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The Entrenchment of the Ideal Worker Norm During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Working Mothers in the U.S.

Mona Zanhour and Dana Sumpter

Forthcoming at ***Gender, Work, and Organizations***

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Abstract

We study shifts in the ideal worker culture as experienced by working mothers across organizations in the United States during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the experiences of 53 interviewees in how they attended to increased responsibilities across both work and family domains, we saw an entrenchment of the ideal worker culture across nearly all organizations and professions. This manifested in three levels, as (1) a reinforced ideal worker culture in the workplace through work-intensification, increased competitiveness, and surface-level support; (2) the reinforcing of organizations' ideal worker norms at home, with gendered division of space and labor, and (3) experienced internalized ideal worker norms in the expectations working mothers maintained for themselves. These findings offer insight into the lives of working mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges which have pushed many mothers to reduce work hours or leave the workforce. Highlighting the intricate nature of the entrenchment of the ideal worker culture informs implications for theory of gendered organizations and for organizational practice.

Keywords: *Covid-19, gender, ideal worker, masculinity in the workplace, work/family scholarship, working mothers*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates how ideal worker norms evolved during the Covid-19 pandemic, from the perspectives of working mothers in the United States. Studies have pointed to the unequal social and economic impact of Covid-19 on women, and working mothers in particular (Cohen & Hsu, 2020; Madgavkar et al., 2020). In 2020, the American labor market lost 2.2 million women between February and October (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). Collins et al. (2020) found that mothers, more than fathers, reduced their work hours as a result of the pandemic, increasing the gender work hours gap by 20 to 30%. The pressure to balance work and family responsibilities and resorting to gendered norms in the home contributed to this substantive loss (Shockley et al., 2020). These alarming trends raise the question of how norms about working in organizations have shaped the responses of working mothers during this crisis, in how they attend to their work and family responsibilities.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was well-documented how norms within work cultures have often betrayed mothers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011) and their bodies (Gattrell, Cooper, & Kossek, 2017; Gabriel et al., 2020). The dominant work culture idolizes work primacy and values an ideal worker "whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and children." (Acker, 1990: 149). This worker is constantly available to work and prioritizes work over personal obligations (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). That "ideal" image was found to be illusive, often projected and not realized by men (Reid, 2015) while penalizing mothers who have to carefully navigate between work and family identities to maintain a professional image that meets these expectations (Ladge et al., 2012). In the U.S., that work culture exists within a larger social context that lacks the infrastructure to support parents. The U.S. is one of only two

countries in the world that do not have a federal paid parental leave (World Policy Center, 2020). The repercussions can be seen in mothers' labor force participation, whereas only 63.3% of women with children under 3 are employed compared to 93.5% of men with kids of the same age (BLS, 2020).

Yet as working mothers have "always battled shame, the pandemic just made it worse." (Vroman, Danko, & Ladge, 2020: 1). During the Covid-19 pandemic, boundaries between work and home collapsed. Working from home became a sudden norm for millions of workers. As of summer 2020, close to half of U.S employees were telecommuting, and one in four workers reported working entirely from home (Gallup, 2020). Working parents with young and school-aged children found themselves not only employees, but also teachers, house managers, cleaners, and caregivers. Reports on parents' and mothers' burnout emerged, along with accumulating evidence of long-term impact on female employment and gender equity (Collins et al. 2020; Pinsker, 2020). The "second shift" transformed into a simultaneous triple shift, with newfound responsibilities (such as cleaning or house work that was previously outsourced, keeping up with public health guidelines, and helping children distance learn), that left many working mothers depleted and overwhelmed.

It is thus important to understand how organizational norms may have evolved during this time and shaped the experiences of working mothers. On one hand, pandemic-related work disruptions could have decreased ideal worker norms in organizations, as working from home can afford flexibility and viewing the living situations and families of work colleagues during video calls could engender empathy and understanding. On the other hand, given the novelty of this disruption and the economic crises many industries were facing, ideal worker norms may have been anticipated to be enhanced during this time of duress. Thus, we developed a study to

explore how women navigated their work and family responsibilities during this time. The findings and resultant theorizing that we develop in this paper were guided by the following research question: *how did organizational ideal worker expectations evolve during the Covid-19 pandemic, as women experienced novel work arrangements – working from home, with children— during this time?* To address this question, we qualitatively examined how mothers in the U.S. navigated working from home with children in 2020, to see if their experiences reflect a reduction or enhancement of ideal worker norm expectations. The inductive nature of the study builds understanding grounded in working mothers' lived experiences, which complements other quantitative studies that have noted alarming trends, such as reduction in work hours and deleterious effects on mental health and wellbeing (Yan, Ding, and Guo, 2020) . Next, we discuss the background of literature on gender and ideal worker norms, and how Covid-19 shaped the gendered nature of work during this time. These are the theories that, during data analysis, we identified as most relevant to the themes which emerged from the data.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Gender and the ideal worker

The sustainability of the "work-first" organizational culture in the U.S. has long been questioned (Kanter, 1977; Solomon, 1994; Williams, 2000). With increased female labor force participation (Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2020) and families moving beyond past assumptions of the male breadwinner and female home-keeper model (Ladge et al., 2015), companies have adapted by timidly embracing family-supportive policies (Galinsky et al., 2010). Despite a lack of federal-level support for paid family leave, access has generally increased over the past two decades, such that an estimated 23 percent of American workers have defined paid family leave benefits through their employer as of 2021 (BLS, 2021). Researchers have also identified

organizational culture as an important determinant of decreased conflict between work and family, and how work cultures impact men and women differentially (Allen, 2001; French et al., 2018). A slow conversation about societal and organizational gender-based work beliefs continues (Slaughter, 2012).

However, these solutions and scholarly conversations have tended to not fully take into account Acker's Theory of Gendered Organizations (Nkomo et al., 2018). In her seminal research on the gendering of organizations and their systemic gender-based inequality, Acker (1990; 2006) explained how terms such as job, performance, work, and task are embedded in a culture that reinforces particular norms of what is acceptable, and what is non-normative. As such language and understandings were developed mostly by men, the norms tend to match with the needs of a man unencumbered by non-work responsibilities. Such norms perpetuate divisions of labor, reward and performance assessment processes, and job designs, which ends up excluding nonconforming employees from promotion or leadership opportunities, translating into gendered hierarchies (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). Acker (1990, 2006) argues that organizations are not gender-neutral spaces where both men and women can be similar players (Acker, 1990). Rather, organizations are regimes of inequality (Acker, 2006), wherein systems of policies and programs are designed to further the advancement and success of ideal workers (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). That ideal worker is wholly committed to work and is unencumbered by family responsibilities (Acker, 1990). That image is based upon the availability and capabilities of a typical man, and yet in practice, is not realistic for any gender and is often gamed. Reid (2015) investigated this work-first culture in a consulting company, and the accompanying expectations of presenteeism and continuous availability for work. She found that men who were considered high performers and projected an image of an 80-hour workweek

were often managing an illusion. Maintaining an image of 80-hour workweeks, along with an outwardly acceptance and propagation of work primacy, can effectively hide other non-work roles, such as parenting and personal time.

These norms have shaped how individuals who are underrepresented or stigmatized respond to their work obligations and interpersonal work processes. In a "masculinity contest culture" that reinforces competition (Berdhal et al., 2018; Glick at al., 2018) and where inequality regimes perpetuate gender-based inequality (Acker, 2006), selective disclosure is an approach that underrepresented groups employ in order to be included (Phillips et al., 2009). In such organizational cultures, employees feel they cannot show weakness or lack of dedication to work, and therefore typically refrain from asking for help. They tend to discount or not share details about their personal lives, such as family responsibilities. Employees feel they must continuously prove their worth by demonstrating strength, putting work first, and be ready to succeed in a "dog-eat-dog" work environment (Glick et al., 2018).

