

Working from home?

New work arrangements (for some) in the context of COVID-19

White Paper for the Region of Waterloo

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Executive summary

This white paper examines the impact of changing work arrangements due to COVID-19 for workers in the Region of Waterloo. Work arrangements involve *where* people work, *how many hours* they work and their *schedules*. This paper focuses on the challenges and opportunities of *where* people work, emphasizing an equity lens and the complex significance of the shift to work-from-home for workers and the Region more broadly.

First, the paper examines the consequences of differential access to flexible work arrangements, where hourly-paid workers are least likely to have access to work from home, leading to higher rates of job loss during the pandemic as well as higher health risks for workers deemed essential. We emphasize the importance of seeing the worker within the discussion of essential work and the gender-based inequalities of the pandemic. Second, for jobs that do switch to a work from home model, there are three considerations for workers a) assessing the costs and benefits of working from home; b) considering work/life balance when we are 'living at work'; c) understanding the impact of caring responsibilities defaulting to women.

Looking to the future, we consider what economic recovery could look like for those who must go to work, and what adjusting to working from home might mean for others if this trend continues. We also consider what successful work from home arrangements might look like for the Region's own workers, while also supporting economic growth in the private sector when some key employers move away from physical workplaces. We offer suggestions based on emerging policy documents and practical examples from other municipalities.

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1 Introduction: work arrangements matter

At the end of May, the front page of *The Globe and Mail* proclaimed 2020 as ‘the year the office died’ (Andrew-Gee, 2020) and the *National Post* (2020) declared ‘the office is over’. Is this true? What would this mean for the Region of Waterloo? These articles and many other news articles examining the shift to working from home during the pandemic (Kayyem, 2020; Thomas, Morris, & Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2020; Khazan, 2020) are written as clear pronouncements, yet our current reality is much more complex. This tendency towards definitive statements aligns with polarized discourses about the future of work—they either grimly decry technological change or position it as our savior (Reid-Musson, Cockayne, Frederiksen, & Worth, 2020). To make sense of the multiple lived realities of (not) working from home, this white paper centres the concerns of workers, and their changing work arrangements in the context of COVID-19.

Work arrangements involve *where* people work, *how many hours* they work and their *schedules*. This paper will focus on challenges and opportunities of where people work, emphasizing an equity lens and the complex significance of the shift to work-from-home for workers and the Region more broadly. Understanding the impacts of pandemic and resulting economic shutdown through an equity lens is vital to make policies that address the needs of those who are most affected by this pandemic and its economic impacts, while also making the Region more resilient to cope with future crises.

2 Who can work from home?

We begin by asking who can work from home, as the pandemic has revealed how different sectors and segments of the labour market had vastly different experiences when the pandemic closed the province in March. Examining work arrangements—especially where people work—reveals precarity and flexibility: precarity for those who lost their jobs or are essential workers, who risk their health to keep working, versus flexibility for those, especially in the knowledge economy, who are able to work safely from home.

