

# Women, Gender equality and COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to review the existing literature on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender and work roles to determine whether the pandemic has undermined the status, pay and advancement of women or has provided opportunities for reducing gender inequality.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The author reviewed the literature on the effects of COVID-19 and past pandemics on gender equality, focusing on job loss, the effects of being in essential occupations on health and well-being, the increased domestic responsibilities of women and men due to closure of schools and other social services and the effects of telecommuting on gender roles.

**Findings** – The pandemic has generally created challenges for women's advancement. More women than men have lost their jobs; more women than men are in essential jobs that expose them to infection and psychological stress, and women have had more work disruption than men have had because of increases in childcare and other responsibilities. On the other hand, telecommuting has increased men's amount of childcare, and this does have the potential to increase men's childcare responsibilities in the long term, thereby reducing the gender gap in domestic responsibilities and increasing gender equality.

**Research limitations/implications** – The COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing and the research on the pandemic's effects are new and ongoing.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first scholarly review of the literature on the potential effects of COVID-19 on the gender gap in pay and advancement.

**Keywords** Gender roles, Gender equality, COVID-19, Women's advancement

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

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Although it is too soon to understand the full and lasting effects of the COVID-19 on gender equity, the pandemic is likely to impact women and men differently. In this paper, I review four potential ways in which the pandemic may impact the gender gap in employment and advancement. First, gender segregation in occupations can affect the rate at which women and men lose their jobs during the pandemic. Second, if female-dominated occupations are more likely to be characterized as "essential," women's work may expose them to a greater risk of infection and work-related stress. In addition, those female-dominated occupations that allow employees to work from home may be especially emotionally challenging, compared with male-dominated occupations. Third, women have traditionally borne greater responsibility for childcare and other domestic duties than men and these responsibilities may be exacerbated by the pandemic, particularly with school closures and reduced availability of social services, such as daycare and eldercare. Finally, rather than merely a temporary solution to the pandemic, the increase in telecommuting may lead to long-term changes in job flexibility and fathers' contribution to childcare, or it may place an even greater burden on women who have more domestic responsibilities than men and may face more difficulties balancing paid work and family obligations while telecommuting.

I have included all relevant research I could find on COVID-19 and gender. Most of the studies focused on US and European samples, but data from Asia, Africa, North and South America and Oceania are also included.



### **Employment status, earnings and advancement**

Past recessions in the USA and the European Union have typically reduced men's employment more than women's because male-dominated industries, such as construction and manufacturing, suffer more losses during recessions than female-dominated industries, such as education and health care (Coskun and Dalgic, 2020; Smith and Villa, 2013). However, evidence suggests that the coronavirus pandemic is likely to impact women's employment more than men's, based on surveys in 129 countries (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020b) and analyses of employment patterns in OECD countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020). For example, unemployment increased more for women than men in the USA (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020b), UK (Blundell *et al.*, 2020), Australia, Columbia, Canada, Japan and South Korea (ILO, 2020c). Because, globally, women earn less than men, they are already more financially vulnerable to job loss; this is especially true for female primary or sole breadwinners (United Nations [UN], 2020).

Why is the current situation different? First, because of the need for social distancing, many jobs that might have been spared in previous recessions are being lost to the pandemic, including those in accommodations and food services, hospitality, tourism, arts/entertainment and retail, all female-dominated occupations across the world (ILO, 2020b; UN, 2020). Second, continued employment depends on the ability to telecommute, and men are more likely to be employed in jobs that easily allow telecommuting (Alon *et al.*, 2020).

Losing a job impacts careers by slowing or obstructing opportunities for advancement, and this is especially true for women (Brand, 2006). Job losses also reduce future income; losing a job during a recession has an even greater cumulative effect on future earnings than job losses at other times, and these effects become increasingly pronounced the higher the unemployment rate is when a job is lost (Davis and von Wachter, 2011). The pandemic has caused a rapid and unprecedented loss of work hours worldwide (ILO, 2020b); in fact, this is projected to be the deepest global recession since the Second World War (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, it is likely that individuals who have lost jobs during the pandemic will experience a substantial decline in future earnings. Many of those affected will be women, who not only earn less than men, but, based on research in Europe, also have accumulated less wealth (Schneebaum *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, men's livelihoods have recovered more rapidly from past pandemics than women's (UN, 2020). These findings suggest that the pandemic will harm women's incomes and advancement more than men's, increasing gender inequality.

