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Gender and the blurring boundaries of work in the era of telework—A longitudinal study

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Abstract

This longitudinal study analyses gender and the blurring boundaries of work during prolonged telework, utilising data gathered during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused a major change in the knowledge work sector, which has characteristically been more prone to work leaking into other parts of life. The study examines the blurring boundaries of telework: between time and place, care and housework, and emotional, social, spiritual and aesthetic labour. The experiences of different genders regarding the blurring boundaries of work during long-term telework are scrutinised using a mixed methods approach, analysing two surveys (Autumn 2020: $N = 87$, and Autumn 2021: $N = 94$) conducted longitudinally in a consulting company operating in Finland. There were several gendered differences in the reported forms of labour, which contribute to the blurring boundaries of work. Some boundary blurring remained the same during the study, while some fluctuated. The study also showed how the gendered practices around the blurring boundaries of work transformed during prolonged telework. Blurring boundaries of work and attempts to establish boundaries became partially gendered, as gender and life situation were reflected in knowledge workers' experiences of teleworking.

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KEYWORDS

gender, longitudinal study, telework, work boundaries

1 | INTRODUCTION

This longitudinal study analyses gender and the blurring boundaries of work during prolonged telework, utilising data gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused a major change in working life, particularly in the knowledge work sector (Alvesson, 2004), which has characteristically been more prone to work leaking into other parts of life. Spring 2020 saw almost all employees across the globe whose work could be done away from the workplace transferring to telework. In Finland, the pandemic pushed almost half of wage earners into telework (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2021), thus contributing to the blurring of work boundaries. The government recommendation for large-scale telework lasted for months, after which each organisation reviewed their own recommendations individually. Schools and kindergartens were closed for 2 months in spring 2020 (Mesiäislehto et al., 2022), forcing parents to simultaneously cater to the needs of their children while trying to do remote work effectively. After spring 2020, schools and kindergartens were open for the most part, but in practice the following one and a half years were punctuated with partial lockdowns and occasional quarantines for the whole class/kindergarten group or individual children, making parents' work planning a challenge (see Graham et al., 2021).

The large-scale transition to telework also had gender effects. European research, for example, in Germany, Hungary, and Italy, shows that COVID-era housework and care have largely fallen to women, especially mothers (Fodor et al., 2021; Hipp & Bünning, 2021; Lomazzi, 2022). Studies in Canada, Turkey, and the United States, for example, indicate the same (Çoban, 2022; Gordon & Pesseau, 2022; Yavorsky et al., 2021). As Finland is considered an egalitarian country with regard to gender roles (Mandel et al., 2020), equality is often taken for granted and gender mainstreaming is considered unnecessary. However, women regularly do more housework (Känsälä & Oinas, 2016) and Finland stands out in terms of the Nordic model due to the lower involvement of men in childcare (Moreno-Colom, 2017). The accumulation of responsibilities affects women's working life and career development.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work have already been extensively studied, and there is a growing body of literature on boundary work and gendered experiences during the pandemic (e.g. Kerman et al., 2021). The gender effects of the blurring boundaries of telework remain an under-researched area in both organisational and gender studies, however. In order to fill this gap, this study scrutinises the blurring boundaries of work by analysing two surveys constituting a longitudinal dataset conducted with employees of a knowledge work company operating in Finland. In addition to time and place, the survey focused on care, housework and the dimensions of emotional, social, spiritual and aesthetic labour in order to gain a comprehensive picture of the blurring boundaries of work.

The gendered effects of telework on boundary-blurring have been reported elsewhere (Karjalainen, 2021). This research utilises two separate datasets gathered in the first (2020) and second (2021) years of the pandemic to scrutinise by means of a longitudinal study the long-term gendered effects of mass-scale teleworking regarding the blurring boundaries of work.

Prolonged teleworking may have significant consequences for employees' career development, ability to cope, and well-being, for example. Therefore, there is a need for research on telework and gender as society is not yet sufficiently aware of the gender effects of transitioning to large-scale long-term telework. The research utilises the research setup made possible by the mass teleworking caused by the pandemic to provide the necessary information for working life research, organisations, and policymakers.

The study first presents the theoretical framework related to work boundaries and gender, after which the focus moves to discussions related to blurring work boundaries and telework. After this, the data and methodology are presented, followed by the findings. The article concludes with a discussion section bringing together the results of the research.

