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Positive During COVID-19: Women Academics' Strategies for Flourishing During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic led to far-reaching detrimental impacts, with challenges weighted toward women, who experience a double-burden of paid work and care/domestic work. Professional lives were enacted in new spaces, as many were ordered to work from home. This was particularly testing for women, who found themselves servicing additional expectations each day, such as complex relational work and home-schooling. For many, this caused stress, damage to career, and strained relationships. Yet, as women academics, we were surprised to see that some of our peers were reporting they had positive experiences during lockdowns. Drawing on interview data from 23 women academics based in the United Kingdom, we found that participants did not report damage to their professional identities; indeed, in some cases the pandemic provided new ways to expand academic identities, for example through skill development and international networking. Furthermore, participants reported the pandemic as a chance to choose how to focus their energies, withdrawing from relationships and activities that did not contribute to the achievement of the selves they sought to become and capitalising on those that did. This paper is therefore valuable in revealing the techniques and resources (narrative and otherwise) that can enable women to report positive experiences, even when facing adversity.

1 | Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes to the way people work and live, with many individuals transitioning to working from home (WFH) or hybrid working. Indications in the United Kingdom are that over 80% of those who were required to work from home during lockdowns are planning to maintain a hybrid-working pattern (ONS 2022). These changes have created new challenges in managing the work-life interface, particularly for women, who are known to perform significant amounts of unpaid work outside of their professional lives (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Hilbrecht et al. 2008). In addition to enforced remote working, many women also had to take on new roles during the lockdowns (Anderson and Kelliher 2020) such as caring for young children while nurseries were closed, and home-schooling (Petts, Carlson, and

Pepin 2021). These new and different demands on time, and the anxiety and uncertainty about the unfolding pandemic, led to reports of significant amounts of stress, loneliness and social isolation for many people (El-Osta et al. 2021; Gao and Sai 2020; Utoft 2020).

Many studies reporting on well-being during the pandemic focus on the experiences of parents, and specifically mothers (El-Osta et al. 2021), and/or compare women and men, showing that women have faced increasing challenges and experienced greater adversity. In particular, concerns have been raised widely about increasing gender inequality as a result of lockdowns and associated demands from the family and home domain (Chung et al. 2021). However, most of these articles also indicated small numbers of people in any sample who reported positive states of being during the pandemic (e.g., see Cornell et al. 2022; O'Connor et al. 2021).

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Academics around the globe were required to continue working during the pandemic, juggling the demands of work and caring without the structural supports such as nursery care and domestic support, which had previously facilitated this (Deryugina, Shurchkov, and Stearns 2021). Typically, academics transferred to online teaching within a few days of national lockdowns, and like many knowledge professionals, quickly became attendees at constant, back-to-back, online meetings. Studies showed how academic parents negotiated the tensions between additional caring responsibilities and maintaining their productivity as far as possible, with mothers in particular having to juggle such demands (Guy and Arthur 2020; Kasymova et al. 2021).

Having heard anecdotal stories of women academics flourishing during the pandemic, both personally and via social media, we found few peer-reviewed publications which document, in any detail, women's positive experiences of working during lockdown. We specifically wanted to explore this phenomenon in order to uncover some of the facilitating factors, and the outcomes of these positive experiences. We were particularly interested in understanding the experiences of women academics, regardless of caring responsibilities. Our interests lie in understanding the experiences of some women who had flourished at a time when the overwhelming messages for women and for gender equality were negative.

We are mindful that much of what is known about remote working relates to pre-pandemic flexible working literature (for an overview see Kelliher and de Menezes 2019), and highlights both positive and negative outcomes such as greater job satisfaction (Kröll et al. 2017), increased organisational commitment (Harker Martin and MacDonnell 2012), enhanced productivity (Allen, Golden, and Shockley 2015), work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson 2010), and stress (Moore 2006).

However, according to Kelliher, Richardson and Boiarintseva (2019), there remain significant 'blind spots' in our understanding of the interface between personal and professional lives in the WFH context. Specifically, they note that our lack of understanding of how individuals may navigate balancing work with other activities that are important to them, looking beyond childcare and family responsibilities, is a significant lacuna that needs addressing. Furthermore, the assumptions around navigating the personal and professional interface of WFH suggest that these two contexts are at odds with each other, creating tensions and challenges for boundary management (Kelliher, Richardson, and Boiarintseva 2019). Our research aims to address this gap in knowledge by exploring how women academics developed strategies to address the tensions and challenges related to managing the personal and professional interface, therefore leading to positive states of being (i.e., flourishing). Examining these strategies provides valuable knowledge for developing best practices and interventions that can enhance the remote working experience for academic women. Understanding the barriers women academics encounter in remote settings and the strategies they employ to overcome them sheds light on the complex dynamics of remote working and offers actionable insights for individuals, institutions, and policymakers.