Because they lack the available capital of larger companies, small businesses are expected to bear the brunt of the pandemic's economic costs (Bartik *et al.*, 2020; ILO, 2020b). Women-owned small businesses are likely to be especially vulnerable. Although women's companies were more resilient during the 2008 recession, principally because female-owned businesses in many countries focus on services such as health, personal care and education (OECD, 2012), the pandemic has particularly targeted businesses involving face-to-face services (Bartik *et al.*, 2020), such as those provided by women. Moreover, US female small-business owners report greater financial concern than their male counterparts as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, in large part because women's businesses receive less funding than men's (Badal and Robison, 2020), even controlling for past firm performance (Eddleston *et al.*, 2014). As a consequence, they have less capital than small businesses run by men. Globally, women represent only a minority of CEOs, entrepreneurs and small business owners (Adema *et al.*, 2014), and the pandemic is likely to reduce those numbers further.

### **Childcare, family care and domestic duties**

In every country that has been studied around the world, women, regardless of employment status, spend more time in caring for children and other household

duties than men do (ILO, 2018; OECD, 2016; BLS, 2020a). It is true that men have increased their investment in time with children, but so have women. Even though more women in Europe, the USA and Australia are employed than in the past, they now devote more time to one-on-one interactions with their children than they did historically (Aguar and Hurst, 2007; Gauthier *et al.*, 2004). Also, women more often provide unpaid care for elderly relatives (ILO, 2018; OECD, 2020). All of these responsibilities have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

COVID-19 has increased telecommuting, caused layoffs of many employees, closed schools and increased the amount of time parents spend with their children at home. By the end of May, nearly 150 nations had country-wide school closures, affecting two-thirds of all children (UNESCO, 2020). Based on time-diaries of heterosexual couples with children living in England, since the pandemic, both women and men have increased the time they spend with their children, but the increase has been greater for women, and not just because more women have lost their jobs and therefore have increased time to devote to family (Andrew *et al.*, 2020). The time-diary study showed that employed mothers spend as much time as their unemployed husbands on childcare, whereas unemployed mothers devote twice as many hours to children as their employed spouses. Moreover, the study found that among employed parents, mothers devote fewer hours to their jobs than fathers do. In addition, interruptions to women's paid work hours have increased much more than men's, so that fathers have about twice as many uninterrupted paid work hours as mothers do.

Surveys of parents in the USA have likewise found that COVID has increased the childcare, housekeeping and other domestic responsibilities of both mothers and fathers (Carlson *et al.*, 2020; Miller, 2020). Although only a minority of parents reported equal sharing of childcare and housework, the percentage of egalitarian households has increased since the start of the pandemic (Carlson *et al.*, 2020). Some of this may be due to the high percentage of women in essential face-to-face occupations, leaving men at home to care for children. Still, the surveys revealed that mothers do more than fathers and, in particular, mothers more than fathers have taken on the responsibility of home schooling their children. Similar results have been reported in surveys of women in eastern Europe and central Asia, with increased gender gaps in childcare, eldercare and housework as a result of the pandemic (UN Women, 2020b). The consequence of inequitable division of domestic labor is that more employed mothers than fathers have reduced time devoted to their jobs (Collins *et al.*, 2020; Miller, 2020), particularly among couples with young children (Collins *et al.*, 2020).

In all regions of the world, women are more likely to head single-parent families than men are (ILO, 2018). Time-diary studies in the USA indicate that even when fathers are single parents, they continue to do less childcare and work more hours than single mothers because single fathers more often share their residence with family members or other adults who can share domestic responsibilities (Lee and Hofferth, 2017; Sayer *et al.*, 2004). Thus, single mothers have less support than fathers or other mothers and face more difficulties coping with the pandemic and balancing work and family.