2.1 Who is going to work? Risky ‘high touch’ work and unemployment in jobs that are already insecure

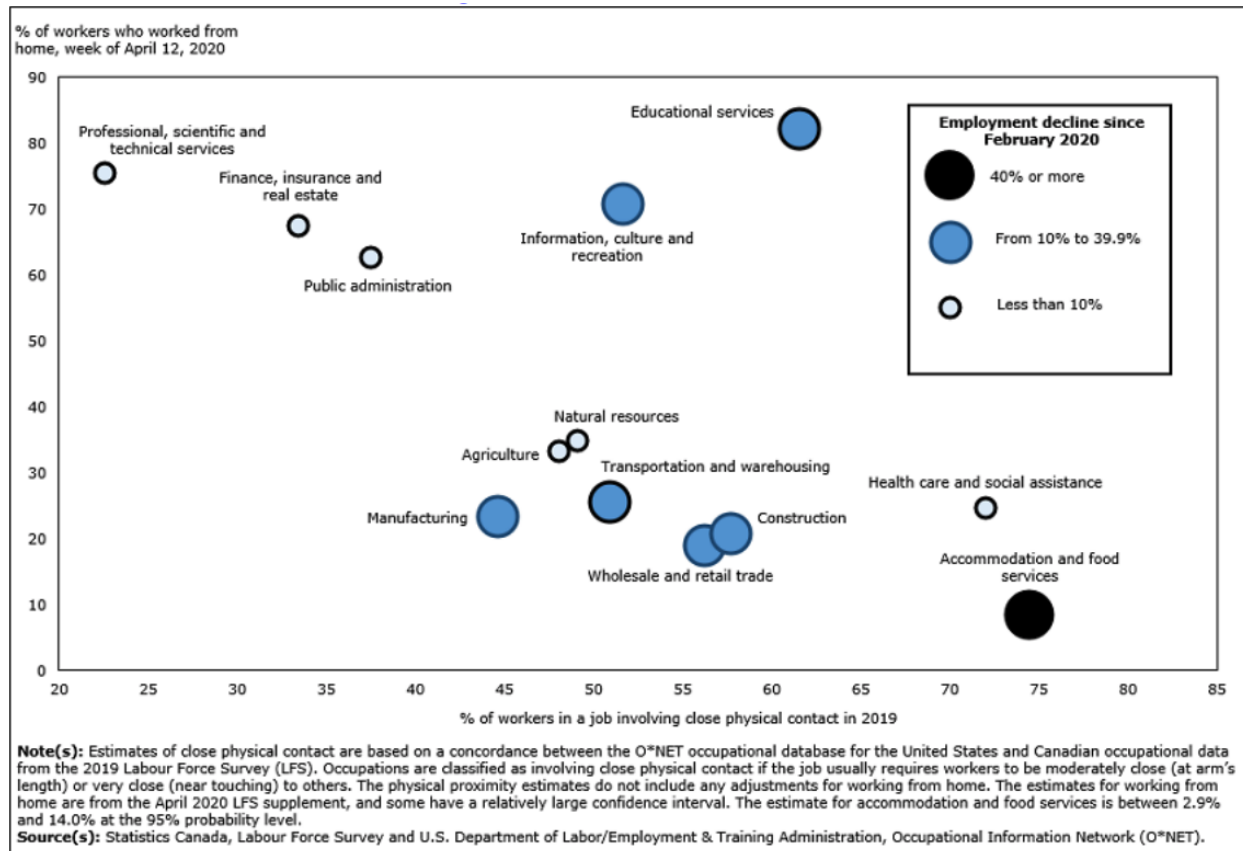
The pandemic’s stay home restrictions expose a critical difference among the labour force in terms of flexibility and precarity. By mid-April, about 12 million Canadians were employed and worked more than 50% of their usual hours, while an estimated 7 million workers have continued to work at workplaces other than home (Statistics Canada, May 2020). In May, this number increased to 8 million (businesses

partially opening), while those who were able to work from home (4.9 million) continued to do so (Statistics Canada, June 2020). In June, the easing of restrictions, the introduction of protective measures and new workplace adaptations have led to a 2 million increase in the number of workers working outside home compared to the previous month (Statistics Canada, July 2020). Long before the pandemic, studies on telecommuting in Canada had already shown that only 44% of jobs are compatible with remote working (Lister & Harnish, 2011). A recent analysis of smartphone location data by the *New York Times* has revealed that while high-income earners are staying at home and limiting their exposure, many lower-income workers continue to commute (Valentino-DeVries, Lu and Dance, 2020).

For the last couple of months, the more visible section of the “can’t work from home” labour force was frontline workers in essential businesses. The Government of Canada (2020) describes essential workers as “critical to preserving life, health and basic societal functioning”. These visible groups of the essential workers are mostly employed in ‘high-touch’ services (such as healthcare, social work, grocery stores, nursing homes, delivery services etc.), where remote work is impossible. According to Public Safety Canada (2020), essential services include, but are not limited to, the functions performed by first responders, health care workers, critical infrastructure workers (e.g., hydro and natural gas), and workers who are vital to supply critical goods such as medicine. That means, beyond these essential groups, there is a wider group of workers in sectors such as sanitation, food production, maintenance and construction who operate behind the scenes yet also are not able to benefit from telecommuting. As a result of racialized occupational segregation, these sectors are also the ones where the majority of workers are minimum wage people of colour and migrants (Beland et al., 2020).

