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A (De)colonial View Beyond the Borders

Agile work and gender gap in Italy. An empirical sociological study on downsides and future scenarios

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Email: francesca.colella1@univaq.it**Abstract**

The article discusses an empirical study on agile work (remote working) in Italy, with a sociological perspective. As is well known, the COVID-19 pandemic shock has led to a significant increase in the attention paid to this issue, as long as it has “forced” millions of people to experience this kind of work. This great social experimentation has also triggered a reconsideration of important concepts of everyday life such as those of time and space, among many others. Starting from this preliminary assumption, a national empirical study on agile work was conducted at the Department of Human Sciences at the Italian University of L'Aquila resorting to a qualitative approach. The research was achieved by conducting 64 in-depth interviews with women across the country, highlighting and exploring the multiple critical elements and strengths of the agile work experience from March 2020 lockdown to September 2021. It is clear from the research that emergency strategies on the topic of agile working are not adequate: a paradigm shift is needed.

This article is the result of continuous dialog between the authors. However, for the purposes of the assessment of the scientific production, paragraphs 1, 2, 3, and 6 are attributed to Francesca Colella and paragraphs 4 and 5 to Laura Falci.

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agile work, gender issues, social innovation, space-time perspective

1 | INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this empirical sociological research was the significant increase in attention given to remote working. As we know, the pandemic crisis has “forced” millions of people to experience this type of work and has called for a rethinking of important concepts of everyday life such as those of time and space, among many others.

In particular, the sociological dimensions of time and space represent basic elements around which the lives of individuals and the history of all societies are built. Depending on the perspective taken, social perceptions and representations of time and space change, but still remain the main, conventionally established coordinates where human existence acquires meaning.

In Italy, remote working is known as “smart working” (SW), and this refers to an organizational model no longer based on time and physical presence in the workplace, but rather based on flexible schedules, autonomy, and goal-oriented activities, with greater use of digital tools and in order to foster greater employees' empowerment (Butera, 2020; De Masi, 2020).

The term SW was first introduced in 2008 by Capgemini, an IT consultancy company, in their “Rapporto Innovazione e Smart working. Come rendere più collaborativo, flessibile e produttivo il modo di lavorare delle persone” (*Innovation and Smart Working Report. How to make the way people work more collaborative, flexible, and productive*). Specifically, by SW they meant: «An approach to organising work that aims to drive greater efficiency and effectiveness in achieving job outcomes through a combination of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration, in parallel with optimising tools and working environments for employees» (CIPD, 2008, p. 4).

Before the pandemic, such a work configuration was not widespread, even though smart working offered people—and still offers today—the opportunity to achieve a certain rebalance between paid and unpaid activities. Of course, working at home rather than in the office is not easy and requires a method and a specific *mindset*, as will be discussed in more detail later. Overall, from our viewpoint, the spatio-temporal perspective allows to analyze changing contexts such as those of today; the aim is to understand the plurality of space forms and time needs that articulate the difficult balances of agile work in today's Italian society.

SW certainly implies benefits to organizations, with the possibility of various cost reductions and productivity improvements, and positive impacts on the community, including traffic reduction, the use of public transport, reductions in CO₂ emissions, extending work to remote, isolated, or depressed areas, etc (De Masi, 2020; Di Nicola, 2002).

Starting from this preliminary consideration, a national empirical study on the topic of agile work was carried out at the Department of Human Sciences at the Italian University of L'Aquila resorting to a qualitative approach: the research was achieved by conducting 64 in-depth interviews with women across the country, highlighting and exploring the multiple critical elements and strengths of the SW experience from the March 2020 lockdown to September 2021.

It is now clear that, since the 1980s, SW's greatest enemies have been the normative plan and the organizational culture management refers to (Butera, 2020; De Masi, 2020) and, today, these critical issues are far from being overcome. Emergency strategies and training courses are not enough: « the design of offices and work organization inherited from Weberian rational bureaucracy and Taylor-Fordism is centered on hierarchical coordination and control and on the division of labor into prescribed tasks and procedures. Without changing this paradigm, which is not entirely outdated, it is very difficult for people and teams to work by objectives» (Butera, 2020, pp. 150–151, *our translation*).

