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Gender Inequality and the Division of Labor in the Home During Covid-19: A Literature Review

by

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## **Abstract**

The current Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted families in the United States as working parents face increased demand for domestic labor at home while losing community and institutional support through pandemic closures. By integrating emerging research on gender norms and expectations regarding the division of household labor for working parents, the impact of Covid-19 on working mothers, and the gendered impact of infrastructure and the pandemic response in the United States, I aim to provide a holistic conceptualization and analysis of gender inequality and the division of labor in the home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through summarizing and analyzing current literature, this review will contribute to new developments for future exploration in policy and practice and offer a framework for supporting families and working mothers as we move forward in the world of Covid-19.

*Keywords:* Covid-19 pandemic, working mothers, division of labor in the home, gender inequality, social policy

## **Introduction & Background**

Since its beginning in early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered life, as many U.S. states issued stay-at-home orders and mask mandates for public safety. Offices, schools, and child care centers were closed overnight, and the home became the primary site for work, school, and all aspects of family life. This unprecedented public health crisis has disrupted families in particular, as many working parents lost access to informal and institutional childcare and domestic support (Zamarro & Prados, 2020). Meanwhile, the closures of schools and childcare centers meant increased caregiving demands at home. The pandemic created a care

crisis in the United States as parents attempted to balance work and family obligations during lockdown. Care work is unpaid, but there is still a cost, and this disruption to family life raised concerns that decades of work toward gender equality may be erased as a result of the pandemic.

For the purposes of this paper, division of labor in the home refers to the division of unpaid work such as household tasks and child care between working parents. Domestic labor includes child care, household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, and any other unpaid tasks that take care of the home. There are several reasons that this pandemic is having a disproportionate effect on women in the United States. Participation in the labor force for women over 20 years of age in the United States experienced the largest drop in the past ten years from March 2020 to April 2020 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), because women are overrepresented in part-time, temporary, informal, and low-wage work, making them more vulnerable to large economic shocks, such as a global pandemic (Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). The loss of domestic support such as daycare and in-person school also contributes to low employment and reduced work hours for mothers in the early months of the pandemic (Collins et al., 2020). Women are morally and socially held accountable for housework at higher rates (Thébaud et al., 2019), while at the same time, parents exist in a workforce that prioritizes workers who can separate home and work responsibilities and punishes workers, particularly mothers, who are unable to do so (Kelly et al., 2010). This combination in the face of a large-scale public health crisis like Covid-19 demonstrates how gender inequality in the workforce and gender inequality in the home are connected (Yavorsky et al., 2021) and are reinforced by persistent social norms present in our attitudes and policies (Tertilt et al. 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to examine the gendered impact of public health crises and serves as a natural experiment to test theories and explanations for the

gendered division of household labor. For example, fundamental factors that contribute to how working parents divide household responsibilities, such as time spent at home versus time spent doing paid work outside the home, are impacted by pandemic stay-at-home orders (Carlson et al., 2020). As school and work become part of home life due to pandemic restrictions, Covid-19 sends a shock to social norms that could potentially push toward gender equality rather than exacerbate existing inequalities (Tertilt et al., 2020). The current pandemic also makes unpaid domestic labor more visible and serves as a reminder that care work is critical for keeping society running, especially in a crisis (Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). These findings suggest possibilities for future research on how the reframing and restructuring of the boundaries between work and family can potentially reduce inequality. As we enter the third year of this pandemic and literature on this emerging topic continues to grow, a comprehensive review of the current research is necessary to understand the scope of this problem and how we might move forward.

By examining the impact of Covid-19 on gender equality and the division of labor in the home, this literature review will contribute to understanding how to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for working parents. Much of the existing literature is also heteronormative; there is very little research about the division of labor in the home for LGBTQ+ families, with almost none explicitly relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, very few empirical studies of the gendered division of labor during Covid-19 specifically account for racial and ethnic disparities. Much of the current literature also displays the underlying assumptions about how families are or ideally should be structured in the United States. For example, most studies detailed the impact of systemic support, such as daycare, school, or after-school programs, while hardly ever delving into other forms of community

support. This paper seeks to address these gaps by providing a holistic synthesis and conceptualization of literature on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted gender inequality in the home and the division of childcare and domestic labor for working mothers and asks what policymakers can do to support gender equality at work and home as we move forward as a society in the world of Covid-19. As this crisis persists over time and the future is unclear, this research has the potential to inform policies that can potentially contribute to gender equality in the home and the workplace.

