

The Future of Gender Equality
What's Happened and What Are We Learning from the COVID-19 Pandemic?
Evidence from the SPDLC
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Executive Summary

Introduction

The social and economic changes wrought by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic were immediate and widespread. Against a backdrop of dramatic (and continuous) change over the past three years, there has been real concern that the pandemic would exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities in paid and unpaid labor. Not only were women (especially mothers') more likely to reduce their paid labor force participation during the pandemic, but mothers have also reported increased time in domestic labor to handle the added housework and childcare responsibilities caused by the pandemic. Yet, there also appears to be a silver lining: increased time at home led men to spend more time on domestic tasks early in the pandemic, leading some to hope that the pandemic could be a catalyst for greater gender equality.

Though the pandemic changed life suddenly, there have been continual fluctuations in various arenas throughout the past three years. On the three-year anniversary of the pandemic, it is clear that some pandemic-induced changes were short-lived (e.g., school closures), others varied based on social and economic conditions (e.g., job loss), while others have become more permanent (e.g., remote work for high income, highly educated, predominately white workers). It is also clear that even if changes were short-lived, they may have reverberating effects on education (e.g., children's learning loss) and health (e.g., rise in mental illness), among other areas. How and why the pandemic affected the division of labor in families and what this means for gender equality moving forward is a question yet to be answered.

New findings from our novel survey, the Study on U.S. Parents' Divisions of Labor During COVID-19 (SPDLC), may help answer this question. The SPDLC is a longitudinal survey of partnered US parents residing with a biological child administered via Prolific. The first wave was conducted in April 2020, with follow up waves in November 2020, October 2021, and October 2022. Additional waves will be conducted in 2023 and 2024. The aim of the SPDLC was to assess changes in parents' divisions of labor during COVID and its consequences for health and well-being. This design enables us to track pandemic-induced changes and identify what really mattered for these parents' divisions of labor, but we acknowledge that this study focuses only on two-parent families (which is the most common family structure for children, comprising [two-thirds of family households](#) in the US). Also, because of the opt-in nature of Prolific panels, the respondents in our study are more likely to be White, highly educated, and less religious than the general population of partnered US parents. However, the initial sample of parents in the SPDLC is [comparable to nationally representative estimates](#) on a variety of sociodemographic factors such as percentage married, average number of children, political ideology, and income.

In this executive summary, we present new findings focusing two key questions:

- 1. How did parents' divisions of domestic labor and mothers' employment change throughout the pandemic?**
- 2. What factors were most important in promoting greater sharing of domestic labor and mothers' engagement in paid labor throughout the pandemic?**

Increasing fathers' domestic labor and increasing mothers' paid labor are both vital for achieving gender equality; according to the American Time Use Survey, [prior to the pandemic](#), mothers spent approximately 48% more time caring for children and 75% more time doing housework than fathers, whereas fathers spent more time in paid work than mothers. By analyzing how changing conditions during the pandemic affected parents' divisions of labor, we identify lessons learned from the pandemic to assist policymakers and business leaders in developing policies that promote gender equality.