Overall, the pandemic has increased men's domestic responsibilities, but not as much as women's, and as a result, fathers have more quality time to devote to their jobs than mothers do. Thus, relative to fathers, the pandemic has undermined mothers' productivity and performance and impeded gender equality in employment. Yet the increased childcare and other domestic activities of men could have lasting effects on the gendered distribution of labor in the home. For example, fathers in Germany, the USA, Australia, Denmark and the UK who chose to take even a parental leave of less than a month typically made increased contributions to childcare later on (Buening, 2015; Huerta *et al.*, 2013), presumably because

the domestic work they performed while on leave undermined traditional gender roles and increased their experience and comfort with parenting. These findings suggest that fathers' increased childcare during the pandemic, which has continued for longer than a month, could result in long-term increases in fathers' childcare contributions.

### Effects on women as essential workers

Most essential and care employees are women (ILO, 2018; Robertson and Gebeloff, 2020). Around the world, women make up the majority of health-care workers (Boniol *et al.*, 2019; BLS, 2020b; UN, 2020), placing them at increased risk of infection from the coronavirus. Indeed, health care workers represent about 19% of those who have been infected with the virus in the USA (CDC COVID-19 Response Team, 2020); consequently, women make up the majority of US health-care workers infected with the virus (CDC COVID-19 Response Team, 2020; UN, 2020). Globally, other essential care workers are predominantly female: Most laundry and cleaning staff, as well as administrative assistants working in hospitals and other health-care facilities, are women, as are social workers, personal care aides and cashiers, and food service workers at critical retail establishments, who, because of their close physical proximity to others, are also at increased risk of infection (ILO, 2020a).

Although men have a greater risk of dying from the disease (Global Health 50/50, 2020), research on Chinese health-care workers found that, controlling for occupation, marital status and other variables, women and men are equally likely to experience psychological effects of working with COVID patients (Wang *et al.*, 2020), including increased depression and anxiety (Xing *et al.*, 2020). A study of Italian health-care workers found higher levels of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder among women, although the researchers did not include any controls that might have accounted for the gender differences (Rossi *et al.*, 2020). In one national representative US poll, the majority of employees who continued to work outside their homes reported feeling concerned about contracting the coronavirus and also about exposing members of their household to the disease (Washington Post/Ipsos, 2020). This fear, along with shortages of protective clothing and equipment, has led front-line workers to segregate themselves from family and other members of their households (Glenza, 2020), creating additional isolation and stress. Thus, women's preponderance as health-care workers increases their risk of impaired mental health.

Another category of essential care workers are those providing teaching and mental health services. Around the world, most of these therapists, social workers and grammar, primary and secondary school teachers are women (BLS, 2020b; ILO, 2020a). So far, employees in these occupations have been protected from job loss (ILO, 2020a) and have been able to work from home. However, the rapid change from in-class to online work has created an additional set of challenges for these employees. For example, one US national representative study of teachers found that most did not have considerable experience with online teaching, which proved to be a serious obstacle to doing their job (Educators for Excellence, 2020). Complicating matters, they reported that care-giving responsibilities for children or elderly relatives made it difficult to balance family needs and work, and that they were dealing with students who were anxious or depressed, and, therefore, that they were having to spend more time reaching out to and engaging them. Mental health professionals undoubtedly face similar challenges, just as they are also dealing with new ethical concerns, such as protecting client anonymity and confidentiality while working online (Greenbaum, 2020).

Women's predominance as essential workers places them at greater risk of stress, burnout and impaired mental health. When combined with women's greater unemployment rate and increased domestic duties, it is not surprising that women report more emotional

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distress than men. In fact, based on national representative data in the USA, more women than men report feeling nervous, anxious or on edge (61 vs 49%) and down, depressed or hopeless (48 vs 41%) at least some of the time (U. S. Census, 2020). Other national representative surveys have revealed greater mental health issues among women than men in Cambodia, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand (UN Women, 2020a). For employees remaining in the workforce, particularly essential workers, the psychological challenges of COVID-19 are likely contributing to reduced productivity and impaired performance, which can reduce opportunities for future salary increases and advancement.

### Changes in telecommuting and job flexibility

Telecommuting can provide benefits to both employees and employers. The ability to work from home has been found to increase productivity (Bloom *et al.*, 2015; Choudhury *et al.*, 2020) and employee satisfaction, although it also can induce feelings of isolation and loneliness (Bloom *et al.*, 2015).

