

The Impact of Remote Work on Women's Work-life Balance and Gender-role Attitudes in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of remotework patterns caused by COVID-19 on women's work-life balance and gender-role attitudes in Saudi Arabia. Aqualitative approach employed12in-depth, semi-structured interviews with married Saudi workingwomen in the public education sector.Key findings were identified through thematic analysis. First, the flexibility of remote work pushed married Saudi working women to managea greaterburden of household and family demands to complywith their traditional gender role. Second, marriedSaudi working women considered household helpers and/or the flexibility of remote work as the main solutions to balance their personal and professional lives.Finally, remote work has not changed gender-role attitudes;Saudi women are behaving in accordance with their feminine role and cultural acceptance; andSaudi men offer either modest help or non-cooperation regarding domestic roles.The study was exploratory with a small sample size in the education sector, so the findings cannot be generalised. This study generates new insights into the theoretical lens of institutionaltheory regarding the challenges and opportunitiesof remote work on Saudi women's work-life balance and gender-role attitudes in highly normative societies such as Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: married Saudi working women, COVID-19, remote work, institutional theory, work-life balance, gender-role attitudes

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has spread globally,causing an economic crisis, affecting the health services,education sector, social norms, and the lives of women (Galasso, 2020). This pandemichas causedvarious sectors to operatetheir offices remotely, with administrative jobs being performed from home (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). Many scholars have statedthat COVID-19 will continue to have an impact on both the workforce and the workplace (Al-Youbi et al., 2020; Del Boca et al., 2020; Hite & McDonald, 2020). Indeed, COVID-19 has had a significantly negative impact on vulnerable groups of individuals, such as women (Alon et al., 2020a), and on gender inequality (Galasso, 2020; Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020).Remote work has also created obstacles for married employed women (Al-Youbi et al., 2020; Alon et al., 2020a;Del Boca et al.,2020; Hite & McDonald, 2020; Kaushik & Guleria, 2020;Uddin, 2021).

Several studies have addressed the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality (Alon et al. 2020a; Alon et al., 2020b; Galasso, 2020; Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020) and on the care burden of women (Del Boca et al. 2020; Power, 2020). Moreover, considerable research has addressed women's work-life balance in the labour market before and during COVID-19 (Del Boca et al., 2020; Delina& Raya, 2013; Gregory & Milner, 2009; Khan & Agha, 2013; Uddin, 2021;Woodward, 2007), particularly in the field of education (Palanivelu & Mujeeb, 2019; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). However, little attention has paid to the Arab region, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Al-Alawi et al., 2021; Bahudhailah, 2019).Indeed, scant research has focused on the impact of remote work caused by COVID-19 on gender-role attitudes (Reichelt et al., 2021), and no studies have addressed this issue in the Arab region.

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This study explores the individual experiences and perspectives of Saudi women regarding the impact of remote work patterns caused by COVID-19 on work-life balance and gender-role attitudes. It has adopted institutional theory to explore the experiences and challenges faced by married Saudi women who are employed. In addition, this study contributes to the literature on women's work-life balance and gender-role attitudes during COVID-19 and speculates on how these ideas could be applied post-pandemic, specifically in a highly normative country such as Saudi Arabia. Finally, several practical recommendations and directions for future research are offered.

2. Literature review

2.1. Institutional factors within the Saudi Arabian context

According to Scott (2014), institutional theory is concerned with social structure, which establishes rules, norms, and routines as guidelines for social beliefs and behaviours. Culture, social norms, and gender roles in a society are considered institutional factors (Branisa et al., 2014; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Probert, 2005). Institutional theory can explain the social factors related to gender stereotypes and roles which affect employed women (Ud Din et al., 2020). Gender stereotypes are the attributions and normative expectations of group members, which negatively affect employed women (Heilman, 2012). Globally, women's progress in the workforce is subject to gender stereotypes and their roles in society (Schein, 2007). Indeed, gender stereotyping is considered the primary and salient barrier that employed women face (Ginige et al., 2007; Schein, 2007), which affects their career progress and advancement (Heilman, 2012). Several scholars (e.g. Alfarran et al., 2018; Bahudhailah, 2019; Ginige et al., 2007; Schein, 2007) assert that women face several barriers and obstructions in their professional lives, particularly in relation to gender stereotypes. Indeed, the career interruptions that employed women may encounter differ according to intersectional barriers (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Alfarran et al. 2018). Several factors would interrupt the careers of employed women during their professional lives, including change in marital status, motherhood, childcare, and other institutional factors (Ud Din et al., 2020).

