

The Impact of COVID-19 Workplace Policies on Gender Disparities Across Socioeconomic Strata

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused school and daycare closures, which increased the amount of time parents spent performing child care and household duties. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study finds that women, regardless of income or socioeconomic status, tend to bear the brunt of this labor. This is partially responsible for large numbers of women leaving their jobs and subsequent widening labor market gender disparities triggered by the pandemic. Workplace policies that increase scheduling flexibility, implement paid leave, and subsidize child care shutter these gaps. Through survey collection and interviews, this study assesses if the increase in caregiving hours triggered workplaces to implement child care assistance or flexibility policies. It examines how workplace flexibility policies differ depending upon socioeconomic status, and how a difference between high and low paying job flexibility policies affect gender inequalities in the labor market. This study has broader implications in how organizations and the government will craft future workplace policies that acknowledge the benefits of flexibility, the burden of child care, and the gender inequalities that are exacerbated by those burdens.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, workplace flexibility, child care, labor market inequality

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused school and daycares to institute a remote learning model. This caused many parents, especially those of elementary age and disabled children, to increase their child care hours and decrease the amount of time parents spent working during the traditional workday. Women's labor force participation dropped by 4.3 percentage points and men's dropped by 2.6 percentage points. Furthermore, the unemployment rate of women with children under 13 rose by 11.0 percentage points while fathers' unemployment rate rose by 7.3 percentage points (Landivar et. al 2020). Thus, findings in the existing literature indicate that the increased child care burdens during COVID-19 fell primarily upon mothers, making them far more likely to leave the workforce than fathers. This ultimately exacerbated existing systems of gender inequality within the labor market.

This paper examines the extent to which organizations have accommodated the shifting requirements of child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the types of policies, if any, that assist with child care. This includes the implementation of paid administrative leave, subsidized child care support, or flexibility of hours,

location, and expected productivity. The paper contributes to an ongoing assessment of the divergent labor market experiences of men and women by examining how firm-specific policies contributed to or mitigated existing gender inequities (Landivar et. al 2020). Furthermore, because remote work was only possible for certain labor sectors and individuals of various socioeconomic statuses were impacted differently, it analyzes how income level influenced the type of policies available to account for different employment needs.

I hypothesize that most salaried positions offer flexibility in location and hours, but not productivity. I hypothesize that employers did not temporarily lower their standard for what employees could reasonably accomplish in a day in order to ensure that employees maintained job security during the initial stages of the pandemic. Furthermore, I hypothesize that both hourly wage and salaried positions will offer some form of paid administrative leave. Due to limited support from schools and the traditional division of household labor dictated by gender norms in heterosexual relationships, I hypothesize that ultimately, limited flexibility policies, especially for those of lower socioeconomic status, caused existing gender disparities to widen.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Household labor distributions across SES*

Women in heterosexual marriages perform more child care and household labor than their spouses despite the rising number of women in the labor force and female breadwinners (Craig and Mullan 2011). The discrepancy in hours spent by husband and wife on unpaid household labor varies with the percentage each spouse's income contributes to the total household income and the couple's socioeconomic status (Kamo 2000). The greater the difference between the income of the wife and the husband in a heterosexual marriage, the greater the disparity in the amount of time spent by men and women performing household tasks, regardless of which spouse is the breadwinner. Women perform more tasks when the income disparity is great, and the gap is reduced when the incomes of both spouses are more even. The higher the socioeconomic status of a couple, the weaker the adherence to this trend. Individuals of higher socioeconomic status tend to occupy more egalitarian attitudes about the division of household labor because of their ability to afford child care assistance (Brines 1994).

