

Unpaid family work and the subjective well-being of Italian women during lockdown

Il lavoro domestico e di cura e il benessere soggettivo delle Italiane durante il lockdown

Marina Zannella, Erica Aloé, Marcella Corsi and Alessandra de Rose

Abstract This article is based on data from a web survey conducted in Italy, from May to June 2020, aimed at exploring how the confinement measures taken against the spread of COVID-19 affected family life and time use for paid and unpaid work. In addition to information on time use before/during/after confinement, respondents were also asked to report changes in their feelings associated with different activities. Our data show that during lockdown, women spent significantly more time on unpaid family work, while men only slightly increased their contribution to domestic and care work. The lack of rebalancing is reflected in women's subjective well-being: they reported more stress and fatigue associated with unpaid work. Instead, most mothers reported a greater sense of purpose (i.e., feeling more useful to others) in relation to childcare.

Abstract *Questo articolo utilizza i dati di un'indagine on-line condotta tra maggio e giugno 2020 per studiare gli effetti delle misure di lockdown sui tempi di vita ed il benessere degli italiani. I dati mostrano che durante il confinamento le ore giornaliere dedicate al lavoro non retribuito sono aumentate significativamente per le donne che vivevano in coppia, soprattutto per le madri, mentre le italiane hanno riportato solo un leggero incremento del tempo dedicato dai loro partner al lavoro domestico e di cura. L'assenza di riequilibrio nella distribuzione del carico di lavoro familiare all'interno delle coppie ha avuto ricadute sul benessere soggettivo delle donne che hanno riportato livelli più elevati di stress e stanchezza in associazione al lavoro familiare; tuttavia, solamente in relazione alla cura dei figli,*

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la maggioranza delle madri intervistate ha sperimentato anche un maggior senso di utilità.

Key words: Covid-19; Lockdown; Time Use; Gender; Couples; Children; Subjective Well-being

1 Introduction

At the end of February 2020, Italy reported the largest COVID-19 outbreak outside of China (Chen et al., 2020). Thus, in March 2020, Italy was the first European country to impose a nationwide lockdown followed, later, by social distancing measures. The lockdown lasted 69 days. Moreover, schools have been closed nationwide for in-person activities until the end of the school year (June), a relatively longer period compared to most OECD countries where schools began to re-open in April and May (OECD, 2020).

The pandemic generated several compounding crises harming the economy and the well-being of people in addition to health. It has soon been evident that the consequences of these crises were not gender-neutral but were disproportionately attributed to women. Women are serving on the frontlines against COVID-19, and the impact of the crisis on women is stark. Women face compounding burdens: they continue to do most of the unpaid care work in households, face higher risks of economic insecurity, and face increased risks of violence, exploitation, abuse, or harassment during times of crises and quarantine compared to men (OECD 2020). Women, in Europe, are also more likely than men to work in occupations – such as health, care, education and hospitality – that are more exposed to the risk of being infected by contagious diseases spread by respiratory or close-contact route (Lewandowsky et al., 2021). Moreover, women continue to bear the burden of family care and to do most of the unpaid family work increased by stay-at-home recommendations, quarantine, lockdown periods and school closures.

Thus, the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown did not represent only a danger in economic terms, but also a threat to the process towards gender equality (Bahn et al., 2020, Kabeer et al., 2021). Under the confinement measures there was an unprecedented increase in the demand for household production and the associated input of unpaid labour, a gendered economic phenomenon. Several phenomena affected the use of time at household level, including: closure of schools, with pupils having to bring forward school programs at home; suspension of non-necessary activities, affecting formal and informal sectors; introduction of remote work where it was possible; introduction of various limitations to people mobility. In this context, the unavailability of paid services (such as laundries, restaurants, baby-sitters, care givers, etc.) as well as the impossibility to benefit from informal care (e.g., by grandparents) contributed to the creation of additional unpaid work within households. This “extra” work fell disproportionately onto women, exacerbating the already existing inequalities in the

Unpaid family work and the subjective well-being of Italian women during the lockdown gender division of unpaid work (Raile et al., 2020). In particular, the shift to remote-work and the unavailability of formal and informal care disproportionately affected women's paid and unpaid work (Craig and Churchill, 2021).