Drawing on interview data, we explore the lived experiences of 23 women academics who self-identified as having experienced positive states of being, referred to as flourishing, during COVID-19. In this regard, the research question which informs this study was: *How have women academics experienced flourishing during the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to their changing work and home context?*

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss literature on working from home and pertaining to flourishing. After this, we present details of our chosen methodology and approach to analysis, followed by the findings. We then discuss the findings, including our contribution and the paper closes with practical implications, limitations, and future research agenda.

1.1 | Working From Home During a Pandemic

Remote working, including remote work and telecommuting, has gained significant attention as a flexible work arrangement. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research had already identified several benefits associated with remote working. One of the primary advantages is increased flexibility, allowing employees to work from locations other than the office (Golden, Eddleston, and Powell 2017). This flexibility can offer benefits such as improved work-life balance and reduced commuting time and associated stress (Allen, Golden, and Shockley 2015). Remote working also enables organisations to tap into a broader talent pool by hiring individuals from different geographic locations (Bailey and Kurland 1999).

Remote working has been linked to enhanced job satisfaction and increased employee motivation (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). The autonomy and control over work experienced in remote work arrangements can contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction and overall well-being (Golden, Eddleston, and Powell 2017). Research has also shown that remote working can lead to improved productivity, as employees often report fewer distractions and interruptions compared to traditional office environments (Bloom et al. 2015). However, remote working is not without its costs and challenges. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, some studies highlighted potential drawbacks. These include feelings of isolation and decreased social interaction due to limited face-to-face contact with colleagues (Golden, Eddleston, and Powell 2017). Remote work may also blur the boundaries between work and personal life, making it challenging to establish a clear separation and maintain work-life balance (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000). Additionally, remote work arrangements require effective communication and collaboration tools, as well as strong self-discipline and time management skills from employees (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). The ability to work from home or remotely can potentially alleviate some of the pressures associated with traditional office-based work such as long commutes, enabling women to manage their time more effectively (Islam 2021; Powell and Craig 2015). This increased flexibility may also benefit women who have previously faced barriers in accessing the labour market (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011). Temporal flexibility is often associated with working remotely, thereby facilitating the ways in which women can address the sometimes conflicting demands from work and home, particularly in relation to care-giving.

However, prior research has indicated that women tend to take on a disproportionate share of domestic and care-giving responsibilities (Bianchi et al. 2012; Moen & Roehling 2005; Islam 2021). Perhaps not surprisingly, enforced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated existing gender inequalities (Villamor et al. 2023). The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life when working from home resulted in an increased workload for women, as they faced additional pressures to balance professional responsibilities with household tasks and care-giving (Adisa et al. 2022; Islam 2021; Yeo and Li 2022) and this may continue in the future. Furthermore, studies have shown that women may encounter challenges in remote work settings, including potential biases and stereotypes related to their competence and commitment (Reid 2015).

Given the somewhat contradictory nature of the extant literature, indicating variability of women's experiences, this study explores the previously unreported experiences of women flourishing during COVID-19 lockdowns.

1.2 | Flourishing

The concept of flourishing provides valuable insights into how individuals experience satisfaction and motivation in their work. Exploring how and under what circumstances women have flourished in the WFH landscape can offer valuable knowledge on facilitating effective remote work arrangements and identifying beneficial contexts for such arrangements. This knowledge is particularly pertinent as an increasing number of workers are seeking continued or new WFH or hybrid arrangements (Gottlieb et al. 2021).

There are many theoretical concepts that might explain how and under what circumstances individuals experience positive states of being during challenging times, such as resilience (Herrman et al. 2011). Because our focus is on positive states of being, in which participants found meaning from activities that gave them a sense of purpose and meaning, among other outcomes, our research focuses on flourishing. In this paper, flourishing is understood as an individual's overall well-being and optimal functioning across different life domains, including personal growth, positive relationships, and the achievement of meaningful goals (Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002; Huppert and So 2013). It involves the experience of positive emotions, engagement in activities that bring a sense of purpose and meaning, and a feeling of accomplishment and success (Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002; Keyes and Haidt 2003; Seligman 2011). Flourishing encompasses high levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being, highlighting the presence of positive qualities in an individual's life (Keyes and Haidt 2003; Seligman 2011).

