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**Article**

## No lasting increase in the gender care gap in Germany after the coronavirus pandemic

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AT A GLANCE

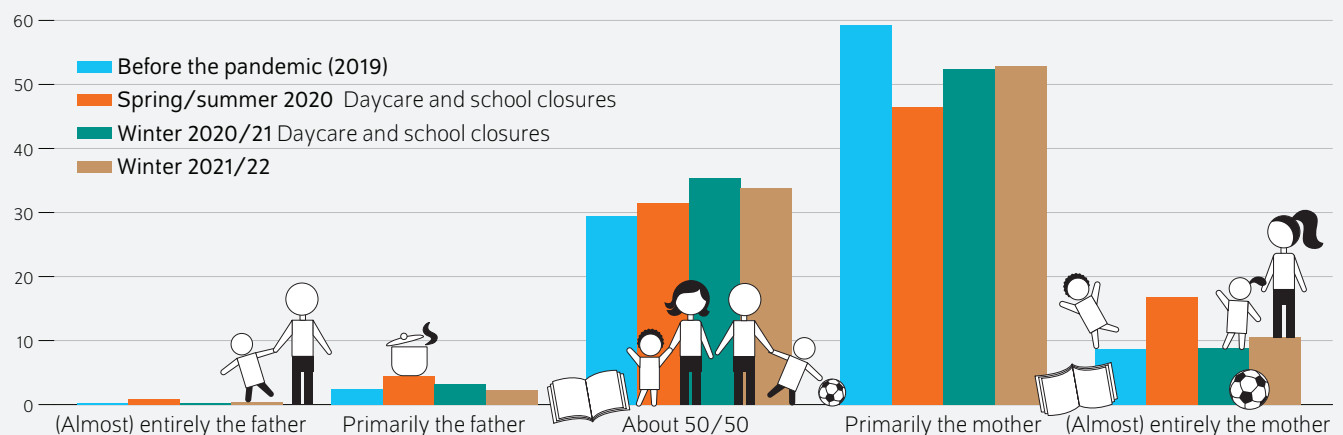
## No lasting increase in the gender care gap in Germany after the coronavirus pandemic

By Jonas Jessen, Lavinia Kinne, and Katharina Wrohlich

- Using the German family panel pairfam, this study examines how couples divided care work during and around the coronavirus pandemic
- Many feared that there would be a return to traditional genders roles due to the pandemic; at first, mothers more often (almost) entirely took care of children and the household
- However, new data show that the gender care gap has now returned to its pre-pandemic level
- Yet differences in the division of care work in Germany remain high, also in an international comparison
- Incentives for couples to divide work more equally should be strengthened, e.g., through more partner months during parental allowance and via reforming *Ehegattensplitting* and minijobs

### During the coronavirus pandemic, childcare was more often (almost) entirely performed by mothers, but only temporarily

Share of couples with a child aged 14 or under in percent



Source: Authors' calculations based on the family panel pairfam.

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### FROM THE AUTHORS

*“Labor market and care work inequalities influence each other. Therefore, to reduce the gender care gap, we must also combat labor market inequalities. Parental leave is perhaps the area with the biggest room for improvement. Expanding the number of partner months could make a difference, but reforming Ehegattensplitting is also necessary.”*

— Jonas Jessen —

### MEDIA



Audio Interview with Jonas Jessen (in German)  
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# No lasting increase in the gender care gap in Germany after the coronavirus pandemic

By Jonas Jessen, Lavinia Kinne, and Katharina Wrohlich

## ABSTRACT

The gender care gap, i.e., the difference between the amount of unpaid care work—such as childcare and housework—performed between men and women is comparatively high in Germany: Women take on much more unpaid care work than men. This gap increases consistently when starting a family. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, many feared that the gender care gap may grow even larger. In fact, empirical analyses show that gender differences in care work did increase in young families at the beginning of the pandemic, as primarily women took on the extra childcare work brought on by closures of daycare facilities and schools. However, using data from the family panel pairfam, this Weekly Report shows that the gender care gap has since returned to its—albeit still high—pre-pandemic level. If policymakers want to effectively combat gender inequalities on the labor market, they should focus more on the unequal division of care work and dismantle existing barriers preventing a more equal division. This could be done by, for example, increasing the period of parental leave earmarked to fathers, and reforming minijobs and Ehegattensplitting, i.e., the joint taxation of married couples with full income splitting.