2 | SMART WORKING: CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK, ORGANIZATIONAL, AND NORMATIVE ASPECTS

In contemporary society, the development of new technologies and the internet have enabled the world of work to change and have led to a revolution in the way space and time are considered: time has been reduced thanks to the speed that permeates every process, and distances have been significantly shortened. The changed context, new contractual conditions, and different organization of working time and space lead to a reshaping of social life that involves both the individual and their family (Colella, 2009). From this perspective, the implementation of SW clearly represents much more than a technological innovation project: it implies the debating of stereotypes concerning places, times, tools, and working relations (De Masi, 2020).

Agile work in our country is regulated by Law No. 81 of May 22, 2017, which defines it as a «mode of execution of the subordinate employment relationship established by agreement between the parties, also with forms of organisation by phases, cycles and objectives and without precise time or place of work constraints, with the possible use of technological tools...» (*our translation*).

As we know, between the 28th of February and the August 31, 2020, without any intention or preparation, the largest mass “organizational experiment” ever attempted before in Italy's history took place. All at once, millions of workers—employees, civil servants, managers, executives, and entrepreneurs—suddenly stopped working in the office, as they had been doing for centuries, and they started working from home (De Masi, 2020).

It is also clear that it has not been an actual smart working but a *home working* that entered our everyday lives by forcing a cultural shift that would otherwise probably have taken decades to unfold in its fullness and complexity. This shows that the greatest obstacle to innovation is the organizational culture and its interpretation by those who detain decision-making powers in complex organizational systems.

The change for some was immediate, for others less so; in any case, it facilitated the transition and digital collaboration. Although, as we have anticipated, the need to limit the circulation of the virus has meant a predominantly “home-based” smart working, in other words, conducted in one's own home, it is evident how this mode of work differs, in terms of flexibility, from the old telework. Telework in Italy was already being debated as far back as 1969, with the seminar on teleworking organized by IFAP in Rome, the largest management school then existing in our country (De Masi, 1993). Here, the spread of smart working before the pandemic was very limited: in fact, around 570,000 workers had access to this modality: 2% of employees, compared to 20.2% in the United Kingdom, 16.6% in France, and 8.6% in Germany (De Masi, 2020). Of these 570,000 citizens, 5% worked in smart working on an occasional basis and less than 1% did telework from home.¹ The COVID-19 emergency accelerated a transition to this organizational mode, which, however, was already on the rise in Italy before 2019: in fact, in 2018 there was an increase of 20% of workers using smart working, who considered themselves more satisfied than traditional workers both in the organization of work (39% vs. 18%) and in relation with colleagues and superiors (40% vs. 23%).²

However, the lack of attention given to smart working was already apparent, as confirmed in a study conducted by Eurofound and the International Labor Office (Eurofound & ILO, 2017), comparing some countries in the European Union (EU28) and outside Europe (Argentina, Brazil, India, Japan, and USA) about employees working in flexible and nontraditional mode (Oliva et al., 2020). The data showed that in Europe, the average number of workers operating remotely represented 18% of the workforce, of which only 3% were regular full-time teleworkers through regular home-based telework. In that occasion, Italy recorded further lower data, showing that the prevalence of smart working before the pandemic was extremely limited: in fact, only 7% of workers had access to this mode, of which less than 1% through regular home-based teleworking.

The results of the 2020 research “Smart working: il futuro del lavoro oltre l'emergenza”³ (*Smart working: the future of work beyond the emergency*) by the Osservatorio Smart Working (*Smart Working Observatory*) show the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work conditions. During the lockdown and thus in the most acute phase of the emergency, 94% of public administrations (PA), 97% of large companies, and 58% of small- and medium-sized

enterprises (SMEs) extended the possibility of working remotely, and the number of workers reached an all-time record number of smart workers, counting approximately 6.58 million, or one-third of all Italian employees. Professionals previously considered incompatible with this working model have been engaged in this emergency scenario: call center operators in large companies have been able to work remotely for the first time, just as counter clerks have been able to work from home by reorganizing part of their activities and communicating digitally with customers, or the digitalization of access to machinery has enabled skilled workers to work remotely (Dingel & Neiman, 2020).

