



Dynamics of Virtual Work

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Global Digital Workplace as an Opportunity for Bulgarian Woman to Achieve Work-Family Balance

by Gabriela Yordanova

The Dynamics of Virtual Work

COST Action IS 1202, *The Dynamics of Virtual Work*, is an international interdisciplinary research network on the transformation of work in the Internet Age, supported by COST (European Co-operation in Science and Technology) within the Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health Domain. Chaired by Ursula Huws, Professor of Labour and Globalisation at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK, the Action is managed by a committee of representatives from 30 participating COST countries. Further information about the Action can be found at

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ICTs have had a major impact on the content and location of work. Digitisation of information has transformed labour processes whilst telecommunications have enabled jobs to be relocated globally. But ICTs have also enabled the creation of entirely new types of 'digital' or 'virtual' labour, both paid and unpaid, shifting the borderline between 'play' and 'work' and creating new types of unpaid labour connected with consumption and co-creation of services. This affects private life as well as transforming the nature of work. Because of the gender division of labour, this affects women and men differently.

The changing geography of virtual work and the emergence of new value-generating virtual activities have major implications for economic development, skills and innovation policies. However these are poorly understood because they have been studied in a highly fragmentary way by isolated researchers.

This Action will distil knowledge to enable policymakers to separate facts from hype and develop effective strategies to generate new employment and economic development in Europe. It will bring together experts in the fields of communications, innovation, management, digital media, creative industries, technology, employment, economics, sociology, geography, gender studies and cultural studies to consolidate theory, map this emerging field, support early stage researchers and develop new research agendas.

This Working Paper is one of a series published by the Action in pursuit of these aims.

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Abstract

The author seeks to analyze a new form of economic employment - that of teleworking, digital/virtual working in Bulgaria, based on 61 completed online questionnaires (in the period 24 May-30 May 2015), among women registered as "freelancers" in job portals. Report reveals strengths and weaknesses, explain the reasons for selection, duration of practice, structure of the activity as time and realized income. Material sought to reveal attitudes to this new form of employment, the qualities required to hold on its implementation and to analyze the opportunity for Bulgarian woman to achieve work-family balance.

Introduction

The trend of introduction in new information technologies in Bulgaria is significant (according to [National Statistical Institute \(NSI\)](#)). For a seven-year period (2007-2014) the share of households with Internet access at home has increased by 38 percentage points. In 2014, their share is 56.7%, compared with 2007 – 19.0%. Almost all of households (56.5% in 2014) use broadband access, i.e. have provided a fast and reliable connection. In 2014, 53.7% of the population in age group 16-74 years old uses the Internet every day or once a week. This share is approximately two times higher than the recorded in 2007 (28.4%).

The socio-demographic profile of active users (individuals, who regularly use Internet) in 2014, indicates that these are most often young people on age between 16 and 24 years old (83.1% in 2014), and 25-34 years old (76.6%), more typically men – compared to women – respectively 54.7% and 52.6%, with higher education (university) – 86.3%.

More frequent use of the global network in Bulgaria recently is supposed to be examined among others as another possible meeting place between employers and employees. Other reasons why the Internet is seen as “rewarding employer” is the opportunity for higher wages (because Bulgaria is among the EU countries with the lowest wages), and also the availability of free time, which offers digital employment.

The main thesis of the paper is that women with higher education which have realized their reproductive attitudes (e.g. with one or more children) are among the most common groups of the arena of virtual work in Bulgaria. The hypothesis is that the digital labour allows for a balance between work and family – something that women do not cease to strive for all lifelong.

Several methods are used, when compiling this paper, as follows:

- Desk research - concerning the development and distribution of digital work in Bulgaria on one hand, and on another - review of specialised literature worldwide related to the topic of study. A comparative analysis by EU level (28 countries) is given, where possible.
- Content analyse of “success stories” of Bulgarian women, who are working as freelancers, published on Bulgarian media websites. On this basis the tool of quantitative research is constructed.
- Web-based survey – a questionnaire is constructed using [Google Docs](#) tool published online in Bulgarian. The participants were contacted though e-mail.

