

# Gender and employment: Recalibrating women's position in work, organizations, and society in times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of women in the labor market and the unrecognized value of essential occupations such as care and education (Queisser et al., 2020). In many countries across the world, people applauded care workers from their balconies in the spring of 2020 (Wikipedia, 2022), in essence clapping for the many women employed in the strongly feminized care sector. Similarly, workers in the strongly feminized educational sector have shown resilience in providing school-age children with opportunities to continue education during COVID-19-induced lockdowns. At the same time, the pandemic highlights the continued undervaluation of women's work—both paid and unpaid—and appears to enhance the precarious nature of women's employment, in some cases causing women to lose their jobs at a rate faster than men (ILO, 2021). Indeed, the disproportionate effect of the early pandemic on women's employment (and mothers' employment in particular) has been well-documented in other issues of *Gender, Work & Organization* (e.g., Collins et al., 2021; Petts et al., 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021).

This special issue builds on previous work published in *Gender, Work & Organization* to explore the recalibration of women's position in work, organizations, and society due to the pandemic. We asked for papers addressing key questions such as: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected women's labor force participation? Are there any signs of diminishing occupational and/or vertical segregation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic? At the intersection of work and family, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected work–family balance among working men and women? Are there signs of a redistribution of household and caring tasks, or has the pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities? At the organizational level, how do employers respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? How have expectations regarding work changed, and can gendered patterns be identified? And at a societal level, why does female labor (both paid and unpaid) remain so undervalued? Has the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the value of some forms of female labor? To what extent will the COVID-19 pandemic change gendered (power) relations in the labor market and organizations?

We wanted to attract papers focused on moving forward after the COVID-19 crisis, centering around the long-term gendered consequences of the pandemic. How and in what ways might women take the lead in shaping a more sustainable economy, based on a broader concept of welfare that goes beyond the traditional welfare concept, primarily focused on economic growth in terms of GDP? How might the COVID-19 pandemic continue to change workplaces and organizations moving forward? Will such changes alter or reinforce the traditional gendered (power) structure of these institutions? What will happen to women's visibility if part of the work will be permanently done from home? To what extent will these changes intersect with broader gender inequality issues arising from technological advancements (e.g., telework)? Academically, how does the COVID-19 pandemic extend or challenge our theoretical knowledge about gendered labor markets, gendered workplaces, and/or gendered distributions of paid work, care tasks, household tasks, and leisure? To what extent does the COVID-19 pandemic challenge existing gender and/or feminist theories about women's position at home, in the workplace, and in society more broadly? Given that the pandemic has endured for over 2 years, it is likely to have long-lasting effects on gendered dynamics within work, organizations, and families. As such, examining questions such as these are vital for gaining insight into the effects of the pandemic and identifying strategies for reducing gendered inequalities that the pandemic has exacerbated.

In response to our call for papers, we received an overwhelming 39 abstracts from all over the world in late September 2021. Most abstracts (17) were from academics located in Europe, eight were from other Western countries (i.e., U.S., Canada, and Australia) and 14 were from non-Western countries, including Africa (2), Asia (10), and Central and South America (2). We selected 15 abstracts to be sent out for peer review (11 from Western, 4 from non-Western countries), focusing on abstracts that combined theoretical and empirical contributions related to the questions listed above (or similar questions). Our aim was to give attention to short- and long-term changes brought about by diverse global experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, with papers employing a broad variety of methodologies. We explicitly emphasized the need for a theoretical contribution, as a primary goal of this special issue is to contribute to theory advancement by relating findings from the COVID-19 pandemic to existing theoretical knowledge about gendered labor markets, gendered workplaces, and/or the gendered distribution of paid work, care tasks, household tasks, and leisure. Following multiple rounds of blinded peer review, a total of six papers were selected for publication in this special issue. One paper focuses on the gendered impact of the pandemic in India, and five focus on European countries.

Although we aimed to provide a global overview of the gendered impacts of the pandemic, the papers in this special issue largely focus on the European context. The majority of papers from authors in the Global North may be attributed in part to the advantages of having (access to) a well-established data collection infrastructure. Indeed, four of the six papers rely on quantitative analyses emerging from nationally representative panel datasets with such infrastructures. Many researchers also struggled and continue to struggle with care responsibilities heightened by the pandemic (Viglione, 2020). The disadvantages faced by researchers are unevenly distributed within countries (e.g., female academics are affected more than their male counterparts; Squazzoni et al., 2021), and are also likely unevenly distributed across researchers from different countries, for example, due to cross-country differences in vaccine and healthcare infrastructures (Stok et al., 2021). Although we would have welcomed a broader global perspective for the special issue than the current focus largely on the European context, the six papers published in this issue each provide key insights into the effects of the first year of the pandemic on gendered dynamics within work, organizations, and families.

