

Women, Work and Inequality: Field Notes During the Covid-19 Crisis

By

Dr. Meriem Kaddouri

Assistant Professor at

City University Ajman, United Arab Emirates

Email: m.kaddouri@cu.ac.ae

Abstract

Undoubtedly, the detrimental ramifications of the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown have had a significant impact on individuals all over the world. The widespread of this unprecedented pandemic has brought on a global economic crisis, financial and medical effects, a halt to commercial activities, social distancing, quarantine, and a rapid rise in social issues, including divorce cases, unemployment, domestic violence, and gender inequality. The present study sought to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak on gender inequality concerning work division and household duties and chores during and after the lockdown. In addition, the implications of gender equality were also examined.

Keywords: COVID-19, domestic violence, gender inequality, working women, work division.

First: Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has sharply affected family life vis-a-vis childcare, healthy relationships between couples, and, more specifically, work division, household chores, and responsibilities during the first lockdown worldwide. Numerous research studies have pointed out that satisfaction with family life has declined (Naujoks et al., 2022), and many social and family problems have emerged, including divorce, gender inequality, domestic violence, and stressful and unhealthy relationships among couples with children. Taub (2020) argued, “the pandemic is not just a health crisis; it is also a social and economic crisis, and many of the broader repercussions affect women more severely than men” (p. 1). Furthermore, it has also been observed that many women were mentally overloaded with childcare, household responsibilities, and remote work. Many women quit their jobs while others were laid off as they failed to cope with the new working situations during the covid-19 arena. Moreover, the lockdown has increased stress, depression, and gender inequality concerning work division, household responsibilities, and chores. In addition, with the closures of schools and daycare centers, the pandemic has severely challenged working women, as they have to cope with remote work and family responsibilities. In this respect, Naujoks et al. (2022) point out that “for many parents, this additional time spent with children may have felt more like a “care burden” than “quality time,” particularly if it was the result of a job loss, or if parents had to combine child care with working remotely” (p. 68).

This paper explored gender relations and the division of work, domestic labor, and care. More specifically, the researcher investigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis on gender inequality concerning work division and household duties and chores during and after the lockdown. Thus, our analysis adds to the growing body of research in the sociology field on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on gendered equality concerning work division and household responsibilities. The data for this analysis came from prior findings in the literature

and some field notes were taken during the time of Covid-19. During the coronavirus lockdown and the closure of many government and private institutions, women have intensified their efforts to cope with remote work and family life. Because of the lockdown, social distancing, and quarantine, women faced many problems relating to housework and work. What aggravated the situation was the unequal sharing of housework responsibilities and duties between the two partners. The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health-challenging disease but also a societal test for all human beings, especially regarding equality, social justice, and social solidarity. Schools and other social institutions' closure as part of the lockdown precautions resulted in imposed and reinforced responsibilities related to caregiving and supporting the children and the elderly, which raised the question of gender equality.

For most women, working from home was the most preferred alternative. However, it was imposed on them as part of the precautionary measures most employers took—however, the time devoted to professional production and, consequently, fair wages are no longer available. Thus, because of domestic activities in general and those added due to the health crisis, women were unable to continue working and face their financial problems. These affected her financial situation and her mental and psychological health. By staying at home, women face several behaviors, especially those that fall under "partner violence," which turns into gender-based violence.

Second: Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

Studies indicate that during the epidemic, COVID-19, women were more susceptible to this catastrophic situation, which exposed them to many adverse effects socially and professionally. According to Alon et al. (2020), COVID-19 is a health epidemic that has affected all parts of the world and continues to affect people's health on a large scale. The Coronavirus has forced most, if not all, governments and countries to impose the lockdown, social distancing, and quarantines for some time as precautionary measures to control and prevent the rapid spread of the virus. Still, these preventive measures affected many jobs as the working hours were reduced and work was imposed to be done remotely; employment increased through mostly unpaid work (Madgavkar et al, 2020). Therefore, COVID-19 has complicated and aggravated the family situation. It has mainly affected financially and significantly various marginal social fractions and has disturbed the daily routine of people's social life (relationships, communication, exchange, interaction, etc). Commenting on remote work, Baig et al. (2020) argue, "The levels of remote working have skyrocketed during lockdowns and are likely to remain higher than precrisis levels for some time" (p. 3).

