Working Mothers during Covid-19: A peak into the Icelandic reality[1]

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Only a few weeks after the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the beginning of 2020, it became quite clear that lockdowns and other measures to prevent the spread of the virus would have a substantial impact on the lives of parents around the world. In Iceland, the first Covid-19 case was diagnosed at the end of February 2020. Almost a month later, strict measures were enforced, including a ban on gatherings of more than 20 people. Lockdowns were not imposed, but facilities like gyms, pubs and swimming pools[2] were closed. Unlike most other countries, elementary schools and preschools remained open and and have continued to be open, at all costs. Yet, the restrictions that were imposed last spring affected the daily routines of all children and their families in the country. It was common for children to attend school every other day and for school days to be shorter, as no more than 20 children were allowed in each group. Student groups could not interact with other groups within the same school, and individuals were expected to keep two meters apart. Children in the 8th to 10th grades (13 to 16-years-old) stayed home and were taught online, as were upper secondary school students. Parents were, in some cases, encouraged to let their children stay at home if they possibly could, while parents in occupations such as healthcare and policing were

[1] This article is a short summary of a paper published in the journal Gender, Work and Organization in September 2020. The title of the paper is „I have turned into a foreman here at home": Families and work-life balance in times of COVID-19 in a gender equality paradise. The full paper can be accessed here: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12552

[2] There is a geothermal swimming pool in practically every village in Iceland and they are one of the pillars of our local culture.

identified as priority groups. If infections were identified among teachers or students, which occasionally happened, the respective student group had to quarantine at home for two weeks.

All this led to great turbulence for families with children, as their daily routines were turned upside down. Women in Iceland work a lot. In fact, they had the highest labour ratio among the OECD countries in 2018 at 84,5% as compared to nearly 90% among men.[i] Despite this active participation in the labour force, the average birth rate has been rather high up until very recently in comparison with other northern European countries.[ii] That requires access to early childhood care, and in fact nearly all children in Iceland attend preschool for eight hours a day from the time they are about 18 months old. It is customary for elementary school children to participate in several after-school activities, so most of children's activities during the day are done outside of the home. Another thing to note is that home schooling is nearly unknown in Iceland. So when the pandemic hit, all those who could work from home were encouraged to do so. At the same time, they had to attend to their children for a considerable amount of time during working hours.

An important contextual issue to note here is that Iceland is, comparing internationally, doing extremely well on gender equality and has ranked first on the Global Gender Gap Index for several consecutive years.[iii] That has created a reputation that Iceland is the most gender equal country in the world, portraying Iceland as a paradise for women and implying that gender equality has mostly been accomplished.[iv] However, these indicators measure gender equality in the public life and do not capture social norms and values that reach beyond that, such as childcare and domestic work. Further, the labour market and educational choices are still gender divided. Therefore, despite considerable advancements in gender equality in Iceland, there are serious cracks in Iceland's glossy image as the frontrunner of gender equality, not least in terms of stress and burnout within the female professions.[v] That might not come as a surprise, as research has indicated that the lion's share of childcare and domestic work lies on the shoulders of mothers, even though their participation in the labour market is only a little bit less than that of men.[vi] Thus, these tasks are more likely to be woven into the mothers' working hours; they multitask more than men and take on a greater share of household managment and family life. Household managment includes immense mental work, which has been framed as the invisible work of managing, monitoring, scheduling, and organizing family life.[vii]

About the study

Soon after the pandemic hit, we heard media coverage and stories from mothers around us that indicated complications for working mothers. Some even referred to this situation as the 1950s revisiting homelife. Soon, there were indications that working mothers and fathers did not approach this crisis as equals. In terms of childcare and domestic work, it might be having a more serious impact on the lives of working mothers. As researchers, we found it important to capture the realities of parents during the pandemic in our apparently gender equality paradise. We did not have much time on our hands as no one knew when the social distancing restrictions would be lifted. We designed an online real-time diary study that was a combination of time-use estimates and open diary reflections where participants could write freely about their everyday life experiences.[viii] To recruit participants, we advertised the study in large groups on Facebook and asked people to share it within their networks. Facebook is an extremely popular social media platform in Iceland that is used regularly be nearly all Icelanders. By using Facebook, we were able to share the advertisement among large groups of people. The only criteria was that participants had children in preschools and/or elementary schools. In all, 47 parents participated in the study,

seven male and 40 female. They received a daily questionnaire via Microsoft Forms for two weeks (from March 26th to April 14th, with a break during the Easter holiday).

Since the gender ratio was unbalanced, we decided to focus on the data from the mothers in our analysis. Therefore, in an effort to shed light on everyday life of mothers during that first wave of Covid-19, we analysed the open diary entries from female participants in heteronormative relationships, or 37 mothers. The number of children in the homes of these mothers varied from one to six, but majority of them had two children. In most of the cases, both parents primarily or solely worked from home during the time of the study, and most of them were working full-time the whole period. The diary entries provided rich and invaluable insights into the lives of the participants, who shared their daily routines, thoughts, and frustrations with us. As researchers rather new to this particular method and more used to interviews or field-work, we sincerely recommend the use of diary methods to capture lived experiences and perceptions of important life events in a natural and spontaneous way. The analysis of the data generated the following themes.

Strained by stress and guilt

It was apparent from the diary entries that the mothers experienced stressful and complex situations as they juggled their time between work and childcare. The situation was overwhelming to them, as this example from a mother of two illustrates.

