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The Impact of COVID-19 on Working Women with Caring Responsibilities: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: Working women forced to quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown often faced additional unpaid care responsibilities, requiring a “second or even a third shift”, such as educating their children in addition to caring for them while working. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of a sample of working women with care responsibilities in order to derive recommendations for post-COVID working structures and arrangements. The study explored the unique experiences of four women from the United States, Latin America, and Africa, across a range of personal and organizational contexts. The study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand and interpret the lived experiences and meaning-making of these women during the pandemic lockdown. The IPA was supplemented by the visual data gathering techniques of “a special object” and “the River of Experience” to give voice to participants’ more metaphoric thinking. The study concluded that participants’ experiences reflected the superordinate themes of: (1) a deep sense of loss of “the normal”; (2) psychological reboot and seeing the world with new eyes; (3) emerging women’s community and connection; and (4) redefining the world of work for women. Each superordinate theme was supported by several subthemes. Recognizing that the 9-to-5 work world has been remodeled to a certain extent, the participants recommended more flexible work arrangements and more support for human needs by employers and society as essential elements of the postpandemic workplace.

Keywords: interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA); work–life balance; COVID-19; postpandemic workplace; flexible work; self-leadership; gender; telework; second shift; third shift; river of experience; metaphors



Citation: Thompson, R.J. The Impact of COVID-19 on Working Women with Caring Responsibilities: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. *Merits* **2023**, *3*, 96–114. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits3010006>

Academic Editor: Wendy M. Purcell

Received: 16 November 2022

Revised: 25 December 2022

Accepted: 5 January 2023

Published: 9 January 2023



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1. Introduction

The requirement to fulfill both professional responsibilities combined with unpaid care obligations has complexified the situation of working women and has negatively influenced their ability to achieve equity with men [1,2]. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the challenges working women face because, due to the lockdown, many women were required to work from home. Their children also stayed at home and needed to be cared for and educated remotely. Working women suddenly had “second” or “third shift” responsibilities of educating their children alongside their working and caring roles. These additional at-home demands, along with the closure of schools and daycare, meant that working women with care responsibilities experienced a major shift in their work–life balance [3,4]. Domestic workers were also quarantined, placing the burden of housekeeping and dependent care on families who normally paid for these services. In the European Union, the burden for childcare increased from 31 to 37 h per week for women and from 16 to 23 h per week for men. In Italy, 44 percent of working women kept their jobs by working from home, compared to 30 percent of men. Further, 33 percent of women and 37 percent of men stopped working because of the lockdown. The burden of prepandemic housekeeping and childcare fell predominantly on women, and this burden continued during the pandemic, with men increasing their childcare somewhat but not their housekeeping [5]. The pandemic

consequently made it more difficult for women working at home to achieve a healthy work–life balance. The lack of a work–life balance is associated with the increased depression experienced by women during the pandemic and may have led to a significant setback to women’s long search for equality in the workplace [3].

The work–life balance of women has been a concern since women started entering the professions in the 1970s. Work–life balance has been variously defined, and the term has been criticized for implying that there should be separation between work and life and equal weight given to work and life [6,7]. Greenhaus and Allen [8] defined work–life balance as individuals’ satisfaction with both their work and family roles and their ability to exercise them effectively in accordance with their values. Grzywacz and Carlson [9] described work–life balance as achieving expectations about work and life within a particular social context. Work–life balance in these two definitions is hence used metaphorically to refer to subjective valuation rather than to equal time devoted to each or separation of the two. Guest [7] attempted to reconcile the various meanings of work–life balance by developing a model of analysis that includes the nature, causes, and consequences of work–life balance. He characterized the nature of work–life balance in terms of objective and subjective indicators; the determinants of work–life balance in terms of individual and organizational factors; and the consequences of work–life balance in terms of work and life satisfaction, health and wellbeing, stress, behavior and performance at work and home, and impact of one’s behavior on others at work and in the home. As the above mentioned authors have emphasized [7–9], work–life balance is typically viewed as being related to health and wellbeing, especially psychological health. The lack of balance is associated with increased stress and even burnout. The lack of work–life balance has been characterized either as work–life conflict, where work interferes with the enjoyment of family and life outside of work, and life–work conflict, where family interferes with work and career success [7–9]. These two forms of conflict derive from the interaction between work and life, leading many scholars to replace the term “work-life balance” with “work-life interaction”, “work-life interface”, or other terms [6]. Recognizing the controversy over the term, “work-life balance” will be employed in this article subjectively in terms of the study participants’ satisfaction with both work and family roles, more objectively by their perceived performance of these roles, and the conflicts they identify between work and family.

Solutions to a healthier work–life balance generally focus on increased flexibility at work, more childcare resources, and setting boundaries on work availability such as not working in the evenings or on the weekend. The phenomenon and women’s struggle to achieve this balance have been widely researched, as summarized by Brown and Yates [10]. In the 1970s, women went to work and worked at home and hence had two full-time jobs, women’s discontent and burn-out led women to demand more flexible schedules and “work-life balance”, which became a topic of considerable study by academics. By the mid 2000s, work–life balance “has become an ethical imperative, as an aspiration that strongly influences how they think about and manage their lives” [11].

Terms such as ‘shcession’ and ‘the great resignation’ were used to reflect the unequal impact of the pandemic on women and, in many cases, forced their exodus from the workplace due to the incompatibility of working alongside managing the shift in their caring responsibilities [12,13]. A 2020 McKinsey & Company report found that during the pandemic, more than one in four women surveyed globally in the corporate world downsized their careers or departed from the workforce, something that the report points out that many would have considered unthinkable before the pandemic [14]. The KFF Women’s Health Survey showed that (1) one in ten women quit their jobs due to a pandemic-related reason, with almost half reporting that they felt unsafe in the workplace; (2) one in ten women who were working mothers with children quit because of COVID-19, with half of them citing school closures as one of the reasons, and three of ten reporting they quit because school or daycare was closed; and (3) 47 percent of working mothers overall took sick leave because school or daycare was closed. This included 65 percent of low-income

women and 70 percent of those working part-time jobs [15]. Because of the disruption caused by the pandemic, women, more than men, have experienced depression, and a 2021 McKinsey & Company report found that almost one-half of all respondents experienced more burnout than even in 2020 [16].

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of a sample of working women with care responsibilities in order to derive recommendations for postpandemic working structures and arrangements. The study looked at the unique experiences of four women living in the USA, Latin America, and Africa, across a range of personal and organizational contexts. The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand and interpret the lived experiences and meaning-making of these women [17]. IPA was selected as a methodology because it allows the generation of an understanding of participants' subjective experiences along with the complexities and sensitivities of living through lockdown during the pandemic. IPA "enables the researcher to move beyond predefined abstract categories and allow individuals to explore experiences in their own terms . . . within a particular social or cultural context" [17].