International Women's Day on March 8 is drawing increased attention to numerous inequalities between women and men. In particular, the gender pay gap, which was 18 percent<sup>1</sup> for the fourth time in a row in 2023 according to calculations by the Federal Statistical Office, is moving into the center of the public debate—not least thanks to the Equal Pay Day campaign, which falls on March 6 in Germany this year.<sup>2</sup>

The difference in unpaid care work between women and men, known as the gender care gap, is closely related to the gender pay gap. Care work includes childcare, housework (cooking, cleaning, washing), repairs, and informal care of relatives.<sup>3</sup> Countless studies over the years have investigated the gender care gap.<sup>4</sup> Recently, the Federal Statistical Office published data on the gender care gap in Germany mounting to about 44 percent.<sup>5</sup>

## Considerable increase in gender care gap after becoming a parent

Like the gender pay gap, the gender care gap is not the same across all age groups and increases from age 30 in particular. For employed individuals aged 35 to 39, the gender care gap is over 100 percent. This means that women in this age

<sup>1</sup> The gender pay gap measures the percentage difference between the average gross hourly wages of men and women compared to the average gross hourly wages of men. For more information, see the entry on the gender care gap in the DIW Berlin Glossary (in German; available online). For the current gender pay gap, see Statistisches Bundesamt, "Gender Pay Gap 2023: Frauen verdienen pro Stunde 18 Prozent weniger als Männer," press release no. 027 from January 18, 2024 (in German; available online. Accessed on February 16, 2024. This applies to all other online sources in this report unless stated otherwise).

<sup>2</sup> Equal Pay Day began in the United States and was observed for the first time in Germany in 2007. It represents the day each year until which women essentially work unpaid. In 2024, Equal Pay Day is on March 6 (18 percent of 366 days is 66 days). For more information, see the Equal Pay Day website (available online).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see the entry on the gender care gap in the DIW Berlin Glossary (in German; available online).

<sup>4</sup> Nina Klünder, *Differenzierte Ermittlung des Gender Care Gap auf Basis der repräsentativen Zeitverwendungsdaten 2012/13* (Berlin: Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik e.V., 2017) (in German; available online); and Claire Samtleben, "Also on Sundays, Women Perform Most of the Housework and Child Care," *DIW Weekly Report* no. 10 (2019): 86-92 (available online).

<sup>5</sup> Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), "Statistisches Bundesamt veröffentlicht neue Zahlen zum Gender Care Gap," latest news, February 28, 2024, (available online).

group take on twice as much unpaid care work as men.<sup>6</sup> How the gender care gap develops over the life course is closely related to having children, which not only leads to a large increase in care work overall but also to a considerable increase in the unequal division of care work.

An evaluation of data from the family panel pairfam shows the relationship between the birth of the first child and an increase in the gender care gap (Box 1). When, for example, considering the division of housework (i.e., cooking, cleaning, and washing) as part of unpaid care work before and after the birth of a child, there is a sharp decline in the share of couples who divide housework almost equally (“about 50/50”). Just under half of couples divide housework roughly equally before the birth of the first child, but this share is up to 27 percentage points lower in the years following the birth of the child (Figure 1, right-hand side). In contrast, the share of couples in which “primarily the mother” or “(almost) entirely the mother” handles the housework increases significantly (by ten and 21 percentage points, respectively).

The share of couples indicating that the mother primarily or (almost) entirely handles childcare is also significantly higher than the share of couples who divide childcare more equally (Figure 1, left-hand side). Only a few couples indicated that the father takes on a larger share of unpaid care work compared to the mother, both before and after the birth of the first child.

### Even more unequal division of care work during the first months of the pandemic

In March 2020, daycare facilities and schools in Germany were closed on short notice to combat the spread of the coronavirus. Parents had to make up for the lack of schooling and childcare options at home to a large extent. At the time, many feared that mothers would primarily take on the majority of the additional educational and childcare tasks, which would further increase the already large gender care gap in Germany.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, some pointed out the possibility that the lack of childcare options could increase fathers’ participation in childcare and thus bring about a change in social norms in the medium term.<sup>8</sup>

Countless empirical studies have examined the division of unpaid care work during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic. Studies on Germany using various surveys from the first weeks and months of the pandemic came to the same conclusion: Mothers took on the majority of the

additional care work.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, the data shows that fathers also spent more time on childcare than before the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

A study from spring and summer 2020 evaluated pairfam data on how couples with at least one child aged 14 or younger divide housework and childcare duties and also concluded that this division was somewhat more unequal than before the pandemic. While the share of couples dividing childcare and housework equally remained nearly the same, the share of couples who indicated that the mother performed (almost) all of these tasks increased. The share of couples in which these tasks were “primarily” performed by the mother decreased accordingly.<sup>11</sup> Studies on other countries came to similar results (Box 2).