The main critical issues reported by smart workers in the emergency phase were as follows: the difficulty in maintaining a proper work–life balance for 58% of workers in large companies, as well as 40% of them and PA workers who said they were affected by unequal workload distribution between colleagues, or 46% of PA workers who said they had experienced problematic situations related to technology.

With the start of the emergency “second phase,” starting in September 2020, amidst recommended and compulsory returns, difficulties and uncertainties in opening workplaces, remote workers dropped to 5.06 million. In particular, there were 1.67 million workers in large enterprises, 890,000 in SMEs, 1.18 million in micro-enterprises, and 1.32 million in PA. Among the main reasons for returning, the research mainly indicated the promotion of a sense of belonging and socialization and contrasting the sense of isolation of employees for large enterprises, while PAs stated that they wanted to promote inter-functional communication and interpersonal collaboration and improve the productivity of their employees.

One year after the first lockdown, in March 2021, the Observatory estimated 5.37 million Italian smart workers, with a larger drop in the public sector. At the end of 2021, with the complicity of the slackening of restrictions and the simultaneous progress of the vaccination program, the amount stood at 4.07 million Italian smart workers.⁴

In terms of wages, the impact of the crisis has been greater overall for women, who record wage decreases of 8.1% compared to 5.4% for men in Q2 2020 (ILO, 2020a). This phenomenon in Italy is represented by the fact that, in December 2020, 444,000 fewer people were employed, of whom 312,000 were women, corresponding to a 3.5% drop in female employment, compared to 2% for men (ISTAT data⁵).

The explanations for this negative impact on women's employment lie in a complex of factors. First and foremost, the sectoral composition of employment, which sees women engaged either in areas requiring face-to-face interaction (such as *essential* health, care, and large-scale food distribution services) or in services defined as *nonessential* subject to restrictive measures and closures ordered in respect of social distancing. Another reason referable to the structurally critical women's participation in the labor market and contractual and atypical precariousness can be found in the nonrenewal of fixed-term employment contracts, a phenomenon that represented for 63% of Italian women the main reason for discontinuation of employment in 2020 (INPS, 2020). Complementary to this phenomenon, there is also the sharp slowdown in hiring that affects women in almost all contract types and that reveals a greater contraction, compared to men, both in terms of attendance and in terms of hours worked, with a consequent impact on the increase in the *overall gender pay gap* (INAPP, 2021).

In 2022, the Observatory's data showed approximately 3.57 million Italians performing part of their work activities outside of company sites. These data indicated 570,000 smart workers in PA, 1.84 million in large enterprises, 510,000 in SMEs, and 650,000 in micro-enterprises, with a decrease that mainly concerns SMEs (decrease in smart working from 53% to 48%) and PAs (decrease from 67% to 57%).⁶

The director of the Smart Working Observatory Fiorella Crespi, speaking at the conference presenting research 2022 “Smart working: il lavoro del futuro al bivio” (*Smart working: the work of the future at the crossroads*), stated: «In SMEs the decline is due to an organisational culture often focused on controlling presence. [...] It is also less necessary to reduce commuting and more difficult to introduce flexible models. In PA, the decrease is partially influenced by government regulations, which have restored presence performance».⁷

Leaving behind the strict necessity to work remotely, organizations—as conceptualized by the Observatory and based on the strengths and weaknesses observed during the emergency state—face a crossroads. Either build a so-

called “feigned” (*façade*) smart working, thus allowing workers to work from home with the sole aim of improving individual well-being and work–life balance, or implement the so-called “real” smart working, through a profound change centered on work by objectives and the digitalization of activities, thus broadening the set of benefits for both individuals and organizations.

Specifically, 65% of large enterprises, 29% of SMEs, and 21% of PA adopt *real* smart working.⁸ This picture suggests that many companies have not yet fully embraced the opportunities offered by smart working, limiting it to a simple means of managing emergency situations or increasing individual well-being, ignoring its strategic potential for reconsidering company organization and improving overall performance, as well as its beneficial potential in terms of social, environmental, and economic sustainability.⁹

Now that the emergency is over, the Observatory's 2023 research “Rimettere a fuoco lo smart working” (*Refocusing smart working*) reports over 3.58 million Italian smart workers; in particular, there are over 1.8 million remote workers in large enterprises, 570,000 in SMEs, 620,000 in micro-enterprises, and 515,000 in PA. The organizations with active and mature projects on all levers in the current year are 52% of large enterprises, 16% of PAs, and 15% of SMEs. The Observatory's estimate of the total number of Italian smart workers for 2024 envisages a further increase, reaching 3,655,000 workers.¹⁰

With our research we tried to focus on gender differences, delving into how women show a lower positive propensity to continue smart working than men (32.5% of men would continue to work remotely exclusively vs. 27.9% of women) (INPS, 2021).