By providing a range of individual women's stories, this study supplements the many surveys that were carried out during the pandemic and illuminates how women themselves made sense of navigating their work and care responsibilities during the pandemic. It adds a much richer volume of information that can be employed to redesign the workplace as women return to work and children return to school.

2. Materials and Methods

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to explore how women in different situations and countries constructed their life stories during the pandemic and the personal meanings they created through the interpretation of their experience.

IPA is derived from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography and is based on the writing of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty [17–25]. Phenomenology approaches the object of attention, so it has the opportunity to reveal itself as itself and on its own terms [18]. The primary focus of phenomenological studies is "to understand the lifeworld through space of meaning" [18]. IPA is hermeneutic in that it is an interpretive process in which the researcher attempts to understand how individuals make sense of their world. It is idiographic in that the researcher is concerned with understanding each of the participants in the study [18]. The intention of IPA is "to investigate and develop a deeper understanding of the meanings particular experiences hold for participants through the collection of their rich and detailed accounts that consider their involvement in their context" [21].

IPA studies involve a detailed analysis of the accounts of a relatively small group of from four to ten participants generally captured by semistructured interviews, focus groups, or sometimes diaries [17]. Patterns of meaning are then culled from the transcripts and developed into subthemes which are then organized into superordinate themes [18–26]. The researcher attempts to produce a "coherent, third-person, and psychologically informed description, which tries to get as 'close' to the participant's view as is possible" [17–25]. The researcher then attempts to develop an interpretive analysis that contextualizes the participants' descriptions in relation to "a wider, social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical context" [17]. The researcher, in other words, expresses what she thinks participants mean by the statements they make.

The small group of participants in an IPA is selected by purposive sampling so that participants have an experience in common and share a particular perspective. IPA does not collect data to test hypotheses. Researchers attempt to suspend or bracket their own preconceptions about the data in order to grasp the experiential world of the participants. They code the transcripts in detail and shift back and forth between the claims of the participants and their own researchers' interpretation of the meaning of those claims in a hermeneutic stance of inquiry and meaning-making [17–25] in an attempt to make sense

of the participants' attempts to make sense of their own experiences, creating a double hermeneutic [17–25].

In the study described in this article, participants were purposively recruited via social media and personal networks based upon their “second” or “third shift” responsibilities. All the women were employed for more than 22 h a week and had primary (sole or shared) caring responsibilities for at least one school-aged child.

The IPA included open semistructured interviews consisting of prompts but no closed questions. The IPA was accompanied by two visual techniques, “a special object” and “The River of Experience”, aimed at capturing metaphors that explained what was important to the women participants as well as what represented their journey during the pandemic [24,25].

The unstructured interviews included prompts to describe participants' work and care responsibilities. Participants were asked to bring the special object to the interview and explain its meaning. The object served as a sort of metaphor for the participants [24,25]. As Kim and Denicola pointed out, even if we are not aware of this fact, metaphors impact how we reason, think, frame, and solve problems we face in the world and subsequently take action to solve [25]. “Metaphors help create realities for us, especially social realities and are the structures of our lived world. Uncovering the metaphors people live by and exploring how they are used by them in discourse enables us to uncover patterns that shape thoughts, feelings and actions at both an individual and collective level” [24]. By describing the object during the interview, participants could articulate how they perceive themselves and “the constructs that they impose on themselves” [24] in a more visual and anecdotal expression.

Participants were also requested to draw a “River of Experience” that described their journey during the pandemic prior to the interview and to guide the researcher along the river during the interview. Their River of Experience [24,25] visually represented the journey of their life through the pandemic, and each bend, waterfall, lifeboat, or log in their river signified a meaningful event or experience that influenced the direction they took or decisions they made. The River serves as a powerful metaphor for exploring lived experiences meant to surface unconsciously held beliefs among professionals [24,25].

The River is based on the observation that people intrinsically seek connecting threads in the history of their lives, and it helps people put their previously unreflected flow of experiences into words that meaningfully connect them to the present. Additionally, pictorial methods help participants explore their deeper meanings as they engage in a creative process of describing aspects of their lives in a reflective way [24,25].

After transcribing the interview, a summary of the lifeworld the participants described was drafted. Then, the text of the interviews were coded for insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives on their world during the pandemic. The codes that emerged were subsequently cataloged from patterns that represented themes derived from recurring ideas, thoughts, and feelings the participants expressed. The themes expressed what seemed to matter to the participants. These subthemes were then grouped under broader superordinate themes. Finally, recommendations identified by participants for the postpandemic workplace were identified from the transcripts.

3. Results

As indicated above, summaries of the interviews of the four participants are presented below, followed by an elaboration of the subthemes and superordinate themes that emerged from coding the interview transcripts.

3.1. Tammy

Tammy is a mother with three young children who, at the time of the interview in December 2021, included a girl aged 3, a boy aged 8, and another boy aged 9. Her husband works for the US government. She currently has a job and works from home three days during the week and two days in her office, which is several miles away. When lockdown started in March 2020, Tammy's 8-year-old son was in first grade. He

subsequently completed second grade remotely, and he is now back to in-person school in third grade. Her 9-year old son was in second grade at the time of the lockdown, completed third grade remotely, and is now in fourth grade. Her daughter was an infant at the beginning of lockdown and started preschool two days per week in March 2021. Tammy and her children were locked down at home for 18 months during the pandemic, from March 2020 to September 2021, when children were allowed to return physically to school. Still, even after returning to school, children were sent home again for virtual schooling every time there was a COVID case at school. This, of course, happened randomly.

In March 2020, in the wake of lockdown, Tammy lost her two jobs, one as a preschool teacher and the other as a sales associate in a retail store, because both establishments were forced to close down. Her three children were suddenly at home because both preschool and public school were closed. The school system had not yet figured out how to educate children virtually, so Tammy immediately began to collect homeschooling resources so that she could homeschool her sons and keep them on track. After one month of the lockdown, the school district provided two hours of online instruction on two days of the week for her older son's grade and two hours of instruction three days a week for her younger son. Tammy filled in the gaps with homeschooling materials, some of which she was familiar with because she had been a preschool teacher. A friend of a friend who worked as a substitute teacher came every Friday to help her younger son with reading. Tammy also hired a babysitter who had been homeschooled, and she helped teach her younger son also. Tammy continued homeschooling over the summer and joined a pod of parents who were also homeschooling their children. The pod employed nature as a learning environment and explored things and places in the environment. Meanwhile, Tammy was interviewing for jobs in the fall of 2020 and took a job for an international development company, the profession her education prepared her for. She kept delaying her start date and finally began work in November 2020.