The epidemiological situations have severely affected many developing countries, as previous experiences indicate. The International Labor Organization (ILO) previously recognized that nearly 2.7 billion workers had been affected by epidemiological disaster situations (Boris et al., 2018). As we previously said, Covid-19 has negative impacts on life, work, and on gender equality around the world. The lockdown during COVID-19 has affected working women concerning work division and household chores, resulting in stressful relationships (Coffey et al., 2020). According to numerous researchers cited in Reichelt et al. (2020), "women have been affected more severely by these developments" (p. 229). In addition to the negative effects of the Covid-19 lockdown measures on women's employment, they "have broader implications for gender inequality" (Reichelt et al., 2020, p. 229).

The epidemic has increased the rate of gender-based violence due to many reasons, including scarcity of basic needs, change in the routine of social relations, disruption of the

financial system causing financial pressure, and job loss. In addition, staying at home for an extended period leads to more aggressiveness and adverse reactions between partners (Madgavkar et al., 2020). The public health emergency affects women differently and leads to gender inequality.

1- Gender Equality due to the Coronavirus and the Economic Crisis

Working women are the most vulnerable to the epidemic as they lost their jobs and were unable to cope with the consequences of the crisis, where the average rate of job loss for women is 1.9 times more than for men (Madgavkar et al., 2020). In addition, remote work is more difficult for women as they have to manage household duties and chores in addition to working from home. For example, in the United States, according to a study conducted by Baig et al. (2020), 5.8% of women are unemployed compared to 3.2% of men who have lost their jobs during the first lockdown conditions. On the other hand, the closure of daycare centers and institutions has increased women's responsibilities and reduced paid work time. Therefore, women have to pay more attention to their children, so they do not have much time for their paid jobs (Alon et al., 2020). As a result, working women have to quit their jobs, and business owners and employees must stop their activities and work outside their homes. During the lockdown, men spent more time at home and did more housework with their jobs, while women had to quit their work and be present to do the housework. However, they rarely manage due to a lack of time (Power, 2020). Commenting on the effects of the lockdown on working mothers, Taub (2020) maintains, "The lockdowns triggered by COVID-19 are taking a disproportionate toll on women in the labor market, as the sectors with high rates of female employment are experiencing heavier job losses while increased childcare needs during school closures exert an outsized impact on working mothers" (p. 1).

2- Gender-based Violence, Mental Health, and Technology: Several Variables of a Crisis Situation

The lockdown during the COVID-19 crisis has created an unusual social situation, with men and women staying at home for longer than usual, increasing tension, discord, and gender-based violence. Where did a woman have to live with her partner in a stressful situation that often ends in violence, where restrictions and orders all the time tightened her and reinforced gender-based violence and a kind of male domination? In certain areas, domestic violence increased by up to 500% during the lockdown, reported Czymara and others (Czymara, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath have had several impacts on health, with various factors affecting women's mental health during the lockdown, including financial fallout, domestic violence, job losses, childcare, and increased housework (Craig & Churchill, 2020). Regarding domestic violence, Taub (2020) argues, "Movement restrictions aimed to stop the spread of the coronavirus may be making violence in homes more frequent, more severe, and more dangerous" (p. 1). She adds further, "There are early reports of rising domestic violence as couples and families are forced to hunker down together, which puts many women at great risk (p.1).

