

The Gendered Pandemic: The Implications of COVID-19 for Work and Family

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly all aspects of society since its onset in early 2020. In addition to infecting and taking the lives of millions of global citizens, the pandemic has fundamentally changed family and work patterns. The pandemic and associated mitigation measures increased unemployment rates, amplified health risks for essential workers required to work on-site, and led to unprecedented rates of telecommuting. Additionally, due to school/daycare closures and social distancing, many parents lost access to institutional and informal childcare support during the COVID-19 crisis. Such losses in childcare support significantly impacted the paid and unpaid labor of parents, particularly of mothers. In this article, we synthesize recent research on pandemic-related changes to work and family in the United States. Applying an intersectionality lens, we discuss the gendered implications of these changes. Because gender inequality in family and work are connected, COVID-19 has, in many cases, deepened pre-existing gender inequalities in both realms.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, gender, work, family, inequality, disaster

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The Gendered Pandemic: The Implications of COVID-19 for Work and Family

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nearly all aspects of society since its onset in early 2020. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2021), at the time of our writing, the cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has exceeded 117 million globally, with over 2.6 million deaths. The United States is one of the countries hit hardest by the pandemic, accumulating the most cases and deaths of COVID-19 in the world. Although the United States accounts for only 4% of the global population, it has 25% and 20% of the world's coronavirus cases and deaths, respectively.ⁱ

In addition to infecting and taking the lives of millions of global citizens, the pandemic has fundamentally changed everyday life and the way people work. To slow the spread of COVID-19, many countries have implemented pandemic containment measures, such as lockdowns and social distancing mandates (International Monetary Fund, 2020). In the United States, lockdowns and stay-at-home orders have been implemented to varying degrees across states (Weill et al., 2020), leading many businesses, including schools and daycare facilities, to shut down or move work online. As a result, the pandemic triggered unprecedented mass layoffs, caused unemployment rates to skyrocket, and at the same time, dramatically increased telecommuting (Bloom, 2020; Dias et al., 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Along with drastic changes in people's work lives, the pandemic also intensified demand for care work at home, particularly for parents with young or school-aged children amidst daycare/school closures (Calarco et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020; Collins et al., in press; Heggeness, 2020; Petts et al., 2020). Increased care demands compelled some parents to make significant adjustments to their paid and unpaid work routines (Collins et al., in press; Petts et al., 2020).

Given the unprecedented disruptions to both work and family life brought about by the pandemic, a large and rapidly growing body of social sciences research has emerged to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on social inequalities (for earlier summaries, see Carli, 2020; Kantamneni, 2020). In this article, we synthesize key findings from this research to examine the gendered implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for work and family in the United States. Although our review is specifically about changing gender inequalities in the areas of work and family during COVID-19, it draws on broad insights from the long-standing literature on disasters and social inequalities (for a review, see Reid, 2013). In the now classic sociological study of disasters, Eric Klinenberg (1999) examined the social processes that led to unequal vulnerabilities in the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave. Klinenberg (1999, p. 242) proposed to de-naturalize disasters, and posited that disastrous events were “revealers of social conditions that are less visible but nonetheless present in everyday life.” As a disastrous event, the pandemic has revealed the entrenched social conditions and processes that existed long before COVID-19 to produce gender inequalities in the labor market and in the home. Our review will shed light on how the sudden changes in work institutions and systems of care have influenced those pre-existing gender inequalities.

Consistent with prior research, our article emphasizes that gender inequality in family and work are connected (Gerson, 2009; Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Raley et al., 2012). As highlighted in a recent review of research on work and family, “both paid and unpaid work...shape, and are shaped by, families” (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020, p. 420). Gender disparities in the labor market impact gender disparities in the division of paid and unpaid work at home, and vice versa (Gerson, 2009; Raley et al., 2012). Because of their inter-relatedness, COVID-19 has, in many cases, deepened pre-existing gender inequalities in both work and

family realms, as we discuss below. We also note patterns, when pertinent, that suggest gender egalitarianism may have prevailed in some cases, such as for couples who divided care work more evenly during the pandemic (Carlson et al., 2020; Shockley et al., 2020). How long or whether these exacerbated—or alleviated—gender inequalities persist post-pandemic remains an open question, one we call on future research to investigate later in our discussion.

In response to the call for greater attention to “intersecting identities” in the work and family literature (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020, p. 443), we describe broad patterns of pandemic-related changes for men and women and also highlight heterogeneity along the lines of race, class, and marital/parental status when relevant research is available. By including studies that have examined racial minorities, parents, single parents, etc., our review provides nuanced insights into how and in what ways the pandemic has affected men and women differently depending on the intersections of their gender and other salient identities.

