Author/s:
Craig, L

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Coronavirus, Domestic Labour and Care

Lyn Craig University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
lyn.craig@unimelb.edu.au

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic turned our daily lives upside down. Lockdowns and physical distancing orders meant hundreds of thousands of people switched to working from home, significantly blurring the temporal and spatial boundaries between paid work, domestic labour and caring for others. This dramatic shift opened the possibility that longstanding patterns in work-family and gender relations, central concerns of sociology, would be tested and disrupted during the pandemic.

Background

The temporal and spatial split between 'work' and 'family' emerged following the industrial revolution. Paid work began to be performed outside the home, for money, and the household came to be rhetorically characterized as a site of love, leisure and recuperation from the labour of employment (Folbre 2014). This conceptualization obscured the fact that much laborious work was also done in the home, centrally the socially reproductive activities of housework, raising children, and providing family care. Though unpaid, this work is highly productive, comprising "the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally" (Laslett and Brenner, 1989: 382).

The labour of social reproduction is still overwhelmingly done by women (Folbre 2014). The 'traditional' pattern whereby men went out to earn money, while women stayed home to manage the household, generated and perpetuated norms about gender roles, and about how families can and should function (Feree 2010). The view that men should be the main family breadwinner imbued ideals of masculinity, and the view that women should prioritize family care imbued ideals of femininity (Thebaud 2010).

Some of these norms have changed, and women have increasingly entered employment. However, men's share of unpaid domestic work and care has not risen commensurately (Sullivan et al. 2018). Still reflecting the role expectations of mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners, it is usually mothers, not fathers, who fit their employment commitments around the care needs of the family (Ranson, 2012; Warren et al., 2009). Therefore, with most women now in the paid work force, there has been a major change in one domain of gender relations yet marked continuity in another (Craig 2016).

This is partly due to the currently dominant neoliberal approach to gender equality, which offers formal opportunity in education and employment whilst simultaneously framing the labour of social

reproduction as a private matter for individuals and families to manage (Craig 2016). This can yield only partial gains and has not led to equality for most women. Some call it 'feminism for the one percent' (Arruzza et. al. 2019: 3). For many it is the worst of both worlds. Ignoring social reproduction whilst recruiting women into paid work 'effectively externalises care work onto families and communities while simultaneously diminishing their capacity to perform it' (Fraser & Rahel, 2018).

Ignoring the labour of domestic work and care is also socially unsustainable, because it not only maintains households and families but is also essential to underpin the economy and reproduce the workforce (Folbre 2014). If the economic value of reproductive labour were calculated, it would be equivalent to over 50 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (UN Women 2019). Yet unpaid domestic work and care is not counted in GDP figures, despite arguments that such calculations should be included in satellite accounts (Waring 2016). Rather, this labour has long been taken for granted by governments, simultaneously relied upon and discounted as if it were a costless renewable resource, like a magic pudding (Folbre 2014).

Governments can do this because most of the costs of providing care fall privately, on individual women and their families. In a way analogous to corporations avoiding the environmental and climate costs of manufacturing, any damage to social functioning by squeezing or exploiting unpaid family care work is defined out of the economic picture (Crary 2019). Yet benefiting from this labour without recognising it or recompensing those who do it is a form of wage theft. In Australia, gender penalties are present in the high price of childcare, the gender pay gap, lower female career progression and much higher casual and part time work (Charlesworth & McDonald 2015). They accumulate to significantly lower lifetime earnings, leaving older women with insufficient retirement savings to live on (Ong et. al. 2017).

The urgency of this longstanding social problem is increasing as economic uncertainty, technological disruption and eroding job conditions have made it harder to find secure employment (Kalleberg, 2018). Since 2000 average household income has declined (HILDA, 2019), raising the hours of paid work needed to support a family (Craig & Churchill 2019). Yet there are only 24 hours in the day, and if time demands conflict too much, something must give. Often this is wellbeing. Young mothers are working more, at the cost of escalating time stress and declining mental health, with currently a fifth of Australian women under age 35 diagnosed with depression or anxiety disorders (HILDA 2019).

Understanding the issue calls for a sociological lens that takes account of the links between individuals, families and society. Gendered divisions of labour do not only involve women making trade-offs between their own employment and family care, or couples making trade-offs between the employment of one and the family care of the other. Importantly, they are also shaped by government policies that trade off women's economic participation against having to provide more publicly funded care services. These multilevel trade-offs are interconnected, and the balance between them changed when the coronavirus hit.

