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Working Paper
COVID-19, Gender and Labour

GLO Discussion Paper, No. 1012

Provided in Cooperation with:
Global Labor Organization (GLO)

Suggested Citation: Corsi, Marcella; Ilkcaracan, Ipek (2022) : COVID-19, Gender and Labour, GLO Discussion Paper, No. 1012, Global Labor Organization (GLO), Essen

This Version is available at:
<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/248563>

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COVID-19, GENDER AND LABOUR ¹

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered simultaneously a global health crisis and a global economic crisis which have further deepened existing inequalities along several dimensions, including gender. Increasing gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work has been a primary outcome of the pandemic and the associated economic crisis. Given the disproportionate gender division of labor, women were foremost in bearing the brunt of the increased demands on unpaid care work under the lockdown conditions. At the same time, women were also overrepresented in informal employment and service sectors hard-hit by the pandemic resulting in more severe job loss for female workers overall. In many labor markets, women constituted the majority of so-called essential workers, who were protected from job loss yet exposed to increased health risks and prolonged work hours under distressed work conditions. The increasing demand for household production and the unpaid work burden contributed to weakening women's labor market attachment resulting in higher declines in female labor force participation than male. The increased prevalence of teleworking under the pandemic has the potential to provide improved work-life balance conditions, yet at the risk of widening the gender inequalities in the labor market. While these outcomes point to the threat that Covid-19 poses at rolling back the gains achieved in gender equality, the experiences under the pandemic conditions have also contributed to increased awareness around the Globe of the importance of caring labor and care workers, establishing a solid basis for advocacy of gender equal care policies.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, paid and unpaid work, work-life balance, telework

JEL codes: B54, J08, J010

I. Introduction

The pandemic generated several compounding crises harming the economy and the well-being of people in addition to health. It has soon been evident that the consequences of these crises were not gender-neutral but were disproportionately attributed to women given their different positions in the economy, both market (paid) and non-market (unpaid) work as conditioned by their conventional roles as family carers (Bahn et al., 2020).

Existing gender analyses of economic crises and of health shocks pre-Covid, had already shown that a major mechanism for gendered outcomes pertains to increasing demand for care work and decreasing access to market substitutes. In the case of health crises such as HIV-AIDS or the Ebola outbreak, this is due to increasing demand for healthcare (Makina, 2009; Smith, 2019). In the case of economic crises, an indirect impact on unpaid work is triggered through several factors such as decreasing ability of households to afford market substitutes for household produced goods and services, decreased access to public provisioning of services under austerity measures as well as increasing availability of time due to increasing unemployment. As a result, health and economic

¹ A revised version of this working paper will appear as a chapter in the "COVID-19" section of the *Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics*, edited by Klaus F. Zimmermann. The authors are grateful to the responsible Section Editor, Sergio Scicchitano, for insightful comments. Usual disclaimers apply.

crises have been shown to trigger changes in time allocation by women and men and the consequent gender gaps in paid and unpaid work time. In the context of Covid-19, the increasing demand for care work has been triggered both through higher need for healthcare as well as the lockdown measures which limited access to public provisioning of services and market substitutes for household production.

Gender analyses of the impact of economic crises have also shown that the gendered outcomes on employment depend upon women's positioning in the labor market determined by the extent and nature of gender jobs segregation. Under the Covid-19 triggered economic crisis, labor demand in some conventionally female sectors such as healthcare and education remained intact, while some of the other sectors hardest hit such as hospitality and retail, or informal employment were dominated by women workers. The overall gender balance in job and earnings loss depended upon the net outcomes.

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the various channels through which the gendered economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has manifested itself through household production (unpaid work) and employment (paid work), and their mutual feed-back effects. The next section provides an overview of the recent research findings on the gendered impact of the pandemic through unpaid work with a focus on childcare, school closures and employed parents, as well as the increasing fragility of elderly under the pandemic and the changing conditions of elderly care. Section III discusses the gender trends in the impact of the recent economic crisis on employment, looking at job loss and economic vulnerability, the changing conditions of essential workers and the increasing prevalence of work from home practices.

II. Gendered economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on unpaid work

Under the lockdown measures there has been an unprecedented increase in the demand for household production and the associated input of unpaid labor, a gendered economic phenomenon. Several phenomena have affected the use of time at household level:

- closure of schools, with pupils having to bring forward school programs at home;
- suspension of non-necessary activities, affecting formal and informal sectors;
- introduction of remote work (so called 'smart working') where it was possible;
- introduction of various limitations to people mobility.

