

“I have turned into a foreman here at home”: Families and work–life balance in times of COVID-19 in a gender equality paradise

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Abstract

This article explores the gendered realities of work–life balance in Iceland during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular how these societal changes reflect and affect the gendered division of unpaid labor, such as childcare and household chores. The study draws on open-ended real-time diary entries, collected for 2 weeks during the peak of the pandemic in Iceland. The entries represent the voices of 37 mothers in heteronormative relationships. The findings imply that, during the pandemic, the mothers took on greater mental work than before. They also described intense emotional labor, as they tried to keep everyone calm and safe. The division of tasks at home lay on their shoulders, causing them stress and frustration. The findings suggest that, even in a country that has been at the top of the Gender Gap Index for several years, an unprecedented situation like COVID-19 can reveal and exaggerate strong gender norms and expectations toward mothers.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, diary study, gender equality, work–life balance

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health emergency and economic hazard but has also resulted in dramatic changes in people's personal lives and roles within families have been disrupted. During the pandemic, many countries have taken drastic measures to reduce the spread of the virus, such as social distancing, lockdowns, and closing schools, public institutions, and workplaces. Children and adults alike have been forced to stay at home for a shorter or longer time and upturn their lives as the home became the school, the workplace, the playground, sports

facility, and family sanctuary. UNESCO (2020) has estimated that more than 70% of the world's student population, or around 1.2 billion students, has been affected by either temporary school closures or restricted services. This entails increased care responsibilities for parents across the world.

Even though the number of dual-earner households has been increasing for the last few decades, findings of several studies indicate that women still bear the burden of childrearing and household labor in industrialized countries (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Carlson, Petts, & Pepin, 2020; Friedman, 2015; Knight & Brinton, 2017; T. Miller, 2018; Schwanen, 2007). It can therefore be assumed that they are more affected by the closing of schools than their male partners. In fact, several studies (Alon et al., 2020; Andrew et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020) and media coverage (see, e.g., Ascher, 2020; C. C. Miller, 2020; Topping, 2020) on the impact of COVID-19 on families have indicated complications and challenges, as this unprecedented situation appears to have revealed or exaggerated existing gender inequalities and divisions within families. Some have even referred to this strange situation as the 1950s was revisiting homelife (Ferguson, 2020), indicating a backlash in terms of gender equality and power positions in the home during these circumstances.

During previous crises, women have been more likely to either reduce their working hours or temporarily step down from work (Alon et al., 2020; Andrew et al., 2020). We still do not know if the effects of COVID-19 will be the same, but new studies from England, Canada, Australia, Italy, and the United States indicate that parents have been under greater time pressure for the last few months and that mothers have spent less time on paid work and more time on household responsibilities as compared to fathers during the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020; Collins, Landivar, Ruppner, & Scarborough, 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2020; Hennekam & Shymko, 2020; Manzo & Minello, 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020). Studies have indicated that young children tend to seek help and attention by interrupting their mothers, and that the mothers in turn experience time as more fragmented (Collins, 2020; Collins et al., 2020; O. Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018), which can become a bigger challenge in lockdown as the one during COVID-19. Since the lockdown, more mothers participating in Andrew et al.'s (2020) research have reduced their working hours and those who have stopped working do twice as much childcare and household duties as their male partners who are still working. Conversely, in families where the male partner has stopped working but not the female, the parents share childcare and household duties equally even though the mother works at least 5 h of paid work a day. Qian and Fuller (2020) argue that the pandemic is far from being an equalizer when it comes to gender equality, as their research indicates a widening gender employment gap among Canadian parents with young children.

The pandemic has not only affected schools, as many companies and businesses have been forced to adopt to the circumstances with more working from home and telecommuting opportunities for their workers (Alon et al., 2020). Juggling childcare and paid work has been very challenging for parents, but then again, this has meant increased flexibility for many employees, flexibility that has often been discussed as the solution to a better work-life balance, especially for women (Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2014; C. Sullivan, 2015; Wheatley, 2012). However, there are various intricacies around the interactions of gender equality and work-life balance in normal times, which seem to have intensified during the pandemic as the pressure on parents' time increases (e.g., Andrew et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020).

