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Working and Caring at Home: gender differences in the effects of COVID-19 on paid and unpaid labor in Australia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused working from home to spike abruptly. This had implications for those with caring responsibilities, particularly women, who shoulder most unpaid domestic work. But what about men? This paper reports early results from a survey of Australian men and women, conducted during state-imposed lockdown in May 2020 (N=2772). Respondents were asked their average daily time in housework, household management, and care (active and supervisory), and about time pressure, spare time and satisfaction with balance of paid and unpaid labor, before and during the pandemic. Unpaid work rose significantly. Women still did most, but men's childcare time increased more in relative terms, so average gender gaps narrowed. The relative gap in housework remained. For many, the lockdown generated lower subjective time pressure, but dissatisfaction with balance of paid and unpaid work rose markedly, and from a much higher base for women. Gender gaps in this measure remained wide.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected how and where we spend our time. School, daycare and respite care closures increased the need for family care, and workplace lockdowns saw caused an unprecedented spike in working from home. The disruptions significantly blurred the temporal and spatial boundaries between paid work and caring for others.

More people working at home is a major shift conceptually as well as practically. The longstanding distinction between employment and unpaid domestic labor has a strong spatial dimension. Since the industrial revolution, paid work has usually been performed outside the household, with the home more often rhetorically characterized as a site of leisure, a refuge from 'work' (Folbre 2014). This conceptualization is highly gendered, since household production - housework, raising children, voluntary work and family care - was essential labor mostly done at home by women (Folbre 2014). Women's workforce participation is now usual, but nonetheless, progress towards gender equality in paid and unpaid labor has been gradual (Sullivan, Gershuny, and Robinson 2018). Many argue that the gender revolution stalled due to lack of significant change in men's time allocation; on average their domestic work and care remains low, and their time commitment to paid work remains high (see Goldscheider et.al 2015 for an overview).

The COVID-19 restrictions temporarily removed a gendered fault line in external constraint, by requiring men and women alike to stay home, even if they were still employed. So, what happens when due to an abrupt external shock, the spatial organization of paid work and unpaid domestic

work and care is not so different for men and women? This paper reports early results of a survey (N=2,772), conducted between 7th to 30th May 2020, on how COVID-19 affected paid work, domestic work and care in Australia. The survey investigated whether the pandemic affected gender differences in objective time allocation, or in subjective feelings about it.

As context for the findings, we first give a brief overview of the government response to COVID-19, and prior gendered patterns in labor force participation, work-family reconciliation and working from home in Australia.

Australian experience and government response to COVID-19

Australia responded to COVID-19 with enforced social distancing measures, national and state border closures, and school and workplace lockdowns, supported with government income maintenance for many whose jobs were lost or threatened. Eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits were relaxed. Job search requirements were lowered, the cap on spousal earnings was raised, and the payment level was doubled to \$1100 a fortnight. A wage subsidy program was implemented, paying employers \$1500 a fortnight for each employee they kept on the payroll. Eligibility excluded employees on casual or short-term contracts who had been with their current employer for less than a year. In Australia, women are disproportionately employed on such contracts. Formal childcare was made temporarily free to parents, because it was suddenly apparent that many frontline workers were women who would be unable to work without childcare. The federal government adjusted the childcare subsidy system, ensuring that services received a weekly ‘business continuity payment’ (DESE 2020). The intervention was both unexpected and welcome, because Australian childcare is amongst the most expensive in the world, nearly five times the European average (Adamson and Brennan 2017).

Australia’s first recorded COVID-19 case was in late January 2020. After an initial spike, spread was contained by the early closures and restrictions. By the end of May, 7184 cases and 103 deaths had been reported. Daily new cases were in single digits. At the same time, economic impacts were severe, with women most affected in job loss, reduced hours and lack of access to the government job retention program (ABS 2020).