The unavailability of paid services (such as laundries, restaurants, baby-sitters, carers, etc.) as well as the impossibility to benefit from informal care (e.g., by grandparents) contributed to create more unpaid work within the households during the pandemic. This "extra" work fell disproportionately onto women, exacerbating the already existing inequalities in the gender division of unpaid work.

Andrew et al. (2020) shows, by using survey data collected in the UK, that during the pandemic women bore the brunt of the increased time needed for household chores and childcare. Findings from the study highlight that mothers, who stopped working in the labor market, did far more domestic work than fathers in the equivalent situation. Similar pandemic time-use surveys provide supporting results (see for example Farre, et.al. 2020 for Spain; Ilkkaracan and Memiş 2021 for Turkey). These results seem to suggest that asymmetries in the gender allocation of the extra-amount of domestic work created by the pandemic cannot be explained as a sole effect of gender differences in employment and earnings, but mostly depend on social norms regulating gender roles as well as expectations on motherhood.

In the literature, even before the pandemic, it was observed that women with young children reported more fragmented working time, reduced ability to complete a task and, thus, lower productivity (Adams, 2020). Women's work-life balance differs according to whether children are in early childhood, middle childhood, or the early teen years. Research using the Australian Time Use Survey (Craig and Sawrikar, 2009) found that the responsibility for childcare falls more on women than on men, even if, as the age of children increases, the division of labor is more equal between the partners, and, with less pressing domestic burdens, mothers feel less stressed. Nonetheless, this is not the result of the redistribution of work within the couple but the effect of women recalibrating their commitments to paid and unpaid work (at home).

These are recurring results in the literature, that has demonstrated parenting time to be considerably gendered virtually everywhere (Craig, 2006; Craig and Powell, 2011). The gendered nature of parenting time is reflected also in the subjective experience of mothers' and fathers' time with children. Despite childcare is usually reported as a positive experience by both parents, time use literature has demonstrated fathers to enjoy childcare time more than mothers (Musick et al., 2016). Furthermore, among the different type of childcare activities performed, routine care is likely to bring less enjoyment to parents compared to recreational ones (Mc Donnell et al., 2019).

Paternity and parental leaves may play a major role in the way fathers perceive their care responsibilities. Fathers' satisfaction with their work-family balance increases with their participation in childcare and the support that they receive by their workplace to access family-friendly work policies (Craig and Sawrikar, 2009), and, even if the decision whether to use or not the paternity leave is seen by most fathers as an individual decision rather than a duty, the longer is the leave the likelier fathers will consider it as a duty within their families (Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). In a similar vein, Ilkcaracan and Memiş (2021) find that fathers who have reverted to work from home and reduced paid work hours under the pandemic lockdown conditions (equivalent to increased access to time under paternity and parental leave) demonstrate higher propensity to contribute to unpaid work in the domestic sphere than men who continued their employment uninterrupted at the workplace.

Overall impact on unpaid care and the living conditions of working parents

Several studies have analyzed the impact on the burden of unpaid care around the world. In the European Union, data provided by the Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* electronic survey in two waves (April and July 2020), highlight the gendered impact of the pandemic on unpaid care: the data show that on average in the EU-27, the pandemic has increased the unpaid care activities of both women and men, although women continue to bear the greatest unpaid care burden. The largest increase in unpaid care time for men was in cooking and housework, rising to an average of 12.1 hours per week during the first wave of the pandemic, compared with 6.8 hours in 2016.

Factors contributing to the increase in unpaid caregiving include the decline in informal support for grandparents due to mobility restrictions and social distance, particularly in member states that rely heavily on grandparents for childcare. Similarly, COVID-19 restrictions affected workers' ability to access personal care and contracted domestic workers, with large numbers of migrant domestic and care workers (especially women) returning to their home countries before the borders closed.

National research shows similar trends. In several countries, data show that during the closure periods, fathers working at home generally tended to share the caregiving workload more than before, especially in households where only the father stopped working while the mother held essential jobs (Andrew et al., 2020, Ilkharacan and Memiş, 2021; Sevilla and Smith, 2020). In Germany, men with low and medium levels of education spent more time with their children than before the crisis began (Kreyenfeld et al., 2020). Similarly, in Italy, men whose partners remained in their usual jobs spent more time on household tasks than before the pandemic (Del Boca et al., 2020).