2 | GENDER, WORK BOUNDARIES AND ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated many trends in working life. For example, the nature of work and its boundaries have changed in recent decades, but the mass transition to telework made these changes visible. This transition has been highlighted in knowledge work in particular, in which various and complex tasks require problem-solving and creativity, intertwined with relative autonomy and independence in decision-making (Alvesson, 2004; Costas & Kärreman, 2016). Autonomous knowledge work emphasises the importance of individual and organisational flexibility, and one of its key features is the blurring of work boundaries.

The boundary between work and regular life can be seen as flexible or inflexible depending on how easy it is to cross (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Organisations have varying practices and organisational cultures regarding work boundaries, influencing how individuals perceive their own room for flexibility (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). Organisations often assume that their actions are based on gender neutrality rewarding the most qualified individuals, and forget the inequalities typical of masculine career structures (Geiger & Jordan, 2014). Flexibility is often seen as synonymous with prolonged workdays (Bathini & Kandathil, 2019), placing employees in unequal positions based on their life situations and caring responsibilities. Moreover, in knowledge work, the flexibility of work boundaries is linked to gendered organisational hierarchies (Hearn & Louvrier, 2014).

Individuals attempt to maintain work boundaries in order to manage the demands and resources involved in different roles: these boundaries can be psychological, temporal or local (Kinnunen et al., 2014). The degree of trying to keep work and life separate varies, as well as the understanding of the boundaries (Moazami-Goodarzi et al., 2015). These perceptions and aspirations also change at different career stages and in different life situations (Desrochers & Sargent, 2003; Ford & Collinson, 2011).

The stretching of work boundaries is revealed in various ways, for example, in the disproportionate flexibility required of employees due to busyness or excessive work (Correll et al., 2014), work leaking into other areas of life, and technology-enabled decentralisation of time and space (Kinnunen et al., 2014). Although the development of information technology and teleworking has been found to improve job satisfaction (Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet, 2019), previous research results have been contradictory with regard to the boundaries of work, showing that telework has both positive and negative effects on the reconciliation of work and family (see e.g., Mital, 2010).

3 | BLURRING BOUNDARIES OF TELEWORK

The blurring boundaries of work, or telework, are not without gender effects. This is shown in the different dimensions of boundary blurring, for example, regarding the time and place of work. The boundaries of work also become blurred when work leaks into new areas of life, regarding for example, emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), social labour (Fleming, 2009), spiritual labour (Karjalainen, 2022), and aesthetic labour (Caven et al., 2013). These can be expected to take on new forms in teleworking, as the pandemic era has accelerated these transformations.

Emotional labour—the utilisation of emotions in the modern service economy—may have a negative impact on employee health and well-being. Employees are expected to show and use a certain kind of emotion that is appropriate for implementing an organisational strategy (Hochschild, 1983). While emotional labour is usually identified with client-facing occupations and the vast majority of the literature deals with the emotional labour of service professions such as waiters or salespeople, it is also widely experienced in other professions, such as the teaching profession (Buric et al., 2021). In knowledge work, emotional labour is often more subtle but also partly more demanding: the client must be assured of reliability, interest and genuine commitment to long-term customer relationships. Emotional labour can vary from superficial to profound emotional work, as well as from customer situations to the feelings experienced towards the work itself (Miller et al., 2007). In telework, emotional labour may change as encounters move from the same space to different digital platforms (see Blanchard, 2021).

Social labour (Anderson et al., 2016; Fleming, 2009) focuses on friendships and networks in working life, such as the commodification of friendships at work. By succumbing to social labour, employee relationships inside and outside the organisation (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Spicer, 2011) become part of organisational strategies, structures and practices. In telework, creating and maintaining friendships that can be utilised for work raises new questions about the nature of both social labour and friendships. Telework often lacks social interaction (Felstead & Henseke, 2017) and long-term full-time telework can radically change the maintenance of work-related networks and friendships.