This makes it more difficult for women, and for working mothers in particular, to hide truths about their non-work role needs. Pregnancy, for example, is not easily hidden. Women are penalized for pregnancy and motherhood (Correll, et al., 2007; Ladge et al., 2012). Even if organizational family leave policies exist, informal norms often discourage working mothers from taking advantage of them (Williams et al., 2013). Motherhood in such work cultures is viewed as misaligned with the image of the ideal worker. As a result, working mothers often manage identities and work/family boundaries in a way that reduces the visibility of their motherhood role (Ladge & Greenberg, 2019). They avoid asking for support, so that they are not stigmatized as insufficiently committed to their work (Manzi, 2019; Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

As Acker's theory of gendered organizations suggests that women's success in the workplace encourages them to leave their motherhood identity outside of work, we now discuss the impossible scenario that working mothers were subject to in 2020. The Covid-19 work-from-home mandates brought the two worlds of work and family into the home-- the result of which could either be a moment of reckoning for or a reinforcement of ideal worker expectations.

2.2 Local context: Covid-19 in the United States

This background sets the stage for how the Covid-19 pandemic began to thrust these conversations to center stage in 2020. In March 2020, the declaration of a national health emergency prompted the closings of most schools and daycare facilities across the United States. Millions of employed adults shifted immediately to working from home. Simultaneously, millions of children were suddenly unable to physically go to school, daycare, or before/afterschool programs. External helpers such as nannies, babysitters, or family members were unable to help with childcare needs, as households were locked down under "safer at home" orders prohibiting the mixing of households (Zhang & Warner, 2020).

This compelled a series of different effects on workers in the U.S. We focus here on working mothers who shifted to working from home, with children at home as well. Those shifts created a situation that made it more difficult for women to hide or suppress non-work role responsibilities, given that newly-normative video work meetings provided enhanced visibility into what the work from home experience was like during this time. Interruptions from children on video work calls became a common occurrence, sometimes met with laughter or smiles, while other times met with frustration laden with gender-based stereotypes (Cooper, 2020). The resources and systems that had been relied upon to help navigate both home and work

responsibilities, such as after-school care, were no longer available. Moreover, as work came home, physical boundaries between work and home were eliminated. The responsibilities of both home and work roles needed to be completed in the same space, and often at the same time. This combination led to working mothers being placed in a seemingly impossible position, where they needed to manage their reputations and external identities, while working from home with children.

During the summer months of 2020 when this research was conducted, many families in the U.S. were still working from home. As of May 2020, most states had only just begun their initial phases of reopening (Lee et al., 2020). Schools and a considerable percentage of childcare facilities remained closed for in-person learning (Guynn, 2020; Lee & Parolin, 2021). Even in the summer months when school is not in session and several months into the pandemic, we noted a consistent lack of availability of child care and in-person schooling for children of the majority of our participants. Additionally, even though some child care facilities and schools or summer programs had opened to be in-person during the summer months when the interviews took place, the majority of our participants still had their children at home with them during some or all work hours during weekdays. This is for numerous reasons, including (1) lack of availability of in-person care, schooling, or camps that operated for full time weekday work hours; (2) some participants had to move from their homes (e.g., moving from a city apartment to a rural or suburban home with relatives); (3) even if childcare was available, some participants still did not feel comfortable placing their children in an in-person setting due to continued pandemic health and safety concerns; (4) even if childcare was available and their children were in it, it could be closed at any time due to quarantine protocols. One participant expressed this as follows:

> "*Please, is it summer break? It wasn't even a vacation. It was like just everyone on the edge of their seat waiting for {the school} to make a decision. Are we going back, are we not going back? Did they find the vaccine? What's happening? So it was like from March until now, we've just been on this roller coaster, just struggling along. Trying to move forward. But no teacher at least here ever got an actual break… I'm tech support, I'm emotional support, I'm the teacher, I'm the psychologist in this. It's exhausting." (P53;project manager; children seven and six years old)*

In addition to limited childcare options, workplaces in the U.S. tend to have very limited paid leave options for caregiving employees. At a national level, the U.S. does not have paid family or sick leave. Rather, there exists a patchwork of policies decided upon by organizations, state or local laws, or determined by negotiated labor or union contracts. Although the 2020 Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided some leave availability for Covid-related illness, quarantine, and child care needs,workers across the U.S. still faced different constraints regarding having the choice to take paid leave. There was a disproportionate impact on lower-wage and part-time workers, which became more prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic as workers got sick, had to help care for sick family members, or needed to quarantine for 14 days after a virus exposure (Ranji et al., 2020).

Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic put all of our participants' families in unfamiliar situations, where they had to quickly learn how to navigate the new reality of working, living, and parenting during a global health crisis. There were daily decisions being made about where and how to work, while also managing the home, parenting, and distance learning from home. We have some early understanding of how the pandemic has impacted women versus men differently. Petts, Carlson, and Pepin (2020) analyzed surveys from 989 parent partners in the U.S., and found that the lack of access to childcare and increased distance learning responsibilities negatively impacted mothers' employment, but not that of fathers. In a sample of 274 dual-earner couples with young children, Shockley and colleagues (2020) Found that a 36.6% of the couples in their sample employed highly gendered strategies for working from home during spring 2020,

with 18.9% employing strategies that were neither gendered nor egalitarian, and 44.5% adopting a clearly egalitarian approach to work and childcare.

We extend these contributions by employing the lens of ideal worker norms in examining how gendered norms evolved for working mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic in the U.S.This unique setting of an absence of boundaries between work and family, and lack of ability to separate the mothering identity from the professional, provides an opportunity to explore how ideal worker norms can manifest not only in organizations and in individual responses, but also in the home. The ideal worker concept was developed in the context of the organization (Acker, 1990), and has been theorized as manifesting through individual responses to organizational ideal worker norms (e.g., Gatrell, Cooper, and Kossek, 2017). While understanding how an organization's culture can impact work/life choices made in the home has been identified in work/family literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2001), this has yet to be understood through an ideal worker theory lens (Nkomo et al., 2018). As we describe next, our qualitative approach allowed us to delve into this context, exploring how mothers managed their expanded responsibilities, and whether their experiences reflect any shifting nature of ideal worker norms across organizations during this time.

3. METHOD

3.1. Sample and procedure

We employed a phenomenological qualitative methodology to enable us to gain insights into less-understood organizational phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2014),describing the commonalities of a phenomenon among the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994), as well as elicit multiple socially-constructed realities that we could analyze holistically (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Following a phenomenological approach to garner the

individual lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) of working mothers, being inductive allowed us to move from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. That is, as our research interest is in how women navigated their work and family responsibilities during this time, qualitative research enables us to uncover how women construct meaning from their lived experiences, which can be drawn from to generate theoretical insights that are closely connected to that lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). We leveraged our participants' expertise as they report on their own experiences, as well as their observations of their organizational and job context. Finally, qualitative methodology is also well-suited for this study as the research question concerns a comparison of participants' perceptions of their experiences across different points in time from a group that is considered underrepresented or disempowered within the phenomenon under investigation (ideal worker norms), and theory pertaining to these questions is currently underdeveloped (Klag & Langley, 2013).

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 53 working mothers. We recruited our participants using personal and professional networks, mothers' listervs and social media groups, and snowball sampling. Participants in our sample worked across 10 states in the U.S. and in a variety of occupations and industries including retail management, education, consulting, and information technology. All participants identified as female, were over the age of 18 years old, had a male parenting partner who lived with them, worked their jobs fully at home, and had at least one child under the age of 16. Demographically, 61% of our participants identify as white and 39% identify as women of color, including being of Hispanic/Latina, Black, Middle Eastern, Asian, or South Asian descent. Our working mother participants all had to work from home as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic response. They all lived in states that had

stay-at-home mandates starting in March 2020, at which point schools and daycare centers were closed.

We conducted all interviews virtually using audio and video. We informed our participants that the goal of this study is to learn about the experiences of working mothers in navigating work and home responsibilities during the Covid-19 crisis. The interview questions[1] asked about mothers' wellbeing, division of labor at home, typical workday responsibilities, and organizational culture and support. In order to better understand pandemic-driven shifts, our questions focused on experiences prior to Covid-19 and then following the Covid-19 response. After the first two interviews conducted by each of the researchers, we met to review the interview protocol and discuss edits, which were minor at this stage relating to wording, clarity, and ease. After the first 15 interviews were completed, we further refined the interview protocol. At this stage, given the progression of the pandemic, we noticed that participants' answers were reflecting multiple phases following the pandemic response. Therefore, we added new questions asking participants to elaborate on how phases of the pandemic changed over time. Our interviews averaged 61 minutes in length, accumulating into a total of 3,303 minutes recorded.

