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Work-from-home during COVID-19: Accounting for the care economy to build back better

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Abstract

In the COVID-19 pandemic, people's dwellings suddenly became a predominant site of economic activity. We argue that, predictably, policy-makers and employers took the home for granted as a background support of economic life. Acting as if home is a cost-less resource that is free for appropriation in an emergency, ignoring how home functions as a site of gendered relations of care and labour, and assuming home is a largely harmonious site, all shaped the invisibility of the imposition. Taking employee flexibility for granted and presenting work-from-home as a privilege offered by generous employers assumed rapid adaptation. As Australia emerges from lockdown, 'building back better' to meet future shocks entails better supporting adaptive capabilities of workers in the care economy, and of homes that have likewise played an unacknowledged role as buffer and shelter for the economy. Investing in infrastructure capable of providing a more equitable basis for future resilience is urgent to reap the benefits that work-from-home offers. This article points to the need for rethinking public investment and infrastructure priorities for economic recovery and reconstruction in the light of a gender perspective on COVID-19 'lockdown' experience.

JEL Codes: E01, E22, J24

Keywords

Altruism, care economy, childcare, COVID-19, gender relations, household capital, national income accounting, nonmarket work, work-from-home

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Introduction

In mid-March 2020, Australian State and Federal governments united to declare a ‘lock-down’ to support the containment of the coronavirus, and avoid its spread overloading health services. The Prime Minister described plans to help businesses with ‘hibernation’ (Norman, 2020). Large events were banned, and passengers on incoming international flights had to enter isolation for 14 days. Interstate travel was severely limited. Much retail activity ceased. All but ‘essential workers’ had to work from home.

Emergency funding of AUD\$1.6 billion provided temporary relief to childcare services, half of which faced closure owing to mass withdrawal of children. With schools and childcare centres expected to remain open for workers who needed them, however, commentaries in the media noted the irony in policies defining childcare workers as ‘essential’ to recovery, when childcare workers remain universally among the poorest paid (Berry, 2020). Teachers were simultaneously attending to children being home schooled (mainly by their mothers), as well as managing classroom teaching for children of essential workers (many of whom worked in the health care sector) attending school. An anxious and frustrated teacher with children of her own at risk from her work highlighted the invisible economic buffering role of the non-market sector (Smith, 2020):

We are not babysitters for the economy. You keep the schools open, and I find myself in the unenviable position of being exposed to high-risk behaviours by a beautiful bunch of guileless innocents.

Many have spoken of the pandemic as revealing and extending deeply entrenched social inequalities. Throughout this crisis, assumptions about the provision of care (or ‘babysitting’) and women’s availability to support children and families, played into its management. In May, the Australian Prime Minister called for the population to go ‘back to work’ (Bryce et al., 2005). This use of the term ‘work’ ignored that the workload for many women increased significantly during the COVID-19 ‘work-from-home’ period (Crabbe, 2020). It also reminds us that while production and productivity move between the household and market sector, they are only measured and recognised when paid for. Running through many aspects of response to the pandemic is a profound tension between increased visibility of the essential contribution made by care work and its ongoing *invisibility* – continuing to ‘count for nothing’ – in political and economic common sense. Similarly, the contribution made by the home in hosting the ‘hibernating economy’ is at once quite obvious and yet goes uncounted in measures of productivity. Here, we examine these neglected economic contributions from the recent Australian experience of lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role their invisibility has played in managing a crisis.

The invisibility of home productivity and its infrastructure is underpinned by conventional ways of measuring productivity. For example, while the crisis introduced new dimensions into the importance and value of care work, with paid care viewed as more significant outside the home (‘essential work’), unpaid care work remained simply a demand and pressure, viewed as constraining work capacity within the home. Home-based care was thus seen as reducing productivity, even though hours devoted to it increased. Productive work by parents (especially mothers) that substituted for school supervision went uncounted.