3 | METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

After framing the theoretical–conceptual background and on the basis of the most recent secondary data about the topic of employment (gender and non-gender aspects) and expectations of workers regarding agile work in pandemic, we chose a qualitative methodology to investigate these elements, with the main aim of understanding, in the Weberian sense of the term, the point of view of the interviewees through their opinions, perceptions, and interpretations, offering ample space for their perspective. For this purpose, we chose to collect the empirical materials resorting to focused interviews, to privilege the biographical viewpoint and the lived experience of those directly involved on the chosen topics. The interviewees, when asked to tell their stories and express their point of view, tend to favor some aspects over others, they reorder events by rationalizing their experiences, trying to give coherence and logic to their choices. All this happens when the «memory factor» comes into play. As Franco Ferrarotti writes «these experiences are filtered, more or less critically organised, remembered, in a particular order and according to the red thread of inner coherence so as to constitute the person or, indeed, the “personality” of the person» (Ferrarotti, 2005, p. 2, *our translation*; IN Maciotti, 2005, p. 6).

The researcher is required to recompose with new humility the processes of interaction between the individual and the social world through the enunciative event evoked by narrative memory. Ferrarotti explains in his interview that: «I need to establish, accept and somehow foster a personal human relationship with the one who narrates. Because one does not tell one's life to a tape recorder or a questionnaire» (Interview with Franco Ferrarotti) (Gianturco & Colella, 2017, p. 302; IN Petroccia, 2017, p. 6).

Thus, as anticipated, more than 60 women nationwide were interviewed, female employees in the public, private, and third sector, who had experienced agile work for at least three months during the pandemic, beginning with the lockdown in March 2020. Interviews took place from December 2021 until April 2022.

Interviewees were initially identified among the researcher's acquaintances; subsequently, resorting to the indications of some of the first interviewees, a «snowball sampling» selection strategy, structured in 4 phases, was employed:

1. First phase: the characteristics of the subjects to be interviewed are established (defining target population). In general, the characteristics taken into account were mainly structural: age (18–70), gender, type of work (employee), and residence in Italy.
2. Second phase: consists in identifying the first subjects, diversifying the fields from which to start the different «chains», in order to increase the possibility of identifying subjects with different characteristics.
3. Third phase: the different «chains» are developed (each interviewee indicates one or more subjects with certain characteristics) and the number of significant witnesses identified gets increased.
4. Last phase: data quality control (Colella, 2009, p. 141).

This technique was chosen as a «*face-to-face*» interaction, whereby the conversation between researcher and interviewee focuses on specific topics with the aim of bringing out the subjective experience of people involved to the situation of interest (cf. Gianturco, 2005), through a previously developed conduction scheme. Therefore, it was necessary to proceed with the formulation of *open non-directing, specific, wide, and deep*-interview outline congruent with the identified thematic macro- and micro-areas in the theoretical frame. This tool was also useful as a guide for the researcher during the realization of the interviews, as well as a grid of the subsequent analysis (cf. Bichi, 2002).

Questions were then formulated focusing on four main **thematic areas**:

- Changes in **family balances** due to working from home.
- The possibility of benefiting or not from the **right to disconnect**.
- The redefinition of concepts of personal and work **time and space**.
- The possibility of **burnout** conditions as a result of the attempts to mediate between work demands and the management of personal needs.

The interviews conducted, once transcribed, were subjected to thematic analysis, which consists of retrieving from each interview the passages related to each theme to finally compare them among the different interviewees. This operation is necessary to meaningfully relate the different portions of text present within each of the accounts. This work of deconstruction, comparison, and transversalization was necessary to illustrate and return the researcher's theoretical discourse and support it through the praxis (cf. Gianturco, 2005).