Iceland has been considered a frontrunner, even among the other Nordic countries, in gender equality (The World Economic Forum, 2020), which makes it a particularly interesting setting in this regard. We believe that times like the COVID-19 pandemic provide a unique opportunity to explore and shed light on deeply entrenched and gendered social structures within the organization of the family. In fact, research has already pointed in that direction (Auðardóttir & Rúðólfssdóttir, 2020). Thus, the focus of this study is to look at how the societal changes reflect and affect the gendered division of labor, especially concerning the unpaid labor of childcare and household chores, from the perspectives of mothers in heterosexual relationships. This was done by collecting daily real-time diary entries from almost 40 mothers for 2 weeks during the peak of the pandemic in Iceland while severe restrictions were being followed.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Gendered realities in Iceland

Important steps towards gender equality have been taken in the Western part of the world over the years, not least in the Nordic countries. These include improved legal frameworks, rising female employment and educational levels, and improvement in fathers' involvement in childrearing (Evertsson, 2014; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2018; Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018; Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018). Despite these steps, the gender pay gap remains unbridged, reflecting the persistent idea of male provider roles (Petersen, Penner, & Høgsnes, 2014; Snævarr, 2015).

Iceland's reputation as the most gender equal country in the world has been quite prominent in public discourse and in the media, both in Iceland and around the world. This media discourse has portrayed Iceland as a paradise for women, implying that gender equality has more or less been achieved in Iceland (Hertz, 2016; Jakobsdóttir, 2018; Kilpatrick, 2017; Tuttle, 2017), which has even been used for international branding purposes (Einarsdóttir, 2020). Despite the importance of recognizing that the ranking of gender equality as practiced by the Global Gender Gap Index, among others, has its limitations and overlooks important institutional variables such as social norms and values (Einarsdóttir, 2020), certainly Iceland is doing well in international comparisons. Women's educational attainment in Iceland has steadily increased over the last few decades (Bjarnason & Edvardsson, 2017), and in the year 2018, Icelandic women had the highest labor ratio among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries at 84.5%. The same applies to men's labor force participation of 89.9% (OECD, 2020). Despite this active participation in the labor force, Icelandic women have established families at relatively young ages and the average birthrate has been rather high up until very recently in comparison with other northern European countries (Hognert et al., 2017; Jónsson, 2017). In Iceland, as elsewhere, women work part-time jobs in higher numbers, and mothers reduce their labor participation following childbirth more often than do fathers (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018).

Regardless of international trends toward increased active female participation in the workforce, the labor market is still very gender divided, and the rates of gender segregation both in line of work and educational choices are striking (Dinella, Fulcher, & Weisgram, 2014). The same manifestation applies to Iceland (Snævarr, 2015). Over the last few decades, the government of Iceland has taken some important steps in making laws and policies to facilitate fathers' involvement in childrearing responsibilities. The most substantial step is probably an Act on shared parental leave passed in 2000, which gave parents 9 months in total, "dividing the 9 months so that three are sharable while each parent has three that are strictly nontransferable" (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018, p. 460), and was lengthened by a month on January 1, 2020 (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave No. 95/2000 with amendments [Althing, 2019]). In Iceland, research has indicated that discourses on motherhood in relation to breastfeeding imply more intensive mothering that starts when the children are very young. This is somehow in opposition to the governmental emphasis on gender equality that aims to get fathers more involved in parenting (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018).

Despite all these advancements, there are some signs that these have been achieved at a cost and there are some cracks in Iceland's glossy image as the frontrunner of gender equality (Einarsdóttir, 2020). In recent years, media coverage about people experiencing burnout has been more common, especially among professions like nurses and elementary school teachers (Halldórsdóttir, Skúladóttir, Sigursteinsdóttir, & Agnarsdóttir, 2016; The Icelandic Nurses' Association, 2017; The Icelandic Teachers Union, n.d.), which in Iceland are typically female professions. It appears that people are increasingly experiencing stress in their everyday lives, which, if prolonged, can result in both poor physical and mental health (Jónsdóttir, 2017).

Over the last few years, research results from Iceland have indicated that conflicts between work and family are quite frequent among Icelandic parents, even though they do not consider housework alone to be a great burden (Þórsdóttir, 2012). Family obligations and issues related to the care of children are more likely to be woven into the mothers' working hours than fathers' (Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019). There are also indications that parents are more likely to express difficulties when it comes to everyday chores than are workers without children

and that parents experience conflict in balancing work and family (Eyjólfsdóttir, 2013; Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019; Þórsdóttir, 2012).

