

Unlike previous recessions, the Covid-19 crisis is harming women's labour market prospects more than those of men. Women are also likely to be on the receiving end of the bulk of increased 'home production' requirements for childcare and housework. **Claudia Hupkau** and **Barbara Petrongolo** explore the evidence for the UK.

Covid-19 and the work patterns of men and women

Covid-19 is hitting most economies as hard as the deepest recessions, but given the exceptional nature of this crisis, the distribution of jobs and workers affected is potentially different from previous downturns.

Sectors in which activities involve social contact, such as retail, restaurants and hospitality, have been shut down, with temporary or permanent job losses concentrated among low-skill service workers. At the same time, other sectors, such as healthcare, food production and distribution, and protective services, have been defined as critical to the Covid-19 response, and their activity is maintained at or above full capacity.

Market work

While the 2008/09 recession, as well as other previous downturns, seemed to have a more severe effect on industries dominated by men, such as construction and manufacturing, the social distancing and lockdown associated with the Covid-19 crisis have naturally hit service sectors with frequent interactions between consumers and providers, in which women tend to be over-represented.

But even among workers whose activities are not directly subject to lockdown, many are unable to work as



normal, as their work would not comply with social distancing (for example, in construction, repairs and home services), and can hardly be performed from home.

Figure 1 gives a snapshot of the distribution of job attributes for men and women in the UK, through the lens of Covid-19 incidence. The data combine sector-level information on critical and locked-down jobs from the UK Labour

Lockdown reversed by decree a secular process of marketisation of childcare and housework

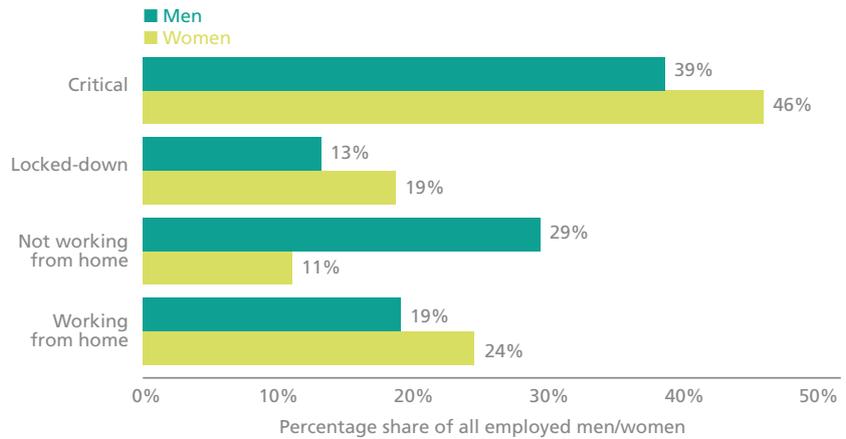
Force Survey (LFS, April-June 2019), and occupation-level information on which activities can be performed from home.

The latter is obtained by matching information on tasks in O-NET (from Dingel and Neiman, 2020) with the UK classification of occupations in the LFS. We classify jobs into four categories, including those in critical industries (health care, public services and security) and those in locked-down industries (hospitality, accommodation and food services). All remaining jobs are classified into whether or not they can be performed from home.

About 39% and 46% of working men and women, respectively, are employed in critical sectors, while 13% and 19%, respectively, are in locked-down sectors, those where businesses must remain closed. For the remaining 48% of men and 35% of women, the chances of avoiding earnings losses are closely linked to their ability to work from home.

This is largely the case for sectors dominated by women, such as education, where teachers support distance learning for the vast majority of children (and continue to provide schooling for children of critical workers). By contrast, working from home is mostly impossible in sectors dominated by men, such as construction,