Methodological framework (notes):

Respondents recruitment was designed as follows: Women from Bulgaria, who have profiles in job portals for freelancers (<https://www.upwork.com>; <https://www.freelancer.com>; <https://www.elance.com>; <http://www.guru.com>; <https://www.peopleperhour.com>; <https://www.fiverr.com>, etc.) and social channels (in Facebook, on the pages of Bulgarian freelance community, Freelance Tips and Freelance). Each participant is asked to contact colleagues and friends known to telework. A total of 61 participants completed the survey in the period 24 May 2015 – 30 May 2015. The data from the research is analysed using SPSS. The results are available in Appendix.

Woman participation in labor market and work-life (main trends and characteristics within national contexts)

Socio-economic and demographic environment in Bulgaria for the years after 1989 is characterized by features typical to most countries in transition from a planned to a market economy - higher educational

attainment and high employment rate of women, low birth rate, low attitudes toward marriage, postponement of parenthood and simultaneously the birth of a first child at a later fertile age.

The work-life balance is a social problem in today's increased demands of both works for economic efficiency and in terms of birth, upbringing and education of child-care. In achieving balance between all the social roles of modern man intervened numerous factors that affect individual choices.

Patterns of balance between work and family life change during the life cycle of individuals, along with a set of requirements and resources. The greatest accumulation of challenges are in the stage of youth, when intertwined transitions from education to employment and parent to create an own family.

Overall, the educational structure of the population in Bulgaria in the observed period (2007-2014) is improving following the clear trend of increase in the number and proportion of population with higher and secondary education compared to reducing the number and proportion of the population with primary or lower education. This statement applies with even greater force to women who increased their educational qualifications several times.

In response to the common European goals in strategy “Europe 2020”, Bulgaria has as its starting point, the achievement of 36% tertiary educational attainment among 30-34 year olds in the EU leading goal of 40%. Up to 2013 the Bulgarian women are met this condition (Figure 1. Tertiary educational attainment by sex (age group 30-34)).

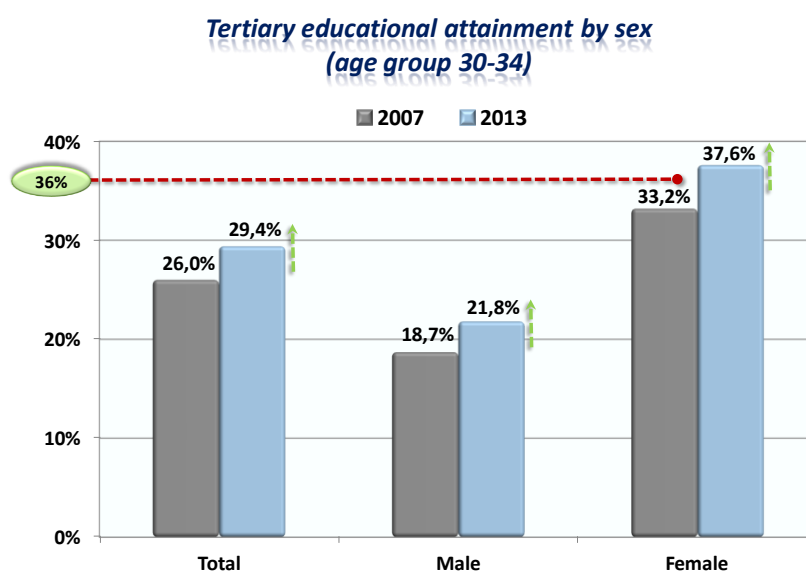


Figure 1 (Source: Eurostat)

In 2014, the employment rate registered in Bulgaria is 65.1% (Figure 2. Employment rates of population (age group 20-64)). The designated national target of Bulgaria in implementing the strategy “Europe 2020” in the portion employment is 76% or 10.9 points higher.