For workers not considered essential, being unable to work from home meant unemployment, impacting large sectors of the labour force including wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food services and the hospitality industry (See Figure 1). According to the Labour Force Survey, these same industries have experienced some of the largest employment declines, with low-wage workers (who earn \leq \$24/hour) facing twice the average rate of unemployment (38.1% unemployment for low wage workers, 17.8% unemployment across all categories) over the first two months of the COVID-19 lockdown (Statistics Canada, May 2020). These sectors are dominated by hourly-paid, part-time, and majority unprotected work. Workers in these sectors are most likely to experience permanent layoffs due to economic recession, as this workforce is easily replaceable when the economy gets back to ‘normal’ (Shierholz, 2020).

Figure-1: COVID-19 Impact on Economic Sectors - % of Employment Decline, Working from Home and Close Physical Contact (February - April 2020)



2.2 Who is working from home?

Before the pandemic, few Canadian workers worked from home: our best measure is that about 13% of employees were in jobs where *any* of their scheduled hours could be worked from home (Statistics Canada, 2018). The emphasis on any of their scheduled hours is important—this is not a measure of the number of work from home positions, but positions where part of the working time could be done from home. By the end of March 2020, 40% of Canadians were working from home (presumably for all their hours as most offices were closed). Within a few weeks of the start of the pandemic, Canadians reached the estimated maximum capacity of work from home potential of the labour market (Deng, Morissette, & Messacar, 2020). Workers who were able to work from home are more likely to be salaried rather than hourly employees, they are also more likely to be highly educated and highly paid (Messacar, Morissette, & Deng, 2020). As a result, these workers were the least likely to lose their jobs due to COVID-19 and were the fastest to bounce back to near normal employment by June.

Importantly, the ability to work from home varies greatly by industry (see Figure 1). Industries that make up the knowledge economy, including finance, public administration and professional, scientific and technical services are the most amenable to flexible work locations. Moreover, especially for aspects of the knowledge economy dominated by freelancing, working from home is a norm. Besides considering who can work from home by education level, pay and industry, gender is an important consideration, as before the pandemic women were more likely to be working in jobs that could be done from home. According to StatCan data, for dual-earner couples, 62% of women could work from home compared to 38% of men (Messacar et al., 2020). This can be explained by the gendered nature of the labour market, especially positions below a Bachelor's degree, with industries dominated by men less able to be done from home. Moreover, this difference can also be explained by social expectations about caring responsibilities in families, with women on average doing more than double the childcare hours compared to men (50.1 hours/week for women; 24.4 hours/week for men) (Milan, Keown, & Robles Urquijo, 2011).

Key points:

- 60% of jobs are not adjustable to work from home
- 40% of Canadians were working from home just a few weeks into the pandemic, maximizing the capacity of telecommuting
- Not being able to work from home is precarious as non-essential workers face unemployment and essential frontline workers risk their health and the health of those around them
- The flexibility of being able to shift to working from home a privilege, allowing workers to maintain both employment and personal health

3 Going to work: Considerations for workers

In this section, we consider the consequences of changing work arrangements for workers who can't work from home. Although COVID-19 measures have impacted every worker, those who can't work from home are being impacted on a larger scale; the pandemic is exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities in the labour force.

3.1 Seeing the *worker* in essential work: making inequality visible in the care economy

Essential work is a significant part of the care economy. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how important care work is to society, yet also how undervalued and precarious it is. Women are on the frontlines of the pandemic, as 81% of the health care and social assistance workforce is made up of women (Statistics Canada, 2019). Many care workers face extreme vulnerability during this crisis, yet are excluded from the pandemic response (access to healthcare, paid sick-leave, work-place safety, unionization, emergency benefits etc.) as majority racialized and immigrant women (Sultana & Ravanera, 2020). Similarly, immigrant workers are concentrated in agricultural production where invisible, on-demand and unprotected essential work persists. There exist certain inequalities among essential workers who can't work from home with regard to labour protection (in June 26% of COVID cases in Waterloo Region involved health care workers (Thompson 2020)). Therefore, a more socially just economic recovery requires acknowledging and prioritizing the wellbeing of the essential workers as much as the people who benefit from the care labour of those workers.

