance to family members remain very limited and not all eligible people have access to existing forms of financial support. Moreover, as research shows, cash transfer programmes do not affect the redistribution of care responsibilities between partners. On the contrary, the availability of allowances may discourage women in low-wage occupations from pursuing better employment opportunities (Saraceno, 2020).

As far as (2) *care services* are concerned, the Italian Law 65 of 2017 guarantees the right to access care facilities for children of 0–6 years old. However, despite recent progress, Italy is far from meeting the EU recommendations to provide childcare for at least 45% of children under 3 and 96% of children between 3 and 6 by 2030. Indeed, the availability of places in public Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, and especially in kindergartens, is limited and not accessible to all children. In 2021, only 33.4% of children aged 0–2 years were enrolled in educational facilities. In this field the territorial disparity is high. In the Centre and North of the country, the coverage of places in kindergartens is 36%, while in the South and islands it stands at 16% (ISTAT, 2023a). Moreover, children of two-income and higher-income households are more likely to attend kindergarten than children of less economically advantaged and single-income households (ISTAT, 2023b), leading to the so-called “Matthew effect” (Merton, 1968) showing how initial advantages lead to cumulative benefits over time.

With the extension of the single allowance described above, almost all the (3) *incentives towards provision in the market* have been merged under this policy instrument, while extraordinary measures developed during the pandemic, such as the “bonus Babysitter”, have not been repropounded. The “Daycare Bonus” of up to EUR 3,000 for parents of children born, adopted or fostered up to three years of age between January and August 2022 remained in force for 2023 and was valid both to support the cost of the daycare centre and to pay for support at home for children unable to attend daycare due to illnesses and who turn three by 31 December 2023.

In such a context, (4) *Employment related provisions* represent key tools to support parents in their caring responsibilities. In Italy, maternity leave is compulsory for five months and covers 80% of the salary. In contrast, paternity leave, which became mandatory only with the Law 92 of 2012, was initially of 3 days (one mandatory and two optional) and was extended to 10 days in 2022. In addition to maternity and paternity leave, the law provides ten months of reduced paid leave for both parents until the child is twelve years old. Despite the progressive increase in paternity leave days, we are far from the reallocation of care work between partners and from the deconstruction of the male-breadwinner model, as parental leave is mainly uptake by women. The persistence of gender inequalities is due not only to the difference in the length of parental leave granted to mothers and fathers but also to men’s reluctance – albeit somewhat

reduced in recent years – to take advantage of this measure. This reluctance is influenced both by persistent socially constructed gender roles and by the salary reduction associated with parental leave, which particularly discourages fathers from utilising it. Since men tend to earn higher wages than women, taking leave would result in a significant loss of income needed for everyday family needs. Finally, national regulation of flextime and reduction of working time is very limited and eventually delegated to company bargaining. Working hours are among the longest in Europe, and (voluntary) part-time, as well as other flexible forms of work, are still little widespread, negatively affecting work-life balance and equal sharing of care commitments within the couple (Gaiaschi, 2014).

It is in this last set of employment-related provisions that we find remote work, which was initially ruled by a 1998 Law on teleworking and then a 2017 Law on so-called “smart working”, that foresees flexibility regarding the time and place from where work is performed. The 2017 Law explicitly connects remote work to work-life balance by stating that this working modality should “facilitate the conciliation of life and working times” (Art 18). However, this measure received little attention until the outbreak of the pandemic.

### 3. Remote work as a care strategy during the pandemic

There is not a unanimous view on the impacts of remote work on domestic care management. On the one hand, some studies highlight that working from home favours better integration between work and family needs (Duxbury *et al.*, 1998), allowing parents to pick up children earlier, spend time with them in the afternoon, and compensate by working in the evenings, also in contexts with strong care infrastructures. Other research, on the other, associates remote work with high levels of conflict between the different spheres of life (Russell *et al.*, 2009), which exacerbate traditional gender-based division of paid and unpaid labour (Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2008). The literature on the pandemic, despite stressing the increased involvement of fathers in care (Arntz *et al.*, 2020), confirms that home working resulted in overwork outside standard working hours with high levels of stress and burnout, and intensified traditional gender roles (Chung *et al.*, 2021). This also emerged in Italy (Mangiavacchi *et al.*, 2020; Romens *et al.*, 2024), where women remained the main providers of domestic work and care. Therefore, it is not surprising that women, particularly mothers, reported being less satisfied than men during the lockdowns (Hipp and Bünning, 2021).

