

'I feel like a 1950s housewife': How lockdown has exposed the gender divide ^[1]

It's still expected that women will make their jobs fit around childcare and home schooling, while a man's job comes first

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 May 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

During the lockdown, Anna Bosworth, a freelance marketing consultant, has given up on her career so that her husband can concentrate on his. "There isn't a second I can work, from 5am until my kids go to sleep at 8.30pm," she says. "I can't do anything productive."

Like many working mothers, Bosworth is self-employed and went part-time after she had her first child. Meanwhile, her husband has a full-time job at an advertising agency. He is continuing to work normally, except for one day a week which he is taking as holiday. "He's doing everything to help with the children, but I feel lucky he still has a job," says Bosworth. "The priority for us is to keep our house and pay our bills, and his job is the most straightforward route to that."

They have an eight-month-old baby and a five-year-old girl, and normally get help from grandparents and a childminder so that they can both work. "I'm a feminist and believe in choice," she says. "But because of the pandemic, my choices have been taken away. I feel like a 1950s housewife."

She is not alone. During the lockdown, mothers in the UK are typically providing at least 50% more childcare as well as spending around 10% to 30% more time than fathers home schooling their children, figures analysed by the Observer show.

It doesn't matter whether a woman is working from home, working outside the home or not working at all: the research reveals she is typically spending at least an extra hour-and-a-half on childcare and home schooling every day, compared to the average man in the same circumstances.

The research, carried out by economists from the universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Zurich between 9 and 14 April, indicates that a woman who is at home – whether or not she is formally working – is affected by this gender divide. Both employed and unemployed mothers are typically spending around six hours providing childcare and home schooling every working day. By contrast, the average father at home is only spending a little over four hours on childcare and homeschooling each working day, regardless of his employment status.

"Whatever situation you have, on average it's the woman doing more, and it's not because she's working less" says Dr Christopher Rauh, an economist at Cambridge University.

The gender divide is even larger in high-income households. A mother who earns over £80,000 and is working from home is typically doing 3.3 hours of home schooling and 3.8 hours of childcare each day – over seven hours in total. A typical father who earns over £80,000 only spends 2.1 hours home schooling his children and 2.3 hours on childcare each working day – less than 4.5 hours in total.

"The higher the household income, the more time women are spending home schooling compared to men," says Rauh. "People come up with explanations – like women are better at taking care of their children due to evolution – but if that were true, it shouldn't apply to home schooling. Yet we also see those differences here."

The amount of home schooling children are receiving in lockdown appears to be particularly affected by the income of their mothers, with the lowest-paid women spending 2.1 hours a day educating their children each day (over an hour less than the highest-paid women). Fathers earning £0 to £20,000 are doing even less homeschooling (1.9 hours), but that's still roughly the same as the higher-paid men.

The starkest gender divide among low-paid parents, however, is around childcare. Like the highest-paid women, those women earning £0 to £20,000 are doing 3.9 hours of childcare each day. By contrast, the lowest-paid men are carrying out just 2.4 hours of childcare each day.

In other words, a woman earning over £80,000 and working from home is typically spending 60% more time (an extra 1.4 hours) on childcare each working day than the average man earning £0 to £20,000.

Mary-Ann Stephenson, director of the Women's Budget Group, thinks this may be because women are more used to having to juggle looking after children and work than men. "It may be that in an emergency the woman takes on more of the childcare work," she says.

Children may also be more inclined to go to their mothers than their fathers, she says. Similarly, if their father is paid more, it might be seen as more important that he doesn't lose his job.

The home-learning platform Atom Learning says that since the lockdown began, more than three-quarters of parents who have registered their children for free online lessons and set them schoolwork were female.

At the same time, there is evidence that women's contributions outside the home are decreasing. There has been a drop in the number of solo-authored academic papers submitted by women, while submissions by male academics have increased. Similarly, at the Philosophy Foundation, the majority of the organisation's work is now being carried out by men. "This is because most of our female philosophers are having to focus on childcare and home education" says co-CEO Emma Worley.

Working Families, which runs a legal advice service for parents and carers, has seen a sixfold increase in inquiries since the lockdown began, 80% of which have come from women. "We have seen evidence from mothers that they're being penalised and not being supported to work from home because they have children. We've also seen mothers having to take unpaid leave or being dismissed."

There are concerns about the impact of all this on women's mental health. Research from King's College London shows that, since the lockdown began, 57% of women say they are feeling more anxious and depressed, compared to only 40% of men. More women than men also report that they are getting less sleep, and eating less healthily, than usual.

"In a large number of cases, women are doing the vast majority of the caring for small children and the home educating work," says Stephenson. "The men seem to be able to lock themselves away in a study, while the women are working at the kitchen table – and also trying to home-educate"

Sam Smethers, chief executive of the Fawcett Society, says the wider implications of the lockdown gender divide are clear. "This shows that the default assumptions about who does the caring for children fundamentally haven't shifted. It defaults to women. There's still an expectation that women will make their jobs fit around the caring, whereas a man's job will come first."

In lockdown, Lizzie Harrop had been experiencing the same anxiety levels she felt when she was suffering from postnatal depression five years ago. "In the beginning, my child was making me feel like a prisoner again. I was trapped in my own home, with responsibility for a five-year-old and a huge pressure to teach him, but I had a job to do as well."

She works full-time in a senior role at a well-known company – and for the first week was having to conduct almost every single meeting with her son, Barnaby, on her knee. "I called him my shadow. He was very excited about having me around all the time. But it was relentless, seven days a week."

Her stress levels rose. "Even though the business was being brilliant around not expecting parents with children at home to do all their usual hours, as a hardworking person you don't feel like you're performing 100%. As a consequence, you feel like you're failing. And failing is just a shit place to be."

She and her husband both work full-time and earn equal salaries. "But if I am at home, my child will always migrate to me –and that's a bloody nightmare."

She began to argue with her husband about whose job was more important, resulting in some major rows. "There were moments when we were like: we're probably not going to make it through this lockdown together. We had a couple of really difficult conversations."

But now, she says, they are in "a really good place". The key change was deciding to "own" her situation in lockdown. "You've got to boss it. You can't let it boss you."

That's where the framework came in: a shared calendar that shows who is the primary carer for their son every minute of the day from 6am until bedtime, with each parent expected to do equal amounts of childcare and home schooling during that period, ideally in scheduled three-hour chunks. The timing of work meetings – and exercise – must be diarised and agreed between them, days in advance.

"What I've now observed is that my husband is brilliant with Barnaby, who has turned into a different, more confident boy with both of us being there for him at home. And as a couple, we've gotten much closer together. I think we had to have a rocky bit to come out the other side."

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