Finally, the discussion on the emerging empirical materials allowed to outline and synthesize the main themes, identified by the interviewees as **positive and negative aspects** of their smart working experience and to include them in a **personal and collective** framework, highlighting the complexity of the factors resulting in facilitating or, on the contrary, hindering the achievement of a **work-life balance** condition for the women interviewed.

4 | RESULTS

Among the **positive aspects** indicated, lots of interviewees reported that remote working has been an opportunity to save money and logistics by not needing to commute.

«[...] I save travel time to and from the office and I also reduce the risk of driving. By travelling 80 km a day there is also a lower risk of accidents, mishaps, and vehicle breakdowns» (Interviewee 10).

«By avoiding the need to commute to the company site, the employee can reduce the stress of travelling and also avoid wasted time and costs to get to the place » (Interviewee 33).

Many of them also stated how they saw their **digital skills** growing and how remote working has been an opportunity to learn new techniques and tools for work organization. In this regard, some interviewees stated that

they had experienced greater and unexpected shared work coordination in the impossibility of maintaining physical contact due to social distancing.

«I was forced to think about new forms of teaching, experimenting with new methods. Another positive aspect was the discovery of these online meeting spaces, which are very convenient, practical, fast. [...] I now also consider the online platform as a meeting space, something I was not used to do before» (Interviewee 4).

Among the reports concerning collaboration between colleagues, some even highlight conflictual relational situations, due to the digital divide between the younger and older working population.

«With colleagues, especially younger colleagues, a barrier was created. The younger saw us older colleagues as not inclined to learn and use this new form of teaching» (Interviewee 1).

The empirical findings suggest, among the **negative aspects**, cases of boredom, isolation due to the lack of interaction and poor socialization in work contexts, and alienation.

«One of the words that comes to mind when thinking about smart working is social interaction, because of the lack of contact within the work environment. Another word that comes to mind is routine because working at home becomes monotonous in some ways» (Interviewee 12).

«My quality of life has been very bad in isolation. Not having human relationship with colleagues makes work much heavier. With colleagues you can have teamwork, there is collaboration. If you are at home alone, there is no communication. [...] Moreover, I believe that at work the group wins and not the single» (Interviewee 18).

Many interviewees also reported the fear of losing their job or possible long-term negative repercussions on career paths due to being away from production sites and the impossibility of being *noticed* in the workplace.

«I have had moments when I have felt less motivated and more demoralised because you always have to raise your hand, not being controlled [...] because those above you do not have the full perception of what you do» (Interviewee 11).

«You have to be initiative-taking, always *on the ball*, or else you risk disappearing. So, I would also it is difficult to emerge, workwise. And then relational difficulties, because you need them both for work and then just socially, on an emotional level» (Interviewee 43).

An interesting issue that emerged from the research concerns the **prejudiced attitude** of management toward remote work in both the public and private sectors. This attitude of mistrust is confirmed by some interviewees who point out that in many Italian working contexts remains a lack of trust in the working relationship, supported by the culture of employee control and the need for physical presence. These are the main factors that have limited, up to the pandemic emergency, the implementation of agile working.

«I know people who were forced to return to the workplace at the time of the pandemic, even though it was risky, because there were *old-fashioned* managers who think that not having the employee in their sight can make them lose control of the situation and activities. I am certainly disappointed by this» (Interviewee 11).

«Why will smart working not apply after the pandemic? Is it because of a lack of trust or because it is more important to have total control right before their eyes, rather than performance?» (Interviewee 25).

As mentioned above, these concerns are most evident for those women who reported not having their productivity increased while working remotely. Very frequently, this eventuality has occurred for those reporting a lack of suitable conditions for achieving the necessary attention and concentration to be able to manage their work at home. From this viewpoint, the thematic area of the changed perception of the ideas of **time and space** returns a heterogeneous image depending on the specific features of the personal and family life of each one of the interviewees because of differential elements referable to the domestic spaces and to the possibility of having places solely dedicated to remote work.

«Home space and workspace are indistinct. Personal time and working time are equally indistinct » (Interviewee 3).

«Managing domestic space was a bit problematic, because with a ridiculously small house it was difficult to manage the situation. My partner also works in the same job as me and organising space in the house was extremely hard. We did not have any space available, so we interfered with each other» (Interviewee 24).