Considering the Italian context, these results were conditioned by the legislative novelties introduced during the pandemic. Between February 2020 and July 2021, several decrees and regulations were implemented to cope with the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and the lockdowns, introducing exceptional income support measures (e.g. subsidies for families with an equivalent income up to 15,000 euros, a 100-euro bonus for essential workers, a 500-euro bonus for domestic workers and caregivers, among others). As for work-life balance measures, a specific parental leave was adopted to increase paid leave of 15 days for workers with children aged under 14, and paid leave of up to 12 days to workers who cared for disabled or elderly/non-autonomous persons.

As some scholars have emphasised, the policy response to Covid-19 was subject to path-dependency and reproduced the existing institutional and welfare legacies (Béland *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, these policy interventions reflected the pre-existing familialistic logic of the Italian care provision. Emblematic of this is the fact that the extension of parental leave was not guaranteed to remote workers, as homeworking was conceived as a tool to support parents in their childcare responsibilities (ESPN, 2021). As a result, domestic and care work fell exclusively on families, and working from home represented for many working parents, mainly mothers, the only way to combine family duties and work commitments (Romens *et al.*, 2024). This situation was worsened by the fact that Italy was one of the European countries that kept schools closed the longest during the emergency, unlike other countries. In Denmark, for example, schools and childcare services reopened earlier, recognising that parental employment relies heavily on the availability of care services, especially for mothers (Bariola and Collins, 2021; Fersch *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, although considerable financial

efforts were made to support workers and households, the weak nature of the Italian welfare system is reflected in these emergency responses, which have prioritised financial transfers over services. Furthermore, many of these policies were based on gender neutrality, neglecting gender inequalities in the labour market and the specific challenges faced by women during the crisis (Scalise, 2022).

Finally, during the pandemic, many Italian companies used remote work as a corporate welfare policy. However, the possibility to work from home was often subject to management approval and regulated by informal agreements, leading many companies to consider it a “concession” rather than a right (Senatori and Carla, 2021). A survey conducted in Italy in 2021 found that 21% of respondents were unwilling or unable to take leave because it was “unwelcome by their employer”, conditioning more women than men. The “performative” ideal internalised by women during the lockdown, as the capacity to cope with paid and unpaid work, generated even a sense of guilt, driving some of them to work longer hours to maintain high performance and productivity (Williamson *et al.*, 2023).

#### 4. Methodology

What happens after the pandemic? Has the use of remote work changed? Our assumption is that working parents continue using remote work to cope with the limits of care policies and handle their care responsibilities while working. Similarly to what happened during the pandemic, this strategy permits families to limit the use of their social capital (e.g. calling grandparents to care for their offsprings) and economic capital (e.g. hiring a babysitter to care for their children) to compensate for the limits of care policies. To address these questions and test our hypothesis, we apply Daly’s typology to analyse how care responsibilities are distributed among families, the market, the (national and local) state, and the community in a specific urban setting (see Table 1).

The city represents an ideal unit of analysis for studying local welfare dynamics (Andreotti *et al.*, 2012), because it is where national policies are implemented, local resources are mobilised, and social needs are most directly addressed. Following a single case study logic, aimed at generating new knowledge for further theoretical proposition with broader applicability (Yin, 2009), we selected the largest urban economy in Italy and the thirdlargest among EU cities, Milan, which stands out for its dynamic labour market, high concentration of remote workers, and a significant share of dual-earner households. The city has the highest female (64.3% in 2022) and male (75.9%) employment rates in the country, alongside the largest proportion of workers employed in the quaternary sector (ISTAT, 2022b). This is a setting where remote work is widely adopted and where conciliation policies and care services are particularly needed to support dual-earner households. The fact that women participate in the labour market at higher rates intensifies work-care tensions, making challenges and adaptation strategies more visible. Remote work is a concrete option for many

**Table 1.** Use of remote work to compensate for limited childcare policies

Daly’s childcare policy types	Strategies to compensate for the limits of childcare policies
(1) Monetary social security and taxation benefits, e.g. Universal single allowance ( <i>assegno unico</i> )	Paying for private services (e.g. baby-sitting and summer camps)
(2) Public care services, e.g. kindergarten and schools	
(3) Incentives towards provision in the market, e.g. Bonus for summer camps	Counting on informal support (e.g. grand parenting)
(4) Employment related provisions, e.g. parental leave	
	Remote working

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work based on Daly’s (2002)

families and the availability of local resources would allow for urban investments in childcare services, but public childcare services remain insufficient to meet demand, and many families rely on informal arrangements or market-based solutions. Thus, this case allows for studying how remote work interacts with familialistic care policies in a setting where both structural constraints and adaptive strategies are particularly visible.

