COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS WIDENING GENDER GAPS AT WORK AND HOME
But the crisis could lead to more equal childcare roles in the long term, say economists

Women are more likely to lose their jobs than men in the Covid-19 economic crisis – and they are more likely to be taking on extra housework and childcare whether working or not, says research published today.

The study from the LSE’s Centre for Economic Performance finds that, unlike the previous Great Recession, the downturn triggered by Covid-19 and the lockdown has the potential to result in more women losing jobs than men – as female-dominated sectors such as hospitality face devastation.

And economists Claudia Hupkau and Barbara Petrongolo also find that when it comes to home life, women are more likely than men to be taking on the childcare and home-schooling duties.

But in the long term, the crisis could lead to a ‘substantial shift’ in gender roles, concludes the study Work, care and gender during the Covid-19 crisis.

An increased acceptance of working from home could benefit women, who value this flexibility more than men.

Sharing childcare equally could also become more widespread, prompted by the experience of households where a father is now the main child carer, either because he is working from home or because he is not working. This has happened in about 20 per cent of the households made up of a man, woman and dependent children, the study estimates.

The report concludes:

• Given the exceptional nature of the Covid-19 crisis, the distribution of jobs and workers affected is potentially different from previous recessions.
• Women are over-represented in locked-down sectors but, if not subject to the lockdown, they are more likely to work in jobs that can be done from home. Preliminary survey evidence for the UK finds that, overall, women are more likely to lose their jobs than men.
• The closure of schools and nurseries has meant that education and childcare services must largely be done at home, with a likely increase in pre-existing disparities between the childcare contributions of mothers and fathers.
• The massive increase in the incidence of working from home provides a valuable testing ground for the adoption of flexible working solutions beyond the current emergency.
• Parental childcare roles are likely to be reversed in households where the mother works in a critical sector and the father is forced to stay at home due to social distancing measures. This may accelerate the evolution of gender norms towards more equitable roles.

Professor Barbara Petrongolo said: “The Covid-19 crisis is currently widening the gender gap at work, where women are more likely to lose their jobs than men, and at home, where women are taking on the bulk of childcare.
“But there are a substantial minority of families where fathers now shoulder the bulk of childcare. Together with the way we are adapting our working lives to cope during the lockdown, this gives me hope that in the long term, a more equal society will emerge.”

Dr Claudia Hupkau said: “Women are facing great challenges. They make up the majority of those working in jobs on the front-line, and those working in industries that have been closed entirely – particularly in those sectors, such as hospitality, which are at higher risk of being destroyed as it is unclear when and at what capacity they will be able to reopen.

“But previous studies have shown that women value flexible working and the ability to work from home, and if these options remain as the economy reopens, that could boost parents’ ability to combine work and family commitments.

“The influx of women into the labour market during the Second World War led to permanent positive change for women’s job prospects in the following decades. Perhaps when we look back, the Covid-19 crisis will prove to have been a similar turning point.”

The full report is available here: Work, care and gender during the Covid-19 crisis

Notes to editors

1. The Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) is an independent research centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Its members are from the LSE and a wide range of universities within the UK and around the world.


3. About the authors
   - Claudia Hupkau is assistant professor of economics at CUNEF, Madrid, and an associate at CEP.
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