Spirituality at work may also turn into a form of labour as the trend of workplace spirituality is gaining a foothold in contemporary organisations (Aboobaker et al., 2019; Zaidman, 2020). As current trends in spirituality are largely seen as a feminine practice, this may also be indicated in spiritual labour and telework. Spiritual labour, another topical concept in organisational research, scrutinises harnessing employee spirituality into work (Karjalainen, 2022). In spiritual labour, the organisation sees the spirituality of its employees as part of its own resources, or the employee utilises spirituality in customer work, for example. Spirituality becomes a new task that needs to be handled excellently and failure to do so can result in a bad conscience and a sense of inadequacy. Previous research has found (Karjalainen et al., 2021) that spiritual labour and various mental exercises are gendered in working life. In a study on self-care in working life, it was found that women see mindfulness exercises as a means of improving endurance or efficiency (Hyyönen & Karjalainen, 2020). Telework highlights the dimensions of spiritual labour and the organisation's assumptions about work boundaries. The pursuit of perfection through self-care is always connected to the prevailing social and cultural reality, although the dynamics underlying the organisational culture and working life are easily overlooked (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). Self-care related to working life has been considered to include the preservation of overall personal wellbeing as well as the effort to utilise oneself and one's own resources as efficiently as possible (Bressi & Vaden, 2017).

Aesthetic labour refers to managing and controlling one's appearance at work (Witz et al., 2003), which has gender effects (McKie & Jyrkinen, 2017). In aesthetic labour, the employee is required to adhere to organisational standards of appearance and to construct their appearance in accordance with management guidelines and the organisational culture (Caven et al., 2013; Nickson et al., 2001). The right kind of appearance is strongly related to gender and age, looks and dress (Haynes, 2012). Telework can be expected to change aesthetic labour as there is no visual context for telework, and teleconferencing requires different types of appearance modification. The research examines how the boundaries of work move, blur and become gendered in COVID-19-era telework, paying special attention to time and space, care and housework, and emotional, social, spiritual and aesthetic labour. The research task is to look at how experts in long-term and full-time telework perceive the boundaries of work and their blurring, and how these evolve in prolonged telework. The study focuses on how these experiences are gendered and how the diverse background and life situation (gender, age, family situation) of employees is reflected in these experiences.

4 | MIXED METHODS AND DATA

The research examines the data gathered from two surveys conducted in an organisation operating in Finland. The organisation, a knowledge work company with a few hundred highly skilled employees, specialises in consulting, especially in information and communication technology (ICT) and outsourcing services. With a vertically segregated labour market in Finland (Palencia-Esteban, 2021), the chosen organisation is suitable for research on work boundaries from the gender perspective as there is an equal number of male and female employees.

In March 2020, the organisation ordered its employees to telework, meetings were moved to digital platforms, and there were few visits to the workplace. Previously, telework had been an exception rather than the rule. By the time of the first survey, September 2020, almost everyone was working remotely. A link to the anonymous survey was sent to all staff, 44% of whom participated: 87 employees, 30 of whom were men (34%) and 57 women (66%), with no one choosing the non-binary option or omitting information on gender. Respondents were quite evenly

distributed by age group, considering the nature of the consulting industry: 18 persons aged 21–29 (21%), 36 (41%) aged 30–39, 25 (29%) aged 40–49, and 8 aged 50+ (9%). The second survey was conducted a year later, in September 2021, when almost everyone was still working remotely. The second survey was answered by 94 employees (43% of the staff), 32 of whom were men (34%) and 62 women (66%). Again, respondents were rather evenly distributed by age group: 19 people aged 21–29 (20%), 32 (34%) aged 30–39, 27 (29%) aged 40–49, and 16 aged 50+ (17%). Each survey was completely anonymous and those who responded to the second survey were untraceable to the respondents of the first survey, allowing the aggregate level analysis of the longitudinal data.

The surveys included open questions about the course of the respondents' teleworking day, the pros and cons of teleworking, changes in knowledge work in teleworking, and about emotional, social, spiritual and aesthetic labour (see Appendix 1). In order to ensure that the respondent understood the purpose of the questions, in each question the concept was defined more precisely (see Brenner, 2020). With the exception of background information (gender, age, line of work), the questions did not refer to gender or caring responsibilities in order to let the gender-related themes emerge naturally in the responses. A multi-method research framework was utilised in which quantitative background variables were examined quantitatively, and theoretically informed thematic content analysis was used to support the qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). To ensure that the analysis was not too driven by background variables and theory, the analysis was conducted so that the gender, age, and family status of the respondents were checked only after the thematic analysis.