The Pandemic and Gender Inequality: Changes to Work and Family

The Gendered Impact of Labor Market Changes

The pandemic and associated mitigation measures have brought three major changes to the labor market and work institutions. The pandemic has (1) increased unemployment rates and organizational downsizing; (2) amplified challenges and health risks for essential workers who are required to work on-site, and; (3) led to unprecedented shifts to telecommuting. Below, we discuss the gendered impacts of these changes.

Unemployment

Long-standing occupational gender segregation and resulting labor market inequalities have created particular vulnerabilities for women during COVID-19 (Carli, 2020). Occupational

gender segregation is a defining feature of the U.S. labor market, whereby women and men occupy different, and often unequal, jobs (Levanon et al., 2009). Gender-related stereotypes, expectations, and sorting processes that occur in educational and employment settings funnel women and men into gender-typical jobs (Yavorsky, 2019). The key issue with gender-segregated jobs is that male-dominated jobs tend to offer higher pay, better benefits, more full-time positions, and greater upward mobility than female-dominated jobs, even when controlling for the skill and education required (Levanon et al., 2009). Thus, compared with men, women tend to be concentrated in lower-paying, more precarious, and/or part-time jobs (Blau et al., 2013; Weeden et al., 2016).

Deep-rooted gender inequalities that existed before the pandemic led COVID-19 to impact women's and men's economic and labor market positions differently. Although past recessions have affected men's employment more severely than women's employment (Alon et al., 2020b), the pandemic's economic fallout has reduced employment most significantly in non-essential service sectors that require high personal contact (e.g., restaurants, retail, hospitality, travel) (Kochhar & Barosso, 2020). As women make up the majority of workers in these sectors, they were, and continue to be, disproportionately affected by pandemic-related employment losses (Dias et al., 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a).

Notably, many non-essential service jobs were precarious prior to the pandemic (Kalleberg, 2012). Indeed, such jobs are frequently characterized by part-time or contingent positions, unstable work hours, and non-standard shifts (Kalleberg, 2012). These conditions made service sector jobs ripe for layoffs during state-wide lockdowns when many businesses were required to either close or have restricted openings (Day et al., 2020). Women of color and low-income women are over-represented in such precarious jobs and more likely to be in

marginal, low-authority positions at the top of employers' layoff lists (Frye, 2020). Thus, the pandemic compounded gender, racial, and class inequalities in this regard, with women of color facing higher unemployment rates relative to their within-race male counterparts and whites (both men and women) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020d).

As the economy gradually reopened, pandemic-related job losses continued to hit women harder than men (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021). The approximately 22 million jobs lost due to the pandemic in March and April of 2020 continuously, yet only partially, rebounded between May and December that year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020b). Women, however, lagged behind men in the economic recovery (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020). For example, 43% of the jobs added to the U.S. economy in September 2020 were gained by women, despite women having higher levels of job loss (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). As of December 2020, women's payroll employment was still 5.4 million below February 2020, whereas the respective figure was 4.4 million for men (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021). Additionally, recovery of jobs for women of color has been slower than men and also white women (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021; Saenz & Sparks, 2020). These gendered (and racialized) patterns of job recovery may have far-reaching consequences for social inequalities because longer periods of unemployment are associated with food and housing insecurities, greater difficulties finding another job, and larger wage penalties when workers re-enter the labor market (Brand, 2015; Pedulla, 2020).

Essential Services

While women, as described above, are overrepresented in non-essential, high contact jobs (e.g., service jobs), they also are over-represented (relative to men) among *essential*, high contact jobs such as those in healthcare, critical retail, and residential care (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020).

Despite their importance in pandemic responses, and more generally to society, many essential-services jobs, especially the ones held by women of color, are undervalued, poorly paid, and precarious, with little access to benefits such as healthcare insurance or paid sick leave (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020; Kantamneni, 2020). In the midst of lockdowns, uncertainties, and fear for a new disease, essential workers continue to be physically present at their workplaces and perform on-site jobs critical for meeting people's basic needs and maintaining societal functioning. Women's disproportionate representation in essential high contact jobs place them at heightened risk during COVID-19. Given high levels of face-to-face interactions on the job and the highly infectious nature of the coronavirus, some workers felt that they had to choose between their own (and family's) health/safety and the need to earn a wage to make ends meet (Kantamneni, 2020).