The data collection occurred between June 1 and August 28, 2020. Conducting the interviews during the summer of 2020 allowed us to collect data at an important juncture where participants and their families have already gone through the initial shock experience of the pandemic. Organizations had adjusted and proceeded with a new way of business, allowing us to capture any apparent cultural shifts or changes in policy. During these summer months, stay-at-home mandates varied across states and counties, but working mothers all continued to face a common series of obstacles regarding child care availability and family choices regarding pandemic-driven safety norms. For example, even if day camps or daycares were open at this

[1] Complete interview protocol is available from the first author.

time, not all families felt comfortable exposing their children and communities to risks, so they still chose to keep their children at home. For those with school-aged children, the summer offered an evaluative period for our participants who were transitioning between two uncertain school years. Responding to questions about their experience during this liminal period allowed participants to put their different parenting roles into perspective, considering and comparing across three time periods: the past months when the pandemic arose and everything closed, to the current summer months in between school years and when (in many regions) the pandemic had subsided, to the preparation and planning for the upcoming school year and potential next waves of viral spread during the colder fall and winter months.

Given the time pressure that we expected our participants were experiencing, we were mindful and respectful of our participants' time and their emotional well-being. Participants were promised confidentiality, and we took measures to protect their identification through use of numerical identifiers. Many of our participants stated that they appreciated the interview, the space it gave them to express their thoughts and process their experiences, with several describing the interview sessions as "*therapeutic.*"

3.2 Reflexivity

We demonstrated reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009) by engaging with the participants and with the data both as researchers and as working mothers ourselves. Our personal experience helped us interrogate and strengthen the theoretical insights which were emerging from our data analysis (Greenberg, Clair, & Ladge, 2021). Given that we had experienced similar situations by shifting to working from home with children at home, we were able to communicate with, relate with, and hear our participants in an informed way. We also engaged this lens throughout our analysis. Yet in doing so, we continuously examined and

explicitly discussed our own beliefs, judgments, and practices throughout the analytical process. We engaged in analytical techniques such as theoretical comparison, constant comparison among the data, and looking at negative cases to help us question our own basic assumptions and biases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We also paid special attention to and explicitly discussed participant experiences which were dissimilar to ours, so that such examples could mitigate any potential bias stemming from our own experiences.

3.3 Data analysis

Our data consist of the interview transcripts, as well as notes and analytical memos that we captured during data collection. We analyzed our data inductively (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2019; Corbin & Strauss, 2014), allowing for themes to emerge from how participants described their work experiences during this time. We first read through the interviews and notes to identify and discuss emerging themes. The first author then started coding the data using Nvivo software, creating codes and developing code definitions as themes of interest emerged. Based on emergent themes, the second author then coded the full dataset, adding new codes and definitions that emerged, as well as refining and updating definitions of existing codes. Both authors then took turns with the data through additional coding stages, meeting frequently to review codes, subcodes, and definitions. Any time there was a difference in coding, the authors would discuss and reach consensus. At this time, numerous codes emerged, including “self high expectations,” “manager support,” “organization support,” “gender differences,” “worried job security,” and “job intensification.”

As the coding process clarified the emergent themes, both authors iterated back and forth between the data, relevant theory, and the data structure as it emerged (Corbin & Strauss 2014; Miles et al. 2019). We focused on themes that emerged related to experienced ideal worker

norms, masculine work culture, and family-supportive work culture. This allowed us to generate and refine the coding definitions based on relevant research, which resulted in combining some codes and adding others. For example, we aggregated the open codes of “work intensification,” “masculine work culture,” and “lack of org support” to the axial theme of “experienced ideal worker culture in organizations.” We then discussed and made decisions about how the emergent data structure developed into conceptually meaningful themes, which we share next.

4. FINDINGS

We report the findings of our analysis of participants’ experiences that they shared with us during the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this unique context of mothers working at home with children at home with them, we discovered how experienced ideal worker norms manifested at three levels: the organization, the home, and internally. Overall, our findings suggest an entrenchment of the ideal worker norms and a persistence of the ideal worker culture. By “entrenchment,” we refer to how individuals experienced ideal worker norms as becoming more firmly established or fortified within organizational systems and experienced by organizational members. We portray these themes in Figure 1, and explain them further next. While these experienced ideal worker norms represent the most prevalent experiences in our data, we also describe particular participant situations which serve as counterexamples to ideal worker norm entrenchment.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

4.1. Experienced ideal worker culture in organizations

Women described how they experienced the effects of an ideal worker culture in how they worked with others in their organization, as they worked to perform in their jobs during this time. Three themes emerged in how ideal worker norms and expectations were reinforced within

their organizations: through the intensification of work, a reinforcement of the masculine aspects of their work culture, and the temporary nature of support in absence of clear or meaningful support policies.

First, most participants reported a workload intensification following pandemic-related disruptions. Businesses required additional work as they adjusted their operations to face both the impact of Covid-19 on the changing nature of work (such as shifting to work from home) and the turbulent economic reality of the pandemic's effects on particular industries and occupations. This quickly increased employees' workload. Exemplifying this, Participant 2 is a mother of two children who were seven and five, and an executive at a large retail organization. As an 11-year veteran of the industry, she described how during the spring and summer months of 2020, the entire industry was in crisis mode, since customers were not going to stores to shop. She explained that before Covid-19, she worked at her office for about eight hours each day. Yet once her company shifted to crisis mode and she began to work from home, she shared:

> *"I worked for a large corporation that was going through a very difficult time because of Covid-19 . And the negative impact to the business required me, being in the role that I was in, to basically be in meetings like all day, every day. And it almost felt like because it was such a crisis situation, there was even more of a focus and emphasis on meeting more, and creating more work streams, dealing with crisis type work streams... It was almost as though the company was creating more meetings and more structure, more control and oversight, because we no longer work together physically and we need to over-compensate for that."(P2)*

She then went on to specifically outline the overwork she experienced:

> *"I was required to be in meetings all day, every day. Because it was such a crisis, I was dealing with crisis-type work streams… Work got really crazy. It wasn't an eight hour workday. My meetings started at 8:30 and didn't end until 7:00pm… Even after the meeting ended, 7:00 or 7:30, I was still having to do some work at night to counterpoint and actually to direct the teams." (P2)*

This woman's experience illustrates a common one for working mothers during this time. Her two children were both distance-learning at home in the spring. During this time, her work

intensified, and her organization's expectations of her work time and commitment intensified as well, such that she was unable to balance her work and family roles in ways that she wanted. Her company also exerted pressure to maintain this commitment, as she phrased that her overwork was to "*all save the sinking ship, conserve all the cash we can, and try to survive*"—reinforcing the expectations of her work role and the expected commitment to help her organization. This work intensification was especially exacerbated in businesses that experienced layoffs, as women were taking on the added workload left by downsized employees.

Another participant (P14) , who works in an executive communications role in an IT organization and had a two-year old child, described how prior to Covid-19 , they lived in the city, where she and her husband and a full-time nanny "*worked as a team*" so that they could all attend to their jobs and their child. Then when Covid-19 struck, they moved out of the city to a suburb in a home with their parents, who needed full-time care. Their nanny was no longer able to help, and they were all working at home. Then, "*In April, we laid off 50% of workforce, including my entire department. So I'm the only person left in marketing and communications… And now I work with nobody, no department, no colleagues*." (P14) She went on to describe how she took on the work of her downsized colleagues, and pursuantly felt "*perpetually tired*," that "*this is not sustainable*", and that "*we're failing at everything*." Whether spurred by industry crises or downsizings, such descriptions of work intensification were reported by participants across different industries. Many businesses were in a crisis, navigating a high level of uncertainty that trickled down to employees. For others, work intensification resulted from unfamiliarity with working from home, where organizations were not accustomed to managing teams remotely. Despite the challenges associated with this time, managers still encouraged or

expected immediate responsiveness and constant availability of their employees, reflecting the expected constant commitment of an ideal work culture.