The analysis was guided by the experiences, remarks and phenomena related to telework that emerged in the open-ended answers. The meanings and attitudes behind the answers appearing in the lives of the respondents were addressed through thematic content analysis (Bacchi, 2005). This provided access to established ways of meaning-making that participants took for granted, and to their conscious commitment to certain values and goals. The answers to the open-ended questions were grouped according to the themes that arose from the data (such as the nature of telework, work-life balance, emotions, friends, networks, bodywork, mental exercises, and spirituality). These initial sub-units were further analysed and then grouped into larger analytical categories interacting with the theoretical framework. The findings section includes a few illustrative citations from the data to demonstrate the nature of the qualitative data gathered in survey form.

5 | GENDERED AND NON-GENDERED BOUNDARIES OF TELEWORK

This section presents the research results, starting with the temporal and spatial changes in work boundaries, followed by the care and domestic work in relation to telework, and finally the emotional, social, spiritual and aesthetic labour blurring the work boundaries.

5.1 | Time, space and boundaries of work

Each respondent pondered the blurring boundaries of telework regarding time and space, although this was not directly asked in the surveys. The respondents perceived work boundaries as becoming more blurred in telework than in working at the office, and there was no change in this in the datasets from 2020 to 2021, as the general working conditions at home did not change much after the spring 2020 lockdown with children at home had ended. Work being transferred to home for a prolonged time was the aspect considered most problematic:

Sometimes it would also be nice not to have to work at home—to be completely free without the possibility of turning the computer on after working hours. The computer could be left in the office after the working day.

(Female, 30–39, no children, 2020)

The responses highlighted the feeling that work was present all the time, and there was no gender difference in this regard. It was felt that one could not leave the work behind at the end of the working day—partly due to the lack of a journey to work, and partly because work-related technological equipment at home constantly reminded one of work duties. There was also no gender difference between childless workers and workers with children when it came to describing their day working from home.

Similarly, in autumn 2020 there was no gender difference in what respondents missed about work before the pandemic, nor in their views on the benefits that teleworking had brought to their everyday work. The questions on time and space regarding work boundaries did not give rise to gender issues; the work itself was not gender-specific and the respondents did not bring up gender at all in their reflections. Gender differences were revealed in responses concerning relations between work and life, especially regarding care and housework, and in other areas of blurring work boundaries discussed below.

There was a change in work boundaries between the surveys conducted in autumn 2020 and 2021. Whereas in 2020 after 6 months of telework many respondents reported taking breaks and enjoying long walks, in 2021 hardly anyone mentioned these aspects anymore:

Because there are no coworkers at home, there are no ad-hoc conversations in the cafeteria, at lunch, or in any other way. For this reason, working days are busy. Some days I hardly go to the bathroom. Breaks are easily forgotten.

(Female, 50–59, no children at home, 2021)

Women in particular experienced a shift towards not maintaining the boundaries, and forgoing breaks. The first spring of telework in 2020 had introduced the practice of working from home to the organisation—a novelty for most of the employees. As in autumn 2020, many were still enjoying the opportunity of taking long breaks and dividing the day so that they could enjoy themselves, which had faded by autumn 2021 when working remotely had already lasted for one and a half years. The prolonged unexpected telework affected their reflections on work boundaries.

5.2 | Care and housework

The results revealed a profound change in the daily lives of caregivers with the transition to telework. Women referred to childcare, but (including childless women) talked more than men did about cooking and laundry:

When working at the office, I sometimes retreated to a quiet place to concentrate, or if there was a lot of commotion in the open office. There's no such need now, but it's difficult to turn a blind eye to housework right next to where I'm working. I should know how to create a "work bubble" at home.

(Female, 50, school-aged child, 2021)

The housework did not leave the respondent in peace, and undone work was a constant reminder of household responsibilities. Men's reflections did not consider housework as much, but highlighted the effects of teleworking on their relationships with their children:

In principle, I can see my kids during the day when they come home from school. In practice, this hardly ever happens because I'm so tied up in meetings.

(Male, 40–49, school-aged children, 2020)

I wake up late and then have breakfast as a rule. I work at my remote workstation and my child often disturbs me or makes a noise if not in daycare.

(Male, 40–49, small child, 2020)

The first answer reflects disappointment when the work-family flexibility allowed by telework is not realised, and the work boundaries are inflexible for the employee. In the latter answer, the unplanned crossing of boundaries interferes with work as family life spills over. The proximity of children due to working from home thus brought at least an apparent flexibility to family relationships, although it could disrupt the working day. All of the above responses reflect the situation in Finland where women do more housework than men and bear most of the childcare responsibilities (Känsälä & Oinas, 2016; Moreno-Colom, 2017).