In the fall of 2020, the school district finally developed a virtual learning routine, providing online instruction four days a week and designating Wednesday as an independent learning day. Her older son could handle the routine, but her younger son could not adjust and was extremely emotionally distressed, screaming violently every morning. "He wasn't like this before the lockdown", Tammy explained. "This transition in life has really impacted him and I have to work with him daily to help him feel better about school".

Tammy finally decided to pull her younger son out of school, and she had to find an alternative. She sent messages to mother groups on Facebook asking if anyone knew of a mother who was teaching her children at home who would be willing to take her son as a student. A Montessori teacher who was teaching her children at home responded and agreed to teach Tammy's younger son in her home three days a week for a half day. Her son thrived in this environment, which lasted from January to June 2021. Unfortunately, her homeschooled babysitter left in January 2021 to return to college, so Tammy was left again with full responsibility to help her older son's online learning, to support her younger son's learning journey, and to care for her infant daughter, who had tight muscles. Tammy hopped off and on the computer all day to fulfill her work responsibilities and her mom responsibilities. Her husband worked from home, but she did not let him share in childcare or cooking or housework. She "let him do his thing" and took it all on herself because, as she said, "He is our breadwinner".

Tammy explained her river of experience, which started on New Year's Day in 2019 prior to the pandemic. She started the river at this point because this is the day her 70-year-old mother fell down the stairs and broke her neck, represented by a waterfall on Tammy's river. Tammy represented each crisis point during this time as a waterfall and each time someone "saved" her as a life raft. At the time of her mother's near-death accident, Tammy was spending considerable time providing physical therapy to her infant daughter, who was born with muscle tightness. After her mother's recovery, her mother moved in with Tammy and her family in March 2019. In May 2019, Tammy started a new job with an international development company. After moving in, her mother had three strokes and

Tammy had to fight the medical system in order to save her mother, causing her to quit her job in June 2019, represented by another waterfall in her river. In August, her mother moved to Tammy's sister's house across the country. Tammy depicts her sister in a life raft in her river. Tammy began a new job as a preschool teacher. In November 2019, Tammy's mother became septic and almost died, and Tammy had to fly out to be with her at her sister's house. While there, Tammy bought "her special object", a framed print of the following phrase: "You can't go back and change the beginning but you can start where you are and finish the ending". Tammy explained that she keeps the print near her bed and reminds herself of this every night.

When COVID hit right after her mother experienced one death-defying accident and health crisis after another, Tammy said she cried out "Oh my God, now what?" Tammy depicted the loss of her two jobs in March 2020 as a waterfall. The waterfalls continued as she homeschooled, and her homeschooled babysitter showed up in a life raft in November 2020. Tammy experienced another waterfall in January 2021, when her babysitter left, but then the Montessorri teacher showed up in a life raft in April 2021. From then on, Tammy depicted her life as a waterfall when her sons returned to school in September 2021, when she started a new job, and when her toddler got COVID while her younger son was forced to stay home because there was COVID in his class.

Tammy related that she is in therapy with two therapists, one to help her cope psychologically and the other to help with nutrition and exercise, since during the pandemic she had become very sedentary, she chagrined. Looking back, she said, "I don't even know how I did it I juggled it all . . . Everything was on me and I had to do it . . .".

3.2. *Amira Ipek*

Amira Ipek is a mother of two children, a boy aged 11 and a girl aged 6. Amira lives overseas in a Latin American country with her husband and children, and both she and her husband work in international development. Amira is originally from a country in the Balkans but lived and worked in the United States for over 15 years. Amira is a linguist by training and speaks several languages fluently and without an accent. She is the daughter of a diplomat and hence grew up in many countries of the world. She has worked in international development for 20 years, as a translator, in judicial reform, in knowledge management, and in business development. She is an active trainer in the country in which she lives, training teams in monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and she also consults with several companies. Much of her work can be completed virtually, so the switch to working exclusively from home was not very "challenging" or "an upward battle". What was challenging was her family living together in one space.

The country in which Amira currently lives with her family had very strict lockdown regulations. Only one family member could leave home once per week to go to the grocery store or the pharmacy. If people were caught out more than this, or caught driving, they could be sent away to detention centers where people were in quarantine from COVID. Hence, during lockdown, they were virtually under house arrest.

Amira said her children were uprooted and disrupted in their day-to-day routine. In their minds, they had trouble differentiating school and family. They did not have a break between two routines.

Amira recounted that lockdown was challenging for all of them because they were under one roof. Her children would study while she and her husband worked. She and her husband had to be supportive and supervise what their children were doing online.

Fortunately, her children are computer-literate. As Amira said, "they were born with a chip already and so it was natural for them to manipulate technology. But they needed to gain a new skill in sitting in front of a computer screen all day and get used to seeing their teachers online and talking to their teacher in a very impersonal way". This situation represented "a deluge of new information for everyone, new routines, new expectations and they adapted, they adapted well. There was no room for error, they were thrown into it just like all of us were thrown into it. And they swam".

Amira reported that she and her husband had to help her young daughter learn how to learn online and to understand that every 45 min there would be a change in class and teacher. It took about one month for her daughter to understand and be comfortable with the radically new routine. It was challenging for both children to sit in front of a screen for three to four hours per day.

Amira's family's routine was very different, she said, with everyone under one roof trying to work while making sure that kids were plugged in. The situation was very challenging. The pressure was psychological, and how they felt emotionally and socially being in their apartment days on end weighed on them. There was no precedent, and they had to learn "as they were going".

Amira drew her river of experience by depicting that she and her family were on a boat when the pandemic hit. Suddenly, the river widened extensively, and they could no longer see the shore or any people or even houses. Huge logs floated toward them, many of them, and they had to dodge the logs as they floated down this wide river. As the pandemic began to get more under control, the river narrowed again, the logs disappeared, and they could see shore and people and houses again. As Amira said, "with the pandemic the river widened and was just like the Amazon and there were logs coming our way that I did not know how to handle. I tried to swerve around them but some of them hit me and I had to learn how to get past them without being hurt. As the pandemic worsened, we were in that boat in the middle of the river and could not see people or even the shore since we could not see any where to land or anyone to save us. We were on our own".