The research is qualitatively driven, being mainly built upon in-depth interviews collected in Milan, from January 2022 to February 2025. More specifically, 25 interviews were conducted with thirteen remote workers employed in the quaternary sector (eleven of whom were also shop stewards), four human resources managers of companies in the quaternary sector, seven union officials who also follow companies in this sector, and one policy maker. Nine of the interviewees were women and sixteen were men. The study focuses on a group of workers – white collars – considered privileged due to their access to remote work, in contrast to more vulnerable categories who are excluded from this work arrangement. However, this category is not marginal. In 2023, 2.8 million workers in Italy worked remotely (occasionally or not) (ISTAT, 2024). All the interviews were recorded, after obtaining the consent of research participants, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To preserve participants' privacy, all names cited are fictitious. A table in the Appendix provides details on the interviewees.

The data of the interviews was completed with a survey that involved 285 remote workers in six large companies from the quaternary sector in Milan and conducted from November 2022 to February 2023. In this article, the survey data is mainly used in the finding section 5.2, to complement the analysis that emerges from the interviews when detailing the gender impact of using remote work as a care strategy. All participants to the survey had already worked remotely and most of them (91%) were working remotely at least 3 days per week. Nearly half of the respondents were women (53%) and over a third (37%) of them were living with underage children. We conducted descriptive analysis of the data collected with the survey, using the software SPSS.

## 5. Results

We first present our findings structured according to Daly's (2002) typology to illustrate how remote work is used in post-pandemic to compensate for the limitations of childcare policies in Italy. We then examine how this practice reinforces gender inequalities.

### 5.1 Remote work still compensates for limited childcare policies

Our empirical material stresses that, even after the pandemic, one of the main reasons why employees continue asking to work remotely is because it allows them to combine their paid work with their care responsibilities. This perception of remote work as an “enabler of conciliation” is shared by workers, unionists, and human resources managers.

[For] those who have a family [the main positive thing is] being able to manage their children and to pick them up from school. If they have a cold, being able to stay at home and work from home. Family management benefits from it (Federica, remote worker, trading company).

#### (1) Monetary social security and taxation benefits

Low and insufficient income support not only fails to change the distribution of caregiving responsibilities but also forces parents to rely more on remote work to reduce additional childcare expenses. These expenses can include after-school programs, babysitters, or private childcare services. This issue is particularly relevant in Italy. For example, in Milan there is a scarcity of nursery spots for children aged 0–2, which pushes families toward expensive private options. Additionally, after-school programs are not universally available, creating challenges for working

parents during the afternoons. As a result, many parents increasingly depend on remote work to fill these gaps. Without comprehensive monetary social security and tax benefits, remote work becomes more of a cost-saving strategy than a true solution for achieving work-life balance.

I receive the *Assegno Unico*, but it's about 50 euros per month, consider that my daughter didn't get a spot in a public nursery, so she's attending a private one, and I pay around 800 euros per month. So, this is basically the public support I receive. It's clear that if I can, I'll work from home to avoid other expenses for after-school care or babysitting (Emma, remote worker, insurance company).

#### (2) Public care services, such as kindergarten and schools

In contrast with pandemic times, schools and kindergarten are now open all along the school year. However, our research findings highlight that remote work is particularly appreciated to cover the care needs when schools are closed, especially during the summer. Indeed, the Italian summer school holidays are among the longest in the EU, covering a period of over three months, from June to September (EECEA, 2022). During this period, public services are closed and the other sets of tools identified by Daly are limited. As a result, working parents in the private sector are constrained to call on the help of relatives, especially grandparents (Zamberletti *et al.*, 2018), or if they can afford it, they pay for private baby-sitting services or outdoor centres out of their pockets to be able to continue working. In this context of limited care policies, being able to work remotely during the summer period is particularly appreciated and has been a key issue subject to bargaining by the unions.