Due to gender roles in such a conservative society, women are responsible for the burden of housework and childcare (Del Boca et al., 2020). Thus, women face difficulties in maintaining a balance between their responsibilities of work and family (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Mavin, 2001; Omair, 2008; Probert, 2005). In the Arab region, employed women face difficulties in balancing their personal and professional lives due to their traditional gender roles and societal expectations (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Alfarran, 2016). In the stereotypical perception of countries such as Saudi Arabia, women's roles are in households, as mothers and wives (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Therefore, employed Saudi women face obstacles in balancing their work and traditional roles in the home, due to institutional factors and gender stereotypes (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Alfarran, 2016; Bahudhailah, 2019).

2.2. Remote work and women's work-life balance

The COVID-19 pandemic drove most countries into lockdowns and imposed quarantines, which affected different sectors to varying degrees (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). In response to this crisis, the implementation of the operation of offices remotely from the homes of employees increased (Alon et al. 2020a; Kaushik & Guleria, 2020), particularly affecting women (Cserhádi, 2020). As a result, opportunities to change the traditional workplace have arisen (Hite and McDonald, 2020). Thus, remote work can create both obstacles and opportunities for employed women (Al-Youbi et al., 2020; Alon et al., 2020a; Hite & McDonald, 2020).

In response to imposed quarantines, family members needed to stay at home, placing a greater burden on employed women from both work and family duties, which led them to face increased pressure (Del Boca et al., 2020; Uddin, 2021). Due to the traditional feminine role, domestic family responsibilities are unequally distributed; therefore, married employees may face the risk of role conflict (Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020; Uddin, 2021). In this case, women usually have a higher workload at home, with many interruptions (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Uddin, 2021). Several scholars (e.g. Del Boca et al., 2020; Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Uddin, 2021) argue that, in the case of work from home, married working women face challenges in managing their life responsibilities and work duties. Indeed, COVID-19 has resulted in a dramatic increase in women's responsibilities, such as household and care duties (Power, 2020). Therefore, women continue to attempt to maintain a balance between work demands and family responsibilities, which negatively affects their work (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Mavin, 2001).

In the education sector, married working women face mounting difficulties in balancing their work and family responsibilities due to the increased workload and long working hours (Delina & Raya, 2013; Palanivelu & Mujeeb, 2019; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016; Woodward, 2007), which negatively affects the health and domestic life of employees (Palanivelu & Mujeeb, 2019).

Olson (1989) states that remote workplaces increase employees' working hours, as they are available to work at any time. Al-Youbi et al. (2020) added that remote work creates a major imbalance between employees' professional careers and domestic lives, which leads to poor performance. However, scholars such as Olson (1983), Cserhádi (2020), Kaushik & Guleria (2020), and Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) assert that working remotely from home is an opportunity to help women, particularly those with young children, to manage the dual responsibilities of home and work. Olson (1989) suggests that work from home might be the best employment option for people with childcare responsibilities. Alon et al. (2020a) suggested that in response to the pandemic crisis, working remotely is a great option for employed women who struggle to combine their work with family needs.

Moreover, remote work can provide individuals with formal flexibility (such as reduced hours or alternative schedules) and informal flexibility (such as less or no administrative tasks) to deal with daily work duties and life patterns (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Olson, 1989; Uddin, 2021). Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020), Powell & Craig (2015), and Khan & Agha (2013) added that remote work may save commuting time and effort, which could help balance the professional and personal lives of employees. Indeed, the work-life balance of women may positively affect their commitment, motivation, production, and career advancement (Khan & Agha, 2013; Palanivelu & Mujeeb, 2019). Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) noted that work from home is largely possible in the education sector. Scholars such as Al-Shathry (2012), Bahudhailah (2019), and Alfarran (2016) consider remote work as a convenient situation in response to Saudi women's roles within the family.