### Unequal division of care work declined to pre-pandemic level within one year

Empirical studies based on data from winter 2020/2021, nearly a year into the pandemic, concluded that couples were splitting unpaid care work essentially the same as they did before the pandemic (in 2019) (Figure 2).<sup>12</sup> The larger share of couples in which the mother “(almost) entirely” took over childcare and housework in the first lockdown in 2020 was no longer observed in winter 2020/2021.

### Division of care work has not changed two years following the start of the pandemic

Pairfam data is now available for the second year following the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. These data include very detailed information on the division of housework and childcare between mothers and fathers. They are available for the time before the pandemic (2019) and can be compared with three periods during and after the pandemic (spring and summer 2020, winter 2020/2021, and winter 2021/2022). While many families were still affected by pandemic containment measures such as daycare and school closures in summer 2020 and winter 2020/2021, this was no longer the case in winter 2021/2022.<sup>13</sup> The analyses

<sup>6</sup> Clara Schäper, Annekatrin Schrenker, and Katharina Wrohlich, “Gender Care Gap and Gender Pay Gap Increase Substantially until Middle Age,” *DIW Weekly Report* no. 9 (2023): 99–105 (available online).

<sup>7</sup> A return to traditional gender roles is often discussed in this context. Cf. for example Jutta Allmendinger, “Zurück in alte Rollen. Corona bedroht die Geschlechtergerechtigkeit,” *WZB-Mitteilungen* no. 168 (2020) (in German).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for example Titan Alon et al., “The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality,” *NBER Working Paper* 26947 (2020); as well as Claudia Hupkau and Barbara Petrongolo, “Work, Care and Gender during the COVID-19 Crisis,” *Fiscal Studies* 41, no. 3 (2020): 623–651.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sabine Zinn, Michaela Kreyenfeld, and Michael Bayer, “Kinderbetreuung in Corona-Zeiten: Mütter tragen die Hauptlast, aber Väter holen auf,” *DIW aktuell* no. 51 (2020) (in German; available online); Gundula Zoch, Ann-Christin Bächmann, and Basha Vicari, “Kinderbetreuung in der Corona-Krise: Wer betreut, wenn Schulen und Kitas schließen?” *NEPS Corona & Bildung* no. 3 (2020) (in German); Katja Möhring et al., *Die Mannheimer Corona-Studie: Schwerpunktbericht zu Erwerbstätigkeit und Kinderbetreuung* (2020) (in German; available online).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Zinn et al., “Kinderbetreuung in Corona-Zeiten.”

<sup>11</sup> Jonas Jessen, C. Katharina Spieß and Katharina Wrohlich, “Sorgearbeit während der Corona-Pandemie: Mütter übernehmen größeren Anteil – Vor allem bei schon zuvor ungleicher Aufteilung,” *DIW Wochenbericht* no. 9, 131–139 (in German; available online).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. for example Jonas Jessen et al., “The gender division of unpaid care work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany,” *German Economic Review* 23, no. 4 (2022): 641–667; as well as Christina Boll, Dana Müller, and Simone Schüller, “Neither backlash nor convergence: dynamics of intra-couple childcare division during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany,” *Journal for Labour Market Research* 57, no. 27 (2023) (available online).

<sup>13</sup> For a timeline of all containment measures, see Sachverständigenausschuss nach § 5 Absatz 9 Infektionsschutzgesetz, *Evaluation der Rechtsgrundlagen und Maßnahmen der Pandemiepolitik* (2022) (in German; available online).

Figure 1

Division of unpaid care work between couples before and after the birth of the first child



Note: The shaded areas around the lines each indicate a 95 percent confidence band. In 95 percent of cases, the actual value is within this band. Accordingly, the probability of error is five percent. The smaller the interval, the more exact the estimated effect. The dashed blue line under housework shows the value two years before the birth of the first child, which serves as a reference point in the regressions. The negative numbers on the x axis are the number of years before the birth of the first child.