Commenting on the effect of the pandemic on women's mental health, Betz and Murray (2017) noted that approximately 67% of women suffer from psychological problems, while 59% of men suffer from this problem. Thus, we concluded that women are relatively more vulnerable to the health consequences of epidemics at mental and psychological levels. On the other hand, using information technology on a large scale was the preferable measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus as it ensured social distancing. In addition, this preventive measure compensated for the suspended activities resulting from the closure by introducing a remote and online work system and compensation for offices and educational institutions (UN

Women, 2020).

Work became limited to activities done from home using applications and several websites that ensured its progress. In this regard, not all women knew and were equipped to work according to remote Internet systems. Many of them could not use information technology programs, so they could not continue their work, leading them to leave their jobs (Brief, 2020) or be laid off by employers. In this way, women are more affected by this epidemic than men, forcing them to do more unpaid work such as childcare and household chores that have forced them to quit their paid jobs (Bauernschuster & Schlotter, 2015) and even trying to work in unpaid and officially unauthorized positions.

Due to the sharing of household duties and chores between men and women and associated social constraints, more housework, and unpaid work fall on women. Thus, it is a burden and effort as well as less time for other useful activities such as paid jobs and education (Brady et al., 2020), so it can be said that the closure situation has badly disrupted working women's daily life routine.

3- *Objective and Research Questions of the Study*

The paper's main objective is to study the effects of COVID-19 and its preventive measures (closure, social distancing, and quarantines) on working women with respect to gender inequality. Specifically with many other factors such as the percentage of job losses, the reality of married life, economic issues, mental health, domestic violence, and unpaid work. In this paper, we aim to investigate the changes in men's and women's work status, working hours, the impact of the coronavirus on their lives during and before the closure, and what factors led to that. In addition, we sought to find out whether public health emergencies reinforced gender inequality at and outside of work. What are the various effects resulting from that?

4- *A Summary of Some Relevant Studies in the Literature*

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many changes in the gender sharing of work and negative impacts on women globally; according to Reichelt, McCovey, and Sargsyan, the percentage of job losses and changes in the duration of activity and work from home are much more for women than for men. Moreover, working couples suffer from disruption in their relationship due to losing their jobs and displaying aggressive behaviors. In contrast, women do not show this behavior (Reichelt, Makovi & Sargsyan, 2020).

Quarantine and lockdowns change people's lives worldwide, including sharing work and gender inequality at behavioral levels. When losing their jobs, men show more aggressive behaviors than women, which makes them very stressed. Offices and educational institutions have been shut down due to social distancing policies, which have pushed more to work through online systems and continue office work and education through it (Chauhan, 2020).

The pandemic is resulting in job and business disruption and increased unpaid work. Craig and Churchill (2020) studied the effects of COVID-19 on employment, household chores, childcare, and the elderly, and they found that more businesses and activities were produced. Unpaid women during this emergency; however, men's responsibilities have also increased while working from home (UN Women, 2020).

Working women have to manage the housework along with their jobs. However, the unpaid work representing housework and childcare responsibilities is so tiring that they leave much less time for their work, affecting the effectiveness of various activities. This is one of

the factors that prompted Institutions may be laid off, have to forego significant percentages of their wages, or resign, resulting in financial problems, increased risk of gender-based violence, and psychological stress.

5- Methodological Notes about the Study

The implications of COVID-19 on women, the division of labor between men and women, and gender inequality have been studied in many other dimensions. In many societies, using some scientific documents that were published in the year of the epidemic, some data collected during the exploratory phases of the project, and some field observations, the documentary and exploratory approach were implemented through qualitative and quantitative data collected from various sources about the effects of the disease. The pandemic affected gender inequality regarding the division of labor and household chores before and after the lockdown. The survey was conducted as a quick and unstructured response using social media (the Internet due to closure and social distancing). Some free interviews were conducted by telephone, with women and men intentionally selected to survey the topic and build the project.