2.3. Remote work and gender-role attitudes

Remote work could reduce the gap in gender inequity and increase the ability of women to pursue careers (Cserhádi, 2020). Thus, the current crisis is a great opportunity to challenge the gender role stereotype in society and support equal sharing of the burden of household and family demands (Power, 2020). Some recent researchers (Alon et al., 2020a; Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020; Cserhádi, 2020) have stated that COVID-19 may increase gender equality and restructure traditional gender norms. Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) found that men have shared some home responsibilities with women during the COVID-19 crisis. Alon et al. (2020a) and Carli (2020) predicted that due to the current crisis, a potential cultural shift in social norms regarding gender roles will force fathers to become more involved with their own family's responsibilities and provide childcare. Alon et al. (2020b) asserted that COVID-19 may change traditional gender roles and push social norms toward more equality in the division of the burden of family and household responsibilities. Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic changed traditional gender roles and the redistribution of family obligations. In contrast, Uddin (2021) found that the gap in gender inequality increased with the spouse's non-cooperation in domestic roles, which eventually required women to work longer hours.

3. Research Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative approach to explain the participants' perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon, which provides in-depth information and generates a richly interpretive narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Veal, 2005). Individual face-to-face and telephonic interviews were conducted (Veal, 2005). The interviews were conducted in Arabic, as all participants were native Arabic speakers. To enhance data collection, the interviews were conducted by Arabic-speaking Saudi women. This increased the understanding of the interviewees' answers, enhanced the possibility of contacting female participants, improved the likelihood of conducting face-to-face interviews with them, and ensured the privacy of female participants to share their perspectives.

A sample of 12 married Saudi working women from the public education sector was selected, as this sector transformed from a traditional workplace setting to an online workplace ever since COVID-19 spread worldwide (Al-Youbi et al., 2020). The sample was obtained from different job positions and destinations, particularly from universities and education department. Six married working women from each destination were chosen and interviewed for approximately 40 minutes each. For the initial interviews, personal networks were used to select employed women from each destination, and a snowball sampling approach was used for further contact (Bryman,

2012). All interviews were conducted in the education sector of the city of Taif in Western Saudi Arabia. To address the significance themes, open-ended inductive (bottom-up) reasoning has been adopted (Bryman, 2012; Veal, 2005).

To summarise and code data, thematic analysis was applied for further analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Data labelling was applied to the transcripts to protect the identity of the participants (Veal, 2005).

4. Findings

This study sheds light on the individual experiences and perspectives of married working women in Saudi Arabia, to explore the impact of remote work patterns caused by COVID-19 on women's work-life balance and gender-role attitudes. Tables 1 and 2 present the demographic characteristics of all the female participants.

Table 1 shows the codes used for the participants from the Taif university and presents their personal and professional demographics.

Table 1. The characteristics of the Taif university participants

Participants	Group of age	Working hours of teaching/ weekly	Education level	Occupation	Number of children	School shift	Current situation of husband	Education level of husband	Have household helper	Work at same city
U1	35-44 years	15	PhD	Faculty member	3	Morning	Working	Bachelor	No	Yes
U2	35-44 years	18	Masters	Faculty member	2	Afternoon	Working	PhD	No	No
U3	35-44 years	6	PhD	Faculty member with managerial position	4	Morning Afternoon	Working	Bachelor	Yes	No
U4	35-44 years	6	PhD	Faculty member with managerial position	4	Afternoon	Working	Master	Yes	No
U5	35-44 years	18	Bachelor	Faculty member	2	Afternoon	Working	Bachelor	Yes	Yes
U6	25-34 years	18	Bachelor	Faculty member	1	Afternoon	Working	Bachelor	No	Yes

The education level of this group was varied (PhD, master's, and bachelor's degrees), with two participants in managerial positions. The table shows that participants' weekly working hours of teaching differ according to their education level and positions. Regarding their personal lives, the age group of a majority of participants was between 35 and 44 years. Participants had between one and four children, and a majority of the children were younger than 12 years old. The husbands of all participants were working and held a bachelor's degree or above. Half of the participants had household helpers, and two of these worked in a different city from where their family lived.