Figure 1:
The composition of jobs according to Covid-19 incidence



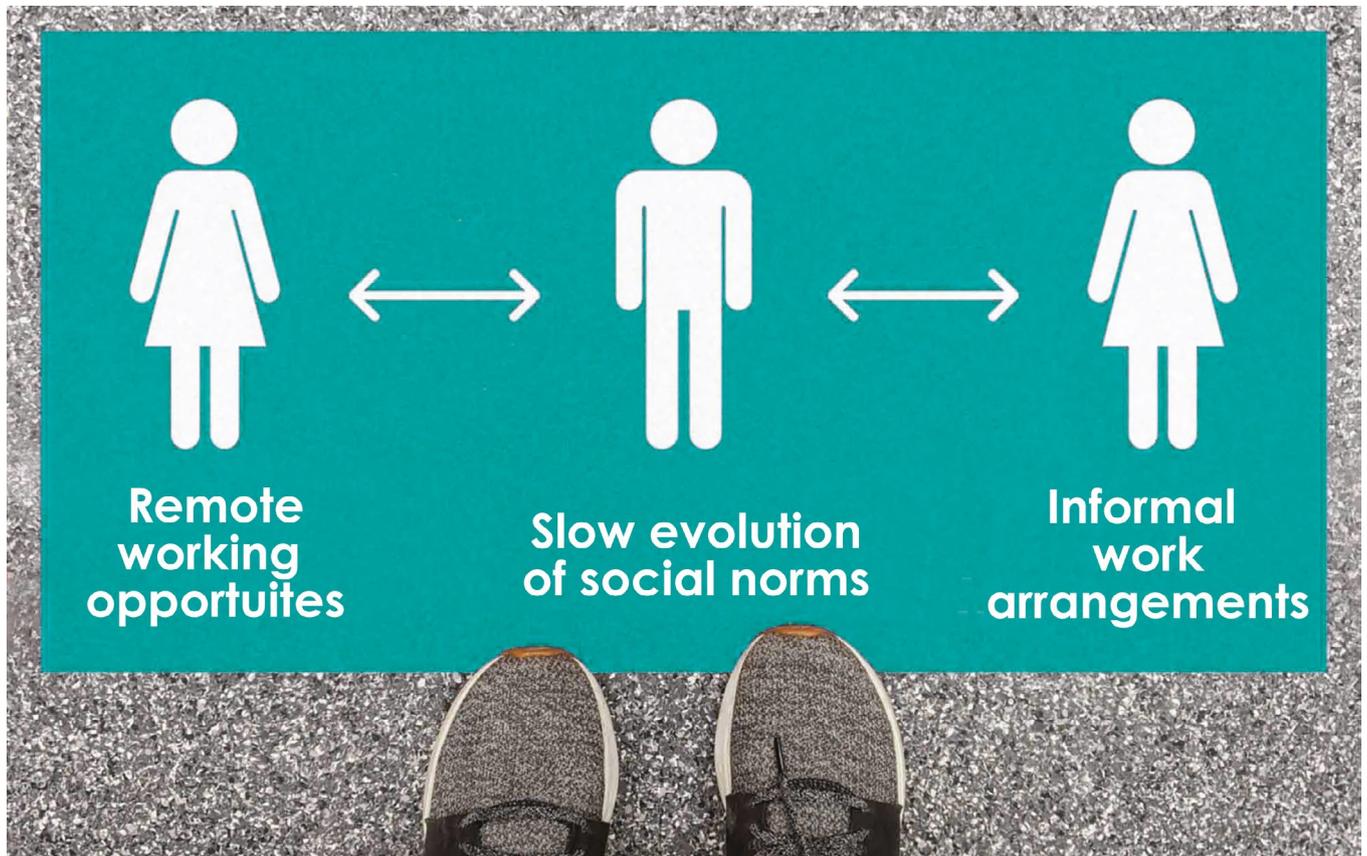
Note: Sample: employed men and women. The bars show the incidence of critical jobs and locked-down jobs, as well as the incidence of working from home among those not in critical or locked-down jobs. For completeness, the percentage of critical jobs that can be done from home is 44% for men and 41% for women, and the percentage of locked-down jobs that can be done from home is 22% for men and 24% for women. Source: UK LFS, April-June 2019.

repairs and large parts of manufacturing. Thus, it is unsurprising that about 29% of men but only 11% of women are in jobs that cannot be done from home, while not directly subject to lockdown.

Overall, the share of workers who are either in locked-down industries or in jobs

that cannot be done from home is 42% for men and 30% for women. Does this mean that, as in previous recessions, men will be more affected than women? Probably not.

