



FAMILY

The Remote Work–Fertility Connection

It's easier for parents whose jobs can be done remotely to juggle work and child care. This digital divide is starting to shape who chooses to have kids.

By Stephanie H. Murray



Adam Maida / The Atlantic

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Last year was a blur for Miranda Turner, but she remembers the day her kids' school shut down like it was yesterday. On a Friday in March 2020, Arlington Public Schools, in Virginia, announced that it would close the following Monday because of the newly circulating coronavirus, sending working parents like Turner scrambling to figure out what to do with their kids.

An attorney with the punishing schedule to prove it, Turner already employed a nanny to watch her 2-year-old, but she anticipated that two other children—her 4-year-old and her anxiety-prone second grader—would have trouble adjusting to lockdown. So she approached her boss and told him she needed to work from home a few days a week. “I didn’t really ask for it. I just said, ‘This is what I’m doing.’ Because I felt like this is what I had to do,” Turner told me.

Across town, Meredith Gade was going through orientation for her new job as a nurse at a local hospital when she got wind of the impending school closure. The position didn’t pay much, but it offered health insurance and hours that mostly lined up with her 7- and 4-year-olds’ school day. But Gade wasn’t sure how she’d manage with schools closed. Working from home wasn’t an option.

A wearying 17 months followed for both women, but only Turner emerged from it with her job intact.

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The contrast between Turner and Gade’s experiences is consistent with a trend that spans continents: Some of the people hit hardest by the pandemic-induced economic crisis were mothers without the option of working from home. But that disparity is not a fluke. For years now, it’s been easier for parents whose jobs can be done remotely to juggle work and child care. But those in professions such as nursing, where virtual work is not possible, don’t have that flexibility. The technological revolution of work is transforming family life—but not for everyone. And this digital divide is altering not just the number of kids people are having, but who is having them.

The internet’s impact on the family is a subject of debate among social scientists. Some point out that, with smartphones and tablets tethering us to the office at all times, the ongoing digitization of society has created a channel for work to spill over into the domestic realm. Others contend that by dissolving the barrier between the office and home, the internet has the potential to improve family life in some ways, particularly for women.

“Being able to work from home gives you a lot more flexibility. And flexibility is something you really want to have if you have a family, because things happen ... Kids get sick, they have school performances,” Matthias Doepke, a professor studying family economics at Northwestern University, told me. Remote work weakens the constraints that employment puts on people’s time and location, allowing them to work odd hours in their kitchen while their children sleep upstairs, or to follow their partner to a new city for a job without losing their own. If both parents can

sometimes work from home, it's easier for them to trade off on child care, which can help cut down on costs and improve the balance of domestic labor within couples. Child care falls disproportionately on women in countries the world over, but fathers in jobs that can be done remotely tend to spend more time with their kids than those in jobs that can't. All of this helps women reconcile work and parenthood—a notoriously difficult task.

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Research done in European countries suggests that part-time and flexible work arrangements are positively related to fertility. And the internet facilitates flexible schedules for those who do knowledge work. This could be why some studies have also found an association between internet access and fertility. For instance, a team of economists at the University of Pittsburgh and Bocconi University, in Italy, set out to investigate whether the rise of the internet was influencing people's decision to have kids. Using data from Germany, the researchers found that the expansion of broadband internet there during the late aughts caused a rise in fertility, with one major caveat: The increase was driven entirely by highly educated women. A more recent study, based in Russia, found the same thing.

There is no American equivalent of these studies, but there is reason to believe the internet is having a similarly inequitable impact in the United States. A 2016 study found that the expansion of high-speed internet access in the U.S. led to an increase in labor-force participation among married women, and that the largest increases were among college-educated women with children.

“The internet is discriminatory in terms of work-family balance,” Francesco Billari, a demography professor at Bocconi and an author of the Germany study, told me. Not all jobs can be done remotely, and the ones that can’t are overwhelmingly manual and service-sector positions that require less education. Even where remote work is possible, many “unskilled” workers lack the bargaining power to demand such accommodation, Alicia Adsera, a senior research scholar at Princeton University, told me. Jobs that can’t—or aren’t allowed to be—done remotely typically offer lower pay and involve hours that are as unpredictable as they are rigid, which makes arranging consistent child care difficult, Adsera said. In other words, those most in need of child care are in the worst position to get it.

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“The downside of our findings is that broadband might introduce a ‘digital divide’ in fertility, allowing highly educated individuals to realize their fertility goals, while not improving those chances for less-educated individuals,” the authors of the Germany study concluded.

The digital divide is only one of many factors driving a shift in who is having children. For most of the 20th century, women with the highest level of education—that is, those with the best career prospects—have had the fewest children. But this inverse relationship between education and female fertility is weakening, and some demographers suspect that it will flatten out or even reverse in the coming decades. In some Nordic countries, it already has. To some extent, this shift simply reflects rising education levels; although it was unusual for women to attend college a century ago, it’s the norm now in high-income countries. But the shift is also spurred by rising economic inequality, in which the digital divide plays a part. “The world seems to be moving toward a situation in which affording to have children is for those who are privileged,” Billari said.

Both Billari and Adsera cautioned against broadly characterizing the internet as a fertility booster. “Digitalization is changing society in very different ways. And it’s going to affect fertility in different ways,” Adsera said. The internet is a powerful source of information, for example, allowing women to learn about contraceptive methods and exposing them to lifestyles, ideas, and possibilities beyond those they might observe in their immediate surroundings. This is particularly important in many developing countries, where fertility rates remain high and women are likelier than in developed countries to have more children than they want. In countries such as Malawi, mobile-phone ownership—and in particular, phones with internet access—is associated with reduced fertility. Internet access seems to have the opposite effect in developed countries because it helps people balance work and family, which is a

more and more crucial component of childbearing in advanced economies. In the industrialized world, the future of work is the future of fertility.

The digital divide came into full view during the pandemic, as remote work played a role in determining who kept their income. Job losses were highest in occupations where working from home is impossible. And although the pandemic pushed more women than men out of the labor force, gender gaps in job losses arose almost entirely among workers, and specifically parents, who were unable to telecommute. As difficult as the pandemic was for a lot of working parents, it would have been worse without Zoom. And if employers maintain the expanded flexibility of the COVID-19 era, many parents will be better off for it. Many others won't be.

When I asked Miranda Turner whether the pandemic has hurt her career, she said she suspects that it probably slowed her advancement in her old-school, male-dominated law firm, but she has kept her clients happy. "We came through this about as well as we could have, and it was really hard," said Turner, who is currently running for school board on a platform of returning to in-person classes. Meredith Gade couldn't say the same. By spring of this year, she was spending more on child care than she earned, her kindergartner was experiencing a "downward spiral of behavioral issues" and falling behind in school, and for the first time in her career, Gade was struggling to get to work on time. By that stage, she said, leaving her job was "kind of a no-brainer."