Second, our data suggest that organizations were reinforcing aspects of a masculinized workplace culture. Glick et al. (2018) identify four dimensions of workplace masculinity: 1) show no weakness; 2) strength and stamina; 3) put work first; and 4) a hyper-competitive environment. Indeed, our participants talked about working from home as a time to "*prove your worth*." When jobs are threatened or when an industry is in duress, many participants felt compelled to put work first, to avoid what could be perceived as weakness or lack of commitment. Their organizations expected them to continue to work with little or no consideration of parenting responsibilities—even though, paradoxically, parenting responsibilities had intensified during that time due to school and childcare closures. We particularly noted these norms exacerbated in participants working in the industries of oil/gas, financial services, and those who were working independently as consultants (observed in the expectations of their clients). These participants shared how if they signaled concern over non-work responsibilities, they felt they would then be perceived as insufficiently focused on their jobs. One woman, a human resources professional with a young baby, stated:

> *"Working from home, you're never leaving work… I wish there was a different expectation. My boss sent me a message this morning at 5am. I'm committed to strong job work ethic. You want to show up and perform, but I think it would be nice if we could say 'nobody send emails before 7am or after 7pm.' If we could build that in as a hard and fast rule. I wish that could be a stigma." (P21; Senior Recruiter; has a 5-month old baby)*

The expectation to put work first became more prominent as some lockdown mandates lifted, and organizations began encouraging employees to physically return back to the office. The mother of a toddler and a talent management professional, Participant 35, a human resources professional with a two-year old, described how the external, societal environment in her region

was "*really extreme*" in the late spring and early summer, that it "*became 'us versus them' of people who were saying it's {the pandemic is} not that big of a deal, versus others saying this is crazy*." It was at this time that her company initiated a "*volunteer*" phase of employees returning to work in the office. She explained "*I remember telling my boss at that time,* "*I am wholly against coming back into the office. We are taking this seriously. We aren't even putting our kids back in daycare*." Yet in response to this acknowledgement of her personal needs, she expanded on how she truly felt:

> *"The unspoken rule was "If you care about your job and care about your future, you'd better be there." I heard from senior leaders, "If you think you can just continue working from home, you don't care about your job." Then we learned we can't even social distance safely at work in June... There was still this overtone of "we have to get a lot done. It's not as good as face to face, so you've got to come back in." (P35; HR Business Partner; has a 2 year-old)*

Her description portrays how she perceived her organization's culture as expecting commitment to work as a priority, even above personal health and safety concerns during a pandemic. This working mother went on to describe how:

> *"If you're a current leader, and expect to progress, you've got to come back in face to face. At that time, that's probably when it shifted for me, in I don't feel comfortable saying 'I can't make that meeting because I need to do a craft with {my child} because she's home'. I stop saying stuff like that. I accept every call. I do everything I can to pretend {my child} is not with me."*

Such clear expectation of sacrifice and dedication to maintaining work as a priority, while discounting or ignoring the needs of non-work roles such as being a mother, represents how many women experienced a reinforcement of masculinized work cultures during this time.

Though that work culture had existed previously for some participants, our analysis reveals how the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated and raised the prominence of this type of culture. Participants described how this was prompted by the shift to working from home, particularly in organizations which resisted this shift. There was also managerial resistance to

continuing support and accommodation for family needs, such as wanting to continue to work from home which was deemed as being insufficiently committed to the job. Work-first expectations were brought to the forefront through video meetings, expected responsiveness around the clock, and the need to “make up” for working from home.

Third, even as working mother employees faced escalating home and family responsibilities, we found consistent evidence of organizations providing elusive or temporary support. There was sometimes demonstrated intent to help. Some participants shared how their organizations sent emails acknowledging the extra load that parents had to take on, offered expanded leave policies, or encouraged managers to support their teams and keep meeting-free periods during the day. However, those messages did not always translate into actionable support. Participant 5, a sales manager with two school-aged children (eight and nice years old), shared how her organizations’ leadership announced in a general meeting that they intended to support parenting employees, such as having the flexibility to take a longer breaks during the day and then compensate for that work later at night. Yet in reflecting on this meeting in comparison to her experiences, she stated:

> *“There is a genuine concern for supporting parents, but there is a misconception of how easy it is to ask for help, ... The policies are kind of given, but there isn't encouragement. You cannot blame employees for not asking for help. There has to be more frequent check-ins from managers on people…. They overestimate how much support they give their employees.” (P5)*

This participant’s description targets the gap between superficial support and authentic support. Ideal worker expectations prevent women from feeling comfortable and supported in taking advantage of structural support. This was frequently mentioned throughout our data. Participant 5 went on to give examples of two conversations she had with coworkers about needing support or accommodations, after which she “*felt guilty asking for more as I had already asked two days*

in a row to re-couple things" and that in general, "*people have that constant guilt that 'I don't want to keep asking for flexibility'*." Organizations instill formal support policies, with the expectation that working mothers will ask for help when they need it. Ideal worker cultures, however, typically discourage asking for help (Williams et al., 2013). What we heard from our participants underscores the idea that many women felt that asking for help signals weakness and lack of commitment. These work expectations and norms of limited support were reinforced, rather than challenged, as lockdown mandates and the emergence of work-from-home as a new norm eliminated the boundaries between the professional and family domains. Many organizations reacted with superficial support, such as general policies or expressed messages acknowledging challenges. Yet from the perspective of working mothers, it was business as usual, as they suspected they would be discriminated against if they elected to use such policies (such as requesting a caretaking leave), and they found that their organization's expressions of support did not align with how their individual managers behaved towards them. As a result, families and working mothers often struggled to find their own solutions at home.

4.2. Experienced ideal worker culture in the home environment

Family solutions to organizational role demands tended to reinforce the ideal worker culture in participants' homes, through a reemergence of a gendered division of labor in households with heterosexual parenting partners, where the man's work is often protected. As our participants worked from home with children, they described different arrangements regarding their male partners. Some partners worked at home as well, while others worked outside the home as essential workers in health care or medical professional roles. Generally, we learned that how each individual approached their work choices stemmed from how they would perceive their choices as deemed to be acceptable or not within their organizational culture. In

many cases, these cultures expected commitment and overwork during this time, in a way that neglected family and non-work-related needs. Three themes emerged in how ideal worker norms manifested at home: gendered arrangements of household responsibilities with a male partner, finding solutions when external support disappeared, and the gendering of how partners navigated physical work space at home.

First, our participants shared how their home environments were disrupted during this time, and how their partners responded to the increasing home and family needs. For many of our participants (42 out of 53), there was a reemergence of a gendered division of labor at home, where the man's work was protected while the woman was responsible for the home and children (Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2020). This also manifested as mothers felt it necessary to hide their mother role demands as they worked from home, to protect their image of professionalism, enabling them to "pass" as an ideal worker (Reid, 2015). This was particularly frustrating for participants who, before Covid-19, felt they had established amenable arrangements of household responsibilities with their partners. The data revealed an emergent theme of participants sharing that, during this crisis, there was an identified pattern of parents reverting back to gendered norms. A program coordinator for a nonprofit and mom of a three-year old, who is also pursuing a master's degree evening program, explains how she faced ideal worker norms in her job:

> "*My job was using that to their advantage. They would see that I would send out emails later in the evening, because I would work partially in the day and some at night. So then they started sending out emails at 10pm at night, and I was responding to them. It was just starting to get out of hand. I was like, "I don't want you to always expect me to respond! Nobody's going to sleep!'... My job also knows I am going to school too. I got in trouble twice for choosing to spend time with my daughter than work*." *(P51)*

As a result of how her organization has responded to her needs during the pandemic, she has expressed the desire to turnover: "*I've learned over the years that if I have to choose between my*

family and job, I'm going to choose my family. So I want to work somewhere where I don't have to choose. I want somewhere that has support for moms." She then goes on to relate how gender-based role expectations also reemerged at home with her husband:

> *"It was{before Covid} much more balanced, compared to now-- we've gotten right back into "I'm doing everything". Now, I cook, I clean. He still does the grocery shopping every other week, but we're back to "I'm doing everything for our kid". We're having that argument all over again. And it's really annoying... The biggest difference is we went from, "we are balancing things," and then it became "I was home all day." It switched. I'm my daughter's caretaker, and I'm taking care of the whole house by myself. And he doesn't even notice that he doesn't do anything. He gets upset. It's "who works the hardest!" I can't believe we're back to that again. He told me that I make it look easy. I was like, first off, you should commend me for making it look easy, but then I'm like, "You've seen me cry, you've heard me say I want to give up." I don't know how he thinks I make it look easy. It's like he thinks 'cause he goes into work every day it is harder... I just recently had a conversation with him saying "We need to get back to more of a balance." I can't say much progress has been made." (*P51)

She explains how prior to Covid-19, she had, over time since her child was born, worked with her husband to more fairly balance their household and childcare responsibilities. Yet because of the nature of how their jobs were disrupted as a result of the pandemic – as her work role demands became deprioritized since he had to work outside the home at a hospital – their arrangement of home responsibilities had reverted back to traditional gender norms.