Survey evidence from Adam-Prassl et al (2020) shows that the possibility of performing some of one's usual work



tasks from home provides only partial insurance against job and earning losses. In addition, jobs in locked-down sectors (where women are over-represented), such as accommodation and food services, are at a higher risk of being destroyed as it is still unclear when and at what capacity business in these sectors will be able to operate in the future.

Activities that are not locked down and that cannot be performed from home, but that do not involve frequent social interactions with customers (for example, in construction or manufacturing, where men are over-represented), have already slowly started to resume. Consistent with this, recent evidence from the Business Impact of Coronavirus (Covid-19) Survey (published by the Office for National Statistics) shows that furloughing affects about 27% of the UK workforce, but that the percentage is much higher in locked-down sectors (up to 80%).

There is only limited evidence available to date on actual patterns of job loss. Some of the evidence finds more detrimental effects for women, while some detects impacts that are roughly balanced across genders. Adam-Prassl et al (2020) find that women in the UK are nearly 5 percentage points more likely to

have lost their jobs than men since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis.

For the United States, Adam-Prassl et al (2020) report a gender differential in the probability of job loss of nearly 7 points. Alon et al (2020) report that women filed the majority of unemployment claims at the start of lockdown, while Bick and Blandin (2020) find similar employment losses for men and women. If these survey findings generalise, it seems that – unlike in previous recessions – the current crisis will not harm men’s labour market prospects more than women’s.

Home production

One unique feature of the Covid-19 crisis has been its impact on the volume of home production, reversing by decree a secular process of marketisation of childcare and housework. With the start of lockdown, virtually none of the typical components of home production can be outsourced to the market, and the closure of schools and nurseries has added all education and childcare services to pre-existing home production needs.

The effects of Covid-19 on the gender distribution of home production depend on various factors. First, the incidence of increased childcare needs is shaped by

individuals’ household composition. In particular, women are more likely than men to raise children as single parents. In the UK, 20.3% of households with dependent children (aged 15 or younger) are headed by single mothers, compared with 3.3% headed by single fathers. Hence, women are more likely than men to be the sole providers of the sharp increase in childcare during lockdown.

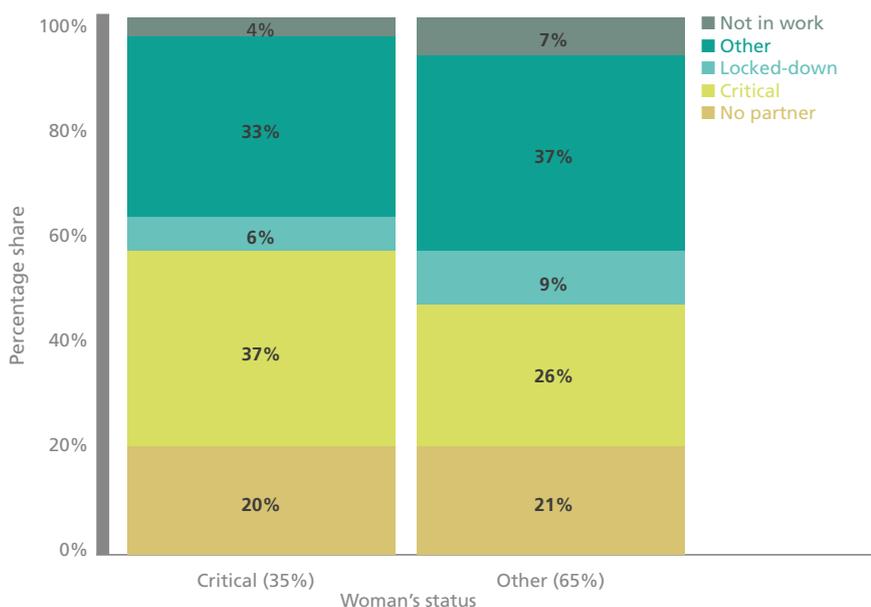
Second, the distribution of home production depends on the working status of one’s partner (if any), which is itself affected by the crisis. Figure 2 shows the distribution of partner’s status for women with dependent children.

Among mothers in critical jobs, representing about one-third of the total, 57% have either no partner or a partner who also works in a critical job, and hence mostly rely on basic childcare services guaranteed by the education system to parents in critical jobs. The remaining 43% have a partner who is staying at home – whether he is employed in a locked-down sector (6%), or cannot go to work due to social distancing (33%) or does not work at all (4%).

