



LISER - MEGA series on gender dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic

#2

Time use, childcare and home schooling

This is the second of a series of notes about gender dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each note focuses on a particular dimension of gendered impacts of the crisis. It first quickly reviews relevant academic and policy research and presents the views of selected national or international experts about what happened and what can be done.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected households around the globe in many dimensions. Governments' responses to the public health crisis have almost brought economies to a halt and unemployment rates have jumped to historical highs. Work conditions for those who remained employed changed abruptly, with many being forced to work from home. As schools and daycare centres closed, child-care needs soared. Social distancing recommendations and stay-at-home orders made it difficult, if not impossible, for informal care providers, such as grandparents or other family members, to help with child-care responsibilities. So how did parents cope?

Needless to say, women were carrying a heavier load than men in the provision of childcare before the crisis (Aguiar and Hurst, 2007; Schoonbroodt, 2018). Did the traditional division of roles within households just carry over through the pandemic? Or did it make it worse for women? Or, on the contrary, did the COVID-19 crisis help break those codes?

International evidence: working mothers foot the bill

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic and the extraordinary containment measures triggered a stream of research all around the world to try and understand their impacts. A number of studies examined in particular how families responded to the closure of schools, stay-at-home orders and quarantines which turned the day-to-day organisation of most families upside down.

The equation is simple. Schools and (formal and informal) care providers shut down, leaving it to parents to deal with the increased care load – an important increase in the “demand” for parental time. But, at the same time, the reduction in economic activity and the limitation of non-care activities (such

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as doing sports, going out with friends and other leisurely activities) endowed parents with a larger amount of time that they could devote to care. So the question is how did parents use their extended time endowment to respond to the demand for care by their children.

The increase in the demand for care had no reason to be “gendered” – both parents can in principle support their children with, for example, distance learning. However, research shows that the extra “supply” of care provided by parents disproportionately fell on the shoulders of mothers. One part of the explanation comes from the unequal change in parents’ time endowments. Furloughed or dismissed workers or people forced to work reduced hours, for example, indeed saw the possibility to increase their supply of care substantially. Workers who continued their activity through “homeworking” arrangements, however, only partially saw their time endowments increase. And front-line workers simply did not see their time endowment change very much. The available time of fathers and mothers therefore depended very much on their employment situation and work arrangements. In the UK, for example, more women than men have been furloughed, but less women than men have been working from home.¹ At the same time, front-line or essential workers were generally disproportionately women.² So it is unclear which parent generally saw her/his time endowment grow most.

The other part of the explanation rests, of course, in how parents decided to allocate their respective, available time to the extra child-care needs – and possibly to reallocate their time across different housework activities. In the most problematic situations, the time released by reduced commuting time, work and leisure was not enough to respond to the increased child-care needs. Parents in such situations therefore had to voluntarily reduce working hours further by taking days off work from paid annual leave, by taking advantage of special parental leave schemes that many countries implemented (the “cong  pour raisons familiales” in Luxembourg), or in the worst case scenarios by reducing their working time or quitting their jobs. Decisions about which parent’s working hours should be reduced in these cases were critical to explaining differences in how men and women responded to child-care needs.

Putting these factors together, the outcome documented in recent research can be summarised easily.³ Yes, fathers, on average, increased their contribution to housework significantly – especially for child-care activities. But mothers, on average, increased their contribution to housework even more, especially in non-care activities. Such patterns were documented both in Europe and North America. Starting from a fairly “traditional” pre-pandemic childcare division, the lockdown stimulus was not nearly strong enough to level the playing field between men and women in childcare and housework more generally.

¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/how-has-the-coronavirus-pandemic-affected-women-in-work/> and <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/datasets/anewnormalhowpeoplespenttheirtimeafterthemarch2020coronaviruslockdown>

² <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/essential-workers>

³ We draw here on Stantcheva (2021) for a review of international evidence; Adams-Prassl et al. (2020) for a comparison of Germany, the US and the UK; Alon et al. (2020), Collins et al. (2021), Prados and Zamarro (2020) or Petts et al. (2021), among many others, for US evidence; Hipp and B nning (2021)), Boll et al. (2021), Zoch et al. (2021) for Germany; Andrew et al. (2020), Hupkau and Petrongolo (2020), Orefice and Quintana-Domeque (2020), Sevilla and Smith (2020) for the UK; Del Boca et al. (2020) for Italy; Farr  et al. (2020) for Spain, Fodor et al. (2021) for Hungary.