Migrant workers are more vulnerable to outbreaks and infections due to fewer resources, language barriers, poverty and other socio-economic conditions (Abboud, 2020). For example, a recent report of *The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change* revealed that migrant workers were less likely to socially distance and receive decent food, income or health information during quarantine while their work has intensified greatly (MWAC, 2020). Especially after major outbreaks among migrant farmworkers across southern Ontario (CBC News, April, May, June 2020), the top concern among workers was getting sick and losing their income as no income support was available for them (MWAC, 2020). Employment among very recent immigrants (five years or less) fell more sharply from February to April (-23.2%) than it did for those born in Canada (-14.0%) (Statistics Canada, May 2020).

In addition to the concentration of migrant workers in agricultural production (Lu & Hou, 2019), racialized workers (and many asylum seekers) make up a large portion of the personal support workers in nursing homes and seniors' homes across Canada (Hsiung & Nichol, 2010). During the pandemic, they keep working on the frontlines without status, in multiple facilities, risking job losses and deportation if they get sick (Stevenson & Shingler, May 2020). Therefore, recent breakouts and health crises across Region's

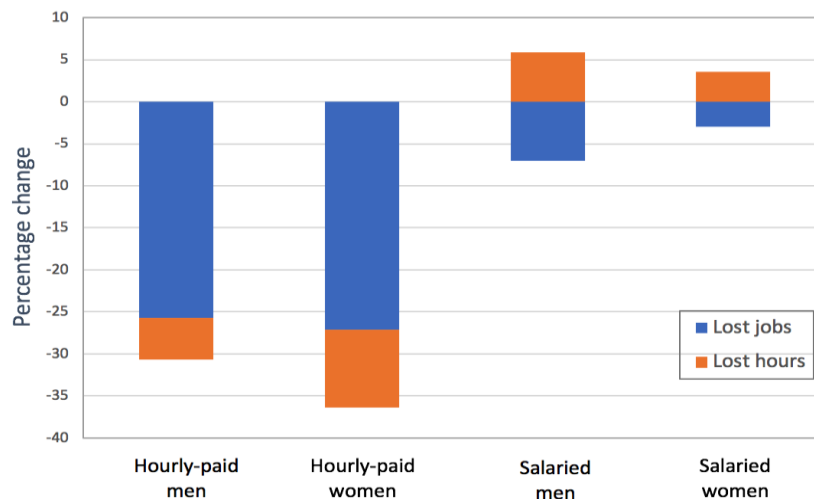
long-term care facilities (Banger, 2020) can also be seen as a labour protection crisis, focusing on the wellbeing of both the residents as well as their caregivers.

3.2 ‘She-cession’: gender-based inequalities persist in sickness & health

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting work arrangements magnify gender-based inequalities in the labour market. A gender lens towards the conditions of those who can’t work from home during the pandemic shows that (1) the majority of the essential workers in high-touch occupations, known as the 5Cs: caring, cashiering, catering, cleaning and clerical functions, are women in low-wage employment (Statistics Canada, 2019); (2) women are more likely to be left to choose between care responsibilities at home and securing income. Moving forward, these conditions will persist during the recovery period. The visible fall in labour force participation among women from March 2020 onwards failed to recover as fast as it did among the male labour force by June 2020 (Statistics Canada, July 2020).