In the latter households, we would expect a reversal of the home production gap, with men taking over the bulk of increased childcare and housework needs. Among mothers who are not in critical jobs, and therefore stay at home during lockdown, 47% have no partner at home, and hence are likely to be fully in charge of home production. The other 53% have a stay-at-home partner, and home production is somehow shared between spouses.

There is plenty of pre-Covid-19 evidence on the contribution of men and women to home production from time use data. According to a 2015 time use survey for the UK, women do 27 hours per week of home production on average, while

Figure 2: The distribution of partner’s status, by woman’s status



Note: Sample: Women with dependent children. The ‘other’ status indicates women staying at home during Covid-19 (including: in locked-down jobs, in non-critical jobs, not employed).

Source: UK LFS, April-June 2019.

The massive increase in working from home has accelerated a move towards flexible work arrangements

men do 16 hours on average. Among households with dependent children, weekly home production hours are 40 for mothers and 20 for fathers, of which 16 and eight, respectively, represent childcare. If the additional home production falls on men and women according to baseline specialisation patterns, women are at the receiving end of the best part of increased home production requirements.

There is no comprehensive evidence on the time use of spouses since the onset of the crisis, but Aguiar et al (2013) show that during the 2008/09 recession, women allocated a larger portion of reduced market hours to childcare and housework. Evidence collected by Adams-Prassl et al (2020) shows that during lockdown, mothers are doing about 90 minutes extra childcare on a typical workday relative to men. This is larger than the corresponding 69 minutes differential among comparable individuals at baseline, providing suggestive evidence that the higher childcare load has on average widened existing inequalities in gender contributions to home production.

Potential long-lasting consequences

Several of these effects are temporary in nature and can in principle be reversed with the end of lockdown and the restart of usual economic activity. But given the recent radical changes to the organisation of work and family life, it is natural to reflect on potentially permanent consequences of the crisis beyond lockdown, via learning, habit formation and the evolution of social norms.

First, the massive increase in the incidence of working from home has suddenly accelerated a pre-existing but slowly evolving tendency towards smart working and flexible work arrangements. The number of people working from home in the UK has risen from 2.9 million in 1998 to 4.2 million in 2014, representing 14% of employment, and an additional 1.8 million people report they would prefer to work from home if they were given the chance.

According to a recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 86% of UK managers foresee organisational barriers to the adoption of flexible working in their workplaces. But it is possible that some of the perceived barriers will be eventually cracked by actual remote work patterns implemented during Covid-19.

Effects of the emergency could ease the breakdown of traditional gender roles come the recovery

The supply and demand for remote work varies across genders. In the UK, 48% of women are in jobs that can be done from home, compared with 39% of men. Due to heavier household responsibilities, women also value flexible work schedules and shorter commutes more than men (Mas and Pallais, 2017; Le Barbanchon et al, 2019), and thus may be more beneficially affected by remote work opportunities.

But while remote working may provide women with the flexibility to combine market work and family commitments, it may also lead them to specialise in low- or middle-tier jobs that are more permeable to informal work arrangements. Furthermore, remote working may dilute employee presence and attachment to the workplace, with possibly detrimental effects on career progression.

Second, the increased home production needs may substantially shift the allocation of childcare and housework in households in which the husband is forced to be at home by lockdown. There is evidence that the spousal allocation of home production is shaped in large part by social norms on gender roles, and that gender identity norms are only slowly evolving.

But evidence has also shown that 'forced' changes in gender roles may have permanent consequences beyond short-term circumstances, by accelerating the evolution of norms and eroding gender comparative advantages. For example, the mobilisation of men during the Second World War in the United States induced more women to enter the labour market, and thereby shaped the norms and preferences of younger generations who were exposed to those early labour market entrants (Fernandez et al, 2004).

In the UK, 63% of fathers stay at home during lockdown, and about one-third of these live with women working long hours in critical sectors. One would expect a substantial redistribution of home production loads in these households during the crisis, and one should wonder whether the emergency would ease the breakdown of traditional gender roles come the recovery.

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Further reading

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