As we discuss below, the issue of the reorganization of domestic space is heavily dependent on the composition of the household. In fact, the presence or absence of offspring, as well as the simultaneous need for space for adults to work in the house, have been determining factors in defining more or less pleasant the experience of smart working. In this regard many of the interviewees reported to experience a total **fusion of work and personal time**, characterized by the impression of never being *disconnected* from their work activity and of feeling continually *invaded* by demands.

« [...] extra-work time no longer exists; it is all work time. [...] It undoubtedly intrudes into the spatial and temporal domestic sphere» (Interviewee 3).

«With smart working, family and work life become as a whole. This makes both aspects demanding» (Interviewee 18).

The accounts of the interviewees made it possible to identify themes such as the intensification of work rhythms, hyperconnectivity, and the lack of disconnection. Some situations resulted in experiences of real **burnout**, meaning that in terms of exhaustion of personal resources useful to produce adequate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to the work situation, with consequent negative repercussions on both work activity and personal well-being (cf. Argentero et al., 2008, pp. 218–219).

«Stress is perhaps both work- and family-related, because you have to try to reconcile both as best you can» (Interviewee 17).

«I ended up hating my mobile phone because it reminded me of work. I would get calls, notifications so I downsized it all. The right to disconnect is very important; in fact, it is also stated in the contract, and I absolutely rely on it» (Interviewee 16).

This led our analysis to the reflection on the possibility of getting as guaranteed the **right to disconnect** and thus confirming the lack of disengagement from production time for most of the interviewees, who were engaged in their work—even remotely—in a remarkably similar way and in the same timeframe as office work or, in most cases, even outside of work hours, especially in the early stages of the pandemic.

«The negative element is precisely the split between working day and personal day. I mean, work is always there, because you always have access to your laptop» (Interviewee 10).

«I thought that working hours would be more convenient, but this idea also turned out to be wrong. Sometimes I was also contacted for work reasons outside the fixed hours» (Interviewee 17).

All these elements have therefore guided our analysis on the changes that have occurred within the **family equilibrium** on remote work; as the literature suggests, the dissolution of the traditional workspace and the evanescence of the social function of the workplace may lead the agile worker to take potential risks to their work well-being, especially in terms of working hours and the need for reconciliation (Malzani, 2018). In our research we managed to observe the well-known tendency for the remote worker to extend their average weekly working time, often interrupted by the fulfillment of family duties, leading to an expansion of activity into the evening or weekend hours, placing it in an area of unpaid supplemental work that falls, essentially, on caregivers, culturally identifiable on female rather than male social actors.

«Being at home all the time, you are constantly required to meet family needs and cope with household chores, which are numerous. While leaving home to go to work allows you to get away from household duties for a few hours» (Interviewee 5).

«The main difficulty is now, when in smart working, I am at home and my 3-year-old son now wants to interact more [...]. I often have to absent myself, find a corner of the house where he does not know I am there» (Interviewee 9).

«After being in smart working during the lockdown, I go to work more gladly, whereas before it was a bit of a burden for me. [...] Now I think of it the other way around. I like going to work because home and work are two things that must be disjointed. At least a woman with two little girls cannot do that» (Interviewee 31).

This confirmed how this emergency situation had the merit of succeeding in accelerating a process that had been struggling to take hold, namely the activation of organizational models—discussed for over 40 years—based on the possibilities offered by technology to carry out work activity from a location other than the traditional one; however, not fully respecting several structural prerogatives of smart working, such as the flexibility of the service—once freed from the fixed place and time and instead linked to the objectives to be achieved—voluntariness, reversibility, adequate training on the subject, or alternating between in-person and remote activities (*hybrid solutions*), especially in lockdown. These critical issues have resulted in psycho-social factors such as the perception of the porousness of personal and work time and space, the worsening of the quality of professional interpersonal interaction, and estrangement from corporate community life. These dynamics, if not widely reflected upon and addressed to, may lead to new forms of **segregation**, especially among women.

5 | DISCUSSION

The most interesting empirical evidence precisely concerns the so-called *care overload* in a context that has exasperated the traditional gender gap between paid market work and unpaid domestic work, particularly in the exercise of care and assistance of children and the elderly (ISTAT, 2019). These activities, especially in the lockdown period, despite the copresence of the partner, have been mainly performed by women even if they are smart workers (Cardinali, 2021), reinforcing the label of “*sandwich generation*” for those women, mainly between 35 and 45 years, engaged in both remote work and multiple care needs that they have to cope with having little support.