In the context of WFH, flourishing refers to the experience of optimal functioning and well-being while engaging in remote work. It involves striking a balance between work and personal life, maintaining positive social relationships, and deriving a sense of purpose and achievement from one's work (Balaji 2014). Research by Carvalho et al. (2021) suggests that flourishing in the WFH context entails fully engaging in work activities,

enjoying autonomy and control over work, fostering positive social interactions with colleagues, and effectively managing work-family boundaries. Flourishing while WFH may be linked with preserving mental health and well-being, as well as achieving high levels of work productivity and satisfaction (Keyes 2007). In order to achieve such positive outcomes, individuals need to develop strategies for managing their time, nurturing social connections, and engaging in activities that bring a sense of purpose and fulfilment (Dempsey and Burke 2021). From this review, flourishing provides valuable insight when applied as a lens through which to view the WFH context. Moving on from the review of the literature, the following section will explain the material and methods utilised in the study.

2 | Materials and Methods

2.1 | Semi-Structured Interviews

Our interests lie in understanding more about how some women flourished during the challenging circumstances of enforced home-based work within the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploratory nature of our study contributed to our choice of semi-structured interviews (Bryman and Bell 2011) where we encouraged participants to share stories of their positive experiences. We collected the data for our project by conducting one-to-one qualitative interviews, each lasting 50–90 min. To provide some parameters for our sample, we restricted our recruitment to: people who self-identified as women; worked in an academic role and were based in the United Kingdom during the initial lockdown period of 2020; and considered themselves to have flourished when working from home during the pandemic. We used a checklist of the above sampling criteria to attract potential participants. We asked women to respond if they felt they met the criteria and then contacted them to arrange an interview at a mutually convenient time. The checklist was sent to our academic networks at UK HE institutions and advertised more widely via LinkedIn.

The majority of the interviews were conducted by the first and second authors; in order to limit bias, we personally did not interview anyone from our own department or institution or who were previously known to us in a professional or other capacity. To maintain consistency, we constructed and used a carefully considered interview guide that we agreed would allow us to gain the data required to address the research question. This interview guide allowed for open ended questions and probing for further details, in order to illicit detailed insights from the participants.

All of the interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom or Teams (video-call technology) and were transcribed using Otter AI. The first author listened to the recording and checked all transcripts for accuracy before commencing data analysis. We gained ethical approval from our respective Universities and ensured that the transcripts of the interviews were anonymised before they were shared between us for the purposes of analysis. We conducted an initial, tentative, analysis upon reaching 10 participants and continued collecting data until we agreed that we had reached saturation, that is, the ideas expressed by the participants in the data were beginning to repeat and crystallise.

2.2 | Sample

The sample consisted of 23 women. All of the participants worked in teaching or research positions in universities. Because we recognised that there were different governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to seek participants from the United Kingdom only, as we could better expect that they would have a similar lockdown experience in this regard. We had no other demographic limitations; the sample therefore varies quite significantly in terms of biological age, marital status, childcare responsibilities, and tenure in their organisations. However, all participants were over the age of 25 and had been in their current role for over 1 year. Because our research sought to access a comparatively small and difficult-to-access group of individuals, only 23 participants were identified as meeting our criteria for interview. To protect the identities of each of our participants, we have given each a pseudonym (See Table 1).

2.3 | Data Analysis

We adopted a thematic approach to narrative analysis approach which is an appropriate method for exploring individual lived experiences (Nasheeda et al. 2019) and involves inductively creating codes or groupings from the data. This seemed particularly valuable during the disruptive time of lockdown, because, as Caza (2018, 898) comments, individuals draw on narratives ‘to make sense of ambiguous or unexpected events’. Smith (2016a, 2016b) talks about narratives being the resources drawn upon for people to construct stories about themselves and reminds us that these are limited to what is deemed acceptable in a society at a specific time. Stories, Smith (2016a, 2016b) argues, are our crucial ‘equipment’ for making sense of, organising, rewriting and communicating our past.

We chose to take a thematic approach to the narrative analysis (Bengtsson and Andersen 2020), as outlined by Riessman and Speedy (2007) (as cited in Ronkainen, Watkins, and Ryba 2016), a thematic approach focuses on the ‘whats’ of the stories and therefore seeks to identify common elements in order to theorise across the data corpus.

In order to maintain oversight of the data and the data analysis process, and reduce possible errors, the primary author took the lead in coding the data set. This process entailed first becoming familiar with the dataset through reading and rereading the interview transcripts. This was followed by the initial coding of the data following coding guidance from Bengtsson and Andersen (2020) which suggests that codes should be assigned to specific sections of text (narratives) which are conceptually relevant to the research and which represent recurring patterns in the data. This coding process was carried out by looking for meaningful passages of text that indicated flourishing states occurring while working from home, coding for processes, types of activities, outcomes, and experiences that the participants identified as being meaningful to their positive state of being. During this time, the other two authors also took five interviews and performed their own coding to validate the initial analysis round. The three authors then

TABLE 1 | Overview of participants.