2.2 | Work-life balance and the matter of time

Work-life balance refers to the ability of every individual, regardless of gender, to coordinate work and family obligations successfully. Work, in this context, refers to paid labor performed outside the home (Wheatley, 2012). Studies have found that, when parents manage to balance family and working life, they are more satisfied with their life, which positively impacts their mental and physical health (Haar, Russo, Suñe, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014). Successful work-life balance can, therefore, be considered to be an important public health issue (Lunau, Bamba, Eikemo, van der Wel, & Dragano, 2014).

A growing number of people describe increased time pressure in their daily lives and experience time being a scarce resource for all the tasks in their daily schedules (Fyhri & Hjorthol, 2009). Time is gendered, and Bryson and Deery (2010) have claimed that gender inequalities are sustained by differences in the use and experience of time among men and women and “that ‘time cultures’ are bound up with power and control” (p. 91). Research has indicated that men have, on average, more control over their time outside work than women. More claims are laid on women's time from family members. They feel more rushed in their daily lives and are more likely to be expected to attend to household work. Women are also more inclined to multitask than men (Bryson, 2016; Craig & Brown, 2017; Friedman, 2015; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; O. Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018).

For the last few decades, some countries have been changing their policies to improve the opportunity parents have to balance work and family (Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; C. Sullivan, 2015; Wheatley, 2012). Such policies are often based on more access to subsidized childcare or flexibility. Work flexibility has been argued to be desirable and a step towards gender equality, since it has enabled people's work-life balance (Gatrell et al., 2013; Haar et al., 2014; C. Sullivan, 2015; Wheatley, 2012). Alon et al. (2020) predict that the somehow forced flexibility of many workplaces caused by COVID-19 might last after the pandemic has run its course and be beneficial for both mothers and fathers.

Nevertheless, work-related flexibility has both pros and cons and can even cause stress. The division between work and home can become more blurred when the employees bring their work home and take care of family matters during working hours (Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019; Wheatley, 2012). It has also been argued that not all professions offer an opportunity to enjoy the taking of work home or having different working hours. Such flexibility is often dependent on educational level, as well as being related to the gendered division of the labor market (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Female-dominated professions, like teachers and nurses, often have strict attendance obligations in their workplaces and less opportunity for work flexibility (Pétursdóttir, 2009; Wheatley, 2012). Men enjoy the opportunity to have flexible working hours or work from home more often, and flexibility can be more likely to have a negative effect on women's careers (Friedman, 2015). As such, seemingly supportive policies can have different consequences for men and women (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015).

2.3 | Parents on the run

The structure of the family as an institution has changed in recent years, including the composition of families and the roles of the genders, and each family member now has more complex roles (Júlíusdóttir, 2012). Starting a family and having children has turned out to have different effects on the lives of men and women, and it seems to be less beneficial for mothers. More families now rely on dual earnings, and although the number of females working in paid labor has been on the increase, there is still a lack of active participation among men in the home. This applies to Iceland and many other countries (Gíslason, 2007; Petersen et al., 2014). Having children and family relations

maintain and support gendered positions and divisions of labor in public and private lives. Petersen et al. (2014) underline how important it is to take such aspects into consideration when it comes to the positions of men and women on the labor market.

T. Miller (2018) claims that the reasons behind caring practices and their gendered performances “can be multiple and are interrelated, operating at the interpersonal and broader structural, political, policy and cultural levels” (p. 32). Research has indicated that social structures and prevailing attitudes can influence the gendered division of labor in relationships (Dotti Sani, 2014; Evertsson, 2014). Household labor has often been referred to as invisible work (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), and the conceptualization of family work can be ambiguous since scholars often use different explanations of what such work actually entails (Robertson, Anderson, Hall, & Kim, 2019). Here, we follow these lines of thought and the three constructs of family work, commonly referred to in family work studies: housework, childcare, and emotional labor. Emotional labor relates to activities relevant to the emotional wellbeing of other family members and giving them emotional support (Curran, McDaniel, Pollitt, & Totenhagen, 2015). In an attempt to distinguish between emotional labor and mental work, Robertson et al. (2019, p. 185) suggest mental work as the fourth construct of family work which “includes the invisible mental work related to managerial and family caregiving responsibilities,” such as managing, monitoring, scheduling, knowing, and organizing the family life.