The amount of time men devoted to housework depended critically on their partners' working arrangements. Men whose partners continued to work at their usual workplace spent more time on housework than before. In particular, men started spending more time in childcare and homeschooling, but the additional childcare provided by them was related to their own employment status. Unsurprisingly, the allocation was more equal in households where men were working from home or where they had been furloughed or had lost their jobs. On the contrary, mothers' working situations appear to have had a limited influence on their child-care responsibilities. Among couples with children with both parents working full time, women still provided the majority of child-care hours.

Perhaps more disturbingly for long-term impacts, mothers, especially in the US, have been exposed to a greater risk of losing or quitting their job during the early pandemic when they lost a substantial number of non-parental care hours and when they had to substitute school for homeschooling activities. Fathers' employment has been less affected by the loss of non-parental care provision.

Last but not least, evidence identifies single mothers as the group most adversely affected. Our discussion has so far assumed that parents had a common stock of time that they could decide to allocate to child care, but, of course, the problem for single parents is both simpler and harder: only their own time is available for work, care and other housework. Many single mothers had reduced possibility to continue working during the pandemic and, notably in the US, many had to quit their jobs – adding further economic vulnerability to a group whose situation was already more precarious prior to the pandemic.

On the whole, mothers – working mothers primarily – seem to have absorbed the higher burden for childcare during school and kindergarten closures. This may have had immediate consequences – higher psychological distress compared to mothers and women without school-age children has been documented – but it may also have implications for their employment and professional career development in the long run.

Policy recommendations

So what? Can policy provide support in such extreme situations? And are there lessons to be drawn for child care more generally, once COVID-19 is a story of the past? Gromada et al. (2020) on behalf of the UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti, issued the following recommendations aimed at strengthening support for families in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – with calls for emergency actions, but also suggestions of longer run initiatives:

- To support non-family childcare through, for example, public provision of childcare, or subsidies and tax incentives and legal requirements for employers to provide childcare;
- In the face of the pandemic, many employers have adopted homeworking. However, working from home is not synonymous with flexible work. Employers should consult staff regularly to learn about their needs in times of restricted childcare options. Solutions might include flexible hours, compressed time, reduced overall time and staggered time;
- Even flexible time arrangements might be insufficient for single parents during a pandemic. Child allowances or partly state-subsidised paid leave should be considered in such circumstances;
- To provide the necessary support to workers in the informal sector, governments can extend access to social protection, ensure the rights and safety of essential informal workers, and support informal workers' organisations;
- Employers can also support all working parents by being flexible in response to their situations and needs, providing services when parents have to take direct responsibility for care and supporting referrals to public services;
- During the COVID-19 outbreak, governments and employers, where relevant, should offer outreach to parents, particularly those with limited resources. This could, for example, include public information campaigns and direct support and guidance on care, stimulation and play;
- Governments should consider introducing social protection floors with basic universal social protection for families, including childcare support, building on the expansions seen in COVID-19 economic recovery packages wherever possible;
- When providing COVID-19 related support, governments should recognise that parents in the informal economy do not always qualify for income support and services. Recognising the universal commitment to children's rights, under Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, existing childcare benefits and services will need to be expanded to meet the needs of these children during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath;
- The economic and social repercussions of COVID-19 promise to be wide reaching and long lasting. COVID-19 responses globally have made limited use of childcare support, despite the impact the lockdowns have had on family work and care. Governments should provide more support for parents with childcare responsibilities, reflecting both the differences in vulnerability to lockdowns (loss of employment), and the persistence and depth of the economic crisis;
- The pandemic and its socio-economic fallout present a range of challenges to the mental health and psychosocial well-being both of children and their caregivers. Many will overcome their mental health issues if their basic needs are met, and if family, peer and community support is restored and strengthened. For those who need specialised mental health care, governments should seek to ensure this care is available, accessible and provided in a non-stigmatising way.

These UNICEF recommendations are broad and wide-ranging (and a number of them have already been put in place by employers and authorities in Luxembourg) but they also make clear that there is no shortage of additional solutions and scope for initiative.