### **Article Criteria for Inclusion**

To achieve this, I collected peer-reviewed journal articles that were published since the onset of the pandemic in 2020 and address the following topics: gender norms and expectations regarding domestic labor, the impact of Covid-19 on working mothers, and the gendered economic impact of the pandemic response in the United States. One of the limitations of some current research is that it does not speak to the diversity of U.S. families. To address this, I expanded my article criteria to include recent relevant literature exploring domestic labor division for marginalized communities such as the LGBTQIA+ community and the Black community, but that does not necessarily relate to the current pandemic. Including pre-pandemic literature also provides context and sets the scene for analyzing pandemic research on this emerging topic.

In the spirit of reflexive practice and commitment to understanding my own bias as a researcher, I acknowledge my position as a white, heterosexual, cis woman and that my positionality, experiences, assumptions, and beliefs influence the research process. I understand that I write about experiences of marginalized communities that differ from my own and that I

can never experience or fully understand due to the privilege that I hold through my social identities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Increased Demand for Domestic Labor**

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated gender inequality regarding the division of labor in the home as childcare centers and school closures created an increased demand for childcare and domestic labor. As all elements of family life become delegated to the home and the demand for domestic labor increases, many scholars attempt to understand how families adjust their division of paid and unpaid labor to meet their families' needs. Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, globally, women spent approximately three times as many hours on unpaid domestic work compared to men (United Nations Women, 2020). As pandemic lockdowns removed many domestic supports such as schools and daycares, researchers ask how the pandemic will affect already existing gender inequality. Covid-19 has revealed how the functioning of the labor market and gender roles combine to disproportionately affect women in a crisis (Bahn et al., 2020).

### **Women's Economic Impact During Covid-19**

As the demand for unpaid domestic labor increases, several factors influence how American families manage work and family responsibilities. Mothers in heterosexual partnerships in the United States are more likely to lose their jobs or reduce their work hours to meet caregiving demands such as childcare, homeschooling, and other increased domestic responsibilities on them as a result of the pandemic (Collins et al., 2020; Petts et al., 2021). As stated above, participation in the labor force for women over 20 years of age in the United States

experienced the largest drop in the past ten years, from March 2020 to April 2020, during the onset of the pandemic (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), and one explanation for this drop is women's vulnerable economic position due to being overrepresented in part-time, temporary, or informal jobs (Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). These findings demonstrate how existing gender inequalities worsened as a result of the pandemic and suggest that there are deeper societal forces behind how families manage work and family responsibilities in a crisis and causing mothers to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

### **Social Norms and Gender Expectations**

The gendered impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is also a result of social norms and gender expectations regarding paid work in the workforce and unpaid domestic work at home. The traditional norm that men should work and women should take care of the home is a pervasive ideal that penetrates many aspects of life in the United States and is not immune to the impact of the pandemic. In many American workplaces, the ideal worker norm prefers paid work over unpaid family obligations (Kelly et al., 2010). When workplaces give preferential treatment to workers who can focus solely on paid work, there are gendered consequences. This workplace norm contributes to gender discrimination and stereotypes that mothers are "less likely to live up to these expectations and less likely to reap the economic rewards associated with being an ideal worker" (Kelly et al., 2010). Working parents are under pressure to separate work and family in the workplace in order to be considered successful and professional. The pandemic response calls attention to the problematic idea that family responsibilities are personal life choices that should be handled outside of work hours (Power, 2020). These findings demonstrate the workplace climate that working parents in the United States experience as the onset of the pandemic forces



families to shift the boundaries between work and home. Today, gender equality in the labor market is closely related to the unequal division of domestic labor at home (Tertilt et al., 2020). The consequences of these internalized expectations about unpaid labor in the home are exposed during Covid-19 as mothers face increased housework and subsequent emotional strain during the pandemic (Ruppanner et al., 2021). This is true even for working mothers who contribute equally to their male partners in the workforce (Raile et al., 2020) and when women's earnings are equal to or greater than that of their husbands (Thébaud et al., 2019). Given the long-term economic benefits of paid work outside the home, as well as the disproportionate effect of pandemic restrictions on working mothers, the pandemic exacerbates overall gender inequality (Collins et al., 2020).

