

The Covid-19 recession will hurt women more, but it might nudge them toward equality ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The coronavirus pandemic is likely to damage women's work more than men's, certainly in the short term and quite possibly for a long time to come, according to new research. But there's a flipside: It's possible, the researchers write, that the specifics of such a far-reaching crisis will alter gender norms in a similar way to the shock of World War II—a jolt so big it could potentially lead to more equal workplaces, and a more equal society.

The ideas come from a working paper circulated this month by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a US nonprofit. The authors point out that their study is a work in progress and not yet peer-reviewed, but the initial thinking, and linking together of available evidence, is illuminating.

In "normal" recessions, jobs more often done by men (construction, manufacturing, etc.) are hit disproportionately harder than fields with more women (education, healthcare). In aggregate, women's work is less volatile in normal times than men's, and less prone to big cyclical changes. Another reason for women having "steadier" jobs could be that women with partners choose roles that counterbalance the volatility of their partners' industries, the researchers suggested.

But the coronavirus crisis, and the recession it's precipitating, is different in specific ways to many prior recessions, the new paper pointed out. The authors used the American Time Use Survey from 2017 and 2018 to divine two things: to what extent people's roles would now be considered "critical"—for example health care workers—and how able people say they are to do their job from home.

They discovered that 17% of all employed women worked in "critical" roles (though this excluded grocery store workers), while 24% of all employed men did so (though this included men working in transportation—and while many of those jobs, such as drivers delivering food, would indeed be critical, public transport is scaling back.)

When it came to working from home, the researchers—Titan Alon at the University of California San Diego, Matthias Doepke and Jane Olmstead-Rumsey of Northwestern University, and Michèle Tertilt at the University of Mannheim—found that men were more likely to be employed in "highly telecommutable" occupations, with 28% of male workers versus 22% of female workers in those jobs. Again, this picture is imperfect, because the theory of who might be able to telecommute doesn't necessarily match up to the reality of who can. Remember, the researchers were looking at pre-crisis survey responses, and things have changed dramatically in recent weeks in terms of what many thought was possible.

Overall, however, it seems likely that more women will see their jobs affected by the specific limitations and redundancies associated with the economic fallout of Covid-19, while more men will find their jobs protected or moved to a home office.

But there's another big factor at work. And it could make things more unequal, especially in the immediate term; but it could make things more equitable in the long term: children.

Childcare

More than 1 billion children around the world have been affected by school and daycare closures. This has precipitated a "sudden spike in childcare" that's likely to be felt most by women, the researchers write.

Even in two-earner households where both parents work full-time, women tend to do more childcare—especially when kids are young. "Among the full time employed, married men provide 7.2 hours of child care per week versus 10.3 hours for married women. Conditional on having at least one child up to the age of 5, the numbers are 10.6 hours for married men versus 16.8 hours for married women," the researchers note.

In other words, women already do about 60% of the childcare even when they also work full-time, and if the focus is narrowed to childcare during work hours, it's more—around 70% before coronavirus struck. If those patterns are perpetuated under lockdown, women with kids trying to fulfill work obligations from home will be disproportionately disadvantaged. In two-parent households where women work less

or are paid less than a male partner (which is likely, on average, to be the case), women are more likely to give up inflexible jobs to care for kids.

Single mothers, meanwhile, are even more stretched than usual. There are 15 million single-mother households in US; some 21% of American children live only with their mother, compared to 4% with only their father. In addition to losing their usual childcare—which might be daycare or school—they are likely to have fewer alternatives for backup care from grandparents and the like, suggesting they'll bear the full brunt of their families' new childcare needs.

On the flipside

Helen Lewis in The Atlantic has argued persuasively that coronavirus will be terrible for women globally, not just in the US, which is the focus of the new research shared by NBER. Quartz, meanwhile, has noted there's an opportunity for couples in nominally equal relationships to make sure they truly are walking the walk—like actually sharing childcare and domestic work 50/50.

The early research does suggest that, given the huge scale of the crisis and the societal changes it's already brought about, lasting social change, in the form of a shift in what we actually think is possible and even normal, could ensue.

Some men who previously did not or could not work from home are now doing so, and companies that previously refused to afford them that flexibility have been forced to change. In some cases, men are at home with kids while their female partners are working in critical roles such as medicine, and leaving the home to fulfill their duties.

The new paper unearths an interesting stat that points to how the situation could play out. Pre-virus, in couples where the woman's job couldn't be done from home (for example if she was a midwife or fixed wind turbines), but the husband had the capacity for flexibility, men did about two hours more childcare a week than men in less flexible jobs. This was true even when the men didn't work from home. When men can work from home, the researchers suggest, "the added flexibility of these jobs is reflected in a much higher participation of men in childcare, as long as their wives do not have the same flexibility."

Families that fit that profile make up only a small proportion—about 9%—of US homes, but still account for millions of households, the paper notes.

In families with other structures, meanwhile, at least some evening-up of domestic responsibility is likely to occur over the course of the lockdown, the researchers write, and it's also likely some of that will spill over into the post-lockdown era. Once employers have learned to be flexible, and are invested in doing so, they're unlikely to return to exactly the way they did things before. And workers are likely to demand more flexibility, having finally seen that it's possible. Since women originally shouldered more of the burden of childcare, they stand to gain more from this change.

The working paper makes a comparison between the world-changing events of the past months and those of the last World War, which precipitated a huge influx of women into the workforce in many industrialized countries, a change that didn't revert once the war was over. "The example of World War II suggests that temporary changes to the division of labor between the sexes have long-run effects," the paper notes.

How this plays out

The picture for gender equality is by no means rosy. Nor is the new paper at all exhaustive: The researchers mention, but don't explore, for example, the fact that domestic violence is likely to spike with people cooped up at home.

But it's also possible that a fundamental shift is taking place, while we work in our bedrooms and create chore-wheel rotations for baby care, bursts of work, homeschooling duties, and getting dinner on the table.

The "crisis is likely to generate a large, if temporary, upward shift in men's participation in child care, with a sizable fraction of married men taking the main responsibility, in most cases for the first time," the researchers note. "Based on the persistent effects of other shocks to the household distribution of labor in the past, we expect this shift to lead to a substantial increase in men's future participation in child care."

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