Andrew et al. (2020) show, by using survey data collected in the UK, that during the pandemic women bore the brunt of the increased time needed for household chores and childcare. Findings from the study highlight that mothers who stopped working in the labour market did far more domestic work than fathers in the equivalent situation. These results seem to suggest that asymmetries in the gender allocation of the extra-amount of domestic work created by the pandemic cannot be explained as a sole effect of gender differences in employment and earnings, but mostly depend on social norms regulating gender roles as well as expectations on motherhood. Similar pandemic time-use surveys provide supporting results (see for example Farre, et.al. 2020 for Spain; Ilkkaracan and Memiş 2021 for Turkey).

Regarding Italy, Del Boca and colleagues (2020) used survey data collected in April 2020 on women living in dual-earner heterosexual couples to show that most of the additional housework and childcare associated with COVID-19 fell on women, while childcare activities were more equally shared within the couple than housework activities. Mangiavacchi et al. (2021) confirm that Italian households experienced a greater involvement of fathers in childcare during the lockdown. Their study also highlighted that men whose partners continued to work at their usual workplace spent more time on housework than before. Additionally, analysis of satisfaction with work-life balance shows that working women with children aged 0–5 years are those who found balancing work and family more difficult during COVID-19. The work-life balance was especially difficult to achieve for those with partners who continued to work outside the home during the emergency. From the perspective of paid work, using data from the Italian Labour Force Survey for the years 2019 and 2020, Brini and colleagues (2021) found no evidence of retraditionalization of gender roles in paid work among couples in Italy with dependent children. On the contrary, the authors found that the pandemic reduced time spent in paid work (and earnings) more for fathers than for mothers.

Other international studies, reviewed by Seedat and Rondon (2021), have documented a greater rise in psychological distress in women than in men during the lockdown. The higher risk of depressive and anxiety symptoms among women may be partially explained by the disproportionate burden of work that fell onto them.

Based on this background, this paper explores how the lockdown measures adopted in contrast to the diffusion of COVID-19 affected Italian women's use of time for unpaid family work. The assessment is based on real-time survey that collected more than 1,000 observations of persons aged 18 years or older living in Italy. The questionnaire was administered on-line to the respondents immediately after the confinement period and, in addition to information about the use of time for paid and unpaid work, it included a set of well-being questions. This paper aims at describing changes in the couple's division of unpaid care and domestic work as well as in the levels of stress and fatigue experienced by women in association with these activities during the lockdown. In particular, the paper concentrates on the weight of increased care burdens due to lockdown measures and highlights the

different impact that such measures had on women that lived with children below 18 years old compared to other women.

2 Survey

To create the survey, we used the instrument developed by Donehower (2020) as a base. We translated the original survey from English into Italian, and we adapted it to the purposes of our study adjusting some of the queries and adding new questions. The final survey -structured in multiple choice questions- consisted of nine sections: household composition, health status, paid work (own and partner's), unpaid care work (active and passive), unpaid domestic work, informal help to/from other households, division of unpaid care work and unpaid domestic work within the household, feelings, socio-demographic information. Questions were asked to the respondent in relation to three different moments: before the pandemic, during the first lockdown and in the moment when they responded to the survey (that is immediately after the end of the lockdown). Responses were collected from May 22 and June 12, 2020. The lockdown in Italy ended on May 19th, 2020 and was followed by a so called 'phase two', which still implied several restrictions, including school closures.

The online questionnaire was open to anyone who was at least 18 years old while completing the survey and resided in Italy. The survey collected 1,008 observations (reduced to 979 when the dataset was cleaned from missing and invalid responses). In our analysis, we focus on women representing the great majority of the respondents (81%). Data collection was conducted anonymously and participation in the survey was voluntary. The survey was promoted through the institutional website of Sapienza and the main social networks, as well as through the mailing lists of scientific associations and professional contacts. The dataset is mainly composed by women with a high level of education (three fourth of them have a level of education higher than college). This is mirrored by a high reported employment rate among them. Therefore, data were post-stratified to ensure consistency with the main socio-demographic characteristics of the Italian population (i.e., age, education, geographical area of residence).