Covid-19 and Domestic Labour and Care

In the first chaotic weeks of the pandemic, the fact that unpaid care is essential to the economy seemed to become more obvious to the Australian federal government. The government resisted early calls to close schools, with the stated motivation that they were safe supervised places for children to go while their parents worked in frontline services such as health care and food supply (Young 2020). Also, along with income maintenance measures, the government ensured formal childcare was made temporarily free to parents. This was a remarkable intervention, because Australian childcare is usually amongst the

most expensive in the world, nearly five time the European average (Adamson & Brennan, 2017). Through the clarifying lens of the imminent lockdowns, the government could see that if mothers didn't have someone to look after their children, they would have to do it themselves. So, pragmatically, it removed a longstanding price barrier to using a service that underpins more gender-equal divisions of labour (Gornick & Meyers 2009).

At the same time, many thousands lost their jobs or were stood down. For those whose employment could be done remotely, working at home spiked. The government directives were that if you could work at home, you should do so. Together with eventual school closures, this meant that most parents were faced with doing paid work and family care at home simultaneously. By requiring most people to stay home, even if they were still employed, the lockdown restrictions abruptly removed a gendered fault line in external constraint. The spatial organization of paid work and unpaid domestic work and care was suddenly not so different for men and women for reasons independent of gender norms and pre-existing participation patterns. This opened the possibility that during lockdown, divisions of domestic labour and care could also be more equal.

The opportunity of crisis

Thus, amidst the stress and fear, it seemed the Covid-19 crisis might also engender change in some of the structures underpinning unequal gender relations. First, there might be more government recognition of women's economic contribution, family constraints and how to best support them working, and second, there might be more gender-equal participation in domestic work and unpaid care at home.

These hopes were consistent with some early predictions that the pandemic and the economic collapse it precipitated would upend neoliberalism (Solty, 2020; Lent 2020), ushering in a society with a greater sense of community and solidarity (Lourens, 2020; Saad-Filho 2020). Some scholars argued that as an unprecedented humanitarian crisis Covid-19 could lead to overthrow of the 'old normal' and provide lessons on how to build more equal and sustainable societies (van Barneveld et al, 2020). Predictions about the potential impact on gender equality were mixed, with early evidence that women's jobs were being impacted more than men's counterbalanced by 'opposing forces which could ultimately promote gender equality' (Alon et. al. 2020: 1). For example, Alon et. al. argued the flexible work arrangements businesses were rapidly adopting might persist, and more father involvement could erode social norms currently underpinning the unequal divisions of domestic labour. This seemed to be supported by early results from studies from the US and the UK showing that some gender gaps were narrower under lockdown (Carlson et. al. 2020; Smith and Sevilla 2020).

Australian domestic labour and care under lockdown

To gather similar information in Australia, an online survey *Work and Care in the Time of Covid-19* *http://unimelb.edu.au/covidcare* was fielded during lockdown between 7th May and 4th June 2020. The survey garnered nearly 3,000 responses on how the pandemic affected both the time men and women spent in domestic work and care in Australian households, and their subjective feelings about it.

Unsurprisingly, the survey found that time in unpaid work was significantly higher during the lockdown than it had been before. Across households, this added substantially to reproductive labour overall, raising men's average unpaid work by more than two and a half hours a day, and women's by more than three and a half hours a day. Also, there were some signs of gender shifts in work-family trade-offs. Women's care time went up more than men's, but because men had much lower average input prior to

the lockdown, in proportional terms the increases in care were greater for men than women. This narrowed relative gender differences in care time. The same did not occur for housework and household management, which rose for both men and women, but retained the same relative gender gap. Also, the changes in men's time were enough to reduce gender gaps in childcare, but not to remove them (Craig & Churchill 2020).

For many people, the additional domestic labour and care was on top of paid work. While some were still going out to work in jobs that could not be done remotely, many couples' work and care was now concentrated into the same place at the same time, with home schooling an extra taxing requirement for those with school aged children. The survey results made clear that for most the situation was stressful, and that this was the case for both men and women. Interesting, however, was a narrowing gender gap in dissatisfaction, including how satisfied respondents were with how they shared their housework and unpaid care with their partner. Before the pandemic, just over 13 percent of fathers reported feeling somewhat or extremely dissatisfied with their partner's share, compared to 46 percent of mothers who felt this way. During the pandemic more than half the mothers felt either extremely or somewhat dissatisfied with their partner's share, compared to 21 percent of fathers. So slightly more gender similarity resulted from men coming a bit closer to women's much higher pre-Covid levels of dissatisfaction (Craig & Churchill 2020).

The survey elicited comments on how respondents felt during lockdown. The views of those who were extremely dissatisfied with gender shares during Covid revealed that to many of the women, it felt like a return to a prior era. For example, 'Hello 1963!', 'What is it 1950?? Don't start me!!', 'I feel like it's 1952 in here' and 'I feel like I am a 1950's housewife'. Others noted that the reversion in unpaid work was extra to employment demands 'I suddenly find I'm living in decades gone by in terms of house and family care load, but also expected to continue to work.'