Mental work cannot be delegated to someone who does not belong to the family, and within families, mothers are much more likely to be household managers (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Curran et al., 2015; Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019; Robertson et al., 2019). This type of work often goes unnoticed by other family members along with the mental burden that such responsibilities require but impacts the mother's wellbeing with feelings of being rushed and strained in everyday life (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Craig & Brown, 2017). It has also been pointed out that it can be difficult to detect mental work since it is quite often closely connected with other activities related to the family (Robertson et al., 2019). In addition, many parents, especially mothers, experience work–family guilt when combining work and family, experiencing conflict between the tasks in the public and private spheres (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017), which can add to the mental load of everyday life.

2.4 | The local context: COVID-19 in Iceland

The first COVID-19 case was diagnosed in Iceland on February 28, 2020 (The Directorate of Health & The Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, 2020). Two weeks later, following the increased spread of COVID-19 and in order to slow the transmission of the disease, the government issued a ban on gatherings of 100 people or more. Starting on March 16, universities and upper secondary schools were to close, but elementary schools and preschools remained open under specific conditions (Government of Iceland, 2020c). On March 24, stricter measures were enforced by banning gatherings of more than 20 people. Also, people had to ensure that they kept a distance of at least 2 meters between individuals. This entailed closing of swimming pools, gyms, pubs, and museums. However, no changes were made to the organization of schools (Government of Iceland, 2020b) from the previous measures. Due to these actions, those who possibly could work from home were encouraged to do so (Sveinsdóttir, 2020).

Even though preschools and elementary schools remained open, restrictions affected the daily routines of all children and their families, depending on the size and design of school buildings and the number of students in individual municipalities and schools. Each municipality designed and implemented measures to fulfill the restrictions (Minister of Health, 2020), including no more than 20 children in the same group and groups not being allowed to interact. It was common for students to attend school every other day, for school days to be shorter, and for meals to be available for a small part of the student body. Parents were, in some cases, encouraged to let their children stay at home if they possibly could, while parents in occupations such as doctors, nurses, and police were

identified as priority groups. This meant that they were somewhat less affected by school closures and restrictions. Students in 8th to 10th grade (14- to 16-year-olds) had to study from home via distance education.

After-school care was closed; sports and other extra curriculum activities were cancelled, and children were encouraged to only meet with the kids in their small groups outside school (Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, 2020). As in other countries, all these measures had a severe impact on families with children, even though the schools technically never closed, and lockdowns were not imposed. This is the context in which this study was conducted in March and April 2020. On May 4, 2020, social distancing restrictions were eased, meaning that all children's activities were more or less back to normal (Government of Iceland, 2020a)—at least for the time being.

3 | METHOD

This article draws from a real-time diary study conducted during the ban on public gathering in Iceland. The first week of the diary study started on March 26, and the second week started on April 7 and ended on April 14, 2020. The research is a part of a larger project on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and work-life balance. Inspired by time-use research (e.g., Bonke & McIntosh, 2005) and real-time diary studies, in which participants write freely about their everyday life experiences and events (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003), we decided to design a survey in which daily structured time-use estimates would be combined with open diary entries (see, e.g., Kan, 2008; Kitterød & Lyngstad, 2005). For the purpose of this study, we only analyze and present findings from the open diary entries.

According to Bolger et al. (2003), diary studies are well suited to capturing the experiences and particulars of the life of the participants. As this is a real-time study with a minimum of time lapse between the experience and reflections, the likelihood of retrospection is minimized. One of the benefits of real-time diary studies like this one is that events are reported in a natural, spontaneous context. By doing so, the data becomes richer and important contextual information and meanings are pieced together to include in the study.