Although the majority of respondents reported that teleworking brought peace to their day after the stress caused by kindergarten and work transitions eased, women's responses in particular also showed a harsher side, particularly in families where both parents were working:

I work on my laptop either on the couch or at the dining table. [...] Our home office is used by my husband. When the kindergartens closed in the spring and the children were at home, I worked in the sauna as it was the quietest place in the house.

(Female, 30–39, small children, 2020)

Longitudinally, the worst phase was spring 2020 when kindergarten youngsters and schoolchildren stayed at home as the country went into lockdown. Although the kindergartens and schools reopened, the undone housework weighed on women in particular. An obstacle that particularly affects women's career development is the amount of caring responsibilities they shoulder, with the support given by the spouse being a notable factor in the possibility for career advancement (Heikkinen et al., 2014). Many responses show how demanding knowledge work is often difficult to reconcile with concurrent care responsibilities.

5.3 | Emotional and social labour

Previous research has reported that women's emotional work extended to caring responsibilities at home that involved keeping the family calm at the height of the COVID-19 crisis (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). This study focuses on emotional labour as a form of work in an organisational context. Emotional labour is one of the dimensions of work boundary blurring. Although emotional work has already been recognised as a part of the modern service economy for decades, it may change in telework. Men and women both emphasised the challenges of emotional labour in telework:

The cheering up of coworkers has diminished as I find myself working a lot in my own bubble. In the office, I circulated to say hi and got people smiling. I also spontaneously praised others. In telework, spontaneous expression of emotions is clearly more difficult, but not completely forgotten.

(Female, 30–39 years, no children, 2020)

Perhaps empathy diminishes a little when people don't meet and are just distant faces on the screen. You can't see the reactions of others and become more "business-oriented".

(Male, 30–39, no children, 2021)

The responses highlight the difficulty of emotional labour in telework and the frustration associated with it. In telework, remote meetings replace office meetings, and phone calls and emails become prominent mediums of

contact, replacing face-to-face encounters in the same space. All of these technologies change human interaction and thus emotional labour.

Some respondents mainly reflected on their own emotions, but the focus was largely on coworkers' emotions and how to support them. There were also men and women who felt that there was no place for emotions at work:

I don't express my emotions at work; there's no room for emotions here.

(Female, 40–49, no care responsibilities, 2020)

There was a difference in the responses concerning how emotional labour was described and in which contexts of meaning it was situated (Bacchi, 2005).

The closely related research concept of social labour helps when looking at work friendships as the focus shifts from emotions and their control to social relationships. Many reported that at the beginning of the telework era in spring 2020 they had tried to catch up on coworkers' news in remote meetings, but soon became tired of the practice. When asked whether they had tried to maintain or build friendships and networks at work, many respondents said that they felt uneasy about doing so, due to technology:

This is almost zero now. I don't feel natural with video connections.

(Female, 40–49, school-aged child, 2021)

Women reflected a little more than men on their friendships, but social relationships at work were talked about in the same way regardless of gender. More women than men described themselves as introverted, and said that COVID-era telework duly suited them well:

I've found that I feel much better when I telework. I'm an introvert by nature and get tired of too much noise in the office or constant human contact.

(Female, 30–39, no children, 2020)

Women also had a bad conscience about maintaining their friendships at work, deeming that more should be done. Men did not feel the same way, although nor did they report doing social labour more than women did. In emotional and social labour, the vast majority of employees felt that carrying out these forms of labour remotely was challenging, and often frustrating. The gender differences were revealed as women were more likely to declare themselves introverts, to reflect more on their friendships, and to experience greater feelings of inadequacy. The longitudinal data shows how emotional and social labour changed somewhat during the long-term telework. The round of news that started the Teams meetings at the beginning of the telework era was soon abandoned and the frustration of socialising on digital platforms grew. Introverted women did not report suffering the consequences of long-term telework, but regarded themselves as being willing to continue teleworking instead.

5.4 | Spiritual labour

In addition to emotional and social labour, the boundaries of work may blur when utilising mental techniques at work, which may cause spiritual labour. One of the questions in both surveys asked respondents: 'Do you use any technique to survive/thrive at work? (e.g., mindfulness, meditation, mental exercises, or such-like)'. A typical answer given by a female respondent demonstrated feelings of inadequacy:

I don't take advantage [of such techniques], although it would certainly be good.