Others reported that household resources to work from home were being inequitably shared and that their male partner took prime space and claimed time for work while the female partner did everything at once, for example, 'I work downstairs in our living area where I supervise our kid, my husband works upstairs with no supervision duties.' '[I've] dropped everything to home school the kids and keep the home running - and of course quiet - while [my] husbands job rolls on via laptop in a closed off room.'

Some women in this category commented explicitly on the broader implications for gender equality. For example, 'I am angry, I am disillusioned, I am depressed…the feminist cause has been set back 10 years by this pandemic and the conditioning of our society (both for males and females) makes it blatantly obvious that gender equality is far from a reality'; 'I have 2 master's degrees yet somehow I am now doing it all. How did this happen?'; 'How can we have come so far only for it to matter so little when the chips are down?'; and '…how could a contemporary female like myself, with feminist principles and innovative thinking capacity, still end up cohabitating with a caveman?'.

However, although dissatisfaction with partner's share was predominant for women, some had the opposite experience. They reported being more satisfied during the lockdown and that the lockdowns had engendered more equality. For example, 'The pandemic has really shifted things for our family. More discussions, acknowledgement of the work I was doing and a fairer division of labour'; 'My husband has done more now than in 27 years together'; 'It has actually brought us together. [The gender division of labour] is still not fair…but it's fairer than it was before…', and 'I feel like the scales have tipped - now my husband is doing as much or more supervisory care than me. Yipeeeeeee!'.

At the same time, for most respondents, subjective time pressure was lower during the pandemic than it was before (Craig & Churchill 2020). This was related to higher satisfaction, for example 'I love having everyone at home and the slower pace of life. As a family we are spending more quality time together and I am highly appreciative of that.' Some linked lower time stress to the reduced need to commute or pick up children from school/daycare. For example: 'Now working from home, the time previously spent getting ready for work and commuting can now be spent on unpaid caring and domestic work which greatly enhances family life'; 'We have more time with the toddler since we don't have to commute - that's why our caring hours have gone up'; and 'Without the stress of peak hour commutes taking up to 1 hour each direction, we now have more time for our housework, our health, and each other.'

Possibilities for structural change

This raises the question of structural constraints, as more people working from home ongoing could retain some of these benefits into the future. This would not be the case for all, and amongst those who were dissatisfied with their balance of paid and unpaid work, many commented that high workplace expectations remained. 'My workplace made it clear that they didn't mind where we worked (home or the office), as long as the work got done. That seems flexible on the surface, but it actually puts the entire burden on the individual to be as productive as before.' Notwithstanding, the experience of the pandemic might allow more men, particularly, to seek this flexibility from their employers. Scholars have noted that in many workplaces there are unwritten sanctions against men accessing 'family-friendly' measures such as working from home (Gregory and Milner, 2009). They risk being seen as uncommitted to their work (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003), but the pandemic may engender change in this regard if employers are readier to support it. The mixed comments and experiences noted above indicate that removing the necessity to be present in a workplace is by no means a sure-fire route to gender-equal divisions of domestic labour, but for men who *want* to share more equally and participate more fully in family care, it could help.

As to whether the pandemic would engender more government recognition of women's family constraints and how to best support them working, early indications are not encouraging. One survey respondent described how the temporary relief childcare fees had affected her family. 'Zero child care fees was a game changer. Initially we had the kids at home but had still had to pay over $200 / week to keep their places. Without our having to pay for child care, my husband has been able to be the kids' primary carer without worrying about going out and finding work, and we have all been able to stay at home.' But the measure was not retained, and early hopes that lower fees would be instituted ongoing, as necessary infrastructure to underpin women's employment during the recovery, have faded. It is now clear that it is women who have suffered most loss of employment and earnings during the pandemic. By the end of May, rises in unemployment, underemployment and withdrawal from the labour force were significantly higher for women than men (Jericho 2020). Yet the government stimulus measures announced so far are concentrated in the male-dominated construction industry.

Conclusion

Crises crystallize longstanding issues and make them more obvious (Chwieroth & Walter 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic threw a spotlight on gender relations, and the division of employment, domestic labour and care. For many women, pre-existing work-family arrangements were already stressful to the point of unsustainability, and there was significant potential for the pandemic to test and disrupt longstanding patterns (van Barneveld et al, 2020).

For many, the crisis made it worse, and gender inequities proved resistant to the changes in temporal and spatial workplace constraints. But for some, there was welcome improvement in shares and time stress, and perhaps grounds for cautious optimism. For example, 'it's fairer than it was before in terms of division of labour. Whether I manage to hold onto it once we return to normal remains to be seen; and 'My hope is that we use this time where we suddenly have more time to think about the things we want to go back to and leave behind the things we don't. It has made us all stop and think about the things that matter like our health, the environment, seeing family and friends. I hope this stays with us in the years to come. I fear it won't.'

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