> *I experienced a slight panic attack on the way home over juggling all these different duties, and I cried a little. I went to the grocery store to get some time for myself and shopped for my sister who is in quarantine . . . No one has energy to start putting the kids to bed, so they went to sleep too late. . . Jesus, how the parental fuse is short, and I feel guilty about that.*

This example also illustrates how guilt became quite common for working mothers, as previous research has indicated.[ix] Even in these unpreceded times, the mothers in the study felt guilty for not being able to keep everything going as if it were normal. They expressed guilt over not being able to deliver everything they wanted at work and over messy homes and 'neglected' children, even though they were not able to find time for themselves.

Mental work

It was not only that workhours had to be combined with taking care of children; the situation was also likely to create more domestic work. From the diary entries, we learned that if the mothers did not end up doing the lion's share of that work, which was often the case according to them, they were the ones to monitor and make sure that other family members participated in the household chores. That kind of work, which has been termed mental work, was central to their gendered realities during Covid-19. The following quote from a mother of a two-year-old child demonstrates this quite well.

> *I have turned into a foreman here at home. I am trying to get clearer oversight over what has to be done and activate my husband to prevent everything from becoming a mess, and I do not want to take care of it all by myself. So, I had a family meeting and put up a clear division of duties.*

The diaries illustrate a reality in which the women were somewhat surprised over how the situation was because they had expected the division of duties to be more equal in their

homes. But when their daily routines were turned upside down, deeply rooted gender norms became evident. Some have talked about a backlash[x] in terms of childcare and domestic work, but we would like to argue that the situation during the pandemic has revealed carefully hidden structures even in a country that has been touted as a paradise for women. The experiences of the mothers in our study revealed that men and women did not approach the situation as equals and the emotional administration that followed only added to the mothers' tasks.

The default parent

We know from research that women are more likely to be interrupted with household responsibilities and childcare[xi] and that their time is more often fragmented.[xii] [xiii] Mothers seem to more frequently combine their paid work with other activities during the pandemic,[xiv] which might not come as a surprise when we think of time as gendered. Women feel more rushed in their daily lives, are more inclined to multitask, and have more claims aid on their time from family members, while men seem to have more control over the use of their time.[xv] It is interesting to look into time as gendered during Covid-19, when the boundaries between work and home were practically obliterated. One important issue is how being the default parent interacts with gender and uninterrupted time to attend to work related dutites. The default parent is the parent that the children turn to if they need something, and studies show that it is most commonly the mother.[xvi] This situation is reflected in the diaries, as the mothers describe levels of multitasking. As one said, *"now that we are both working from home, it is obvious that he takes his space when he needs to attend to 'his' things, and I run, and I sprint from my work much more than he does."* This same mother, who was a mother of two, realized that the children always asked for her help even though their father was also at home. It can be assumed that the person who has attended more to the children before the crisis became the person to whome the children turned during the pandemic. It is likely that this is a reflection of prioritization of working parents, which is seen in studies[xvii] that showed how fathers had twice as many uninterrupted working hours as mothers during the first wave of the pandemic.

Mothers and emotional labour

Another theme that came out in our study was the emotional labour the women performed. This was seen in descriptions of making an effort to hide stress and anxiety from their children and other family members, keeping the family calm, being well informed about the situation, and checking in on parents and relatives, to name a few examples. Their accounts are in accord with studies and theories of gendered aspects of emotional labour that show that this kind of work is often part of women's routines.[xviii]
The following quote from a mother of two is an example of emotional labour. "*I am pained by this situation, but I try to stay positive, especially with my husband and children. They may not see [my] anxiety because then they become afraid.*" Emotional labour, just like mental load, is an example of invisible work that is generally performed by women, and there are indications that this kind of work has escalated during Covid-19. Just like mental work, emotional labour interfered with their working hours and took energy from them.

Take home messages

When we started this study, we did not expect that this situation would last for such a long time. In Iceland, we almost had a Covid-19 free summer and children started their school year as in normal times. Then, a third wave of Covid-19 hit us hard in October. As of writing this article, we are back to restrictions similar as those during the time of the study. Upper secondary school students are back to online learning, elementary school children have a limited school week (many of them are more or less studying online from home), and those who can are encouraged to work from home to prevent the spread of the virus.
The situation has put immense pressure on children and parents alike. With no end to Covid-19 in sight, this pressure will continue, and no one knows about the long term affects this could have on the physical and mental health of children and their parents. The mothers in our study felt guilty for not being able to live up to the standards they and society had for them. We find it important to seriously address the reasonableness of demands on families during these times, both in terms of workload for school children and in the labour market. People cannot be expected to perform as usual in times of crisis.

Getting to know the realities of mothers during this time, we saw how stressful the situation was for them. Their words reflected a reality in which they shouldered more of the housework and childcare than their partners. Despite advances in gender equality over the last decades, drastic events such a pandemic can elicit situations that we overlook in our heavily routinized lives. Perhaps we simply resist acknowledging them – and perhaps it is shameful to do so in a country that leads in terms of gender equality. Either way, the burden of the unequal division of duties in the home, created by gendered norms and values that expect women to take greater share of both the visible and invisible domestic labour, can have immense impact on the position of women in the labour market. Our findings suggest that there is an uneven division of labor within Icelandic homes as the mothers in the study bore the burden of housework, childcare, emotional labour, and household mental work. These findings are in line with emerging findings from larger studies from different countries.[xix xx xxi] If the aim is to close the gender gap in both the public and the private sphere, a focus on the gendered division of labor within the home is essential.

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