The sample is self-controlled as it consists of individuals who responded to an advertisement that we posted in various large and active Icelandic Facebook groups, such as *Brask & Brall* (a sales group with around 150,000 members),¹ and through our own extended networks. Facebook is the most popular social media in Iceland, used regularly by nearly all Icelanders (Facebook Nation, 2018), which makes it a good forum for reaching a considerable part of the population. In all, 47 parents participated in the study, 7 male and 40 female. In an effort to shed light on the everyday life of mothers during COVID-19, we analyzed the open diary entries from female participants in heteronormative relationships, or 37 mothers. About half of them lived in the Reykjavík metropolitan area ($n = 18$) while the others were spread around the country. The number of children in the homes of these 37 mothers varied from one to six, but the majority ($n = 21$) of the mothers had two children. The educational level of the participants was rather high, as a majority of participants held a university degree, 14 with bachelor's degrees and 18 with master's degrees. Twenty-eight were in paid labor, four were on parental leave, one was an independent laborer, one was a student, one was both studying and working, one was on sick leave, and one was on disability. In most of the cases, both parents primarily or solely worked from home during the time of the study, and most of them were working full-time the whole period, even though some worked reduced hours due to the pandemic. In all cases, the children could attend schools up to some extent, but with severe restrictions of many sorts.

After providing informed consent, participants were asked to answer a questionnaire consisting of background questions. Then, they received a daily questionnaire via Microsoft Forms for 2 weeks. The purpose of the questionnaire was twofold: to collect structured time-use data (Fisher, Gershuny, Gauthier, & Victorino, 2000), and open-ended diary entries in which participants would write an "old style" diary, reflecting on everyday life during COVID-19. In the diary entries, participants were asked to reflect on their day, the impact of COVID-19 on their

life, division of household duties and responsibilities, and other issues they wanted to share. It is important to consider the risk of failure in distinguishing participants' reports of atypical experiences related to or caused by a major event or general experiences (Bolger et al., 2003). Therefore, participants were asked to reflect specifically on their experiences in the context of COVID-19. The total word count of the written reflections was around 28,000 words, which provided us with rich qualitative data.

We analyzed the written reflections drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2013) phases of thematic analysis. The text was sorted by date and participant before we read it several times, added notes, and discussed the content together. Then, we coded the text, applying an inductive approach. This means that the initial coding of the diary entries was open and emphasized understanding the participants' experiences without engaging too much with existing literature and theories. Similar codes and text segments were then collated in order to identify repeated patterns of meaning across the data: stress, work-life balance, and division of household duties.

Participants were promised confidentiality and that measures would be taken to prevent identification. We provided participants with a random personal participant number to ensure their anonymity. Information that could link participants' names to the number was deleted right after the data collection period. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time, and some did for unknown reasons.

Due to the limited time for the study, we decided to use the most convenient way possible to share information about the research and recruit participants, Facebook. That probably affected both the number of participants, as the window of time to recruit participants was limited, and how homogeneous the group became, particularly in terms of educational level.

4 | FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data generated two themes, presented in two sections. The first concerns the complexities of work-life balance in COVID-19 times, particularly the gendered interactions of stress, work-life balance, and mental work. The second section specifically draws on the emotional labor performed by the women in the study, some of which is represented by how conscious the women were of the wellbeing of their family members.

4.1 | Gendered interactions of work, family, and stress

The diary entries quite clearly described complications and stressful situations as the women were trying to juggle their time between work duties and childcare. They described how strained they were and how their stress level was increasing, using words like overwhelmed, frustrated, tired, annoyed, and angry to describe their situations. Below are a few diary entries from mothers who were all working 70%–100% that reflect this. In the following example, a mother of a 2-year-old working in mass media, who worked entirely from home as did her husband, described one of her days like this: "I'm a little anxious because of all this, the situation in society. Then, I do not have the energy to do much, only the necessary things. The child wore pajamas the whole day." She mentioned how the whole situation made her feel anxious and drained her energy. This was true of many of the other women, like this mother of three (6, 8, and 13) who worked in a nursing home explained: "Now we have spent more than a month in quarantine and home-schooling. It has started to take its toll mentally, and the day today was difficult. I was almost in tears." Her husband was still working in his workplace while she had taken a leave for the first weeks of COVID-19.

Juggling home-schooling, childcare, and work created a lot of pressure on the mothers and some of them described the guilt they were experiencing from feeling that they could not keep up with everything. The next

example is from a mother who worked full-time at her workplace. She had two children, 2 and 7 years old, and wrote about her experience in the following way:

I experienced a slight panic attack on the way home over juggling all these different duties, and I cried a little. I went to the grocery store to get some time for myself and shopped for my sister who is in quarantine ... no one has energy to start putting the kids to bed, so they went to sleep too late ... Jesus, how the parental-fuse is short, and I feel guilty about that.