Clearly, the movement of work into the home was experienced in highly variable ways. For some it was overwhelmingly positive. In the wake of the abruptly forced experiment, many companies and individuals have embraced its continuation in some form or another. For others, ‘babysitting the economy’ through an emergency, by stepping up to provide care that is either undervalued or not counted at all, has been costly to mental health, personal wellbeing and careers. A primary shock was induced by this crisis at a time when many other services (schools, cafes, etc.) integral to supporting many kinds of productive activity, were also being hastily withdrawn. Yet, the experience of widespread working from home could be very different under other circumstances. This invites reflection on what such a future might look like. Understanding how emergency arrangements impacted women, care and the use of the home will lead towards some recommendations for ‘building back better’. The lessons we draw are broadly applicable to nations that have similarly high rates of good housing and that followed lockdowns and ‘work-from-home’ (WFH) strategies to control the virus spreading.

Our approach will be interested less in the many varied *experiences* that have been reported of this time than in beginning from exploring the background *assumptions* that shaped the rapid shift to mandatory working from home arrangements. What made the movement of white-collar work into the home, as part of sudden and dramatic lockdown measures, so politically acceptable and easy to implement as an emergency response? We suggest that the scale of the imposition such arrangements made on the home and its inhabitants were barely reckoned within employers’ and government policy, because prevailing economic and political common sense prepared the way for seeing the home and its productivity as wholly appropriable, ready to be put to use. This common sense, however, facilitates ongoing structural gender inequality and strain on individual women. It thus *undermines* capacities for social resilience, the importance of which this emergency reveals.

In sum, we argue that in a predictable way, policy-makers and employers could be largely unreflective about the legitimacy and appropriateness of moving to ‘working from home’ as a pillar of their mitigation strategy because they customarily take the home for granted as a background support of economic life. Acting as if home is a costless resource that is free for appropriation in an emergency, ignoring how home functions as a site of gendered relations of care and labour, and assuming home is a largely harmonious site of inter-personal relations, all shaped the invisibility of the imposition involved. Taking the employee flexibility this entailed for granted, and presenting working from home as a privilege offered by generous employers, also shaped rapid adaptation. As we emerge from this crisis, ‘building back better’ entails improving support for the adaptive capabilities of the women who underpin a largely unseen economy of care, and of the homes that have likewise played an unacknowledged role as they buffered and sheltered the economy. It becomes urgent to invest in infrastructure capable of providing a more equitable basis for future resilience.

Requisitioning the home?

To challenge commonsense, we sometimes need strong language. Somewhat provocatively, we suggest that the abrupt change in the setting for economic production brought

by the mandatory move to working from home can be theorised in an illuminating way by analogy with the requisitioning of assets permitted to the state in times of emergency. In the COVID-19 crisis, employers in effect requisitioned the home as a site to maintain productivity, but in most cases, they did not compensate for this imposition. By contrast, during COVID-19, factories were paid extra to reconfigure production systems to prioritise making more of the things governments wanted made, such as masks and sanitiser. To argue that mandatory working from home was analogous to a *requisition* of people's homes as their place of work, emphasises its extreme character as an imposition which nonetheless remained uncompensated and was unevenly borne by diverse households (Jenkins, 2020).

To requisition is to demand the supply of something by official order. In reverse parallels with the economic dislocations early in the Second World War, which saw a shift to war production outside the home, the COVID-19 pandemic in effect highlighted how the country's dwelling infrastructure could be requisitioned as the essential economic infrastructure for ongoing functioning of the 'hibernating' COVID-19 economy. Homes became busier, while conventionally prioritised economic infrastructure such as commercial offices, transport systems and business assets such as childcare centres, gym clubs and coffee shops were moth-balled. Access to the services provided within private dwellings shaped capacity for paid work to be conducted at home, such as space for a home office and/or access to Internet services.

That this forced relocation of work has mostly neither been named nor seen as requisitioning, with its appropriative, even violent connotations, is indicative of some political aspects of the situation, including that its extremity as an emergency measure was ameliorated by broad public agreement on its necessity. Although lockdown measures have been opposed by some, with particularly large protests appearing in the USA, no large-scale opposition to employers requiring work to take place from home emerged (the objection has rather been to the economic impact of being unable to go to work, or maintain normal freedom of movement, etc.). Moreover, widescale loss of employment in a range of unrelatable industries has loomed large, making those working from home seem lucky. The uneven burden of dealing with this emergency situation has consequently been downplayed, with employers tending to depict themselves as flexible and generous in 'allowing' working from home, rather than as demanding the use of facilities, services and cost contributions from their employees that could not be required in ordinary times.

