

## The virus changed everything, didn't it? Couples' division of housework and childcare before and during the Corona crisis

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To investigate dynamics in a core aspect of gender (in)equality in intimate relationships – namely couples' division of housework and childcare – during the Corona crisis.

**Background:** The present study responds to public concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic might have triggered a backlash in gender equality.

**Method:** Our descriptive analysis is based on pre-release data from the German Family Panel (*pairfam*; Wave 12) and its supplementary COVID-19 web-survey (n=3,108).

**Results:** We observe no fundamental changes in established *aggregate-level patterns* of couples' division of labor, but some shift towards the extremes ('traditional' and 'role reversal') of the distribution. Regarding *changes within couples*, there is an almost equal split between those in which the female partner's share in housework and childcare increased and those in which it decreased. Particularly in previously more egalitarian arrangements, a substantial proportion of women is now more likely to be primarily responsible for everything. If male partners increased their relative contribution to housework and childcare, they rarely moved beyond the threshold of an equal split. Changes in employment hours were associated with adaptations of men's, but not women's, relative contribution to domestic and family responsibilities.

**Conclusion:** Our findings neither support the notion of a 'patriarchal pandemic', nor do they indicate that the Corona crisis might have fostered macro-level trends of gender convergence. We rather observe heterogeneous responses of couples to the 'Corona shock'.

**Key words:** division of labor; gender; COVID-19; pairfam



## 1. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit families across the world, affecting all family members and almost every aspect of family life. Using data from a supplementary web-survey conducted as part of the German Family Panel (*pairfam*), the present study's focus is on a core aspect of gender (in)equality in intimate relationships, namely couples' division of housework and childcare (for reviews see Drobnič & Ruppanner 2015; Grunow 2019), and whether this has changed during the Corona crisis of 2020 (also see Bujard et al. 2020).

Our descriptive analysis aims to provide an initial assessment of immediate dynamics in partners' division of labor (1) at the aggregate-level and (2) within couples. We thereby contribute to the discussion about the potential impact of COVID-19 on gender (in)equality (e.g., Alon et al. 2020; Kohlrausch & Zucco 2020), responding to concerns that the virological pandemic might have triggered a 'patriarchal pandemic' (Chemaly 2020; also see Allmendinger 2020). This would constitute a backlash in a situation that – according to recent 'pre-crisis' analyses for Germany and other Western societies – has been characterized by a macro-level trend of gender convergence in housework time (e.g., Leopold et al. 2018; Skopek & Leopold 2019; also see Altintas & Sullivan 2016). Cohort profiles showed a substantial reduction in the gender gap resulting from strong declines in women's and moderate increases in men's housework time. Conversely, whereas the time parents' spent on childcare slightly increased in Germany during the early 2000s, the gender gap did not decline (Schulz & Engelhardt 2017; but see Samtleben et al. 2020).

Studies taking a micro-level perspective on couples' division of housework – and its dynamics over the course of relationships – are mainly informed by economic reasoning (focusing on partners' relative resources and time availability) or by gender construction theories (especially the idea of 'doing gender'); see Drobnič & Ruppanner (2015); Röhler et al. (2000). It has been shown that younger couples, for example, often experience shifts towards a more traditional division of labor if they become parents and/or hold traditional gender ideologies (e.g., Grunow et al. 2012; Nitsche & Grunow 2016; 2018). It is beyond the scope of our descriptive analysis to delve into such mechanisms of change. However, when thinking of potential immediate (short-term) dynamics in couples' division of housework and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially two likely pathways – both related to changes in partners' time-availability rather than in gender ideologies – come to mind:

*First*, during the Corona crisis, employment decreased considerably. Even though workers in Germany were overall less affected than those in the United States or the United Kingdom, for example, women everywhere seem more likely than men to have reduced their working hours or to have lost their jobs (e.g., Adams-Prassl et al. 2020; Bünning et al. 2020). Whereas ample evidence indicates an overall increase in housework time following unemployment (e.g., Gough & Killewald 2011; van der Lippe et al. 2018) or a reduction in working hours (e.g., Pailhé et al. 2019; also see Bünning 2020), there are important gender differences in couples' adjustment to reduced or terminated employment: Task specialization by gender becomes more pronounced and the extra domestic work for unemployed women is substantially greater than for unemployed men (see Fauser 2019; Voßemer & Heyne 2019, for recent evidence from Germany). From this perspective, one might expect the labor market impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to be

