

Mothers bear the cost of the pandemic shift to remote work

April 1 2021, by Katherine Unger Baillie



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For many parents, the COVID-19 pandemic has made life's everyday juggling act—managing work, school, extracurricular, and household responsibilities—much, much harder. And according to a new study led

by Penn sociologists, those extra burdens have fallen disproportionately on mothers.

The research, shared in the April issue of the journal *Gender and Society*, investigated how shifts in work and school that arose due to the pandemic triggered changes in the division of [labor](#) in families. Using data on two-parent households from a nationwide survey conducted in April 2020, the researchers found that [gender disparities](#) in unpaid labor were most apparent when a mother was the only parent working from home, or when neither parent was able to work remotely.

"It turns out that when the mother is working remotely and her partner isn't, she ends up taking on a ton more responsibilities," says Jerry Jacobs, a sociology professor in Penn's School of Arts & Sciences and one of the paper's authors. "When a father is working remotely and his partner isn't, somehow he doesn't take on as much extra work. This seems to be a deeply gendered issue."

As the pandemic has worn on, the toll on women has been hard to ignore. Each month, hundreds of thousands of women lost their jobs or dropped out of the workforce to meet new demands at home.

Yet remote work also seemed to open the possibility of greater equity between the genders in domestic responsibility, as two [parents](#) would be at home and accessible.

To tease out the effects of a shift to remote work on domestic labor during the pandemic, Jacobs, Penn doctoral student Allison Dunatchik, and colleagues turned to data from a New York Times survey, conducted by marketing research firm Morning Consult. Of 2,200 respondents, 478 were partnered parents, and 151 were single parents.

While the gender of each survey respondent's partner was unknown, the

gender of the respondents themselves played a key role in how the pandemic affected their domestic responsibilities, which, with children largely at home, increased across the board.

Families where both partners worked remotely had the most egalitarian split of household and parenting duties, the researchers found. Both mothers and [fathers](#) reported similar increases in housework and childcare responsibilities, as well as in the pressure they felt about managing their children's schooling. Yet even this best-case-scenario was imbued with gender disparity, as pre-pandemic disparities endured. Mothers working remotely whose partners were also were more than twice as likely as fathers to report being the partner primarily responsible for housework and [child care](#).

When only one parent worked remotely and the other worked out of the home, the gender disparity in domestic labor was far more evident. Mothers who worked from home essentially absorbed the extra labor, while fathers who worked remotely reported less uptake of the extra housework and child care than either mothers working from home alone or fathers who worked at home along with their partner.

"The disparity, how this affected remote dads versus remote moms, was just so stark," says Jacobs. "Even for a hard-boiled, data-driven sociologist like me, I was surprised."

"I had a similar reaction," Dunatchik says. "It's interesting when you compare the fathers working remotely alone to the fathers whose partners are also working from home. There's something interesting about the partner dynamics, it seems, that makes fathers more likely to pitch in in the presence of a partner."

When neither partner was able to work remotely, again mothers bore the brunt of the extra labor. In these couples, mothers were twice as likely as

fathers to report increases in time spent on household labor and were seven times as likely to say they were the person responsible for the majority of children's home learning.

While the survey data had only 151 responses from single parents, most of which were women, the researchers found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, single mothers were spending more time on domestic labor, though they were less likely to have increased their time spent on housework during the pandemic than partnered mothers. "They were also less likely to report feeling significant pressure about their children's home learning compared to partnered [mothers](#)," says Dunatchik.

The survey was conducted about one month into the pandemic, so the researchers can only speculate about the lingering impact on gendered division of labor. Yet the researchers' findings provide a window into the pressures that may have driven some women's voluntary exit from the labor market. As more children return to in-person school, "some of that pressure will be reduced," Jacobs says. The longer-term impacts on women's seniority and loss of wages, however, could be significant and enduring, he says even if they do eventually return to full-time work.

One silver lining of the pandemic's "natural experiment" on remote work, the researchers say, may be increased work flexibility. With more opportunities for all parents to work from [home](#), there may be more opportunities to move toward a more egalitarian division of responsibilities. "That's something that scholars have been pushing for a long time," Jacobs says.

More information: Allison Dunatchik et al, Gender, Parenting, and The Rise of Remote Work During the Pandemic: Implications for Domestic Inequality in the United States, *Gender & Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/08912432211001301](https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211001301)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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