Parents' Divisions of Labor During the Pandemic

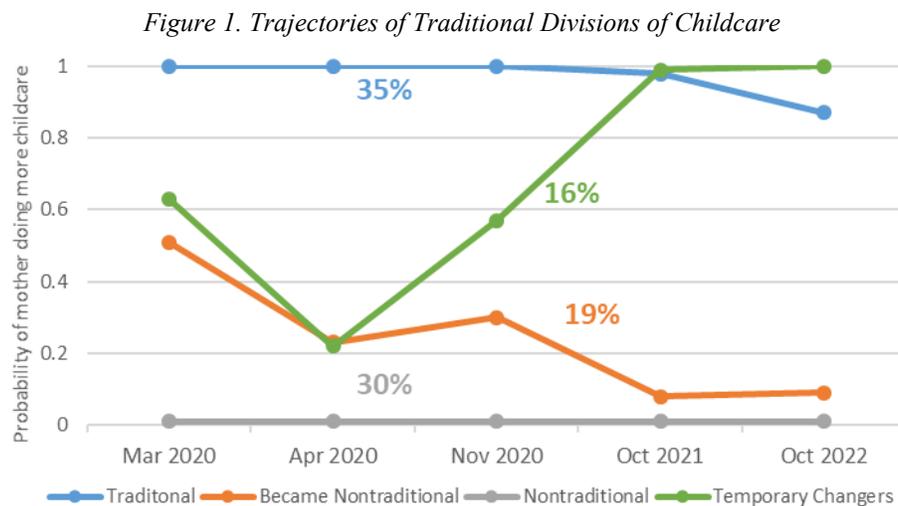
Domestic Labor

Overall, we find that fathers in partnered couples living together performed a greater share of housework and childcare early in the pandemic, and [this was true](#) across families from different class, racial/ethnic, and political backgrounds. And, though there has been [some reversion toward pre-pandemic levels](#), there remains – three years later – a slight shift toward less traditional divisions of domestic labor.

- In the early months of the pandemic, traditional divisions of labor where mothers have primary responsibility for housework decreased from 65% to 51% of families whereas traditional divisions of childcare decreased from 52% to 37% of families. By Fall 2022, 60% of families had traditional housework arrangements and 47% had traditional childcare arrangements.

While overall trends are useful, parents' circumstances vary and they do not all follow the same patterns over time. To understand these variations, we identified unique trajectories of parents' divisions of domestic labor throughout the pandemic.

- Most parents maintained the division of domestic labor they had prior to the pandemic, following a stable pattern of either a traditional or nontraditional (equally shared or fathers do most) division of housework and childcare throughout the pandemic.
- Approximately one in four parents shifted from mothers doing most of the housework pre-pandemic to being more likely to have a nontraditional division of housework by Fall 2022.
- One in five parents shifted from a traditional to a nontraditional arrangement of childcare in Spring 2020, and maintained a nontraditional arrangement through Fall 2022 (Figure 1).
- Approximately one in six parents temporarily shifted from a traditional to nontraditional division of childcare in Spring 2020 before returning to a traditional arrangement by Fall 2021 (Figure 1).



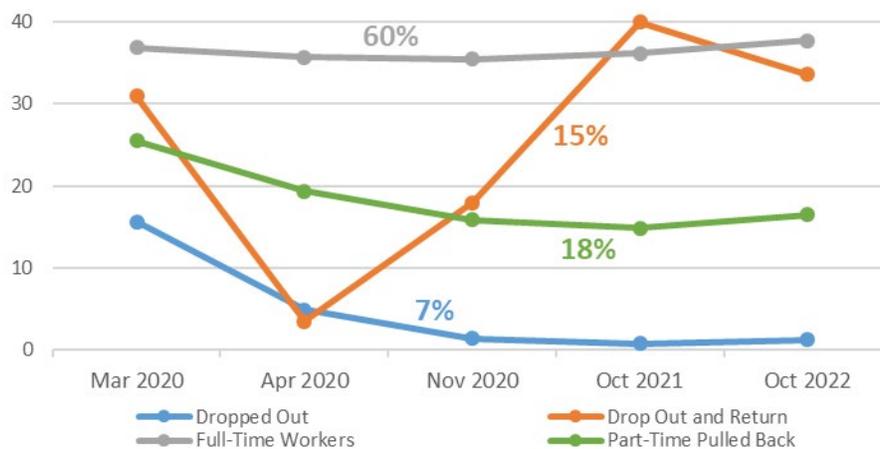
Mothers' Paid Employment

From 2004-2018, mothers' employment rates stayed [fairly consistent at 71%](#) before increasing to over [72% right before the pandemic](#). In the SPDLC, overall trends for mothers' employment suggest that paid labor force participation fell in the early months of the pandemic before rebounding by Fall 2022. Overall employment rates of SPDLC mothers have fully recovered (67% pre-pandemic; 71% in Fall 2022), whereas weekly hours remain slightly lower (35 hours/week pre-pandemic; 34 hours/week in Fall 2022). Yet, these trends mask important nuances as revealed by trajectories of mothers' labor force participation.

