

COMMENTARY

Remote work, social inequality and the redistribution of mobility

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Remote work, or more precisely work from home, is widely expected to become a new normal (Raghunath & Tan, 2020). The popularization of remote work has two important backgrounds, in addition to technological advancement. The first is the COVID-19 pandemic, which made remote work a necessity for many people. The second is the worsening socio-economic inequality across gender, ethnicity, income and working conditions. Some people are free to choose to work remotely, others are not allowed to do so, and yet others are forced to work remotely. In understanding the relation between remote work, the pandemic, and inequality, population mobility can serve as a useful lens. In particular, I propose that the perspective of the 'redistribution of mobility' offers new analytical power.

Remote work and the pandemic are related to each other not only because they reduce mobility but also because they both redistribute mobility. Work from home without commuting relies on the intensification of mobility of others. Certain populations have to move more in order to deliver food, dispatch medicine and maintain the communications system. The redistribution of mobility was evident in China's first epicentre, Wuhan. Wuhan is the first major city in the world that was put under total lockdown in early 2020, and remote work became a default for the 12 million residents. According to data from Alibaba Research Academy (2020), during the first phase of lockdown (23 January 2020 to 8 April 2020), delivery orders jumped fivefold; and the average distance of riders' daily travel more than tripled. Meituan – the largest meals delivery platform in China that facilitated nearly 40 million food delivery transactions every day in 2021 (China Internet Watch, 2022) – received nearly 4 million orders in Wuhan during the same period (China Federation of Logistics and Group Purchase, 2020). This trend continued since. The market size of the online food delivery business expanded from 578 billion RMB (approximately 84 billion USD) in 2019, to 665 in 2020, 812 in 2021 and an expected 942 in 2022 (Statista, 2022). The rapid growth of such mobility services was indispensable for implementing the lockdown and remote work. Persons engaged in remote work 'outsourced' their mobility needs to a new army of specialist mobility labour. Alibaba Research Institute (2020) estimated that a single rider enables 24 residents to stay at home.

In the redistribution of mobility, platform-based technology companies played a key role. These companies redistributed primarily effectively by drawing in low-pay labour at marginal positions with weak bargaining power. Meituan, the Chinese shopping platform mentioned above, for instance, recruited 336,000 riders between the end of January 2020 and mid-March. Many of the new recruits had lost jobs recently due to mobility restriction. Reflecting the precarious nature of labour relations in the gig economy, companies provided minimum training, no regular salaries and no

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welfare provisions. Very often the workers must pay the company to buy their mopeds, delivery bags, uniforms and helmets. This partly explains why, in Western Europe, immigrants are very prominent among delivery workers. Even in Germany, known for its strict labour market regulation, foreign workers can register with platforms such as Helpling or Deliveroo if they have a visa. (Altenried et al., 2020). The redistribution of mobility would not have proceeded so swiftly without employment deregulation and labour flexibilization, which are closely related to economic inequality.

Such redistribution of mobility on an unequal basis is directly responsible for the highly skewed distribution of COVID-related deaths across populations. In the USA, blacks were 3.5 times more likely to die from COVID, and Latinos were nearly twice as likely. One of the main reasons for the high infection and mortality rates among ethnic minorities is that many of them are 'essential workers' such as nurses and firefighters. They had to move against the stream to work, and their daily mobility is fraught with risks. According to the US Census, 28 per cent of these workers usually use public transportation. Blacks made up 12 percent of the US workforce in 2020, but nearly 30 per cent of those in the core industries that rely on public transportation (Bliss et al., 2020).

But not everyone engaged in remote work and free from commuting is privileged. Some institutions had to adopt remote work because they did not have enough resources to follow public health recommendations on the physical site. This is particularly evident with schools. In the USA, overcrowded, under-resourced schools were unable to replace ventilation systems or decrease classroom density. As a result, 'children in families of lower socio-economic status are therefore more likely to be learning remotely than their wealthy counterparts'. (Remus, 2021) Remote work and study also negatively impacted social groups who are vulnerable in domestic space, including women, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ individuals (Dattani, 2020; Ramachandran, 2021). For them, the redistribution of mobility means the loss of opportunities to be away from abusive partners and family pressure, and to seek assistance. It is worrying, but not surprising, the redistribution of mobility contributed to the sharp rise of the incidents of domestic violence during the pandemic (Boserup et al., 2020) The United Nations called the increase of domestic violence a 'shadow pandemic' based on data from 13 nations in Africa, Asia, South America, Eastern Europe and the Balkans (United Nation Women, 2021).

Finally, remote work and the redistribution of mobility have complex impacts on gender equality beyond domestic violence. For some women, remote work increased their housework burden even further, including homeschooling for the children. For other women, remote work can lead to layoff (Remus, 2021). A survey among students from the African Leadership University in Rwanda in mid-September 2020 found that female students shouldered a disproportionate amount of household duties as compared to their male counterparts when they studied from home remotely, which impeded female students' academic performance (Skyum, 2021). As 'home' means different things for men and women in many societies, staying at home also has very different implications for men and women.

In sum, mobility, even in its most mundane form of daily commuting, can be deeply consequential. New thinking on mobility can shed light on the complex relation between remote work, pandemic and inequality. Three tentative conclusions can be drawn. First, mobility cannot be turned on and off like a water tap; mobility restriction always leads to mobility redistribution. Second, the way of how mobility is redistributed is conditioned by, and in turn may reinforce, existing inequality. Third and finally, policy interventions in the process of mobility redistribution, for instance, providing protection for those who move on behalf of others, can help to make mobility redistribution more equitable. This perspective of the redistribution of mobility can be applied to broader analysis of remote work and social inequality. Remote work as performed by 'digital nomads' involves the redistribution of mobility across populations, for instance, labour migration from typical immigration countries in the Global North to the Global South. It also involves the redistribution of entitlements across different categories of mobility, for instance, remote work visa is privileged over other categories. These redistributions have implications for inequalities between the employer and the employee, the migrant workforce and the local population, as well as between the country where the employer is registered, and where the workers temporarily reside (Sanul, this issue; Benton and Hooper, this issue).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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How to cite this article: Xiang, B. (2022) Remote work, social inequality and the redistribution of mobility. *International Migration*, 60, 280–282. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13085>