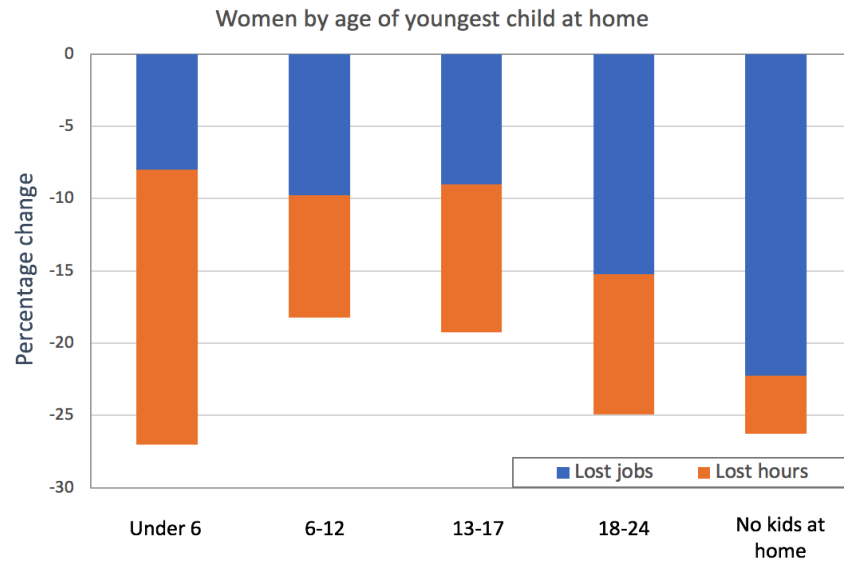
The April Labour Force Survey revealed women account for a disproportionate share of job losses in March which then gradually split between men (-14.6%) and women (-16.9%) in April (Statistics Canada, May 2020). Figure 2 shows that employment losses among both men and women were more severe in hourly-paid jobs than salaried ones, with losses in working hours are more common among hourly-paid women. As we also consider the age of women’s youngest child at home, the impact of COVID-19 on aggregate hours worked is unequally distributed (Figure 3). Strikingly, women who lost the majority of their usual work hours were the ones with children under age 6, suggesting care work (childcare, homeschooling, domestic work) is still considered as primarily women’s responsibility (Peck, 2020).

Figure 2: COVID-19 impact on aggregate hours worked



*Hours are actual weekly hours on all jobs. Values are the double-difference: (April-February2020)/February2020-(April-February2019)/February2019. Source: Labour Force Survey, March & April (PUMFs)

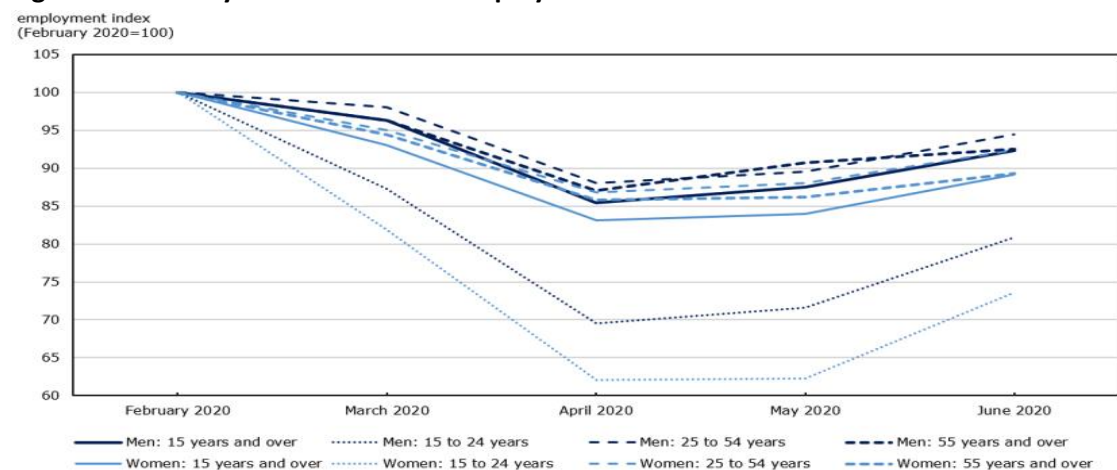
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 Source: Labour Force Survey, March & April (PUMFs)