Participant	Work status	Age range	Home life status
Stacy	PT	25–30	Partner, no children
Emily	FT	40–45	Husband, three children
Lillian	FT	40–45	Partner, no children
Siobhan	FT	40–45	Husband, no children
Emma	FT	60–65	Husband, no children
Claire	FT	55–60	Husband, two adult children
Mary	FT	30–35	Partner, no children
Mariam	FT	30–35	Single, no children
Kathy	FT	45–50	Partner, no children
Jenny	FT	30–35	Husband, no children
Kristina	FT	30–35	Husband, no children
Catherine	FT	40–45	Husband, two children
Chelsea	FT	50–55	Partner, one adult child
Patricia	FT	45–50	Husband, two children
Sasha	FT	30–35	Single, no children
Patty	FT	30–35	Husband, one child
Beth	FT	35–40	Husband, no children
Sophia	FT	45–50	Single, no children
Ava	FT	55–60	Single, no children
Isobel	FT	35–40	Single, no children
Olivia	FT	35–40	Husband, two children
Brenda	FT	45–50	Husband, no children
Brisa	FT	40–45	Husband, no children

shared the coding with each other and met to discuss similarities and dissimilarities. The authors found a high level of similarity between their individual coding; through in-depth discussions they compared and debated the themes, reaching agreement about the main themes. Therefore, intercoder reliability was subjectively judged to be satisfactory. Microsoft Excel was used for data entry of the participant demographics and logging of all corresponding codes. Excel was also used to create a coding book to document the codes and group them into themes. No other software was used to code the data in the first instance, per the first author's preference for conducting data analysis directly on paper.

What we present in the next section of this article are three core illustrative narratives representative of the ways in which the women in our sample spoke about their positive experiences of the pandemic. In the discussion section that follows, we use the themes we identified as our headings to consider how the findings address the research question and compare to extant literature in this area.

3 | Results

Three core narratives were identified from the data. These narratives help to provide insights regarding the strategies that women academics utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic to flourish. These core narratives were: 1. New Life Balance; 2. Refocusing Relationships; and 3. Reimagining Selves.

The following sections will outline these three core narratives to illustrate how they were presented by the participants. The data will be presented in the form of data extracts from the interviews. Pseudonyms are used to replace the women's real names in order to preserve anonymity.

3.1 | New Life Balance

Across the interviews, one of the narratives that was identified from the women's lived experience of WFH focused on the participants' appreciation of the fact that they could focus more on nurturing themselves and balancing their other life responsibilities (i.e., housework). This flexibility of being able to choose which tasks and activities they wanted to do and when, contributed greatly to their overall sense of accomplishment and well-being. In this regard, the core narrative of new life balance was expressed through repeated stories of women feeling engaged in their life because they had greater agency over when and how they performed their work tasks while also feeling that they had more time and flexibility to take care of day-to-day life activities such as housework, cooking, laundry, and also being able to engage in engaging hobbies and activities which they felt enriched their life. An example of this came from Mary who reflected the following:

'Because I'm home more, I can pick up my hobbies more often, so I just sit down and start working on something, and it really just de-stresses me, or I can do some exercise, and then go back to work when I'm ready'. (Mary)

Lillian reflected upon her WFH experience and the new balance that she felt it had brought her. She said the following:

'For the most part it improved my productivity, it changed my relationship with my work. I focused my attention on things that I wanted to do and it gave me the head space and the physical space, like uninterrupted focused space to do that and to enjoy doing that... I do a lot better when I work from home, and this is because I'm more likely to take breaks, I'm more likely to eat better meals, more regularly timed meals, and to do more exercise, because when I commute, I would come home a little bit later than planned and then it's very unlikely that I would do much exercise or anything else'. (Lillian)

Mary, further reflected upon the newfound life balance that she had enjoyed experiencing while WFH. She said:

'I don't feel as stressed during the weekends, because I don't feel like I have to do all of my chores on Saturday and Sunday, I can kind of space it out during the week, so it's less hectic...because you know as a woman I do most of the chores in the house even though my partner is also involved'. (Mary)

Isobel also echoed a similar observation stating that she enjoyed the benefits of being able to spread out the workload of her housework, even though she acknowledged, as someone who lives alone, there isn't much to do—she still enjoyed having that flexibility.

It is very interesting to note that Mary took ownership of the chores referring to them as 'my chores' and acknowledging that she does the majority of the household chores even though her partner does engage to some degree in taking care of these. The gendered nature of housework is a recognised barrier to women's time and mental space; the majority of our sample acknowledged that they felt they benefited from the ability to spread out household responsibilities across the week rather than leaving them all for the weekend, thereby reducing their leisure time.

