

# 'We are losers in this crisis': Research finds lockdowns reinforcing gender inequality<sup>[1]</sup>

Campaign groups warn women across Europe risk being pushed back into traditional roles

**Author:** Connolly, Kate & Kassam, Ashifa & Willsher, Kim & Carroll, Rory

**Source:** The Guardian

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 29 May 2020

## AVAILABILITY

Access online<sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Life during the coronavirus lockdown has reinforced gender inequality across Europe with research emphasising that the economic and social consequences of the crisis are far greater for women and threaten to push them back into traditional roles in the home which they will struggle to shake off once it is over.

Throughout the continent, campaign groups are warning that the burdens of the home office and home schooling together with additional household duties and extra cooking, has been unequally carried by women and that improvements made in their lives by the growth in equality over the past decades are in danger of being rolled back by the health crisis.

In Spain, more than 170,000 people have signed a petition calling for urgent measures to address the fact that women have been left to bear the brunt of the lockdown. "As a result of this crisis, many women will be forced to give up 'paid work' in order to care for their families," the petition notes, urging the government to adopt measures such as legally enshrining working from home and facilitating greater flexibility.

The petition was launched earlier this month by Yo No Renuncio, an association that since 2015 has fought to improve work-life balance in Spain. "We had started to make headway. Then came the lockdown," said Laura Baena, a mother of three and one of the founders of the group. "And all of a sudden we were pushed back into our homes."

In a bid to battle one of the world's deadliest outbreaks, Spanish officials plunged the country into one of Europe's strictest lockdowns in mid-March; schools were shuttered, children banned from leaving their homes for six weeks and non-essential workers told to work from home.

For women's rights campaigners, the situation set off alarm bells. Women in Spain were already spending an average of 2.5 hours more per day on domestic tasks with many families leaning on grandparents – one of the pandemic's most vulnerable groups – for help with child care as they grappled with the country's long working hours.

"So what happens if grandparents are out of play, schools are closed and most mothers need to work during school hours?" said Baena. "The absurd system that was holding up work-family balance in Spain crumbles."

A survey sent out by her group in the second week of Spain's lockdown found that 80% of the 12,600 women who responded were struggling to balance teleworking with childcare. Around 13% said the lockdown had forced them to shoulder an even greater share of housework and childcare than normal.

The findings echo a study from the University of Valencia that found that, for the most part, mothers were the ones left ensuring school-age children kept up with online classes and homework during the lockdown, adding to women's stress and anxiety levels.

In recent weeks, as Spain eases out of lockdown through a four-phase plan, there's been little clarity as to when most children will go back to school. "Society is moving forward but mothers are still stuck in phase zero," said Baena. "Right now we have no idea what will happen in September. But we know that the bars will be open."

Women in France have, say campaigners, seen their domestic workload triple since the country locked down in March, when schools and nurseries were forced to close and workers told to operate from home where possible.

Céline Piques, spokesperson for the feminist organisation Osez le Féminisme, told FranceInfo radio that women were being forced into homemaker roles she had thought they had long since left behind. She said: "There's a form of regression for mothers during the lockdown. They are now having to do a triple day.

"We already know women's work is doubled (compared to men's) because they have to do their jobs, housework and parenting ... to that they have had to add home schooling," Piques said.

Marlène Schiappa, secretary of state for female-male equality in the French government, was so concerned about what she saw as a mounting social crisis, she commissioned a study on the double “mental work” for women during the lockdown that confirmed that 58% of the women who responded “do more housework than men” as opposed to 21% of men. According to the poll, French women are doing an average of two hours and 34 minutes of housework a day, compared with men, who do 24 minutes less, while 63% of women said they made family meals, compared with 28 per cent of men.

A study by Germany’s leading economic research body, the DIW, has shown that more than a quarter of women with children under 14 are spending less time on paid work since lockdown began, compared with 16% of men, with women in particular restructuring their paid jobs to stay at home. It has voiced its concern that this will be to the detriment of their long-term career goals and earning potential, as well as their pensions.

Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany, and Europe’s longest-serving elected female leader, has warned against what she called a “retraditionalisation” of roles, insisting to parliament recently she would do everything she could to halt its creep in Germany.

“I will intervene with all my strength to ensure that a retraditionalisation does not take place, but that instead we give women and men the same opportunities,” she said. Always cautious about being labelled a feminist, she added: “By the way, there are lots of men who are also occupied with home schooling, not only mothers. But ... I’m sure if we add up all the hours at the end of this it will be women who will have been more heavily burdened.”

Women have criticised that questions of how to ease up on lockdowns have focused on economic considerations rather than childcare. “Far more effort has been made debating when the beer gardens, the car showrooms and the Bundesliga matches can resume, than whether kindergartens can open,” said Suzanne, a 41-year-old accountant and mother of two from Hamburg.

In Ireland, where social and economic changes of recent decades have transformed the lives of many women, research carried out for the Irish legislature, the Oireachtas, has concluded that women have less time to carry out paid work from home compared with men due to the closure of schools and nurseries. It concluded that a “likely immediate consequence” of the situation was that “women’s productivity in employment will suffer more than men’s.” Longer-term, it said women could expect “potentially fewer economic opportunities ... and a wider gender remuneration gap.”

The research also noted that women in Ireland, as elsewhere, are disproportionately employed in sectors such as retail and hospitality which have been shut down entirely, increasing the hit on female earnings.

An investigation by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) into how the coronavirus crisis impacts daily life with the concentration of work, school and leisure in people’s homes, concluded that while all family members had generally benefited from less time pressures, the main responsibility for organising everything from routines to social contacts had fallen to women.

“Women seem to be doing much more than men to manage the amalgamation of the different areas of life at home,” said Theun Pieter van Tienoven, a sociologist at the VUB, summarising the findings of the study drawing on the daily diaries kept by 661 Belgians. “The lockdown therefore reinforces gender inequality in relative terms,” he added.

As lockdowns ease across Europe, new pressures on mothers are now emerging as employers start demanding that their workers return to their office desks, even though schools and nurseries have returned only in part or often not at all.

“The messages I’m getting are desperate,” Baena, the Spanish campaigner, said. “The objective right now is survival.”

Some women, she said, have guiltily resorted to asking elderly parents to resume their childcare duties, despite the health risks involved, while others have been forced to leave children on their own at home. Many women had been left with little option but to quit their jobs or take leave without pay.

“All the advances we made in terms of equality and now so many women are going to end up back in their homes,” she added. “We’re going to be the big losers in this crisis.”

**Related link:**

**Region:** Europe [3]

**Tags:** gender inequity [4]

women's labour force participation [5]

---

**Source URL (modified on 17 Jun 2020):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/06/we-are-losers-crisis-research-finds-lockdowns-reinforcing-gender>

**Links**

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/06/we-are-losers-crisis-research-finds-lockdowns-reinforcing-gender> [2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/29/we-are-losers-in-this-crisis-research-finds-lockdowns-reinforcing-gender-inequality> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender-inequity> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/womens-labour-force-participation>