Amira's special object was the Yugoslavian flag. "I always carry it with me, it is part of who I am . . . a little passport . . . that reminds me of change, change like in the COVID context. This flag was part of me and always is a reflection of where I came from of who I am. It is my flag". Amira explained that change is inevitable, but even through changes, there are some things that are indelible and stick with us, such as the Yugoslavian flag. The flag, Amira recounted, "reminds me of potential, of how change can help you grow . . . and get you out of your comfort zone sometimes too abruptly, uncomfortably . . . get out of our safe zone. Seizing those opportunities, working through that, having those moments of introspection is important for growth, for health. . . . The past, present, and future is like a river and this flag is where the river started with me . . . The flag is a symbol that change is inevitable and that things will exist and will perish . . . Although this change was monumental, it provided me a lot of opportunities and made me the person I am today. The flag is always a reminder of where I came from".

Amira reflected that the pandemic is the second time she was in lockdown, the first time being when NATO bombed the Balkans. "This shouldn't happen", she exclaimed.

"It caused and incited a level of awareness I didn't have prior to pandemic—the pandemic as a 'mental psychological reboot' . . . The pandemic taught us to live our lives more self-aware, to be more introspective and more aware of our environment and of the fundamentals".

Amira's work did not change during the pandemic. She continued training. However, the mode of training differed in that she could only train virtually, a change that she did not like. She missed the interaction with training participants where she could "read the room" and obtain a clearer sense of where participants "were at". As Amira explained, "the screen is a barrier in terms of training . . . I need to feel the dynamic of the room—like kids with school—need interplay—need the group—to feel them, where they are going, support one another, working groups, and so on".

3.3. Ebere

Ebere is an international development professional from an African country. She worked as a monitoring, evaluation, and learning specialist for approximately five years and was working for a US company at the time of the pandemic. In her country, people started isolating at home in January 2020, and this meant that Ebere could not even go to the hospital for fear of becoming infected. Ebere had recently given birth to her daughter in

November 2019, and she was very excited about her baby's birth because she had waited five years after having her firstborn, a son, to have her daughter. She was planning to resume work in April of 2020. Her son was five years old at the time of lockdown. Her husband is a businessman who works late nights.

Since her son was out of school because of the pandemic, Ebere had to take charge of her son's online learning. She had to pay for online tutoring for him and help him learn how to learn online and to listen to his teacher on a computer. She did this while caring for and nursing her new baby daughter. Ebere found it challenging to be glued to the computer and TV all day while also feeding her daughter every other hour.

In April 2020, her first work assignment was to travel to a distant state in order to complete a data quality assessment. This assignment caused her a great deal of chagrin because her baby was still very young, and the thought of leaving her five-month-old-baby, who was still nursing, for several days with someone else was extremely disturbing. She thought of bringing her daughter with her, but her husband thought that was not a good idea given the conditions in their country at the time. She thought about appealing to her supervisor that she could not travel at that time but was afraid to do this because she had been away for four months and could not make a legitimate case for not going. She did not want to step back and look like she could not do the work. She needed to get back to her position and reaffirm her position, especially as a woman and especially in a country where employment was at a premium and many others were ready to leap onto one's job. She finally had to make a decision to leave and do something that she clearly did not want to do and leave her children for four days.

Fortunately, in April, her company decided to institute a work-at-home policy because of the pandemic, so thankfully Ebere was relieved of the agonizing decision to leave her children to go on a business trip. Ebere subsequently worked from home from April until October 2020. During that time, Ebere conducted her assignments online and interviewed people virtually. She said that "this was the best period of my life. I will always remember it. I interviewed people while holding or even nursing my baby". Once she was speaking via the computer to a large group of colleagues while nursing her baby. She did not know that her video was on and that everyone could see her. She had put her phone on silent during the call so only after the meeting did she see all the calls and messages that her colleagues were sending telling her to turn off her video. She was obviously embarrassed and asked her colleagues if "they saw anything!"

During this period, the burden of working and caring for her family fell solely on her shoulders. She completed her work tasks while feeding her baby and helping her son in online learning. She would not allow her nanny to come to her home during lockdown, so housework, cooking, educating, feeding, and working fell on her alone. Her husband, Ebere reported, helped ensure that she had necessary resources, such as a generator that always worked during the common electricity outages and fuel in her car, but he did not participate directly in housework or childcare. He once did place the baby in a wrapper on his back when Ebere left the house for an errand, but she quickly grabbed her baby when she returned because she did not think he had the physique to hold a baby this way!

She said African women are sometimes envious when they hear about husbands in the West who help with care responsibilities, but that practice was not common in her country. She also did not want her mother-in-law saying that she loved her job more than her family and was not a dutiful wife. Ebere emphasized that her family meant everything to her, and she would never "give them up for anything". She said she worked to help support her family and also because she did not receive her education only to stay home.

At times, she felt like a bad mother and wife, especially during the times she had to write reports for her job while holding her baby in one hand and type on the keyboard with the other, which she described as a nightmare. She said she developed severe pain in her right hand from holding her baby and keyboarding at the same time. That pain is now less but has not completely subsided even today. She said she had to smile and look happy when speaking with colleagues and clients via video even when she was not feeling happy

because of the stress she was under. “That was my life during this period, she said. My son and I shared the laptop and even my baby played with it”.

Ebere’s special object is her smartphone, which helped her through the pandemic and provided a hotspot for her computer, communication, and everything necessary to help her ensure that she could complete her responsibilities during lockdown and support her son’s online education. Her phone was a symbol of what provided her the means to accomplish all she had to. “It served as a facilitator of everything I had to achieve during COVID”.

Ebere reflected on the time she worked from home during lockdown and concluded that despite the stress of blending work and life, she considered the time with her family as precious and valuable. “It was not so bad because I had a year at home with my family which was very special and my family did not have to suffer from lack of care”.

In October 2020, Ebere had to physically return to work, and she had to turn over the daily care of her children to her nanny, who was an older, more experienced woman who could handle the household. Since her project was ending, Ebere had to begin to look for new jobs in addition to working. She had to spend a lot of time reworking her CV, attending interviews, and looking for job opportunities in addition to working and caring for her family.

During one interview for an international job held at 11 p.m., her baby started crying loudly and would not stop. Ebere texted her husband to come home to quiet the baby, but he could not come, so Ebere had to excuse herself and put her baby in a wrapper on her back so that her baby would stop crying and she could continue the interview. Although the interviewer, who also had a baby, was understanding, Ebere did not receive the job. Realistically, however, she was not in a position to work overseas at that time.

Ebere’s project ended at the end of 2020, so from January to March 2021, Ebere stayed home again and looked for a job. She was happy to have more time with her family. She worked on a United Nations assessment in April 2021, and by September she was working for her current project.