Some insights for Luxembourg

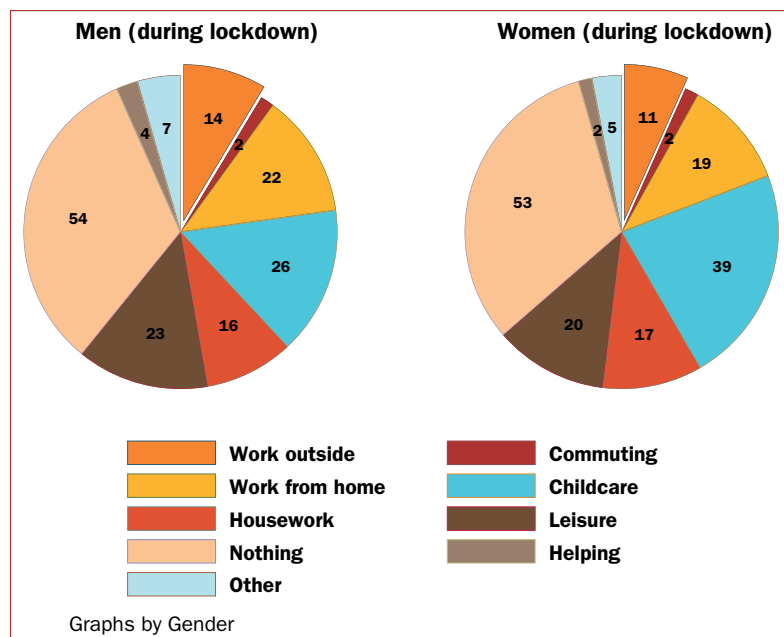
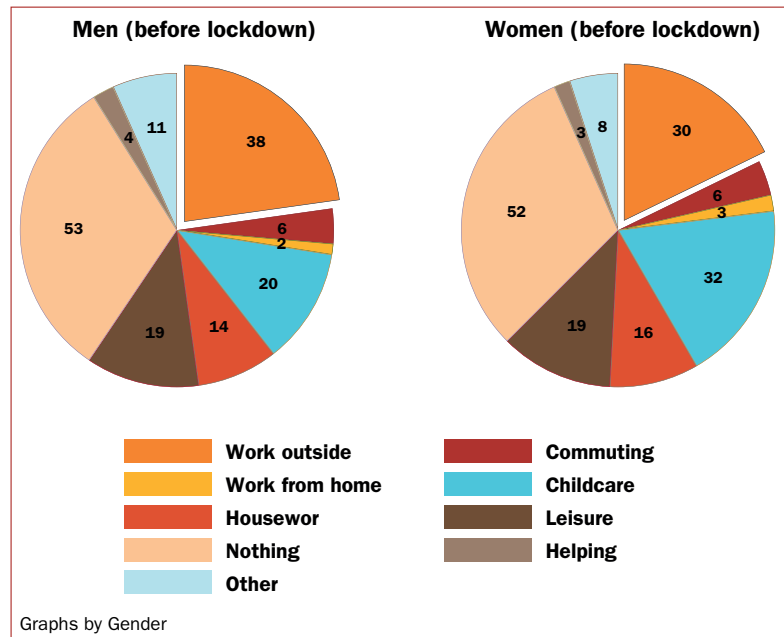
Dijst et al. (2021) conducted comprehensive research on socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in Luxembourg. As part of the study, they collected detailed information on time use for 522 respondents living in stable relationships with a child younger than 13 years old. Participants were asked how many hours per week they spent on nine main activities before and during the confinement of Spring 2020: (1) paid work outside of home; (2) travelling to and from work or to and from school; (3) paid work at home; (4) activities with own children (including washing, dressing, playing, reading, taking children to see the doctor, taking child to activities and home schooling); (5) household chores; (6) leisure time activities; (7) not doing anything (including sleep and rest); (8) helping other family members, friends or neighbours; and (9) other activities not mentioned above.

According to these responses, childcare increased from 28 to 34 hours per week on average. But was this symmetrical between fathers and mothers? Figure 1 charts the time use for fathers (left panel) and mothers (right panel) before and during the lockdown. Fathers reported doing 6 hours more of childcare on average (while the time spent on work decreased by 8 hours – commuting included), and mothers increased childcare by 7 hours (just balancing a reduction of 7 hours of work on average). The increase in childcare during the confinement therefore seems to have been somewhat balanced among respondents, but mothers still reported doing substantially more childcare with 39 hours versus 26 hours for fathers.

