

**Paid and Unpaid Work during COVID-19.  
A Study on the Effects of Lockdown Measures in Italy**

Erica Aloè, Marcella Corsi, Alessandra De Rose, Marina Zannella  
[MinervaLab, Sapienza University of Rome](#)

**Abstract:** On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. At that time, Italy was the first country after China to undergo restrictive measures due to the pandemic, and school closures lasted longer than in other countries, consequently.

This paper relies on data stemming from a web-survey carried out in the period from May to June 2020 (with 1,000 participants) to explore how the lockdown measures were affecting family life and the division of care/domestic work within the household. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to report their feelings associated to unpaid work activities during the lockdown too.

The analysis highlights that lockdown measures had an impact on the total workload borne by women, but also on the division of unpaid care work within the household. Women reported that their partners slightly increased their share of unpaid care and domestic work during the lockdown. However, the change in the use of time during lockdown does not suggest that a stable change in the division of unpaid work has occurred, so to achieve a rebalancing of family roles (parental and non-parental). The lack of rebalancing shows its effects, on the subjective wellbeing perceived by women: they reported more stress and tiredness in association to paid and unpaid work activities while, only in relation to childcare, the majority of mothers highlighted to have experienced a greater sense of meaningfulness.

**Key words:** unpaid care and domestic work, COVID-19, time use, survey, gender division of work

## **1. Introduction**

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown did not represent only a danger in economic terms but also a threat for what concerns the process toward gender equality (Bahn et al., 2020).

On March 2020, Italy was the first European country to impose a nationwide lockdown followed, later, by social distancing measures. The lockdown lasted 69 days. Moreover, schools have been closed nationwide for in-person activities until the end of the school year (June), a relatively longer period compared to most OECD countries where schools began to re-open in April and May (OECD, 2020).

Several phenomena have affected the use of time at household level:

- closure of schools, with pupils having to bring forward school programs at home;
- suspension of non-necessary activities, affecting formal and informal sectors;
- introduction of remote work (so called '*smart working*') where it was possible;
- introduction of various limitations to people mobility.

The pandemic generated several compounding crises harming the economy and the well-being of people in addition to health. It has soon been evident that the consequences of these crises were not gender-neutral but were disproportionately attributed to women.<sup>1</sup>

The unavailability of paid services (such as laundries, restaurants, baby-sitters, carers, etc.) as well as the impossibility to benefit from informal care (e.g., by grandparents) contributed to create more unpaid work within the households during the pandemic. This “extra” work fell disproportionately onto women, exacerbating the already existing inequalities in the gender division of unpaid work (Raile et al., 2020). In particular, the shift to remote-work and the unavailability of formal and informal care have reduced the time available to mothers for paid work.

Andrew et al. (2020) shows, by using survey data collected in the UK, that during the pandemic women bore the brunt of the increased time needed for household chores and childcare. Findings from the study highlight that mothers, who stopped working in the labor market, did far more domestic work than fathers in the equivalent situation. These results seem to suggest that asymmetries in the gender allocation of the extra-amount of domestic work created by the pandemic cannot be explained as a sole effect of gender differences in employment and earnings, but mostly depend on social norms regulating gender roles as well as expectations on motherhood.

## **2 The gender division of labor in Italy**

---

<sup>1</sup> Women account for 70% of the global health workforce and are, therefore, at higher risks of infection. They are more exposed to job and economic insecurity than men and face increased risks of violence and abuse (OECD, 2020). Moreover, women continue to bear the burden of family care and to do most of the unpaid family work increased by stay-at-home recommendations, quarantine, lockdown periods and school closures.

In the literature, even before the pandemic, it was observed that women with young children reported more fragmented working time, reduced ability to complete a task and, thus, lower productivity (Adams, 2020). Women's work-life balance differs according to whether children are in early childhood, middle childhood or the early teen years. A research using the Australian Time Use Survey (Craig and Sawrikar, 2009) found that the responsibility for childcare falls more on women than on men, even if, as the age of children increases, the division of labor is more equal between the partners, and, with less pressing domestic burdens, mothers feel less stressed. Nonetheless, this is not the result of the redistribution of work within the couple but the effect of women recalibrating their commitments to paid and unpaid work (at home).