Healthcare workers—those on the frontline fighting the virus—faced particularly challenging workplace conditions, with women occupying 70% of U.S. healthcare positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). In the face of the COVID-19 public health emergency, healthcare workers experienced work intensification in both hours and criticality (Carrière, et al., 2020). Many also faced shortages of personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, etc.), especially during early months of the pandemic (March/April). Accordingly, healthcare workers were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 than the general public (Nguyen et al., 2020). To prevent household transmission of the virus, some healthcare workers lived apart from their families for weeks and even months (Glenza, 2020). Increased infection risks, long work hours, considerable stress, and prolonged family separation contributed to healthcare workers experiencing high levels of mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, insomnia) during COVID-19. In view of the fact that women make up the majority of the healthcare workforce and rates of depression and anxiety were higher for women healthcare workers relative to

comparable men during the pandemic (Pappa et al., 2020), women appear to bear a disproportionate mental health toll associated with this work.

Telecommuting

One of the largest impacts of COVID-19 was on where paid work was performed. COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented transition to remote work. Prior to the pandemic, about 25% of the U.S. workforce worked from home at least occasionally (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In May 2020, about 42% of all workers transitioned to working from home full time (Bloom, 2020). Most of the jobs that transitioned to the home were white-collar jobs such as those in management, education, administrative support, computers and mathematics, finance, and law (Bloom, 2020).

Research suggests that women were more likely to telecommute than men during the pandemic (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020c). Although men are more likely to be in higher-status white-collar jobs (e.g., those in management and finance), women are over-represented in lower status white-collar jobs (e.g., administrative support or clerical positions), increasing the number of women able to telecommute (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020a). Importantly, there has been a long-standing debate as to whether telecommuting alleviates or exacerbates gender inequality. Some research suggests that flexible work is associated with higher employment rates for mothers, because it allows them to balance their competing work and family demands (Goldin, 2014). Other research suggests that telecommuting might increase women's already larger unpaid workload (as compared to men), because of social pressures to spend time on childrearing and housework while working at home (Noonan & Glass, 2012).

A rapid shift toward working from home during the pandemic created “essentially the largest global experiment in telecommuting in human history” (Papanikolaou & Schmidt, 2020, p.

4). When the pandemic hit, millions of American workers were suddenly left with no choice but to work at home. In many couples—particularly those who had children, the lived experience of working from home during COVID-19 meaningfully differed between men and women, as we next discuss (Lyttelton et al., 2020; Power, 2020).

The Gendered Impact of School and Childcare Closures

Women’s employment is shaped by not only broader inequality patterns in the labor market, but also partner dynamics of how parents split paid and unpaid labor and care-related institutions (e.g., schools and childcare systems) (Cha, 2010; Collins et al., in press; Ruppner, 2020). Generally, mothers are more likely than fathers to be stay-at-home parents, work part-time, or adjust their work hours to accommodate family needs, especially when women are not the primary earner in the family (Collins, 2019; Weeden et al., 2016). Even when both men and women work full-time, women do 60% of the childcare in different-sex couples, and that number increases to 70% for childcare that occurs during typical work hours (Alon et al., 2020a). Additionally, given that men infrequently drop out of the labor market for childcare reasons (Livingston, 2018), childcare facilities and schools provide critical institutional support that enables women’s working abilities (Ruppner et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated mitigation measures, however, brought wide-spread disruptions to childcare and schooling arrangements, affecting millions of parents and their paid and unpaid labor (Collins et al., in press; Patrick et al., 2020; Petts et al., 2020).ⁱⁱ

Changes to Domestic Labor Among Parents

Empirical evidence suggests that, in general, the pandemic increased childcare responsibilities for both fathers and mothers due to school and daycare closures (Carlson et al.,

2020; Patrick et al., 2020), but how did this affect within-couple disparities in domestic labor among parents? On the one hand, research indicates that at least some different-sex couples reported *more* egalitarian divisions of labor, suggesting that many fathers stepped up their contributions in the home (Carlson et al., 2020; Shockley et al., 2020). Based on data collected in April from partnered parents, Carlson and colleagues (2020) find that approximately 10–15% of U.S. couples shifted away from traditional to more egalitarian divisions of unpaid labor. This shift could result, in part, from both men and women working at home and more equitably splitting childcare, or the fact that, in some instances, men may be the only adult at home and thus are more available to children than their partner (Kim, 2020). Indeed, about 12% of U.S. married couples with children consist of a husband who can work from home and a wife who cannot (Alon et al., 2020a).