The pandemic is clearly affecting the division of unpaid work among parents in gendered ways (e.g., Hipp & Bünning, 2020; Hjalmsdóttir et al., 2021; Petts et al., 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020; Zamberlan et al., 2021). In many countries, fathers increased their share of childcare and/or housework early in the pandemic, yet mothers also increased their time spent in domestic tasks and continue to do more than fathers (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Petts et al., 2021; Shafer et al., 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020). But what is driving these changes? In their article on the gendered consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown on unpaid work for Swiss dual earner couples with children, Steinmetz, Vandecasteele, Lebert, Voorpostel and Lipps use high-quality representative panel data to examine the change in time invested in housework and childcare before and during the pandemic. Using insights from the economics of the family, bargaining power and time availability theories, and the doing gender approach, they test theoretical assumptions regarding the mechanisms underlying these gender unequal patterns. Their results suggest that time availability matters. For the division of housework, only changes in the time availability of the partner are relevant. When the spouse changed to short-time or remote work, the respondent's time investment in housework decreased significantly. In relation to childcare, the respondent's own time availability matters. In particular, parents who worked overtime did not increase their time spent on care work like other parents did. This is in line with other studies showing that employment in essential occupations (which often required an increase in working time) was accompanied by less time investment in unpaid care work (André et al., 2021). These results are consistent with studies arguing that fathers' greater exposure to domestic tasks may have led them to take on a greater share of the domestic labor early in the pandemic (e.g., Shafer et al., 2020), and Steinmetz, Vandecasteele, Lebert, Voorpostel, and Lipps extend these findings by demonstrating that such exposure may have been triggered by changes in time availability due to short-time, remote or overtime working schemes. As such, this paper demonstrates that gender explanations alone are insufficient for explaining the impact of the pandemic on divisions of housework and childcare.

The pandemic is also having a significant impact on men and women's well-being. In the second paper of this special issue, Vicari, Zoch, and Bächmann highlight important gender differences in the relationships between employment conditions, family responsibilities, and subjective well-being. In their quantitative analysis of German panel data from the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) and its supplementary COVID-19 web survey (May–June 2020), they find that the pandemic had a negative effect on women's life satisfaction and men's work satisfaction in Germany. They consider multiple explanations for these gendered differences in the impact of the pandemic on well-being, showing that changes in well-being during the pandemic were closely associated with gendered expectations and opportunities. As men are expected to fulfill the provider role, involuntary changes to working hours and income led to declines in men's work satisfaction. In contrast, domestic burdens dramatically increased for women due to expectations that they are primarily responsible for the domestic sphere. Consequently, the decline in women's life satisfaction is driven by changes to their connection with caregiving responsibilities and social lives during the pandemic. These findings showing gendered variations in factors associated with changes in well-being offer important theoretical avenues to explore further as we move forward from the pandemic.

The duration of the pandemic and the significant impact it is having on gender relations and gender inequalities within and outside the home has the potential to shape attitudes towards men and women's roles in society, the home, and the workplace. Vandecasteele, Ivanova, Sieben, and Reeskens use representative longitudinal panel data from the Dutch European Values Survey (EVS) to study whether the COVID-19 pandemic led to changes in gender attitudes. They focus on the often-studied measure of how a woman's full-time employment is presumed to impact family life. They studied the change in attitudes between 2017 (prior to the pandemic) and May 2020 (during the first lockdown in the Netherlands). The analysis focuses on groups whose unpaid and paid work situation changed abruptly with the COVID-19 pandemic, including parents with children in the household and groups who experienced a change in paid workload that clashes with traditional gender role expectations, namely women whose workload increased and men whose workload decreased or who stopped working. The authors find an overall shift towards more progressive gender attitudes, particularly among single men and women. In relation to the pandemic, they find that groups who faced an abrupt change in their paid and unpaid work routines that clashed with their previously held gender attitude adapted their gender attitudes in alignment with their new situation. For men who stopped working and women who started working more, their gender attitudes became more progressive, aligning with their changed work situation. Women living with a partner and children also saw a change toward more traditional gender role attitudes. As many women in coupled households experienced an increase in their traditional care tasks for children because of the closure of childcare facilities and schools, their attitudes became more aligned with a traditional division of work and care. Here, we see a clear detrimental effect of the lockdown measures on attitudes toward gender equality. Whether the changes in paid and unpaid work, and the ensuing changes in attitudes, are temporary or evidence of a longer-term shift remains to be seen. Overall, this paper extends previous work on changes in gender attitudes during the pandemic (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021) by identifying some pandemic-related factors that may have triggered these changes as well as demonstrating variations across family and work contexts.

