

Women at risk of 'digital overload,' new research reveals

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When it comes to juggling using digital technology for both work and family, women are at greater risk than men of "digital overload," according to new research led by Lancaster University.

The study, which has important implications for the unequal gender division of digital labor, highlights that women are more likely than men to frequently use information and [communication technologies](#) (ICT) in both work and family lives.

This work-family "digital double burden" heightens the potential risk of digital overload and burnout for women.

The new research, led by Professor Yang Hu, of Lancaster University, working with Professor Yue Qian from the University of British Columbia in Canada, examines gender and digital labor across 29 countries and is [published](#) in the journal *Community, Work & Family*.

Digital labor involves the use of a diverse range of digital tools and platforms, such as Zoom and WhatsApp, for completing everyday work and domestic tasks.

As the pandemic considerably accelerated the progress of digitalization, people increasingly and widely use ICT for work and family communication post-COVID-19.

"As frequent ICT use takes time and effort, it constitutes a new form of labor," explains Professor Hu. "Our study examined gender inequalities in the performance of such digital labor."

The cross-national study uses latest data from the European Social Survey and looks at how people maintain digital communication for work and family across 29 countries (including the UK).

They limited the sample to 6,654 working respondents aged 30–59 who have both at least one child (aged 12 or above) and at least one living parent, to examine the respondents' ICT use for both work and family.

They found:

- A distinctive work-family "digital double burden"—women are 1.6 times more likely than men to juggle dual-high digital communication both at work and at home.
- The traditional gender division of labor in work and family lives extends into the performance of digital labor—women are 31% less likely than men to have high work-only digital communication, but they are 2.6 times more likely than men to have high family-only digital communication.
- In the UK, 42% of the respondents have a dual medium-high work-family digital communication, which is lower than the average of 48% across the 29 countries examined. UK respondents are, therefore, to a lesser extent burdened by the dual digital (communicative) labor in work and family lives compared to respondents from, for example, Norway (59%), Spain (54%) and Serbia (65%).
- UK respondents have one of the highest proportions of work-only digital communication, with 30% having a high level of digital (communicative) labor only for work but not in family life. This is one of the highest across the 29 countries examined (only after the 31% in Israel).

"Policymakers, educators, and practitioners are investing heavily in building digital capacity globally in many societies," said Professor Hu.

"Our findings show that among people with a higher level of digital literacy and in countries where people use the internet more intensely, women are particularly more likely than men to suffer the 'digital double burden.'"

Professor Qian added, "The findings urge policymakers, educators, and practitioners to incorporate gender equality considerations into their

efforts at building digital capacity. Women's gain in digital literacy should not come at the cost of their juggling heavy digital burden in both work and family lives."

Following the pandemic, working from home is becoming more widespread.

The study findings also show that frequent working from home exacerbates the 'digital double burden' disproportionately falling on women's shoulders.

While working from home offers workers the flexibility to juggle work and [family responsibilities](#), it's also becoming a crucial new site of gender inequality in digital labor.

"We need gender-egalitarian work-from-home arrangements and policies," added Professor Hu.

More information: Yang Hu et al, Gendering digital labor: work and family digital communication across 29 countries, *Community, Work & Family* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2024.2373852](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2024.2373852)

Provided by Lancaster University

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