Ebere bemoaned the lack of flexibility in work and the inadequate maternity leave that organizations offer women. “Mothers need time to bond time with their kids”, Ebere explained. “Maternity leave is grossly insufficient especially if the job requires travel If a woman who has just had a baby after three months needs to travel, this is very stressful. A woman is forced to choose between job and her family and should not have to”.

“Jobs should offer more flexibility and maternity leave for six months at least. Women are constantly challenged to go beyond their responsibilities because there are many others ready to take our jobs Some international organizations factor in maternity leave for one year. This is something I recommend”. Ebere is lucky because when she travels, her younger sister or nanny can sometimes stay overnight at her home to care for her children, who are now older.

Ebere explained that COVID “taught us a lot”. People worked much longer hours. “Because I was working from home, I needed to take care of my family as well as do my work. I had to complete assignments by deadlines without knowing what my colleagues were doing so If there were more flexibility in the workplace, people would give their best. If you get the right people, they will deliver even from home”.

“COVID changed the way we look at things. When we were all stuck in our homes, we had more collaborative relationships with our donor clients who were also working from home. For example, they gave us all the documents for desk review before we went to the field. COVID allowed the review of documents and our donors were also part of those virtual reviews. Now we have to review them after we go to the field. Things were more participatory when everyone was locked up”.

3.4. *Murphy*

Murphy is a university professor at an American university who has two teenage sons, one in middle school and one in high school, and a longtime partner who is a business owner.

Murphy accepted a position as Associate Dean in the largest academic unit in her university right before the COVID lockdown began. She only isolated at home from March to July 2020, after which she assumed her new position in person at the university. During lockdown, her sons undertook digital document studies because the school district had not yet learned how to host classes online. Students were given independent assignments to submit for grading. This continued until the next school year began in the fall of 2020, when the school system had organized online classes. "There was a lot of lost learning", Murphy reflected. Murphy worked out a lockdown schedule for her sons to include at least 30 min outside for exercise, schoolwork, housework, family time, and free time. Luckily, her boys are very technologically savvy and self-reliant. By December 2021, the time of the interview, her sons were physically back in school.

Murphy was thankful that her family was independent and very supportive of each other and of her. "They are all low maintenance. I am probably the highest maintenance of the four of us", she smiled. They had to be especially careful not to get infected with COVID-19, because Murphy's partner's mother was soon to turn 100 years old, and he took care of her once per week and obviously had to protect her from becoming infected.

She described the challenges of the four family members being on zoom at the same time for school and for teaching. "The Internet is not meant for that", she explained. She and her partner had to place each other strategically apart in order to teach or host meetings simultaneously. This was one of the greatest challenges of lockdown.

Murphy reported to work as the Dean on 1 July 2020, and she and her three colleagues were some of the very few university staff who worked in the office during lockdown. Although Murphy said that she did not have a lot of care responsibilities for her sons, in her new position as Associate Dean, she had enormous care responsibilities for students and parents during the lockdown and the early days of the pandemic. Students were obviously concerned about their health, and parents were worried about their children and how they would be able to continue their education. Murphy reflected on what it must be like for students who now had no idea what their future may bring. Murphy and her colleagues had to answer an enormous number of emails in order to keep everyone apprised. Murphy's university is student-oriented and hence focused on transparent communication. However, there are only 300 staff for 1500 students, and hence, the workload was enormous.

Murphy stressed that "stepping up to something new and challenging proved to be interesting" and helped her cope with the pandemic because "I had so much to learn and do and had such a clear direction". Murphy emphasized the benefit of using work and problem-solving as a refuge. While many of her colleagues and friends "were falling apart", Murphy felt good because her brain was so active, and her university had to be ready to teach by fall of 2020, only a few short months after lockdown began. She said that she was "blessed" because she, unlike most of her colleagues and friends during lockdown, still got dressed and went to work as usual. However, Murphy noted that COVID ramped up her learning curve and made it steeper because of the challenges the university and she, as Dean, faced when confronted with this paradigm-shifting pandemic. Murphy also jumped over being a Department Chair to serve as Dean, and hence, she skirted the normal process of moving from teaching to administration. She was also made Acting Chair of the Conflict Analysis and Dispute Resolution Department, ironically because of conflict between the previous chair and professors.

Murphy's university was ahead of the curve and prepared well for the pandemic because the university president is a chemist who understood what the pandemic would mean for the university. The university sent students home during spring break and began to prepare professors to teach online long before the local school districts had taught their grade and high school teachers to do so. University opened back up for fall 2020, and students were required to be tested for COVID once a week. The university hired 14 nurses and provided 20 home test kits per week for everyone. As a consequence, the university only had a one percent COVID infection rate. Students were very verbal about their mental health challenges and their struggles, and their parents were open about their worry and

concern. Murphy spoke about “empathy burnout”. Everyone was concerned about helping the students and professors, and Murphy wondered about the caretakers, such as her and her staff, and their mental health.

Murphy brought her office keys to the interview as her special object, which she qualified by saying that they were not really special. The keys were all different because it took different keys to open different doors since the locks were not standardized. She reported that the keys represented an interdisciplinary course the university had recently given. She said her keys were a metaphor for the reality that “one key will not open everything” and she lifted up a book by David Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. Epstein argued that being in one discipline may have been appropriate for a stable, less complex world, but in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, that is, a “VUCA world”, being a generalist may prove to be more functional. She said she may have been a generalist but was always told in graduate school that “those who dabble babble”.

Murphy began her river of experience in March in a boat excited about the prospect of her new position. Then, the pandemic and lockdown hit, and Murphy drew herself falling down a waterfall into self-isolation, during which she hated the term “social distancing”, a term that, according to her, should have been “physical distancing”. She said she googled to find out what was at the bottom of a waterfall and found out that it was a pool of calm water. So, she drew the pool in her river.

Murphy was confronted with the challenge of how to teach fellow professors to teach, with a mask on, to a camera. As Murphy said, “sometimes we need a plan in a crisis”, and their plan was preparing professors to teach virtually. Murphy discovered her own leadership during the crisis since there was no heroic leader to tell her and her team what to do. She drew a knight on a white horse in her river as she reflected that she and her team kept asking each other whether they were allowed to do things, and they recognized that they needed to get over the fear of “doing it wrong” and, rather, to do it themselves and survive. As she pointed out, “we all needed to save ourselves”.

Murphy’s boys exclaimed that lockdown and no physical school was the “summer that never ended”. For her birthday, her younger son placed 752 candles on her cake, because time was goofy during lockdown and people’s brains became confused about time.