Yet, a further factor we seek to foreground is that exploitation of the home as a costless resource is already an extensive underpinning of economic life, tax and transfer arrangements, alongside the discriminatory treatment of women. Many of the ways in which we think about 'work-life balance' or 'flexible work' have as their implicit background these inequitable and inefficient ways of 'not counting' work, especially women's work, in the care economy and the home. As working from home was mandated, these devaluations and distorting metrics for national accounting of productivity were shaping policy responses.

Especially, since the 1980s publication of Marilyn Waring's classic critique of gross domestic product (GDP) and the UN System of National Accounting (SNA) (*Counting for Nothing*) (Waring, 1988), feminist scholarship has amply highlighted the economic

importance of nonmarket household production and unpaid care work in national accounting frameworks for measuring economic performance (GDP) (Messac, 2018; Reid, 1934). Other research has highlighted the role of non-market household production in buffering the market economy during economic downturns (Bridgman et al., 2012; Wagman and Folbre, 1996). Nancy Folbre observed the equalising effects of substitutability of market and non-market household production, and the reduced opportunities for this with increased urbanisation, such as less opportunity to grow food (Aslaksen and Koren, 1996; Folbre, 2015).

Less attention has been given to how the productivity of households is underpinned by the services provided by dwellings and related assets. Dwellings are the major form of wealth held by households in Australia, with around 10 million dwellings worth around AUD\$700,000 each (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2020). Along with motor vehicles and consumer durables, these household assets yield important productivity-enhancing services to households, as Duncan Ironmonger has emphasised (Ironmonger, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic response highlights the importance of housing assets for productivity, as people's dwellings, rented or owned, suddenly became the predominant site of a significant percentage of economic activity including both paid and unpaid work.

How do these aspects of accounting figure in facilitating the rapid movement of work into the home that the pandemic engendered? The value of uncounted infrastructure and services represented by the home should have become vividly apparent in the context of closing workplaces and abruptly substituting working from home. Yet, the impositions on the home incurred in this crisis also reflect long-standing patterns of discrimination against women through the failure to value care work properly or to distribute it equally. The increased prevalence of WFH has brought several assumptions into stark relief, including the following:

1. An assumed capacity for an increased contribution from unpaid household labour (buffering the economy);
2. The assumed access to housing, space and household equipment for production to occur (despite the uneven distribution of these assets);
3. The assumed safety, manageability and adaptability of working from home and the resilience of home to stresses placed upon it (even where home-space is unregulated and unmonitored, and is a major site of gender-based violence).

This suggests the need to develop less arbitrary delineations of the production boundaries which underpin the way in which we frame work, workplaces and 'the economy'. Many of these 'common sense' aspects of economic thinking currently reflect the undervaluation and lack of power associated with caring roles and feminised work. In the remainder of this article, we argue that these aspects of assumed, but uncounted, economic life also need to be met with attention to infrastructure, labour relations and social protection systems, both in the context of the normalisation of working from home and more broadly, in the context of redrawing the boundaries of productive life. The benefits that can be discerned for more effective integration of different demands in a home-based economy point to the need for rethinking public investment and infrastructure

priorities for economic recovery and reconstruction in the light of the COVID-19 ‘lockdown’ experience. The social experiment of working from home indicated clear potentials in this re-arrangement, including for enhancing economic efficiency and gender equity, as well as for social and environmental sustainability. However, if there is to be an equitable and positive way forward on this opportunity, it must challenge entrenched conceptions about the meanings of working from home and flexibility, as well as the stark gender divide between paid work and unpaid labour in the home.