On the other hand, research shows that mothers, on average, still perform more housework than fathers and spend a higher number of hours on home-schooling and childcare responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2020; Ruppanner et al., 2021). To this point, a report by McKinsey & Company (2020) showed that during COVID-19, “mothers are more than three times as likely as fathers to be responsible for most of the housework and caregiving” (p. 18). Moreover, mothers are “1.5 times more likely than fathers to be spending an extra three or more hours a day on housework and childcare—equivalent to 20 hours a week, or half a full-time job” (McKinsey & Company, 2020, p. 18). Another study, using nationally-representative data from the Understanding Coronavirus in America Tracking Survey (collected biweekly from March to mid-July), found that 33% of employed mothers (versus 11% of employed fathers) reported they are the sole provider of childcare in their family (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Notably, compared

to other parents, single mothers are even more likely to report that all of the housework and childcare fall on their shoulders (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Given parents' limited ability to outsource childcare in times of school/daycare closure and social distancing (Hertz et al., 2020), telecommuting during the pandemic may have created unique challenges for parents, particularly for mothers. Telecommuting blurs the boundaries between work and home life demands, in that children are sometimes present when parents are working at home. When parents have to juggle their attention between work and children, they may be unable to give their full attention to either, and negative emotions, stress, and psychological distress likely arise from multitasking (Offer & Schneider, 2011). Pre-COVID-19 time use surveys showed that telecommuting mothers spent more than double the time on work in the presence of children than telecommuting fathers (Lyttelton et al., 2020). Gendered patterns appear to also be present during the pandemic: based on a national study from the Pew Research Center conducted in October 2020, mothers are approximately twice as likely as fathers to report that they have a lot of childcare responsibilities while performing their paid job, and a greater proportion of employed mothers than employed fathers report that work-family balance has become more difficult since the onset of COVID-19 (Igielnik, 2021).

Even if the mother is the only partner employed (and her partner is unemployed), she may receive less parenting support than a father in a similar situation (if he is the only partner employed). Earlier research shows that while unemployment increases men's domestic labor contributions (Carlson et al., 2020), unemployed men, on average, do not increase their domestic labor as much as unemployed women (Gough & Killewald, 2011). Emerging evidence suggests that this pattern may have held during the pandemic. In a study of mothers from Southern Indiana, Calarco et al. (2020) found that women with spouses who were between jobs or

unemployed perceived a lack of spousal support for their careers. Mothers reported that their spouses, despite not being in paid employment, still relied on them to manage key parenting responsibilities during the pandemic. Future research is necessary to fully understand how unemployment shaped divisions of labor within different-sex couples during the pandemic and whether findings from Calarco and colleagues (2020) are supported using nationally-representative data.

Pushes Out of the Workforce

The escalated work load at home affected both mothers' and fathers' employment, albeit with a larger impact on mothers' employment (Collins et al., in press; Heggeness, 2020; Heggeness & Fields, 2020). Women, particularly mothers of young or school-aged children, were more likely than men to reduce their paid work hours, drop out of the labor market, or take hits to their productivity at work during COVID-19 (Collins et al., in press; Dias et al., 2020; Heggeness, 2020; Landivar et al., 2020). These paid work reductions were evident early on during the pandemic. National data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) shows that between February and April 2020, mothers with children under 13 years of age reduced their labor force rates by 3 to 4 percentage points; meanwhile, fathers also reduced their labor force participation, but their exit rates were one to two percentage points lower than mothers (Landivar et al., 2020). In raw numbers, about 250,000 more mothers than fathers with children under 13 left the labor force during this time (Landivar et al., 2020). Relatedly, another study used CPS data to examine gender differences in taking temporary leave from work by the date of school closures and stay-at-home ordinances in U.S. states: it found that mothers nearly exclusively were the ones to take temporary leave at the onset of the pandemic (Heggeness, 2020).

As the pandemic continued, weekly data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that the share of prime-working-age mothers who were not working due to childcare demands increased by about 5 percentage points between April 23 and July 21 2020, whereas no increase was found for similar men (Heggeness & Fields, 2020). By the week of July 16–21, among non-working parents, women aged 25–44 years (32%) were nearly three times as likely as men (12%) to be not working due to COVID-19-related childcare issues (Heggeness & Fields, 2020).

