

# Not a Virtual Education: The Entanglement of the Private and Public Spheres in the Lives of Women Teachers During the Pandemic in Iran

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

Teleworking and teaching from home is not just a modality change; it is deeply intertwined with other aspects of life. If we pretend to have a new everyday life during a public health crisis, an economic, social, political, and moral crisis, we commit an immoral act. Job losses, school closures, and family isolation shift caregivers from paying jobs to unpaid jobs, primarily for women. This change occurs because of gender-biased social norms that hold women as caregivers and because of the workforce structure. Acknowledging the statement that "the personal is political" requires education system decision-makers and administration to consider this a moral issue and encourage women to raise awareness and change the lives of men and women by telling their stories unapologetically. In this article, while studying the lives of women teachers, we address the issue of the interference of professional and personal domains.

## Introduction

It matters what stories tell stories.

It matters what thoughts think thought.

It matters what worlds world worlds.

Virginia Woolf (Stengers and Despret, 2015)

The forced lockdown and the crisis that has challenged the world over the outbreak of the new Coronavirus has revealed the inequality across the world and showed that discrimination has become more pervasive during this pandemic: how can the poor suffer more than the wealthy and women more than men from a single virus? Why do the lives of different groups in the power hierarchy not suffer equally?

Teleworking and teaching from home is not just a modality change; it is deeply intertwined with other aspects of life. If we pretend to have a new everyday life during a public health crisis, an economic, social, political, and moral crisis, we will commit an immoral act. Job losses, school closures, and family isolation shift caregivers from paying jobs to unpaid ones, mainly for women. This change occurs not only because of gender-biased social norms that position women as caregivers but also because of the structure of the workforce.

William Shakespeare and Isaac Newton have done some of their best work during the plague epidemic (Lewis, 2020). There was an apparent reason for their success: none of them had the responsibility of caring for a child. Teaching mothers, who spend 24 hours a day with their children due to the closure of schools and daycares and serve their needs all day, are going through unique and challenging conditions. Housework, which used to take a lot of time and energy from women, has now suddenly multiplied, and housework for all family members has dramatically increased women's responsibilities and work. From

washing clothes, which is often more common these days, to cleaning the house, sanitizing surfaces, which should be done more than before and probably several times a day, and other chores that women usually manage.

Cooking meals, which has become a necessity these days, is another task that has become heavier than before. Restaurants are half-closed, all family members are at home, and households can hardly order food outside. All of these are essential and exhausting responsibilities that have fallen on women worldwide and multiplied in the days of quarantine.

Meanwhile, there have been numerous reports that forced quarantine and lockdown have led to increased violence against women. Domestic violence rates have risen significantly in Turkey, France, and Germany. Published information on the situation in China also confirms that domestic violence has quadrupled during quarantine times (Peterman et al., 2020). According to the Social Harm Office of the Welfare Organization in Iran, calls to the Social Emergency Center have doubled (Etemad Online, 2020).

Forced housekeeping, spending too much time together, fear of the future, and the family's economic situation's uncertainty following the pandemic creates more stress and anxiety. In such circumstances, it is clear that women and children are the primary victims of violence and abuse in families.

## **Theoretical Framework and Background of Research**

The second-wave feminist movement in the second half of the twentieth century, inspired by the slogan "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969), criticized the duality of the public and private spheres. A dichotomy that since ancient times had allowed the private affair (such as cleaning, cooking, parenting, caring for the sick and the elderly) to women and enslaved people, and public affairs (such as economic, social, and political activities) to be for the free men (Arendt, 2013). In this division of labor, the public is privileged, and the private is considered less valued. Likewise, attributes such as rationality, leadership, culture, and science are masculine, and attribute such as emotion, obedience, and nature are considered feminine. This hierarchical duality also requires the belief that only the public matters are worth discussing and studying and that private matters should be hidden in the closet. Famous psychologists such as G Stanley Hall, who coined the concept of adolescence, as well as Sigmund Freud (the founder of psychoanalysis), explicitly claimed that the minds of all non-white men were not worth studying (Diehl, 1986; Hall, 1904; Lesko, 2011; Sagan, 1988). Carol Hanish invited women to share their stories (as well as men) with the slogan "the personal is political." Of course, understanding that there is common oppression among women immediately transforms it from a personal issue to a political one. This approach requires politicians and decision-makers to consider this as a moral issue.

## **What is Political?**

Paolo Freire (1970) believed that "education is entirely political" and that "education is never neutral" (p. 19). In this highly polarized age where opinions, studies, and actions are often analyzed through political and ideological lenses, it is essential to acknowledge that our collective work as educators has become more politicized than ever. This *political* focuses on the relationship between education and power, not in partisan politics, but a broader sense. As has been said, power is a commodity traded in the political market. Therefore, anything to do with the redistribution of power is political.