3 Results

The survey gathered detailed information about the time devoted by each respondent to unpaid work in the household. In this context, it becomes relevant to observe the differences between women that live with a minor children and other women. In fact, the answers that we collected highlight that, during the lockdown, but also after it, women faced an increase in the amount of time that they devoted to unpaid domestic work. The magnitude of this increase was higher for mothers of

Unpaid family work and the subjective well-being of Italian women during the lockdown minor children aged less than 18 years compared to women with no children or with adult children (Figure 1). According to our data, time for domestic chores increased from 2.4 hours per day to almost 3.7 hours per day for women with no dependent children, while it increased from 3.1 hours per day to almost 5 hours for women with minor children. For what concerns time devoted to childcare, Figure 2 shows that for women with small children (under 5 years old) during the lockdown childcare time became similar to a full-time job, more than 7 hours per day. Women with older children devoted to childcare less time than women with smaller children -around 6 hours per day with children between 6 and 10 years old and around 4 hours per day with children between 11 and 17 years old. It is relevant to notice that after the end of the lockdown the time devoted to childcare decreased only slightly and this was caused by the fact that all schools in Italy remained closed until September.

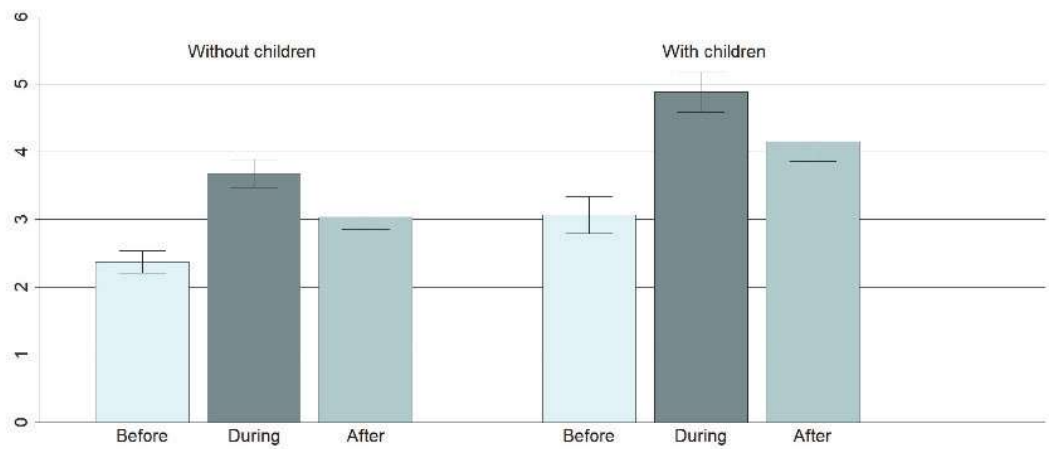


Figure 1: Women's average daily hours of unpaid domestic work.

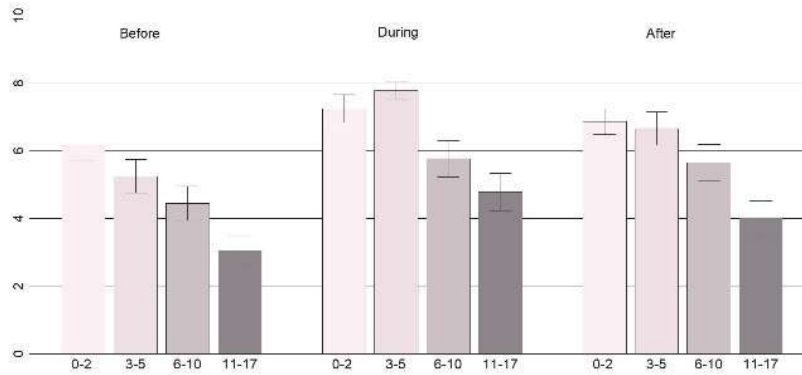


Figure 2: Mothers' average daily hours of childcare according to the age of the youngest child.

The survey asked each respondent to report the approximate share of the total household's unpaid care and domestic work performed by the partner if present. The results revealed that, before the pandemic, the male partner's share of unpaid care and domestic work was around 26% for men with no dependent children and 28% for fathers (see Figure 3). During the lockdown this share increased to almost 28% for men without young children, and 31% for men with children under 18 years old. However, soon after the end of the lockdown the male partner's share of unpaid care and domestic work lowered compared to its pre-pandemic level (25 and 26, respectively).

