

Remote work and emerging challenges to the welfare state. Insights from ongoing research in Milan

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The Covid-19 pandemic constituted a disruptive event that led millions of workers to perform their tasks remotely for the first time. Italy passed from being one of the EU countries with the lower percentage of remote workers to counting over 7 million individuals using this working modality, many of whom continue working remotely including after the pandemic. The literature has analysed how the spread of remote work has transformed organisations and work, emphasising the consequences it has regarding the sharing of care work within families. However, little has been written on how remote work challenges certain dimensions of welfare state, such as measures to promote work-life balance and services. Our paper aims at filling the gap in the literature. It is based on empirical data, resulting from two ongoing research projects, that was collected in Milan, using a mixed method approach and consisting of two surveys and 23 interviews with remote workers, union officials, policymakers and other stakeholders.

On the one hand, our fieldwork highlights that remote work contributes to a refamiliarisation of care, in which workers request to perform their tasks remotely to be able to look not only after their children, but also after their elderly parents, and disabled dependents. As a result, remote work contributes to the de-commodification of care work and its refamiliarisation, as it is increasingly being performed by remote workers for free and less by service providers external to the family, such as babysitters or caregivers. Moreover, workers are increasingly remote working including when they are sick or have to look after their children and dependents, which challenges the traditional rights to sick leave and parental leave. The phenomenon has significant implications in gender terms, as women are particularly keen to ask for remote work to perform unpaid care work.

On the other hand, the spatial fragmentation of the workplace resulting from remote work implies that services, including care services, have to be rethought and eventually relocated to answer remote workers' specific needs. Our fieldwork highlights that, while public institutions and companies are only slowly adapting to the new setting, localised initiatives are emerging to meet remote workers' specific requirements. For instance, coworking spaces with crèche services, that eventually receive public funding, are being created closer to where workers live, which facilitates the combination between different times of living, especially for workers with care responsibilities.