Source: Authors' calculations based on the family panel pairfam.

The gender care gap increases significantly with the birth of the first child.

focus on couples living together with at least one child below the age of 14.

In 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic, the majority (59 percent) of respondents indicated that childcare was provided primarily by the mother. In around 30 percent of cases, childcare was divided evenly. Less than nine percent of respondents indicated that the mother was (almost) entirely responsible for childcare. In fewer than three percent of all households in 2019 the father was (almost) entirely or primarily providing childcare. Very similar patterns were found for housework.

In comparison, the division of childcare and housework in early summer 2020, i.e., during the first survey after the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, was more unequal. Particularly noticeable is the decline in the share of couples in which the mother was “primarily” responsible for childcare and housework. In contrast, the share of couples in which the mother took on childcare and housework “(almost) entirely” increased by almost the same extent (Figure 2). A detailed analysis of the changes in how couples divide care work shows that some couples in which the mother was primarily responsible for these duties before the pandemic also had a more equal division during the first lockdown (Figure 3). However, some couples who initially had a more equal division switched to a more unequal division in spring/summer 2020 in which primarily the mother took on childcare and housework.

Nine months later, in winter 2020/2021, the share of couples in which the mother took care of childcare and housework “(almost) entirely” again declined markedly. Couples in which the mothers took on almost all of the childcare at the beginning of the pandemic now divide childcare more equally. In addition, the share of couples dividing housework and childcare roughly equally increased again and was above the 2019 pre-pandemic level. The division of childcare duties remained nearly the same in winter 2021/2022 as well.

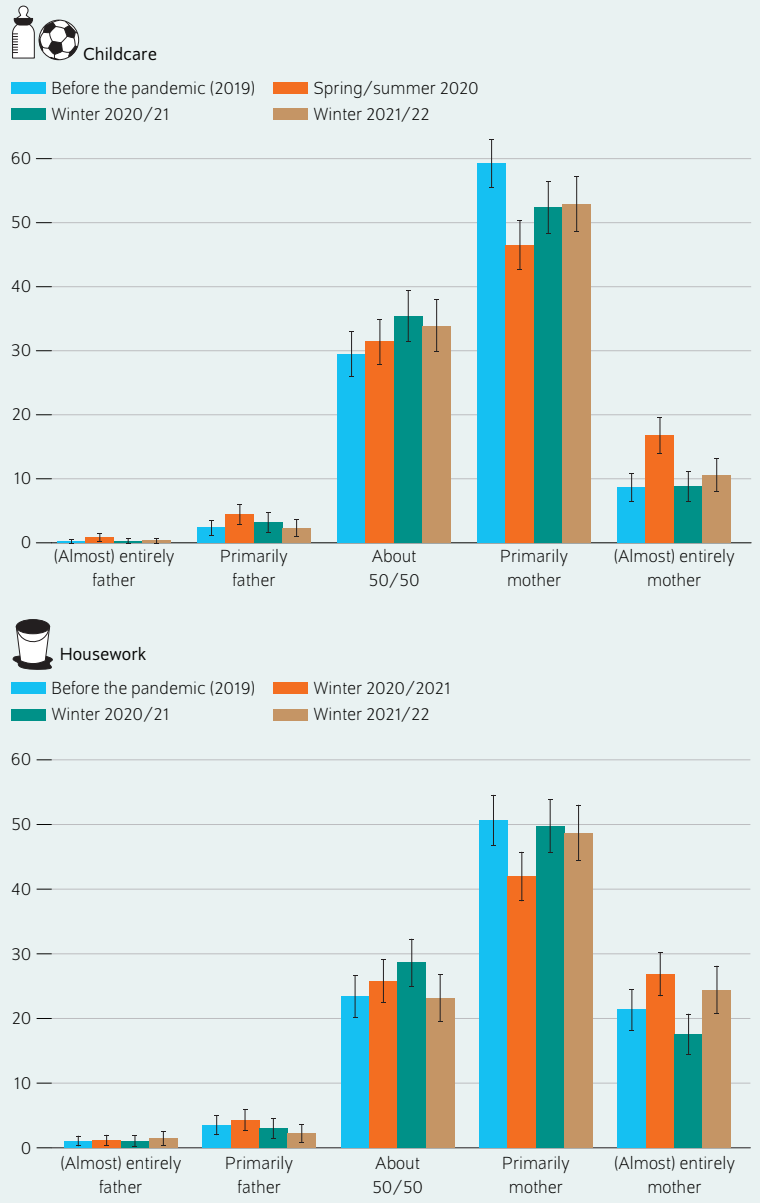
Thus, the new data from winter 2021/2022 confirm the observation that the division of childcare between mothers and fathers—following a brief more unequal division during the first lockdown in 2020—has not changed significantly following the coronavirus pandemic. A similar picture emerges for housework: Although the share of couples in which the mother was (almost) entirely responsible for housework increased by three percentage points, these changes were not statistically significant. Overall, it cannot be said with statistical certainty that there have been any changes compared to before the pandemic for any constellations of housework division.