Empirical evidence from the latest Time Use Survey (TUS) available for Italy (year 2013/4) reveals the existence of a gender gap of more than 9h per week in the total amount of time devoted by women to work activities compared to men (Aloè, 2020). Not only the number of working hours but also their composition considerably differs by gender. Men spend on average 25h per week on paid work and 12.1h per week on unpaid family work, while women devote 14.1h and 32.4h per week respectively to paid and unpaid work activities. Looking at employed people, gender differences in the amount and in the composition of time devoted to work activities are even more pronounced. Employed women work an average of 57.7h per week, that are virtually equally distributed between paid and unpaid tasks. The same is not true for men. The total number of hours per week worked by employed men is 49.3, of which 36.8h are devoted to paid work. Indeed, men's use of time for unpaid family work does not change much according to their employment status and to the number of hours worked into the labor market.

Considerable gender differences are found also in the quantity and composition of time devoted to childcare by parents. For instance, Italian women perform more routine care tasks, spend more time alone with children, are more likely to multitask childcare and housework and to enjoy parenting time less than men (Zannella and De Rose, 2020). On average, mothers spend 17.1h per week and fathers 10.5h per week on childcare activities. The greater amount of childcare time is spent by mothers on physical care and supervising activities (44.4%), followed by travel-related activities (25.7%) consisting of picking up and dropping off children. Recreational care (e.g., playing with the child, talking with the child, etc.) and educational activities (helping the child doing the homework, correcting homework, etc.) make up, respectively, 19.9% and 9.9% of mothers' childcare time. Recreational care represents the greatest share of fathers' childcare time (41.9%), followed by physical care and supervising (26.7%), travel-related care (24.8%) and educational care (6.7%). Indeed, Italian mothers spend considerably more time in routine

care activities than fathers, who in turn spend a higher proportion of their childcare time in interaction-based activities such as talking and playing with the child.

These are recurring results in the literature, that has demonstrated parenting time to be considerably gendered virtually everywhere (Craig, 2006; Craig and Powell, 2011). The gendered nature of parenting time is reflected also in the subjective experience of mothers' and fathers' time with children. Despite childcare is usually reported as a positive experience by both parents, time use literature has demonstrated fathers to enjoy childcare time more than mothers (Connelly and Kimmel, 2015; Musick et al., 2016). Furthermore, among the different type of childcare activities performed, routine care is likely to bring less enjoyment to parents compared to recreational ones (Mc Donnell et al., 2019).

Paternity and parental leaves may play a major role in the way fathers perceive their care responsibilities (Craig and Sawrikar, 2009; Romero-Balsas et al., 2013). Fathers' satisfaction with their work-family balance increases with their participation in childcare and the support that they receive by their workplace to access family-friendly work policies (Craig and Sawrikar, 2009), and, even if the decision whether to use or not the paternity leave is seen by most fathers as an individual decision rather than a duty, the longer is the leave the likelier fathers will consider it as a duty within their families (Romero-Balsas et al., 2013).

### **3. Survey**

To carry out our survey, we used the questionnaire developed by Donehower (2020) as a base. We translated the original questions from English into Italian, and we adapted them to the purposes of our study adjusting some of them and adding a few new questions. The final survey - structured in multiple choice questions - consisted of nine sections: household composition, health status, paid work (own and partner's), unpaid care work (active and passive), unpaid domestic work, informal help to/from other households, division of unpaid care work and unpaid domestic work within the household, feelings, socio-demographic information. Several questions - especially those about time use - asked the respondents to report information referring to their conditions before the pandemic, during the lockdown and at the moment in which they responded to the survey.

Responses were collected from May 22<sup>nd</sup> and June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The lockdown in Italy ended on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and was followed by a so called 'phase two', which still implied several restrictions, including the school closure. The online questionnaire was open to anyone who was at least 18 years old while completing the survey and resident in Italy. The survey collected 1008 observations, reduced to 979 when the dataset was cleaned from missing and invalid responses.