Workforce participation and working at home in Australia

Australian women have a high incidence of part time work, comprising 68.2 percent of all part-time employees (ABS 2020). In heterosexual couple-headed households, the usual arrangement is that the male partner works full time and the female partner works part time. The tax system imposes high effective marginal tax rates on the ‘secondary’ earner in couples (Stewart 2017). Women are more likely than men to be employed in ‘casual’ jobs without benefits such as sick and annual leave; nearly 30 percent of female employees are in these types of jobs compared to 23 percent of male employees (ABS 2018). Women are disproportionately in lower paid positions which underutilize their education and skill levels (Charlesworth and MacDonald 2015), in the care sector (73 percent), retail (55 percent), and accommodation/food services (54 percent) (ABS 2018). Expensive childcare and thin work-care reconciliation measures encourage others to become self-employed, often explicitly to be able to work from home and care for children more flexibly (Foley et al., 2018).

Prior to the pandemic, nearly a third of employed Australians sometimes worked at home, with non-gender-disaggregated data showing 42 percent giving their main reason for doing so was ‘to catch up on work’ (ABS 2018). However, research suggests both motivations and experiences of working at home differed by gender (Craig and Powell 2015; Cortis and Powell 2018). For example, it was associated with higher subjective time stress for both men and women, but for different reasons

(Craig and Brown 2017). Compared to the organizationally employed, home-working women did less paid work and more domestic work and care, which amounted to a higher workload overall. They also multitasked more, with many women doing paid work whilst supervising children at the same time. In contrast, men working at home did not do fewer paid work hours, more unpaid work or more multitasking than men working outside the home. They maintained more distinct boundaries between employment and domestic activities than home-working women did. The implication is that more women were motivated to work from home to maximize their care time (Craig and Powell 2015) whilst men were more likely to do so for employment reasons including to keep up with growing work demands (Cortis and Powell 2018).

When working at home was imposed on both men and women due to the sudden external shock of COVID-19, what happened to gendered patterns in unpaid domestic work and care?

Approach and method

We developed an online survey, *Work and Care in the Time of COVID-19*. Between 7th and 30th May 2020, it drew 2,722 responses from a non-probability sample of current Australian residents. Using a convenience sample design, we targeted people living in households with caregiving responsibilities through community and service organizations, professional networks and both traditional and social media. Participants self-selected into the study, which was open to both working and non-working individuals. The sample was skewed towards women and the employed, and towards the tertiary educated, as is characteristic of most online surveys (Kellner 2004). To attenuate this bias, results were weighted using estimates from the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census of Population and Housing to be nationally representative based on age, sex and highest level of education.

The survey asked respondents for demographic information, and about change in their employment arrangements, including their employment status and location before and during the pandemic. 'Before' referred to 'before any COVID-19-related restrictions' and 'during' referred to the time of filling out the survey. Restrictions included social distancing measures, school and business closures and only leaving the house for essential prescribed reasons. See Table A1 for a sample description.

Respondents were asked how many hours they spent in an average day in 1) paid work, 2) care of children, the elderly, sick and/or those living with a disability, and 3) housework and household management. Because care is often multitasked, and its magnitude is underestimated if simultaneous activity is overlooked (Offer and Schneider 2011), we asked about both active and supervisory care. *Active care* was defined as 'hands-on activities such as bathing, feeding, dressing, teaching, playing, soothing, taking people to appointments, and similar activities where you are interacting directly with the other person.' *Supervisory care* was defined as 'time when you are not interacting with the person being cared for but are responsible for them and "on-call" should active care be needed.' *Housework* included activities like cooking, cleaning, repairs and maintenance, shopping, lawn and garden care and laundry, and *household management* activities like scheduling, planning, making shopping lists, and paying bills. We did not request separate time estimates for the component tasks.