Second, once Covid-19 hit and stay-at-home mandates began, many support systems disappeared. This was extremely prevalent in our sample. Prior to Covid-19, families had carefully crafted a web of support amongst various outlets, including schools, before or after school programs, paid caregiving, external family member help, and coordinated schedules. Yet when the crisis struck, in the face of persistent ideal worker norms imposed on employees and a lack of substantive support to working mothers, families had to find their own solutions to the disrupted new normal, which included the added responsibilities of home-schooling, childcare, and working from home. In the midst of this global crisis, many organizations failed to step up to

provide the support their employees needed. Instead, employee-level solutions were left on the shoulders of families, who were scrambling for solutions. Our participants worked with their partners to find solutions to replace schools and childcare, while keeping up with their intensified work demands. As stated in the previous section, when mothers face a workplace where motherhood is synonymous with lack of professionalism (Cuddy et al., 2011) or where asking for help is a sign of weakness (Allen, 2001), they endeavored to find workable solutions that enabled them to attend to their work. For example, Participant 52, an executive manager of a retail brand, who had decided to hire a nanny to care for her five year old and twin babies, explains the financial and emotional strain she felt when arriving at her particular solution:

> *"We ended up having my mom come up for the first two months, and she lived with us and watched the kids. And that was challenging for her. It was a lot of work and she did her best... Then we brought {a nanny} on, which was the best thing we've ever done. And you know, it's worked out great. She's amazing... If I didn't have her, I think that this would be a very different conversation, to be honest with you… We had to take a 15% pay cut. And so for me, you know, I was stressed... We had decided on the nanny that we wanted to watch the girls. But I was apprehensive to have her start because I didn't really know what was going to happen. And I didn't want to put ourselves in a financial situation where we were paying all this money... So I was having panic attacks, waking up and cold sweats, feeling like I had a gun to my head to make a decision." (P52)*

She describes the ideal worker norms of her industry and organization, providing the example of how her boss, after pressuring her to start to physically return back to work, "*called me at seven AM. Asked me if I was on my way in. I was just so pissed that he asked me. I'm like, I have three kids, you think I drop them off at seven AM*?" This woman's description shows how families often reacted to the reinforcement of the ideal worker in the office by furthering that reinforcement at home. Working mothers created systems at home and outside of work to show up to their jobs virtually, as an image that is as close to the ideal worker as possible. Such home-support arrangements reveal how families were burdened with finding solutions to address

the lack of organizational support, and to address a work culture that assumes employees have no responsibilities outside of work, and can readily put work first.

Third, we observed how the use of space in the home was reported as gendered. We noted a clear trend in households where both parents were working at home, where mothers tended to work adjacent to children (either in a playpen or distance learning), while fathers tended to work in a separate space in a different room in the home. As a result, mothers were often more subject to interruptions and distractions from children, working in tandem with attending to children's needs. Meanwhile, the father was able to focus exclusively on work without interruption. At the office, the ideal worker culture posits that the worker is a man who is not encumbered by family responsibilities (Williams, 2000). At home, we saw that arrangements have the unspoken assumption that home and childcare responsibilities fall on the mothers' lap. Many participants described how they work alongside their children, such as sitting at the same kitchen table with their work laptop in front of them, next to one or more school-aged children who are participating in their virtual learning at the same time. Participant 11, a non-profit president and mother of two school-aged children (five and seven years old), describes how "*I was working from the kitchen table*," while her "*{husband} has a dedicated office upstairs, he does so many Zoom calls and tv interviews*." She took the primary role of caregiving as her children were home distance learning, so that her husband could work uninterrupted. Describing his work circumstances further: "*it's just been kind of like, just non-stop. It's good, but also exhausting, as I have to be supportive. I'm happy for him, but at the same time, but also I'm really tired of being like "You guys, be quiet, daddy's on the phone!" I still have a job and I feel like more often than not, my job is second*." Working alongside children often entailed frequent interruptions to the mother's work, and cognitive interference as the mother could see and overhear what the

children are saying and doing during their school hours. Women with young children also faced such interference because they needed to take care of their young children while trying to work at home. Participant 31, an accountant with a toddler describes:

> *"I do not have a good home office. I can't have one. Because {my 18 month old daughter} is around, and I need to watch her all the time. I did get another monitor, but the place where I had to put it is somewhere she can't reach. It's in a corner, and if I look at it my neck needs to go all the way to the left, and I can't see her, so I'm not using that anymore. I'm using my tiny laptop and screen. I'm using a table that weights three pounds, just in case it falls on her I don't want her to get hurt. It's not a good height, I'm sitting on the couch because I had to get her a gate to not get inside rooms where I can't see her anymore. So I have the living room and kitchen open. When she was still not walking, she was crawling all over kitchen and living room, then whenever I had meetings this gate is just six pieces, so I would close that gate, to a tinier space to have the ability to get to her, as long as the cord for my headphones goes. I don't want her to feel like she's in some kind of jail, so I sit inside the gated area with her. The couch needs to be changed. I'm sitting always in the same spot, and I'm leaning forward, so the edges of the couch are more worn off. It's not comfortable anymore… I realize this isn't a temporary thing, this is my life. My back is hurting. I don't think the way I'm sitting is healthy at all, I'm worried my back is going to be crooked and leaning to the left a little bit." (P31)*

She elaborates on how she sets up the carefully crafted physical space and all of the related tools in her home, attempting to simultaneously attend to both work and mother roles, even experiencing physical strain and discomfort as a result. Her husband worked in IT and was sometimes at home, sometimes going in person to work. Yet the constant expectation remained that she would be the primary caregiver for their young child, despite any effects on her ability to do her job.

There were some exceptions to this theme. Some of our participants (11 out of 53) did not indicate a traditionally gendered division of labor at home. For the vast majority of this subset of our data, this was because they had one or more of the following circumstances: their family role responsibilities allowed them to work in a separate room, they relied on the support of a live-in nanny or family member, their male partner's job had reduced hours or commitments, or their partner was not working. However, the vast majority of our sample described remaining

accessible to their children so as to more easily cross the boundaries between work and family domains.

4.3. The internalized ideal worker

Finally, the working mothers themselves set work expectations that align with masculinized external expectations. Our participants demonstrated internalization of ideal worker norms in three ways: by engaging in passing behaviors to hide their working mother status, feeling guilt or shame for not meeting ideal worker expectations, and sacrificing their own wellbeing in order to meet ideal worker norms. First, participants frequently hid their home and family responsibilities so that they would not interfere with their work time and space, so as to "pass" as an ideal worker (Phillips et al., 2009; Ragins, 2008). They did so even while they had to work with children at home—a novel, challenging, and stressful experience as described by our participants. Even the few who had worked at home previously, now had to adjust to working at home with their children there as well. For those who had young children or babies, or children of any age who had special or mental health needs, this made for a nearly impossible situation of trying to work while attending to the needs of their children. A mother of a baby and a purchaser for an e-commerce organization, Participant 22 describes how she desperately attempted to hide her mothering needs from her coworkers:

> "*I've been on plenty of calls, where, thank god for the mute button. If I unmute for one second, {the baby} is screaming in the background. There's a part of me that thinks, if I'm on the phone with my boss, is he thinking "god that kid is crying so much, how is she getting anything done??" And I know that's not the case. But there's a little bit of "let's make it look like nothing is happening here." Maybe I need to turn off my camera if I should be on a call, that's been fine… It's happened so many times where I'm downstairs on my computer, I log in for a meeting, and showing my face like I'm supposed to. And I know I need to put {the baby} down. So I'll turn my camera off. I'll log in on my phone. I'll run in upstairs, so I can still hear the meeting while upstairs, and then I'll come back down. It's like smoke and mirrors! Make it look like it never happened."(P22)*

Her description of her concern over how her boss will perceive her if he hears her baby crying, as well as the lengths to which she goes to hide her need to spend time putting her baby down for a nap, indicate her internalization of her organization's ideal worker norms in engaging in these passing behaviors.