Overall, it is essential that the invisibility or undervaluation of the ‘care economy’ is remedied in order to derive social and economic benefits from the next phase of pandemic-induced change. In the context of planning in Australia to position the economy for the post-pandemic recovery and reconstruction, gender-sensitive support is needed for the economic infrastructure use of the home during the COVID-19 lockdown. A careful re-evaluation of the home as a site of work is timely as we seek to ‘build back better’.

Redrawing the boundaries of productivity in the care economy

The care economy includes paid and unpaid childcare and healthcare, as well as social care, such as for the dependent elderly or disabled, but these activities are included in measures of the economy only when care work involves a monetary transaction (Folbre, 2015; Van De Ven and Zwijnenburg, 2016). Marilyn Waring has famously described this economic accounting system as ‘applied patriarchy’ (Dalziel and Saunders, 2019; Saunders and Dalziel, 2016), and recently called for abandoning the economic paradigm that gives rise to it (Waring, 2018).

Similarly, the national accounting balance sheets account only for stocks of physical (business) capital, and not human capital (people, particularly the labour force) which is assumed to come from nowhere (Cloud and Garrett, 1996; Walters, 1995) or environmental capital (Ingham, 1991) which is only recently acknowledged among national accounting leaders as depletable (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Services provided by dwellings are valued as the imputed rental value and thus counted in GDP as an element of the market economy, even though they are most relevantly associated with production by the non-market, household economy (Ironmonger, 1996).

The difficulties arising from such assumptions can be further illustrated by ways of ‘counting productivity’ during lockdowns. The conventional wisdom of managers at a leading Australian university during the imposed ‘home working’ in late-March 2020 was that up to a 38% ‘productivity loss’ could be accepted for its full-time employees (Australian National University, 2020). Economic experts were meanwhile warning of a ‘productivity disaster’ for firms, due to a forced shift to ‘home working alongside our kids, in unsuitable spaces, with no choice and no in-office days’ (Choudhury et al., 2020; Gorlick, 2020).

This perspective was understandable for employers, but misleading for policymaking. Although market childcare and education services were operating at much reduced capacity, this economic activity had not vanished, rather its locus had shifted dramatically into homes. A survey of time use during May 2020 showed that while average daily

hours of paid work reduced by an insignificant amount (0.5–1 hour), hours of care work increased by 6 hours during the ‘lockdown’ period, as parents were schooling at home and were unable to access childcare for younger children (Crabbe, 2020). With more people using the dwelling, and more meals cooked and eaten at home, time spent in domestic work also increased (Craig, 2020b).

Other kinds of productivity were also generated, though again, misleadingly measured in GDP. For example, consumer goods facilitating home-based alternatives to market goods and services were highly sought after, including for establishing backyard vegetable gardens and chicken runs (Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), 2020; Burgess, 2020; Finder, 2020). The consumer goods counted, the home-produced eggs and vegetables counted, the take-away meals counted, but the bread-baking and home-cooked meals did not. These changes in the setting for economic activity would be measured in conventional economic statistics as a decline in sales and production, with for example, reduced expenditures in restaurants and on childcare services. As the offsetting rise in economic output in homes would not be measured in GDP, we are provided with an inaccurate picture of the decline in economic production of goods and services during the shutdown.

Illustrating this mismeasurement of economic productivity for the case of childcare, a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) paper unknowingly foreshadowed the massive shift in the location of economic productive work activity during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in early-2020 (Van De Ven et al., 2018). It investigated hidden shifts in the locus of childcare services over recent decades and how this biased GDP measurement over time, showing that GDP growth in countries like the US, the UK, and Canada was much lower (0.1–1.8 percentage points less) than measured in official statistics since the 1980s. This mainly arose because the apparent GDP boost from growth in childcare services was not real but simply substituted for the unmeasured and unpaid childcare previously provided by households as women took up paid jobs. The provision of unpaid care services in the home presupposes the existence of this vital infrastructure support for non-market household production. Moreover, this also points to the importance of paying attention to the role of dwellings and consumer durables in facilitating economic activity, including in servicing one of the largest components of non-market household production, the care and education of children. As feminist economic work has highlighted, the likely payoff to basic public infrastructure investment is understated where it helps women spending time tending to family needs but the value of non-market production is not factored in (Agénor and Agénor, 2009; Fontana and Elson, 2014).