**Conclusion: Large gender care gap in Germany, but no lasting increase during the coronavirus pandemic**

Germany has a relatively large gender care gap compared to, for example, the Nordic countries, Sweden, Norway, Finland,

Figure 2

**Division of unpaid care work between couples during and around the coronavirus pandemic**  
Shares in percent



Note: The vertical black lines each represent a 95 percent confidence interval. In 95 percent of cases, the actual value is within this interval. Accordingly, the probability of error is five percent. The smaller the interval, the more exact the estimated effect.

Source: Authors' calculations based on the relationship and family panel pairfam.

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The even more unequal division of care work in the early phase of the coronavirus pandemic soon declined.

and Denmark. This means that women perform significantly more unpaid care work, such as childcare and housework, compared to men. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, many feared that the related daycare and school closures could further increase this inequality. And this seemed to be the case, at least in the short term: In spring and early

## Box 1

## Data

The analyses are based on data from the family panel pairfam.<sup>1</sup> Pairfam was funded by the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG) from 2008 to 2022 and has since been continued as a part of the family demography panel study FReDA. Each year, over 12,000 randomly selected people born between 1971 to 1973, 1981 to 1983, 1991 to 1993, and 2001 to 2003 (since 2019) cohorts participated in the pairfam survey. In the survey, respondents are asked to provide information about themselves and their family members, while the family members answer a less extensive survey.

An additional survey was conducted in summer 2020 with the purpose of investigating societal changes following the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The focus of the survey was on coronavirus-related changes to family life. All respondents who participated in the previous survey wave, or were only temporarily absent, participated in the additional survey. The regular pairfam survey was continued in the winters of 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. The analyses in this Weekly Report are mainly based on the last regular survey before the pandemic (2018/2019), the additional coronavirus pandemic survey, and the two following survey waves. As gender differences are investigated, the analysis was limited to opposite-gender couples.

The data include extensive information on socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, their employment situation, and attitudes toward and details about relationships. Furthermore, there are questions about the division of labor in the partnership, the main topic of this Weekly Report. The survey question is:

"How are you and your partner **currently** dividing the time spent performing work in the following areas?"

- Housework (washing, cooking, cleaning)
- Shopping
- House, apartment, or car repairs
- Financial matters, dealing with authorities
- Childcare [only households with children]

Answer options are:

- (Almost) entirely my partner
- Primarily my partner
- About 50/50 split
- Primarily me
- (Almost) entirely me

The answers are recoded by gender in order to more directly interpret the responses of women and men, each of which make up

about half of the respondents. The answers thus range from "the male partner takes over this area (almost) entirely" to "the female partner takes over this area (almost) entirely."

To examine the changes in the division of unpaid care work, the responses from 2018/2019 are used as a reference period and deviations during and after the coronavirus pandemic are subsequently studied.

The analyses on the effects of having children on the division of unpaid care work<sup>3</sup> are based on all survey waves from 2008 to 2022. The dependent variable, i.e., different constellations of care work division, is regressed on indicators for the years before and after the birth of the first child. In addition, age and cohort effects are partialled out. The coefficients displayed thus show how the division of care work has changed relative to the reference period (two years before the birth of the first child). As no childcare is performed before the birth of the first child, the coefficients are naturally set to zero before the birth of the first child. In contrast, the division of household labor before the birth of the first child is indicated in the figures. The estimates are based on a total of 19,665 observations of 5,840 respondents. The sample in the estimation is limited to couples who will either have a child in the following survey years or had a child in the previous waves.