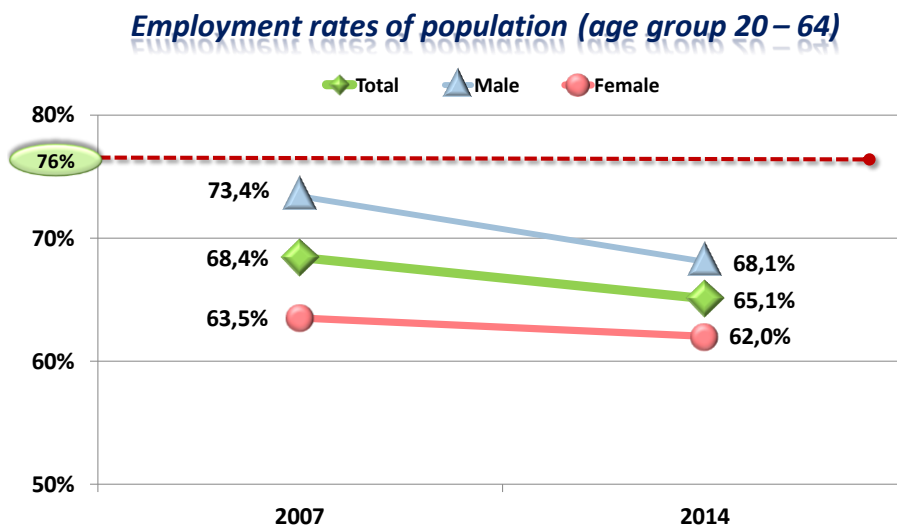


Figure 2 (Source: NSI)

Concerning the employment by professional status, self-employed persons in 2014 are 335,9 thousands. Among them, the women are 111,6. (Table 1. Employment by sex, age and professional status (1 000))

Table 1 Employment by sex, age and professional status (in thousands)

| GEO/WSTATUS | 2014 - TOTAL | | 2014 - FEMALES | | 2007-TOTAL | | 2007 - FEMALES | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| | Employed persons | Self-employed persons | Employed persons | Self-employed persons | Employed persons | Self-employed persons | Employed persons | Self-employed persons |
| European Union (28 countries) | 208 954,1 | 30 467,9 | 96 289,7 | 9 684,7 | 210 687,70 | 31 095,60 | 94 179,7 | 9 343,1 |
| Bulgaria | 2 916,4 | 335,9 | 1 379,6 | 111,6 | 3 180,90 | 349,9 | 1 495,8 | 115,3 |

Source: Eurostat

According to NSI, in 2010, work-life reconciliation statistics reveal that women are more likely to take care of children and elderly family members than men. 568,2 thousands women are taking care of their own or spouse's children (up to 14 years of age), as well as 240,1 – for adults (i.e. Ill, disabled, very old or other persons aged 15 or over in need of care). For men the distribution is as follows: 512,2 and 197,6.

In 2014, the chronic lack of vacancies in the child care facilities covers average of 82.9% (compare with 2007/8 - 73.2% is higher) of children in pre-school age and very limited capacity of the public retirement homes (75 homes for the whole country, 100% occupied) puts additional pressure on working parents forcing them to combine full-time work with care for family members.

In 2014, the average children per women are 1.52, almost the same like in the beginning of the period – 1.42 (2007).

In Bulgaria, the current maternity leave is 2 years and 45 days. During the first 410 days, (one year after and 45 days before giving birth) women are entitled to receive social payments equal of 90% of their previous labour income. During the second year the mothers are receiving social payments equal to the minimal wage which in 2014 is BGN 340 (approximately EUR 174).

Virtual labor market (teleworking)

The early case for telecommuting was made by Alvin Toffler in his best-selling *The Third Wave* in 1980. In Toffler's future, we would all be telecommuting together. For futurists like

Toffler, the home office would be an “electronic cottage” that might “glue the family together again,” provide “greater community stability,” and even trigger a “renaissance among voluntary organizations.” Even more, Alvin Toffler enthused about telework's potential to allow' married secretaries caring for small children at home to continue to work (Toffler, 1981).

Currently, telecommuting has become a ubiquitous alternative work mode. Telecommuting has been viewed as a mean of reducing conflict such that it enables employees to better manage work demands in order to accommodate more readily family needs (Bailey & Kurland, 2002).

Telecommuting is popular with policy makers and activists, with proponents pointing out the multiple ways in which telecommuting can cut commuting time and costs (Todorova, 2008), reduce energy consumption and traffic congestion, and contribute to worklife balance for those with caregiving responsibilities (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Changes in the structure of jobs that enables mothers to compete more effectively in the workplace, such as telecommuting, may be needed to finally eliminate the gender gap in earnings and direct more earned income to children, i.e. both are important public policy goals. (Folbre, 1995; Williams, 2000).

By working at home, telecommuters are afforded the opportunity to alter their typical office-based work patterns and strains - such as reducing or avoiding supervisory or coworker interruptions, not needing to cope with the emotional immediacy of requests from supervisors and others that often are not urgent, and reducing the frustration associated with the admixture of an inability to concentrate, the impulse to socialize, and the strain of feeling less focused and unproductive. All of these save time and strain. Faced with how to use such savings, telecommuters are apt to experience pressures from different role senders to choose between work and family activities. (Lewis, 2012).