Our analysis focuses on the 810 women that responded to the questionnaire:<sup>2</sup> 74.6% of women respondents lived with their partner (married or unmarried), and 37.9% with at least one child below 18 years old (this includes both own and partner's children). Concerning the level of education, 24.7% of them had up to college degree, 38.4% had a bachelor's degree, and 36.9% had a level of education higher than a bachelor's degree. Half of women with minor children are 35-44 years old (49.8%), while women without minor children are older (slightly more than half of them, 52.5%, aged between 50 and 64 years old).

The findings presented in the following section concentrate on the increased care burden due to lockdown measures and highlight the different impact that such measures had on women that lived with children below 18 years old compared to other women.

#### **4. Main findings**

The dataset is mainly composed by women with a high level of education (three fourth of them have a level of education higher than college). This is mirrored by a high reported employment rate among them before February 23rd, 2020 (the beginning date of the lockdown in Italy): 93.8% of the women with minor children and 80.1% of the women without minor children had an employment. Additionally, among women without minor children there is a relevant percentage, 9.3%, of retired persons. In fact, as highlighted in the previous section, in our dataset women without minor children are older.

In the dataset only 5 women among the 691 that reported to be employed before the COVID-19 crisis lost their job during the lockdown. However, redundancy did not represent the only risk of losing one's wage, and our data shows that around 13% of women reported that their employers suspended their activity. In fact, when we look at those women that held an employment before the COVID-19 crisis the average reported a decrease in weekly hours devoted to paid work from over 32 hours per week before the pandemic to around 27.5 hours per week during the lockdown, and on average reported a decrease in monthly net wages from 1,883.3 to 1,682.3 euro. Concerning the situation after the end of the lockdown, the paid work condition slightly improved with a reported weekly time of just above 29 hours and a monthly net wage of 1,705 euro on average.

The survey also gathered detailed information about the time devoted by each respondent to unpaid work in the household. In this context, it becomes relevant to observe the differences between women that live with a minor children and other women. In fact, the answers that we collected highlight that, during the

---

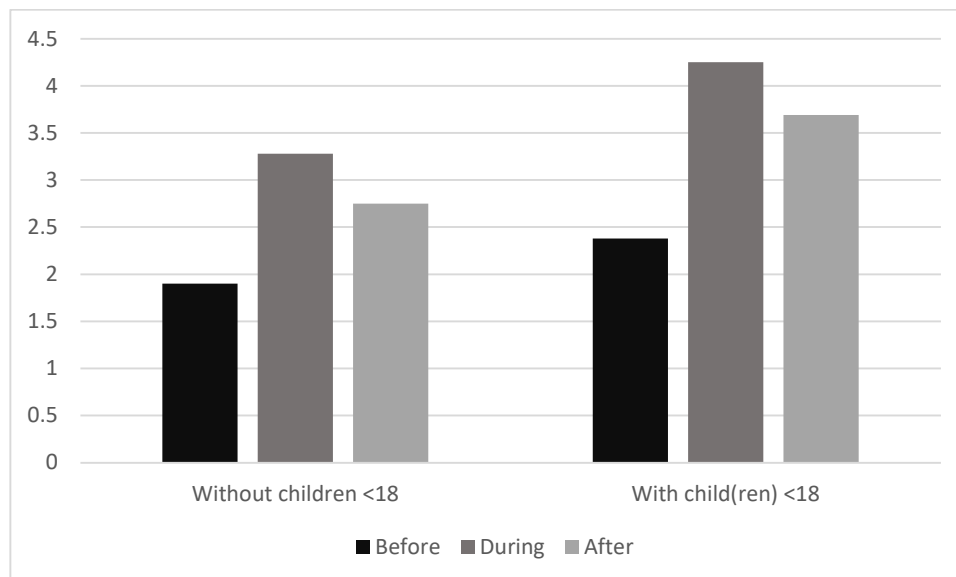
<sup>2</sup> For a socio-demographic description of the sample by sex, see table A.1 in the Appendix.

lockdown, but also after it, all women were forced to increase the amount of time that they devoted to unpaid domestic work, and that women that live with at least one minor child not only had to increase the amount of unpaid domestic work time more than women without children, but they also had to increase the amount of time devoted to unpaid childcare.