Second, participants tended to internalize sacrifices made towards attaining the ideal worker image in feelings of failure or guilt. They often expressed these feelings when they were not able to meet these expectations, or in what they had to do in order to try to meet such expectations, including when they were not able to put work first, be available or "on call," or respond to meetings requests with no hesitation. As a result of these expectations that originated from the workplace, we observed how women internalized these expectations and accepted them as a norm. This meant that when they failed to meet those expectations, or when they overly sacrificed family role responsibilities to do so, they directed negative feelings inward. Our participants did share frustration over these expectations, but have also described these expectations as a matter of fact and business need. Many shared an acceptance of these norms, and a sense of helplessness in striving to reach them. Participants expressed phrases indicating the importance of being "c*ommitted to my job,"* having a *"strong work ethic,"* wanting *"to show up and perform,"* that *"I have to be the best worker in the world"*-- indicating their decisions to prioritize work. The few participants who had their male partners take more of a primary role with childcare needs, and who were able to separate their work space from their children, reported feeling guilt and shame or feeling like a "failure" in their role as a mother. Participant 32, who runs a marketing agency and has two school-aged children (five and six years old), describes: "*I feel stressed with trying to manage everything. I feel like I'm not doing a good job at work, and I'm not doing good job as a mother, so that I have a lot of motherhood guilt… god, I*

can only do so much." (P32; Owner/Project Manager; has 2 kids, 5 and 6 years old). Another participant, a sales director who was able to work in a separate space from her toddler son and (non-working) husband, shared:

> "*I can hear {my son}. When he's happy, it bugs me, and I go out there. Total guilt! But no interruptions. Now I just wish I could go to Starbucks down the street and crank out five solid hours. Now I resent the family a little bit now, whereas I used to resent the job. I don't want my performance and team to suffer. So now, home life is more demanding, and work life is more demanding." (P10)*

In this situation, Participant 10 felt guilty when she could not engage with her young son, as she felt she should be working. She felt this need particularly at this time during the pandemic, as she worked in an industry that was under duress and in a role that had intensified. She described feelings of resentment, guilt, and stress over these tensions throughout her interview. As mothers, women are expected to be engaged in intensive mothering in a child-centric world (Hays, 1996). These intensive mothering norms contradict the norms of an ideal worker, who is expected to be fully devoted to work in psychological, emotional and time-based ways (Williams, 2000). Together, these organizational and societal norms create unmanageable pressures and work/family images which threaten women's ability to meet expectations in either domain.

Third, all of our participants communicated how they experienced higher levels of anxiety and stress as compared to before the pandemic. Many expressed how they felt they needed to sacrifice their own wellbeing in order to meet the expectations of their work and family roles. This is not surprising given the nature of living during a global pandemic. However, we also noted a common pattern of their feeling compelled to meet ideal worker norms amidst a heightened level of work and family role intensification. They were doing so while simultaneously struggling to attend to family responsibilities of their children, partners, and homes. These working mothers slept less, extended their work hours well into the evening, or

woke up before the children to access uninterrupted work time. Participant 20, who works in development at a religious non-profit and is the mother of a three-year old, demonstrates this:

> *"My wellbeing? Generally, not so great. Sleeping is a struggle. Weird dreams that everyone's been talking about, very strange dreams. If I looked back six months or a year ago, I wasn't having weird or vivid dreams. My overall wellbeing, physically healthy. I don't have coronavirus or flu. But, I'm not exercising. I can't seem to find the time in my schedule to go for a walk, or run. No gyms are open, and I'm not doing a dance class in the living room with everyone here around and with my kid who is attached to me. I'm physically healthy and grateful to have roof over our heads, food on table, diapers on kids bottom, essentials are met. But other things are hard to get to, like exercise… I'm definitely working a lot of nighttime hours after my son is asleep in bed." (P20)*

This woman explains how her employer was generally forgiving of family needs, but that because of the "*disjointed*" times that she has to work during the day given the caregiving needs of her son, she is able to get less work done overall, the quality is low, and as a result, she feels overly stressed—"*not good for sleep or health*." One of our participants had lost her job right before the summer interview took place, and her reaction was actually relief-- because of the stress that had come from working and parenting during Covid-19. While losing a job would normally compel feelings of loss, this working mother felt relieved to no longer face the stress and burnout that she had incurred from her unworkable organizational culture and job expectations.

4.4. Pockets of resistance to ideal worker norm entrenchment

While the above description of ideal worker norm entrenchment captured the experiences we observed in the majority of our participant data, we also note some examples of particular participants who serve as outliers or counterexamples to this pattern. In how they described their work and life choices during this time, we characterize them as resisting ideal worker norms, meaning they did not push and fight to meet such expectations. Rather, in the face of the

escalated work and family role demands, they reduced work hours, or withdrew from their jobs and careers. That is, they scaled down.

Of the women who demonstrated such resistance to ideal worker norms, we identified two broad themes which shaped how and why they were able to do so. First, several women worked in an organization or industry that was not male-dominated and that was authentically family-friendly. For example, Participant 1 oversees a training center for a non-profit organization that focuses on child welfare, and has children six and four years old. She shared how she and her colleagues have talked about the ability to be responsive and focused while working remotely at home:

> "*We actually have these discussions a lot. It's very, very outward conversations... We mentioned the arena of having the working moms conversations and welfare of the children... Our agency is quick to identify working parents as having this additional challenge. And then my co-workers and peers, including my boss, who don't have children, will say things like, 'Man, this is tough because... I don't even have children, and this is a challenge for me… we kind of voice that as women to one another*.'"(*P1)*

As her job dramatically changed as the training programs all pivoted to online learning, she describes how her employer responded with employee support for continued work from home: "*Now as we've transitioned to a stay-at-home, our agency was pretty quick to send us home and to help accommodate us. So in terms of supplies or electronic needs, anything-- they sent it home to us*." Her organization provided the support (such as technological equipment, training, and flexibility in work hours) to be able to accommodate work from home. She continues in explaining the outcome of this organizational environment:

> "*We've been pretty successful in doing so, and so now it looks like for all intents and purposes we can work from home moving forward. Indefinitely. Which is a super plus, because our schools are uncertain about what they'll look like. {Leadership} pulled us, they surveyed us. My direct supervisor, who is a VP, had this conversation with us not too long ago. We're just her direct reports, where she said, "Please follow up with your direct reports and really, all of us, we want the feedback, what is your home life looking like...*

> *What do you think your future would look like in terms of your position? How feasible is it that you come back to work?*" (*P1)*

They sought feedback from employees on what their needs and capabilities were, seeking feedback about home life and how they could continue to work going forward. She went on to explain how she would limit her work hours so that she could attend to household responsibilities and particularly spend time directing the distance learning efforts of her two young elementary school-aged children: "*Sometimes I'm like, I guess, when I just got my all my work done in two hours, and I'll just, I answer emails here and there as they pop up*," which allowed her to have the time and space to devote to helping her children's school needs as they arose during the day. Overall, she appreciated this aspect of her job and employer, stating: "*I feel like my job is being responsive to the demands and to the challenges that we have, that we have as working mothers or just working parents at home*." Her employer was responsive, provided support, and allowed her to have flexibility to accommodate her family and non-work demands--representing a lack of ideal worker norms and expectations at the organizational, home or individual levels.