Telework in Bulgaria and EU framework agreement

Teleworking is a relatively new phenomenon in Bulgaria. It is known under several terms: - teleworking, distance work, work from home, flexible working time; freelance work.

There are many definitions and conceptualizations of telework (Sullivan, 1997). Increasingly, telework is defined as working remotely using information and communication technology (ICT) links (Huws, 1996). This definition implies only when the work is remote from the employer, and therefore - not necessarily at home. The focus of this research is on the impact of work that is done at home (home-based) No official statistics are available concerning the number of employees engaged in telework in

Bulgaria. Since regulation concerning telework is relatively new practice, the majority of countries in EU have just started to gather statistics on telework.

Review of the most popular job portals shows that up to June 2015, there are total of 19,610 registered Bulgarian freelancer profiles. It should be taken into account that one person usually has a registration in more than one job portal (Table 2. Distribution of Bulgarian freelancer profiles in job portals, June 2015).

Table 2 Distribution of Bulgarian freelances profiles in job portals, June 2015 (Count) (Source: own elaboration)

| Job portals | Total |
|---|-------|
| http://www.guru.com | 9 714 |
| https://www.upwork.com | 4 491 |
| https://www.elance.com | 4 348 |
| https://www.freelancer.com | 806 |
| https://www.peopleperhour.com | 226 |
| https://www.fiverr.com | 25 |

According to report of [Eurofound](#), in 2003, teleworkers represents 5.5% of the total workforce in Bulgaria. The proportion of teleworkers amounts an average of 13% in the 15 EU Member States before enlargement of the European Union in May 2004, while in the new Member States, the average share of teleworkers is 5.4%.

Occupations typically using telework in Bulgaria are:

- professionals and management specialists: architects, accountants, managers, marketing and public relations professionals, human resource and finance professionals, financial analysts and brokers;
- information technology specialists: systems analysts, software programmers and engineers;
- field workers: company representatives, surveyors, inspectors, property agents, auditors, journalists and insurance brokers;
- professional support workers: book-keepers, translators, proofreaders, indexers and researchers;
- clerical support workers: data entry staff, word processor operators, directory enquiry staff and telesales staff.

Plamen Dimitrov, President of The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria CITUB estimates that between 300,000 and 500,000 people are employed in these types of jobs, as teleworkers in 2010.

A survey undertaken by the Association of Home-based Workers for the [Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria](#) as part of a project called ‘Security through the law and flexibility through collective bargaining’ funded by the European Social Fund in 2010

showed that only 2.8% of respondents had a work contract. Self-employed home workers tend not to comply with the legislation that requires them to register with ID and pay insurance and taxes. As a consequence, home workers in Bulgaria are predominantly in the informal economy - their work is invisible and not monitored.

Article 2 of the 2002 [European framework agreement on telework](#) has defined telework as “... *a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employers premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis.*”

Bulgaria signed this telework agreement on [24 November 2010](#). Teleworkers are also protected by the [Labour Code](#) -, the [Health and Safety Working Conditions](#) -, and all other labour-related regulations. It is important to mention Regulation No. 7 of 15 August 2005 of the [Ministry of Labour and Social Policy](#) - and the [Ministry of Health](#) - that defines specific minimum health and safety requirements for work with video display units (VDUs). This follows the transposition of [Council Directive 90/270/EEC](#) on this subject.

Perceptions about teleworking – main results from the web-based survey

Socio-demographic profile

All women conducted the survey (web-based survey, among 61 women, who practise telework), do most of their work away from their employer's site. More than a half (57.4%) of them are working at home, and the rest - both from office and home.

In the greatest number of cases (82.0%) telework is a permanent work. The virtual labour market is familiar to Bulgarian women in the research. The data on the length of time that women have been working at home showed that half of the sample (50.8%) were using telework from 1 to 5 years and even 24.6% had more than five year's of experience.

So the results of the survey are not just based on recent changes to working patterns, where there could be a “honeymoon period” of high performance, but on years of first-hand knowledge about working at home. Average practice of telework is 3,75 years.

Women taking part in the research who work remotely in Bulgaria are in middle-age (average age is 37,8 years). The respondents are well educated. The majority (86.9%) of them declared university degree, 6.6% have college, and the same part (6.6%) - secondary education.