The picture is, of course, complex. Employer and business operating costs, and sometimes rents, dropped during the lockdown, not only as staff laid off, but as office running costs fell and some costs such as cleaning were shifted to households. However, considerable savings in time and money were identified for households able to avoid commuting costs such as fuel, fares or parking (Pederson-McKinnon, 2020). Such changes would be reflected as a fall in GDP as conventionally measured. In reality, this drop in GDP is a measure of some important hidden costs of market-based work in offices or centralised work facilities. What is clear is that at present the allocation of the economic costs of the market sector is misleading.

All these factors suggest that just as ‘hibernation’ did not reflect the productive reality, ‘back to work’ misses key aspects of a changed world, post lockdown: one in which private investment in the services necessary for working from home needs to be matched by larger scale policy and infrastructural investment, and the costs of the crisis that have been disproportionately imposed on women need to be acknowledged and compensated. The rush to re-open schools, for instance, acknowledges that the fundamentals of economic life include the provisioning of care for dependents (Berry, 2020). Proper accounting for how that care is delivered together with investment in supporting the complex work involved in integrating work and home needs (and now health risks) are long over-due.

Yet, schools, aged-care and health provision have not thus far been at the forefront of the Australian federal government’s thinking on immediate infrastructure needs. Indeed, the rush to invest in supposedly ‘shovel-ready’ projects seems likely to favour infrastructure such as roads, sports stadiums and trains, pouring stimulus spending into construction and related industries that have a strong interest in maintaining unsustainable patterns of office use and commuting. A less gender-biased investment programme would invest in supporting care economies, including the presently uncounted contributions of work in the home. In ‘building back better’, infrastructural supports are needed to improve the efficiency and equity of expanding working from home in future, reaping benefits such as reduced commuting times, transportation costs and pressure on central business district (CBD) office and retail space.

However, recognising what makes good economic sense for government to invest in presupposes better accounting practices for measuring productivity. With expectations that WFH becomes more commonplace, the non-market production of households, including women’s unpaid care and domestic work, needs to be seen not only as a crucial economic buffer but also a site of important social and political change towards improving the status of women. Key questions include how acknowledging such work and its role in provisioning human life can effectively improve its visibility, justifying public and individual investments in the household economy and care work; and how economic policies for recovery, including infrastructural spending, make the expansion of work in the home both more efficient and more equitably allocated between men and women. The next sections develop some approaches to these questions.

Flexibility and adaptability as forms of work

During lockdown, deprivation of the usual infrastructure supporting the capacity to work – school, after-school and child care, canteens and cafes, dedicated office space – illuminated critical dependencies. The absence of this infrastructure intensified gendered inequalities in the capacity to work, leading many women to leave the labour force (Hill, 2020). The increased productivity of the home workplace added to work pressures on women, much more than for men (Craig, 2020a). Yet, the need for greater multi-tasking, intrinsic to juggling work at home in such circumstances, was economically invisible, not counting as productive because it is unremunerated. The vital contribution of women’s ‘flexibility’ to the economy’s resilience against risks and shocks has gone largely unrecognised.

Thinking about flexibility *as* work expands points made earlier about the many kinds of women's work that as Waring put it, 'count for nothing'. 'Home' functions, at least in part, as a managed resource from which bodies emerge to attend school and offices, fed, washed and clothed. An on-going production of the working body takes place in the home. The unpaid labour that feeds into this, disproportionately provided by women, includes not only crucial activities of the care economy such as tending to children but, in addition, the management of competing priorities and ensuring the usability and effective distribution of working space. That labour, comprising a range of skills from management to cleaning, has become much more evident as work, education, leisure time – and even the labour of childbirth (Bradfield, 2020) – moved with the family into the home.

As practical boundaries between work and home life disappeared during lockdowns, women felt the consequences more. A study found mothers 'far more likely to be interrupted during paid working hours than fathers' (Andrew et al., 2020). Work/life balance became an untenable concept, presupposing a separation of spheres of activity that was unrealizable in a situation which had intensified domestic pressures and required skilled multi-tasking. Homes had to supply and service the equivalent of office space for work, at a time when whole families were crowding together.