It is unclear whether men's increased participation in childcare and domestic work leads to lasting changes in family arrangements and a redistribution of care. Andrew et al. (2020) suggest that the shock of the freezing of family dynamics may have initiated new processes, giving rise to new arrangements, gender roles, and attitudes. While historical events may be behind these changes, other authors urge caution, as the results are uncertain (Boll and Schüller, 2020). The increased assumption of caregiving tasks by fathers may continue to reflect a gender specialization in unpaid care work. According to Farré et al. (2020), during the first closure, the increase in fathers' share of care work was largely attributed to increased time spent running errands, which was the only permissible reason for leaving the home during the closure.

School closures increased unpaid work

The closure of schools and child care during the COVID-19 crisis increased the burden of child care and created new unpaid work (e.g., homeschooling), particularly for workers. Before the pandemic, female employees with childcare responsibilities (in the EU27 and the UK) spent about 23 hours per week on childcare, compared with 19 hours per week for men (EIGE, 2021b).

According to the second wave of Eurofound's COVID-19 electronic survey (July 2020), employed women with children under 12 spent about 54 hours per week on childcare, compared with 32 hours per week for employed men (Eurofound, 2020a). National data show similar results. During the spring 2020 block, women with young children (0-5 years) faced the greatest challenges in balancing work and family; in Italy (Del Boca et al., 2020), Spain (Farré et al., 2020), and the United Kingdom (Collins et al., 2020), many changed their work schedules to meet these increased demands.

In the United States, panel data from the US Current Population Survey allow us to examine changes in mothers' and fathers' paid work hours from February to April 2020, the period before and during the widespread COVID-19 epidemic in the United States. The EIGE (2021b) analysis shows that mothers of young children reduced their paid work hours four to five times more than fathers. As a result, the gender gap in paid work time increased by 20 to 50 percent. These findings highlight another negative consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the challenges it poses to women paid and unpaid work hours, and recording the majority of labor market exits among women and workers with low education levels. Similarly, in France, a survey conducted during the hardest phase of the spring 2020 lockout found that one in three women left their jobs to care for children and unpaid domestic work, compared to one in four men (Lambert et al., 2020).

Single mothers are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of school closures and disruption of access to childcare due to reduced financial resources and the inability to share childcare demands (Alon et al., 2020). Low-wage employed women with children were less likely

than higher-wage women to use childcare and were more likely to rely on relatives and other less formal childcare arrangements (EIGE, 2021a). The pressure to meet increased care work during the COVID-19 epidemic by reducing employment is likely to be severe for single mothers with children (Blasko et al., 2020).

Increased burden of care for elderly and disabled women

The closure of day care services for people with disabilities and mobility restrictions for irregularly employed caregivers (primarily migrant women) have increased the burden on home-based caregivers. Workers in critical occupations, especially women caring for elderly parents and people with disabilities, face additional challenges.

According to Eurofound data, women spent an average of 4.5 hours per week caring for elderly or disabled family members in the first block period, compared with 2.8 hours for men. The 2016 QLHS showed that women previously spent an average of 3.2 hours per week providing such care, compared with 1.8 hours for men.

Even before the pandemic, about 29% of EU households reported an unmet need for professional home care services, with large differences across countries (from 12% in Sweden to more than 60% in Greece and Portugal). Inadequate care infrastructure pushes women to fill the care gap (Folbre and Bittman, 2004; Saraceno, 2008; Henz, 2009, 2010; Luppi and Nazio, 2019). In 2018, more than 10 million workers in the EU-28 (6 million of whom were women) were responsible for family members in need of care (aged 15 years and older), representing 6 percent of employed women and 4 percent of employed men (EIGE, 2021a). In many Member States, the lack of availability and/or high costs of formal long-term care services (at home or in institutions) have led to an increasing role for home-based workers, often irregularly employed migrant women who provide long-term care at home (Spasova et al., 2018; Eurofound, 2020b).

Deterioration in work-family balance

Prior to the pandemic, the lack of accessible, affordable, and good quality care services, as well as the disproportionate amount of time spent on care activities, made it difficult for women to balance work and family life (European Commission, 2018; EIGE, 2021a). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated this situation. Eurofound's COVID-19 e-survey revealed an overall deterioration in the work-life balance of EU workers during the first wave of the pandemic, compared to the situation described in Eurofound's 2015 European Working Conditions Survey.