To capture subjective feelings about time allocation, respondents were asked questions including 'how often do you feel rushed or pressed for time?'; 'how often do you have too much spare time?'; and 'how satisfied are you with how you divide your time between paid and unpaid work?', which we report on in this paper. Responses were on a five-point Likert scale, from 'always' to 'never' on the first two questions, and from 'extremely dissatisfied' to 'extremely satisfied' on the third. All questions were asked first in relation to before COVID-19 restrictions were imposed, and then during the lockdown at the time of being surveyed. An open-ended question asked respondents to comment

on anything else about domestic labor, care and COVID that they wished to add, and we present selected responses to illustrate some of the findings.

To determine whether gender differences were statistically significant before and during COVID-19 we conducted t-tests on the reports of time, and chi-square tests of independence on the subjective measures. We ran OLS regression models to test the effect of COVID on unpaid work accounting for individual and household characteristics: education (tertiary=1, no tertiary=0), employment status (full-time (omitted)/ part-time/ not employed), indicator variables of whether the respondent's household contained children under 17 (yes=1), persons who were sick (yes=1) or persons needing assistance with daily living (yes=1), relationship status (partnered=1, single=0), immigrant status (born overseas=1, born in Australia=0), location (regional/rural=1, urban=0), age and age squared.

Results

Table 1 shows the work status and location of employed men and women before COVID-19 and during the restrictions. About 90 percent were in the same position at both time points. Both before and during the pandemic there was significant gender difference in full or part time status. These narrowed during COVID, however, largely because the proportion of men in part time employment rose whilst the proportion of women in part time employment stayed steady. This suggests that overall more jobs became part time. There were also gender differences in the location of work. Before COVID, 70 percent of men worked away from home, compared to just under two-thirds of women. During COVID, most respondents were working at home, although slightly more men than women (73% vs 69%). Together with a slightly higher share of women than men (27% vs 23%) working away from home, or both at home and away, this suggests more women than men had jobs that required their presence in essential services exempted from lockdown.

Table 1 Changes in employment status and location before and during COVID-19 (employed men and women)

| | Pre-COVID | | During COVID | |
|--|-----------|-------|--------------|-------|
| | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| Employed in same job since COVID-19 began | | | | |
| <i>Yes, and still working</i> | | | 91.86 | 90.83 |
| <i>Yes, but stood down</i> | | | 2.71 | 3.21 |
| <i>No, out of work</i> | | | 3.10 | 3.47 |
| <i>No, have different job</i> | | | 2.33 | 2.50 |
| <i>Chi-sq test</i> | | | n.s | |
| Employment status | | | | |
| <i>Employed, full-time</i> | 83.19 | 52.77 | 74.78 | 50.23 |
| <i>Employed, part-time</i> | 16.81 | 47.23 | 25.22 | 49.77 |
| <i>Chi-sq test</i> | *** | | *** | |
| Location of paid work | | | | |
| <i>At home</i> | 4.25 | 5.80 | 72.87 | 68.98 |
| <i>At a workplace away from home</i> | 70.27 | 64.89 | 11.63 | 12.27 |
| <i>Both at home and away</i> | 25.10 | 29.06 | 11.63 | 13.83 |
| <i>Neither</i> | 0.39 | 0.25 | 3.88 | 4.92 |
| <i>Chi-sq test</i> | *** | | *** | |

Source: Work and Care in the Time of COVID-19 (2020)

Note: *p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

Time in paid and unpaid work before and during COVID-19

Against this background of substantial change in work location, we examined respondents' time allocation to paid and unpaid work activities. T-tests show significant differences between men and women (see Table 2).

Pre-COVID, men averaged more paid work hours than women per day (6.52 vs 5.91). At the time of being surveyed, work hours had dropped, but the average gender difference remained the same at around 10 percent across the period of analysis. Women spent significantly more daily hours in housework and household management than men (2.11 vs 1.7) before COVID. During lockdown men were doing about 40 minutes and women were doing about an hour more than before. The gender gap had increased slightly, from 22 to 24 percent.