In June, employment among men had recovered to 92.3% of its February level, compared with 89.2% among women (Statistics Canada, July 2020). Figure 4 demonstrates that in each age group, recovery of pandemic related employment losses was more advanced among men and slowest for women with school-aged children (Statistics Canada, July 2020). With the re-opening of economies while childcare is largely unavailable, women are still more likely to lose their jobs, forcefully or voluntarily dropping out of the labour force (Beland et al., 2020; Long, 2020). As a result, any economic recovery policy needs to prioritize women workers experiencing ‘she-cession’ (Yalnizyan, 2020), stretched too thin on several fronts caring for others (Trichur, 2020).

Figure 4: Recovery of COVID-related employment losses



Source(s): Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Key points:

- Those who worked in 'non-essential' businesses and lost their jobs within the first wave of the lockdown were mostly women, low-wage, part-time, hourly paid, non-unionized, temporary workers with lower levels of education. That means existing labour force inequalities with respect to sectoral categorizations became highly visible during the pandemic.
- Care work is essential work. The pandemic has revealed how important care work is to society, yet how undervalued and precarious it is. The majority of caregivers are invisible, on-demand and unprotected. Those who operate behind the scenes such in agricultural production, personal support, long-term care (also majority women and immigrants workers) bear the burdens of increasing risks during COVID-19 but can't benefit from certain protections (income support, sick leave, healthcare) as other workers do. As the pandemic surged, workers in high-touch businesses were made to choose between losing jobs or being more exposed to the virus. A more socially just economic recovery requires acknowledging and prioritizing the wellbeing of all essential workers.
- Gender-based inequalities shape the work landscape of COVID-19, both during the economic shutdown as well as recovery. For the Region's workers who can't work from home and who have lost their jobs over the past couple of months, we should consider gender conscious recovery programs ('she-covery'), ensuring access to safe, affordable, and high-quality care.

4 Working from home: Considerations for workers

A popular question is whether those working from home will remain in this work arrangement even when not required to by the pandemic. The answer is both yes and no. According to the literature and recent studies, some workers never want to go back to the office. For them, it means an end to commuting and potentially offers more flexibility in their working day. Yet for others, working from home damages both their wellbeing and their career as they take on more unpaid work.

4.1 The costs and benefits of working from home

When work moves into the home, workers have several cost considerations. At the outset, there is often a significant cost involved in setting up or improving a home office space, setting up the technology of

virtual meetings as well as making the space suitable for full-time hours. While some employers are granting credits to purchase office furniture to use at home, this is not a universal practice. Moreover, many homes are too small to accommodate separate office space, with Shearmur (2020) estimating that to fully compensate workers for home offices, pay would need to increase at least \$5871/year. This figure is based on the costs of renting a flat with an extra room to use as an office as well as ongoing costs like increased energy usage. So far, residential usage rates of electricity rose 15% in Ontario during the pandemic (CBC News, August 2020). The biggest savings (of time and money) involves commuting; yet savings in Waterloo Region may be small, as we already have the second shortest commutes in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, with most commuters living within 10km of their workplaces (Region of Waterloo, 2016). Importantly, for the small but growing percentage of residents who previously commuted to Toronto, working from home provides significant cost savings. While we often assume commuting is negative, some research cites its value in separating work from home (Wilhoit, 2017).