The uneven distribution of household labor can be accounted for by the economic dependency of one spouse on the other and gender norms (Brines 1994). Economic dependency refers to the extent to which one spouse is reliant on the other for their present financial status. When the husband is the primary earner, a discrepancy in child care hours exists because the wage gap compels the wife to engage in a quasi-economic model of exchange between labor and income (Brines 1994). In contrast, when the husband is not the primary earner, Western gender roles, which dictate that men assume a role of providership for the family whereas women occupy a nurturing role, are subverted (Blackstone 2003). As a result, when the wife is the primary or sole earner, women tend to bear the brunt of housework in order to counteract this subversion and reinforce a degree of normative gender performances.

The effects of gender roles extend to the workplace and bolster systemic inequality based on gender. Women comprise the majority of the lower paying jobs in the service and child care industries because gender norms portray women as better suited for these roles than positions that are higher paying and perceived as more ambitious (Blau and Kahn 2007). This is further exacerbated by gender discrimination that causes men to be deemed as more

productive and better long term labor investments, and therefore more likely to be viewed as competent and well-suited for a position than their female counterparts with the exact same qualifications. The aforementioned unequal distribution of labor also contributes to gender inequalities in the workplace: women are far more likely than men to work part-time or take time off from work due to child care needs than men (Landivar et. al 2020). Thus, perceptions of gender contribute to the persisting aggregate gender pay gap – women occupy lower paying industries and are expected to sacrifice their careers for their children more often than men, and are subsequently paid less due to societal expectations.

B. *Workplace flexibility policy*

The negative impact of child care on women's wages is counteracted by child care policies (Blau and Kahn 2007). As more egalitarian attitudes have begun to inform workplace culture and policy, the amount of child care benefits offered by corporations and governments has increased. A notorious child care benefit in the literature is paid maternity leave (Crompton, Kaufman, and Lyonette 2011). Despite not being guaranteed in the United States, maternity leave policies increase maternal employment and stymie the gap in male and female child care hours at home. However, women who leverage maternity leave are often scored lower on performance evaluations because the use of these policies often causes women to be viewed as unproductive, absent-minded, and overly dedicated to their children (Berdahl and Moon). Paternity leave, while not as ubiquitous, is also used far less frequently by men who have access to it (Zagorsky et. al 2017). The fatherhood penalty, which refers to the professional penalty faced by men who utilize workplace flexibility or child care benefits to engage in child care or other tasks perceived as feminine, accounts for this trend (Berdahl and Moon).

C. *COVID-19 and child care*

Due to the largely asynchronous nature of the classroom in a remote learning model, adults and older siblings in the household were charged with becoming children's teachers (Calarco et. al 2020). This burden was largely shouldered by mothers and other female family members and detracted from time spent working productively during the hours of the traditional workday. Furthermore, droves of women lost their jobs because women occupy a majority of the jobs in the service

industry, which was disproportionately hit by the pandemic (Azcona, et. al 2020).

The increase of child care hours, unemployment, and general financial and health pressures that have been compounded by the pandemic this raises the question of what policies were enacted or enforced during the pandemic to support struggling individuals (Calarco et. al 2020). Furthermore, individuals of various socioeconomic statuses faced different challenges. There is a gap in the literature with regard to what policies were utilized by organizations and the government to alleviate these challenges.

We operationalized public child care benefits as child care assistance, COVID-19 relief packages, social security and unemployment benefits, and other types of legislation of programs meant to support low income and unemployed individuals. We operationalized workplace policy as the implementation of programs such as paid administrative leave, hybrid work, and child care assistance that accounted for the challenges brought forth by the pandemic. This research takes a cross sectional approach to examine what types of policies were enacted and how those policies affected the gender disparities in various socioeconomic strata.

III. METHODS

A. Data Collection

This study utilized mixed-methods to ensure that we captured the human experience both prior to and during COVID. Data was collected using a Google Forms survey, which includes six sections: introduction, demographic information, division of child care responsibilities, remote learning assistance, work, and mental health. The survey asked participants to recount details about their own and their spouse's child care hours, workplace policy satisfaction, and mental health prior to and during the pandemic. It includes a mixture of dichotomous (1,0), likert scale questions, and open response boxes, which were then coded using a codebook created by the PI. The last question on the survey allowed participants to list their email address if they were interested in being interviewed via the video conference platform Zoom. Interviews lasted for an average of 45 minutes and covered participants' experiences of workplace and public policies.