Table 2 Respondents' mean hours a day in paid and unpaid work

| Activity | Pre-COVID | | | During COVID | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| | Men | Women | Sig diff | Men | Women | Sig diff |
| Paid work | 6.52 | 5.91 | *** | 5.99 | 5.44 | *** |
| Housework/household management | 1.7 | 2.11 | *** | 2.37 | 3.02 | *** |
| Active care | | | | | | |
| <i>Children</i> | 1.66 | 2.83 | *** | 2.75 | 4.18 | *** |
| <i>Elderly</i> | 0.11 | 0.15 | | 0.09 | 0.22 | ** |
| <i>Sick/disabled persons</i> | 0.13 | 0.14 | | 0.18 | 0.21 | |
| TOTAL AS PRIMARY ACTIVITY | 10.12 | 11.4 | *** | 11.38 | 13.07 | *** |
| Supervisory care | | | | | | |
| <i>Children</i> | 1.43 | 2.53 | *** | 2.5 | 3.78 | *** |
| <i>Elderly</i> | 0.16 | 0.15 | | 0.14 | 0.23 | |
| <i>Sick/disabled persons</i> | 0.14 | 0.14 | | 0.21 | 0.23 | |
| TOTAL SUPERVISORY CARE | 1.73 | 2.82 | *** | 2.85 | 4.24 | *** |

Source: Work and Care in the Time of COVID-19 (2020)

Note: *p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

Before COVID-19, women averaged 52 percent more daily hours actively caring for children than men did (2.83 vs 1.66). During lockdown men were averaging just over an hour more, and women were averaging an hour and 20 minutes more. This brought men's active childcare to just less than women's active childcare had been before the pandemic, but because the proportional rise for men (43%) was higher than for women (33%), the *relative* gender difference narrowed to about 41 percent. On average, men and women spent similar, small amounts of time caring for others and the elderly before COVID. During lockdown, women were doing more active care for the elderly, creating a small but statistically significant gender gap (see Table 2).

As was the case for active care, prior to COVID-19, women averaged more daily hours than men in supervisory care activities (2.82 vs 1.73). During lockdown, women's time in supervisory care had risen by an hour and three-quarters and men's supervisory care had risen by an hour and ten minutes, to respective totals of 4.24 vs 2.85 hours. Most of this was childcare, the rise in which brought men's time to just less than women's time had been pre-COVID. The changes narrowed the relative gender difference from 47 percent pre-COVID to 39 percent during COVID, despite the absolute difference nearly doubling from just over an hour to just under two hours.

We ran OLS regression models on each of the categories of unpaid labor on the whole sample, which confirmed that all else equal, women's unpaid labor time increased significantly more in the

pandemic than did men's (results not shown). Considerable gender difference was explained by individual and household characteristics, which can exert greater influence or pull in opposite directions for men and women, so we show stratified gender models in Table 3.

Net of covariates, men and women were both estimated to do about an hour more each of active and supervisory care during the pandemic than they had before, and respectively 40 and 50 minutes more housework and household management. Within-gender associations between tertiary education and time in care and domestic labor were positive for men, but negative for women, consistent with prior research finding more-equal unpaid work amongst the more highly educated (Baxter, Hewitt, and Western 2005; Sullivan 2010). Compared to having a fulltime job, being employed part time or not employed predicted more time in unpaid labor, with the estimated magnitude of the positive associations higher for women than for men. Similarly, having co-resident care recipients predicted larger time increases for women than men. This was expected given a body of work finding that women's domestic labor and care are more responsive to household composition and demand than is men's (see Bianchi and Milkie 2010 for an overview). The other covariates also predicted significant variation in the same direction for both genders. Exceptions were that partnered men and men born overseas were estimated to do slightly more active care than their non-partnered or non-immigrant counterparts, whereas the opposite was the case for women, suggesting slightly more gender equality in these groups.