4.2 Work/life balance when you are ‘living at work’

Beyond financial costs, there can also be work/life balance costs. A popular lament circulating on Twitter this summer is that *we’re not working from home, we’re living at work*. Researchers have been concerned with disruptions to work/life balance since the shift away from manufacturing as the core economic activity of the economy, considering how the ‘new economy’—one that is service-based and connected to technology and innovation—inherently pushes work into all aspects of our lives (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2004; see Lott, 2018 for the cognitive ‘spillover’ of work into life). We have argued, “Over the last few decades, the neoliberal transformation of production and labour relations in knowledge economies have informed critical approaches to knowledge work, reversing its mainstream associations with privilege, security and freedom. The integration of information and communication technologies (Perrons et al., 2005), a reconfiguration of workspace and activities (Gray et al., 2017) and the acceleration of work rhythms have changed the boundaries of work” (Worth & Karaagac, 2020). In the work from home context, despite concerns from employers that workers would take advantage of work from home arrangements, employees often worked more (in the CTrip experiment, productivity rose 14%), in part because workers took fewer breaks (Bloom, 2014). The length of time working from home matters as well, as a few months into the pandemic some commentators are labelling an early rise in productivity for some workers as ‘fear-based’ and not sustainable long term (Cutter, 2020). In the CTrip experiment, about half the workers involved in the study wanted to return to the office, while the other half preferred to work from home. Given the diverse lives of workers, the research suggests letting employees try out work from

home arrangements and then allowing them to opt-in if it works for them (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2014).

4.3 Care responsibilities defaulting to women

Like the gendered impacts of those who can't work from home, there is a gendered inequality to work from home arrangements. While Collins et al. (2020) surmised that the transition to work from home might make invisible domestic and caring labour more obvious to fathers, according to US data collected before and during the pandemic, for two-sex dual earner couples able to work from home “mothers with young children have reduced their work hours four to five times more than fathers. Consequently, the gender gap in work hours has grown by 20 to 50 percent”. This inequality can be seen as a deepening of existing gaps—when someone needs to take care of the kids, it makes sense for family finances that the person who earns less steps back from paid work—here the gender pay gap reinforces social norms about who is a carer. This is a longstanding finding in research on telework, where gendered caring responsibilities and domestic labour persist in work from home arrangements for both for employees who choose to work from home and for those who are assigned telework (Hilbrecht et al., 2013). While mothers value the flexibility of work from home, “Time ‘saved’ from not having to commute to an office was reallocated to caregiving, housework or paid employment rather than to time for their self” (Hilbrecht et al., 2008: 454). Valenti (2020) puts this even more bluntly:

“The pandemic isn't forcing mothers out of the workforce—it's just shining a light on long-standing inequalities. The coronavirus doesn't care who does the dishes or who helps with homework. So when we talk about these issues, let's be precise: Covid-19 may be making it harder for parents to balance their home and work lives; but it's dads who are making it harder for moms.”

Key Points:

- There are thousands of dollars of costs shifted to workers who work from home, both in set-up and maintenance costs of home offices.
- Productivity often increases in work from home arrangements, but often in ways that are damaging to workers (taking fewer breaks), working more due to fears of unemployment
- The gender gap in work hours is growing, especially for mothers with young children as they move away from paid work to unpaid care work

5 What happens next? Considerations for the Region

The impact of COVID-19 crisis is highly heterogeneous across the Region's labour force and businesses. The concentration of employment losses among less secure jobs (hourly-paid, non-unionized, temporary, part-time) urges us to consider the ability of low-income and laid-off workforce to afford basic needs and get by during and post-pandemic. Knowing which workers are affected in which ways allows the Region to develop policy effectively. This means considering the needs of different groups of workers with respect to gender, class, Indigeneity, race and immigration status as well as their ability to work from home or not. Overall, we suggest a care-based approach to labour market from the point of view of workers, while also considering how to keep highly skilled workers in the Region.

5.1 Recovery for those who can't work from home

As the pandemic exposed how much society depends on essential workers and how vulnerable they are to crisis, the recovery period is an opportunity to increase investments in care economy as it benefits all. Inequalities exist among essential workers regarding labour protection. Therefore, a more socially just economic recovery requires acknowledging and prioritizing the wellbeing of essential workers as much as securing their services. Accordingly, the concentration of employment losses among less secure jobs (hourly-paid, non-unionized, temporary, part-time) urges us to consider the ability of low-income and laid-off workforce to afford basic needs and get by during and post-pandemic.