The pandemic has also had a gendered impact on the location of work. To minimize the risk of infection, many employees around the globe were urged or even required to work from home. As the pandemic continues, work location and work location preferences are shifting (e.g., Yerkes et al., 2021), with the potential for key differences between men and women (Ahrendt et al., 2021). Evidence from Germany highlights these differences. Using four waves of a German national probability survey (HOPP) collected in the early stages of the pandemic (May–August 2021), and including retrospective data on the pre-pandemic situation, Abendroth, Lott, Hipp, Müller, Saueremann, and Carstensen examine the extent to which the pandemic changed gender and parental-status differences in working from home patterns. Their analyses reveal changes to gender and parental-status differences in who worked from home before and during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, fathers were not more likely than mothers to work from home, but they were more likely than women without children and men without children to work from home. It appears that men without children worked from home more often than women without children, but they show that this difference is driven by job and workplace characteristics rather than gender. These gender and parental-status

differences in working from home shifted during the pandemic. Initially, working from home increased across all groups; differences between men and women and those with and without children decreased. By August 2020, when public life was almost back to normal in Germany, remote working decreased again, but not to pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, pre-pandemic gender and parental-status-specific patterns did not return. Similar shifts were found in relation to the number of hours worked from home. Although women who work from home typically do so for more hours than men, these gender differences decreased during the pandemic as the number of hours worked from home increased especially among men. In addition, analyses of reasons for not working from home (permission of supervisor/employer to work from home and stigmas surrounding work from home) showed a decrease in gender and parental-status-specific cultural barriers. These results provide some insight into how flexible workplace practices—which workers increasingly support—may help to reduce gender inequalities within workplaces moving forward after the pandemic.

As highlighted in the final two articles in this special issue, the disappearance of spatial and temporal boundaries for many workers also led to gendered boundary work practices while simultaneously highlighting blurred boundaries of work done in private and public spaces. Otonkorpi- Lehtoranta, Salin, Hakovirta, and Kaittila focus on this blurring of boundaries for parents, related not only to remote work recommendations but also to the closing of school premises and childcare centers. They examine gendered boundary work practices among Finnish parents during the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020 using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Relying on a rich discussion of doing boundaries and gender theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, their mixed-methods analysis demonstrates that like families elsewhere, many Finnish families had to improvise during the lockdown. The exception was families where both parents worked outside the home, which was described by the authors as 'business as usual'. In these cases, mothers and fathers did not have to renegotiate boundaries between work and home. In families where one partner worked outside the home, predominantly mothers shouldered the main responsibility of increased childcare and struggled to manage their work duties. These mothers felt they were 'left alone' to negotiate their own boundaries between caring for children and attempting to do paid work at the same time, without help from a partner. When both parents worked from home, the negotiation of physical space—particularly to 'work in peace' was gendered. Mothers felt that they had less access to quiet workspaces, resulting in paid work more often being interrupted by childcare. In short, many Finnish families experienced a highly gendered nature of boundary practices during the lockdown. The authors use these findings to emphasize the importance of relationships between families and public institutions such as schools and day cares, which can help improve future theorizing by accounting for the materially and socially situated negotiations of work-family boundaries.

The discussion of boundaries continues in the final article of the special issue, which starts by considering the long-standing dichotomy between the 'private' versus 'public' spheres of women's work questioned by feminist economists. As noted by the authors, feminist economists (e.g., Bettio & Plantenga, 2004; Woolley, 1993) and other feminist scholars (e.g., Crompton, 2006) have argued for a more nuanced understanding of marketable paid work and the unpaid work of household caregiving. Guha, Neti, and Lobo provide a vivid account of the blurred public private spaces using multiple in-depth interviews with 23 women street food vendors (SFVs) in Bengaluru, India. They investigate these women's experiences before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how undertaking street food vending for one's livelihood interacts with the social dimensions of gender and the division of labor. This much-needed non-western look at the effects of the pandemic provides insights into how the lockdown affected women in a country where informal work is much more prevalent. The qualitative analysis undertaken by Guha, Neti, and Lobo starts by exploring the household labor dynamics in the context of paid and unpaid work of women prior to the pandemic. They explain how the women street food vendors capitalized on their existing skills of 'cooking' and were thereby able to gain agency and recognition for themselves within their households. The second part of the analysis shows the impact of the first wave of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, where the narratives of women street food vendors highlight the return of the dichotomy between private and public spheres. The pandemic made this public-private boundary more pronounced for these women street food vendors, leading to a loss of control over the public sphere and their work being restricted only to the private sphere.

