



Women's work, housework, and childcare before and during COVID-19

Daniela Del Boca, Noemi Oggero, Paola Profeta, Mariacristina Rossi 19 June 2020

The social distancing measures adopted to slow the spread of COVID-19 have placed a particular burden on families. Using survey data collected in April 2020 from a representative sample of Italian women, this column asks how working from home – combined with school closures – has affected the working arrangements, housework, and childcare provisions of couples in which both partners are employed. Most of the additional responsibilities have fallen to women, though childcare activities are shared more equally than housework.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Italy experienced the worst outbreak in Europe, especially northern Italy. At the beginning of March 2020, the Italian government imposed drastic measures to contain the growing epidemic. While these measures have largely stemmed the spread of the virus, they have also had a huge impact on labour market participation (Bertocchi 2020, Galasso 2020) and we expect them to have substantially affected housework and childcare.

Unlike previous recessions, which disproportionately affected male employment, the current shock is likely to have a similar impact on male and female employment (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020, Alon et al.

2020), since the measures taken affected sectors where both genders are employed (ILO 2020). COVID-19 is expected to have major consequences on family work due to increased housework and childcare resulting from the closing of schools and nurseries. Many women are already struggling to get to work at all, given the need for at least one parent to stay home with the children (Queisser et al. 2020). Preliminary evidence from Spain (Farré and Gonzalez 2020) and the UK (Sevilla and Smith 2020) shows that there has been a shift towards a more equal distribution of household and childcare between men and women, but most of the extra work caused by the crisis has fallen to women.

We focus on Italy and investigate jointly the effect of COVID-19 on work, housework, and childcare arrangements of working women and their male partners (Del Boca et al. 2020). The Italian context is particularly interesting, not only because of the markedly strict lockdown measures taken to contain the crisis, but also from a gender standpoint. Italy is characterised both by traditionally high gender gaps in the labour market and conservative gender roles, which put most of the burden of housework and childcare on women.[1] Before the pandemic, a large proportion of grandparents (about 40% according to SHARE data) provided daily childcare. The mandatory implementation of social distancing has substantially reduced the availability of grandparental care, increasing the burden on families already caused by school and child-care facility closures. Higher fatality rates among the elderly may also have affected a large number of families living together or close by

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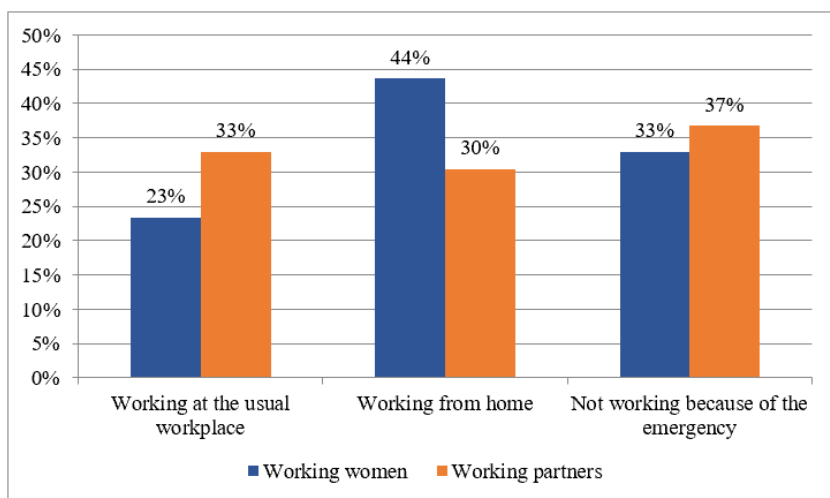
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(Stancati 2020). In this context, we argue that the impact of COVID-19 on family work is related to the time that couples have to spend at home due to the emergency restrictions.

We use data on a representative sample of 800 Italian working women.[2] The data were collected before and during the emergency, allowing us to compare the number of hours spent at work, on housework and childcare before the emergency (April and July 2019) to the hours spent during the first three months of the emergency (April 2020). We hypothesise different impacts on the division of labour between housework and childcare within households depending on the working arrangements of women and their partners at the time of the outbreak of COVID-19.

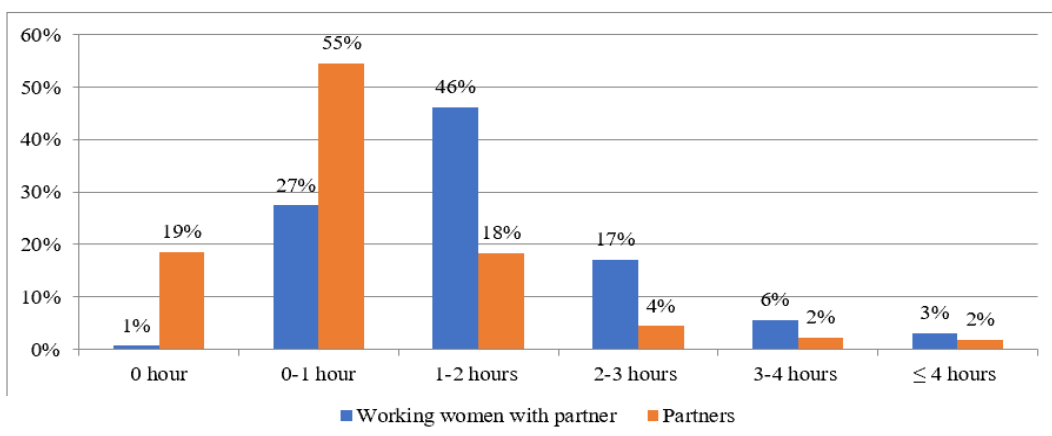
Figure 1 shows the working arrangements of working women and their partners during the COVID-19 emergency. The first column shows that women are less likely to have kept working in their usual workplace than men: just 23% of women as opposed to 33% of their partners. The second column shows that 44% of working women have kept their jobs by working from home (versus 30% of men). Women are therefore much more likely to work from home, which increases the likelihood of a heavier overall workload for women resulting from the combination of their occupation and domestic work. The last column shows that about the same number of women and men have stopped working because of the emergency (33% and 37%).