Table 3. OLS regression estimates for men’s and women’s hours a day in active care, supervisory care and housework/household management

| | <i>Active Care</i> | | | | <i>Supervisory Care</i> | | | | <i>Housework/household management</i> | | | | |
|---|--------------------|------------|--------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|--------------|------------|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------|------------|-----|
| | <i>Men</i> | | <i>Women</i> | | <i>Men</i> | | <i>Women</i> | | <i>Men</i> | | <i>Women</i> | | |
| | <i>B</i> | <i>Sig</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Sig</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Sig</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Sig</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Sig</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Sig</i> | |
| Intercept | 0.19 | *** | 1.51 | *** | 0.69 | *** | 1.55 | *** | 1.74 | *** | 2.12 | *** | |
| COVID-19 (ref: pre-COVID) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>During COVID</i> | 0.99 | *** | 0.91 | *** | 1.12 | *** | 1.01 | *** | 0.69 | *** | 0.87 | *** | |
| Education (ref: no tertiary qualifications) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Has tertiary qualifications</i> | 0.48 | *** | -0.57 | *** | 0.39 | ** | -0.25 | ** | 0.35 | *** | -0.39 | *** | |
| Employment status (ref: employed full time) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Employed part time</i> | 0.68 | *** | 1.49 | *** | 0.20 | *** | 0.75 | *** | 0.37 | *** | 0.49 | *** | |
| <i>Not in the labour force</i> | 0.46 | *** | 1.46 | *** | 0.51 | *** | 0.71 | *** | 0.76 | *** | 1.33 | *** | |
| Household contains | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Children under 17</i> | 2.59 | *** | 3.08 | ** | 1.97 | *** | 2.73 | *** | 0.03 | *** | 0.52 | *** | |
| <i>Sick persons</i> | 0.03 | *** | 0.32 | ** | 1.28 | ** | 1.42 | *** | 0.40 | *** | 0.30 | *** | |
| <i>Persons needing assistance with daily living</i> | 1.56 | ** | 2.03 | *** | 1.30 | *** | 1.91 | *** | 0.26 | ** | 0.37 | ** | |
| Relationship status (ref: single) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Partnered</i> | 0.09 | *** | -0.12 | *** | -0.20 | *** | -0.55 | *** | - | 0.10 | *** | -0.20 | ** |
| Immigrant status (ref: born in Australia) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Born overseas</i> | 0.03 | ** | -0.08 | *** | -0.34 | ** | -0.41 | *** | - | 0.25 | *** | -0.12 | *** |
| Location (ref: urban) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Regional/rural</i> | 0.54 | *** | 0.44 | *** | 0.52 | *** | 0.90 | ** | - | 0.24 | ** | -0.07 | *** |
| Age | 0.01 | ** | 0.00 | *** | 0.03 | *** | 0.01 | ** | 0.03 | *** | 0.01 | *** | |
| Age square | 0.00 | ** | 0.00 | ** | 0.00 | *** | 0.00 | *** | 0.00 | *** | 0.00 | *** | |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.45 | | 0.40 | | 0.30 | | 0.27 | | 0.22 | | 0.13 | | |

Source: Work and Care in the Time of COVID-19 (2020)

Note: *p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

We now explore whether the changes in time allocation were reflected in respondents' subjective feelings about how they spent their time.

Subjective feelings about time allocation before and during COVID-19

In Table 4, chi-square tests indicate that gender differences in the subjective measures were statistically significant at the less than one-percent level. There were also substantial differences before and during COVID-19, with some contrasting patterns for men and women.

First, results indicate narrowed gender gaps in time stress. Just over seven percent of men 'always' felt rushed before COVID, compared to 14 percent during the restrictions. Women did not report the same change; both before and during COVID-19, 15 percent of them always felt rushed. So, for a significant subset of women, extreme time pressure remained constant, and for a significant subset of men, extreme time pressure increased to match that of women. This is perhaps because making a care contribution closer to women's pre-pandemic input was a strain.

