COVID-19 AND THE GENDERED DIVISION OF COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL LABOR IN THE HOME

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing gender inequality, particularly in the home. Schools and daycares have been forced to close their doors, leaving a huge gap in childcare that parents have had to fill. Women have disproportionately shouldered this burden, spending an average of fifteen more hours a week on domestic labor tasks than men.[1] While this type of unpaid labor is recognizable and readily quantifiable, women also take on a disproportionate amount of emotional and cognitive labor, which is often overlooked by economists, yet necessary to keep a household running. The burden of increased emotional and cognitive labor caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has significant psychological implications for mothers and children and is detrimental to the Nation's economic prospects and efforts to close the gender wage gap.

Gender Norms for Domestic Labor Before and During COVID-19

Despite shifting gender norms that have increased female participation in the paid work force and male contribution to domestic tasks, the division of unpaid, domestic labor remained sharply gendered prior to the pandemic.[2] Before COVID-19 in the United States women performed an average of four hours of unpaid work per day, while men performed an average of two and a half.[3] This disparity can be partially attributed to women carrying a significantly heavier load of childcare responsibility than their male counterparts, even when both parents work full time. On average, mothers with full-time jobs spent an additional 50% more time caring for children compared to full-time working fathers.[4]

The societal changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the issues underlying the unequal division of unpaid labor in the home. Because of school and daycare closures, parents were spending an additional twenty-four

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[1] Anu Madgavkar, et al., *COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects*, MCKINSEY & CO. (Jul. 15, 2020), https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects.

[2] *See, e.g.*, *American Time Use Survey - May to December 2019 and 2020 Results*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., (JUL. 22, 2021), https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf.

[3] *Employment: Time spent in paid and unpaid work, by sex*, ORG. FOR ECON. CO-OPERATION & DEV., https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54757# (last visited Oct. 24, 2021).

[4] *Time spent in primary activities and the percent of married mothers and fathers who did the activities on an average day by employment status, average for the combined years 2015-19*, U.S. BUREAU OF LAB. STAT., (Jun. 25, 2020), https://www.bls.gov/tus/tables/a6-1519.htm.

hours per week on household chores, childcare, and education.[5] In households with two opposite-sex, working parents, women were responsible for the majority of childcare responsibilities created by the lockdowns.[6] One third of working mothers, as compared with one tenth of working fathers, reported being the only providers of childcare for their children during this period.[7] For mothers, the sudden responsibility of providing around the clock childcare, a role previously fulfilled by schools and daycare centers, was not without professional consequences. 64% of college-educated working mothers reported reducing their working hours at some point during the pandemic, as compared to 36% of college-educated working fathers.[8]

Studies of the gendered division of unpaid labor have historically measured domestic work by the physical tasks required to keep a household running: cooking, cleaning, and laundry.[9] However, this view overlooks two types of invisible labor which are also necessary: emotional work and cognitive labor.[10]

Emotional Work

Emotional work concerns the attempt to induce or inhibit feelings so that they are appropriate for the current situation, while also enhancing the emotional well-being of others.[11] The term was originally used to describe how workers, such as flight attendants, are trained to smile and maintain a friendly and positive attitude in the face of rude, unruly, and abusive passengers.[12] The deeper the bond between people, the more emotional work is likely to occur.[13] This means that there is likely a large amount of emotional work involved in the relationships between partners, and between parents and children.

In the context of parenting, emotional work describes parents' attempts to evoke the situationally-appropriate emotions in the presence of their children.[14] In the United States, the current prevailing parenting philosophy is positive parenting,