As the pandemic persisted into the fall of 2020, some research suggests that COVID-19 suppressed employment similarly for mothers as it did for fathers. For example, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of the 2019 and 2020 CPS data, both fathers' and mothers' employment rates were down by about 5 percentage points in September 2020, compared to September 2019 (Kochhar, 2020). Although similar in absolute percentage points, mothers' employment decrease was nevertheless a higher relative percent change from the previous year (8% versus 5% decrease for fathers' employment). Notably, scholars have identified heterogeneity in employment changes depending on the availability of institutional childcare support. Based on state-wide data of school instruction models (in-person, remote, hybrid) linked to the CPS, Collins and colleagues (in press) find that the gender gap in labor force participation rates widened by 5 percentage points (between September–November 2019 and September–November 2020) for parents who had school-aged children (5–12) and resided in states where schools offered primarily remote instruction. Mothers' labor force participation was less affected in states that offered hybrid or in-person instruction (Collins et al., in press). These patterns highlight how additional responsibilities associated with online schooling particularly impacted mothers' employment and align with a non-representative study of about 1,000 U.S. parents,

which found that women were more likely than men to drop out of the labor force, if they were responsible for creating all or some of the school content (Petts et al., 2020).

Productivity Hits

Even for women, and more specifically mothers, who maintained employment, their productivity at work may have declined, particularly among those who telecommute (Igielnik, 2021). Although measuring worker productivity poses some methodological challenges (given that no nationally-representative database exists that includes objective productivity assessments of workers), academia provides insight into this issue. Here, productivity, at least based on one key area for academics, is relatively straightforward to quantify and study—academic submissions and publications. Research on academics suggests that women’s productivity took a larger hit than men’s during the pandemic. For example, analyses of all submissions to Elsevier journals between February and May 2018–2020 indicate that, during the COVID-19 lockdown months, women submitted proportionally fewer manuscripts than men (Squazzoni et al., 2020). Likewise, in a study on the largest open-access preprint repository for social sciences (the Social Science Research Network), Cui and colleagues (2020) found that 2.5 months after the lockdown in the United States, women produced 14% fewer papers compared to their male counterparts. Although this research on academics does not disentangle parenthood status, coupled with the previously reviewed research, it is a logical assumption that gender differences in productivity are driven by differences between mothers and fathers and potential gender disparities in domestic labor. Indeed, pre-COVID-19 research shows that mothers in academia perform significantly more childcare and housework than comparable fathers (Mason et al., 2013; Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010); at the same time, men academics are far more likely than

women academics to have a stay-at-home spouse or spouse whose career is considered secondary (Mason et al., 2013).

Studies done *outside of academia* using self-reports suggest that women, particularly mothers, working in a variety of sectors felt a greater impact of the pandemic on their productivity than men (Feng & Savani, 2020; Igielnik, 2021). For example, a U.S. national study of employed parents conducted by the Pew Research Center in Oct 2020 indicated that, although both fathers and mothers reported experiencing professional challenges due to increased childcare demands, a greater percentage of mothers than fathers felt that they could not give 100% to work (54% vs. 43%), needed to reduce work hours (34% vs. 26%), turned down an important assignment at work (15% vs. 11%), or turned down a promotion (9% vs. 3%) because they were balancing work and parenting responsibilities since the onset of the pandemic (Igielnik, 2021). The productivity of single mothers may have been especially impacted, given that they lacked a partner to share at least some childcare and housework (Hertz et al., 2020). In an online survey of 833 single mothers (Hertz et al., 2020), 57% of the respondents who did not have another adult present in the household felt that their productivity worsened during the pandemic.

In sum, this body of research on gender, work, and family in the pandemic highlights the critical function of institutional childcare support for promoting gender equality in employment and career prospects. In many cases, if care work in the home cannot be outsourced, it is more likely to fall back on women than on men (Collins et al., in press; Petts et al., 2020; Ruppner, 2020).

Conclusion and Future Directions

Summary of What We Currently Know

Prior research on sociology of disasters has suggested that women are more vulnerable to the negative consequences in disasters and encounter more challenges in the post-disaster recovery (for review, see Reid, 2013). Our review of the most recent research on COVID-19 and gender has also indicated that the pandemic, as a form of disaster, has exacerbated many pre-existing gender inequalities in the labor market and in the home. Women are more vulnerable to pandemic-related job losses, due to the long-standing concentration of women in precarious jobs and increased care demands at home during the pandemic. Moreover, with the gradual re-opening of the economy, women lag behind men in the recovery of jobs. Also, telecommuting has posed gender-related work and productivity challenges, particularly for mothers, in the absence of institutional childcare support. At the same time, the pandemic may have helped challenge some pre-existing gender inequalities, like for those couples who reported more egalitarian divisions of labor after the onset of COVID-19.