In the context of the pandemic, work-life balance was more difficult for women than for men, especially with the reopening of economic activities in June/July 2020. Across the EU-27, employed women are more likely than employed men to have difficulty concentrating on work (8% of women and less than 5% of men) or spending the time needed for work (6.5% of women and 3% of men). Similarly, work-related tasks during the pandemic had a more negative impact on domestic work for women than for men. Nearly one in three women (31%) reported feeling too tired after work to do some of the necessary household chores, compared with about 26% of men. Twenty-one percent of both women and men responded that their work prevented them from spending as much time as they wanted with their families, an increase of 10 percentage points since 2015.

An important aspect of work-life balance conditions during the pandemic concerns the increasing prevalence of telecommuting or work-from-home (WFH) practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, WFH promoted continuity of work and activity and a relative shift in the division of caregiving tasks, particularly in households where women continued to work as usual (e.g., in essential jobs) and partners were required to contribute more to caregiving tasks than in the past (ILO, 2020a; OECD, 2020). However, the widespread adoption of telecommuting has coincided with an increase in unpaid work for women, primarily due to school closures and the shift to online education.

Under normal circumstances, the main benefits of WFH are reduced commuting time and improved work-life balance (ILO, 2020b). It offers the possibility of more flexible work schedules for workers with children. Because caregiving and domestic responsibilities are not equally distributed, women tend to value flexible work schedules and limited commuting time more than men (Mas and Pallais, 2017; Le Barbanchon et al., 2021), and may be more positively affected by the opportunity to work from home. Before the pandemic, for example, women working from home reported slightly better work-life balance scores than men (Eurofound, 2017). However, this positive effect may be offset by the risk of reinforcing gender roles, making telecommuting a highly feminized alternative to office work.

Greater flexibility in work schedules may encourage women with children to work more and men with children to take on family responsibilities. For example, in Germany, working from home was found to reduce the gender gap in work hours and monthly earnings to some extent, primarily because women with children who teleworked were able to increase their work hours more than those who did not have the option to telework (Arntz et al., 2020). However, the overall effect of telecommuting on gender pay gaps is uncertain and depends, among other things, not only on potential changes for women, but also on potential changes for men. For example, home-based telecommuting arrangements have been found to be related to increases in the gender pay gap in Italy (Bonacini et al., 2021) and Austria (Beno, 2019).

However, despite the benefits of WHF in terms of reconciling paid and unpaid work, women's greater propensity to adopt telecommuting compared to men also implies disadvantages in terms of their career prospects and poses a threat of occupational gender segregation and a deepening gender pay gap. These implications of WHF for gender differences in the labor market are discussed in the following section on the gender impact of the employment pandemic.

III. Gendered economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment and labor markets

The gendered effects of the pandemic on employment and labor markets are transmitted through a variety of channels. An immediate gendered effect has been mitigated through a new category of workers that emerged with the Covid-19 pandemic called “essential workers,” of which women constituted a substantial share in many countries around the world. The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, the consequent contraction in employment, increasing unemployment and declining labor force participation played themselves out as gendered phenomena, but beyond gender also with intersectional inequalities in terms of class, work status such as informality, migrant status, race, ethnic and other origin. An emerging phenomenon in the labor market under the pandemic has been work from home practices, with strong gender implications. This section explores the gendered effects culminating through these different mechanisms and summarizes the findings of emerging research.

Essential workers

Essential workers, a new categorization of workers under the pandemic, constitute a wide range of occupations from high-skilled professionals to low skilled service workers, employed primarily in health care and social care, food and agriculture, retail services for necessity goods such as food, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, government and community-based services such as garbage disposal, cleaning services and public transport. Women are typically overrepresented in these sectors, particularly in healthcare and social care, where globally over 70 percent of employment is female (ILO 2020b). The unprecedented increase in the number of ill people in need of care in health and long-term care institutions led to a similarly unprecedented increase in demand for health and social care workers. As women constituted a majority of these essential workers in many countries around the World, it became increasingly evident under the pandemic that their services were “*not only necessary to sustain life and health but also to help maintain the basics of everyday existence.*” (Kabeer et al., 2021) Consequently, a positive outcome of the pandemic was to draw attention to the importance of some of these typically ‘female’ occupations, which are often undervalued.