The education system can act as a tool for socialization or conscientization, maintaining the status quo and empowering those historically oppressed. Schools and curricula play an essential role in curbing or making meaningful changes. That implies that teachers and policymakers should consider participating in the power structure.

In the public/private dichotomy, the political is defined as opposed to the personal. The position of politics is outside the home, and in the patriarchal axiology is typically considered masculine. Therefore, the equivalence of the personal and the political by Hanish is regarded as a substantial deconstruction. The main message of this feminist critique and a major theory of the second wave of feminism is to interrogate the public and private spheres (Kelly, 2017). Many of those, who fought for women's suffrage and liberation from legal oppression in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was aware of the connection between the personal and political domination of the patriarchal system over women. However, before the 1960s, a small number of feminist activists questioned the unique role of women in the family. When feminists fought for equal suffrage or access to education, many considered the prevailing assumption that the woman being in charge of the family's care was natural and inevitable (Crow, 2000).

The second-wave feminist movement showed that what was previously considered apolitical was political. Just as a public authority, such as the formal laws and unwritten values of a patriarchal society determines relationships, roles, and homosexual obligations inside the home (private), so must the critique and analysis of events within the house find a way out. The political view of the personal sphere of gender, housework, childcare, and family life gives the impression that what was considered natural is, in fact, situational, arbitrary, socially constructed, and can be criticized. Feminist

scholars with different tendencies and in various fields of study have examined the relationship between the personal lives of women and the inequality in the workplace in physical and psychological aspects of their subjugation (Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Pittard, 2015). Decades later, there is no doubt that the links between the private and non-private aspects of our lives are deep and pervasive.

## **The Life of Women Teachers**

In the field of education, many women have historically entered educational institutions as labor to escape domestic violence. This participation was welcomed because the patriarchal social structure

continued to dominate the bodies and minds of women. Grumet asserted that, although female teachers serve patriarchal values in schooling, they are still part of the workforce that can feel liberated by relieving themselves of personal responsibilities and economic independence (Grumet, 1988).

Walkerdine (2003) analyzes the role of women teachers and their struggles in the neoliberal system and shows that they have to serve patriarchal and class values not only to succeed but also to continue their careers. Pittard (2015) also shows that the patriarchal discourse of women teachers has entered them into an endless competition with themselves that they could never be won. The rules and regulations of this competition are designed so that women will never be good enough (brilliant, beautiful, artist, capable, housewife, child-loving, etc.) and always explicitly and implicitly blame themselves and others. In some cases, these ideal traits are so contradictory that their coexistence is difficult, if not impossible (Salazar-Parrenas, 2001).

In the days of the COVID-19 Pandemic, women are simultaneously (and at the same place) entangled in two patriarchal systems: the role that imposes most of the responsibilities of domestic work (private sphere) on them and the role that entrusts them with caring for the children of others (public sphere). Patients with epidemics also need care. Older people also need care, and of course, children who have dropped out of school need care. The "care," this unpaid human work, falls on women because of the existing structure. Single mothers, of course, face far more difficult decisions.

## Research Methodology

This study is based on a feminist case study and through an informal conversation with ten secondary school teachers in Tehran, Iran. The school is located in the east of Tehran, and the teachers could be considered socio-economically middle class. All teachers who spoke with us are married and have children.

The study is informed by feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1991, 1993; Hartsock, 1998). While criticizing the positivist and objectivist views, this approach claims that there is always a standpoint to see the world from somewhere. There is no neutral position in studying a phenomenon, and there is no god-like eye trick of seeing the world from nowhere (Haraway, 1991). This approach has inspired social scientists, especially in women's studies, and introduced feminist studies as a methodology (Abu - Lughod, 1990; Prasad, 2017). Objectives such as reviewing the man-made world (Crotty, 1998), critique of patriarchy, striving for justice and liberation, freedom through the struggle against stereotypes and gender maps, and policy-making to change the power relations between men and women in society (Weedon, 1987) and presuppositions such as inequality as oppression, the need to change the status quo, the conceptualization of different views and lived experiences between women and men (Safarik, 2002) are features of feminist methodology. Reinharz (1992) also shows in detail how feminist methodology "makes women's voices audible" (p. 48). This study aimed to explore the experiences of women teachers during teleworking and virtual teaching from home in Iran.

During the conversations, teachers were asked to comment on breaking the boundary between work and

home, the effects of teleworking on family relationships, family support for professional duties, general household conditions, division of household chores among family members, and psychological issues of being at home.