- Most mothers (59%) were continually employed throughout the pandemic whereas approximately 1 in 5 mothers were continually unemployed from Spring 2020-Fall 2022.

- One in twelve mothers left the paid labor market during the first year of the pandemic, before slowly returning to work by Fall 2022.
- Approximately 10% of mothers were unemployed prior to the pandemic and began entering the paid labor market starting in Fall 2020. This group is important; overall trends showing that mothers' employment has "fully rebounded" likely includes newly employed mothers and hides the fact that some previously employed mothers have not returned to paid work. Relatedly, national estimates show that industries dominated by women such as nursing and teaching continue to have [lower employment rates](#) compared to before the pandemic.
- Among mothers who were employed prior to the pandemic (see Figure 2):
 - The majority (60%) worked full-time throughout the pandemic
 - Fifteen percent dropped out during the lockdown period before returning to full-time work by fall 2021
 - A little less than 20% worked part-time prior to the pandemic, and gradually reduced their hours throughout the duration of the pandemic
 - Seven percent worked part-time prior to the pandemic and dropped out of paid labor by 2021

Figure 2. Trajectories of Work Hours among Mothers Employed Pre-Pandemic



Overall, results show that numerous families experienced changes in their division of paid and unpaid labor during the pandemic, some of which have been temporary and some of which have been more permanent. Our second goal is to understand what factors mattered most for these changes and identify policies that may promote gender equality post-pandemic.

What Changed During the Pandemic?

Numerous factors relevant to the gendered division of labor shifted during the pandemic. These include:

- **Domestic Supports:** Schools and daycares closed in Spring 2020 with many but not all reopening by Fall 2020. In Fall 2020, all schools provided virtual learning option, but not all had an in-person option. By 2021, most schools were in-person (virtual learning remained available), but access to childcare remained limited for some parents.
- **Job Loss, Income, and Financial Providing:** Lockdown-induced furloughs and layoffs altered breadwinning responsibilities in many families while also increasing financial strains. Public policies early in the pandemic (e.g., child tax credit expansion, free school lunches) alleviated financial strains for many parents, but the expiration of these policies, rising inflation, and continuing supply chain issues presented potential financial challenges later in the pandemic.

- **Job Flexibility:** Numerous jobs became exclusively remote early in the pandemic and many have stayed that way, or shifted to hybrid models of some combination of digital and in-person work. Conversely, a large number of essential workers are unable to work remotely.
- **Access to Paid Leave:** Public policy increased access to paid sick and child care leave related to COVID-19 in 2020. These policies were short-lived, however, and most US workers continue to lack access to paid family leave; low-wage workers also disproportionately lack access to paid sick time, relative to higher-wage workers.
- **Stress and Concerns over COVID:** Mental health declined during the pandemic, especially for parents. Levels of stress have increased, and have remained elevated due to many factors including social isolation and COVID fears, which may inhibit employment. Despite societal reopening, parents continued to express concerns over COVID in Fall 2020 and many remained concerned throughout 2021 and 2022.
- **Gender Attitudes:** Peoples' beliefs about the gendered division of labor are important in shaping labor arrangements. Some [research](#) shows that gender attitudes, especially regarding parenting, became more traditional during the pandemic.