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[5] Matt Krentz, et al., *Easing the COVID-19 Burden on Working Parents*, BOS. CONSULTING GRP. (May 21, 2020), https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/helping-working-parents-ease-the-burden-of-covid-19.
[6] Gema Zamarro & María J. Prados, *Gender Differences in Couples' Division of Childcare, Work and Mental Health During COVID-19*, 19 REV. ECON. HOUSEHOLD 11, 18 (2021).
[7] *Id.*
[8] *Id.* at 19.
[9] *See* Allison Daminger, *The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor*, 84(4) AM. SOCIO. REV. 609, 611 (2019).
[10] *Id.*
[11] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Emotional Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, 85(3) AM. J. SOCIOL. 551, 561 (1979); Rebecca Erickson, *Reconceptualizing Family Work: The Effect of Emotion Work on Perceptions of Marital Quality*, 55 J MARRIAGE FAM 888, 561 (1993).
[12] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart Commercialization of Human Feelings* 80, 20th ed. 2012).
[13] *Id.* at 338-339.
[14] *See* Gao-Xian Lin, et al., *Parenting with a smile: Display rules, regulatory effort, and parental burnout*, 38(9) J SOC. PERS. RELATIONSHIPS 2701, 2703 (2021).

which emphasizes parents' role in bolstering the subjective well-being and happiness of their children.[15] Positive parenting encourages parents to regulate their own emotions in order to display more positive emotion and control negative emotion while parenting.[16] For example, a mother may attempt to temper her disappointment when her family does not like the meal that she has prepared. Or a mother may attempt to show extreme optimism to her child going into surgery, while suppressing any scared or nervous feelings. Emotional work can also involve parents tuning into the emotions of their children and "offering encouragement, showing your appreciation, listening closely to what someone has to say, and expressing empathy with another person's feelings (even when they are not shared)."[17]

The amount of emotional labor performed by parents was gendered before the pandemic. Despite difficulties in quantifying emotional work, studies have shown that in dual-income households with at least one child, women perform more emotional work than men.[18] Differing conceptions of emotional work based on gender account for part of the disparity. Mothers view emotional labor as a distinct type of work that they will be held accountable for as part of their role in the household.[19] In contrast, fathers conceptualize emotional work as merely part of their interpersonal relationship with their wives and children, not an additional job.[20] This suggests that mothers view emotional work as a job in and of itself, while men view emotional work as an inherent part of their relationships.

The gendered culture of emotion in the United States significantly contributes to the unequal allocation of emotional labor in parenting. In households with traditional views of gender, where men embody characteristics such as competitiveness, independence, and decisiveness, and women embody characteristics like being nurturing, selfless, kind, and warm, emotional work was more sharply gendered.[21] The amount of time spent on housework and childcare are also significant indicators of the amount of emotional work performed and often correlate with traditional constructions of gender, the most closely linked factor.[22] Women get less credit for their caretaking and nurturing because it is viewed as part of their nature, while men who display similar emotions are rewarded socially and monetarily.[23] This suggests that emotional work is viewed as women's work, contributing to the bulk of the emotional work of parenting being performed by women.

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[15] *Id.* at 2701.
[16] *Id.*
[17] Rebecca Erickson, *Why Emotion Work Matters: Sex, Gender, and the Division of Household Labor*, 67 J MARRIAGE FAM, 337, 339 (2005).
[18] *Id.* at 344.
[19] *Id.* at 348.
[20] *Id.*
[21] *Id.*
[22] *Id.*
[23] James Diefendorff, et al., EMOTIONAL LABOR IN THE 21ST CENTURY: DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON THE PSYCH. OF EMOTION REGULATION AT WORK 225, (2013).

COVID-19 has increased the amount of emotional work required of parenting, likely burdening mothers more significantly than fathers. Although there is not yet literature on the implications of COVID-19 on the emotional labor of parenting, pre-pandemic data provides some possible insights.[24] Parents are likely performing considerably more emotional work in regulating their feelings of fear and uncertainty to remain positive for their children. Mothers are also likely performing more emotional work to enhance the wellbeing of their children, who are experiencing increased rates of emotional distress, anxiety, and depression.[25] This additional emotional work will likely burden mothers more than fathers, simply because women were performing significantly more of this type of emotional work before the pandemic.[26]

The unequal burden of parental emotional labor has negative implications for both parents and children. Individuals who perform high levels of emotional labor, such as mothers in the course of parenting, are at an increased risk of psychological distress and depression.[27] Additionally, the emotional labor involved in displaying the perceived appropriate emotions while parenting leads to increased risk of parental burnout.[28] The symptoms of parental burnout include "intense exhaustion resulting from one's parental role, perceived saturation with one's parental role, emotional distancing from one's child(ren), and perceived contrast between previous and current parental self."[29] Parental burnout is associated with escape ideations, taking the form of suicidal thoughts or the desire to leave one's family without explanation, and addiction.[30] Significantly, there is a very large association between parental burnout and neglectful and violent behavior towards their child(ren).[31] This is true even when controlling for education level, income, and addiction.[32] Because mothers are performing more emotional labor in the course of parenting than fathers, they are at an increased risk of parental burnout.

