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Committee on the situation
of women in economics

Newsletter 2020: Research summary

Gender inequalities during Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns of entire sectors of the economy are driving drastic changes to the work and domestic lives of many families around the world. Among the most affected are families with young children. They not only face the full disruption that the crisis is having on jobs and the ability of workers to carry out normal professional activities, they have also been left with the full responsibility of caring for and educating their children from home during the extended closures of schools and childcare facilities.

Many worry that mothers are particularly vulnerable to this extreme shock. For instance, early evidence showed that women did a disproportionate share of the jobs in some of the most affected sectors, such as hospitality, putting them at higher risk of job loss. The time pressures of having to care for children with little help from outside the nuclear family may also have fallen mainly on women, who in most cases were already the primary carer before the pandemic. Moreover, dual earner couples facing pressing childcare responsibilities may have had to prioritise the paid work of one of the partners, something that again may have followed a gendered pattern. If responses to the lockdown reinforce traditional divisions of responsibilities within the household, they may weaken women's positions in work and their careers beyond this period.

To shed light on these effects and learn about decisions within the family, a group of IFS and UCL researchers collected data for families with school-aged children living in England.¹ The data describe the employment, working status and time use of mothers and fathers in two-parent opposite-gender families during the first lockdown in Spring 2020, and how these relate to the characteristics of the family, what parents used to do before the pandemic, the types of jobs they worked and their relative earnings.

These data show striking results.² We find that the employment and hours of paid work have fallen dramatically during the lockdown period for both mothers and fathers, but the drops were substantially larger for mothers, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. We also found that mothers time doing paid work was interrupted over 50% more often during lockdown than that of fathers, a gap that did not exist before the pandemic and that may undermine the productivity of the already short number of working hours that mothers were doing. These differences were counterbalanced

1 IFS-IoE Online Survey of Time Use.

2 All the results are drawn from Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A., and Sevilla, A. (2020), 'The Gendered Division of Paid and Domestic Work under Lockdown', IZA Discussion Paper 13500, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3654937>.

by unequal gender divisions of domestic responsibilities. Mothers did a greater share of housework and childcare than fathers, coming to around 2 hours more per day of each.

These are large differences in domestic responsibilities but they may simply reflect pre-existing inequalities in the allocation of domestic work. To investigate how parents shared *additional* demands for their time during the pandemic, we look at responsibilities that they outsourced in normal times. In particular, childcare during normal school hours were met by schools and other childcare providers before the pandemic, but were left for parents to provide during lockdown. We see that, as compared to fathers, mothers did an additional 80 minutes of childcare during normal school hours. Even among parents who remained active in paid work during the lockdown, mothers did almost one additional hour more of childcare during normal school hours than fathers did,

One could think that the increase in gendered specialisation brought about by the Covid-19 crisis was motivated by financial arguments as families attempted to protect their incomes. Since fathers are the primary earner in most families, it could make financial sense for families to prioritise their paid work over that of mothers when faced with increased demands for childcare and domestic work that cannot be outsourced.

Our data, however, does not support this view. Among those parents who worked both before and during the lockdown, mothers who were the primary earner pre-lockdown worked the same number of paid hours during the lockdown as their lower-paid male partners. In contrast, fathers who were the primary earner worked almost double the number of hours as their lower-paid female partners. The figures are even more striking for uninterrupted working time: no matter who was better paid before the lockdown, mothers always did less uninterrupted working time during the confinement period. These differences in working time were more than compensated by differences in time doing childcare and housework. Mothers did more of these irrespective of their pre-lockdown relative pay, and they did much more if paid less than their partners. As for the overall population of parents, the differences remain sizeable when focusing only on childcare during the main school hours.

Our results suggest that this crisis is intensifying gender inequalities in market and domestic work along traditional norms. They also suggest that mothers are more likely than fathers to adjust what they do and reduce their hours in paid work when families are faced with unexpected shocks that change, for instance, their needs for childcare. This could weaken their position in work if, as a consequence, they are seen as less reliable by employers.