The effects of telecommuting, however, depend on the gender and parental status of employees. A survey in Sweden revealed that the presence of children increased employees' perception that their homes were a source of demands rather than a place of restoration, and this was particularly true for women; moreover, telecommuting increased men's but reduced women's perceptions that their homes were restorative (Hartig *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, in a second Swedish sample, when controlling for hours of telecommuting, women and parents of children reported more time pressure than men and nonparents, respectively (Thulin *et al.*, 2019). These surveys did not ask participants how they were spending their time or reveal why women benefited less than men when telecommuting, but given the gender gap in childcare and domestic labor it is likely that women working from home experience more time pressures and difficulty balancing family and job responsibilities.

In support of this explanation, a US quasi-experimental time-diary study revealed that telecommuting increased the amount of time that women and men spent performing childcare and housework and reduced the gender gap in childcare; but it also increased the gender gap in time spent with children, housework and work hours (Lyttelton *et al.*, 2020). These results are consistent with the findings reported earlier on the effects of the pandemic on childcare. Whether fathers are at home because of telecommuting or the pandemic, working at home increases their contributions to childcare and other domestic duties. But women continue to do more than men and more often disrupt and reduce their work hours to attend to their children, which could lower their performance and productivity relative to men.

The pandemic has dramatically increased the percentage of employees who work from home (Hickman and Saad, 2020) and may accelerate the reliance on telecommuting in the future. Still, working from home during COVID-19 is more challenging than doing so at other times. Because of the pandemic, workers may be sharing their work environments with family or roommates, may lack privacy and may be struggling to balance their private and professional lives. People feel increased anxiety about the economy, the risk of job loss and the spread of the coronavirus. Those who live alone are especially likely to feel lonely. Parents, especially mothers, have greater childcare responsibilities and these, as noted earlier, reduce work hours. Productivity is not likely to be enhanced under these conditions. Moreover, not all employees prefer working from home, even when given the choice to do so (Bloom *et al.*, 2015; Hickman and Saad, 2020), and people currently have little choice.

Assuming that telecommuting becomes more common post pandemic, what is the likely effect of this on gender equality? Time diaries document greater childcare by mothers and fathers who have flexibility and can telecommute compared with parents with less flexible



jobs (Alon *et al.*, 2020). However, fathers do not increase their childcare hours when their partners are also telecommuting. Even in homes where both parents have been telecommuting during the pandemic, it is mothers more than fathers who have reduced their work hours to accommodate increased childcare demands, increasing the gender gap in paid work hours (Collins *et al.*, 2020; Lyttelton *et al.*, 2020). This reflects differences between men and women in their use of work flexibility.

Although women are as likely as men to have flexible jobs and work from home, women more often report that they telecommute to balance work and family and to catch up on work, whereas men report that they work from home because they prefer it (BLS, 2019). In effect, flexible work arrangements can facilitate traditional gender roles and reduce women's access to high-status jobs. For example, some family friendly policies, such as parental leave and the right to part-time work, increase women's workforce participation. But they also impede women's advancement (Blau and Kahn, 2013) and reduce their pay (Flabbi and Moro, 2012) because women take advantage of them more than men do, reducing women's work experience compared with men. In the same way, if women who telecommute devote more time to family and domestic duties and work fewer hours, relative to men, then an expansion in telecommuting could increase the gender gap in pay and advancement.

Yet there is a possibility that telecommuting could have quite the opposite effect. As discussed earlier, fathers working at home, either because of the pandemic or because they telecommute, increase the time they devote to childcare (Andrew *et al.*, 2020; Carlson *et al.*, 2020; Miller, 2020), and even taking a short family leave increases fathers' childcare contributions long after the leave ends (Buening, 2015; Huerta *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, increased telecommuting may shift gender roles, so that childcare by fathers becomes more normative. If it does, this could potentially reduce the gender gap, not only in time devoted to childcare but also in taking family leaves, working part-time and taking advantage of other flexible job arrangements to accommodate family, thereby reducing gender inequality in pay and advancement.

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