Second, women who were their own bosses, running their own small businesses as consultants or working as independent agents as writers, made the choice to significantly reduce their work involvement. Several women consultants described how they did have to sometimes navigate unrealistic expectations from clients, but instead of letting that drive their work approach during this time, they decided to drop those clients or let the clients self-select out of their portfolio. These women made the choice during this time to significantly decrease their work hours. For example, Participant 44 is a leadership consultant and executive coach and has two children (eight and five years old). Her husband's job had inflexible demands, so she took the lead on helping her two young children distance learn. She made accommodations to when

she scheduled her consulting and coaching clients to occur when her children were not on Zoom for school, or in the summer months, when their family felt comfortable making the choice to start having a helper come a few days a week. As a result, her reduction in work hours was drastic:

> "*Now I maybe do an hour and a half of work a day, and I used to {before COVID} do five or six hours of work a day… I mean, I feel lucky that I can just tone down my work… I'm not taking new clients right now, I'm not looking for new clients, and I'm very lucky that I'm able to do that even though I don't want to do that… If my clients are amenable, I really could do most of my required work Tuesdays and Thursdays and I could like just try to stay on top of house stuff and life stuff. And when I'm with the kids managing school, I don't really need to get work done. I just need to kind of stay above water a little bit*." (P44)

In making the choice to "*tone down*" her work, she described how she is able to be "*on top*" of her non-work role responsibilities in a way that is personally sustainable for her. However, she notes implications for her ongoing work opportunities and how these constraints make her feel. "*It's forcing me to seek out less work, and to feel like I can't give my existing work my full time, so, or like as much time as I would want to... I feel like it's so hard just to make any work progress... I'm frustrated by the work that I don't get to*." (P44) The few participants who did make the conscious choice to not tackle job responsibilities in the face of ideal worker expectations, and prioritized non-work responsibilities by decreasing work hours, often still felt frustrated or guilty for doing so, while also acknowledging potential negative effects on their careers.

5. DISCUSSION

As evidence builds supporting how organizations are far from gender-neutral structures, Acker's theory of gendered organizations (1990) continues to capture the unspoken underlying assumptions of the organization's masculinity and of ideal worker expectations built upon the needs of a man unburdened by non-work responsibilities. Nearly three decades since her seminal

1990-work, a disruption as dire as a pandemic that impacted the lives of employees and families globally was a critical moment, perhaps even an opportunity, to re-examine the ideal worker culture and form updated responses to the gendered nature of organizational policies and systems. Sadly, interviews with 53 working mothers in the U.S. provided evidence suggesting an entrenchment of the ideal worker during the spring and summer of 2020, following the initial shock and adaptation of the Covid-19 pandemic. We next discuss how this work affirms and extends previous literature on the ideal worker culture and gendered organizations.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

First, we provide findings based on data collected in the summer of 2020 documenting mothers' experiences of work cultures following the initial shock of the pandemic. While pre-pandemic research calls suggested that scholars should steer away from providing further evidence on the gendered nature of organizations and women's struggles within them (Nkomo et al. 2018), we argue that the nature of the pandemic as a globally shared crisis and a pivotal moment in our recent history makes it essential to document working mothers' experiences following the pandemic's disruption. Such evidence is valuable to understanding how they experienced organizational responses in that time of crisis. Our evidence of an entrenchment of ideal worker norms at that time has the potential to inform our understanding of what could be Covid-19 pandemic's lasting impact. By "entrenchment," we refer to how individuals experienced ideal worker norms as becoming more firmly established or fortified within organizational systems. During the initial shock response and adaptation, our participants mostly experienced the persistent and dominant organizational culture of work-primacy. Such ideal worker norms pressured women into finding personal solutions to systemic problems, which led to increased stress, lack of sleep, and burnout in addition to reduction of work hours and other

indicators of potential career disruption. Seeing this evidence from the current lens of the labor market's "great resignation" (Cook, 2021) trend, we highlight the importance of documenting the unfolding of post-pandemic organizational cultural changes. Only from understanding how and why this transpired can we learn how to best put in place systematic change to prevent the worst of these effects happening again.

Second, we provide evidence for that entrenchment as experienced by working mothers across multiple industries, geographic locations across the U.S., and stages in their careers. This extends from how empirical studies typically conceptualize ideal worker norms, which tend to focus on one organization or a particular occupation (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). In this study, we identified reported widespread patterns of organizational responses rooted in the ideal worker culture, which provides evidence for the ubiquity of this problem across organizations and occupations, even in a time of crisis. During this difficult time, our participants shared how previous assumptions about how and when work should get done and availability expectations persisted, and even deepened in their new work-from-home context while children were at home with them. What we saw from the data is that there was an initial push and pull between organizations wanting to be supportive of families (at least performatively), and the strongly held attitude that work needs to come first. For most, the work-primacy culture persisted. This inhibited women in particular due to their increased family role demands during that time, which, we argue, will serve to perpetuate systemic gender inequality. The ideal worker norm lens helps to explain how organizational responses to the pandemic perpetuated systemic gender inequality, or the "inequality regimes" theorized by Acker (2006). Acker stated that "masculine-stereotyped patterns of on-the-job behavior in team-organized work may mean that women must make adaptations to expectations that interfere with family responsibilities and with which they are

uncomfortable."(2006: 446) During this particular crisis, we noted phases during which the empathy and support offered by managers and organizations varied. Specifically, in March and April 2020, there were more frequent offerings of support, solidarity in facing the pandemic, and understanding when norms and performance standards could not be met. That initial reaction was contrary to what would be expected in gendered organizations; however, it was short-lived. As the weeks went by, empathy decreased. Managers and clients wanted things to "get back to normal." Our data from this time also revealed a gap between organizational support that was superficial rather than authentic, such that ideal worker expectations prevented women from feeling comfortable in taking advantage of any structural support that was offered. So by the time we interviewed women over summer 2020, we observed how the dwindling support disproportionately impacted working mothers and how the strength of the ideal worker culture had persisted in the face of isolated attempts to provide support.

The ubiquity of those experiences directs us to examine non-organizational systems that seem to have empowered the ideal worker image at work. Namely, it became clearer that support systems, such as schools, low-paid help, and extended family members' help, which were in place to preserve the continuity of work expectations, are key solutions that allowed some mothers to continue their labor force participation prior to Covid-19. Our data shed light on the fragility of these solutions. Importantly, these systems seem to have been reinforcing a work-first culture, as they allow mothers to meet work "expectations such as full‐time visibility, availability and mobility that disadvantage women, particularly mothers" (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2017: 1740) by hiding motherhood. Within those parameters, the disappearance of those systems as a result of Covid-19 had a profound impact on working women, who now needed to make difficult choices between falling in line with a manager's ideal worker expectations or meeting

family role needs. Our data also revealed how the ideal worker image manifested in the home, where gender norms aligned with the expectations that women are the natural caregivers and therefore are responsible for filling the gaps that were left by inaccessibility to help and child care. These findings help explain recent research documenting the negative impact of Covid-19 on the wellbeing and employment of mothers. For example, Petts et al.'s 2020 study found that the lack of access to childcare and involvement in homeschooling negatively impacted mothers' employment, but not that of fathers. The qualitative nature of our study provides an opportunity to delve more deeply into the experiences of working mothers, allowing us to examine the why behind the health and employment outcomes that have been identified. Our findings suggest that the entrenchment of ideal worker norms in organizations, in homes, and within working mothers themselves contributed to these negative outcomes identified by Petts et al. (2020). Future research can help to further unpack the different experiences of mothers versus fathers, to better understand the nature of gender roles at home and how they resulted in different opportunities and constraints in working from home.