In the summer period, [companies] give the possibility to stay five days out of five [working from] home, so when children are at home [from school]. Trade union agreements have also been [signed] regarding the summer period, June, July, August, so that [employees] can always stay five days out of five at home to manage the children. (Oscar, union official).

#### (3) Incentives towards provision in the market, such as specific bonuses

A specific bonus based on income (*Bonus asilo nido*) aims at supporting access to kindergarten. However, this bonus does not cover all costs, and a significant amount of the fee remains on families' shoulders, including when they perceive this support. Similarly, a specific bonus (*Contributo centri estivi*) permits its beneficiaries to access funding to cover part of the costs of summer camps for their children. However, this incentive towards the market is only available to employees of the public administration and do not cover all family needs. As a result, access to market services, such as summer camps or baby-sitters, significantly depends on the families' economic capital and capacity to pay for such services. In this context, remote work makes it possible to reduce the costs of private care, such as babysitters, and the need for support by grandparents and other figures external to the family unit.

If you work from home, it's good because you can handle that thing of picking the children up from school and then coming home and working instead of asking for help from a babysitter which has a cost, a cost for families (Francesco, remote worker, IT company).

#### (4) Employment related provisions, such as parental leave

Our fieldwork highlights that employees utilise remote work to care for their children instead of requesting parental leave, even though this practice increases their workload.

I also have two daughters so [with remote work] I dovetail some things better with them, although I have to run much more; because in exchange I put in fewer hours of [parental] leave. [...] With the flexibility one maybe makes things dovetail, one manages them without asking for [parental] leaves

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which, however, sometimes means that, when it comes to the quality of life, one pulls one's neck much more. (Veronica, remote worker, trading company)

This practice underscores the limits of the Italian parental leave policy. At the time of the fieldwork, those using parental leave had access to a compensation equivalent to 30% of their salary for up to 6 months until their child turned 6 and, under certain conditions until the age of 8, after which the leave was no longer remunerated. The relatively low income it provided, and its short duration compared to other European countries (OECD, 2022) partly explained why parents privileged remote work, over this provision.

Overall, our analysis stresses that remote work is still being used to compensate for the limits of childcare policies, including after the pandemic. This practice implies that childcare is more individualised and increasingly rests on the shoulders of parents who find themselves working while having to look after their children. This situation contributes to further blurring the lines between work and other times of living and increases gender inequalities, as highlighted in the following section.

### 5.2 *The gender impact of using remote work as a care strategy*

In line with previous studies conducted during the pandemic (Mangiavacchi *et al.*, 2020), our fieldwork stresses that after the pandemic remote work continues to enable parents, including fathers who were previously less involved in care work, to spend more time with their children. An example is that of Marco, an HR manager in an IT company, who refers to his own experience:

The positive points [of remote work] are first, from my perspective, the work-family relation, the relations in terms of time that the activity requires. Just to say, before the Covid I wasn't bringing my children to school in the morning, now I can leave them in the morning. In my opinion, this is a very important aspect for a young person who is a father (Marco, HR manager, ICT company).

Despite few examples of fathers more involved in care work, our fieldwork emphasises that women continue to be the main carers. Compared to men, female workers are more often asking to work remotely to care for their children and this tool is perceived as a "care strategy" especially by mothers. For instance, Giorgio, an HR manager, indicates that in his company it is mainly women who ask to work remotely and connect this trend to gender inequalities.

There is still a very unbalanced family burden on women [ . . . ], and this is why we have given these people more days to work remotely. Because those with children up to 14 years old can ask to stay at home for up to 4 days [ . . . ], not only the mothers, but also the fathers. However, mothers tend to ask for it more, because, indeed, the management of the family is still a bit unbalanced (Giorgio, HR manager, consulting company).

Mothers are more often hit by the negative effects of having to work remotely, while caring for their children. In this regard, the literature developed during the pandemic underscores the impacts that remote working while caring had on the wellbeing of workers, and especially mothers (ESPN, 2021; Romens *et al.*, 2024). According to our fieldwork, even when preschools and schools reopened and the care pressure on parents decreased compared to the pandemic, the overlap between work and care work continued to jeopardise working conditions, especially for women.