(Female, 40–49, no children, 2020)

Men, on the other hand, largely replied straightforwardly, stating that they were either practising a technique or that they were not doing anything like that. These responses were gendered, with the same kind of internalisation and adherence to the demands of working life familiar from the social labour discussed above. As contemporary spirituality is seen as feminine (Zaidman et al., 2018), it seems that although men and women did engage in different forms of mental and spiritual practices, only women had a bad conscience about not doing enough.

The organisation started to offer mindfulness classes to its employees after autumn 2020 when it was understood that teleworking would continue longer than expected. The corporate mindfulness class, however, fed into the women's feelings of not doing enough. The internalisation of these demands resulted in a bad conscience and experiences of inadequacy if the standards set for oneself were not met. Feelings of inadequacy dogged women, regardless of whether they engaged in well-being practices:

Again, I don't but I should... has the mindfulness class in Teams contributed to this feeling? When did it start? Probably within a year.

(Female, 20–29, no children, 2021)

I haven't had time or understood to take a break and attend the mindfulness class.

(Female, 20–29, no children, 2021)

Women reiterated the quest for perfection shown in a previous study, in which well-being practices became part of the burden of unfinished tasks (Hyvönen & Karjalainen, 2020). This demonstrated how self-care, such as well-being, has become part of work (Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

5.5 | Aesthetic labour

Aesthetic labour—taking care of and controlling one's appearance according to the corporate culture and rules—faced a significant change after workers ended up in prolonged telework. Aesthetic labour is a strongly gendered practice, as was demonstrated in the two surveys produced in 2020 and 2021:

When I work from home, I usually dress comfortably, I don't put makeup on, and so on, while for the office I would always dress well and wear makeup. I always hope that if, for example, the camera should be on during a meeting, this will be announced in advance. Even then, I mainly think about what is visible to the camera (for example, hair need only be done at the front).

(Female, 30–39, no children, 2020)

If there are no meetings, I don't wear makeup, for example, and visits to the hairdresser have also decreased. But otherwise, no big change.

(Female, 20–29, 2021)

The change in aesthetic labour was particularly significant for women. The responses reveal the demands of aesthetic labour and, on the other hand, the desire to avoid any extra work. Women recounted saving time and money as the need for aesthetic labour diminished. As expected, the gendered nature of aesthetic labour became visible in the responses. For men, the reduction in aesthetic work was demonstrated in their choice of clothes, shaving habits, and their hair:

A presentable top and shorts or sweatpants.

(Male, 20–29, 2021)

I go to the barber less often, and a basic T-shirt and shorts are enough any day.

(Male, 40–49, 2021)

All female respondents reported a decrease in their aesthetic labour in 2020, and 94% reported the same in 2021. As for men, 81% in 2020 and 87% in 2021 reported a decrease in aesthetic labour. Furthermore, women reported a more radical drop in their aesthetic work.

The prolonged teleworking for 18 months was revealed in the thoughts of the professionals regarding the relationship between aesthetic labour and professionalism:

I've almost entirely abandoned "getting ready" for work, which is why working can even feel unprofessional sometimes when dragged straight from bed to the computer.

(Male, 20–29, 2021)

At one point, I stopped investing in getting dressed and doing my hair and makeup. However, I've partly gone back to it because it makes me feel different about starting the working day.

(Female, 30–39, 2021)

These entries show how aesthetic labour has grown into the professional self, and how reducing it may even make one question one's own professionalism—regardless of whether anyone is looking.

The gendered differences found in aesthetic labour during prolonged telework reflect the different standards of appearance with regard to different genders (Haynes, 2012). The attitudes towards and practices of aesthetic labour transformed during the 18-month period. The long-term telework also brought to the surface the internal need for aesthetic labour even if there were no external expectations. This reflects the internalisation and voluntary observance of the requirements of aesthetic labour.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study looked at how the boundaries of work become shaped, blurred, and gendered in long-term telework. In addition to the temporal and spatial boundaries of work, as well as care and housework, the research focused on emotional, social, spiritual, and aesthetic labour. Although research has already been conducted on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on collective telework, the gender effects of the blurring boundaries of work remain an under-researched field. This research examined the effects of prolonged telework on the blurring of work boundaries from a gender perspective, also considering age and family situation.