However, for most respondents, subjective time pressure eased. The proportion who 'often' felt rushed dropped 25 points for women and 14 points for men. We observed a corresponding increase in 'seldom' or 'never' feeling rushed, particularly for women, whose proportion in these two categories combined was three times higher during COVID than before it. As a result, the gender gap closed from over ten points pre-COVID to almost no difference during it. In open-ended comments some respondents linked relief from time pressure to the reduced need to ferry children around, or to commute for work, one saying for example 'Without the stress of peak hour commutes taking up to an hour each direction, we now have more time for our housework, our health, and each other.'

Supplementing the time pressure results, about 35 percent of women reported 'never' having too much spare time and this was constant over the period of analysis. In contrast, the proportion of men who reported never having too much spare time rose from 26 to 30 percent, narrowing the gender gap on this measure from nine to four percentage points. Before COVID, 40 percent of men and 45 percent of women reported 'seldom' having too much spare time. For both men and women, this fell by about 17 points across the period of analysis, likely reflecting the increased domestic and care hours noted above.

Table 4 Respondents' subjective time pressure and satisfaction (%)

| | Pre-COVID | | During COVID | |
|--|-----------|-------|--------------|-------|
| | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| I feel rushed or pressed for time | | | | |
| <i>Never</i> | 3.04 | 3.65 | 7.31 | 8.62 |
| <i>Seldom</i> | 18.49 | 8.34 | 26.4 | 26.25 |
| <i>Sometimes</i> | 35.77 | 29.59 | 29.4 | 30.71 |
| <i>Often</i> | 35.38 | 44.27 | 21.88 | 19.11 |
| <i>Always</i> | 7.33 | 14.15 | 15.00 | 15.3 |
| Chi-sq test | *** | | *** | |
| I have too much spare time | | | | |
| <i>Never</i> | 26.46 | 35.05 | 30.87 | 34.51 |
| <i>Seldom</i> | 40.4 | 45.73 | 23.45 | 27.23 |
| <i>Sometimes</i> | 29.16 | 16.93 | 28.54 | 23.12 |
| <i>Often</i> | 2.84 | 2.06 | 15.24 | 13.81 |
| <i>Always</i> | 1.14 | 0.22 | 1.90 | 1.33 |
| Chi-sq test | *** | | *** | |
| Regarding how I divide my time between paid and unpaid work, I am | | | | |
| <i>Extremely dissatisfied</i> | 1.53 | 4.16 | 7.5 | 14.48 |
| <i>Somewhat dissatisfied</i> | 19.08 | 28.91 | 22.89 | 25.71 |
| <i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i> | 25.24 | 22.49 | 20.89 | 20.2 |
| <i>Somewhat satisfied</i> | 39.38 | 32.13 | 32.37 | 27.84 |
| <i>Extremely satisfied</i> | 14.77 | 12.32 | 16.35 | 11.77 |
| Chi-sq test | *** | | *** | |

Source: Work and Care in the time of COVID-19 (2020)

Note: *p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001.

Before COVID, only 1.5 percent of men and four percent of women reported being 'extremely' dissatisfied with how they divided their time between paid and unpaid work. During lockdown this had risen to eight and 14 percent for men and women, respectively. So, extreme dissatisfaction rose, and the gender gap on this measure widened. There were, however, slight falls in the percentage of men feeling 'somewhat' dissatisfied, thus that overall, the share of men who reported being 'extremely' or 'somewhat' dissatisfied rose from 20 percent before COVID to 29 percent during the restrictions. The proportion of women reporting similarly rose from 32 to 40 percent, thus that the gender gap across the two categories combined was at just over 10 percentage points at both time points. Conversely, prior to the pandemic, 54 percent of men and 44 percent of women had been 'extremely' or 'somewhat' satisfied with how they divided their time between paid and unpaid work. This amounted to a gender gap of 10 percent on these two categories combined, with substantially fewer women satisfied than men. Under lockdown, the proportions feeling extremely or somewhat satisfied fell to 49 percent and 40 percent of men and women, respectively, still a difference of about 10 percentage points.