As these examples show, the mothers experienced stress, a lack of energy, and even guilt. As during “normal” times mothers are more likely to experience work–family guilt, as they feel guilty about not being the best while not spending enough time with their kids, despite being on the run all the time (Borelli et al., 2017; Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019). During COVID-19, this pattern seems to have intensified, supported by research from other contexts as well (e.g., Hennekam & Shymko, 2020).

The levels of guilt and how it affected them was addressed by more participants. This mother had two children (4 and 8 years old) and was working full-time. She and her husband were both working from home:

I feel as if I should be able to organize my time better. The day passes, and I have not had time to enjoy one cup of coffee in peace. I do not sit down, but still the apartment is in chaos, the children neglected, and work unfinished.

These examples show how much time pressure these mothers were under, and how they experienced guilt over not being able to complete their tasks, neither work nor family related. Studies have shown that parents are under significant time pressure in their daily lives (Fyhri & Hjorthol, 2009), especially women (O. Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). This pressure seemingly increased greatly during the pandemic, as other research has indicated as well (Alon et al., 2020; Andrew et al., 2020).

The above example also indicates a level of multitasking as did entries from several other mothers in the study. According to previous studies (e.g., Bryson, 2016; Craig & Brown, 2017; Friedman, 2015; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; O. Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018), women multitask more often than men. The experiences of these women indicate that their perceived time pressure and increased need for multitasking laid heavily on their shoulders.

Towards the end of the study, when restrictions because of COVID-19 were somewhat lifted, some mothers mentioned that they had just realized how much constraint was caused by having to erase the boundaries between work and family life. In the following diary entry, a mother with a 6-month-old child, who worked as a manager in a half-time job, explained how:

I went to my workplace for the first time in weeks. It was so different. I do not think that I realized until yesterday how much constraint comes from working from home with a child at home. I cannot wait until I can return to my workplace every day and create these boundaries between private life and work.

This description is interesting in the light of how flexibility and working from home have often been portrayed as the solution to work–life balance, especially for women, to improve parents’ opportunities to better balance work with homelife (Gatrell et al., 2014; Wheatley, 2012). Some of the other mothers also described how the boundaries between home and work had been blurred. These experiences indicate that working from home can be difficult for parents, particularly mothers, as they find their work time being interrupted by other duties. This has been documented in previous research (e.g., Wheatley, 2012). Alon et al. (2020) predicted that changes in working practices adopted during COVID-19 might be permanent, but we argue that it is important to consider that working

from home and having flexible working hours must be considered very carefully in favor of the working parents, bearing in mind gendered social structures.

It was clear from the diaries that these unprecedented times revealed or intensified unequal divisions of duties at home, which made the mothers realize and reflect on their positions at home. A mother of two (5 and 9 years old), who was a teacher working full-time but had started working from home, as well as her husband, said that:

Today, there was a little clash at home. I have noticed that I usually write the diary before dinner, and a lot of work awaits me afterwards. I usually put the kids to bed, bathe them, tidy up endlessly (usually in the evenings when they are asleep), read, and tuck them in. Today, I threw a tantrum over this, ... but we had a good conversation, and everyone agreed to contribute more ... [My husband] agreed with me that he could be more present in these daily routines around the kids and home.

This example shows how being responsible for the kids and home was on her shoulders, as well as being responsible for taking action to change the balance. A few days later, the same woman explained how she was starting to realize how the situation affected the division of tasks, partially because her husband prioritized differently, for example, around work or exercise, and also because the children asked her for help even though their father was also at home:

We knew that the division of tasks is rather equal in our everyday life, but now that we are both working from home, it is obvious that he takes his space when he needs to attend to "his" things, and I run, and I sprint from my work much more than he does.

This example shows how the mother was easily interrupted with household responsibilities, which is in accord with other research findings that suggest that mothers' time is more often fragmented (Collins, 2020; Collins et al., 2020; O. Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). According to Andrews et al.'s (2020) study, mothers more frequently combined their paid work with other activities during the pandemic. This illustration also supports the notion of time being gendered (Bryson & Deery, 2010), as she perceived that her husband had more control over his time to tend to matters unrelated to work or family. This is in accordance with previous studies on gendered control of time among parents (Bryson, 2016; Friedman, 2015) and new research conducted during COVID-19 that indicate that unpaid work performed by mothers has increased during the pandemic (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Manzo & Minello, 2020).

