Why Physical Distancing Should Not Become the New (Ab)Normal

By Rasna Warah

Many office workers are celebrating working from home (WFH), which has become the “new normal” in the age of coronavirus and lockdowns. Introverts who hate the prospect of making small talk with colleagues they secretly loathe have welcomed the idea of working remotely from home in their pajamas and setting their own work schedules. Those whose working experience was considerably diminished by office politics find that it is much easier to ignore these politics on Zoom.

WFH certainly has its advantages. Time spent commuting to work (which in Nairobi can be as long as two hours due to the city’s horrific traffic jams) can now be spent working. This is good for the environment, which is already choking from vehicular fumes, and for productivity. I have worked from home for several years and find that I am more productive at home because I spend less time getting dressed for work, travelling to work, and conducting idle chitchat with colleagues, time that is essentially wasted. Twitter has already told its employees that they can work from home for the rest of their working life at the company if they choose to do so.

With the advent of WFH, it has also become evident that showing up at work is not the same as working. Many of us have worked in places where it is not clear what work people actually do or why they were hired. Their output appears negligible or insignificant, but because they show up at work, it is assumed that they are working. With WFH, managers might be more diligent about monitoring
“deliverables” (NGO-ese for outputs) by employees. After all, if you say you are working from home, and cannot show what you did, then it becomes clear that you are not actually working.

However, before we throw out our office suits and slip permanently into our comfortable bedroom slippers, we might consider this: the majority of essential workers in this world still have to go to work and make physical contact with human beings to earn a living. Doctors, nurses, retail store managers, food vendors, hawkers, need to physically interact with the people they serve. No WFH for them.

For those of us who were already working from home before the pandemic and lockdowns started, the new normal might appear like the old normal, but it is not for one simple reason – this lockdown is enforced; it is not voluntary. People working from home can decide when to go out and socialise to recharge their batteries or to make human contact; now that option no longer exists or is restricted.

Studies have also shown that while many women prefer the flexibility of working from home, a majority find that leaving the house to go to work is actually therapeutic. A survey by Gallup, for instance, found that two-thirds of working women liked the “social aspect” of their jobs. Working from home alone doesn’t provide the social contact and camaraderie that an office can provide.

There are other disadvantages of WFH and using online platforms to communicate with colleagues. As Jennifer Senior wrote in the New York Times recently, “Remote work leaves a terrible feedback vacuum. Communication with colleagues is no longer casual but effortful; no matter how hard you try, you’re going to have less contact – particularly of the casual variety – and with fewer people”.

Senior says that it would also be a mistake to assume that toxic office politics will not find its way into the WFH space. “They [office politics] are much easier to navigate if you can actually see your colleagues – and therefore discern where the power resides, how business gets done and who the kind people are”, she wrote.

**When the home becomes a battlefield**

The lockdowns around the globe are also testing marriages and giving rise to mental health problems that are breaking up families and leading to increased domestic violence. As the war against the coronavirus pandemic accelerates, another kind of pandemic is raging across the world. Reports indicate that violence against women has increased since lockdowns have been enforced in various countries, and that women are bearing a disproportionate burden of taking care of their families.

United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, raised the alarm recently when he stated: “Over the past weeks as economic and social pressures and fear have grown, we have seen a horrifying global surge in domestic violence”. He noted that “violence is not confined to the battlefield”.

According to a recent UNWomen report, “COVID-19 and Ending Violence against Women”, in France reports of domestic violence increased by 30 per cent since the lockdown on 17 March. In Argentina, emergency calls on domestic violence cases increased by 25 per cent after the lockdown on 20 March. In Cyprus and Singapore, helplines registered an increase in calls by 30 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively. Demands for emergency shelter for domestic violence victims have also been reported in Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

“As stay-at-home orders expand to contain the spread of the virus, women with violent partners increasingly find themselves isolated from the people and resources that can help them”, says the report. “The surge in COVID-19 cases is straining even the most advanced and best-resourced health
systems to the breaking point, including those at the front line in violence response”.

“It’s a perfect storm”, said the CEO of one British charity. “Lockdowns will lead to a surge in domestic abuse, but also severely limit the ability of services to help”.

In many countries where there are few services for victims of domestic violence, or where reporting physical abuse, especially by an intimate partner, is difficult, women are trapped in a vicious cycle. In situations where healthcare services are already over-stretched, women victims of domestic violence are also less likely to seek medical attention.

The closure of schools has also placed enormous pressure on women, who tend to be the main caregivers in families. For women who are poor, and who live in cramped housing, the pressures can be overwhelming. With stay-at-home children and a spouse who has either been let go at work, or who cannot work because of the lockdown, the home can become a pressure cooker ready to explode. Men who feel more insecure due to their unemployment status are likely to take out their frustrations on their wives. Sometimes this can result in physical violence, even murder, as has been reported in Kenya, where there appears to be a surge in intimate partner violence, sometimes resulting in death.