In the analysis of the division of care work before, during, and after the coronavirus pandemic,<sup>4</sup> opposite-gender couples living together are observed in the corresponding four survey waves. The sample includes 7,352 observations based on 3,186 respondents. In both samples, 56 to 60 percent of the respondents are women.

To depict the division of care work over the four survey waves around the pandemic and how this division changed from survey to survey, the sample is limited to households that were observed in all four survey waves.<sup>5</sup> This way, it can be ensured that the periods between the surveys can be investigated. The sample includes 2,324 observations and 581 respondents.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Johannes Huinink et al., "Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam): Conceptual framework and design," *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung* 23, no. 1 (2011): 77–100; and Josef Brüderl et al., *The German Family Panel (pairfam) Version 14.1.0* (Cologne: GESIS Data Archive, 2023) (in German; available online).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sabine Walper et al., "The pairfam COVID-19 survey: Design and instruments. Release Version," pairfam Technical Paper 15 (LMU Munich: 2020) and Sabine Walper et al., "The pairfam COVID-19 survey," (Cologne: GESIS Data, Version 1.0.0) (available online).

<sup>3</sup> See Figure 1 in this Weekly Report.

<sup>4</sup> See Figure 2 in this report.

<sup>5</sup> See Figure 3 in this report.

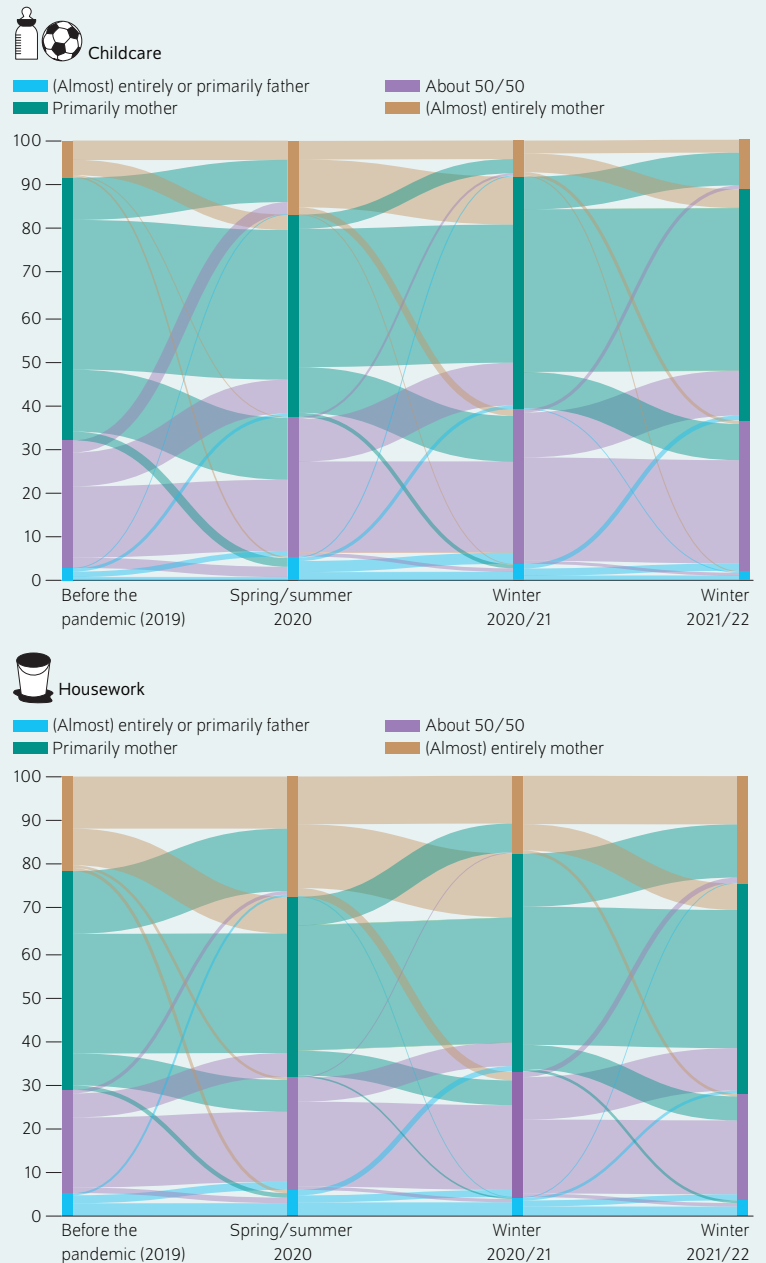
summer 2020, inequality in unpaid care work among couples with children had increased compared to the year before the pandemic. However, this inequality declined back to its pre-pandemic level within the first year of the pandemic. Recent data from the second year after the beginning of the pandemic confirm this finding.