Table 2 shows the codes used for the participants from the education department and presents their personal and professional demographics.

Table 2. The characteristics of participants from the education department

Participants	Group of age	Working hours of teaching/ daily	Education level	Occupation	Number of children	School shift	Current situation of husband	Education level of husband	Have household helper	Work at same city
E1	45 years and above	7	Bachelor	Educational supervisor (Managerial position)	5	Morning Afternoon	Working	High school	Yes	Yes
E2	45 years and above	7	Bachelor	School principal (Managerial position)	5	Morning Afternoon	Retried	Bachelor	Yes	Yes
E3	35-44 years	7	Bachelor	School principal (Managerial position)	5	Morning Afternoon	Working	High school	No	Yes
E4	25-34 years	7	Bachelor	Teacher	2	Afternoon	Working	Bachelor	No	Yes
E5	45 years and above	7	Bachelor	Students' advisor (Managerial position)	5	Morning	Retried	High school	Yes	Yes
E6	35-44 years	7	Bachelor	Teacher	6	Morning Afternoon	Working	Bachelor	Yes	Yes

The education level of this group is a bachelor's degree, with five participants in managerial positions and working seven hours per day. Regarding their personal lives, half of the participants were aged 45 years and above. The majority of participants had five children, and most of the children were either 7–12 years old or over 18 years old. More than half of the participants' husbands were working, and only two of them were retired. Half of the husbands held a bachelor's degree and the other half had attended high school. More than half of the participants had either one or two household helpers, and all of them worked in the city where their families lived.

The themes identified in this study included the following: the individual experience and perspective of Saudi women regarding the flexibility associated with working remotely, work-life balance, and changes in gender-role attitudes during remote work.

4.1. The flexibility of remote work

Before COVID-19, all interviewees from both groups worked at a certain time without flexibility. Interviewees from the education department worked seven hours per day (from 7am to 2pm). All six interviewees from the education department agreed that they had either no free time at the workplace or days off per week, regardless of their positions. Two teachers (E4 and E6) stated that they have many tasks besides teaching to do at school, such as supervising students during the morning assembly, breaktime, and at dismissal time. The interviewees from the university had daily working hours and schedules that differed. Regarding weekly teaching hours, assistant professors with managerial positions had 6 working hours, other assistant professors had 15 working hours, and lecturers and teaching assistants had 18 working hours. Moreover, all participants from the university had six office hours for weekly academic advising. As each university's members had different schedules and teaching hours, their daily free time differed. Two participants (U5, U6) noted that in their free time at the workplace, they performed work requirements and commitments, such as preparing the subject, checking assignments, correcting exams papers, and other administrative work. Regarding days off, only two participants from the university had one day off per week. An assistant professor explained that '[A]s I have only 15 teaching hours a week, I rearrange my schedule to have one day off for rest (U1)'.

Another lecturer said:

Because my family lives in another city, I try to just fill four days of my schedule with any available curricula to get one day off...which makes me have more [of a] workload in terms of preparing for several subjects and having no free time during those days (U2).

However, because of the managerial positions of assistant professors (U3, U4), they had no daily free time or days off per week.

During COVID-19, all interviewees worked at a certain time with flexibility. Interviewees from the education department worked either morning or afternoon shifts. As in the traditional workplace, the university's participants worked depending on their teaching schedule. Regarding free time and days off, all participants from the education department agreed that they had free time, but no days off. Two teachers (E4 and E6) explained that the period time of classes is less than that in traditional workplaces without administrative tasks. Half of the interviewees had free time between lectures and during the day. A university participant noted the following:

The period time of lectures and the load of administrative tasks have not changed, but I still have a free time...between lectures, I save commuting time, and have no distraction from colleagues and students (U5).