## Findings And Data Analysis

The findings of this study can be presented in the following areas:

### Ⅹ. Entanglement of Professional and Housework:

In the current situation, the daily and minor problems of the house that were easily resolved in the past or were even considered negligible, such as not having lunch on time cluttering the house, have become a concern. Says Sarah, a math teacher:

"I feel sad and guilty that I have time to teach online and I cannot give breakfast to my little child, or sometimes I am so busy teaching that I do not have time to prepare lunch for my family."

The physical presence of women in the home has increased the family's expectations. These expectations, along with the internalized belief that women are responsible for the house have made them feel inefficient and undermined their self-esteem. Teachers are satisfied that they are at home and seemingly able to play the gendered roles of mother, wife, and housekeeper, but they also complain a lot about the pressure. Huriya, a geology teacher, says:

"I am thrilled to be at home and physically present, but both online teaching and housekeeping have been difficult for me."

Women teachers feel satisfied in performing their duties properly and flawlessly, whether as teachers or caregivers, mothers, and wives. Presence in the field of endless competition to meet expectations requires a perfectionist attitude and the fear of the stigma of incompetence. Hosna, a biology teacher, says:

"In the spirit of perfectionism, I try to take care of everything promptly."

Supposedly, online teaching has the advantage of being at home and working while being with their children, which has also caused other issues that made them worried about losing emotional stability and healthy relationships with their children and especially with their spouses. Mehri says:

"Teaching for hours and sitting in a separate room, as well as being constantly busy answering students' questions, has robbed me the opportunities to be with my family, and I cannot help but answer my students, and I feel so far away from my family."

Raised expectations are not just from the family and the teachers themselves. Online communication has made teachers available to students all day. Samaneh, a Persian language arts teacher, says:

"[In the past] I had a set time and a specific workday, a specific schedule, I could make time for my children, my partner, my home and get some rest, but now, although we are not physically present at school, we are available to students all day, and we do not have a regular schedule anymore."

Manijeh, an Arabic foreign language teacher, also says:

"My work schedule and timing are disrupted. With our access to phones and cyberspace, school officials and students expect teachers to be always online and available to answer questions, reducing the level of tolerance and patience for students and administrators. They expect their request to be answered immediately. Working hours used to be more orderly in person."

In a similar vein, Manijeh says:

"The working hours in the online class have increased for me because I answer children's questions in private chats. In addition, a large number of children send homework or questions every day and every hour, even at one o'clock after midnight, and expect prompt answers."

Teachers' lives have changed, making it impossible to succeed with a blurry line between housework and school, the two battles that were already un-winnable and unjust.

Coping with the change and resisting a new order is another thing that is heard during the conversations. For example, Mastaneh, a physics teacher, says:

"During my class, I get furious at the noise that my little five-year-old daughter makes, I have to argue with her, and I make my child and family members upset all the time."

## **2. Internalized Gender Roles:**

Although the teachers stated in many cases that they had the support from their families, they also said that they were always responsible for the housework and that their spouses did not do anything except in forced/ emergency cases. This confirms the internalization of patriarchal values and the manifestation of gender roles, i.e., the housework is for women. In other words, despite their social contributions, women teachers have accepted that it is their duty to do housework, take care of children, and only benefit from their husbands' rare cooperation. Says Nastaran, an English foreign language teacher:

"Usually, we do things together at my request; I just wish it could not be done without an argument and dispute."

The social presence of women in the labor market and economic independence has also brought a sense of emancipation. Simultaneous work at home and work from home have also affected self-worth. Hamta, a teacher of Religion and Life, says:

"I became a teacher to have social relations outside the house, being with students and interacting with my colleagues gave me much energy, now I feel tired and isolated."

Of course, some teachers have accepted the prevailing patriarchal culture and are very satisfied with staying home while teaching. Nevertheless, women embrace inequality and the culture of male domination, their belief.

Khadijeh, a writing teacher, says:

"I am pleased with the new situation and being at home because I can take care of my house, my children, and my spouse and not worry about traffic and arriving late."

Some teachers consider themselves absent attendants who, although physically present at home, are not with their families and are mostly engaged in online teaching. Nastaran says:

"It is difficult to accept that family members are not available while at home and that the present is indeed absent."

### ❖. Teaching as a Feminine Job:

Another critical point that was brought up during the conversations is the family's view of women's (teacher) jobs, which in some cases has been considered less-valued, insignificant, and underpaid. This view complements another traditionally feminine work, the housework, which considers women's work invisible, inadequate, and unimportant. Huriyah says:

"Unfortunately, a teacher is understood only by a teacher, and our family members and spouses do not understand us; I feel lonely."