Collectively, the papers in this *Gender, Work and Organization* Special Issue provide valuable insight on the gendered consequences of the pandemic across a diverse set of contexts. Notably, a common theme throughout this special issue is that women—and mothers in particular—have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. As both Guha, Neti, and Lobo, and Otonkorpi- Lehtoranta, Salin, Hakovirta, and Kaittila observe, the boundaries between work and family life not only became more blurred, but women disproportionately had to focus their time on family and caregiving at the expense of paid labor force participation. Unsurprisingly, as Vicari, Zoch, and Bächmann uncover, the increased caregiving responsibility that fell on mothers, and the corresponding loneliness that results from a focus on caregiving (particularly during periods of lockdown), resulted in lower well-being among women. In addition to changes in work–family balance, Vandecasteele, Ivanova, Sieben, and Reeskens show that adults aligned their gender attitudes to match these changing conditions. For some groups, more gender egalitarian attitudes developed. But for women taking on increased caregiving burdens, attitudes became more traditional. In short, for many women, the pandemic has led to an increase in caregiving burdens and a decrease in paid work opportunities, aligned with a noticeable shift in attitudes supporting these new gendered work–family arrangements. As such, although care work became much more visible during the pandemic in many ways, this increased awareness does not appear to have translated into a greater valuing of care work.

Despite these numerous concerns, research from the papers included in this special issue does provide some glimpses of improvements in gender equality. The shift towards more gender egalitarian attitudes among women who worked more and men who worked less during the pandemic suggests shifting work–family behavior during the pandemic could have a long-lasting impact. Moreover, as Abendroth, Lott, Hipp, Müller, Sauermann, and Carstensen discuss, the pandemic has reduced barriers to working from home. Flexible work arrangements are a commonly cited strategy to help workers better balance work and care responsibilities. With gender differences in teleworking decreasing in some countries, the potential negative consequences of women's overrepresentation in telework (e.g., decreased access to informal networks, not conforming to presenteeism ideals) could be mitigated (e.g., Ibarra et al., 2020). Steinmetz, Vandecasteele, Lebert, Voorpostel, and Lipps also demonstrate that changes in time availability largely explained changes in unpaid work. Taken together with the decline in the gendered effect of teleworking, continued gender equal access to and use of flexible work arrangements in a post-pandemic society may reduce time pressures on both women and men and perhaps help to facilitate a more equitable division of labor. Indeed, there is evidence that flexible work practices are associated with greater time spent in housework and childcare among fathers and provide opportunities for women to better balance work and family life (Chung et al., 2021). But, as Abendroth, Lott, Hipp, Müller, Sauermann, and Carstensen acknowledge, such long-term changes to gender inequality are likely only possible if organizations and the broader culture embrace and provide equal opportunities for flexible work once the pandemic ends.

The impact of the pandemic for gender equality in work, at home, in organizations, and in society, is complex. How gender matters differs not only along gender lines, but also according to individuals' pre-pandemic socio-economic status and their embeddedness in various institutional and organizational contexts. Whether someone was working as a nurse in an Italian hospital, as a police officer on the streets of New York, as a street food vendor in India, or as a university professor in Germany likely shapes individuals' gendered experiences of the pandemic, and future studies will need to elaborate on such intersectional dimensions. In addition, scholars are only beginning to fully unpack both the short- and long-term gendered effects of the pandemic. At the time of writing, evidence seems to suggest that improvements in gender equality may be short-lived (e.g., Remery et al., 2021; Rodríguez Sánchez et al., 2021), but this is certainly an area in need of ongoing research.

The papers in this special issue provide valuable insights, yet there is still much more work to be done. For example, one notable perspective missing from this special issue is that of organizations. Will organizations embrace more flexible forms of work moving forward, and will such arrangements be equitable such that workers who work remotely and those present in workplaces will be provided the same opportunities? Will such decisions be guided by workers' interests and their opportunities to perform their job in the best possible way, arguments related to a better fit of work and private life, the need to reduce CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions from commuting, or something else? The guiding principles


chosen to structure longer-term changes to the organization of work can have important implications for gender equality. Another perspective requiring further elaboration is how gendered experiences have varied across country contexts, particularly in regards to low-income countries and countries in the Global South. Differences in economies and access to vaccines likely create very different lived pandemic experiences that need to be considered. One thing is clear: the pandemic has had wide-reaching effects on all aspects of society, such as education, healthcare, the labor market, and the economy, but also social relations. Our primary aim for this special issue was to advance knowledge on how the pandemic has affected gendered dynamics within work, organizations, and societies, and we hope that the papers contained in this issue advance gender theories and spur future research on these topics.


## KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, employment, families, gendered impact


## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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