Gender norms and expectations not only impact individual families but also have a role in systemic influences. Women are disproportionately held responsible for housework based on gender norms and societal expectations (Thébaud et al., 2021). From a Marxist-Feminist perspective, the undervaluing of care work comes from a relationship to capitalism (Carbin, 2021). The care economy is informally referred to as the “hypocrisy economy” because people talk about empowering women to contribute to the workforce in addition to taking care of their children and home, without any systematic attempt to encourage or enable men to take more responsibility (Power, 2020). Additionally, the way we presently conceptualize and measure economics largely ignores unpaid domestic labor that “benefits the whole society but is carried out for ‘free’ by parents and other family members, usually women” (Power, 2020). This hypocrisy is present in the U.S pandemic response, as policymakers assume that there will always be someone at home to do domestic labor for free.

## **Fathers in Heterosexual Partnerships**

As we attempt to understand how Covid-19 impacts gender inequality and the division of labor, it is critical to examine the role of fathers in domestic labor in response to the pandemic. As policies and social norms interconnect to influence the gendered division of labor for mothers, fathers are also affected by the social expectations placed on men and their contributions to their families. It is well known that men are expected to be financial providers for their families. This gender norm is not immune to the pandemic as restrictions blur the lines between the home and the workplace for working parents. While it is consistently reported that mothers do a disproportionate amount of domestic labor in response to increased demand during the pandemic, there is also evidence of both reduced and exacerbated gender inequalities in the home (Carlson et al., 2020). Even as women shoulder the majority of the increase in domestic responsibilities, fathers also experience increased participation in child care and other domestic labor, while not nearly enough to close the gap in the gendered division of labor (Tertilt et al., 2020). There are several reasons for this shift in the division of labor and the impact on fathers' involvement. The pandemic removed barriers in the workplace, such as paid leave and the inability to work remotely from home, which is often credited as a hindrance to family involvement (Carlson et al., 2020). Increased time at home is also likely to increase men's participation in household responsibilities, especially as the need for child care increased during pandemic lockdowns. More fathers are witnessing what their children do all day, deepening their attachment to them, and learning by doing as a result of working from home (Tertilt et al., 2020). However, there is also evidence that despite the increased time spent in the family sphere, many families still engage in a highly gendered division of labor (Shockley et al., 2021). This contradiction in the research suggests that there are other forces at play, and further exploration

of flexible workplace policies and supporting an equal division of labor at home is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of this issue as well as possible remedies. As the connection between workplace policy and fathers' role in domestic labor becomes more apparent during Covid-19, it is clear that more research needs to be done to build on this momentum and create family policies that lighten the burden on mothers and support gender equality in the home (Margaria, 2021). Fathers' participation in child care also acts as a buffer against mothers exiting the job market due to feeling overburdened by family responsibilities, demonstrating that further research on fathers' involvement in domestic labor is essential to understanding and reducing gender inequality in the home (Petts et al., 2021).

### **Intersectionality**

One weakness of the emerging literature on the division of household labor since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic is its narrow understanding of the American family. It is clear that the pandemic largely exacerbated existing inequalities for working mothers. Still, much of the research in this area does not specifically address the role of intersectional identities in understanding how vulnerable members of our society are disproportionately impacted. For example, while some research focuses on marginalized communities, very little emerging research on Covid-19 and division of labor specifically accounts for the impact of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This oversight limits how we both understand the scope of the pandemic's impact on families and how we move forward in the world of Covid-19. Marginalized communities are diverse and non monolithic and have been identified as largely unexplored in current research around gender inequality and division of labor in the home during Covid-19. Additionally, one limitation of examining social identities

and social factors individually is missing the intersectional nature of social identity. Every individual and family has unique strengths and challenges that are impacted by social norms, policies, and attitudes in a unique way.