The majority of the 23 academic women interviewed were able to identify significant individual-level personal benefits that they experienced while working from home. The majority of the benefits that they identified for themselves revolved around self-care such as exercising and spending more time outdoors (Isobel, Lillian, Emily, Stacy, Kristina and Kathy), feeling that they had more time to cook and eat healthy and nutritious meals as was outlined by Mary, Lillian, Claire, Siobhan, Emily, Kristina, Kathy, Brenda, Jenny and Brisa. These activities contributed to our participants' overall perceptions of having flourished while working from home. The next section will focus on outlining the core narrative of refocusing relationships.

3.2 | Refocusing Relationships

The core narrative of refocusing relationships encapsulates the stories that were told to us by our participants which capture the experience of finding ways of recalibrating and focusing on the relationships that are meaningful and enriching to them. Overwhelmingly the majority of our interview participants identified this process of refocusing their relationships as a key benefit that helped them to feel that they had flourished while working from home. For some participants, this meant being able to spend more time with important others, something they had struggled with because of their job role demands in their previous office-working context. For others, it meant having the mental space to think about the relationships that were meaningful to them and then being able to take the time to recalibrate or refocus their energy on these relationships.

Emma observed that working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic had given her the opportunity to start thinking more

about the kind of relationship she wanted with her sibling and her mother. As a result of this, she established a more frequent calling schedule to keep in touch with her mother which she found beneficial to her own mental health and her mother's also. Mary had a similar observation, stating that because she's not originally from the United Kingdom she sometimes felt isolated living away from her family. Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic not only prompted her to make more frequent contact with her parents and grandparents, but also helped her to appreciate the value that this has for her and her emotional well-being, a habit she reported continuing up to the point of the interview.

Emily reported that working from home during the pandemic gave her the opportunity to reinvest her time in her family, an opportunity she greatly valued and appreciated. For example, she said the following:

'I think for us, in our family dynamic it's been a huge positive... so before the pandemic, I was required to teach evening sessions, so I was always away, I felt like I was chasing my tail and so you know coming home, I'd think gosh I've got to feed the children quickly, or they've got this activity and I can't get to them in time so I would ask my parents to fill in, maybe put my daughter to bed...and now it's such a luxury because the big thing for us is that we now have the time to sit down and eat as a family... and I don't have to ask my parents to take responsibility for my daughter anymore... and now my husband's able to take my daughter to school every day'. (Emily)

Chelsea and Sophia both also reflected upon their relationships during the lockdown periods of working from home. Both of these participants commented that working from home allowed them greater connectivity to their loved ones. For Sophia, this meant actually being able to have her parents come and live with her and her sister. She particularly valued this reconnection with her parents as they were elderly and she recognised that the time spent with them might be one of the few opportunities she would have left in their lifetime. For Chelsea, this meant having the opportunity to spend time with her children and reinvest in their relationship. Similarly, Claire reflected that her children are almost grown-up and she may not have the opportunity to spend this type of quality time with them in the future, a sentiment that she elaborated upon through her narrative of the time spent with her grown-up daughter who come back home and live with her during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mariam, Kristina and Emma all reflected upon the benefits that had come to their work relationships in the changed context of WFH. While many of the participants in this study reflected upon their work relationships, these three participants gave particular attention to these. They all reflected that while they had good high quality collegial relationships prior to the WFH context they had found that working from home gave them a greater appreciation of the meaningfulness that they ascribed to their work relationships. They further felt that this realisation was a catalyst to their decision to invest additional time in

maintaining and building these relationships. For Emma, this meant increasing her engagement as a line manager with her direct reports and having weekly check-ins.

In addition to the elements of self-care that were outlined in this core narrative, the participants also indicated that what contributed to their sense of self-care was not just about the new behaviours or the enrichment of activities but also the absence of behaviours or previous responsibilities that they no longer had to fulfil. For example, a number of the women indicated that working from home allowed them to spend less time on activities they no longer found enriching or meaningful, such as worrying about wearing makeup or dressing in office appropriate attire. While the women indicated a range of reasons as to why they found this new change in behaviour beneficial, primarily the women indicated that they felt the relaxed nature of working from home freed them from gendered notions of beauty and impression management.

Emily for example outlined the following reflection on the changes that she had made to her daily routine.

'One of the things that I've thought about for me is how I used to dress at work. It was always really important to me and so I've got loads of quite smart and trendy, well coordinated clothing and I very much put on a work uniform. It was very much a clearly defined work wardrobe. And now I don't have to find my wardrobe anymore and I don't bother with makeup. So, that maybe doesn't sound like a lot, but I think if you ask somebody about me, they would describe me as probably being very well dressed. You know, the makeup and putting on high heels... So it's a very different version of myself'. (Emily)

Olivia also reflected in her interview on the fact that she now felt she could stop focusing on wearing makeup and doing her hair in order to present herself in a professional fashion.