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paralleled by an increase in women's share of household labor, including childcare. However, for many of those who remained in employment, everyday working conditions changed dramatically, when, for example, long-distance commuting was replaced by homeoffice. Particularly for men, working more from home offers new opportunities to increase one's contribution to managing the household and caring for children (e.g., Bujard et al. 2020; Stenpaß & Kley 2020). The Corona crisis might thus have brought about a decline in the gender gap.

*Second*, recent studies suggest that domestic outsourcing reduces the time spent on housework as well as the gender gap (e.g., Craig et al. 2016; Raz-Yurovich & Marx 2019; also see Hank 1998). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, limited households' opportunities for outsourcing. For example, restaurants closed and household help was not hired anymore for safety or economic reasons. This might have disadvantaged women, particularly highly-skilled ones, who have been shown to be the main beneficiaries of domestic outsourcing. Along similar lines, mothers may also be likely to carry the main burden of new or regained responsibilities resulting from closures of childcare facilities and schools (e.g., Bujard et al. 2020; Kohlrausch & Zucco 2020; also see Schulz & Engelhardt 2017).

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Data and samples

Previous research in Germany aiming to assess the impact of the Corona crisis on gender inequalities in couples almost exclusively relied on non-random samples (for exceptions see Bujard et al. 2020; Möhring et al. 2020; Zinn 2020). Our study uses data from the German Family Panel (*pairfam*; see Huinink et al. 2011), which is based on a nationally representative sample of three birth cohorts (1971-73, 1981-83, and 1991-93). More than 12,000 computer assisted personal interviews were conducted in *pairfam*'s Wave 1 (2008/09), followed by annual re-interviews. In 2018, a new cohort (born 2001-03) and a sample refreshment for the two younger initial cohorts was added, resulting in 9,435 primary respondents in Wave 11.

Due to COVID-19, face-to-face interviews for Wave 12 were terminated in mid-March 2020 (for details see Gummer et al. 2020). By then 6,285 interviews had already been conducted. Our analysis employs a pre-release version of data from these interviews, supplemented by information derived from a short online survey focusing on *pairfam* respondents' situation during the Corona crisis. All primary respondents eligible for an interview in Wave 12 were invited, by mail, to participate in this supplementary COVID-19 web-survey, which was fielded from mid-May through early-July 2020 (that is, right after the peak of the so called 'lockdown'). By the end of the field period, 3,108 questionnaires (which include responses from study participants who were not interviewed before termination of the face-to-face fieldwork in March) were completed. The data will become publicly available through the GESIS Data Archive for the Social Sciences along with the

scientific use files of all other pairfam waves (for the most recent release see Brüderl et al. 2020).

The present study is based on three *analytic samples*. The *first* one consists of participants in pairfam's Wave 12 who were interviewed face-to-face prior to the Corona-related fieldwork interruption in mid-March: 3,107 respondents (57% female, 43% male;  $\bar{X}$  age: 38.0) cohabiting with a partner, including 1,955 parents with at least one cohabiting child. The *second* one comprises participants in pairfam's supplementary COVID-19 web-survey, whose data were collected from mid-May through early-July: 1,545 respondents (60% female, 40% male,  $\bar{X}$  age: 38.3) cohabiting with a partner, including 916 parents with at least one cohabiting child. Based on these two samples, we assess aggregate-level dynamics in couples' division of housework and childcare before and during the Corona crisis (see Table 1). The *third* sample constitutes a balanced panel of participants in both the Wave 12 face-to-face interview and the supplementary web-survey: 1,076 respondents (59% female, 41% male,  $\bar{X}$  age: 39.4) cohabiting with a partner, including 637 parents with at least one cohabiting child. This allows us to assess within-couple dynamics in the division of housework and childcare over time (see Tables 2 & 3).