Murphy was teaching a course on political communication during these tumultuous times. Ironically, she was teaching about civility in politics when there was no civility in the political United States.

Murphy drew a party boat in her river at the time she said people were starting to become distressed and depressed during lockdown and needed a lot of support. She organized a virtual party of the women and leadership community of the International Leadership Association, of which Murphy was President, at which women wore funny hats and tried to forget the stress of lockdown. Murphy had become terrified by the news. Her partner was a news junkie, and she could no longer bear to hear what the death toll was and “needed to go to the mailbox” when the news was on.

Murphy kept extremely busy as her pandemic coping technique. She participated in a state leadership program in which she and 50 other participants began to meet virtually and eventually met in person to learn about leading in a number of different industries, including in prisons. They traveled all over the state, and that began to wear on Murphy, she said. She led a group of PhD students during the International Leadership Association Women and Leadership Community Research Colloquium in June, and her group published a case study in a Sage publication, the first publication for the students as well as the first group of the colloquium to publish. Murphy was also involved in the organization of a national folk festival that included 90,000 attendees. Meanwhile, her father’s health took a turn for the worse, putting more pressure on her mother as caregiver. Her older son received his driver’s license but soon after crashed his car going only eight miles per hour. She went to a conference in Geneva and, soon after, another conference in Seattle. Then,

her older son was accepted into university, a huge accomplishment for him and Murphy. Soon after, COVID Christmas 2021 arrived.

3.5. Superordinate and Subthemes

As is clear from participant descriptions, each of the participants projected unique images of their journey during lockdown and the pandemic. Tammy represented each challenge as a waterfall and being saved as a life raft. Amira's image of the challenges was being hit over the head with a log or being stopped and having to steer past the log and press on. Murphy's image included one waterfall at the beginning of the pandemic, followed by a river full of activities and symbols as her boat floated on. Eberé included herself and her children swimming in the river, sometimes in a boat and sometimes next to a computer screen, their constant companion during lockdown.

Tammy's psychological metaphor, expressed in the painting of the words about "changing the ending", included having the burden, responsibility, and the power to change serious challenges into positive endings. Amira's metaphor, manifested by the Yugoslavian flag, included maintaining one's core identity in the face of enormous change while allowing that change to open new opportunities and ways of seeing the world. Murphy's metaphor of the keys included the revelation of a multitude of new ways of identifying herself and of acting and doing in the world. Eberé's metaphor of her smartphone included having and being the power source to do what was necessary to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Despite their unique ways of depicting the pandemic and their unique concepts of themselves during the pandemic, the participants described many of the same themes. Four superordinate themes emerged from coding their statements. Each superordinate theme had subthemes that supported one of these superordinate themes. These superordinate and subthemes are described below.

3.6. Superordinate Theme 1: Deep Sense of Loss of the Normal

Participants recognized that their reality and their emotional responses to that reality were no longer reflective of what they had long considered "normal". As Tammy said, "I just want the return of some sense of normal". They experienced a deep sense of loss in their feelings and psychological state, in fearing the infection and the unknown, in what they were used to doing, and in the passing away of some routines and some of what had been considered normal in their work and family lives. Tammy expressed her sense of loss when she pronounced, with a sense of sadness: "This is America, this is current day, this is society, this is COVID".

3.6.1. Subtheme 1.1: Fear of Infection

Participants expressed chagrin and loss at the shift of emotion from the normal emotional ups and downs of life to suddenly living while constantly in fear because of the unknown impact of becoming infected with COVID themselves or their loved ones and of not knowing how long the infection would last. As Murphy said, "My boys stayed in during lockdown. They were worried about COVID so I didn't have to warn them. They felt anxiety". The fear of infection impacted their behavior as Murphy related that her family had to be very careful not to get COVID because they especially did not want to infect Murphy's partner's soon-to-be-100-year-old mother. Murphy also said that at one moment, she experienced a feeling of terror when she imagined that the pandemic and lockdown might never end. She also admitted that she had become overwhelmed by the news of the deaths caused by COVID.

Tammy's mother-in-law could not help take care of the kids because she and her husband were very worried about getting COVID. Tammy was worried about her entire family getting COVID after her toddler caught COVID at daycare. Amira was living in an environment that cultivated fear not only of COVID but also of being arrested and put in a detention center with COVID-infected people. "You couldn't go out, you couldn't drive

because if they caught you they could send you to one of those centers. It was petrifying”, she explained. Eberé expressed that she could not even go to the hospital, despite having a newborn, because of her fear of infection.

3.6.2. Subtheme 1.2: Loss of the Distinction between Work and Life (Family)

The participants recognized that there was a merging of work and life, and it became very difficult to carve out separate lives for themselves as well as for their children. As Amira reflected, “There was a merging of work and life. Because of the physical space, there was no more demarcation zone. There was nostalgia for lost times and normal times. Our life was compartmentalized. Now, everyone is under one roof. You are trying to do your work to the best of your ability but you had to ensure that the kids were plugged in and doing what they were supposed to do. It was challenging. Before I had a demarcation zone between work and life”.

Murphy reflected that even in “normal” times, she had trouble carving out a life separate from work and creating work–life balance. She had to schedule it on a calendar. She recognized she needed physical exercise and meditation, and she has been a yoga teacher from 2006 to 2016, which helped her remember “that my head was connected to a body”. As an intellectual, she said she could sit under a tree and think all day. The pandemic made it more difficult for Murphy to maintain her work–life balance. On the other hand, Murphy said that some of her colleagues absolutely hated having to be at home with their families, but that she certainly did not hate this because her partner and sons “are very chill” and she felt totally supported. Tammy discussed, in detail, having to homeschool her children while working and jumping from work calls to care and back all day. Eberé described the stress of being glued to the computer or television all day in order to work and educate her son while trying to take care of her household responsibilities.

3.6.3. Subtheme 1.3: Loss of Previous Activities and Life at Work

The participants expressed the loss of and deeply missed activities that they previously enjoyed and that formed part of their sense of wellbeing. Murphy missed going to the gym and her massages. Tammy mentioned that she had become sedentary and missed being active and eating healthy food. Eberé missed being able to go to places like the hospital.

Amira mentioned missing in-person training, being able to interact with participants, and getting a feel for the room. She missed having the rapport of being with people in the office. “People don’t get as much from virtual training as from in-person training”, she explained.