The responsibility to divide duties at home lay on the mothers' shoulders, as they explained in several diary entries. This shows how mental work (Robertson et al., 2019) was central to their gendered realities. As one said, "everyone has to have certain duties in the home if domesticity is supposed to work without me losing my mind." This mother had two teenagers and was working full-time from home while her husband worked in his workplace. Another one, who had two children (2 and 7 years old) and was working full-time, explained her situation in this way:

It is not easy working from home with a two-year-old. I had to make sure that his father takes him to his parent's home, who were away, so that I could get some peace. Then, I put him down to nap after lunch and had to make sure that father and son woke up at the right time.... Usually, I must make sure that things work ... How are you supposed to be an employee, parent, leisure worker, cook, and a teacher all at once?

This outlines quite well how she experiences the responsibility of managing the household. The father is a participant, but she is the manager and carries responsibilities that add to the mental burden of everyday life (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), exacerbating the mental draining women have felt during COVID-19 (Hennekam &

Shymko, 2020). Another mother, with a 2-year-old child, who worked full-time from home along with her husband, similarly wrote that:

I have turned into a foreman here at home. I am trying to get clearer oversight over what has to be done and activate my husband to prevent everything from becoming a mess, and I do not want to take care of it all by myself. So, I had a family meeting and put up a clear division of duties.

This mother also wrote that, on an everyday basis, they did not have a clear division of tasks, but during COVID-19, it became necessary. This indicates that times of crisis can reveal deeply rooted norms and structures on gender roles within the home. The experience of another mother, who had three children (6, 8, and 13 years old), further supports this. She was a care worker and she and her husband were both working in their workplaces:

I became tired today and reprimanded my husband. I take care of the management, division of tasks and responsibility for the children's education and practices. I feel like we are dangerously close to the gender development as it was before the middle of the last century. Also, it is my responsibility to remind [him] of that this is not supposed to be like this, so that also adds to my basket of duties.

All of these examples show how the situation during the pandemic revealed and exaggerated the mothers' roles as household managers (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Curran et al., 2015). They planned and organized family life to make sure that everything worked. This is consistent with research from Australia where mothers felt unsatisfied with the division of labor in their homes during COVID-19 (Craig & Churchill, 2020). Drawing on previous studies (e.g., Craig & Brown, 2017), this invisible mental work became a burden for the women and clearly affected their everyday wellbeing. Interestingly, this also added to their duties, as they became somewhat responsible for getting other people in the household, particularly the fathers, to take on more responsibility to even the load.

4.2 | Emotional labor

Some of the women in the study described how they made an effort to hide their stress and anxiety from their children and other family members in order to ease the atmosphere and keep the family calm. In accordance with studies and theories of gendered aspects of emotional labor (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Craig & Brown, 2017; Robertson et al., 2019), the women performed that kind of labor in addition to other duties. This is reflected in the words of a mother of two children, 9 and 10, working full-time mostly from home with a husband who mostly worked away from home:

The days are getting really difficult, and I will take my first summer holiday tomorrow. The younger child is not happy about [the situation] and cries over everything that seems like adversity, even as little things like when she is asked to read or tidy up. The little patience I have is running out, but I try my best not to let her see it.

The day after, the situation became worse, as the family was facing possible quarantine and they were waiting for further directions from a national team of contact tracers. She wrote this in her diary:

Now we possibly have to start 14 days of quarantine. We will know tomorrow. At least we have to remain in quarantine for 24 hours until the test results. I am pained by this situation, but I try to stay positive, especially with my husband and children. They cannot see [my] anxiety because then they become afraid. I continue to meditate and do Yoga; everything will be ok.

As these diary entries show, this mother found it important to keep her anxiety to herself in order to keep the family calm. Another mother with a 5- and 8-year-old who worked in an elementary school was working full-time from home as did her husband. She described how difficult her day was, as one of her children cried a lot because she missed her friends so dearly. The day “was spent tending emotionally to the children.”

The women in the study had to devote time to emotional labor instead of work. Another reflected on how she tried to calm the people around her:

I am really focused on being well informed so that I can answer [questions] and calm elderly people and children around me. I am very cautious and try to follow up with my children on how to be careful without frightening them.