B. Recruitment

Responses were garnered through posting on elementary, middle, and high school PTA pages on Facebook, NextDoor, Reddit, and LinkedIn. We emailed PTA presidents and school principals in all 50 states by accessing online state databases. Posts and emails included a recruitment flyer, a link to the survey, and a paragraph explaining the study. After the third week of recruitment, we added a financial incentive for survey participants to be entered in a raffle for one of four \$25 Amazon gift cards. Recruitment for this study is ongoing.

C. Analysis

163 survey responses were cleaned and coded using SPSS by the PI in order to ensure reliability. Coding consisted of converting string responses into numeric codes and consolidating the responses on a five-point scale into three values. Stata was used to perform cross-tabulations and regression analysis as well as visualize the data through bar charts. In addition to quantitatively analysing all 163 survey responses, qualitative analysis was performed on 11 Zoom interviews using a coding system. Interviews were coded using a color-coded highlighting system where each color referred to one of three previously identified themes of interest. Coding primarily centered around three women of upper, middle, and lower class. Their responses were contrasted and corroborated by relationships identified in the survey and the responses of the other eight interviewees.

The two primary variables of interest were gender and socioeconomic status. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis focused on identifying relationships between these two variables and the three primary themes: child care hours, workplace policy, and impacts on employment. Socioeconomic status was operationalized into three categories: upper, middle, and lower class. Participants self-reported socioeconomic status on a likert scale consisting of five categories: lower class, working class, middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. Lower and working class were grouped together and upper middle and upper class were grouped together during the coding process. Child care hours were operationalized as any time spent caring for children, and the theme included virtual school assistance as well. Presence of workplace policy was operationalized as the existence of a written policy that guaranteed some sort of previously defined child care or flexibility benefits. Impacts on employment refers to a dichotomous question that asked participants whether they

had to leave their job due to child care reasons during the pandemic.

D. Limitations

This survey received a far greater number of responses from individuals who self-identified as middle and upper class — groups that were less drastically impacted by the pandemic than those of low socioeconomic status (Enriquez et. al 2020). Social-desirability bias may have caused participants to undervalue their socioeconomic status, which we solved for by grouping all measures of socioeconomic status into a three point scale. Also, because we did not ask income questions or consider participants’ socioeconomic status in the context of their state, there are discrepancies in how people of the “same” socioeconomic status experienced the pandemic. Due to recruitment methods, PTA members were more likely to respond than other parents, and being on the PTA already indicates a high level of involvement with their children’s lives. In self-reported surveys such as this one, social-desirability bias impacts participants’ responses, causing them to overestimate their own child care hours. There is also typically a discrepancy between how many child care hours participants report that their spouse performs and how many hours the spouse themselves will report. However, we considered the self-reported data to be reliable for this research study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall

This research examines the relationship between gender and socioeconomic status with three themes: child care hours, workplace policy, and impacts on employment. It synthesizes quantitative relationships derived from STATA and inductive reasoning from the interviews of 11 candidates to draw conclusions. We reference four interviewees in this paper under a pseudonym. Alice identifies as an unemployed, low income, 64-year-old Black woman from Wilmington, Delaware. Emily identifies as a middle class 41-year-old Black woman from Washington, DC. She is in a heterosexual relationship with her Latino fiance, and works as a bartender and tax firm business owner. Sarah identifies as a middle class white woman in her 40s from Atascadero, California. She is married to a white man and is an essential worker as a hospital administrator. Julia identifies as an upper class

white woman in her 40s from Washington, DC. She is married to a white man and works at a consulting firm.