The other half of the participants stated that they had no free time for several reasons. Two participants with managerial positions (U3 and U4) stated that they were on-call during the day to perform administrative tasks. One participant (U1) said, 'I have poor time management skills; I cannot organise my time'. Moreover, none of the university participants had a day off. One participant stated the following:

I rearranged my schedule to have one day off when I was working from the campus...now that I am working from home and with my family...I do not need to have it (U2).

The majority of participants (11 out of 12) utilised their free time. Half of the interviewees spent their free time carrying out family responsibilities. A university member said, 'Finally, I can cook for my family every day (U6)'. A minority of participants (4 out of 12) noted engaging in self-development by attending several training courses. Only two participants noted that they used their free time to meet work requirements. One participant (E1) wrote a book and offered training courses.

It was clear that, regardless of the destination, remote work gave all employed women a flexible work arrangement and more free time. Interestingly, half of the employed women attempted to comply with their traditional gender role by utilising their free time to fulfil their family obligations.

4.2. Work-life balance during remote work

Before COVID-19, a majority of participants (8 out of 12) agreed that they could balance their personal and professional lives. Interestingly, all participants from the education department could achieve a work-life balance for several reasons. The main reason was that the majority of participants (4 out of 6) had at least one household helper. Other reasons included good time management skills, completing work at the workplace, and husbands working in another city. An educational supervisor said:

I have two household helpers...so, it is easy to manage my time and maintain a balance between my personal and professional life (E1).

A teacher stated that:

My husband is working in another city, and he comes on the weekend...so, I [have] done all my work during the weekdays and spent the weekend with my family (E4).

On the other hand, the majority of participants from the university (4 out of 6) stated that they could not balance their personal and professional lives for several reasons. All participants noted feeling of physical exhaustion, due to either a long day of working or living in another city. A teaching assistant explained it in the following way:

I have household helpers, but I cannot maintain a balance between my work and family...I usually work for a long time, from 9am to 5 pm (U5).

An assistant professor said:

I suffer from physical exhaustion...because I live in another city, I have to travel every day to the university involves a two-hour return journey. Thus, I cannot carry out my family responsibilities (U2).

Participants from the education department, who balance their personal and professional lives, are able to do so for many reasons. They work at certain hours (7 am to 2 pm), the majority of them have household helpers, and their children are either at elementary school, university, or work. On the other hand, a majority of university participants face challenges in balancing their personal and professional lives. Half of them either had no household helpers or worked in a different city, and the majority had young children (at elementary school or nursery/infant care).

During COVID-19, almost all interviewees (11 out of 12) agreed that remote work helped them to balance their personal and domestic lives. Due to school shifts, less effort, and fewer working hours, eight participants could manage to have free time to fulfil their family responsibilities. A participant from the university explained:

Most of my lectures are in the morning and the school session of my child is [in the] afternoon... it is easy for me to handle the responsibilities of work and family (U6).

Another participant from university added:

While remote work is increasing the administrative tasks, I have no physical exhaustion...so, I have the energy to carry out my personal and professional life (U3).

Only one assistant professor noted that 'I am bad at managing my work and family life during remote work (U1)'.

It was clear that, regardless of the destination, remote work helped a majority of employed women to balance their professional and domestic lives. As it has been previously noted, employed women attempt to conform with their traditional gender roles by carrying out their family obligations.

4.3. Changes in gender-role attitudes during remote work

Before COVID-19, more than half of the employed women (7 out of 12) received assistance from their husbands, mostly with some of their children's responsibilities and household obligations. A university participant said:

I have no household helper and my husband does not help me with household obligations...he only helps with some of the children's responsibilities (U1).

A school principal added:

Because I have no household helper, we divided the household obligations...I mostly carry out the children's responsibilities, and my husband sometimes cooks and irons clothes (E3).

The other four participants did not receive any support or help from their husbands, as they had household helpers or their husbands believed it was not their gender role. Interestingly, two of the participants' husbands were retired and had no other work. A school participant said 'My husband is retired, but he never helps me because I have two household helpers (E5)'. Another university participant said:

I have no household helper...so, I do all household obligations because my husband believes it is my role and responsibility (U6).