Overall, the subjective results reflect both the extra domestic burden for all, and the continued higher unpaid workload shouldered by women during the pandemic. Before COVID, more women than men suffered extreme time stress and found their division of paid and unpaid work time unsatisfactory. The concentration of work and care together in one location during the pandemic seems to have made more men feel this way too, whilst also further increasing both the unpaid workload and dissatisfaction of women.

Discussion and conclusion

Crises can starkly expose longstanding and systemic social problems, and this has been the case with COVID-19 and gendered divisions of labor. Suddenly households were faced with juggling paid work and care at the same time, in the same place, all together, amidst heightened stress and fear. This extraordinary upheaval has implications for households, workplaces and governments.

First, the results show that when substantial extra unpaid work was unexpectedly dropped onto households, men pitched in more. But they also revealed limits to the relative gender equality that produced. For example, there was more malleability in divisions of care work than in divisions of housework. This contrast has also been evident in trends over time and attributed to norms around childcare being less rigid than those around housework (Sullivan et. al. 2018). It could also be because, for many, care-giving is more rewarding than housework, and men have more domestic power to choose the amount and type of contribution they make (Connell 2009). Moreover, in 'normal' times, fathers do less routine physical childcare, and are less often in sole charge of children, or responsible for the mental load of planning and managing unpaid labor than women (Offer and Schneider 2011; Craig 2006). Because during lockdown many parents were home together, partnered men could have followed prior practices of 'joining in' rather than 'taking over' childcare from their spouse, and thus found it preferable to doing housework.

Notwithstanding, the lockdown did generate more multitasking, as well as more unpaid work, for women *and* men. This contrasts with prior findings about home-working in Australia (Craig and Powell 2015) and suggests that in the unusual circumstances of being home all day with children, more men were actively juggling work and care, as were women. But the much greater overall dissatisfaction with paid and unpaid work suggests the experience may not have lasting positive effects on gender equality in domestic divisions of labor. For women, the rise in relative equity did not compensate for the burden of the extra work the pandemic caused; doing a slightly lower share of a much larger workload did not make it satisfactory. And whilst men's heightened exposure to domestic demands could shift norms and encourage them to continue pitching in (Alon et al 2020), it is also likely that many will prefer to return to the pre-pandemic practices with which they were much more satisfied than women.

Even if individuals and households would like to make ongoing changes, it would require concomitant shifts in systemic and structural factors that underpin the organization of paid and unpaid work. One of these is employment demands. It is possible that in future more employers will allow working at home, since the lockdowns have demonstrated that it is feasible, at least for many white-collar jobs. This could help retain an upside of lockdown we have identified, that many people were less time stressed. As noted above, some respondents linked this to not having to commute. However, others reported that workplace expectations remained high. For example, 'My workplace made 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'. Home-working can transfer financial costs, such as for electricity, telephony and office equipment, from employers to employees (Cortis and Powell 2018). Similarly, requiring the same output from home-based workers notwithstanding domestic responsibilities imposes the time and stress costs of conflicting demands upon employees. The invisibility of care to employers will further disadvantage care-givers, especially women.

Moreover, early hope that the pandemic could generate lasting government recognition that care is fundamental to the economy, and lead to ongoing policy change to benefit women, is fading. Free childcare was the first national support measure to be wound back when lockdowns eased; it ended in mid-July. The intervention had been essential to many families, with respondents variously

describing it as a ‘game changer’, a god-send’ or a ‘lifeline’. There was strong and widespread public advocacy that lower fees should be instituted ongoing, as vitally necessary social infrastructure to underpin women’s employment (Tuohy 2020). Supporting female jobs is especially critical given that by the end of July, job loss was highest in the female-dominated care, retail and personal service industries. Employment had fallen 5.3 percent for women, and 3.9 percent for men; working hours had fallen 11.5 percent for women and 7.5 percent for men (Richardson and Dennis 2020). Yet thus far stimulus spending priority has been given to construction and physical infrastructure projects that will predominantly benefit male jobs (DITRDC 2020).