Women’s higher representation amongst the essential workers also meant that they were relatively protected from the risk of unemployment as compared to those who were in the contracting sectors under lockdown measures such as tourism, many sub-sectors of manufacturing and transport. Nevertheless, essential workers were exposed to higher health risks (the risk of contracting Covid), faced longer work shifts and a more straining work environment under increased demand for their services. Despite the indispensable content of their services and the straining work conditions, however, the frontline care workers are typically underpaid given the overall devaluation of caring labor (Folbre et al., 2021). Kabeer et al., (2021) point attention to how these care penalties carry implications for the future supply of care services and the prospects of a care-led recovery from the crisis.

Going down the chain of relations around care work, the ability of essential workers to remain productive at the workplace despite lockdown measures that facilitated the increase in demand for unpaid care at home such as school closures (as discussed in the previous section) was often due to support by the unpaid work of other women in the household such as grandmothers (Cantillon et al., 2021).

Employment loss and economic vulnerability

Employment data from around the World suggests that women’s job loss under the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, has been worse than that for men in relative terms (ILO 2021): globally from 2019 to 2020, the absolute magnitude of the job loss was worse for men than women (a loss of 60 million male jobs versus 54 million female jobs), yet women’s employment has declined by a greater percentage than men’s (4.2 per cent decline in women’s employment versus 3 per cent for men). This gender difference in the relative decline in employment comes against a background of an already substantial global gender gap in employment rates, deepening the gender inequalities further. ILO (2021) predicts that there will be 13 million fewer women in employment in 2021 compared to 2019, while men’s employment is expected to recover to 2019 levels. The projected

growth of jobs for women in 2021 is higher than the projected growth for men, still it will be insufficient to bring women back to pre-pandemic employment levels.²

Underlying women's disproportionate job and income losses is in part the pre-existing gender jobs segregation where women are over-represented in some of the worst affected sectors, such as accommodation and hospitality, food services, business services, wholesale and retail trade and some labor-intensive manufacturing.³ This is despite women's overrepresentation amongst essential workers who, as mentioned above, were relatively protected from employment contraction. Hence women's concentration in the harder-hit sectors seems to have dominated the shielding effect of women's overrepresentation amongst essential workers in most countries. Other studies also indicate that gender discrimination may have been another facilitator of women's greater job loss. In South Korea, Ham (2021) finds that only half of the gender differential in employment loss can be explained by gender jobs segregation, suggesting the unexplained gap may reflect employer discrimination and conventional perceptions of women's and men's primary roles as carers and breadwinners respectively.

The gendered effects of the pandemic, however, vary by region and country. Women's job losses have been particularly severe in the Americas and Arab States (9.4 and 4.1 percent respectively), while Africa and Europe and Central Asia the decline was lower (1.9 and 2.5 percent respectively) (ILO 2021). There is also considerable variation across countries within regions. For example, while Arab states register one of the higher employment losses for women and relatively higher than men's for the region as a whole, in Jordan the decline in the employment rate was lower for women than for men, as women were relatively shielded from the contraction due to their overrepresentation amongst essential workers and public employment. In a similar vein, in India women's employment loss was lower than that of men, due to their higher propensity to be self-employed (Desai et al., 2021).

Beyond employment losses, the changes in other indicators of labor market vulnerability such as unemployment or exclusion from the labor force (labor market inactive status) have also been differentiated along gender lines. Men's job loss has been more visible in unemployment statistics, while women's job loss has been reflected in increasing inactivity rates and declining labor force participation rates. This was in part also due to the increasing unpaid work burden of women under the pandemic lockdown measures weakening women's labor market attachment (Ilkcaracan and Bayar 2020; Ilkcaracan and Memiş 2021).

Intersecting inequalities

The impact of COVID-19 on women's labor market experiences has also prevailed intersecting inequalities by class, race, ethnicity, migrant status, and other origin. Low skilled women, such as domestic workers, who are more likely to be in informal employment were unable to benefit from protective measures both in health and employment such as vaccinations, healthcare services, sick leave, paid or unpaid temporary layoffs or unemployment insurance (Rao et al., 2021; Seck et al., 2021). Similarly, migrant workers, who are again more likely to be employed on temporary, informal contracts were more vulnerable to job loss, excluded from benefits and as a further

² ILO (2021) reports that only 43.2 per cent of the world's working-age women will be employed in 2021, compared to 68.6 per cent of working-age men.

