

Lockdown saw couples share housework and childcare more evenly—but these changes didn't last

January 21 2022, by Susan Harkness



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It may feel like a common occurrence today, but if you cast your mind back to the first COVID lockdown, having whole families working and studying from home was a very unfamiliar situation. And it was one that

had unfamiliar consequences.

For opposite-sex couples, [lockdown](#) disrupted the traditional gender division of household chores. In [research](#) that my colleagues and I conducted, we found that having both partners at home saw men increase how much of the domestic burden they took on, so that women's typically greater share decreased.

We discovered this by analysing data from [Understanding Society](#), a big longitudinal household panel study—the largest of its kind. The study follows a sample of UK households, periodically asking them questions to see how their lives are changing. Between April 2020 and September 2021, its participants were asked to complete web surveys every few months specifically about the impact of the pandemic on their lives.

We looked at responses from people of working age who were in opposite-gender relationships that continued throughout this period of COVID surveying. This provided a final sample of just over 2,000 couples for us to analyse. Here's what we discovered.

Lockdown shocks

The couples were asked about the gender division of housework during the first lockdown, and we then compared this with information collected from pre-lockdown surveys carried out during 2019. The couples were also asked whether those changes persisted when the first lockdown eased. On top of this, we also compared the changes experienced by those with no [children](#) at home and those with children of various ages.

What we saw was that overall, women's share of housework fell from 65% pre-COVID to 60% during the first lockdown. So initially there was a moderate amount of gender rebalancing in the sharing of domestic

work. However, by September 2020 the old gender divisions were being re-established. By this point, women were on average doing 62% of housework.

These changes coincided with changes in working behaviour. Overall, the findings showed that both men's and women's paid working hours reduced substantially in the spring of 2020 but had recovered by September.

And during the spring lockdown, around a third of both male and female respondents were employed but working from home. However, this had fallen to just under a quarter by September. Similarly, around one in five women and one in seven men were furloughed in the spring, but this had dropped to fewer than one in 20 by September.

This seems to suggest that having both members of a couple at home, with less time committed to work, leads to the domestic burden being more evenly shared.

Having both [family members](#) spending more time at home also appears to have led to there being more housework to be done. Both men and women increased their weekly hours of domestic work during lockdown—from 12.5 to 15.5 for women and from 6.5 to 10 for men. Come September 2020, these figures had fallen again, though they remained above their pre-lockdown levels.

Childcare burdens

However, the rebalancing of work wasn't consistent across the couples we looked at. The extent of the change depended on the number and age of the couple's children.

When the respondents were split into three groups—those who had no

children living at home, those who had children under the age of five and those who had older children—marked differences emerged.

For couples without children at [home](#), women's share of domestic labour fell during the spring and continued to fall after the summer. Though these women still did more domestic work than their partners, their input did not return to pre-COVID levels as 2020 progressed.

For those with children aged between six and 15, the drop in women's share of housework had partially reversed by September, but it hadn't fully bounced back. In the autumn they were still doing less than before the pandemic.

But for those with children under five, the drop in women's share of housework had reversed completely by September. This was despite the initial drop in the spring having been greater for this group compared to the other two.

Family dynamics

So what do we make of this? In terms of [family](#) dynamics, the lockdown may have had more lasting effects for some families than for others. Fears that advances in gender equality could be reversed during the pandemic were more real for those with very young children, who were much less able to keep themselves busy with other tasks and whose children were not old enough to make use of online education.

One important reason for the division of labour changing during lockdown was men's and women's working hours. Women with young children tended to reduce their paid working hours more as the pandemic progressed in order to take on the increased burden of care that stemmed from schools and nurseries being closed.

Our study shows that changes to family life during the pandemic were nuanced, with different family set-ups resulting in different changes to the balance of housework and the rebalancing of work changing over time. Indeed, there may be further nuances that we're yet to fully identify.

In the future, it would be good to look at whether extended family networks were able to alleviate the increased care burden for some families. We could also look at how the pandemic affected the mental health of women with and without children, and it would be useful to see whether different countries' lockdowns affected families differently as well.

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