Figure 1 shows that during the lockdown for women without minor children the unpaid domestic work time increased from just below 2 hours per day to more than 3 hours (+72 percent), while for women with minor children from almost 2.5 hours per day to almost 4 hours (+78 percent). For both categories of women, the time devoted to unpaid domestic work decreased after the end of the lockdown, but it remained sensibly above the pre-pandemic level.

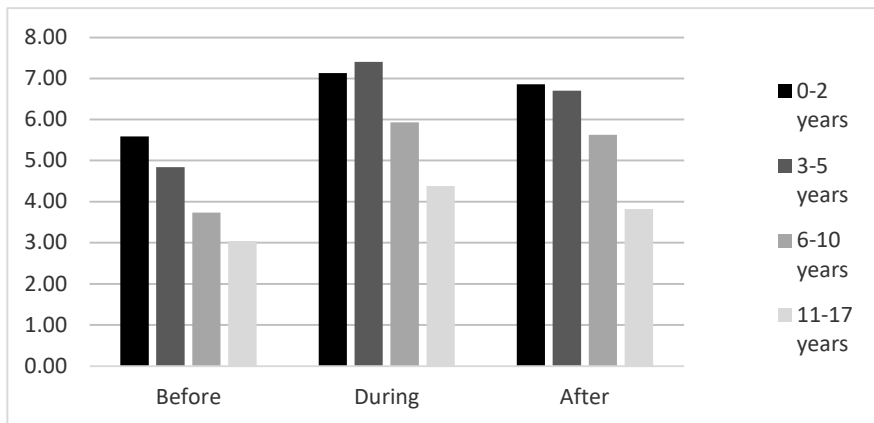
For what concerns time devoted to childcare, figure 2 shows that for women with small children (under 5 years old) during the lockdown childcare time became equal to a full-time job, more than 7 hours per day. Women with older children devoted to childcare less time than women with smaller children -around 6 hours per day with children between 6 and 10 years old and around 4 hours per day with children between 11 and 17 years old. It is relevant to notice that after the end of the lockdown the time devoted to childcare decreased only slightly and this was caused by the fact that all schools in Italy remained closed until September.

**Figure 1: Women's average daily hours of domestic work**



Source: authors' survey

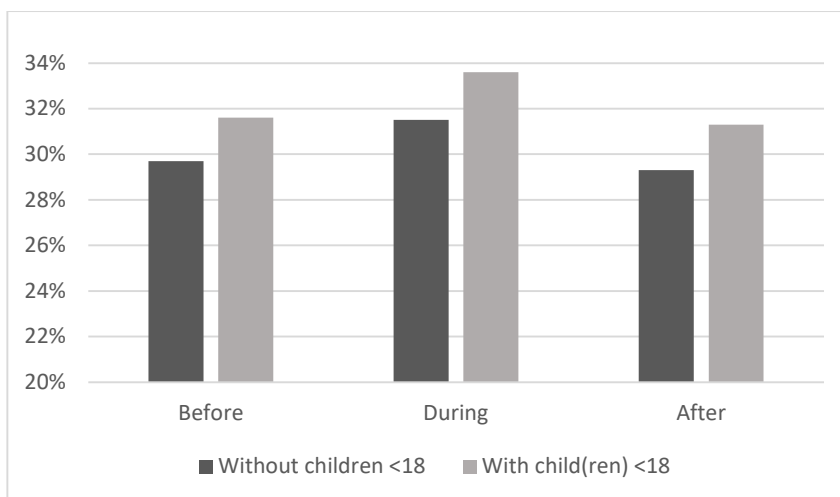
**Figure 2: Women's average daily hours devoted to childcare by age of the youngest child**