The impact fell not only on women, of course, but exacerbated a range of inequalities. A study of working from home in Australia early in the pandemic highlighted other risks and adverse social consequences (Pennington and Stanford, 2020). Not all could work from home – some became unemployed. Other challenges included intensification of demands on workers for excessive and irregular hours, erosion of occupational health and safety standards, and cost shifting by employers. As the study authors point out,

The assumption that workers have a spare room that can be readily converted into a home office, where they can work peacefully and productively, is far-fetched for most home workers.

Into this mix was thrown the technological tool of surveillance and potential intrusion of employers into homes. The unprecedented pressure on workers to rapidly adapt their home to a work setting could be extreme, even as employers continued to 'offer' flexibility to employees.

Reflecting on such experiences of WFH once again renders more visible the underlying *assumptions* that shaped this mitigation strategy. The effort it can take to 'do' flexibility was shared on social media, as the exhaustion of multi-tasking and trying to meet incompatible demands in the household became wide-spread. Yet, the flexibility that took on such importance as people juggled competing demands, is rarely treated as itself work, but seen as the precondition of work. Flexibility is an ambiguous value at the best of times, with a significance that readily differs widely between employers and employees, and across different circumstances. Seen as a generous gift of employers, enabling those with other demands on their time to take on some paid work, it allows employers to draw particular value from having workers who trade their flexibility for less rights and less pay, working flexibly as demand arises. Yet, the 'constant juggle' primarily reflects the uncounted labour of women entering male-dominated workspaces, while still being expected to take responsibility for home. 'Flexibility' has an assumed positive

value in enabling those with caring responsibilities to access paid employment, but also negotiates between separate spheres of life that exact unequal demands on gendered subjects.

Challenging such assumptions is important to instituting more equitable and sustainable future patterns of working. For instance, properly remunerating the kinds of work associated with flexibility might be a way of recognising that it generally falls to the most disadvantaged to 'make work' situations that present no easy fit. In addition, it is important not to presume home is a frictionless place or an unencumbered locale that simply substitutes for the office cleanly. In place of the concept of 'work-life balance' to deal with this situation, we suggest adopting a more nuanced account of 'work-life integration' (Wheeler and Gunasekara, 2020). Counting the work contributed in managing flexibility, including establishing boundaries and smoothing conflicts, needs a non-idealised account of how such integration is performed, requiring skills of careful management by those practicing it.

Some people who found themselves less 'working from home' than 'at home, during a crisis, trying to work' used this rephrasing to secure a sense of rights and dignity in their own homes, and to push back against overly demanding expectations of paid productivity. Such gestures are important and indicate a need for creative political as well as economic thinking about the resilience home-working has offered. Home is always more than an un-acknowledged asset base and rightly resists 'requisitioning'. If public policy began from an appreciation of the contributions of the home and had a better grasp of the skills involved in making a home function as a working place, we would be in a better place to rebuild the economy more inclusively. Those who, under any circumstances, welcome work into the private domain deserve both the respect proper to their role as hosts and an acknowledgement of the imposition this accords.

'Building back better': Policy implications and conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic has been called a 'wake-up call' on many fronts, as well as 'a dress-rehearsal for future challenges' by UN world leaders. As well as health, environmental and social vulnerabilities, it has also highlighted previously unperceived economic risks and exposed market supply chain vulnerabilities. An upside of the disruption and distress arising from COVID-19 is that coming months present a rare opportunity to rethink productivity and economic wellbeing, redesigning our economic institutions, social security systems and economic policy approaches so that public investments produce the best returns in the dramatically changed health, social and economic context. We need to generate a fairer distribution of paid and unpaid work and its rewards, and greater resilience to economic shocks.