## 2.2 Measures

We distinguish two items, *housework* (that is, doing the laundry, cooking, and cleaning) and *childcare*, which we analyze separately (e.g., Sullivan 2013). Respondents were asked to which extent they and/or their partner take care of these duties and answers to both were recorded on a 5-point scale: '(almost) completely my partner', 'for the most part my partner', 'split about 50/50', 'for the most part me', and '(almost) completely me'. Respondents reporting that another person was exclusively responsible to perform a duty as well as those for which none of the above was applicable were excluded from the analysis. Based on the gender of the respondent the initial information on both items was recoded such that a value of (1) in the dependent variables indicated that all work is done by the female partner, whereas a value of (5) indicates that the male partner does everything.

From this information we derived a simple indicator of within-couple changes over time that takes (1) negative values, if the female share decreased, (2) a value of zero, if the division of labor remained unchanged, and (3) positive values, if the female share increased (treating housework and childcare as quasi-metric outcomes; see Dechant et al. 2014). Using this variable, we run three bivariate linear regressions of changes in the division of housework and childcare, respectively, on changes in couples' employment arrangements during the Corona crisis (see Table 3). For each regression, we created a set of binary variables indicating a new employment arrangement – partially or fully working from home ('homeoffice'), increase in working hours, and decrease in working hours (including short-time work and layoff) – which may apply to none of the partners (reference category), the male or the female partner only, or to both partners.

### 3. Results

To begin with, *Table 1* provides aggregate-level information on couples' division of housework and childcare before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Housework* being done 'for the most part by the female partner' is the most frequent arrangement – for about two fifths of all couples – at both points in time, but its proportion declined by almost four percentage points during the Corona crisis. Whereas there is no change in the proportion of those sharing the housework equally (about one third of the samples), we observe modest absolute increases in the proportions of couples where housework is '(almost) completely' done by one of the partners only. Although remaining on a very low level in absolute terms, it seems worth noting that the share of male partners doing (almost) all of the housework more than doubled (from .8 to 2.0 percent). With regard to *childcare*, there are, on the one hand, significant declines in the two most common arrangements, that is, in the proportion of couples sharing equally (-5.4 percentage points) and in those where the female partner is responsible for the most part (-4.3 percentage points). On the other hand, we observe a substantial increase in the share of female partners providing (almost) all childcare (from 10.1 to 17.2 percent), paralleled by a near doubling of the proportion of couples in which the male partner is mostly or (almost) completely responsible for childcare (from – in sum – 3.0 to 5.5 percent).

*Table 1:* The division of housework and childcare before (t) and during (t+1) the Corona crisis – proportions and changes at the aggregate-level (in %)

	<i>Housework</i>			<i>Childcare</i>		
	t	t+1	$\Delta$	t	t+1	$\Delta$
(almost) completely by women	19.5	21.6	+2.1*	10.1	17.2	+7.1***
for the most part by women	41.2	37.5	-3.7**	48.8	44.5	-4.3**
split about 50/50	34.0	33.7	0.3	38.1	32.7	-5.4***
for the most part by men	4.5	5.2	+0.7	2.5	4.5	+2.0***
(almost) completely by men	0.8	2.0	+1.2***	0.5	1.0	+0.5*
<i>n</i>	3,107	1,545		1,955	916	

*Note:* Authors' calculations based on pairfam (pre-release of Wave 12 and supplementary COVID-19 web-survey). Significance (t-test for equality of means): \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.10.