The “Congé pour raison familiales” has been one important policy response to school closures and quarantine requirements in Luxembourg. Unfortunately, little is still known about the use of leave for family reasons when broken down by gender and family types. Early evidence for March 2020 however showed that women were two times more likely than men to ask for days off in the context of the leave for family reasons.⁴ With the pandemic and the scheme lingering on for months since then, it will be enlightening to examine how much more women have taken such a leave throughout the whole period as a key indicator of gender roles in Luxembourg households.

⁴ Luxemburger Wort, May 27, 2020, « Le recours au congé pour raisons familiales en chiffre », <https://www.wort.lu/fr/luxembourg/le-recours-au-conge-pour-raisons-familiales-en-chiffres-5ece93f2da2cc1784e35e9b8>

Figure 1: Time use of fathers and mothers before and during the lockdown in hours per week



Source: Dijst et al. 2021

Expert insights

In July 2020, researchers Lúdia Farré, Yarine Fawaz, Libertad Gonzalez and Jennifer Graves published a thorough examination of the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on gender inequality in paid and unpaid work in Spain in the IZA Discussion Paper 13434, “How the COVID-19 Lockdown Affected Gender Inequality in Paid and Unpaid Work in Spain”. Exploring rich household survey data from early May 2020, they documented increased gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work in the first months of the pandemic in Spain. One of the authors of the study, Dr. Lúdia Farré (University of Barcelona), has answered our questions and shared the highlights of their recent research with us.

1. **Could we start by explaining what have been the long-term trends of division of paid and unpaid work between partners?**

Traditionally, women have been disproportionately in charge of domestic work. So, in all industrialised countries, the larger participation of women in home production is likely to be one of the main causes of the persistence in gender inequalities in the labour market. It is also true that men are progressively increasing their participation in domestic work, but we are still far from reaching egalitarian distribution. Also, I think that some public policies, such as the introduction of paternity leave have incentivised men’s participation in domestic work, but a lot needs to be done still. The pandemic was just evidence of how much more we need to do.

2. **Research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has pronounced this division even further. In most cases mothers became the main care providers. Can we discuss the reasons behind this?**

Yes, the pandemic has exacerbated the gender gap in unpaid work or in time devoted to unpaid work. For Spain we find evidence that while both men and women have increased their time devoted to domestic work, women still shoulder a larger burden. We also find that a gender gap in total hours worked, including paid and unpaid work, that is, the total number of hours a person works per week has increased since the outbreak of COVID-19, mainly due to the increase in hours of unpaid work done by women. In other words, the pandemic has exacerbated the “double shift” phenomenon. The “double shift” means that after hours in paid work, women continue working a large number of hours of unpaid work at home.

There are several explanations for this increase. It could be that women lost their jobs at higher rates than men during the pandemic, and therefore had more time to devote to unpaid work. However, this was not the case in Spain. In Spain, the employment shock has been similar for both men and women,

and the drop in men's and women's employment has been of the same magnitude. Therefore, the traditional explanation based on bargaining power or time availability cannot be the only explanation for the increased gender gap devoted to unpaid work. An alternative explanation could be the presence of social norms that attribute the main role of caregivers to women. The importance of social norms for gender inequality was highlighted before the pandemic by many authors as an important factor for explaining gender inequality on the labour market. In particular, social norms seem to be very important in understanding the penalty that women suffer in the labour market after the birth of their first child. In addition to the presence of these social norms, it could also be the fact that higher flexibility characterises the occupations held by women. This could contribute to the unequal distribution of unpaid work, meaning that women are selected or sort themselves into occupations that seem more flexible, and that allow a better balance of family and work life. As a result, during the pandemic when there was a huge increase in family responsibilities women were more able to adapt their work schedules or organisation of work to deal with the new situation which was an increase in family responsibilities. So, I suggest that both social norms and organisation of work may contribute to this unequal distribution.

3. Are there different effects by countries? What could be the explanation for this?

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there has been extensive research on the impact of the crisis on the labour market and within households. I would like to highlight the results from the industrialised countries, so we will focus on Europe and the US. We have observed that, in contrast to the Spanish case, studies for the US, the UK, and some other European countries show that the recession has affected the employment prospects of women more severely, and therefore this crisis has been named "she-cession", because women have lost their jobs at higher rates than men. This is not the case for Spain, where the crisis on the labour market has similarly affected the employment of women and men. Telecommuting is a different story. It seems that women are more likely to telecommute than men both in Spain and in other industrialised countries. Whether a country has experienced a "she-cession" or not depended on the gender distribution across the sectors. For example, if women have been more employed in sectors that have been more severely affected by the pandemic, or by the protective measures then obviously women have lost their jobs at much higher rates compared to men.