Thus, a major reversal of gender roles did not occur as a result of the coronavirus pandemic as some had feared. The unequal division of unpaid care work between women and men in Germany did not become more unequal in the medium term, but instead remained at a high level.

The gender care gap is associated with many gender gaps on the labor market. Gender inequalities increase in unpaid care work as well as on the labor market when couples have children. If policymakers want to reduce labor market-related gender inequalities such as the gender pay gap, they need to also focus on closing the gender care gap. Numerous courses of action to create incentives for a more equal division of paid and unpaid care work between women and men have been on the table for some time. Expanding the number of partner months during parental allowance (*Elterngeld*), for example, could reduce the considerable inequality in care work following the birth of a child. Furthermore, reforming *Ehegattensplitting* (joint taxation of married couples with full income splitting) and the tax treatment of mini-job income could reduce the financial “part-time trap” for married women and thus lead to a more equal division of paid work and care work between women and men in the long term.

Figure 3

**Change in the division of unpaid care work among couples during and around the coronavirus pandemic**  
Shares in percent



Source: Authors' calculations based on the family panel pairfam.

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At the beginning of the pandemic, many couples divided care work differently, albeit only temporarily.



## Box 2

**Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the division of unpaid care work in an international context**

Worldwide, women perform considerably more unpaid care work than men, although the size of the gender care gap differs between countries. In some OECD countries, such as South Korea, Japan, Mexico, and Turkey, the gender care gap is similar to the gap in Germany. However, the average gender care gap is smaller in many other European countries.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, an especially large increase in the gender care gap can be observed following the birth of a couple's first child in Germany compared to other countries.<sup>2</sup>

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the division of unpaid care work have been investigated in many countries. For example, studies from the U.S. show that couples were dividing care work more equally in 2020 compared to before the pandemic. However, here too there is an increased burden on mothers compared to fathers in terms of educating their children and contemporaneously managing both paid work and childcare. This burden occurred primarily due to daycare and school closures and could be observed in particular for parents with a low level of education and low income.<sup>3</sup> This also resulted in differences in well-being between mothers and women without children: Mothers with young children (up to and including primary school age) reported a greater psychological burden during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

In the United Kingdom, too, mothers primarily took over the additional childcare duties resulting from the coronavirus pandemic measures. Like in the U.S., these duties were taken on mostly independently of the mothers' employment status, such that they were often performing paid and unpaid work at the same time. For households in which the men were not working, however, there was a trend toward a more equal division of care work. Further studies are needed to determine if this trend is continuing after the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

In Spain, men also performed more unpaid household work over the course of the pandemic, but not to the same extent as women.<sup>6</sup> Studies have documented a similar trend in Canada and Australia,<sup>7</sup> India,<sup>8</sup> and Nigeria and South Africa.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which these patterns will revert to pre-pandemic conditions after the end of the pandemic, as in Germany, will largely depend on the institutions and norms in the various countries.

**1** OECD, *Dare to Share – Deutschlands Weg zur Partnerschaftlichkeit in Familie und Beruf* (Paris: 2017) (in German); Jacques Charmes, *The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2019) (available online).

**2** OECD, *The Pursuit of Gender Equality. An Uphill Battle* (2017) (available online).

**3** Ran Liu und Siyun Gan, "Childcare Facility Closure and Exacerbated Gender Inequality in Parenting Time during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Sociology* (forthcoming, 2024); Jennifer March Augustine and Katie Prickett, "Gender Disparities in Increased Parenting Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Research Note," *Demography* 59 (2022) (available online).

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**9** Ihuoma Faith Obioma et al., "Gendered share of housework and the COVID-19 pandemic: Examining self-ratings and speculation of others in Germany, India, Nigeria, and South Africa," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 79 (2023) (available online); Bianca Rochelle Parry and Errolyn Gordon, "The shadow pandemic: Inequitable gendered impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa," *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol. 28 (2021) (available online).

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