The study utilised mixed-methods longitudinal analysis to go deeper than the typical survey analysis. For this reason, the collection of data was limited to one organisation. Although the longitudinal datasets (2020: $N = 87$ and 2021: $N = 94$) are small for quantitative analysis, they are extensive for qualitative analysis. The thematic content analysis focused on a qualitative examination of open responses that supported the gender approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). By scrutinising the attitudes behind the open answers (Bacchi, 2005), the data provided access to meanings that the respondents took for granted, as well as their conscious commitment to certain goals and values.

The first key finding was that knowledge workers experienced the constant presence of work, regardless of gender, age or family status. Two main reasons for the workers' inability to leave work behind were identified: firstly, job transfers had been left out, thus diminishing the transitions, and secondly, work-related technological equipment at home, such as smartphones and computers, were constant reminders of work also during leisure time. This showed how the development of information and communication technologies that increase boundary-blurring between work and life (Mazmanian et al., 2013) has an impact on telework.

Work entering the home for a long period was deemed the most problematic consequence of prolonged telework. Yet, after the spring 2020 lockdown, there was hardly any reported development of better practices in the longitudinal datasets collected during the long-term telework. While the experience of the constant presence of work at home did not fluctuate in the longitudinal study, no organisational practices were developed to tackle the problem. The research found that telework blurs the boundaries of work: when work is done at home, starting and especially ending the working day can become blurred. As the boundaries of work are blurred more easily than usual, organisations and employees need to learn new organisational skills and practices, such as organisations commonly setting time windows for communication and meetings (for example between 9 and 5 during the week), and employees' adopting self-management skills with corresponding rights to organise their own work tasks.

Regarding time and space, there was a longitudinal shift in taking breaks during the working day. Whereas in autumn 2020, after 6 months of telework, many respondents reported taking breaks and enjoying long walks, in 2021 these were largely abandoned and even short breaks during the working day became more scarce. Women in particular experienced a shift towards not maintaining the boundaries and forgoing sufficient breaks. The long-term telework took its toll on maintaining good work practices and sustainable boundaries.

The work-family interface (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2022) revealed major gender differences. The study highlighted the profound change in the daily lives of caregivers with the transition to telework, especially during the spring 2020 lockdown. Telework is also a gender and care issue, as caring responsibilities affect teleworking and put families—especially the parents of young children—in a more difficult position than many other groups. The study found that as the boundary between work and the rest of life became partially gendered, women reported difficulty in reconciling demanding knowledge work with their unpaid caring responsibilities. Recent research on the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown also found that the boundary practices established by families were highly gendered, and if childcare was already gendered before the lockdown, then mothers primarily carried the main responsibility for increased childcare while struggling to manage their work duties.

The longitudinal research setup addressed the transformations of boundary blurring in telework. As the pandemic evolved, the worst phase for most was spring 2020 when kindergarten youngsters and schoolchildren stayed home as the whole country locked down. Although the kindergartens and schools reopened after 2 months, there were intermittently countless quarantines and policy changes that made planning ahead challenging, especially with regard to caring responsibilities. As unpaid care is also gendered in Finland, this made it more difficult for women to try to advance in their career or just to fulfil their work duties.

While telework freed workers from the stress caused by kindergarten and work transitions, the unpaid caring responsibilities weighed on women in particular. Previous research has found that caring responsibilities are strongly gendered and have a decisive impact on participation in working life, and especially on women's career opportunities (McKie et al., 2013). In Finland, family care responsibilities are still more often borne by women than men (Känsälä & Oinas, 2016). Therefore unpaid care is also a career issue: unequal structures in working life hamper women's career development. In telework, the gendered practices of caring responsibilities in particular are reflected in work and thus also in career advancement. In the transition to long-term telework, individuals and groups of people are in quite different positions.

At the outset of full-time telework in spring 2020, the organisation transferred all communication to digital platforms, thereby altering the nature of emotional and social labour. Both male and female employees found emotional labour in telework difficult and frustrating, but felt it was part of their duties. During the first spring, there were more attempts to socialise in remote meetings, but these attempts mostly faded out when telework continued as workers felt uneasy maintaining work friendships and networks digitally. Reflections on emotional and social labour were partly gendered: there were no major gender differences in the level of emotional and social labour reported, but women felt more inadequacy in maintaining work friendships. However, there were differences in attitudes towards declining social interaction: more women reported being introverted or withdrawn, and hence telework suited them well; none of the men described themselves as introverted, shy, or withdrawn. This had an impact on attitudes

towards the organisational plan to return to the workplace in autumn 2021: women who identified as introverts preferred the continuation of telework.