Only one participant's husband carried out all the family responsibilities. An educational supervisor cited:

I have two household helpers...so, I just have to supervise them, and my husband carries out the children's responsibilities and sometimes cooks for us. I am mostly dependent on him (E1).

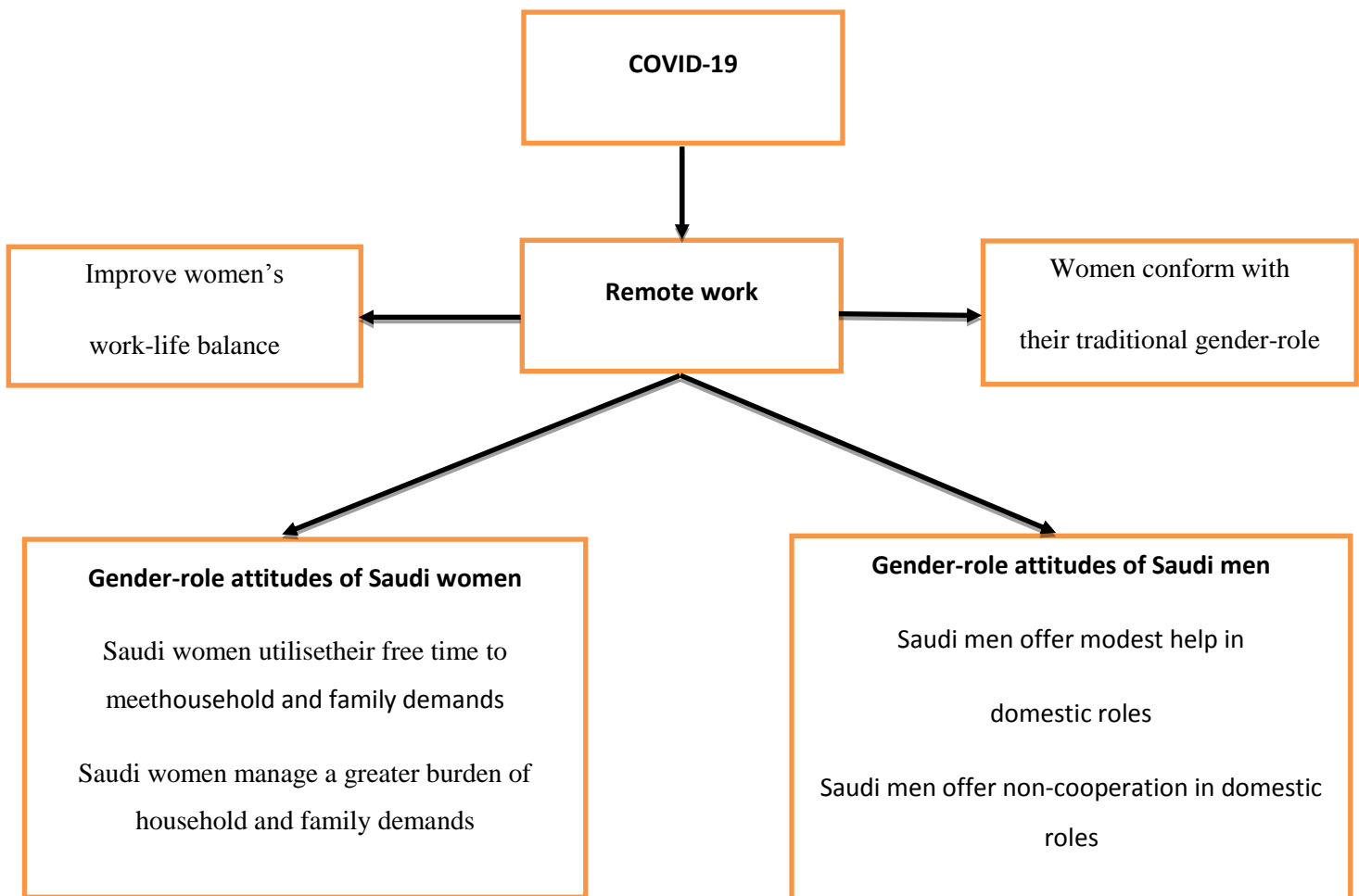
During COVID-19, the number of participants who did not receive assistance from their spouses increased from four to five. It is worth mentioning that the age group and education level of their husbands vary. A teaching assistant explained the following:

Before COVID-19, my husband only helped with schooling responsibilities, because I usually work from 9am to 5pm...now, he does not offer any help because I work from home (E5).