Tammy experienced the loss of several jobs prior to and during the pandemic, caused by lockdown or the necessity to choose between work and life. She quit her job when her mother was living with her and having strokes in order to ensure that her mother received the medical care necessary to save her life. She lost two jobs because of lockdown and then quit a job during lockdown because she could not fully perform it and take care of her children and home life simultaneously.

3.7. *Superordinate Theme 2: Psychological Stress and Reboot and Seeing the World with New Eyes*

The pandemic had a tremendous impact on the psychology of the study participants and also changed the way they viewed themselves and even aspects of the world. Impacted by intense stress and even burnout, the participants got to know themselves and their strengths more deeply and discovered that they were perfectly capable of self-leadership.

3.7.1. Subtheme 2.1: Intense Stress and Burnout

All four participants mentioned the increased stress that lockdown and the pandemic caused them. Tammy said, “It was really hard and I feel like I had it easy because I had help . . . We are so tired, exhausted, done . . . ” Eberé spoke about the physical manifestation of stress during the lockdown as the pain in her right hand. Murphy recognized at a certain point in the pandemic, that everyone “was tanking” and organized an online fun party. She

also spoke about “empathy burnout”. Everyone was concerned about helping the students and professors, and Murphy wondered about the caretakers, such as her and her staff, and their mental health. “Who is caring for those who are caring?” Since she was one of the caretakers, responsible for the well-being of thousands of students, one may deduce she may have been referring to herself also.

“There was a lot of psychological pressure”, Amira explained, “emotional, social, just being in a bubble, not seeing anyone, being in our apartment days on end. It was really very challenging because there was no precedence. We were learning as we were going and learning to adapt as we were going. This is the first time it ever happened in our lifetime that we were locked in for days on end, not being able to get out of the house”.

3.7.2. Subtheme 2.2: Life–Work Conflict and Work–Life Conflict

The additional care responsibilities placed on study participants led them to identify the fact that life interfered with their work to various degrees, and in some cases, work interfered with their lives. For Tammy, the caretaking and educating responsibilities of her children and her mother led her to quit her job, indicating that she experienced intense life–work conflict and was not able to continue to work during periods of intense caretaking. Ebere mentioned that having to care for her children and help educate her son was extremely stressful and was manifested in chronic pain in one of her hands. Ebere also experienced work–life conflict when she was asked to travel when her daughter was a newborn. Murphy experienced life–work conflict in her position as Associate Dean since, because of the pandemic, she took on an enormous care burden for students and their parents, which was not a normal role she would play, and which led her to identify “empathy burnout” as a result. Amira commented that there was no work–life balance because there was no demarcation zone between the two. She concluded that she experienced work–life conflict and life–work conflict because of the loss of the distinction.

3.7.3. Subtheme 2.3: An Opportunity to Know Ourselves and Understand Our Own Strength

Amira pointed out that “how we handle the journey makes me who I am, this person who I am today, who has the strength to confront adversity and change”. The pandemic, Amira emphasized, offered the opportunity “to know ourselves and grow to get comfortable with who we are and to continue our growth trajectory. Change is inevitable and things will exist and will perish. It is a cycle and how I handle that journey makes me the person that I am today. Change needs to happen in order for us to grow as individuals”.

Tammy emphasized that the pandemic offered the opportunity for self-discovery and increased confidence. As she said, “Trust yourself, trust your instincts, have self-confidence that you can do it . . . it is difficult but you can do it The pandemic has served as a testing ground”. She added, “Resilience! . . . just have to adapt . . . I credit my mom . . . I never would have been able to adapt if she hadn’t raised me the way she did”.

3.7.4. Subtheme 2.4: Women’s Self-Leadership

Murphy was thrown into a new and extremely demanding leadership position at the beginning of the pandemic and was left on her own to learn her role because the previous heroic leaders at the university were in lockdown. She discovered her own self-leadership, as did her three colleagues, and recognized that they no longer needed the heroic leader to tell them what to do. She said that she became much more conscious of leadership through COVID, and, in fact, that the pandemic served as a master class that provided her a “PhD in leadership”.

Murphy learned that communication is very critical during crises. She helped to set up a site on which her office staff posted information weekly for all employees and students about the situation. They learned from their mistakes and how important key information is to help quell fear and insecurity. This experience made everyone a believer in communication and the importance of sharing what you know. “Anything short of

misinformation needed to be shared because we were all trying to move step by step”, Murphy explained.

3.7.5. Subtheme 2.5: A Renewed Focus on What Is Important in Life, Seeing the World with New Eyes

As Amira said, “the pandemic renewed my connection with fundamental values about what is important in life. It has been a life lesson that has taught valuing family more. It has been a “pause and reflect” and a serious reboot . . . can be a good reboot to look at life differently, to have different priorities . . . invest more in the family, in nature, be more tolerant, respect the collective and recognize that we have immediate effects on our fellow men”.

“I view the future differently and view society’s responsibilities differently with a different mindset and different values”, she continued explaining. Why are we here? To love one another, to nurture nature. This has been an opportunity for all of us to learn how to live our lives . . . more self-aware, more introspective, to understand the fundamentals . . . My family’s support helped. Without their support, I couldn’t have done it”.

Tammy reported that “I’m not willing anymore to put my family on hold”. She learned how her kids learned and what they do and do not know about computers. Amira also said that “the pandemic really allowed us to get to know our kids”.

Ebere said that she was “surprised” that her five-year-old son was capable of concentrating on learning independently and on manipulating the computer. She also said that she cherished the time she could spend with her family during the pandemic, and that it was, in many ways, the best experience of her life. Murphy explained that she was happy to be home with her partner and two sons, unlike many of her colleagues.

3.8. Superordinate Theme 3: Evolving Women’s Community and Collaboration

All four participants discussed particular challenges women faced during the pandemic, in the workplace, and in themselves. They also discussed women’s self-discoveries, women’s role in solving challenges posed by the pandemic, and the discovery of their place in a women’s community.

3.8.1. Subtheme 3.1: Women Take Action

Tammy spoke a lot about the other mothers who joined together via social media to help each other cope and survive during the pandemic. She heard of several groups of mothers who had gotten together in pods to educate their kids. There was an umbrella group comprised of 160 mothers that oversaw everyone and made educational reports to the state which she joined. “Mothers started trading curriculums, and knowledge and forming small groups . . . Women have done a phenomenal job caring for each other”.

As Tammy added, “Thank God for other mothers. We helped each other . . . There was a lot of help going on between mothers . . . I feel like I had it easy because I had help . . . Mothers put together small groups and got support from each other. This was the only way we made it . . . We become each other’s villages. It takes a village”.