'One of the positives is that I save a lot of time on doing things... I don't have to think about putting makeup on before I go to a meeting. Which I didn't put makeup on every time anyway. But now it's just something I don't have to think about and I save a lot of time... And my hair can be whatever. Like it is now in the interview, Ha, ha'. (Olivia)

Across the interviews, our participants reflected upon a range of relationships that they found meaningful and wanted to invest more time and energy in maintaining or re-establishing. For people like Emily (quoted above), this meant making sure that her parents could just be grandparents to her children rather than taking on the primary care-giving role that she had to rely upon them for when she was working on campus. For some of the women, this re-evaluation of relationships also involved a re-consideration of their sense of self, for example, in terms of how they felt their personal appearance mattered to them. In the next section, the data outlining core narrative 3 will be presented.

3.3 | Reimagining Selves

Across the interviews, participants reflected upon the strategies they utilised for navigating the challenges of maintaining their professional and work identities in a remote work context. This section outlines the core narrative related to how the study participants engaged in strategies to maintain their professional sense of self. For some, this meant re-engaging with roles that they felt they did not have the time and space to focus on previously, while for others this meant recognising the strength of their professional identities outside of the organisational context and reimagining what it means to be an academic. While the participants were asked to reflect on several facets of their sense of self, participants seemed to focus on the recalibration of their professional identity and a realisation of the meaning of their organisational identity in the context of weakened organisational control.

Chelsea outlined her experiences of the challenge of teaching online at the start of the pandemic and how these were linked to her professional sense of self.

‘I was particularly...excited about the challenge of delivering everything online. I’ve always been interested in learning and teaching...so the idea of having to do things differently was really interesting, and you know it’s kept my interest, you know, putting different students in... different breakout rooms and trying to engage students in that sort of environment and then thinking of how you had to adapt the materials...and it made me feel more confident in myself as a teacher’. (Chelsea)

This represents her reflection that the challenge that was brought by working online was not something that scared her but made her feel more competent in her professional identity as a teacher.

Sophia also reflected upon how she felt that the opportunity to teach from home reinforced her perception of being a skilled academic. She said:

‘I became very advanced at hosting meetings with 40 plus people on Teams. As someone who is a scientist and not really at all an organising kind of person, I picked it up very quickly’. (Sophia)

Lillian particularly reflected upon the impact that working from home had, both on her professional identity as an academic, as well as her organisational identity. She felt that her organisational identity had somewhat eroded over the WFH period. She specified that this was a conscious disengagement from an overloaded work life. In this sense, although she did feel less identification with her organisation, she expressed this as a healthy outcome for her in terms of her sense of self. She said the following:

‘Yeah, it’s a lot less part of a collective and it’s a lot less being a part of a Management School. Yeah, I do have a shared interest and what I’m doing, and I am

proud to be part of what I’m doing, but I just don’t feel that all of my work needs to be done specifically for my department, or for my line manager, or for my immediate students, it can be for other things. In my mind there was always a priority for these immediate work contexts around me, whereas now I don’t see that, as in, I mean, it’s important, and I still dedicate a lot of my energy and work to it, but I’ve also carved out a space where I exist as an independent academic. And I wanted this, I wanted to take risks, because now I have a little bit of slack and I can think’. (Lillian)

Lillian also reflected upon the fact that the new digitised work-space allowed her to connect to academics around the world, which strengthened her sense of self as an academic.

Another example of how the WFH context allowed our participants to reimagine their identities comes from Siobhan, who reflected upon how the change enabled her to feel more connected to her work community. She said the following:

‘I think the fact that I can participate in meetings or certain events remotely has allowed me to participate in more things. For example, there were groups that I was not a part of at all before, because I didn’t have time to go to those meetings that they would hold. But it’s much easier to go to their online meetings, and I’ve become really close with these groups, and it enriches my work experience because they’re interesting’. (Siobhan)

Mariam also reflected on the fact that being in online meetings made her feel that she had a greater capacity to participate in the conversation. She reflected that in in-person meetings she doesn’t always feel that she has the ability to make her contribution, but because of the functionality of remote meetings, where only one person can speak at a time, she now felt empowered to make her contribution. This led to her feeling she had a greater organisational voice, leading to a strengthening of her sense of self as a researcher.

The narratives shared by the participants in our study were diverse and unique to their individual experiences. However, a common thread was found when examining the strategies employed by the participants to maintain a sense of self in the face of the dramatic changes in their work context. This core narrative shed light on how the participants navigated the challenges and opportunities presented to them.

For some participants, the shift to remote work and the accompanying changes in their roles and responsibilities empowered them to let go of identities that they felt had constrained them in the past. They saw this transition as a chance to break free from limiting routines and beliefs and embrace new possibilities. In doing so, they saw this as an opportunity to explore different aspects of themselves, to tap into previously unexplored skills and talents, and to redefine their professional personas.