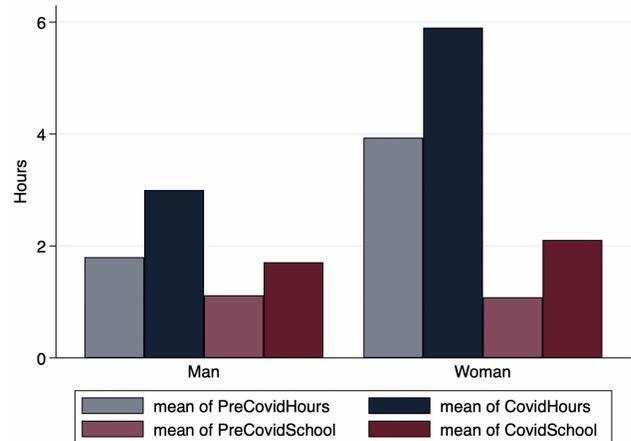


FIG. 1. Gendered distribution of parental child care hours prior to and during the pandemic

A. Child Care Hours

There is a statistically significant positive correlation between increasing child care hours and being a woman both before and during the pandemic. Women are associated with performing more child care hours pre-COVID as compared to men. The positive correlation increases in strength if women answered the survey themselves. The finding that women, regardless of socioeconomic or breadwinner status performed more child care both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic confirms findings that are already widely represented in the literature.

Inductive reasoning from interviews reveals that another cause for this gender disparity is that men did not view child care as an obligation, regardless of socioeconomic status. Instead, child care is viewed as an external task that follows in importance to work, which stems from greater obligation that men feel towards providership. This manifested in male partners creating or demanding a greater division between their children and their remote work situation. Emily’s partner, who teleworked from a call center, demanded total silence during the workday despite the entire family working in the one room with stable broadband. Thus, maintaining silent and divided environments became another burden that mothers shouldered.

Male partners of all interviewees were less likely to ask for flexibility for child care purposes, which confirms findings in literature about the gendered use of flexibility policies. Along with the onus of providership, we

can attribute this to the fact that men feel a stronger sense of responsibility towards their coworkers and therefore feel more guilty asking for time off. This gendered split of familial and workplace obligations thus increases the importance of instituting written policies that do not force employees to *ask* for flexibility and instead allow them to leverage the tools at their disposal.

B. Workplace Policy

	WorkChildcare	WorkplaceLevel	WorkplaceSLevel
NewSES	-0.046 (-0.43)	0.0644 (1.17)	0.10* (1.86)
Woman	-0.044 (-0.72)	-0.06* (-1.88)	-0.013 (-0.38)

t statistics in parentheses
 * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, **** p<0.001

FIG. 2. Coefficients of determination and standard error of the presence of workplace policy and policy satisfaction level with gender and socioeconomic status.

There is a negative correlation between being a woman and the presence of a workplace policy that accounted for the additional child care obligations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a statistically significant negative correlation between being a woman and the level of satisfaction with company response to COVID-19 for both participant’s own companies and spouse’s companies. Women were less satisfied with both their own and their spouse’s company’s responses to the pandemic. The gendered divide in the presence and satisfaction with policies may stem from the fact that women actively sought out and used policies more than men, and therefore faced the impacts of using those policies firsthand as well.

There is a negative correlation between socioeconomic status and the presence of a workplace policy that accounted for the additional child care obligations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We attribute this to the fact that low-income individuals are more likely to be eligible for government benefits and join unions — organizations that rely strictly on written policies when regulating employee benefits. Individuals in higher income jobs tend to instead rely on communication with higher-ups for increased flexibility.

COVID-19 child care support policies for low income individuals such as Alice included child tax credits and COVID-19 stimulus packages. Policies such as rent moratoriums allowed Alice and Emily, who leases a commercial space for her tax business, to stay afloat. While

nonessential businesses, including the bar she works at, were closed, Emily received a weekly payment of \$30 from the bar. Emily and Alice were the only two interviewees that were able to leverage a specific written policy enacted for COVID-19 outside of remote work. Sarah, who is an essential worker, was able to work remotely for the first couple weeks of COVID-19, until her children’s summer vacation began, by communicating with her superiors. The onset of the pandemic caused Julia’s entire firm to transition to remote work. The workplaces of all interviews allowed time off if they or a family member contracted or came into contact with COVID-19.