One of the women explained how her husband was irritated because of the situation and tired because he was working shifts, so much so that he “exploded” at times. Therefore, she made an effort to try to make sure that his irritation did not affect the children (10, 14, and 17 years old) too much. She was working 70% from home while he was working away from home. She explained:

I take care of the children and the home every day, since he is asleep until he has to go to work or loafs around on the computer. Everyone has a short fuse, but I make sure that I intervene and suggest a break, that everyone goes out, plays or when the children are starting to nag. It is difficult to be able to concentrate on work.

Another example of the women's emotional labor included dealing with difficult thoughts and decisions related to the pandemic. A mother of two (5 and 8 years old) wrote that:

Despite a lot of physical resting lately, my mind has been spinning around worries and difficult decisions. Should the children attend school or not? Can I meet my father [who has heart problems] if I keep a 2 m distance? Is it necessary to disinfect all the groceries?

According to Curran et al. (2015), this kind of work can be called emotional labor, as these women emphasize how they tend to the emotional wellbeing of other family members. This kind of labor was not limited to their children; it also applied to other relatives. For example, the emotional labor involved phone calls to parents or other relatives, sometimes several times a day. Other studies have shown that this is often part of women's routines (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Robertson et al., 2019).

5 | CONCLUSION

The months of COVID-19 have been and are quite challenging for many families, and the drastic measures that have been taken to prevent its spread have meant severe changes to people's participation in everyday life and social contact (Brooks et al., 2020). In accordance with new research on the effect of COVID-19 on everyday life (Andrew et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2020; Manzo & Minello, 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020), the time during the social restrictions was not easy. It is apparent from the diary entries of our participants that the period with the tightest restrictions was challenging for the mothers and their families, and they expressed feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed. Despite advances in gender equality over the last few decades, drastic events such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, can elicit situations that we do not necessarily pay attention to in our busy daily lives or even resist recognizing.

In Iceland, which has been portrayed as a “paradise for women” (Jakobsdóttir, 2018) and which is considered a global frontrunner when it comes to gender equality (The World Economic Forum, 2020), parents face challenges related to gendered realities, and gender equality has not been achieved regardless of what the dominant discourse may say. Despite remarkably high labor participation, there are indications that women in Iceland shoulder the greater burden of childcare and household labor (Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019; Þórsdóttir, 2012), as elsewhere around the world (Alon et al., 2020; Knight & Brinton, 2017; T. Miller, 2018). The diary entries of the mothers in the study demonstrate a gendered reality in which they experience burdens that seem to have escalated during the pandemic.

It was stated in a media coverage that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought back the 1950s regarding the gendered division of labor (Ferguson, 2020). The same phrase was used by one of our participants. Some of the women wrote about how surprised they were about how much of the household chores and the childcare remained on their shoulders. Despite some steps towards gender equality in the last few decades, there are few signs of a revolution, especially within the home. The focus on the struggle for gender equality has somehow been more on the public sphere, as reflected in the measures used for gender equality indexes that overlook the gendered division of labor in the home along with social norms and values (Einarsdóttir, 2020). One of the patterns identified in the reflections of the women in our study was how they seemed to be stunned by how uneven the division of labor turned out to be during the pandemic and how much time and energy they devoted to household chores and the management of the household, carrying out the mental work within the family. Their experiences support the idea of time being gendered (Bryson, 2016), as they described how their time was more restricted from childcare and household chores and how they prioritized their children's needs over work.

When the families were pushed into the home due to lockdowns and social restrictions, women faced an uneven division of labor that they might have been too busy in their daily lives to observe or might have found difficult to acknowledge. We argue, based on this study as well as emerging findings from larger studies from different countries (Andrew et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2020; Manzo & Minello, 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020), that the situation caused by the pandemic brought to light pre-existing gendered performances and social structures, more than it caused drastic gendered division of labor in the home. In Iceland, where the dominant discourses have centered on the country as a global leader in gender equality, the existing inequalities have been overlooked. Our findings suggest that there is an uneven division of labor within Icelandic homes as the mothers in the study bore the burdens of housework, childcare, emotional labor, and household mental work. If the aim is to close the gender gap both in the public and the private sphere, a focus on the gendered division of labor within the home is essential.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Neither of the authors have a financial or other conflict of interest related to this project.

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ENDNOTE

¹ In 2020, the total population in Iceland was 364,134, so this group contains a considerable proportion of adult Icelanders (Statistics Iceland, 2020).

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