As stated by Alfano et al. (2023), before the pandemic women working from home reported slightly better work-life balance scores than men (Eurofound & ILO, 2017). The situation changed during the pandemic because

men and women took over caregiving tasks in different ways, depending on their job typologies (ILO, 2020b) and family composition (Eurofound, 2022; Fana et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the growth of remote working led to an increase in unpaid work for women, especially during the lockdowns when schools were closed and teaching was online. The Eurofound 2022 survey suggests that women undertook a disproportionate amount of housework and childcare during the pandemic, even when both parents worked remotely.

As reported in the Eurofound analysis (2020), women with children under the age of 12 reported more work-life conflicts than both men with children of the same age or respondents without children or with children older than 12. Women spent 62 h per week caring for children (compared to 36 h for men), 23 h per week doing housework (compared to 15 h for men), and female single parents with children under 12 spent the longest hours (77 h per week) of all respondents (cf. De Vita et al., 2022).

Even our findings show how, especially in the early lockdown phases when even school activities were conducted in a telematic mode, there was an overlapping of work from home with care tasks, which fell mainly on female workers. If SW is certainly proposed as a tool for achieving a work-life balance condition, it is also true that it can dangerously bring with it the risk of concentrating on women family workloads apparently more easily *manageable* with remote work (cf. Della Ratta-Rinaldi et al., 2021), concealing the risk of producing even among smart workers, some inequalities, first and foremost gender inequalities (De Masi, 1999), since, in this case, work and life converge again, at least in part, in the same physical and social space (Butera, 2020).

Our findings further confirm the well-known picture of the unequal distribution of the *care burden* between men and women at home and home workers, reinforcing the consolidated data of the Italian social structure and culture concerning the **double workload** for women. Those accounts oriented our reflection about the missed opportunity to achieve, through the health emergency, a greater sharing of care roles between men and women in the family context. This allows us to state that this phenomenon, even in obligatory contextual circumstances, has not achieved stable or long-term positive effects (cf. Cardinali, 2021). On that note, Alfano et al. (2023) results suggest that the profile that benefits the most from the revolution in work organization is represented by a male, married, public sector worker, working remotely and not living in the southern part of Italy.

Lessons learned from the first lockdown in Italy (De Vita et al., 2022) confirm a clear gender imbalance in the couple with children between those who took care of the various domestic and daily tasks, especially regarding those tasks that were more demanding and especially in view of the very limited chance of resorting to external help from the couple. Even in their research, the interviews highlight the overwhelming feeling felt during the period of forced confinement, with over 60% of the interviewees declaring a high perception of fatigue and overload, aggravated by the need to manage distance learning and the organization of their offspring's school activities. However, a remarkably interesting finding emerges from the aforementioned research: it does not seem to be a particularly felt need to be supported in the first instance by their partner. This attitude partly accords with the typical Italian *familistic model*, which translates into the persistent belief, rooted primarily in women, that it is *legitimate* to "naturally" attribute care activities to women. These findings highlight how there is clearly still some way to go to achieve greater awareness of the need to seek greater sharing and collaboration within the couple and family organization (cf. De Vita et al., 2022).

These circumstances made evident the so-called **work-life blending**, through the familiar sharing of spaces and connections in a forced domestic cohabitation, which is an exasperation of the need for reconciliation coinciding with the full functionality of remote work, which was also designed to foster **work-life balance**. The two dimensions merge from the point of view of gender differences, into a paradox that risks reducing the objective of reconciliation and the search for balance to a misunderstanding, with likely consequences in terms of work-related risk and possible differences in performance between those who are burdened with care duties and those who are not (Tinti, 2020).

6 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

The article discusses an empirical study on agile work (remote working) in Italy, with a sociological perspective. The research was achieved by conducting 64 in-depth interviews with women across the country, highlighting and exploring the multiple **downsides**—such as boredom, isolation, poor socialization, fear of negative repercussions in terms of career progression, as well as a sense of fusion between private and work time and space due to the lack of the right to disconnect and an increased care burden—and **strengths**—such as improved digital skills and savings in economic and logistical terms due to the lack of commuting—of the agile work experience from March 2020 to September 2021 lockdown. It is clear from the research that emergency strategies on the topic of agile working are not adequate: a paradigm shift is needed.