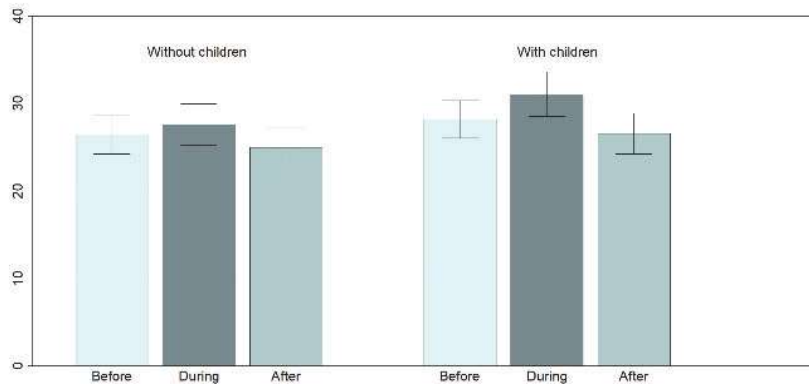


Figure 3: Partner's average share of unpaid care and domestic work.

Around 41% of women reported to feel more tired about domestic work during the lockdown, while 35.5% reported more stress.; the corresponding percentages increases to 50.4% and 39.3% among mothers of minor children. A closer look on mothers in Figure 4 reveals that about 46% of women with young children reported to be more tired and stressed doing childcare; however, about 59% reported more sense of purpose (i.e., feeling more useful to others) associated to childcare giving, 44.4% reported to feel more contented and

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 40.9% felt happier. Among women who reported more stress associated to childcare, responses were concentrated on the response modality indicating more intense changes (“much more”), while the opposite is true for positive feelings (meaningfulness and happiness) for which women reported to have experiences more moderate changes. The results of the changes towards more positive feelings associated with childcare seem to suggest that, despite the fatigue and stress due to the additional unpaid work, in the first phase of the health emergency most mothers positively valued the increased time available to spend with their children. The situation may have changed in the later stages of the health emergency due to the prolonged closure of schools.

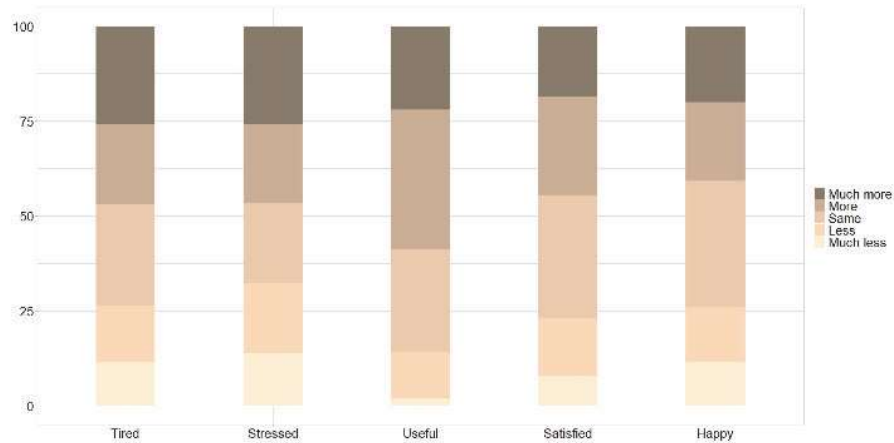


Figure 4: Did you feel more or less ... than usual while spending time on childcare during the lockdown?

4 Concluding remarks

Our data show that in Italy women became time poorer during the first phase of the pandemic: women were required to provide more unpaid care and domestic work (in particular, those with young children). Women reported that their partners only slightly increased their share of unpaid care and domestic work during the lockdown and that they returned to their pre-lockdown share soon after. This change in the use of time during the pandemic does not seem to suggest that a real and stable change in the division of unpaid work has been triggered, so to achieve a rebalancing of roles, parental and non-parental. The lack of rebalancing shows its effects, in our investigation, also on the subjective well-being experienced during phase 1 of the emergency. Women, especially those with minor children, reported to feel more stress and tiredness in association to paid and unpaid work activities while, only in relation to childcare, most women highlighted to have experienced a greater sense of purpose. To conclude, our results suggest that lockdown and social distancing measures introduced to contrast the pandemic have exacerbated the pre-existing

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gender inequalities in the quantity and in the nature of unpaid family work (Zannella
and De Rose 2020; 2021).

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