Source: authors' survey

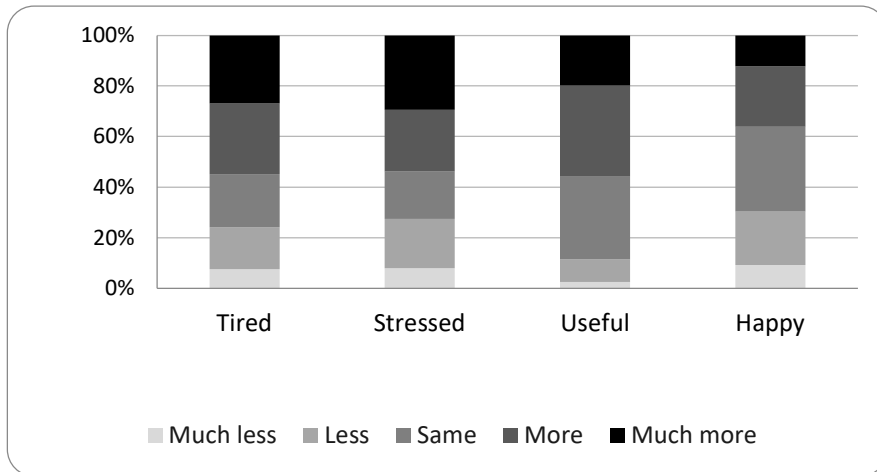
The survey asked each respondent to report the approximate share of the total household's unpaid care and domestic work performed by the partner if present. The results revealed that on average the male partner's share of unpaid care and domestic work is around 30% (see figure 3). During the lockdown this share slightly increased, and for men with children under 18 years old it reached almost 34%. However, after the end of the lockdown the male partner's share of unpaid care and domestic work returned to its pre-pandemic level.

**Figure 3: Partner's average share of unpaid care and domestic work**



Source: authors' survey

**Figure 4: Did you feel more or less ... than usual while caring for children during the lockdown?**



Source: authors' survey

These increased work burdens and unequal sharing on unpaid work are reflected in the feelings that women respondents reported. Most women reported to feel more stressed (58.8%) and 50.1% to be more tired, during the lockdown compared to “usual” times, while performing paid work activities. Around 48% of women reported to feel more tired about domestic work during the lockdown and the percentage increases to more than 60% among women with minor children. Most mothers of minor children reported to be more stressed (54%) and tired (55%) doing childcare, however, about 56% reported more feelings of meaningfulness associated to childcare giving (Figure 4). Results for happiness are more mixed: with 30% and 36% of women feeling, respectively, more and less happy in relation to childcare during the lockdown than usual. Among women who reported more stress associated to childcare, responses were concentrated on the response modality indicating more intense changes (“much more”), while the opposite is true for positive feelings (meaningfulness and happiness) for which women reported to have experiences more moderate changes.

## 5. Conclusions

Our data show that in Italy women became time and income poorer during the first phase of the pandemic. Women experienced a decrease of hours of paid work and of average salaries. Women were also required to provide more unpaid care and domestic work (in particular, those with children). Women reported that their partners only slightly increased their share of unpaid care and domestic work during the lockdown and that they returned to their pre-lockdown share soon after.



This change in the use of time during the pandemic does not seem to suggest that a real and stable change in the division of unpaid work has been triggered, so to achieve a rebalancing of roles, parental and non-parental. The lack of rebalancing shows its effects, in our investigation, also on the subjective wellbeing experienced during phase 1 of the emergency. Women, especially those with minor children, reported to feel more stress and tiredness in association to paid and unpaid work activities while, only in relation to childcare, the majority of women highlighted to have experienced a greater sense of meaningfulness.

A caveat of the quantitative approach used in this study, is that the sample on which our assessment was based is not representative of the full population. Working women were overrepresented in our sample, as well as those with an educational attainment higher than the bachelor's degree. Nevertheless, women with lower educational attainments were fairly represented in the sample.