Non-profit organizations that support employees in the Region in multiple sectors have insights about the conditions of the workers as well as the resources to address their needs in a pandemic. **Collaborating with these organizations and voluntary actors** could provide the Region with the necessary data to **inform a more participatory recovery strategy**. Some of these organizations such as Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, Workforce Planning Board, Communitech, The Working Centre, Waterloo Regional Labour Council, SWAN Waterloo already provide information for workers about their rights and resources and could be supported to develop programs (education, training, mentorship) to help workers. An example of such kind of collaboration is 'The Community Call' in Ireland, a major initiative linking local government with the community and voluntary sectors. The Community Call is overseen and managed locally by local authorities. The forum involves an extensive list of state and voluntary organizations (Government of Ireland, 2020).

Many workers who can't work from home have increasing caring responsibilities and health concerns at home and in their communities as the pandemic continues. As the majority of those who work in essential businesses and the care economy are women, any economic recovery policy needs to prioritize women workers stretched too thin on several fronts or they will opt out of the workforce to care for others. The *Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada* makes clear ties between social care and economic recovery, arguing that "supporting social infrastructure for the care economy is vital for an equitable economic recovery" (Sultana & Ravanera 2020: 6). This response involves **substantial investments in childcare, elderly care services and healthcare provision for the workforce** as a whole (including migrant, seasonal, temporary workers).

5.2 Adjusting to (some) work from home arrangements: building a new normal

While we are still in the midst of the pandemic, there are already discussions about how COVID-19 is building a 'new normal' of work arrangements outside of the traditional workplace. At the outset, working from home might be seen as a threat to the Region, as the tech sector and other easily adaptable work from home industries are central to current economic development plans. Decoupling businesses from physical space means that workers can be located anywhere, and that potentially means a change to the Region's (and potentially the country's) tax base. With recent announcements from Shopify (2020) and others that they will be digital by default, there is a real concern that the Region could lose skilled workers. A recent survey of American CFOs found that "74% will move at least 5% of their previously on-site workforce to permanently remote positions post-COVID 19" (Lavelle, 2020). There could also be knock-on effects in the labour market if working from home becomes more permanent for more people, with a range of lower pay urban service roles which support office workers also disappearing (Glaeser, 2020).

Yet, while the cost savings of having people work from home is often initially tempting, for many firms it is not a long-term solution. For example, Yahoo returned to the office model, after experimenting with work from home arrangements. Yahoo was concerned about the quality and speed of work from home and felt it was losing out on insights and innovation based on copresence, from casual conversations in the hallway as well as responsive team meetings (Goudreau, 2013). What is worth considering is how the Region incentivizes start-ups and businesses in general to locate in the region. The rapid shift to work from home for key professional sectors means that it may be less valuable to support businesses who may then shift to a remote workforce. In a period of decreasing revenues and increasing expenditures, **special**

grant schemes for innovation could help businesses close these gaps. This could include diversifying e-government services, e-education and e-learning, tele-medicine, etc. Also, it can be a moment of opportunity to reinforce investment in the reorganization of production methods such as 3D-printing and production, the expansion of high-tech manufacturing, where highly-skilled jobs are often linked to the plant, keeping jobs in the Region (McKenna, 2020).

As an employer of more than 3500 people, the Region can **support its own employees who might keep working from home** by providing training, guidance on digital literacy and reliable, low-cost internet infrastructure. For example, the municipality of Palermo (Italy), through its innovation office has created a “digital toolbox” that provides the tools, procedures and information necessary to work online. It includes essential information for municipal staff to work remotely at home (Eurocities, 2020). Similarly, the city of Milan has used dashboards to understand where citizens were located on the city map and how they could connect them to private sector services. Based on this data, and in partnership with a telecommunications company, the city was able to provide free internet access to vulnerable families (UCLG, 2020). Beyond supporting employees to work from home with infrastructure, addressing gender pay equity at the Region could help address the gendered workload that persists while working from home, while also serving as an example to the private sector. While the public sector does a better job at paying men and women equitably, significant gaps remain: “women are paid 22% less than men in the public sector and 27% less than men in the private sector. The extra 5% that women take home in the public sector comes to \$2689 per year” (McInturff & Tulloch, 2014). Working towards pay equity bolsters women’s economic security, while also contributing to more equitable divisions of unpaid caring and domestic labour.

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