Figure 1 Percentage of working women and their partners by working arrangement during the COVID-19 emergency.



Moving to housework, Figure 2 illustrates the amount of time spent on housework by women and their partners before the emergency. It appears that women spent significantly more time on housework than their partners: almost three quarters (74%) of men devoted less than one hour a day to housework (as opposed to 28% of women).

Figure 2 Percentage of working women and their partners by hours of housework per day before the COVID-19 emergency.



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The COVID-19 measures adopted over the last two months have massively increased the amount of housework and childcare: How is this extra burden distributed within a couple? We jointly investigate the changes in work arrangements, housework, and childcare experienced by women and their partners. In Tables 1 and 2 we show the percentages of men and women doing more housework and more childcare according to the possible combinations of work arrangements of both partners.

Table 1 Percentage of men and women doing more housework during the COVID-19 emergency by working arrangement.

	Partners working at the usual workplace	Partners working from home	Partners not working because of the emergency
Women working at the usual workplace	Women 49% Partners 28%	Women 40% Partners 55%	Women 61% Partners 58%
Women working from home	Women 78% Partners 28%	Women 65% Partners 40%	Women 64% Partners 58%
Women not working because of the emergency	Women 82% Partners 22%	Women 81% Partners 24%	Women 74% Partners 47%

Note: The sample is made up of coupled women where both partners were working before the emergency (N=520).

Table 2 Percentage of men and women spending more hours on childcare during the COVID-19 emergency by working arrangement.

	Partners working at the usual workplace	Partners working from home	Partners not working because of the emergency
Women working at the usual workplace	Women 45% Partners 40%	Women 45% Partners 36%	Women 31% Partners 54%
Women working from home	Women 54% Partners 37%	Women 77% Partners 60%	Women 60% Partners 60%
Women not working because of the emergency	Women 70% Partners 38%	Women 68% Partners 63%	Women 71% Partners 59%

Note: The sample is made up of coupled women where both partners were working before the emergency (N=350).

Both men and women are spending more time on domestic work. This is in line with results from Angelici and Profeta (2020), who report that in normal times, 'smart working' [3] (allowing flexibility in the working hours and location for certain number of hours each week) leads to increased participation by men in domestic work. Interestingly, this increase is seen more in childcare than housework in almost all cases. However, the distribution of the extra work within the couple appears to be highly unbalanced. The extra work is a burden mainly borne by women.

Increased participation by men overtakes that of women only when women continue to go to their usual place of work and their partner does not work. However, even under these circumstances, this is true only for childcare (54% of partners spend more time on childcare versus only 31% of women), and not for housework (58% of partners spend more time on housework compared to 61% of women). In symmetric situations, the distribution of extra work still penalises women. For example, when both partners work at home, 65% of women increase their housework versus 40% of men. The corresponding percentages for childcare are 77% for women and 60% for men.

Regression analyses confirm the imbalance in the amount of time spent by men and women on work, more in housework than in childcare. They also show that working women with young

children, particularly those aged zero to five, are affected by bearing the excess burden to a greater extent. For women, the work-life balance was especially difficult to achieve when their partners kept working outside of the home during the emergency.

These results may have long-term implications, and implications that are potentially negative for women, especially if both the labour market crisis and school closures persist. Higher rates of male participation in domestic responsibilities, particularly in housework, are associated with higher rates of female participation in the labour market as well as higher fertility rates (Fanelli and Profeta 2019). Thus, the consequences of COVID-19 on female labour market outcomes risk being amplified by the unequal intrahousehold allocation of extra work (housework and childcare) created by the emergency.

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¹ Comparative data show that when adding work in the labor market to work at home, Italian women not only work more than Italian men, but also more than men and women in most European countries (ISTAT 2019).

² The survey was administered by Episteme, a professional survey company:
<https://www.carloalberto.org/research/competitive-projects/clear-closing-the-gender-pension-gap-by-increasing-womens-awareness>

³ 'Smart-working' is a new way to organise work that includes flexibility of location (working from home, but also from a different location than the usual workplace) and flexibility of time (a personalised work schedule). Unlike teleworking, there is no strict control by a supervisor of time and place of work. During the COVID-19 emergency, some form of flexibility was used: many employees worked from home and, in some cases, with some flexibility of time. We do not have detailed information on the specific type of flexibility. Hence, we refer to this arrangement as 'working from home' or 'telecommuting'.

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