In the next section of the paper, we will delve deeper into the core narratives shared by the participants. This analysis will shed light on the intricate relationship between the work context and the strategies employed by the participants to navigate the personal and professional interface while WFH.

4 | Discussion

We have focused on understanding the strategies women academics utilised to manage the challenges of the personal and professional interface while working from home, and the implications these strategies had for flourishing during the COVID-19 period. The strategies of new life balance, refocusing relationships and reimagining selves, are just a few of what might be many possible strategies that can be employed to navigate the challenges of working from home. While our insights might be part of a larger toolbox of possible strategies, we believe our findings offer some valuable theoretical and practical insights. The following sections will outline meaningful theoretical connections that might be made between these strategies and our existing understanding of WFH and how these are linked to flourishing.

4.1 | New Life Balance

A significant theme in our study focused on how finding opportunities for reshaping, reengaging, or developing new ways of caring for the self, led to perceived states of flourishing. As noted by Kelliher, Richardson, and Boiarintseva (2019), the work-life balance literature has largely framed this issue as a work and childcare issue. Our data helps to provide meaningful insights on this balance, beyond just childcare. The new life balance theme provides insights into the types of activities that helped the participants to flourish, by providing meaningful outlets and activities that enriched their lives, beyond just their relationships. Given our lack of insight into the types of work-life balance concerns beyond child rearing, these insights help to address the gaps in our understanding of the types of activities as well as the cadence of activities across the work period, that may foster flourishing. From these findings, we argue that allowing individuals to have flexibility over their work schedule, may help individuals to flourish in a WFH context.

Additionally, by eliminating or reducing time-consuming activities (like commuting, adhering to gendered conceptions of female beauty, and in-person meetings) our participants identified that they gained more autonomy (i.e., time) over their schedules. This newfound control enabled them to allocate their energy to activities that aligned with their values and contributed to their overall flourishing. They could engage in hobbies, pursue personal interests, or spend quality time with loved ones, fostering positive emotions and a greater sense of fulfilment. These insights are linked closely with the concept of work boundaries (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000). We argue that the increased autonomy over their schedules allowed them to focus on the activities they found most meaningful to them, at a given time. Deciding how and when they wished to focus on their work role versus their personal self, helped them to flourish.

However, it should be noted that while most of the participants in our study reflected upon their newly gained life balance as

the result of WFH, not everyone experienced WFH as positive, especially not initially. It should be noted that most of the participants in this study reflected upon the challenges that they faced early on, in learning to work from home and find that balance that they later learned to appreciate. In fact, for four of the participants, although they later did find a greater balance between how they used their time, balancing roles and self-care, they did report experiencing what could be identified as work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson 2010; Boxall and Macky 2014). In short, we acknowledge that, even for those women who identified as having flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic, not all was plain sailing, but, because we have chosen to explore the concept of flourishing here, we have been selective in focusing on the more positive aspects of their experiences in this article.

4.2 | Refocusing Relationships

The women who participated in our study expressed that the shift to WFH created new opportunities for them to invest time in nurturing relationships that they found valuable and meaningful. They reported that while these relationships already enriched their lives and contributed to their overall sense of well-being, being able to invest more energy and time in them was fundamental to their flourishing during a critical time of change and uncertainty.

The value attributed to these relationships by the participants stemmed from their connection to their perceived importance to them, and their overall sense of self. The women in our study recognised the importance of renegotiating and investing in relationships that may have been neglected previously due to the demands of their work lives. By putting renewed energy into their relationships, they experienced a sense of restoration and a greater sense of flourishing.

In this sense, one of the core strategies that was found to have been utilised by the study participants to establish and maintain a sense of flourishing during a significant period of change was to renegotiate, re-establish and re-engage their interpersonal relationships, given that the latter play a vital role in human well-being and flourishing (Prizmić-Larsen et al. 2020).

As social beings, our connections with others are fundamental to our overall sense of happiness, fulfilment, and personal growth. Research consistently highlights the positive impact of strong and meaningful relationships on individual flourishing (Caughlin and Huston 2010; Prizmić-Larsen et al. 2020).

While the participants in our study identified meaningful relationships such as parent-child, wife-husband, sibling-sibling relationships as important to their flourishing, work relationships were also found to be important. Persson, Blomqvist, and Lindström (2021) outline that positive relationships in the work context can also be important for flourishing. When we examine the interaction between core narratives two and three, it becomes clear that the strategies that our participants employed to promote flourishing were also very much connected to the building and fostering of meaningful career-related relationships. In fact, as outlined in the data, many of the women found

that building new research networks, establishing themselves as international researchers, and finding new ways of managing, were empowering outcomes of the shift to remote working. This reveals how relationship management strategies contribute to women's personal growth and development. Meaningful connections allow us to exchange ideas, perspectives, and experiences, which broaden our horizons and expand our understanding of the world.