Turning from changes at the aggregate-level to changes within couples, *Table 2* shows almost identical patterns for housework and childcare. The division of labor remained stable in almost 60 percent of the couples in our longitudinal sample and there was a nearly equal split between those in which the female partner's share increased or decreased, respectively (about 20 percent each). Compared to other couples, those who shared these tasks equally before the COVID-19 pandemic were least likely to experience any changes in their division of labor; but if there was change, it was primarily to the female partner's disadvantage: 25-30 percent of those women who used to share housework or childcare obligations equally with their partner now bear the primary responsibility for it. We also observe a large proportion of women doing an even greater share of housework and childcare during the Corona crisis in those couples, where the female partner was already responsible for the most part of it before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the resulting increase in the proportion of female partners doing (almost) all the work is paralleled by a substantial increase in the proportion of male partners doing a larger share (resulting in a more equal – that is, '50/50' – division of labor).

Finally, we turn to within-couple dynamics in the division of housework and childcare by changes in couples' employment arrangements (see *Table 3*). If only the female partner switched to homeoffice, her share in doing the housework increased, whereas the woman's share in the provision of childcare decreased, if the male partner started to work from home during the Corona crisis. Changes in women's time spent on the labor market were not associated with the female partners' relative contributions to housework or childcare tasks. However, an increase in the male partner's working hours was paralleled by an increase in the woman's share in housework (but not in childcare), whereas a decrease in his working hours was correlated with a decrease in the female partner's relative contribution to housework and childcare.

Table 2: Couples' division of housework and childcare during the Corona crisis (t+1), by 'pre-crisis' arrangement (t)

<i>Housework</i>			<i>Childcare</i>		
t	t+1	%	t	t+1	%
all 'pre-crisis' arrangements (n= 1,076)	women share increased	20.3	all 'pre-crisis' arrangements (n= 637)	women share increased	20.1
	no change	59.8		no change	56.2
	women share decreased	19.9		women share decreased	23.7
(almost) completely by women (n= 208)	(almost) completely by women	56.3	(almost) completely by women (n=61)	(almost) completely by women	37.7
	for the most part by women	36.0		for the most part by women	45.9
	split about 50/50	4.8		split about 50/50	11.5
	mostly or (almost) completely by men	2.9		mostly or (almost) completely by men	4.9
for the most part by women (n= 446)	(almost) completely by women	22.9	for the most part by women (n= 328)	(almost) completely by women	21.3
	for the most part by women	56.7		for the most part by women	56.7
	split about 50/50	18.6		split about 50/50	19.5
	mostly or (almost) completely by men	1.8		mostly or (almost) completely by men	2.4
split about 50/50 (n= 366)	(almost) completely by women	1.9	split about 50/50 (n= 232)	(almost) completely by women	6.0
	for the most part by women	21.8		for the most part by women	25.0
	split about 50/50	68.8		split about 50/50	61.2
mostly or (almost) completely by men (n= 56) <sup>a</sup>	mostly or (almost) completely by men	7.4	mostly or (almost) completely by men (n= 16) <sup>a</sup>	mostly or (almost) completely by men	7.8
	(almost) completely by women	1.8		(almost) completely by women	6.2
	for the most part by women	7.1		for the most part by women	12.5
	split about 50/50	30.4		split about 50/50	31.3
	mostly or (almost) completely by men	60.7		mostly or (almost) completely by men	50.0

Note: Authors' calculations based on pairfam (pre-release of Wave 12 and supplementary COVID-19 web-survey).

<sup>a</sup> Category comprises 'for the most part by men' and '(almost) completely by women'.

*Table 3: Within-couple dynamics in the division of housework and childcare during the Corona crisis, by changes in couples' employment arrangements (bivariate linear regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses)*

	<i>Housework</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>Childcare</i> <sup>a</sup>
<i>(1) Homeoffice for ...</i> <sup>b</sup>		
... female partner only	.19 (.07)***	.09 (.10)
... male partner only	-.09 (.06)	-.23 (.08)***
... both partners	.04 (.06)	-.09 (.08)
<i>(2) Increase in working hours for ...</i> <sup>b</sup>		
... female partner only	-.15 (.11)	-.01 (.15)
... male partner only	.22 (.11)**	.10 (.14)
... both partners	.03 (.18)	.26 (.25)
<i>(3) Decrease in working hours for ...</i> <sup>b</sup>		
... female partner only	.02 (.07)	-.00 (.10)
... male partner only	-.14 (.06)**	-.22 (.09)**
... both partners	-.02 (.08)	-.04 (.11)
<i>n</i>	1,076	637

*Note:* Authors' calculations based on pairfam (pre-release of Wave 12 and supplementary COVID-19 web-survey).  
<sup>a</sup> Negative values in the dependent variables indicate that the female share decreased, whereas positive values indicate an increase in the female partner's share. <sup>b</sup> Reference category: no change for either partner.  
 Significance: \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.10.