The looming mental health crisis

In my view, the idea that self-isolation and working remotely from home should be accepted as the new normal is terribly misplaced for one simple reason: human beings are wired to be social animals, and depriving them of social contact has dire psychological consequences. WFH advocates fail to consider that humans have an innate need to physically interact with other humans.

There is a famous experiment conducted by the American psychologist Harry Harlow that is often cited to underscore the above point. Harlow’s work with primates, particularly infant rhesus monkeys, showed why isolation can be detrimental to human development. His experiments showed that when baby monkeys are taken away from their mothers and raised in a laboratory setting, they start engaging in disturbing behaviour, including self-mutilation. It didn’t matter how well fed the monkeys were, their need for maternal comfort and love proved more critical to their development than their need for sustenance. The infant monkeys placed in cages did not thrive; some held in prolonged captivity even died. The experiment highlighted the importance of maternal care and touch in infant development. Those who believe that hugs, cuddles and handshakes are gestures that will no longer be tolerated in a post-COVID world might want to refer to Harlow’s groundbreaking work.

Johann Hari also highlights the importance of social contact in his book, Lost Connections: Why You’re Depressed and How to Find Hope. Hari, a journalist who had been on anti-depressants for years (without much success) embarked on a journey to find out why depressed people remained depressed even after years of taking drugs or undergoing therapy.

He found that depression is not so much a clinical condition that can managed with the right medicine, but essentially a social disorder whose cure lies in connecting with other like-minded people. He found that depressed people are not only more likely to feel lonely, but also tend to feel insecure. They have few friends and little social interaction.

Despite the proliferation of social media and the billions of “friends” on Facebook, an alarming number of people around the world are reporting being both lonely and depressed. Hari found that social media cannot compensate for the psychological loss of social life. He quotes the biologist E.O Wilson, who said that “people must belong to a tribe” to thrive. People must feel a sense of
community and have friends they can count on. This involves physical interaction.

Unfortunately, our modern world has made connection and a sense of community harder to achieve. Social media has replaced physical contact; online shopping has replaced the pleasure of physically touching an object before buying it; the neoliberal capitalist world order has made it much harder for people to form relationships that have nothing to do with money. This has severely impacted the mental health of societies.

**The social cost of rising inequality**

The world has also become far more unequal, with a handful of people and corporations owning most of the world’s wealth, and a large majority eking out a living from paycheck to paycheck, and with few prospects of owning a home. An Oxfam report released last year showed that in 2018, the 26 richest people in the world had the same net worth as the poorest half of the world’s population, or 3.8 billion people. In addition, the wealth of 2,200 billionaires increased by 12 per cent in 2018 while the wealth of the poorest half decreased by 11 per cent.

Studies have found that millennials are less likely to own their own homes during their lifetime than their parents and grandparents. This is partly the result of the “gig economy”, which has become the new normal, with young people taking on short-term contractual jobs rather than more secure long-term employment that can provide things like health insurance and pension schemes. While the gig economy has been lauded by some for offering people more flexibility and variety in the kinds of jobs they do, it also has several disadvantages, the primary one being lack of financial security, which has led to mounting uncertainty, particularly among people approaching middle age.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global recession is likely to increase inequality in an already highly unequal world. With more people losing their jobs or earning less, the gap between rich and poor is likely to widen. This has mental health and social consequences.

In their groundbreaking book on inequality, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Picket show a strong relationship between inequality and mental illness. The researchers found that highly unequal societies tend to have a higher incidence of depression, obesity, drug addiction, and violent crime than societies that are more equal. One reason for this is that in societies that place a high value on having money and possessions, people who judge themselves through this value system are more at risk of depression and anxiety.

Highly unequal societies also tend to value competition more than cooperation. They tend to be individualistic and materialistic. Hence, they tend not to take care of the “public good”, and so are less likely to invest in good quality and affordable healthcare and education, or in things that have no commercial value, but which are essential for the well-being of societies, such as public parks and social security systems. This affects the overall mental health of people living in these societies.

Human beings need other human beings to survive and thrive. They need to cooperate and make physical contact with others. WFH and self-isolation are already impacting the mental health of people. If physical distancing and self-isolation become the norm in the long term, then hospitals might reduce the number of coronavirus patients, but mental asylums and counselling services will become overwhelmed. In poor countries, where psychological counselling is a luxury, expect more violent crime, suicides and drug and alcohol addiction. The new normal will, in fact, become the new abnormal.

While there is no doubt that social behaviour will be impacted by the pandemic in the short term, it would be a tragedy if human beings shut themselves off permanently from other human beings in
the long term. As I have tried to show, long-term self-isolation is neither healthy nor desirable. The emotional and social costs are simply too high.

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