### **Heteronormativity and Queer Families**

Historically, research on lesbian and gay families has been scarce due to stigma and attitudes that their status was viewed as “exotic ‘alternative’ or ‘experiment,’ to set against heterosexual, married couple households” (Oerton, 1997). As the status of gay marriage and reducing shame and stigma has shifted in the 21st century, there is very little research done on how LGBTQIA+ families organize household labor, let alone in the context of Covid-19. Emerging research about the division of labor for queer, transgender, and non-binary couples demonstrates that LGBTQIA+ couples often must rely on something other than gender to organize the division of household labor. Gay and lesbian couples typically practice a more equitable division of household tasks, and satisfaction with the distribution of labor also must rely on something other than societal norms around men and women’s roles in the home and family (Kurdek, 2007). Because some families do not rely on a traditional gendered division of domestic labor, factors such as time availability, income, citizenship, biological motherhood, and personal preference play a stronger role in how queer couples distribute household labor (Kelly & Hauck, 2015). However, research on the division of household labor with women partners of transgender men found that many women partners credited their more traditional, inegalitarian arrangement to individual choice and free will, separate from gender-role socialization. These individualistic responses suggest a “conceptual disjuncture of the personal from the political,” as many interviewees identified as feminists and did not see their unequal division of labor in the

home as a threat to their identity as feminists or as nontraditional families (Pfeffer & LaRossa, 2010). This finding suggests possibilities for further research into the role of individualism in understanding gender inequality at home during Covid-19, especially as a narrative of individual choice and freedom around safety protocols such as mask-wearing and staying home has existed since the start of the pandemic. Why is it challenging for us to connect our personal struggles to societal and systemic power structures? Gender role socialization and social expectations also affect the power dynamics associated with paid work and the “devaluation of work traditionally associated with femininity,” including within families with same-sex partners (Kelly & Hauck, 2015). These findings suggest possibilities for future research around LGBTQ+ couples and the impact of gender roles, expectations, and potential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

Similarly, recent emerging research on gender inequality and division of labor in the home lacks a specific analysis that examines the role of race and ethnicity. Many feminist theories and research about women’s unpaid work often narrowly center on hetero whiteness and the lived experiences of white women. Similarly, recent research on the division of labor in the home during Covid-19 is not representative of the rich diversity of families in the United States. Researchers seem to collect data about race and ethnicity in their methods but often do not use those demographics to inform their analysis and conclusions. It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic amplifies existing inequalities, so it is crucial to examine the intersection of race and gender to understand the full scope of the impact of Covid-19 on gender inequality in the home. Young single mothers, over half of which are Black and Latina mothers, experienced the largest decline in employment in the first few months of the pandemic (Sun, 2021). Unlike white

women, Black women's identity as women, as well as how gender norms impact the division of domestic labor, are shaped by oppression and racial injustice (Banks, 2020).

This limited view impacts how we understand and conceptualize this issue by influencing our lens of paid and unpaid care work. For example, some Black feminists argue that because many Black women have done domestic work in the homes of American white women, this care work is not necessarily unwaged and has historically been viewed as a way to financially provide for their own families (Carbin, 2021). Black women's work in the home also extends to community work and mutual aid through activism, resistance, and providing needed services to Black community members through nonmarket labor and addressing community needs that "arise out of racial and ethnic group disparities" (Banks, 2020). Banks' framework for conceptualizing race, gender, and unpaid domestic labor shifts from an additive model of understanding how multiple forms of oppression impact families and communities to a more intersectional approach that "more fully captures the magnitude of racialized women's oppression" (2020). This insight from Black feminists demonstrates that in order to understand the connection between women's oppression, domestic labor, and Covid-19, we need to use an intersectional lens to look at care work more holistically and center the lived experiences of marginalized communities while refraining from reducing this problem to the experiences of white women alone.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Another facet of this issue that is sparsely addressed in recent literature is socioeconomic status. As stated above, women are more likely to give up paid work in the labor force to meet caregiving demands (Collins et al., 2020) and are more vulnerable during an economic crisis

such as a pandemic (Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). Current research also primarily focuses on families who can stay home during the pandemic and work remotely, leaving out parents who work in fields where they are required to remain in person through pandemic closures. Women who are more highly educated are more likely to be able to work remotely from home; this flexibility protects their employment, while less-educated women, who are more likely not to have a remote work option, face more significant rates of employment loss during the pandemic (Zamarro & Prados, 2020). It is also important to note that this issue does not exist in isolation. The intersection of social class and other marginalized and minoritized communities is crucial to understanding this issue. For example, as stated above, Black and Latina single mothers face a disproportionate economic impact as a result of the pandemic (Sun, 2021). As we move forward into the third year of this pandemic, the complexity of this issue highlights the need to center the lived experiences of community members facing gender inequality in the home during Covid-19 and who receive very little structural support.