One of the main effects regards the tendency to work overtime and in unconventional hours. Interviewees explain that they are often performing different activities simultaneously when working, which results in expanding the working day to unconventional working hours or during the weekend. Although the Italian legislation (amendments to the Decree 48/2023) foresaw that, until the end of 2023, parents of children under 14 should have access to remote work, the norm did not contemplate the specific number of days parents could use it. As a result, parents felt that it was up to their employer to decide the extension of remote work. This uncertainty contributes to perceiving remote work as an employers' concession that workers

have to deserve (Senatori and Carla, 2021). The combination between the need to access remote work for caring, on the one hand, and seeing remote work as a concession, on the other hand, reinforce forms of disciplining (Chung *et al.*, 2021). This process exposes workers, and particularly mothers, to accepting working overtime and worsening their working conditions to demonstrate their goodwill to their manager and not risk losing the possibility of remote working. In this regard, the experience of Veronica, who has two underage children, illustrates how remote work as a care strategy reinforces self-discipline and working overtime.

I pick up the child at school at 4.30 p.m., but I lose those 20 min and then I say: «I'll make them up later». [When I get home] I say: «Yeah, I have lost that time, so I have to make it up». [...] So to make sure [that I have done my hours] I work much more, let's say, to have a clear conscience and I say to myself: «I did my hours anyway; I didn't take advantage of them» (Veronica, remote worker, trading company).

The data we gathered with the survey that involved 285 remote workers also stresses that gender and care responsibilities have a notable impact on remote working conditions. Both mothers and fathers might be similarly involved in remote work but their working conditions at home tend to significantly differ (see Table 2). In line with the interviews, the survey indicates that parents of underage children, and especially mothers, are more exposed to working in unconventional hours compared to other workers. For instance, 63% of our female respondents with underage children do not take breaks during the day, work during the lunch break, answer emails or phone calls in the evening or on weekends every week, compared to 56% of fathers and 43% of women without children.

Almost all participants are remote working mainly at home (99%) but discrepancies emerge concerning the area of the house from where they work. Most men work from a space dedicated to work, such as a home office, with no significant differences according to whether they have underage children (54%) or not (52%). Conversely, most women remote work from an area of the house that is not dedicated to work, such as the kitchen or the living room. Furthermore, the presence of children reinforces this trend, as mothers more often work in such

**Table 2.** Remote working conditions according to gender and childcare responsibilities

	With underage children		Without underage children		
	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Not available (%)
<i>Frequency of remote work (per week)</i>					
Less than 3 days	5	7	7	14	0
3–4 days	59	44	53	48	0
Mainly remotely	37	49	40	38	100
<i>Willingness to remote work</i>					
Less days	6	12	3	6	100
Same days	74	71	86	72	0
More days	20	17	10	22	0
<i>Frequency of overtime work</i>					
Never or rarely (Less than a few times per month)	26	20	39	44	100
Often (Few times per month)	11	24	18	12	0
Always or very often (more than once a week)	63	56	43	43	0
<i>Space of remote work</i>					
Home, space dedicated to work	29	54	41	52	100
Home, space NOT dedicated to work	71	46	57	47	0
Third space (coworking, etc.)	0	0	1	1	0

**Source(s):** Authors' own work based on research findings

areas (71%), while women without children are slightly more often performing their job from a space dedicated to work (41%). Moreover, employees performing their job from a space not dedicated to work are much more often unsatisfied with the remote working environment (24%), compared to those who can work from a location dedicated to work (0.4%), underlying the impact that gender inequalities on the use of space have on overall satisfaction.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Some policy tools display perverse effects, which are exacerbated in certain institutional contexts. This is the case for remote work, which represents an opportunity for increasing job quality and working conditions. However, within the Italian care regime remote work is likely to be a constraint for working women who use it to replace the lack of care policies and services, managing household and care responsibilities while working remotely. Such a scenario emerged clearly during the pandemic period (ESPN, 2021). This article has illustrated the multiple ways in which remote work continues to be used to compensate for the limits of childcare policies, even after the pandemic period, and in a wealthy context like the city of Milan.