So, one of the differences between the Spanish case and other industrialised countries is the absence in gender asymmetry in the effect of the pandemic on the employment prospects of women. But once we move to households, we see that the

unequal distribution of unpaid work, or the fact that women have shouldered a higher burden of domestic chores and childcare is the same in all industrialised countries. Women have participated more in home production compared to men. It is also true that men have increased their overall participation in domestic work during the lockdowns, but we have not observed an equalisation between genders in unpaid work in any country.

4. Could such gender difference in the division of childcare and homework have been mitigated? How?

I think we should start by erasing the traditional social norms, which attribute women the main role as care givers. This is of course very difficult to do. Social norms were there before the pandemic, have persisted during it, and will exist after it, but I am still not aware of any research that shows evidence that social norms have changed as a result of the pandemic. But given the importance of social norms on allocating unpaid work within families I think it is important to adopt measures to help change these social norms. Public policies can be useful. I think that the introduction of paternity leave has done a lot in incentivising behaviours that contradict gender stereotypes, because paternity leave encourages fathers to take care of the children. What would have been very useful during the pandemic are permits to take care of sick children, or to take care of children in quarantine. If both men and women had been entitled to these permits and would have had the same directions for both men and women, maybe we would have observed a more egalitarian distribution of childcare at least. So, something to bear in the mind for the future, not only in case of a future pandemic, but also for September when schools reopen, is that it would be very useful to have this type of permit, because children are going to get sick anyway.

We also need a universal and free high-quality childcare system to allow women to invest more time in professional careers, avoiding the discussions or negotiations within the household about who takes care of the children.

Then, we also need to redesign work schedules. At least in Spain, work schedules are not aligned with school schedules. There are, for instance, long breaks in the middle of the day, and people need to stay in the office until late in the evening, which is not compatible at all with school schedules, and these two things need to align together to allow a better balance for both men and women.

I also think that telecommuting is going to be very relevant, and another thing that we need to regulate. If telecommuting is a worker's choice, then there is a concern that again it might be that women are the ones who choose the option more than men and we might see a widening of the gender gap on the

labour market. In conclusion, we need to be very careful how we organise flexibility in the workplace, because it may end up having a negative impact on gender inequalities.

5. What are the possible implications for the post-pandemic labour market?

The pandemic has definitely exacerbated the gender gap in unpaid work. If this gender gap persists, and women continue to specialise in home production, then I think that through these mechanisms, the pandemic is going to have a negative impact for female employment prospects. I think that it is very important to adopt the measures I have previously mentioned – regulate teleworking, redesign working schedules, design permits that allow both men and women to take care of the children, introduce universal and high-quality childcare. We need to introduce measures to reverse this trend and the higher specialisation of women in home production. Also, policy makers need to be aware that these policies that allow better balance between men and women are not compulsory, but rather voluntary, such as parental leave or part-time. When they are voluntary, what we have observed in all countries for the last 30 years is that only women participate and use these opportunities. So, we need to be very careful how we define policies, because otherwise they could be counterproductive and negatively affect gender equality instead of having a positive impact.

6. Is more research needed? Where?

Official statistics in most countries do not allow us to measure the impact of the pandemic in all dimensions. We have good data to measure the impact in terms of employment and the labour market, such as employment rates, hours worked, and so on, but we don't have enough data to measure what is going on within the households, such as the allocation of tasks, time devoted to unpaid work, and that is very important. The unequal division of unpaid work is one of the factors that drives the persistence of gender inequality in the labour market. We really need to understand what is going on within households, who is taking care of the children, who is taking care of the house, how this work is distributed, how public policies affect these decisions in order to be able to observe the situation in terms of gender inequality in a few months or years. We need time-use surveys, that are very costly, but they are really useful for understanding the situation. And we also need to see how social norms are evolving. That is something difficult to measure, but there are surveys that allow us to measure social norms and we need to know whether they have changed, and what the implications are for gender equality and the distribution of unpaid work.

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