A school principal stated:

While my husband has been retired, he never helps me with household and family demands...his only role at home is that [he] drove us to schools...and since COVID-19 spread and schools have been under lockdown, he has been doing nothing...so, I have a household helper to carry out household obligations and I look after the children (E2).

Interestingly, due to gender roles in normative societies such as Saudi Arabia, most employed women carry out household and family obligations, and usually have household helpers.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

5. Discussion

This study explored the individual experiences and perspectives of Saudi women regarding the impact of remote work patterns caused by COVID-19 on women's work-life balance and gender-role attitudes. Therefore, this study identifies the following key findings:

The first finding indicates that the flexibility of remote work gives married Saudi working women more free time. The majority of the participants utilised their free time to meet household and family demands, followed by self-development. This finding concurred with that of Chung et al. (2021), who found that employed women use the flexibility of remote work to perform household obligations and family care. Indeed, while remote work reduced administrative tasks, it increased gender duties such as household obligations and childcare (Uddin, 2021).

During the pandemic, married working women needed to manage multiple duties (Uddin, 2021), and thus they struggled to have time for themselves (Delina & Raya, 2013). Remote work helps married working women to save commuting time and utilise it to fulfil their work requirements or family responsibilities (Powell & Craig, 2015). According to Reichelt et al. (2021), employed women are more likely to shift to traditional gender roles. Due to the traditional gender roles in Saudi society, family responsibilities remain largely intact during women's career progress (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Alfarran, 2016). Indeed, the flexibility of remote work has increased the gap in gender inequality (Chung et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021). The findings of this study suggest that in highly normative societies such as Saudi Arabia, the pattern of remote work pushes women to manage more of the burden of household and family demands.

The second finding concerns the work-life balance of employed women. Married Saudi working women considered household helpers and/or the flexibility of remote work as the main solution to balance their personal and professional lives. First, the findings regarding household helpers are supported by scholars such as Omair (2008), who argue that in Arab countries, employed women have household helpers to complete household obligations, and that family demands and childcare remain the responsibilities of women. Delina & Raya (2013) found that the number and age of children, and care responsibilities influence employed women's abilities to achieve a work-life balance.

In response to Saudi social norms, women are primarily responsible for their home roles and family obligations (Bahudhailah, 2019). Saudi women are lacking in support from their spouses in domestic roles; thus, married working women have household helpers to reduce the gap in an unbalanced work-life (Bahudhailah, 2019).

Second, the flexibility of remote work has increased the ability of married working women to balance their professional and personal lives for the following reasons: school shifts, less effort, and fewer working hours. This finding concurred with Uddin (2021), who asserts that married working women enjoy remote flexibility. Indeed, remote work saves the commuting time of employees and increases the time available to devote to work and family (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Powell & Craig, 2015). Scholars such as Felstead & Henseke (2017) and Kelliher & Anderson (2010) have suggested that flexible work, by either reducing working hours or working from home, would solve the issue of work-life conflict. Felstead & Henseke (2017) argue that while the extensive and intensive work effort in traditional workplaces is less than that of remote work, employees are willing to put forward extra effort and work longer hours. Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) found that employed women with young children were more willing to work extra hours from home than in the traditional workplace. However, Felstead & Henseke (2017) and Kelliher & Anderson (2010) found that the beneficial consequence of remote working is that it increases the prospect of a better work-life balance. It can be argued that, due to social norms, it is difficult for married Saudi working women to balance their personal and professional lives. In response to traditional gender roles, either household helpers or working from home are solutions that help Saudi women to achieve a stable work-life balance.