6- Preliminary Results and Discussion

In the current study, we focused on the extent to which the impact of COVID-19 on men and women differs. Of the total participants (free interviews with women and men in a preliminary and unstructured way, that is, we did not build any tool or any sampling system), it was found that most of them were married women and men. Moreover, preliminary results indicate that most women are unemployed during the closure period, while only a tiny percentage of men are unemployed during the same situation.

In addition, the results showed that the majority of participants were working before the closure, and lost their jobs due to the additional burden of unpaid work, as they had, according to most of their statements, to take care of their children, especially in their studies, and other issues. Other household chores also increased, such as cooking for their children and husbands. Dealing with the pressure of the state of closure and the mixed results of the epidemiological situation in their societies. These choices have the same justification for males who return to the traditional division of social work. The participants also stated that unemployed men are more aggressive, which often results in violence that can be described as gender-based since its victims are predominantly women.

As a result, by different criteria, the risks of unemployment for men and women did not differ unless gender inequality in the labor market is considered wages and the resulting pressure to which women are more vulnerable. Through the preliminary investigation, it was also found that among the results of situations resulting from COVID-19 and disruption at work, those that affect the gender behavior between partners, as expressed by "De Paz" and his colleagues, women become unemployed and their partners are employed. They exhibit traditional behavior, in contrast, if men are unemployed and the partner (woman) is still working, they become more aggressive in their social and intimate relationships (De Paz et al. 20).

On this basis, it can be assumed that the epidemic has changed, to some extent, the behaviors and gender roles of both men and women. This means that they have moved to an unorthodox position that makes them demanding, more observant, attentive to details, and perhaps even more aggressive, which is why we assume that gender inequality in the labor

market has a relationship and influence on such situations, and perhaps the epidemic is just a mirror to illustrate and reflect this.

The pandemic, which affected public health, highlighted all the inequalities people faced during this period, and many studies have found that many people are severely affected by these inequalities (UN Women, 2020). However, the pandemic primarily affects the relationship of married couples with children. During the partial and complete closure, nearly all family members have to stay at home, so the housewife has to do all the household tasks for all members. This is, of course, within a general social reality. In a study entitled "Feminist Attitudes and Support for Gender Equality," Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) maintain that women in the last twenties of the 20th and 21st centuries continued to show an increased attitude toward liberation.

We also note that the workload (working women's workload (paid and unpaid) has increased during the epidemic for office work. Hence, women, in particular, have to become unemployed to be able to assume free social responsibilities, which increases their exposure to poverty.

7- General Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in dire consequences for all the social, economic, and financial aspects that affect the world in our lives, especially women who have been hit hard because, in the work community, they lost more jobs and became unemployed and took on additional responsibilities compared to men. Women in the job market have been severely affected because of this global crisis due to the closure of offices, industries, educational institutions, etc.; the role of women in the home to meet needs and household chores became more priority, which contributed more to their presence in a situation of unemployment.

Housework is much more complex and takes up a lot of time and effort, hindering women's work productivity, and it is difficult or non-existent to vit value it. Moreover, working from home and reducing working impacted women's financial conditions. In addition, women shifted/ diverted more into their traditional roles due to job loss. Due to the increasing burden of unpaid work and care for children, the elderly, and the sick, the economic condition of these women and girls has been severely affected. Those earning and saving money for their future depended on those savings to cover the enormous deficit and help their partners through this situation.

In addition to unemployment, there has been an inevitable rise in gender-based violence that affects women psychologically. In addition to their exposure to economic and social pressures, there is a need for several measures to overcome these problems that women face because of the epidemic and to prevent discrimination between opportunities. Working males and females to boost GDP and grow the economy worldwide et al., 2020).

Due to the gender gap, which is growing increasingly in many parts of the world, especially in North Africa and the Middle East, where socio-cultural standards limit women's education and marginalize their work goals (Kaddouri, 2021), it is imperative for women and young people, in particular, to work hard and fight for improving their situations. In addition, government policies should take serious measures to map their plans and economic development policies around women by reducing the gender gap in order to obtain significant results across the world.

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