



## Lessons from the Pandemic for U.S. Work and Family Policy

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The COVID-19 pandemic upended American lives in many ways. Schools and offices closed; childcare centers shut down; many workers suddenly found themselves working at home while others had to decrease their hours or lost their jobs entirely; and many families were unable to leave their homes for months, producing isolation from friends and other relatives. While devastating in many ways, this unprecedented situation also provided an opportunity for heterosexual couples to examine their household dynamics and rearrange their daily patterns.

Gender continued to provide an organizing framework for how most couples divided domestic labor. Women continued to, on average, do more domestic work—including cooking, cleaning, mental labor, and childcare related tasks—than their male partners. Despite this general trend, [our study](#) made it possible to examine what factors prompted some couples to divide household labor more equitably and what prevented other couples from doing so.

### Pandemic Workplace Changes & the Division of Domestic Labor

Changes in workplace policies during the pandemic mattered because they allowed couples who desired more egalitarian partnerships to create them. Our study found that major shifts in the organization of work and caregiving institutions—such as the rise of remote work and the move of schooling and caregiving into the home—did not by themselves reduce inequality in domestic labor for most parents. While most of our participants were concerned that the closure of both day care centers and schools increased the burden of caregiving, only those who reported that both members of the couple held egalitarian aspirations responded to these constraints by creating more egalitarian relationships.

Among the small number—just 10 percent in our study—who were able to enact a preference for more equal sharing, changes such as shifting to working at home or a different work schedule, combined with preexisting feminist beliefs, prompted a more equitable division of labor. Since their prior workplace arrangements and schedules had prevented them previously from achieving more equitable partnership, this shift in the organization of work allowed them to enact a set of practices that more closely resembled their preferences. Had the pandemic not allowed a convergence between their desires and the organization of their jobs, a move toward more egalitarian practices would likely not have occurred.

### The Persistence of Unequal Burdens

The persistence of beliefs that women should take primary responsibility for caregiving and housework prevented most families from taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by working more flexibly from home. When a relationship relied on a traditional view about the proper allocation of domestic labor, parents were unlikely to report a reallocation in their work or caregiving demands. Indeed, even when mothers espoused an egalitarian view, a partner's reluctance prevented a move toward equality. Such women noted that their partners lacked the "initiative" to take on additional tasks and expressed frustration that the work of organizing caregiving and domestic work remained invisible even when their partners were increased their time at home. Despite pandemic-related shifts that moved both work and caregiving in the home, these parents were unable to veer away from arrangements that had taken root long before the pandemic began.

Our analysis of the pandemic experience suggests that reducing gender inequality within families depends not only on transforming the organization of work and caregiving—specifically creating greater workplace flexibility for all parents—but also on supporting norms that stress the importance of equal sharing in relationships.

## Policy Recommendations

Now that most families depend on the earnings of breadwinning women, achieving fairer and most satisfying work and family arrangements depends on melding supportive institutional practices with ideological commitments that together reinforce egalitarian principles.

To achieve this end, we suggest four policy interventions:

- Legislation that guarantees the right to flexible work arrangements would promote organizational changes that permit couples to adopt more egalitarian practices
- Expanding childcare support would enable parents to better balance work and caregiving responsibilities
- Comprehensive family leave policies for all parents, including fathers, would strengthen norms that stress the importance of equal parental involvement
- Continued promotion of the need for women's rights contributes to organizational and normative changes that increase the possibilities for gender egalitarian partnerships