With many schools still closed, childcare no longer free, jobs scarcer and female employment disproportionately affected, the overwhelming probability is that more women will shoulder the unpaid work at home. Like the US, Australia is facing a care crisis, and the possibility that advances in women’s equality will be severely curtailed or go backwards (Stevenson 2020). However, COVID-19 could still open new opportunity to reshape workplace and social policies, because there is growing recognition that workplace precarity has seriously exacerbated the health crisis. A major resurgence in Australian COVID cases in late July has been linked in part to casual shift workers feeling compelled to go to work even when ill. The aged care sector, with predominantly low paid female workers on variable shifts across multiple facilities, has been particularly hard hit. This is again concentrating policy makers’ minds. Lockdowns have been reinstated in the state of Victoria, where the resurgence is most acute. New ‘pandemic leave’ allowances have been announced, and some aspects of the government job retention program and the top-up to unemployment benefit, which were due to be phased out in September, will now be extended. Going forward, granular policy analysis will be necessary to see how helpful specific measures were, whether and how they worked for people across different socio-economic circumstances, and emergency responses and social protection programs may need to be redesigned.

Overall, the findings here imply that without making care a social issue, not a private matter for individuals to solve, gendered divisions of labor will change little post-pandemic. Indeed, without direct public policy attention and support to the care economy, both paid and unpaid, we are likely to see wider rather than narrower gender disparity. But crises are important opportunities for change and given the fluid state of the pandemic, it is still possible COVID-19 could prove to be a liminal moment leading to more sustainable and inclusive policy approaches.

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Table A1 Sample description (means and proportions)

| Variable | Men | Women |
|--|------------|--------------|
| Household composition ^a | | |
| <i>Living with an opposite-sex partner</i> | 85.57 | 84.54 |
| <i>Living with a same-sex partner</i> | 11.41 | 5.78 |
| <i>Living with trans or non-binary partner</i> | 1.43 | 0.39 |
| <i>Living with other family members 18 years or older</i> | 32.02 | 30.81 |
| <i>Living with housemates</i> | 7.35 | 6.14 |
| <i>Living with children aged between 0 and 4</i> | 38.92 | 44.66 |
| <i>Living with children aged between 5 and 12</i> | 54.95 | 63.37 |
| <i>Living with children aged between 13 and 17</i> | 30.81 | 36.10 |
| Persons in household who are sick | 4.93 | 4.81 |
| Persons in household needing assistance with activities | 12.13 | 17.23 |
| Average number of people in household | 3.26 (.06) | 3.39 (0.02) |
| Held job prior to COVID-19 related restrictions | 90.03 | 87.74 |
| Average weekly earnings before COVID-19 | 1289.38 | 1051.43 |
| Average weekly earnings during COVID-19 | 1193.87 | 977.06 |
| Average age of respondent | 44 (.6) | 44 (.6) |
| Country of birth | | |
| <i>Australia</i> | 78.78 | 80.82 |
| <i>Other</i> | 21.22 | 19.18 |
| Location | | |
| <i>Urban</i> | 83.33 | 77.61 |
| <i>Regional</i> | 12.18 | 16.88 |
| <i>Rural</i> | 4.49 | 5.51 |
| Highest level of educational qualifications | | |
| <i>Bachelor's degree or higher (incl. Masters, PhD)</i> | 79.68 | 86.30 |
| <i>Graduate diploma, graduate certificate</i> | 7.74 | 7.29 |
| <i>Certificate I, II, III</i> | 6.45 | 3.87 |
| <i>Year 12 or below</i> | 6.13 | 2.54 |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status | | |
| <i>Does identify as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander origin</i> | 99.0 | 99.0 |
| <i>Does not identify as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander origin</i> | 1.0 | 1.0 |

Notes: ^a Percentages do not add up to 100

Source: Work and Care in the time of COVID-19 (2020)