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[24] *See* Erikson, *supra* note 17, at 344; Terry Arendell, *Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship*, 62 J MARRIAGE FAM 1192, 1194 (2000).
[25] *See, e.g.*, Lilly Shanahan, et al., *Emotional distress in young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence of risk and resilience from a longitudinal cohort study*, PSYCHOL. MED. 2 (2020); Shweta Singh, et. al, *Impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations*, 293 PSYCHIATRY RES 2 (2020).
[26] Eriksen, *supra* note 17, at 348.
[27] Da-Yee Jeung, et. al, *Emotional Labor and Burnout: A Review of the Literature*, 59(2) YONSEI MED J 187, 188 (2018).
[28] Gao-Xian Lin, *supra* note 14, at 2713.
[29] *Id* at 2706; Isabelle Roskam, et al., *A Step Forward in the Conceptualization and Measure of Parental Burnout: The Parental Burnout Assessment*, 9 FRONTIERS PSYCH 758, 761 (2018).
[30] *See* Moïra Mikolajczak, et. al, *Consequence of parental burnout: Its specific effect on child neglect and violence*, 80 CHILD ABUSE NEGLECT 134, 139 (2018).
[31] *Id.* at 141.
[32] *Id.*

Cognitive Labor

The term cognitive labor attempts to capture the mental load of being the primary manager of the household, or the "captain of the ship."[33] Defined more precisely, cognitive labor is "the work of (1) anticipating needs; (2) identifying options for meeting those needs; (3) deciding among the options; and (4) monitoring the results."[34]

The categories of cognitive labor that are most gendered are also the areas most impacted by COVID-19, increasing the overall mental load put on women. 75% of cisgender, opposite-sex households with children reported that logistics and scheduling was a female-led task.[35] Although most couples reported having a shared calendar, women updated it more frequently, issued reminders about upcoming events, and ensured compatibility between all family member's schedules.[36] COVID-19 has created a logistics and scheduling nightmare for families due to the pandemic's uncertainty. For example, what happens when a child tests positive for COVID-19 and needs to quarantine? Or when school is moved online because of a recent increase in cases? On top of these new logistic and scheduling tasks, the existing tasks in this category have become increasingly difficult. For example, it was possible for a parent to simultaneously care for multiple children while attending a pediatrician appointment for one of the kids. However, new COVID-19 protocols may allow only one parent to accompany a child to their appointment, preventing that one parent from bringing the patient's siblings. Suddenly, two parents are necessary to complete a task that used to be a one-parent job.

72% of couples reported that the cognitive labor involved with caring for their children was a female-led task.[37] This includes responsibilities such as finding affordable, desirable, and reliable childcare or establishing a sleep and meal schedule.[38] COVID-19 upended most of the work accomplished by the cognitive labor of caring for children that women had already done. Because of daycare and school closures, new arrangements for childcare had to be established. The routines that children were accustomed to before COVID-19 vanished, so new ones had to be created. Significantly, helping children understand and adjust to the "new normal" required extensive cognitive labor, such as deciding how to explain the pandemic in an age-appropriate manner or researching the most comfortable mask for kids.

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[33] Lucia Ciciolla & Suniya S. Luthar, *Invisible Household Labor and Ramifications for Adjustment: Mothers as Captains of Households*, 81 SEX ROLES 467, 468 (2019).
[34] Daminger, *supra* note 9, at 610.
[35] *Id* at 623.
[36] *Id* at 622.
[37] *Id* at 623.
[38] *Id* at 617.

