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What's for dinner, Mom? Pandemic reveals glaring inequalities in household labor divisions

Lila Zuckermann, Author

In the last four weeks, 22 million Americans have applied for unemployment benefits. I can't tell you how many of these 22 million people were women, because no one has bothered to research it. In a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) poll, 53% of women reported that the Coronavirus pandemic was negatively impacting their mental health, while only 37% of men agreed. In a Lean In survey, it was found that without a month of income, women were twice as likely as men to struggle to afford basic necessities. The Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has taken the world by storm, leaving healthcare workers and legislatures scrambling with how to best serve their populations. As schools close, businesses shut their doors and all but a few jobs operate remotely, there is a whole population silently suffering in the midst: women. Sending most people inside indefinitely, this health emergency has the potential to completely restructure traditional labor divisions – but only if we let it.



Recent closures in the United States have put 300 million children out of school, leaving parents with no childcare and no education plan. According to a 2019 study, even when both parents in a heterosexual relationship are able to work from home, the demand for household labor still falls to women. With school paused for months, many mothers will be tasked with homeschooling their children for the first time ever, adding to their workload.

Homeschooling isn't the only extra work falling in women's hands at this time. According to a recent New York Times article, women have assumed the mental load of worries, fear and panic that come with living through a pandemic. The same KFF poll found that this increased stress can lead to higher rates of anxiety and depression.

So what's going on here? There are more women in the workforce now than ever before. In fact, by 2050, there are projected to be 92 million working women in the United States alone. But unfortunately, just because women participate in the workforce, does not mean they are relieved from household duties. Whether working mothers have their jobs suspended or are working from home, a second shift awaits: one of housework, shopping and childcare. First introduced in a 1989 book, the second shift is an exhausting reality for millions across the country.

You might say that if women need more help around the house, they should just ask for it. No one is "making" them do anything. If women have extra work, it's because they brought it on themselves.

It's true. Women do have extra work – but not because they brought it on themselves. A 1996 study found that men only do between 20 and 34 percent of daily housework, and the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics confirmed it in 2015. Interestingly, both women and men do not believe that the current gendered division of housework is unfair. However, women don't spend hours washing dishes or vacuuming because they love it. The traditional division of labor and the patriarchy are linked. Throughout history, women have been sequestered at home as second-class citizens. While women now enjoy access to the job market and other freedoms, the historical ties still bind. No, women are not physically forced to do chores. But history says it is more an obligation than a true decision.

In a time when couples are likely home all day together for the first time, let's bring to light the extra responsibilities falling on women. Having these conversations could be key to prevent sending women back to the 1950s.

– Lila Zuckermann, Communications and Media Major, Seattle University '21