³ Globally, while women account for 39 percent of the workforce, their share in hardest hit sectors such as hotel and food services (54 percent) and in arts, entertainment, and other services (61 percent) is higher (ILO 2021).

disadvantage suffered travel bans (Kabeer et al., 2021). Research job losses were often worse for women of color (Frye 2020 for the US; Casale and Posel 2020 for S. Africa), unemployment rates were higher for Hispanic and Black women in the US (Holder et al., 2021).

Implications of working from home for gender inequalities in the labor market

The work from home (WFH) practice has become increasingly widespread under the pandemic. Given the uncertainties about the containment of the pandemic, WFH is being adopted as the new normal by an increasing number of employers in the sectors that are conducive to home-based work. While the practice has contributed significantly to flattening out the curve of infections while enabling continuation of employment in jobs that are less dependent on contact, it carries significant gender ramifications.

On the positive side, as already discussed in the previous section, WFH enables possibilities for reconciliation of paid and domestic unpaid work, strengthening the labor market attachment of workers with care responsibilities, particularly women. Yet research findings regarding the impact of WFH practices on gender gaps in unpaid work is inconclusive. Sevilla and Smith (2020) show that in the UK context, women switching to work from home under the pandemic have absorbed a larger share of the increasing unpaid work burden than men. Yet there is also evidence that WFH practices have instigated a relatively larger increase in men's unpaid work time than their male counterparts who continued their jobs at the workplace (Ilkkaracan and Memiş 2021 for Turkey; Craig and Churchill for Australia).

On the negative side, WFH has the potential to deepen gender jobs segregation and the consequent gender earnings due to two factors: women's greater propensity to opt out for WFH due to their imposed roles as carers and the more limited career progress possibilities in WFH jobs. When care responsibilities are not shared equally, the productivity of teleworking women – especially those with children – may be at risk, because of constant interruptions, the additional workload and the mental health burden of working from home (Blasko et al., 2020). Women with small children (aged 1–5 years) have indicated that they experience higher reductions in working hours than men, as children tend to disrupt mothers more than fathers: during the lockdown periods, mothers reported having been interrupted 50% more often than fathers (Andrew et al., 2020). This reflects the impact of gender stereotypes about women's and men's roles in child-rearing. If no improvements occur, even with teleworking, these factors may affect women's employment disproportionately, potentially exposing them to higher job insecurity in the long term (Collins et al., 2020).

Although teleworking provides the flexibility to combine work and life duties, the increased burden in terms of unpaid care and domestic work, which mostly falls on women, and women's greater isolation and invisibility compared with male colleagues working in the workplace, may have negative effects on women's career progression. A recent study of employees at a US technology services company found that extensive telecommuting is associated with fewer promotions and lower pay growth (Golden and Eddleston, 2020). Telework may particularly affect the salaries and career progression of women with children. Under the structural pressure of managing care as a priority over paid work, more women than men are put into a situation of accepting a lower salary in return for working from home (Mas and Pallais, 2017). This comes not only with the associated lower employment opportunities, but also with reduced access to social protection (Rubery and Tavora, 2020).

Telework can increase work intensity. The literature on the use of ICT within and outside employers' premises indicates that, while ICT enables greater autonomy, it also leads to higher levels of work intensity (Eurofound, 2019), with potential risks of workaholism, burnout syndrome and a sense of loneliness.⁴ The increase in work intensity includes a risk of blurring boundaries between paid work and private life (Eurofound, 2017). For this reason, policymakers and social partners are paying increased attention to the 'right to disconnect' and to the avoidance of invasive management surveillance and monitoring practices.

Overall, the preliminary evidence shows that COVID-19-related stress may affect the mental well-being of women more than men, especially women with young children. According to the first wave of the Eurofound COVID-19 e-survey (April 2020), women with children aged 11 or younger were more likely than men to feel tense (23 % versus 19 %), lonely (14 % versus 6 %) and/or depressed (14 % versus 9 %). The pattern also holds true for women and men with children aged 12–17, although the differences are narrower.

Independent of the context of the pandemic, findings of research on the relation between WFH and the gender wage gap are inconclusive. A number of studies find a positive correlation between WFH and the gender wage gap (Smithson et.al. 2004 for the UK; Pabilona and Vernon 2020 and Weedon 2005 for the US). Others show or argue that WFH has the potential to reduce the gender wage gap by enabling longer paid work time by women (Arntz et al., 2020).