Amira explained that “The 24/7 setting was challenging but my friends supported me. We are all in this together . . . Without friends talking to them on the phone and sharing what we are going through together, we would have had more trouble making it . . . Talking to friends helped me realize that I’m not the only one feeling this”.

Amira referred to women’s resilience. “Every woman can do it—we are resilient and we figure it out no matter the circumstances. Trust yourself, be open to the experience”.

3.8.2. Subtheme 3.2: Women’s Community Consolidated

Murphy spoke about women who had taken the initiative to solve the challenges of the pandemic in the community because of a lack of support from the government. She spoke of a colleague who was providing Spanish language translation services at hospitals and churches for the community free of charge to help Spanish speakers access community

services during the pandemic. She mentioned women leading grassroots efforts such as teaching people how to use computers to sign up for the vaccine.

3.9. Superordinate Theme 4: Emergence of New Vision for Women's Workplace

All four of the participants emphasized the need for flexibility in the postpandemic workplace. "The myth of inflexibility between work and home has been disproven", Tammy said. "It is amazing what we can do when we have no choice . . . Not everybody has to be in the office 8 to 5", she added. "Women need to demand more flexibility . . . Our empowered self-leadership has shown our meddle and we have blazed our own trails".

"The stigma of not being able to work from home has been shattered", Amira explained. "Companies are going to be more tolerant and more receptive that you can do work from home and go to the office a couple of times a week because there are some things that you really need to do ensemble with the rest of your colleagues. And again, depending upon the nature of the work. In international development, I think the hybrid modality of working from home and the office will continue. This is a shift of paradigm. "Tammy emphasized that "Women are demanding a new narrative for their future work, one that sees the complexities of their diverse needs". "I have lived in Europe", she continued and we are so backward in the United States in terms of family support".

4. Discussion

It is clear from this study that the lockdown and the pandemic had a tremendous impact on the study participants and that it served as a time not only of great stress but also of reflection and opportunity to reconsider what is important in life and at work. Three of the participants experienced a merging to work and life, and hence, the notion of work–life balance lost its meaning. These three participants expressed dissatisfaction with their performance both in work and life. Although Murphy was able to keep work and life separate unlike the other three, she expressed a loss of work–life balance because she could no longer go to the gym or have massages and because she had to play an enormous care role on her job, which added to her stress. The study findings are similar to the findings of other studies related to the impact of the pandemic on women and their work–life balance. Pettigrew [26] found that women's satisfaction with their work–life balance declined during the pandemic while their hours of work and care increased. She found that women's fears increased, a finding similar to that of this study, and that what she called "mental load" and "emotional labor" increased as a result. Women suffered increased stress and even burnout, leading Pettigrew to conclude that "never have the worlds of work and life collided so violently" [26]. Ruzungunde and Shou [27] found, by analyzing images of work–life balance for men and women on the Internet, that the traditional role of women as responsible for caretaking was still prevalent during the pandemic, reinforcing the finding that women's work–life balance worsened during this period. Woodbridge et al. [28] found that increased childcare responsibilities during the pandemic contributed to both increased work–life conflict and life–work conflict, and that social support mitigated life–work conflict and contributed to career success. On the other hand, Riaz, Begum, and Khan [29] found that the pandemic had a positive impact on family life for many. This finding supports the assertion by the study participants that they enjoyed having time to spend with their families and got to know their children better because of lockdown during the pandemic.

The stories of the four participants in this study also support several of the findings of the 2022 McKinsey & Company Report [30]. First of all, the report calls the exodus of women leaders from their companies the "Great Breakup". Women are leaving because they do not experience conditions conducive to their health and wellbeing and because work is not providing the flexibility women need to maintain work and life and a healthy work–life balance. This finding is in tune with what the four participants in the current study indicated when they asserted that flexibility is key in a post-COVID workplace. The McKinsey report illustrated that women now demand a hybrid workplace and the

opportunity to increasingly work from home, something that participants in this study also indicated. The McKinsey report also noted the still high level of burnout women have experienced during the pandemic, an experience highlighted by all four of the study participants. Women are demanding that companies ensure their wellbeing in the postpandemic workplace, according to the McKinsey 2022 report, something participants in this study also highlighted [30]. Respondents to the survey want to be able to take leave for mental healthcare, want support for emergency childcare, the ability to take off extended leave and return to their same positions, and other benefits. Overall, women do not want to return to a workplace characterized as prepandemic business as usual, a fact emphasized by all four of the participants in this study.

Demers [31] reported on an MIT colloquium that discussed the possibility of achieving a better work–life balance in the postpandemic workplace. One recommendation included searching for a subgroup within one’s organization with shared values to solve work–life challenges together. For women, this is a similar recommendation to that of the study participants, who found a community of like-minded women to solve their lockdown challenges.

5. Limitations

IPA focuses on a small number of individuals because the purpose of this methodology is to understand the lifeworld of and meaning-making processes of these individuals vis-à-vis a particular experience or phenomenon. This study is thus limited in that it sought the perspective of only four participants. The limitation was mitigated by the fact that participants came from different countries and cultures. More interviews of women in different countries around the world employing IPA would enhance even further the findings of this study.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The study concluded that the experiences of the four women study participants during the pandemic reflected the superordinate themes of: (1) a deep sense of loss of “the normal”; (2) psychological stress and reboot and seeing the world with new eyes; (3) emerging women’s community and connection; and (4) redefining the world of work for women. Recognizing that the 9 to 5 work world has been remodeled to a certain extent, the participants recommended more flexible work arrangements and more support by employers and society for life realities as essential elements of the postpandemic workplace.

Overall, it can be concluded from this study, as well as other studies and surveys conducted of women during the pandemic, that women experienced increased care responsibilities, increased stress, and even burnout during the pandemic, but that they also discovered their resilience and ability to navigate the challenges they faced, how to increasingly rely on a community of women with similar challenges, and their own leadership abilities. The implications of the findings are that employers need to provide more flexible workplaces, more health-promoting services, and increased recognition of the leadership abilities of women. More research should be conducted on the role of women’s community and on women’s self-leadership.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University of Winchester for studies involving humans.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy considerations.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to acknowledge her research cohort that was formed following the International Leadership Association Women and Leadership Community’s Research Colloquium in June 2021. Together we decided to study the impact of COVID-19 on women’s work-life balance. The author would especially like to thank Kim Bradley-Cole, Senior Lecturer and Chartered Occupational Psychologist, Department of Psychology, University of Winchester for introducing the cohort to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The author would like to thank other members of the cohort for our collaboration, including Tina Wu, Patrice Torcivia, Atim George, Bethany Huxford Davis, and Corlisha Mitchell.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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