Despite this caveat, results from our survey can help to broadening the understanding of the effects of the pandemic on women's lives. In fact, if women with average higher levels of education and labor market participation experienced a disproportionate increase of their unpaid workload with consequences for their subjective well-being, we expect that this happened to women with lower levels of education - and maybe out of employment - as well.

## References

- Adams, A. (2020). *The Gender Wage Gap on an Online Labour Market: The Cost of Interruptions*. CEPR Working Paper, DP14294.
- Aloè, E. (2020). *Unpaid work, the household and the value of time. An analysis of the effects of the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work within the household and beyond*. PhD thesis, Department of Economics and Law , Sapienza University of Rome.
- Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A., & Sevilla, A. (2020). *The gendered division of paid and domestic work under lockdown*. IZA Discussion Paper 13500.
- Bahn K., Cohen J., & van der Meulen Rodgers, Y. (2020). A feminist perspective on COVID-19 and the value of care work globally. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27, 695–699.
- Connelly, R., & Kimmel, J. (2015). If you're happy and you know it: How do mothers and fathers in the US really feel about caring for their children? *Feminist Economics*, 21(1), 1-34.
- Craig, L. (2006). Does father care mean fathers share? A comparison of how mothers and fathers in intact families spend time with children. *Gender & Society*, 20(2), 259–281.

- Craig, L. & Sawrikar, P. (2009). Work and Family: How Does the (Gender) Balance Change as Children Grow? *Gender, Work & Organization*, 16, 684–709.
- Craig, L. & Powell, A. (2011). Non-standard work schedules, work-family balance and the gendered division of childcare. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25(2), 274-291.
- Donehower, G. (2020). Counting Women's Work: Unpaid care work and Covid-19. <https://www.countingwomenswork.org/news/unpaid-care-work-and-covid19-take-the-survey>
- Musick, K., Meier, A., & Flood, S. (2016). How parents fare: Mothers' and fathers' subjective wellbeing in time with children. *American Sociological Review*, 81(5), 1069-1095.
- OECD (2017). *The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle*, Paris.
- OECD (2020). *OECD Employment Outlook 2020: Worker Security and the COVID-19 Crisis*, Paris.
- Raile, A.N.W., Raile, E.D., Parker, D.C.W., Shanahan, E.A. & Haines, P. (2020). Women and the weight of a pandemic: A survey of four Western US states early in the Coronavirus outbreak. *Gender, Work & Organization*, Feminist frontiers, 1–12.
- Romero-Balsas, P., Muntanyola-Saura, D., & Rogero-García, J. (2013). Decision-making factors within paternity and parental leaves: Why Spanish fathers take time off from work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 20, 678–691.
- Zannella, M., & De Rose, A. (2020). Gender differences in the subjective perception of parenting time. *Rivista Italiana di Economia, Demografia e Statistica*, 74(2), 49-60.

## Appendix

Table A.1: Descriptive statistics on women's sample from our survey

	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Total</b>	810	<i>100</i>
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	8	<i>0.99</i>
25-29	38	<i>4.69</i>
30-34	56	<i>6.91</i>
35-39	116	<i>14.32</i>
40-44	107	<i>13.21</i>
45-49	92	<i>11.36</i>
50-54	119	<i>14.69</i>
55-59	144	<i>17.78</i>
60-64	75	<i>9.26</i>
65-69	30	<i>3.7</i>
70-74	20	<i>2.47</i>
75+	5	<i>0.62</i>
<b>Educational level</b>		
Up to college degree	200	<i>24.69</i>
Bachelor's degree	311	<i>38.4</i>
Higher than bachelor's degree	299	<i>36.91</i>
<b>Lives with partner</b>		
No	206	<i>25.43</i>
Yes	604	<i>74.57</i>
<b>Lives with at least one child &lt;18 (own's or partner's)</b>		
No	503	<i>62.1</i>
Yes	307	<i>37.9</i>
<b>Employed before COVID-19 crisis</b>		
No	119	<i>14.69</i>
Yes	691	<i>85.31</i>