Spirituality and spiritual labour are often gendered in working life (Karjalainen et al., 2021). While men and women practised different kinds of mental and spiritual techniques, there was a gender difference in how workers reflected on their own spiritual labour: women demonstrated feelings of inadequacy while men did not reflect on their own labour on the matter. Having a bad conscience or a sense of inadequacy dogged women regardless of whether they engaged in well-being practices or not. The organisation's initiative to start its own mindfulness classes during the long-term telework added to the women's burden of feeling that they were not doing enough. The internalisation and observance of the demands of working life were highlighted in women's reflections. Spirituality and spiritual exercises turned into spiritual labour as technologies aimed at well-being became part of the burden of unfinished tasks (Hyvönen & Karjalainen, 2020). The organisational mindfulness practice became part of a larger societal development of organisational practices and cultures in which self-care, such as well-being, becomes part of work (Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

During telework, aesthetic labour changed significantly for all, but the ways were gendered. All respondents regardless of gender, age or family situation had radically reduced aesthetic labour, but the aesthetic work plummeted for most women. These differences reflect the varying standards of appearance for different genders (Haynes, 2012), and they remained during prolonged telework. For all, the presumption of compliance with the overall standards of appearance (Caven et al., 2013) prevailed and was carried out strategically. All necessary—but oftentimes nothing more than absolutely necessary—steps were taken to fulfil the aesthetic standards of the organisation, for example, by getting only half-dressed for teleconferencing or fixing hair only at the front if the camera was on. The practices and attitudes towards aesthetic labour transformed during the 18 months of telework reported in the study, between spring 2020 and autumn 2021. For many, the internal need for aesthetic labour—even if there were no external expectations and no witnesses—surfaced during the long-term telework. The longitudinal study revealed how the requirements of aesthetic labour were thus internalised and voluntarily observed.

Gendered work boundaries of telework have consequences for working life. Due to the sudden mass transition to telework, many workers thought—perhaps for the first time—about the boundary blurring of their work and its management. Preventing overstrain through division of labour and ethically sustainable management is vital for organisations; organisational-level problems should not be individualised (Nie et al., 2018). As large-scale, long-term telework creates new structural problems for organisations, the responsibility for organising teleworking cannot be left to the individual employee alone. The organisation has to carry its responsibilities with regard to work coming into the home, the work-family interface, and the blurring boundaries of work, and consider the gendered effects of this boundary blurring.

The obligatory mass telework caused by the pandemic enabled a research setup that produced significant information on the gendered blurring of work boundaries for working life research, organisations, and decision-makers alike. However, from the viewpoint of research methodology, it is paradoxical that although the pandemic made it possible to study blurring boundaries during large-scale telework, it also prevented research methods characteristic of this type of research topic, such as shadowing, participant observation and face-to-face interviews. It would be necessary for future research to address the gendered boundary blurring at work with multiple methods and datasets. Furthermore, although the findings suggest that the framework, content and conditions of telework are partly gendered, it is clear that more research is needed on gender and boundary blurring in telework, as the gender implications of large-scale telework are not yet sufficiently known in society. These effects can have significant consequences for employee well-being, resilience and career development, for example.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE ON WORK BOUNDARIES AND TELEWORK

Questions:

Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- I do not want to say

Age

- 20–29
- 30–39
- 40–49
- 50–

Sector

- ICT
- Outsourcing
- Other

Describe your typical teleworking day

The length of your typical working day during the coronavirus pandemic

- Shorter than before
- The same as before
- Longer than before

What do you miss about working life before the coronavirus crisis?

Has the pandemic era improved your working day in some way?

Have the boundaries of work become more blurred due to the coronavirus pandemic?

- Not at all
- A little
- A lot
- Very much
- I do not know

How do you utilise your emotions at work?

How do you maintain your networks and friendships while teleworking?

Has the way you take care of your appearance for work changed during the pandemic era? If so, how?

Do you use any technique to survive / thrive at work? (e.g., mindfulness, meditation, mental exercises or such-like? If so, what?)

How has the coronavirus crisis changed expert work? (2020)

What are your thoughts on plans to switch to hybrid work? (2021)

Other thoughts on work boundaries and telework during the pandemic era

Thank you for your responses.