According to the survey data collected, 59.0% of teleworkers-women in Bulgaria have children.

Working process

When asked about the number of working hours per week (only working from home), there is a bit difference between women with (average 32,3 hours) and without children (average 36,0 hours). The survey shows that, almost one-fifth of respondents do not work on weekends and holydays. This statement refers more often to women having children.

Nearly two-thirds (65.6%) of study participants work personally (not in team). More frequently the countries where the clients are from are: Bulgaria (54.1%), USA (42.6%), UK (21.3%), Australia

(16.4%) and Germany (16.4%). In almost half of the cases, the communication with clients is via e-mail (49.2%) and Skype (29.5%).

Alarming fact is that almost one-third (31.3%) of women practising telework, do not sign a contract with client. The average monthly income of respondents is BGN 1885,52 (approximately EUR 971,47). To compare, according to NSI for the first quarter of 2015 the average monthly wage in Bulgaria is BGN 859 (EUR 439,21). More than one-fifth (21.0%) of respondents stated that the income does not include taxes.

Virtual work – associations and main reasons to work as freelancer

The first association concerning virtual work is “*Freedom*” (31.1%), “*Flexible working time*” (16.4%) and “*Convenience*” (13.1%).

The majority of women said that they had chosen this form of work because they wanted “*to have more time, spending with family (to achieve work-life balance)*” – 26.2%. It is important to be mentioned, that the result in the group of women having children is with 10 percent point higher (36.1%). Other reasons are: “*because of the independence, freedom*”; “*because of the possibility of higher income*”; “*because of the convenience of better time management*” and “*lack of stress (no personal contact)*”.

For 67,2% the necessary personal skills for telework are “time management, organization skills”, 54.1% - “self discipline”, 31.1% - “motivation” and “professionalism”. Among necessary personal skills are listed also “perseverance”, “responsibility”, “communication skills”, “creativity”, “concentration” and “correctness”.

Advantages and disadvantages of working from home

The advantages outweigh the disadvantages, saying that freelance, home based working was preferred method of women.

Among the advantages the respondents mentioned: “*Opportunity to work in the most productive time for me*”; “*Pleasant working environment (quiet, comfort)*”; “*Ability to choose the work*”; “*Saving travelling time*”; “*Lack of superior (chief)*”; “*Lack of interpersonal conflicts with colleagues*”; “*Possibility of higher income*”; “*Ability to plan commitments undertaken (workload)*”; “*Lack of relatedness of time and place for the implementation of commitments undertaken*”; “*Presence of leisure time*”; “*Lack of stress (no personal contact)*”; “*Presence of more time, spending with family*”; “*Ability to concentrate*” and “*Lack of vanity about how I look*”.

The following was declared as disadvantages of telework: “*Lack of social contacts, social isolation*”; “*Differentiation of professional from the personal obligations*”; “*Lack of guaranteed monthly income*”; “*Communication problems with clients in different time zones*”; “*Possibility of fraud by clients*”; “*Inability to share the responsibility, obligations with colleagues*”; “*Technical problems with the equipment (scanner, printer)*” and “*Immobilisation, sedentary lifestyle*”. It is important to point out, that according to 16.7% of the respondents, there are no disadvantages in teleworking.

Problems concerning the telework

The study aims to understand whether women who are engaged in telework have different types of problems within the family and/or household, concerning the essence of their work. More than two-fifths (43.3%) deny the existence of such. Among others, problems with husband/intimate partner had 38.3% of the respondents, with health – 21.7%, with own children – 18.3%, with friends – 16.4%. Most rarely are the problems with parents – 11.7%.

Attitudes to statements – option “agree”

- 95.1%: “Presence in office is not always equals productivity”;
 86.9%: “Working from home helps for work-family balance (you can reconcile domestic responsibilities with work)”;
 85.2%: “Home office forcing you to self discipline”;
 83.6%: “Working from home gives freedom (you can plan holidays by not taking on projects)”;
 80.3%: “The home environment provoking a motivation”;
 49.2%: “Working from home leads to social isolation, lack of social contacts”; 41.0%: “Working from home does not allow to differentiate personal from professional life”;
 32.8%: “Different time zones (those with customers abroad) are among the major disadvantages”;
 9.8%: “The home environment does not allows to focus, as you would make it in the office”;
 4.9%: “Working from home is an occupation for people who are lazy to work from 9:00 AM to 18:00 PM”;
 1.6%: “Working from home is a frivolous activity for people who can not find a "real" job”.

