



How COVID-19 Has Exacerbated Gender Inequalities and Highlighted the Need for Reforms in Work and Family Life

Maura Mills, The University of Alabama

In recent decades, women have taken on more demanding paid work roles, and men have taken on increased responsibilities at home. However, policies have been slow to adapt accordingly, lagging in both governmental and workplace settings. Consequently, male employees are often not receiving the support they need in order to be optimally present and effective in the home domain. Likewise, female employees—who are increasing their work responsibilities but also still absorb the majority of home duties—are often not receiving sufficient support either. Indeed, women still tend to shoulder the majority of household and childcare duties, and this is the case even in dual-earner and otherwise egalitarian households.

For all the challenges already evident in creating a gender-equitable work-family interface, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated those disparities. Schools and daycares closed abruptly, leaving parents with few options for childcare. And while many organizations shifted to remote work, that hardly alleviated the resulting work-family conflict for parents of young children in particular. Although remote work options allowed parents to stay home with their children, combining full-time work with full-time childcare and homeschool responsibilities was a logistical nightmare for many parents. In this way, the pandemic created an especially untenable situation for working parents—and women were disproportionately impacted. Many mothers fell out of the workforce, while those who were able to keep their jobs often sacrificed their own health and well-being in order to do so.

The Far Reach of Inequity

For a majority of dual-earner heterogamous families, if one earner has to leave the workforce to attend to family demands (as was the case during the pandemic), it often makes most financial sense for that person to be the woman. This is in large part because, writ large, women still earn less than men, making it less of a financial hardship for a family unit to lose the income from the lower-paying job than from the (generally men's) higher-paying jobs. The pandemic has made this situation more obvious than ever, underscoring the stakes for society as a whole when women are cornered into leaving or scaling back their participation in the paid labor force.

Beyond the obvious costs for the economy, women falling out of the workforce en masse also has a far-reaching impact on individual women's lives both professionally and personally. Years out of the workforce results in résumé gaps and makes workforce reentry challenging. It also compromises women's financial independence, not only from lack of salary, but also from less obvious issues such as losing retirement contributions (including employer match) and fewer years paid into social security. Importantly, such hits to women's overall financial security have a long reach; they do not resolve once the pandemic has lifted, and their effects are cumulative throughout women's careers, even if they manage to reenter the workforce.

December 11, 2021

<https://scholars.org>

Actionable Steps Forward

As impossible as it is to thoroughly address all potential means of rectifying gendered work-family inequities, I propose a number of key changes that would create a more equitable work life for mothers and fathers alike. Importantly, this is far from an exhaustive list, and these recommendations are oversimplified, as any bullet-pointed list would be. However, they provide a succinct, tangible path forward insofar as how to address this multifaceted problem from multiple, complementary angles.

Recommended structural changes include:

- Scrutinizing structural processes that inadvertently contribute to disparities (e.g., maternity leaves derailing or postponing promotions and associated pay raises)
- Rectifying the gender wage gap (this is a particularly multifaceted action item, including not only passage of fair pay laws addressing base pay/salary, but also issues such as gender impact on promotions, raises, access to opportunities and informal networks, etc.)

Recommended changes to public policy include:

- Advancing a national paid leave plan that: a) accounts for varied care responsibilities and varied caregivers, b) is gender equitable, and c) includes often-invisible workers most in need of paid leave (e.g., part-time, lower-paid, blue collar, shift workers)
- Uncoupling parental leaves from health-related (e.g., childbirth) leaves (the two should be separate and able to be combined back-to-back)

Recommended changes in individual workplaces include:

- Offering flexible work options (e.g., remote work, compressed work weeks, flexible work hours, job shares)
- Facilitating usage of available work-family policy options for all employees via genuinely supportive leadership and managerial role modeling
- Carefully managing gender-equitable leaves in occupations with fluid and seemingly limitless work availability

Recommended cultural changes include:

- Destigmatizing résumé 'gaps' and work leaves
- Reimagining the mental load of overall household/family management, and reevaluating to whom that load predominantly falls
- Promoting gender-blind school/daycare practices (e.g., no longer assuming that mothers will be a school's primary contact or the only parents available to serve on parent-teacher boards)

The pandemic has cast a bright light on the need for greater supports for working parents, and has exacerbated gender imbalances in work-family experiences and challenges. Increased attention to and recognition of these issues will result in a more gender-equitable work-family interface for all. The zeitgeist is ripe for such changes, and recognizing the far-reaching implications of differential work-family considerations by gender is the first step in realizing effective and equitable policies and practices that are better aligned with today's contemporary workforce.

December 11, 2021

<https://scholars.org>

Read more about the gendered work-family interface in:

Mills, M. J. (Ed.) (2015). *Gender and the work-family experience: An intersection of two domains*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing.

For further information about the book (available in hardcover, softcover, e-book), [CLICK HERE](#) (US) or [HERE](#) (international).