Third, as noted in the aforementioned connectedness between experienced work cultures, household dynamics, and mothers' own decision making within these contexts, this study contributes to scholarship of gendered organizations by highlighting the recursive nature among the organizational, home, and individual levels. In unpacking the ideal worker image, we are facing a multi-level issue that will require multi-level interventions to address. That is, we cannot expect women alone to solve or address these issues, though this has been the precept of industrial/organizational psychological scholarship for too long (Padavic et al., 2020); nor do we expect organizational-level solutions such as increased flexibility to work within the currently dominant work culture (Borgkvist et al., 2021). Nkomo et al. (2018) argued that future research

should explore how to address the lagged progress towards gender equity. We develop here a conceptual understanding of the recursive influence of organizational norms, household dynamics between partners, and internalized norms, amidst a context of constrained external support structures. This provides a framework to devise multi-level interventions to address the slowing down of progress towards gender equity. The sudden lack of availability of external resources, such as schools, daycares, and other external help, revealed how dependent the progress towards gender equality had been on those resources and structures. Such an understanding provides a strong case to ensure that those resources are shored up, funded, and made a priority. Furthermore, as we have learned from this research, when social support structures are based on the premise that parenthood is not professional and does not align with the ideal worker image, the inequality regimes within organizations are perpetuated and exacerbated.

Fourth, a novel aspect of our findings is identifying the manifestation of ideal worker norms and influence in the home domain. This serves as an extension of ideal worker culture and acknowledges its broader impact. In examining what our participants reported on arrangements with their male partners before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, our analysis revealed how carefully crafted arrangements that had accommodated women's work/life balance before Covid-19 were swept away during the pandemic, and replaced with gendered routines and arrangements. That is, they resorted back to gendered home responsibility arrangements such as the mother taking the primary role in attending to the needs of the children and home. As a result, the mom's career often suffered. The severity of the sudden disruption had led partners to react based on the most urgent needs of their jobs and their families. This resulted in the home systems typically revolving around work needs. This identification of how organizational culture

can impact a home's culture has been identified in work/family literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2001), but has yet to be linked to ideal worker theory. This furthers what Nkomo and colleagues (2019) review of ideal worker theory stated that management and organization scholars have paid insufficient attention to Acker's theorizing, as work/family scholarship has investigated and theorized the impact of organizational culture on work/life choices made in the home.

5.2. Practical Implications

Beyond the theoretical implications, there are practical implications of this study which extend beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. First, the most critical set of solutions are directed towards organizations. This is because the measures taken in the home and by working mothers reinforced the ideal worker image *that originated in the workplace*. To fully embrace and successfully support work from home amidst serious limitations (such as having children present and an increased set of family responsibilities), organizations need to recognize the systemic nature of these challenges and enhance their authentic, actionable support. Acknowledging that every employee's situation and set of needs are different is a good first step. It takes communication via an interactive process among managers, employees, clients, and/or coworkers to determine what support any one employee needs. Employee flexibility and control over scheduling of when work gets done can greatly help. However, as we have seen from our participants, giving control over when work gets done while also imposing unrealistic job expectations on working mothers, extending their work days and sacrificing their wellbeing. Previous research (e.g. Hill et al., 2004) has also suggested examples of how jobs can be structured to be more amenable for working mothers, such as six-hour days or shortened work weeks. Such arrangements, however, will remain stigmatized if the stereotype of notions of working mothers being insufficiently committed persists.

Thus, in our second suggestion, the persistent entrenchment of ideal worker norms needs to be called out, named, and coincide with shaping of organizational norms and culture to be more employee-friendly. Our findings align with those of Padavic, Ely, and Reid (2020), and we join their recommendation to call into question the culture of long working hours and work-primacy. It is this culture which has pushed working mothers out of the workforce during the Covid-19 pandemic. What we have seen from our participants' accounts is that companies expect their working mother employees to figure it out themselves, and shift the burden of establishing sustainable work practices and work/family choices to families. The recommendation to organizations is to steer away from mere adoption of policy (such as flexibility) and rather, work to challenge the underlying assumptions of work and the notion of who is an ideal worker. Should organizations heed this call, the effects could be longstanding and positively influence women's careers and labor participation. Building a work culture where working mothers are able to take advantage of flexible work practices, maintain good communication with managers in navigating evolving family needs, and feel supported at all work levels in their sustainable wellbeing while working will be more likely to grow in their careers and elevate pursuant generations of working women. This goal is particularly important now, given the disproportionate impact that this pandemic has had on the career opportunities of working mothers. Organizations that are creative and progressive enough to provide this kind of support will likely yield advantages in attracting and retaining the talent of working mothers.

Third, there is a glaring need to enhanced perspective-taking of the needs of caregiving employees during times of crisis, change, or uncertainty. For employees working from home during Covid-19, managers, coworkers, and clients had the unique opportunity to glimpse inside the homes of their coworkers. This could have engendered empathy and understanding, in

observing firsthand the challenges of having children and the ensuing interruptions, distractions, and need to attend to caregiving demands. However, this clearly was not enough to engender sustainable empathy or understanding. It was also not sufficient to have increased availability of policies such as extended leaves, as there was rarely oversight or encouragement of taking such leaves or acknowledging workplace social norms that disparage women who take them. Organizations need to be more aware of the need to not only have support policies, but to also take the next steps to champion and endorse them, such as leaders themselves demonstrating their use them or positively reinforcing employees who do so. Managers should be assessed in the extent to which their employees who use such support policies do so without retribution. As Acker states that such policies are not gender neutral, organizations should heed this in continuously monitoring to see if such policies are used differentially by employees based on gender. One way to do so is to incorporate a design thinking approach, so as to acknowledge and center the design of policies with women and working mothers in mind. Thinking of mothers as "extreme users," policies should not ignore gender, but center it. In doing so, the need of all employees (all genders and parenting status) will then be encompassed.

Fourth, we look to what a forming of "new" ideal norms could look like. As an example, for employees working remotely, a feature that came out of our data was the intense demands placed based on synchronous video-required meetings-- demands which emergent evidence shows disproportionality impact women (Shockley et al., 2021). Women's status and the subservience of their needs during this time were particularly embedded in relational work interactions (Acker, 1990), whether in how video meetings were mandated or in implicitly forced return to the physical workplace during a raging global pandemic. The need to attend to synchronous work was the huge issue for many of our participants, as they attempted to fit their

work meetings within an evolving and unpredictable schedule. Though this manifested during the pandemic, we do not expect this to go away as the pandemic subsides. Organizational responses to the Covid-19 disruption did not take into account family role childcare or schooling needs, which was one of the many ways we viewed ideal worker norms as being entrenched. Designing work in a way that can accommodate shifts, changing schedules, disruptions, and unpredictability is certainly complex, but taking such dynamism into account when designing jobs and assessing performance can enhance inclusivity of working mothers who face such unpredictability on a regular basis. As the old "ideal worker" was male and could make work a priority, a shift of these norms (however entrenched they may be) could become an "ideal worker" who works with a flexible, controllable schedule, who has clear job demands that are reasonable and attainable, and who is expected to show up as a whole person with other needs outside of work.

6. CONCLUSION

This research draws from the lived experiences of 53 working mothers who worked from home with children during the pandemic, highlighting important considerations to draw out from Covid-19 ‑19 regarding the continued gendering of workforce norms. Our data provide an understanding of the state of the ideal worker culture and the idolization of work in the U.S. during a global pandemic. We identify that, for our participants, ideal worker norms were deeply entrenched during this time, recursively manifesting at three levels: in experienced organization responses, gender dynamics at home, and an internalization of the ideal worker culture within working mothers. For our participants, the work from home experience has revealed the barriers to progressing past ideal worker norms and gender norms of work/family choices. Organizations, partners, and the working mothers themselves seemed subject to these norms during this time of

crisis, stress, and uncertainty. In moments of sudden and dire social phenomena, it could be expected that societal institutions, such as families or organizations, would adapt to preserve their sustainability. We thus may have expected the Covid-19 pandemic would encourage adaptations that challenge the unsustainable nature of work, such as enhancing support structures to accommodate the unique nature of this work from home situation. However, we instead found evidence of systems that support an idolization and primacy of work and a reinforcement of the ideal worker culture.

While the pandemic has exposed the corrosion of many work/family support systems, it did not initiate it. As working from home becomes more normalized and commonplace, boundaries between work and family will likely continue to blur. If underlying assumptions about work remain unchallenged, then their negative impact will continue to be felt by families and working mothers, as we found in our study. We argue that the issues are systemic and necessitate systemic solutions.

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Figure 1: The Entrenchment of Ideal Worker Norms Experienced by Working Mothers During the Covid-19 Pandemic