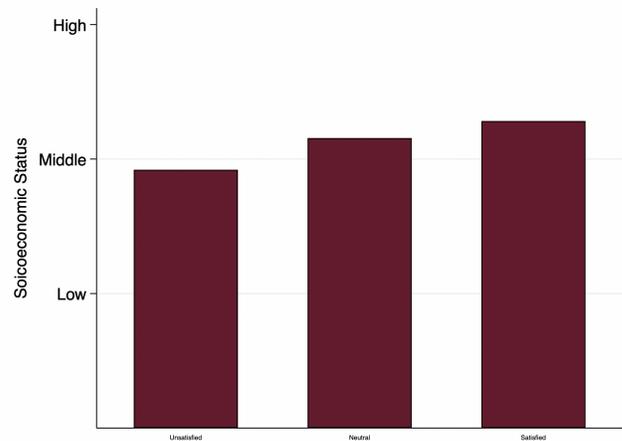


FIG. 3. Workplace policy satisfaction based on socioeconomic status. Horizontal axis is the satisfaction level denoted as Unsatisfied, Neutral, or Satisfied.

There is a statistically significant positive correlation between the level of satisfaction with company and spouse’s workplace policy and socioeconomic status. Lower income individuals were less satisfied with the policies that affected them because those policies do not provide sufficient financial support. Another obstacle that pertains specifically to lower socioeconomic strata is the hassle that surrounds gaining access to any benefits actually offered, especially benefits offered by the government.

While the financial implications of leveraging COVID-19 workplace policies are more salient in lower socioeconomic strata, taking a pay cut in order to take time off is a theme expressed in jobs of all income. In salaried jobs, interviewees explained that opting to take leave corresponds with a removal of responsibilities equivalent to a demotion. As a result, instead of leveraging financially harmful policies, higher income individuals tended to negotiate work hours and scheduling conflicts with their superiors. The increased level of satisfaction from higher

income individuals stems from this ability to adapt schedules — a benefit that essential and hourly wage workers did not have. Therefore, implementing policies that compensate for this lack of flexibility with sufficient financial support when taking paid leave is crucial to allowing parents to engage in child care.

C. Impact on Employment

There is a positive, statistically significant correlation between leaving a job for child care reasons and socioeconomic status, meaning people of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to leave their jobs. There is also a positive correlation between leaving a job for child care reasons and being a woman. This may be attributed to the minimal flexibility offered by lower income jobs, causing parents to choose between prioritizing work and their children. In heterosexual partnerships where having only one working parent was financially feasible, this burden falls disproportionately on the woman.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

An overwhelming theme that surpassed gender was that when a workplace lacked written policies, interviewees felt that negotiating or asking for time for child care would harm them professionally, stressing the importance of explicit flexibility policies. One such policy that should be implemented is a hybrid or fully remote workplace, if feasible. Being able to work remotely allows parents significantly more scheduling flexibility and reduces the “motherhood penalty”.

In future crises, it is crucial to enforce job security by temporarily reducing expectations of worker productivity so that one parent does not take on all the labor while the other works in order to preserve job security of at least income. One policy that participants across all socioeconomic strata and labor sectors expressed desire for is financial compensation for child care. While not entirely applicable to the COVID-19 crisis because child care centers were closed, in future, subsidizing child care, either through the federal government or through private companies, is essential to lowering the barriers of entry for women into the workforce.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was supported by the Departments of Sociology and Pre-College Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. We are grateful to Cindy Zhu,

Neil Johnson, and Dr. Lina Kim for their support and feedback as well.

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