What Has Yet to Be Learned and Future Research Areas

Although hundreds of COVID-19-related studies on work and family have been published thus far, there is still much to be learned about how the pandemic is impacting different groups of people and the long-term implications of these impacts for gender inequality/equality. For example, additional studies are necessary to better understand predictors of couples' divisions of labor during the pandemic, especially as it relates to theories previously identified in the gender, family, and work literature such as doing gender, time availability, and relative resources theories (for review, see Barnes, 2015). Given that the U.S. (and world) is still enduring the pandemic, research to date has mostly focused on documenting trends and variation

in employment and domestic labor as the pandemic unfolds. By contrast, much less attention has been paid to testing theories that explain the patterns and disparities identified. Questions remain as to why and which couples crafted more or less egalitarian relationships. Although many families report a deepening of unequal divisions of labor during the pandemic, some families provide glimmers of hope that traditional gender roles may be redefined and that individuals' gender-role attitudes may change as well to adapt to the new "lived realities" (Reichelt et al., 2020). Future research should examine whether newly negotiated respective roles and responsibilities persist, and under what conditions, after the COVID-19 pandemic fades.

Also, additional research is necessary to understand how labor market changes, such as job loss, career interruptions, and productivity losses, impact women's (particularly mothers') future careers and economic positions. Given the prolonged duration and transformative impact of the pandemic, scholars speculate that the consequences of COVID-19 for gender inequalities in the labor market could be long-lasting and far-reaching (Power, 2020). Future areas of scholarship should examine whether women are any less likely than men to be re-employed after job loss or "voluntarily" dropping out of the labor market as jobs recover and childcare systems are re-implemented. It will be important to examine whether men and women who experienced job loss ("voluntary" or involuntary) during the pandemic face discrimination from employers due to their career interruptions, particularly when it is for caretaking reasons, as previous research has documented (Pedulla, 2020; Weisshaar, 2018). Relatedly, research from the pre-COVID-19 era shows that layoffs and quitting a job for non-work-related reasons result in larger earnings losses for women than for men upon reemployment (Cha, 2014). Future research should empirically examine if the gendered patterns of job loss and unemployment during the pandemic result in a widening of the gender wage gap throughout the recovery, as some scholars have

envisioned (Alon et al., 2020b). Lastly, the loss of job experience (a form of important human capital) and the reduced productivity during the pandemic suggest that women could face more barriers than men to advancing their careers or accessing positions with status and authority in the future (Brand, 2015; Qian & Yavorsky, 2021). This line of inquiry will be critical to understanding whether gender gaps in leadership and/or promotion widen in the short or long term.

Lastly, research should explore how care systems and work institutions may change post-pandemic and the long-term implications of such change for gender equality. For example, the pandemic has clearly highlighted how critical childcare is to the functioning of our society, the labor market, and women’s employment (Collins et al., in press; Petts et al., 2020). To this end and perhaps a silver lining, there has been increased discussion (by popular media and among politicians) about the need for more progressive state and/or federal policies regarding the affordability and availability of childcare (The New York Times, 2021). We await whether COVID-19 sparks positive—and importantly, enduring—policy change in this regard.ⁱⁱⁱ

Overall, this research has highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its associated mitigation policies and economic downturns, has affected men and women, of various identities, in multifaceted ways. Changes in the labor market and systems of care have, in many cases, deepened pre-existing gender inequalities in both areas of work and family. Future research is critical to fully understanding how equality at the intersection of gender, race, class, and parenthood unfolds in the short and long run.

Endnotes

ⁱ The statistics in the opening paragraph are based on authors’ calculations of COVID-19-related data from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>) and population data from the United Nations

(<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>). The authors accessed these data on March 10, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Based on the American Community Survey data, approximately one third of the workforce (about 50 million workers) has a child under 14 in their household (Dingel et al., 2020). According to a national study, 63% of parents had difficulty finding childcare during the peak of the pandemic in April 2020 (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ On March 10, 2021, the 117th Congress passed the H.R. 1319 American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (U.S. Congress, 2021). This bill provides \$39 billion in child care relief funding. Of this amount, “nearly \$24 billion creates a stabilization fund for eligible child care providers,” and “\$15 billion will provide expanded child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) to support families and providers” (Hardy & Gallagher Robbins, 2021). The former is intended to support childcare providers who are currently operating or are closed for pandemic-related reasons; the latter is intended to help eligible families pay for the costs of childcare.

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