Building on Daly's typology, we show that remote work is still being used to cope with the (1) insufficient *monetary social security and taxation benefits*; (2) the shortage of *public national and local care services*; (3) the limits of *incentives towards provision in the market*; (4) the pitfalls of *employment related provisions*, such as parental leave. Furthermore, mothers who work remotely are particularly exposed to working in precarious conditions, as they are more inclined to perform their tasks overtime and in an environment that is not dedicated to work. This limits mothers' career and quality of life and work, strengthening the traditional gendered division of tasks within the household (Crompton, 2006). This process of boundary blurring, and compensation for the lack of care policies triggered by remote work, is not confined to the exceptional period of the pandemic but seems to have become a common practice for women even in a "normal" time. This is especially visible in the Milan context where women are more active in the labour market and remote work is more widespread. Our analysis has underlined the weaknesses of the interaction between the national and local models of care provision in this city, as remote work continues to be used in a distorted way.

Preventing remote work from increasing gender inequalities entails addressing childcare accessibility, affordability, and flexibility, involving a plurality of institutional and socio-economic actors. Elson (2017) and Power (2020) discuss five key "Rs" that could characterise institutional contexts promoting equal participation of women in the labour market, including in remote work settings. The first aspect is *Recognising*, which involves acknowledging the inequal distribution of care work. The following points are: *Reducing* the burden on parents by providing public services for children and monetary support, which should also aim at *Redistributing* care work between genders. Two additional "Rs" were introduced following the Pandemic: *Rewarding*, which emphasises the need for greater financial recognition of care work, and *Representing*, which advocates for the involvement of those performing both paid and unpaid care work—primarily women—in political decision-making.

In Italy, the 2021 National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) aimed at contributing to reduce families' burden, by allocating substantial funding (EUR 4.6 billion) for the construction and long-term management of kindergartens (Caldura et al., 2023). Furthermore, in 2022, the so-called Family Act (Law 7/4/2022 no. 32) also introduced some changes on family policies, as it established a universal monthly allowance for each child; strengthened family support policies for educational and school expenses; reformed parental leave, extending it to all professional categories; increased the duration of compulsory paternity leave (to 10 days) and the possibility for parents to take parental leave until their child turns 14; and increased maternity leave allowance and paid sick leave for children. However, it is too early to assess the impact of these new regulations and investments, as its achievement will

depend on the resources allocated to the income transfers and on the levels of coverage of the services.

The effects of these new measures on relieving parents from care work and the impact they will have on the use of remote work as a care strategy should be analysed through future research. Other avenues for future research arise from some limitations of our research. This study is limited to a narrow population of more advantaged workers who have workplace flexibility and live in a wealthy city. Considering more disadvantaged workers in other areas of the country could further contribute to the understanding of the nexus between remote work and care provisions in Italy. Future comparative research could gain a better understanding of wider patterns. For instance, underexplored perspectives from non-Western contexts could provide additional insights into how different labour market structures, cultural expectations, and digital infrastructures shape the intersection between remote work and unpaid care responsibilities. Despite limitations, our study provides empirical evidence of the interaction between work arrangements and care regimes, encouraging future research to explore work organisational logics that exacerbate gender inequalities.

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**Appendix**

**Table A1.** List of interviewees

Fictitious name	Gender	Function	Economic sector
Francesco	Man	Remote worker	ICT
Gianfranco	Man	Remote worker	ICT
Pietro	Man	Remote worker	ICT
Carlo	Man	Remote worker	ICT
Federica	Woman	Remote worker	Trading branch of a manufacturing company
Veronica	Woman	Remote worker	Trading branch of a manufacturing company
Samuele	Man	Remote worker	Trading branch of a manufacturing company
Andrea	Man	Remote worker	Trading branch of a manufacturing company
Diego	Man	Remote worker	Business consulting
Fabio	Man	Remote worker	Business consulting
Silvia	Woman	Remote worker	Business consulting
Sofia	Woman	Remote worker	HR management and business consulting
Emma	Woman	Remote worker	Insurance
Marco	Man	HR manager	ICT
Giorgio	Man	HR manager	Business consulting
Ilaria	Woman	HR manager	Healthcare and diagnostics
Davide	Man	HR manager	ICT and business consulting
Cecilia	Woman	Union official	Quaternary sector
Olivia	Woman	Union official	Quaternary sector
Roberto	Man	Union official	Quaternary sector
Oscar	Man	Union official	Quaternary sector
Pietro	Man	Union official	Quaternary sector
Filippo	Man	Union official	Quaternary sector
Patrizio	Man	Union official	Quaternary sector
Stefania	Woman	Policy maker	Milan District

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

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