The state of emergency in which work alongside schooling was forcibly moved large-scale into the home, also provides an opportunity to recognise the contribution of work done in the home in a fresh way. If the disruption we have experienced is to improve the status of women, hard hit on many fronts by the COVID-19 crisis, this requires new approaches to gendered working relations. Although most employees will have felt obliged to accede to this requisitioning of the home, its connotations of legal yet violent appropriation might be ameliorated by employers and governments finding practical

ways of acknowledging the hard work and literal ‘accommodation’ of mutual need with which the demand was met. Appreciating the grace with which most adapted to this task, can be seen as a step to recognising the significance of their essential contribution as part of a new social contract.

Long held assumptions about normal office-based patterns of work were shattered by the COVID-19 response. As some extreme pressures of this time ease (at least in Australia at the time of writing) critically due to schools and childcare resuming their economically vital services, it has become possible to contemplate the wide-spread benefits brought by moving to WFH. These include reduced commuting, greater control over one’s time and the related health and well-being benefits. Such benefits only exist, however, under certain working conditions (Dixon et al., 2019) and with appropriate infra-structural support. If the extreme differences in recent experience of working from home reflect system strain, such as needing to work while home-schooling, this draws attention to the need to build response capacities to fill gaps in care, including in times of crisis, and to resource equitable adaptation in how care is delivered.

In addition, as home emerges as a site of work, labour relations should be rethought as part of a wider political economy. Explicit regulation is necessary to confer protections and improve social status for home workers, and ensure appropriate limits are placed on potentially excessive contributions and invasive technology. The contributions of home-based workers should be celebrated as part of the ‘essential work’ which has carried us through crisis. Going forward, this exceptional effort needs to translate into more solid and sustainable integration of demands on the home, while also mitigating risks to availability of dependent care.

‘Building back better’ must be rooted in adequate metrics for measuring contributions to care, flexibility and the resilience these afford. It needs to treat childcare services, paid and unpaid, as the necessary public infrastructure they are. COVID-19 also brings a sharper focus to feminist critiques of how social protection systems are designed, having mostly evolved to target economic risks of labour market earnings rather than addressing the economic risks of care work by women. Social protection design which is reliant on a male breadwinner as in Australia (Smith, 2017) results in contemporary welfare regimes being poorly equipped to address gender inequality, or even recreating or entrenching it (O’Connor, 1993; Orloff, 1993, 1996). Because women are mainly held responsible for care work, their economic vulnerability lies particularly within the family and its care responsibilities.

It is amply clear already that women in many countries are bearing the brunt of economic harm from the COVID 19 epidemic and related ‘lockdown’ public health policy responses (Alon et al., 2020; Van Barneveld et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020; Women’s Budget Group (WBG), 2020b). Unlike in previous economic downturns involving manufacturing or financial services, the food, accommodation and retail industries – with high concentrations of female workers – are most devastated by closures and redundancies, and loss of earnings has dire implications for low-wage workers having lesser access to savings or other assets such as home ownership. Also, women comprise around three quarters of essential workers in industries most highly exposed to transmission risk – health care, childcare, aged-care and schools – yet, are often the most poorly provisioned with viable infection control strategies or personal protective equipment. Furthermore, as

childcare services and schools have been cut back, women's unpaid work at home has increased substantially, even as many struggle to maintain pre-COVID-19 levels of paid work productivity amid providing care, education, meals, and other domestic work in busier, more crowded dwellings. The Australian government's prompt decision to make childcare free for essential workers shines a blazing torch on the fact that women have indeed been uncounted and underpaid 'babysitters for the economy' (Smith, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020).

Yet, still the focus of public policy debate on 'back to work' and recovery from 'hibernation' remains blind to the non-market household economy and the urgent need to better integrate its productivity into the economic recovery. Policy pronouncements and discussion have shifted to large infrastructure projects, such as the long-standing proposal for a Very Fast Train between capital cities in eastern Australia (Terrill and Crowley, 2020). Meanwhile, programmes that could be better characterised as 'emergency relief' than 'recovery' programmes have been put in place for the most severely affected industries, and increased incentives for business investment flagged. The implication is that these measures intend to take the economy back to 'business as usual', driven by private/market sector priorities for investment. Yet, such major construction projects as were immediately on the agenda as Australia moved out of lockdown, are not only discredited as a source of Keynesian stimulus because of the time lags and low returns involved, but fail to address the future needs of society or the economy.

