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Domestic work during COVID-19: Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand

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Abstract

Lockdown restrictions have increased the share of reproductive labour in domestic space, with disproportionate impacts for women. This entry examines that phenomenon in the context of Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Theme

Mobility Events

Keywords

Domestic, reproductive labour, gender, women, pandemic, Australia, New Zealand

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By placing unprecedented restrictions on our mobility, lockdown and social distancing measures have effectively transformed the household into the locus of work, leisure and private life. Staying home can, however, carry significant consequences for social groups who are often vulnerable in domestic space, including women, children, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and the aging. This entry will examine reproductive labour during COVID-19 in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand: an aspect of domestic life which has disproportionate impacts on the lives of women. The pandemic has not necessarily altered the gendered distribution of reproductive labour: women have always shouldered the burden of domestic work, and during the pandemic, women and men may even have inched towards a more equitable distribution of reproductive labour, by virtue of spending increased hours in domestic space. Even so, women have carried the vast majority of domestic work during the pandemic,² with considerable consequences for our health and well-being, and our participation in the labour market.

Gendered spatial containment

For many Australians and New Zealanders, lockdown and social distancing measures introduced to contain the spread of COVID-19 have necessitated spending more time at home. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) finds that the percentage of people *always* working from home has risen from 7% prior to the pandemic, to 60% during the pandemic.³ Kavita Dattani describes this phenomenon as an “enforced spatial containment” that has specific consequences for women.⁴

Increases in domestic reproductive labour

The “spatial containment”⁵ produced by lockdown and social distancing measures has increased domestic work. The AIFS finds that of those of their respondents working from home during the pandemic, 40% *always* or *often* actively cared for their children during work hours.⁶ Spending more time at home has, therefore, also necessitated coping with increasing quantities of socially reproductive work, which Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner describe as the everyday work that is required to “maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation.”⁷ Bridget Anderson highlights that reproductive labour includes raising children, distributing and preparing food, and maintaining cleanliness and hygiene, which we require “in order to survive individually

² See Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) 2020. Gendered impact of COVID-19. Online available at: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

³ Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). 2020. *Families in Australia Survey: Life During COVID-19: Early Findings*, July: 2.

⁴ Dattani, Kavita. 2020. Rethinking Social Reproduction in the Time of Covid-19, *Antipode*. Available online at: <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/04/15/rethinking-social-reproduction-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>. Last accessed 7 July 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ AIFS: 2020.

⁷ Laslett, Barbara and Johanna Brenner. 1989. Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives. *Annual Review of Sociology* 15: 383.

and as a species.”⁸ This is a trend that has only been exacerbated by the (im)mobilities produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has witnessed closures of schools, businesses, and workplaces around the world, and a simultaneous rise in the number of people who are ill and need care.

The Australian Government’s Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) finds that women likely carry the bulk of caring responsibilities for children and sick family members during the pandemic.⁹ The AIFS’s findings are similar, but indicate that the pandemic has had little impact on the gendered distribution of reproductive labour. According to their survey, 54% of respondents reported that mothers had typically cared for the children within the family unit prior to the pandemic, 38% reported that caring responsibilities were shared equally between mother and father, and 8% reported that fathers were the primary carers.¹⁰ During the pandemic, these numbers changed to 52%, 37% and 11%, respectively.¹¹ These changes are minimal, and even illustrate a minor decrease in the amount of caring work carried by women, and a marginal shift towards a more equitable distribution of reproductive labour between women and men. Even so, women continue to carry the bulk of caring responsibilities.

An online survey of heterosexual Australian households conducted by researchers at the University of Melbourne illustrates similar results. The researchers find that prior to COVID-19, mothers tended to work part-time,¹² and were more likely to work from home,¹³ while fathers were more likely to work full-time.¹⁴ The drastic increase in work-from-home arrangements following the (im)mobilities produced by COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures has therefore rearranged the family unit’s spatial economic organisation, leading to both parents spending more time at home. The survey additionally finds that during the pandemic, both mothers and fathers have experienced an overall increase in unpaid domestic work and care.¹⁵ Mothers, however, reported, on average, a more significant increase in the hours of unpaid work they completed during the pandemic.¹⁶ The “spatial containment”¹⁷ produced by COVID-19 restrictions has therefore simply overlain pre-existing, embedded gendered divisions of labour.

While similar large-scale empirical research has not yet been conducted in Aotearoa-New Zealand, the country’s federal government recognises that women generally undertake more unpaid caring work than men, which is a trend likely to intensify during the pandemic.¹⁸ The distribution of this work can also vary by ethnic group: Maori and Pacific women “are more likely to have additional financial and caring responsibilities for extended family members”.¹⁹

⁸ Anderson, Bridget. 2001. Reproductive Labour and Migration. Paper given at the Sixth Metropolis Conference: 6. Rotterdam, 26-30 November 2001. Available online at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.472.2877&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁹ WGEA 2020.

¹⁰ AIFS 2020: 4

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Craig, Lyn and Brendan Churchill, 2020. ‘Dual-earner parent couples’ work and care during COVID-19. *Feminist Frontiers*: 68. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12497>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹³ Powell, A and L Craig 2015. ‘Gender differences in working at home and time use patterns: Evidence from Australia’. *Work, Employment and Society* 29(4): 571-589, in Ibid: 68.

¹⁴ Ibid: 68, 71-73.

¹⁵ Ibid.: 71-73.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ministry for Women, 2020. *COVID-19 and Women*. Available online at: <https://women.govt.nz/news/covid-19-and-women>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Durant, Isabelle and Pamela Coke-Hamilton. 2020. COVID-19 requires gender-equal responses to save economies. Geneva: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

Constraints on paid labour

The pressures of domestic and caring responsibilities are also likely to impact women's participation in the labour market in the longer term. Globally, "women are more likely than men to lose their jobs". The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development finds that women's participation in the labour market is often casualised, which makes them particularly vulnerable to layoffs.²⁰ Aotearoa-New Zealand's government similarly recognises that women are likely to be disproportionately affected by pandemic-related financial downturns, as they are more likely to hold low-paid or unpaid roles.²¹

In this context, increasing pressures to perform unpaid reproductive labour at home further impedes women's prospects for paid work. This is underscored by an analysis by Australia's Chief Scientist, which finds that women, who are already under-represented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) industries, are being negatively impacted at work due to a disproportionate assumption of care and domestic work while working from home.²² The "spatial containment"²³ enacted by COVID-19 restrictions may therefore have consequences for women's participation in the formal labour market for some time to come.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ministry for Women. 2020.

²² Australian Government Chief Scientist, 2020. 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the STEM workforce'. Rapid Research Information Forum. 17 May. Available online at: <https://www.chiefscientist.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/trif-covid19-women-stem-workforce.pdf>. Last accessed 22 December 2020; Finkel, Alan. 2020. Rapid Research Information Forum: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the STEM workforce. Canberra: Chief Scientist.

²³ Dattani 2020.