As already said, our study delved into the positive and negative aspects of agile working through the considerable number of qualitative interviews conducted and to understand that workers wish to continue working by combining office work with a couple of days a week of remote work. This would help mitigate the negative aspects and allow to enjoy the positive aspects of both working modes.

To do so, it will be important to bear in mind the following 8 fundamental aspects, which are actually considered as open questions:

1. **Normative framework:** Clearly define rules concerning flexible working hours, IT security in remote work, and workers' rights in both contexts.
2. **Technology:** Investing in technologies will be essential to facilitate collaboration between team members working in distinct locations, by further developing online communication tools, project management platforms, and data security solutions;
3. **Work–life balance:** Promoting a corporate culture that encourages balance between work and personal life to improve the well-being of employees.
4. **Mindset:** Changing the organizational mindset (of management and employees) is a significant step toward encouraging a flexible and result-oriented mentality rather than based on physical presence in the office.
5. **Workspaces:** Office design should adapt to this new working model to provide workspaces that support both individual work and team collaboration.
6. **Relationship between management and other workers:** This is an essential issue that needs to be seriously addressed, since a retrograde and nostalgic style of workforce management runs the risk of undermining all that has been learned over these years. In this sense, it will be necessary to invest in cooperative and listening skills to build clear communication and mutual trust.
7. **Diversity management:** The valorization of diversity within complex organizational systems will be an especially useful strategic tools to promote an inclusive, fair, and sustainable organizational culture that allows everyone to contribute according to his or her characteristics, so that hybrid work is not an additional instance for inequality.
8. **Good practices:** It will be useful to be inspired by success stories, learning from companies that have been able to grasp the positive elements of change by structuring hybrid working models.

The way to manage this epochal change requires joint planning and development of technology, organization, and work performed with the maximum participation of companies, institutions, trade unions and above all workers (Butera, 2020).

In conclusion, the empirical evidence shows that the work–life balance issue deserves special attention, with an approach that considers not only individual strategies to rely on (*micro level*) but also an organizational (*meso level*) and a social level (*macro level*) above all. Based on this assumption, we are confident to claim that the approach can only be a systemic one.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "Smart Working," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://www.osservatori.net/it/ricerche/osservatori-attivi/smart-working>.
- ² "Smart Working: continua la crescita tra le grandi aziende," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://www.osservatori.net/it/ricerche/comunicati-stampa/smart-working-continua-la-crescita-tra-le-grandi-aziende>.
- ³ "Dallo smart working d'emergenza al 'New normal': nuove abitudini e nuovi approcci al lavoro," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://www.osservatori.net/it/ricerche/comunicati-stampa/smart-working-emergenza-covid19-new-normal>.
- ⁴ "Rivoluzione Smart Working: un futuro da costruire adesso," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://www.osservatori.net/it/prodotti/formato/infografiche/rivoluzione-smart-working-futuro-da-costruire-adesso-infografica>.
- ⁵ ISTAT 2020. "Rilevazione sulle forze di lavoro (RFL) 2020." In INAPP 2021: 70.
- ⁶ "Smart Working tra pandemia e ripresa," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, https://blog.osservatori.net/it_it/smart-working-cos-e-come-funziona-in-italia#covid.
- ⁷ "Il futuro del lavoro al bivio," forme.online, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://www.forme.online/2023/01/17/smart-working-lavoro-del-futuro-al-bivio/>.
- ⁸ "Telelavoro e Smart Working a confronto: come funzionano e quali sono le differenze," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, https://blog.osservatori.net/it_it/telelavoro-smart-working-definizione-differenze.
- ⁹ See footnote 1.
- ¹⁰ "Rimettere a fuoco lo smart working: necessità, convenzione o scelta consapevole?," osservatori.net, accessed December 21, 2023, <https://www.osservatori.net/it/prodotti/formato/infografiche/infografica-rimettere-a-fuoco-smart-working-necessita-convenzione-scelta-consapevole?>

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