Our analysis suggests the merits of instead using the current opportunity to restructure and reposition or reorient the economy and economic activity (including the non-market economy) for a different future. The resilience the home has provided is likely to remain an essential resource. Allowing Keynesian demand stimulus to more immediately generate consumer demand meshes well with concerns to protect public health, as well as structural adjustment away from high risk or potentially redundant industries. It supports preparations for home-based and localised economic activity and 'social distancing' amid future infectious disease or climate-related emergencies and disasters. Rethinking Keynesian style demand expansion and investment priorities in the light of COVID-19 suggests the urgency of directing these towards (female-dominated) public health, education and childcare systems and services (enhancing human capital); or dwellings and neighbourhood environments and infrastructure (as sites of economically valuable production). Public investments in risky or potentially redundant large-scale infrastructure projects such as mass public transport systems (airports, ports or trains) and physical infrastructure (commercial office buildings, sports stadiums or large hospitals) fail to seize the opportunity for change. These are directed at serving the market economy and its institutions, while profiting the commercial CBD property sector. It is well established that such construction industry-based investment and recovery strategies predominantly benefit male jobs (Agénor and Agénor, 2009; Women's Budget Group (WBG), 2020a).

Investments in areas such as aged and disability care would rapidly generate jobs and services to the benefit of both men and women. As well as supporting safer and more efficient care, building back better would require programmes for rapid, small-scale investments to adapt dwellings, neighbourhoods, local retail centres and localities to the new and more intensive demands on them. Enterprise bargaining agreements and wage awards need amendment to include work at home allowances and related provisions

compensating workers for the higher utility, cleaning and other costs of WFH, and to protect against exploitative ‘piece-work’ contracts and excessive employer surveillance. A critical examination of the taxation and social security system that takes an intersectional approach to reforming the welfare system is also essential, reflecting new awareness of the interdependence of public and private spheres through a crisis that has revalued the contribution of work based in the home. For instance, tax allowances for home offices need to be expanded, but reconfigured into refundable tax credits, so that those on the highest marginal tax rates are not advantaged and those on low incomes are not left unassisted with the costs of working from home. Supporting WFH might include subsidies for equipment and Internet access, and payment for parents involved in substantial childcare and schooling activity at home, building on some Australian states’ models for part-time home schooling. Crucially, the move towards more gender equal social norms would be much assisted by a move to a shorter working week, as has recently been proposed in New Zealand (Roy, 2020). Time use research in Australia points to the critical importance of limiting long paid work hours to achieve more equal sharing of unpaid household and care work (Craig et al., 2019).

We used the phrase ‘requisitioning the home’ to draw attention to the assumptions that underpinned the ready take-over of the home, as though it were a place, devoid of its own particular labour, and ready for use in buffering the economy. If such assumptions are challenged, however, this suggests a path to fully acknowledging many kinds of work in the home. If we conceive of working from home as a creative accommodation of diverse needs, and generate the infrastructure to support it, this way of ‘building back better’ will include attention to a range of demands existing in households, and support as well as recognise the significant economic contribution made by work in the home. Those who welcomed work into the private domain deserve the respect proper to their role as hosts and an acknowledgement of the investment in life, as well as in future citizens and workers that is represented by the home.

In the recent response to the COVID-19 crisis, employees have invested in the public good as well as underwritten the maintenance of productivity by providing homes to employers as the effective infrastructure supporting our work as a nation, thus rescuing core operations and allowing their continuation. Just as the state’s rescue-package for large corporations opens a conversation on how far this entails an investment has been made entitling states to part-ownership, might the investment made by *employees* in supporting productivity at this time lead to greater democratisation and say in the institutions and firms that employ them? Although workers are anticipated to lack bargaining power in the coming down-turn in employment, there is scope for a public conversation to develop the respect properly due to ‘essential workers’ in this crisis, as extending into many aspects of hitherto uncounted care and flexibility-work. Conversation over public goods, at a minimum, should involve those engaged in household work in envisioning the types of infrastructural development that would make care and flexibility-work better accounted for and better distributed across gender divides.

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