### **Looking Forward: Gendered Consequences of Infrastructure**

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, balancing work and caregiving is especially challenging for parents with the loss of systemic support during the scramble to shift work and family life to remote formats. This is especially true because family and social welfare policies that directly support family caregivers are severely lacking in the United States (Stokes & Patterson, 2020). The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of our social safety net and highlighted the need for long-term, systemic support (Sun, 2021). Current literature exploring policy response suggests one method of reducing barriers to systemic support through suspending work requirements for families to be eligible to receive services. For example,

participating in federal benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) child care assistance, as well as access to affordable and high-quality child care, depends on parent employment (Sun, 2021). In the face of increased job loss, particularly for mothers, expanding access to these programs is one way to support families through the pandemic. Increasing paid sick days, paid family and medical leave benefits, and improving wages and workplace rights and protections would benefit parents and caregivers, as well as all workers, as we navigate the pandemic. In addition to reducing barriers to accessing support, policies need to factor in the diversity of families and the importance of caregiving in order to support marginalized communities during this crisis (Stokes & Patterson, 2020).

The pandemic highlighted and exacerbated the need to reconceptualize how we structure work and family life. Prior research on work-family policies, like paid maternity leave and subsidized child care, argues that policies are more likely to support women's participation in paid work, while in contrast, policies that support men's involvement at home are much less common (Noonan, 2013). Additionally, unprecedented changes in paid employment during the shift to remote work appear to have eliminated structural barriers to father's participation in child care and domestic labor (Carlson et al., 2020), and "fathers spent more time on childcare during spring 2020 than before the pandemic" (Margarita, 2021). In addition, telecommuting provides a more flexible way for mothers to maintain paid work hours rather than reducing their hours or moving to part-time status (Lyttelton, 2022). However, these findings contradict earlier research on the influence of telecommuting on gender inequality in the home. Some researchers argue that because of the way that telecommuting work is structured, it actually encourages a more traditional unequal division of labor with women using increased flexibility remote work



provides to balance work and family responsibilities, while men use telecommuting for reasons outside of the family, such as increased leisure time or overworking (Noonan, 2013). Further exploration into this contradiction and the connection between flexible work formats and the gendered division of domestic labor is necessary for understanding how to continue to support gender equality at home, especially as it becomes safer and more normalized to return to in-person work.

### **What do we currently know?**

The pandemic created a care crisis in the United States that disproportionately impacts women. Women's employment is more vulnerable during an economic crisis (Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020), and women's labor force participation dropped during the onset of the pandemic (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In the face of increased demand for domestic work at home, mothers are more likely to lose their jobs or reduce paid work hours (Petts et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2020). Additionally, gender equality in the home and the workplace are connected, and factors such as gender norms and social expectations reinforce an inequalitarian division of labor through attitudes and policies. It is necessary to look at societal norms and expectations as well as the structural influences and how they inform one another in order to explore possible solutions moving forward.

### **Future Research Areas & Recommendations**

Although research has been conducted on the impact of Covid-19 on gender equality and the division of labor in the home, there is still much to be learned about this issue. Why is it that heterosexual families often revert to traditional configurations of the father as the breadwinner

and the mother taking care of children during times of crisis (Collins et al., 2020)? There are two research areas that show promise for addressing gender inequality in the division of unpaid domestic labor: fathers' participation in domestic labor at home and increased workplace flexibility through remote work. There is a clear connection between fathers' involvement in the domestic labor and reduced gender inequality and works to prevent mothers from leaving the labor force and feeling overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities (Petts et al., 2021). Remote work options removed several common barriers to paternal participation at home, such as increased time at home and ability to take paid leave. Evidence suggests that while fathers' role in domestic labor increased during Covid-19, it is not enough to close the gender gap in the division of labor (Tertilt et al., 2020) and many families still participate in an unequal division of labor despite working from home during the pandemic (Shockley et al., 2021). Workplace flexibility has the potential to support mothers and, therefore, gender equality at home and work. Contradicting research findings on this topic suggests the need to take a closer look at why remote work creates a more egalitarian family life for some families but not others.

There are significant gaps in emerging research that largely ignores our most at-risk communities. It is clear that the pandemic disproportionately impacts women and mothers, and there is little research looking into how other marginalized groups are specifically affected, as well as how the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and gender impact this issue. This is especially relevant as much of the current research operates with a narrow understanding of the American family. Accurate representation of the diversity of US families is crucial for moving forward from this pandemic and supporting gender equality at work and home, as well as using a more holistic and intersectional lens to examine this issue.

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