In the context of the pandemic, research points to evidence that women workers suffer a wage penalty for WFH, while men workers are able to capture the benefits of WFH for advancing earnings. Bonacini et.al. (2021) explores the potential consequences of a long-lasting increase in WFH feasibility in Italy in terms of inequalities in distribution of labor earnings. They find that an increase in WFH feasibility would be associated with an increase in average labor income, but such an increase is likely to be distributed unequally amongst employees, favoring male, older, high-educated, and high-paid employees. The increasing prevalence of WFH practices in the post-pandemic era may risk deepening pre-existing gender gaps in the labor market unless it is adequately regulated.

The importance of flexible work schedules

Flexible work arrangements allow workers to decide for themselves how and where they want to divide their working time. Empirical studies in the field of organizational research and work-life balance (Lomazzi et al., 2018; van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2018) provide surprisingly little evidence that they reduce work-family conflict.

EIGE (2021b) shows that flexible work schedules support and promote gender equality more than telework alone. It allows workers to organize their work time around the needs of the "family rush hour" when many demands overlap (Craig and Churchill, 2021). Unlike telecommuting, this option maintains the physical separation between work and private life, making it easier for working parents to manage their tasks. While flexible work can, to some

⁴ Eurofound (2020b) provides a list of factors identified by previous research (Green, 2006; Grant et al., 2013) as contributing to the increased intensity of telework / ICT mobile work: work process monitoring; permanent connectivity; interruptions; 'social exchange' between employers and employees; corporate or managerial culture, personal ethics or ambition; information overload; and email overload.

extent, help reconcile work and caregiving activities, it can also reinforce the traditional division of caregiving tasks within the family (Chung and van der Lippe, 2018; EIGE, 2020).

So far, few national studies have examined the impact of telework on work-life balance during a flexible schedule. Studies have been conducted in Australia (Craig and Churchill, 2021), the United Kingdom (Andrew et al., 2020), and the United States (Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Power, 2020), both during the recession and during the subsequent recovery.

Beyond the immediate crisis, there are countervailing forces that may end up favoring gender equality in the labor market. First, companies are rapidly introducing flexible work arrangements, which are likely to continue. Second, there are also many parents (including fathers) who now must assume primary responsibility for childcare, which may erode social norms that currently lead to an unbalanced division of labor within the household. Consequently, many have changed their work schedule to meet these increased demands.

Alon et al. (2020) notes that increased use of telework without improved care services (e.g., child-care, and long-term care services) could increase work and care burdens, especially for women. Finally, access to and institutional support for parental and other family-related leave for men should be promoted to reduce the current gender gap and the expectations and pressures on women.

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 crisis poses a serious risk of rolling back decades of gains achieved in gender equality in labor market participation, particularly if activity is further hampered in sectors overrepresented by women. While the full economic, employment and social consequences of the pandemic are still unknown, emerging evidence suggest significant job losses in service and industrial sectors, as well as contact sectors including retail, leisure and personal services, which are female-dominated; whereas conversely other sectors have preserved employment security despite the crisis, including the public, medical and ICT sectors (Eurofound and European Commission Joint Research Centre 2021).

At the same time, the pandemic has shown to trigger changes in time allocation by women and men and the consequent gender gaps in paid and unpaid work time. In the context of Covid-19, the increasing demand for care work has been triggered both through higher need for healthcare as well as the lockdown measures which limited access to public provisioning of services and market substitutes for household production.

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the various channels through which the gendered economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has manifested itself through household production (unpaid work) and employment (paid work), and their mutual feed-back effects. Concerning the impact on unpaid work, recent research focuses on the effects on childcare of school closures for employed parents, as well as on the increasing fragility of elderly under the pandemic and the changing conditions of elderly care. Looking at the gender trends in the impact of the recent economic crisis on employment, much attention is devoted on job loss and economic vulnerability, as well as on the changing conditions of essential workers and the increasing prevalence of work from home practices.

Although the pandemic has demonstrated to employers that telework is possible (and affordable) and could be scaled up in the future, the impact on gender equality is unclear if flextime is not

offered alongside workplace flexibility. Indeed, flexible work schedules support and promote gender equality more than telework alone. It allows workers to organize their work time around the needs of the household and maintains the physical separation between work and private life, making it easier for working parents to manage their tasks.

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