Finally, the gender-role attitudes of Saudi men and women are highly compatible with social norms and traditional gender roles. Indeed, remote work has increased the responsibilities of married Saudi working women and the gender inequality. Clearly, Saudi women behave in accordance with their traditional feminine roles and cultural acceptance. This finding concurred with that of Reichelt et al. (2021), who assert that the flexibility of remote work has increased the gap in gender inequality. In the labour market, gender inequality is associated with an unequal division of labour in the household (Alon et al., 2020b), as a result of the normative standards of a society (Heilman, 2012). Uddin (2021) explained that the gender inequality increases with a spouse's non-cooperation in domestic roles, which requires women to work longer hours and carry a greater burden of family obligations. On the other hand, this finding contrasts with those of Hupkau & Petrongolo (2020) and Cserháti (2020), who argue that COVID-19 has changed traditional gender roles and reduced the inequalities of parental roles. It also contrasts with Chung et al. (2021) and Carli (2020), who predict that remote work may slightly reduce gender inequality. Clearly, traditional gender-role attitudes are deeply rooted in Saudi society. Regardless of the age and education level, Saudi men offer either modest help or non-cooperation in domestic roles. Therefore, whether Saudi women work from home or at traditional workplaces, they feel compelled to carry out household and family demands.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The current study enriches the existing literature on institutional factors affecting married working women in Saudi Arabia, and provides a unique opportunity for an in-depth investigation of the perspectives and experiences of married working women, regarding their work-life balance and gender-role attitudes during remote work. Globally, while there is a substantial body of literature regarding the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality (Alon et al. 2020a; Alon et al., 2020b; Galasso, 2020; Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020), the care burden on women (Del Boca et al. 2020; Power, 2020), and women's work-life balance (Del Boca et al., 2020; Uddin, 2021), scant research has focused on gender-role attitudes (Reichelt et al., 2021). In the Arab region, little attention has been paid to women's work-life balance (Al-Alawi et al., 2021), particularly in Saudi Arabia (Bahudhailah, 2019). However, there is no single study that has identified or explored the perspectives and experiences of married working women regarding the impact of COVID-19 on work-life balance and gender role attitudes in the Arab region, including in Saudi Arabia.

While the lack of literature and empirical studies has limited the scope of this research, it has increased the significance of the findings and reduced the research gap. The major practical contribution of this study has been to

capture the experiences and perspectives of married working women in Saudi Arabia, and explore the impact of remote work on work-life balance and gender-role attitudes from their opinions.

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature on employed women, work-life balance, gender inequality, and gender-role attitudes in highly conservative cultures such as Saudi Arabia. From a theoretical perspective, this study used institutional theory to explain and understand the situation of married working women in Saudi Arabia. The findings demonstrate that, in a Saudi Arabian context where socio-cultural norms and values have a strong influence, married working women are adaptable and conform with their traditional gender roles in society.

Moreover, the findings have important implications for Saudi government agencies and policymakers in reducing the gap in gender inequality. Due to gender roles, married Saudi working women need more flexible work arrangements compared to men. Thus, there is a need to study the possibility of implementing remote work or blended workplace patterns in the public and private sectors. To redistribute household and family obligations equally, there is a need to develop strategic and credible programs that support married employed women and encourage men to participate in domestic duties. Indeed, a female-friendly work environment is the key factor in facilitating women's work in Saudi Arabia.

5.2. Study limitations and future research

Despite the contributions of this study, it also has some limitations. This study utilised a small sample of 12 married working women from only one city in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the validity of the findings is limited to the current data. Although this study focused on the public education sector, it unintentionally disregarded the challenges faced by employed women in either the public sector or the private sector. Indeed, a country such as Saudi Arabia with 13 provinces should include a larger sample size from various cities.

For future research, it would be interesting to conduct cross-country research, which would include a heterogeneous sample of married working women to address the impact of remote work caused by COVID-19 on work-life balance and gender-role attitudes. To provide a better understanding, future research could shed light on men's opinions regarding the issue of gender roles and also compare those with women's perceptions. Future studies could also explore the impact of remote work on cultural shifts regarding gender equality and gender roles in society.

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