Time use

The difficulties caused by the change of the political and economic model in Bulgaria after 1989 have increased the importance of the family (often in the form of cohabitation rather than marriage). Mass participation of women in paid employment has led to the developing trend of redistribution of the total fund of time between women and men, including paid and unpaid work, as well as the use of leisure time. The relative shares of the types of everyday activities show the differences between the way women and men spend their days.

The results of the “Time use” research done by NSI in Bulgaria for the period [1976 - 2010](#) show that the increase of the employment of women is not accompanied by a decrease of their labor in the household. On the contrary, it remains the same. The society expects them to continue to perform their traditional functions associated with housework, raising and educating children, caring for the sick in the family and doing agriculture work. Reallocation of time for women is carried on between leisure time and work. Underdevelopment of services until 1990 and their high price and insufficient quality and diversity nowadays explain the high share of time women spend working in domestic agriculture and household.

During the period, there is an increase of leisure time for women and men but there is a negative trend - 4,5 times increase in the difference between them: from 15 minutes in the 70s to 1 hour 08 minutes in 1988, to 1 hour 07 minutes in 2001/2002 and to 53 minutes in 2009/2010 to the detriment of leisure time of women who already spend significantly less time than men for rest and leisure, for sports, hobbies and games, TV, social life in the family and outside it. (Table 3. Leisure time of men/women (h./min.))

Table 3 *Leisure time of men/women (h/min) (source: NSI)*

| | 1976/1977 | | 1988 | | 2001/2002 | | 2009/2010 | |
|---------------------|-----------|-------|------|-------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | men | women | men | women | men | women | men | women |
| Leisure time | 3:25 | 3:10 | 4:42 | 3:34 | 5:25 | 4:18 | 4:53 | 4:00 |

In this sense, when analyzing the time budget we “talk about the alternation of work and lack of work; work and leisure is only adequate for men. For women, it makes sense to speak of a succession of professional and household work” (Kergoat D., 2004). This conclusion is confirmed by the results

obtained from a number of polls: 41% of respondents believe that women are in disadvantage as far as leisure time is concerned (NORC, August and November 2000); leisure time and family relations are perceived as one of the areas of discrimination against women (“Gender, politics and fudge” Zhar Foundation, S., 2002); one quarter of Bulgarian women have less than 60 minutes a day for themselves, and one in seven cannot spare even this amount of time (ESI “The Bulgarian woman in the contemporary situation”, ASA, S., 1996). To the question “What do you usually do in your leisure time?” - 57.8% of women reply: “I tend for the household and the children.”, and 40.4 % reply: “I do household and agriculture work.” Leisure time is a luxury that only a few women can afford, and the result is “the exhausted housewife syndrome” (ESI “Women in the informal economy in Bulgaria”, realized in 2004 and 2005 by the ASA and Zhar Foundation). It should be noted that the unconscious mixing of the concepts of “leisure time” and “unpaid work” is typical of many women in Bulgaria. Their underprivileged position is exacerbated by a number of other unfavorable circumstances. For example, most women do many things simultaneously and it is sometimes difficult to determine what is defined as work and what is not: activities such as child rearing, nursing or taking care of the flowers can be quite pleasant, although these are necessary commitments that require time and concentration, and limit the personal leisure time. Moreover, studies have shown (Seili, D. op. cit.: 86) that even while watching TV or out for a walk, women remain burdened with thinking and planning what is to be done in the household. This is an additional mental load detrimental to a fulfilling relaxation and to the equal distribution of leisure time between men and women. Of importance is the fact that for most women the latter largely depends on the need to reconcile their personal leisure time with the time for their children and husbands, i.e. “the daily time limits of women are mediated by other family members, and therefore are not perceived as real “personal” time management” (Rerih, M., op. Cit.:. 72).

The main change in the structure of women's activities in 2009/2010 compared with the same group in 1988, lies in increased participation in training today, higher employment, with relative preservation of participation in unpaid work (home care) and hence limited free time. (Figure 3. National level (Bulgaria) – time use). Concerning the women, who participates in the study, the main differences appears in position of domestic household work and leisure time. (Figure 4. Women in teleworking, web based survey – time use).