70% of couples reported that the cognitive labor of social relationships was a female-led task,[39] such as, buying birthday gifts and coordinating playdates.[40] Mothers maintain this role even when the father established the social connection in the first place, such as organizing a dinner party with his friends and their partners or organizing holiday gatherings with his side of the family.[41] Maintaining social relationships became significantly more difficult during the pandemic because traditional means of socializing were no longer safe. Instead, the cognitive labor of social relationships required tasks like organizing family Zoom calls. Providing children with meaningful opportunities to be social became especially stressful. Not only did parents have to consider how to maintain and develop the social connections of their children in ways vital to their well-being, but they also had to consider the implications of their own social relationship with other parents. Would they be comfortable with a playdate in person or over Zoom? Inside or outside? Masked or unmasked?

The responsibility of being the "captain of the ship" is not without consequence. High cognitive burden is associated with reduced capacity to exercise willpower and decision making.[42] Women who felt disproportionately responsible for household management have lower satisfaction in their relationship with their partner and overall life, as well as feelings of emptiness.[43] These negative psychological consequences were most consistently tied with feeling solely responsible for child adjustment, such as monitoring their emotions and shaping their character.[44] Society has defined good mothering as constantly worrying about their children, while good fathering is defined differently.[45] Women taking on more responsibility in "captaining the ship" during the pandemic bolstered these negative psychological effects. Without intervention, these negative psychological implications will have lasting effects on women's autonomy, wellbeing, and relationships.

The disproportionate burden of cognitive labor on women takes away from their ability to participate in the paid labor force. The increased amount of unpaid labor necessary to keep households running since the emergence of COVID-19 has led women to transition to more flexible or less demanding careers.[46] 7% of women with children under ten considered downshifting their career in 2020, while 23% of women with children under ten considered leaving the workforce altogether in

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[39] *Id* at 623.
[40] *Id* at 617.
[41] *Id.*
[42] *See, e.g.*, Kathleen D Vohs et al., *Making Choices Impairs Subsequent Self-Control: A Limited-Resource Account of Decision Making, Self-Regulation, and Active Initiative*, 94(5) J PERSONALITY SOC. PSYCH. 883 (2008).
[43] Ciciolla & Luthar, *supra* note 33, at 481.
[44] *Id.* at 472.
[45] *See* Jessica Grose, *Why Women Do the Household Worrying*, NY TIMES (Jun. 2, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/parenting/women-gender-gap-domestic-work.html.
[46] *Seven charts that show COVID-19's impact on women's employment*, MCKINSEY & CO. (Mar. 8, 2021), https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/seven-charts-that-show-covid-19s-impact-on-womens-employment.

2020.[47] In September of 2020, four times more women dropped out of the labor force than men.[48] Additionally, mothers who exit the paid labor force to provide childcare often struggle to reenter employment, which carries significant negative effects on future earning potential.[49] Hiring discrimination against mothers, specifically mothers of color, further hinders the ability to reenter the work force.[50] Mothers leaving the paid labor force and reducing hours in order to take on caretaking responsibility amounts to $64.5 billion per year in lost wages and economic activity.[51] Intervention, such as comprehensive child care infrastructure, could remedy and prevent further a further drop in maternal labor force participation and widening of the gender pay gap.[52]

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work, learn, and socialize. While many of these changes seem temporary, the "new normal" for mothers means an increased burden of unpaid physical, emotional, and cognitive labor. Without recognition and remedies, mothers will face detrimental psychological implications, rates of child abuse and neglect will increase, and the gender pay gap will be perpetuated.

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[47] *Id.*
[48] Julie Kashen, et al., *How COVID-19 Sent Women's Workforce Progress Backward* CTR FOR AM. PROGRESS (Oct. 30, 2020, 9:04 am), https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/10/30/492582/covid-19-sent-womens-workforce-progress-backward/.
[49] *Id.*
[50] Stephen Bernad & Shelley Correll, *Normative Discrimination and the Motherhood Penalty*, 24(2) GENDER & SOC'Y 616 (2010).
[51] Kashen, *supra* note 48.
[52] *Id.*