Although learning about this perspective is not a discovery, adding some extra costs, which the employer (school) should ideally be reimbursed, has added to this tension. Insufficient support for online teaching by the school and the lack of technical support, equipment supplement, and the cost of purchasing data/internet packages have discouraged teachers and caused tension in families to the point that they fear being humiliated and teased when additional necessary teaching costs occur. This has become the subject of family disputes. Huriyah says:

"Providing equipment for virtual classes such as laptops, cell phones, and Internet packages is all the responsibility of the teacher, and this is an additional expense for the family, and this in itself causes concern and anxiety, the consequences of which are transmitted to students during teaching, and it goes back to the family."

In such a tense atmosphere, as always, the women have to keep secrets and put their happy faces on when appearing on the screen. Being concerned about the disclosure of privacy, such as sound from the house being heard by the students, disrupts the relationship between teacher and student. A teacher who needs respect and authority to lead the class is always concerned about the details of her personal relationships within the family, including economic status, home decor (which also reflects the family culture and economy), and the status of the teacher as a woman at home. There is also a risk that

students that are now privy to so many things from inside the house could abuse the teacher in the future. Tahereh, a math teacher, says:

"My partner is a retired and very hard-working veteran and has a second job, mostly having phone calls with a thunderous voice which sometimes sounds harsh for people around him. Unfortunately, this tone of voice has affected our sons as well. Of course, I do my best to respect and keep a distance, but well, I am constantly under the stress of leaking noise into my class."

In this regard, Leila says:

"Most of the time, my problem with the noise around me is from my little boy; he cannot understand and cannot be silent for several hours until I finish teaching."

## Conclusion And Suggestion

Neoliberalism has reconstructed human experiences at all levels of society in many parts of the world. Although there is considerable variation in the definition and understanding of neoliberalism, there is widespread agreement among scholars that neoliberalism once again has contributed to the enhancement of economic rationality in social life, the inverse redistribution of income and wealth in favor of the rich, and the commodification of almost all things (Harvey, 2016).

The scope and depth of neoliberalism's influence have been greatly enhanced by its opportunistic and flexible potential to blend in with other powerful social ideas, practices, and movements to advance its goals. In particular, Nancy Fraser (2017) argues that neoliberalism has successfully served the powerful currents of social justice movements in ways that serve their goals of social transformation by redirecting their movements' efforts, such as expanding diversity and empowerment.

Fraser (2019) calls this manifestation of neoliberalism progressive neoliberalism. She describes it as a hegemonic bloc that connects the seemingly incompatible social forces of super-capitalism and the new justice-seeking social movements. This is a bloc of hegemony by shifting and articulating justice-oriented ideals in post-capitalist political economy, has supported the liberal goals of empowerment, inclusion, LGBT rights, post-racism, multiculturalism, post-feminist, and the environment. For example, this diminishing perception has reduced struggles for equality to the demands of meritocracy, the transformation of emancipation into personal responsibility and personal participation, and the manifestation of environmental care as a support for the carbon trade.

Although the concept of progressive neoliberalism has been debated for analytical and ideological reasons, a series of emerging studies trace Fraser's concept of progressive neoliberalism in various disciplinary areas, such as media studies, women's studies, and the social sciences. This insight deepens our understanding of the paradoxical, diverse, and potential manifestations of neoliberalism while at the same time inspiring hopeful spaces for theoretical innovation and social change in feminist struggles and social welfare. Unfortunately, Fraser's analytical scheme has seldom been used in educational

research, but there have been sparse studies to study how neoliberalism has attempted social justice efforts to promote the ideals of meritocracy and justify social efficiency goals in education (Kumashiro, 2012).

In the last century, the entry of women into the modern job market, primary caregivers, such as teachers, nurses, etc., has been a significant subject for the neoliberal and patriarchal system. The increasing participation of women in the labor market and the expansion of their employment in the world is an important indicator to assess the extent of women's social presence in today's societies. It is widely said that women's employment in the global labor market has never been more significant than it is today. Although increasing women's employment helps reduce poverty and economic growth, gender discrimination and injustice to their rights in the labor market and many other social areas continue. Thus, the two neoliberal and patriarchal capitalist domination systems intersect and limit women's lives.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, as an unprecedented event in the political, economic history of the world and the repulsive interference of the workplace and the home, has made working women even more vulnerable. In this case study, we have conducted conceptual and empirical analyses of women's lives at the professional and personal levels (co-located now).

Finally, while emphasizing the multifaceted nature of the current crisis, we argue that as long as women are more vulnerable than men, it is unethical to consider the current situation normal. Despite these injustices, it also seems unjustified to dance to expedite and facilitate online education. Our call for education decision-makers and leaders is to provide safe environments to encourage women to share their stories without being judged in the hope of raising awareness and making a difference in the lives of women (and men).

## Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval through an Institutional Review Board.

Informed consent

All participants completed an informed consent procedure.

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