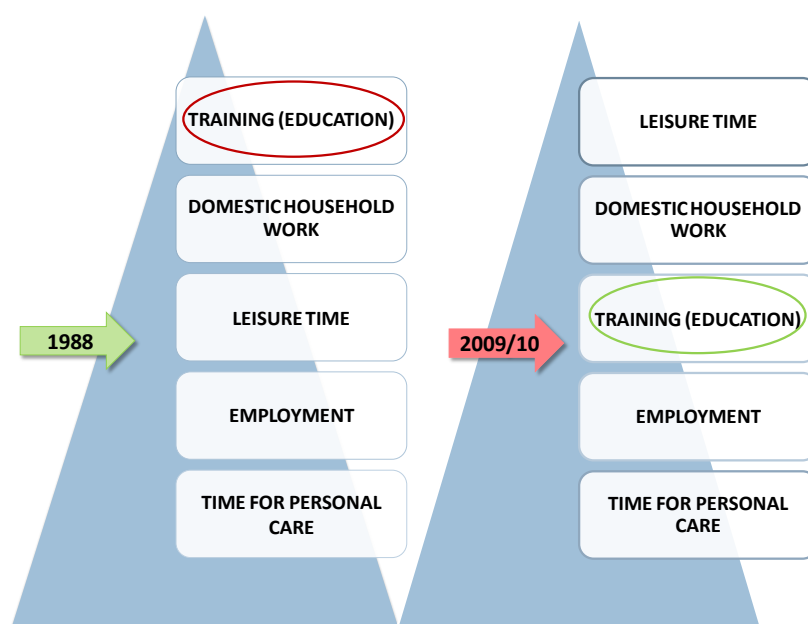


Figure 3 National level (Bulgaria) – time use

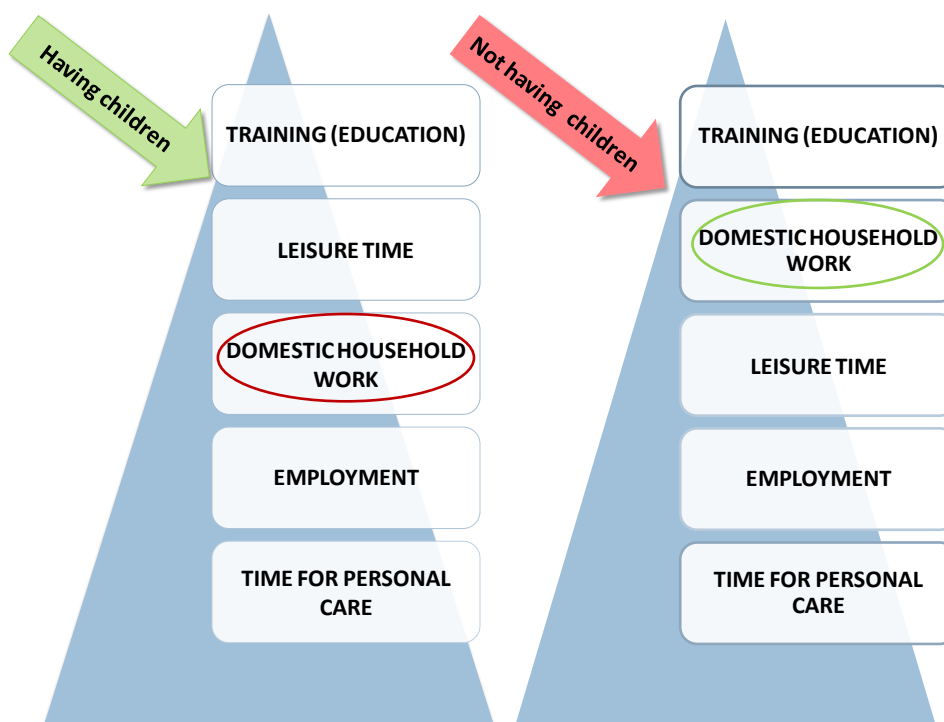


Figure 4 Women in teleworking, web based survey – time use

Conclusion

The potential in the arena of virtual work in Bulgaria is attractive for the women. The digital labour allows for a balance between work and family – something that women do not cease to strive for all lifelong. To find out how, however, feelings of Bulgarian women match real with reconciliation domestic with official work commitments, there is a need of conducting an identical survey among men whose partners / wives are in the field of virtual employment. And even more to explore the attitudes of children, using projective techniques perception of the family.

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