While the data clearly indicated that building and nurturing meaningful relationships was a strategy for flourishing, letting go of other relationships was also helpful. Some participants in the study reported that they disengaged from or significantly worked to renegotiate or withdraw from some relationships as a result of having greater time to reflect upon the meaningfulness of these relationships to them. For these participants, flourishing was linked with the chance to disengage from relationships that they no longer found fulfilling or no longer aligned with their values.

This pruning of relationships creates an interesting lacuna when it comes to the concept of flourishing. While the majority of flourishing research has focused on understanding how the creation of or the maintenance of meaningful interpersonal relationships can foster flourishing (Colbert, Bono, and Purvanova 2016; Nelson et al. 2016; Wissing et al. 2021), there is very little in the extant literature which indicates that pulling back from relationships or indeed leaving relationships which are no longer meaningful to us can also facilitate flourishing. Furthermore, while social network research has found that we might be able to develop strategies to buffer us against de-energising relationships (Gerbasi et al. 2015), this line of research primarily focuses on how to cope with possibly difficult or taxing relationships, rather than the benefit of disengaging ourselves from them. In this way, this study helps to give insight into the role that relationship maintenance strategies might have in flourishing.

4.3 | Reimagining Selves

The final theme of the study revealed that the new WFH context allowed our participants opportunities to reimagine themselves. They embraced new opportunities for personal growth and development, explored different aspects of their identities, and found empowerment through taking control of their work and personal lives. This reimagining process allowed them to redefine their priorities, set goals aligned with their values, and establish a renewed sense of purpose in their lives. It will be interesting to catch up with them through a second phase of research, now the pandemic crisis has ended, to find out if this has become 'the new normal' or if they have since returned to 'business as usual'.

5 | Conclusion

5.1 | Limitations of the Study

While this study brings to light a number of conceptually interesting phenomena in the WFH context during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a number of limitations which need to be acknowledged.

First of all, we note that the sample for this study is made-up of women working in academia. Arguably this particular group has a number of privileges such as flexibility in their work arrangements, job security, and relative financial security due to full time work to name a few that are likely to have buffered them from experiencing the full brunt of the challenges of the pandemic. In addition, women self-selected as flourishing in some way during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that there is a psychological and perhaps an emotional stigma associated with saying that you did well during a period of human history in which arguably the vast majority of people did not do well. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that there may be other individuals in the population whose experiences might parallel those of the participants in the study but who chose not to draw attention to their flourishing.

We also acknowledge that our pragmatic and localised recruitment approach meant that not every eligible woman academic in the United Kingdom was approached to take part in the study. A larger and broader sample might have led to further important findings. It is also worth pointing out that this sample was unique in terms of its demographic makeup. For example, two-thirds of the study participants were in some form of long-term relationship with a partner at home, a factor that was likely to reduce the challenges experienced during extended periods of WFH and isolation. Having a partner at home could also provide important mental health and emotional support to the participants which might have had an impact on their ability to reflect that they have flourished.

A further limitation is the limited number of participants with children. Of those seven women, two had adult children, and the remaining five reported that their children in most cases were over the age of 10 and were to some degree self-sufficient in their ability to monitor and supervise their own self-care and education. Had we wished to undertake a more balanced approach, seeking respondents who had struggled, as well as flourished, may have yielded different insights, however, many from the former camp may have been too busy or exhausted to participate. Additionally, the timing of the research may have an impact on the perceptions of the participants. Our research took place after the first wave of vaccinations took place in the United Kingdom. This timing may limit the participants perspective on their experience of events.

Finally, we recognise that the focus on positive states of being may mask certain negative elements of the experience of our participants. However, we specifically targeted participants who self-identified as flourishing during the pandemic, and who wished to share their positive experiences. These positive experiences contribute to understanding a wider range of perspectives of this global event.

5.2 | Contributions of the Study

This article highlights a bias in research on WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the primary focus upon on negative aspects. The aim of the study presented here was to address this by focusing on the aspects that contributed to flourishing: a state of well-being and thriving, among women academics working from home during the pandemic.

The interview extracts shed light on the specific approaches utilised by the participants to navigate the WFH context during the pandemic. Some of the strategies identified in the study include focusing on self-care and recognising the importance of maintaining physical and mental well-being. Additionally, relationship management emerged as a crucial factor in flourishing. The participants highlighted the significance of maintaining social connections and fostering supportive relationships with colleagues, friends, and family members. Strategies such as online socialising, regular check-ins, and creating remote support networks played a vital role in enhancing their well-being and reducing feelings of isolation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the confidential nature of this research, only anonymized data extracts are available upon request.

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