

COVID-19 recession is tougher on women

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According to a new study, working women are experiencing the worst effects of the COVID-19 recession, unlike in previous downturns, which hit working men the hardest. In [“The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality”](#) (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 26947, April 2020), researchers Titan Alon, Matthias Doepke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey, and Michèle Tertilt suggest that more women in the United States will have lost their jobs because the industries they tend to work in have been harder hit by the effects of the pandemic. The study points out two major reasons that the current recession is tougher for women.

First, the crisis has battered industry sectors in which women’s employment is more concentrated—restaurants and other retail establishments, hospitality, and health care. This was not the case in past recessions, which tended to hurt male-dominated industry sectors like manufacturing and construction more than other industries. In past recessions, men have faced greater risk of unemployment than women, partly because of the gender composition of different sectors of the economy. A larger fraction of employed men (46 percent) than employed women (24 percent) work in construction; manufacturing; and trade, transportation, and utilities. These are considered highly cyclical sectors that typically suffer during “normal” recessions. On the other hand, 40 percent of all working women are employed in government and in health and education services compared with just 20 percent of working men.

Second, the coronavirus shutdowns have closed schools and daycare centers around the country, keeping kids at home and making it even harder for parents (especially mothers who tend to provide the majority of childcare) to keep working. Childcare poses an additional challenge to working mothers during the pandemic.

Working women are also at a greater disadvantage compared with working men in the current crisis because fewer women have jobs that allow them to telecommute: 22 percent of female workers compared with 28 percent of male workers. According to the researchers’ analysis of data from the American Time Use Survey from 2017 and 2018, single parents will face the greatest challenge. Only 20 percent of single parents reported being able to telecommute compared with 40 percent of married people with children. In two-parent households where only one parent works in the labor market, the stay-at-home parent, usually the mother, is likely to assume primary childcare duties during coronavirus-related school closures. However, in 44 percent of married couples with children, both spouses work full-time. Among these couples, mothers provide about 60 percent of childcare. Men perform 7.2 hours of childcare per week versus 10.3 hours for women.

The study also compared the current pandemic to World War II, which led to significant changes in American family dynamics and gender norms, as millions of women joined the labor force for the first time. The huge influx of women into the workforce during the Second World War was a change that did not revert once the war was over. The comparison suggests that temporary changes to the distribution of labor between men and women may have a lasting impact. As of now, millions of American fathers are taking more, and in some cases, primary responsibility

for child care. It is possible that the COVID-19 crisis may erode gender norms that currently lead to a lopsided distribution of the division of labor in housework and childcare at home.

The current economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately hurting women's employment, with ramifications that could be long lasting. The authors estimate that 15 million single mothers in the United States will be the most severely affected, with little potential for receiving other sources of childcare and a smaller likelihood of continuing to work during the crisis. However, the study points out that many businesses are becoming much more aware of their employees' childcare needs and have responded by adopting more flexible work schedules and telecommuting options. The authors hope that by promoting flexible work arrangements and making childcare obligations of both genders a priority, the crisis may reduce labor-market barriers in the long run. Although the evidence suggests that women's employment opportunities will suffer severely during the crisis, the authors see cause for optimism over the longer term.