What Mattered for Gender Equality During the Pandemic? Five Key Findings

To assess the importance of the above factors for parents' divisions of labor, we conducted statistical analyses predicting mothers' shares of housework and childcare as well as mothers' paid labor force participation. Below, we highlight four key findings:

1. **Fathers' remote work was key in promoting gender equality in parents' divisions of labor; mothers' schedule flexibility had the opposite effect.** When fathers worked from home more frequently, mothers performed smaller shares of housework and childcare, were more likely to be employed, and worked more hours in paid labor. These changes were more likely to be long-lasting when fathers worked exclusively from home. By working from home, fathers were more exposed to domestic labor and likely had more time to perform these tasks, reducing mothers' burdens and providing mothers with more time to engaged in paid labor. In contrast, job flexibility led mothers to perform greater shares of domestic labor and fewer hours in paid work. Gender norms suggesting that mothers should prioritize family over work has been shown to increase the likelihood that [mothers choose flexible](#) (often lower-paying) jobs to fulfill these obligations prior to the pandemic, and similarly likely led mothers to utilize flexible work policies to manage increased domestic responsibilities during the pandemic.
2. **Access to in-person school and childcare, and father involvement in domestic tasks, helped mothers stay in paid work.** Mothers were more likely to be employed and work more hours when they had the option to send their children to in-person school or childcare, when children attended school/childcare more frequently, and when fathers performed more housework and childcare. Having domestic support reduces burdens on mothers and enables them to be more engaged in paid labor. Yet, reduced access to structural domestic supports during the pandemic actually facilitated fathers' involvement in domestic labor; when children went back to school/childcare, fathers did less at home.
3. **Stress and worry about COVID diminished mothers' paid labor force participation, and stress remained elevated through fall 2022.** Mothers remain primarily responsible for decisions about family health and well-being. Persistent stress and [worry about COVID](#) led some mothers to leave work or reduce their work hours to keep children at home and protect family health. Persistently high

stress levels and concerns about illness due to this winter's spikes in COVID, flu, and RSV likely contributed to [notable declines](#) in women's employment in Fall 2022.

4. **Mothers' paid labor force attachment is key in facilitating long-lasting shifts toward a more equal division of domestic labor.** Parents were more likely to shift to a more permanent nontraditional division of housework and childcare when mothers were employed (particularly when mothers were not working remotely). Fathers are more likely to take on domestic responsibilities when employed mothers have less time to be solely responsible for these tasks.

Policy Recommendations

Key findings show that remote work and domestic supports are important structural factors that can promote or inhibit gender equality. Policies that include and encourage men to participate in unpaid care work at home and maintaining mothers' attachment to the paid labor market and reducing mothers' stress are also vital. Drawing on these results, we identify four lessons learned from the pandemic that should inform public and workplace policies to promote gender equality.

1. **Work-family policies should be equally available to mothers and fathers, and fathers especially should be encouraged and incentivized to use these policies.** Gender norms encourage mothers to use these policies to perform domestic labor and discourages fathers from using these policies to avoid flexibility stigma. Incentivizing US fathers to use these policies (similar to paid leave "daddy quotas" in some countries) can help shift this culture and promote the benefits of workplace flexibility for all parents.
2. **Expand access to affordable childcare and before/after school programs, and limit virtual learning. Everyone needs to recognize that the care crisis existed prior to the pandemic and continues to persist.** Limited access to childcare has been a longstanding problem exacerbated by the pandemic. Uneven access to high-quality childcare, the high cost of childcare, and a shortage of care workers (in part due to low job quality and low wages) increases domestic burdens for mothers and limits their participation in paid labor. Substantial financial and cultural investments in care are needed, including among fathers who must recognize that care challenges are not pandemic-specific.
3. **Develop better public health measures to lessen parents' (and particularly mothers') worries about virus transmission during outbreak periods. More investment is also needed in mental health services and interventions.** The lack of a unified public health approach to minimize virus transmission places the burden on individual families. Although the COVID pandemic has largely subsided, seasonal increases in flu and other viruses like RSV can pose similar challenges to mothers' employment. Enacting policies that reduce parents' fears and lessen stress would enable mothers to maintain stronger paid labor attachments.
4. **Employers need to actively retain employed mothers and develop strategies to recruit mothers back to the labor force.** It can be challenging for mothers (and women more generally) to return to the workforce after being out for a period of time, especially if their period of unemployment is perceived negatively by employers. Return to work and mentorship programs may provide important career development and training for employed mothers to re-enter the paid labor market successfully.