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## 4. Conclusions

Against the background of concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic might have triggered a ‘patriarchal pandemic’ (Chemaly 2020), the present study used pre-release data from the German Family Panel (*pairfam*; Wave 12) and its supplementary COVID-19 web-survey to provide an initial assessment of crisis-related dynamics in couples’ division of housework and childcare. Three main sets of findings result from our descriptive analysis:

*First*, there are no fundamental changes in established *aggregate-level* patterns of couples’ division of labor, but some shift towards the extremes of the distribution, that is: During the Corona crisis, we observed more couples than before exhibiting a ‘(strongly) traditional’ arrangement *and* somewhat more couples whose division of housework and childcare indicates ‘role reversal’.

*Second*, looking at changes *within couples*, there is an almost equal split between those in which the female partner’s share in domestic and family duties increased and those in which it decreased, respectively. Particularly in previously more egalitarian arrangements, a substantial proportion of women is now more likely to be mostly or (almost) completely responsible for everything. If male partners increased their relative contribution to housework and childcare tasks, they rarely moved beyond the threshold of an equal split of ‘50/50’.

*Third*, working from home (‘homeoffice’) seems to provide greater opportunities and/or obligations to increase one’s relative contribution to housework (for female partners) and childcare (for male partners); see Stenpaß & Kley (2020) for a related discussion. Moreover, whereas changes in women’s time availability (resulting from changes in their working hours on the labor market) appear to be fairly unrelated to their share in housework and childcare tasks, our findings suggest that men exhibit an immediate reaction to changes in working hours during the Corona crisis, resulting in – positive or negative – adaptations of their relative contribution to domestic and family responsibilities.

Starting out from a pre-Corona situation in which about 60 percent of the couples in our sample ‘shared’ housework and childcare in a way that the female partner was mostly or almost completely responsible for it, the results of our study thus neither support the notion of a new ‘patriarchal pandemic’ induced by the COVID-19 pandemic (also see Bujard et al. 2020), nor do they indicate that the crisis might have fostered macro-level trends of gender convergence. The dynamics we observe in a situation characterized by a large extent of stability rather than by fundamental disruptions in established patterns of couples’ division of labor rather suggest heterogeneous responses to the ‘Corona shock’: More women have taken on the primary or almost exclusive responsibility for housework and childcare, but – at the same time – more men are now contributing at least equally to these tasks. Whose relative contribution has changed in the course of the pandemic appears to be driven by changes in the male rather than the female partner’s time availability, which is consistent with gender differences in couples’ adjustment to reduced or terminated employment previously reported in the literature.

Obviously, our study is not without *limitations*: To begin with, it was beyond the scope of our descriptive analysis to delve more deeply into possible pathways and mechanisms of change. Moreover, weights were not yet available for our analysis and the comparability

of our measurements of couples' division of housework and childcare over time might be compromised due to the different survey modes employed in pairfam's 'regular' Wave 12 (CAPI) and the supplementary Corona survey (CAWI); see, for example, Jäckle et al. (2015). However, we do not have any plausible hypotheses, how a possible mode effect should have systematically biased our results or the conclusions we derived from them (but see Schröder & Schmiedeberg (2020) for an analysis of effects of partner presence during pairfam's face-to-face interviews on respondents' response to questions concerning the division of household labor).

Most importantly, we were only able to assess immediate short-term responses of couples to the arguably unique crisis situation during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. It remains an open empirical question, whether or how couples' division of housework and childcare, as well as gender inequalities more generally (Alon et al. 2020), will be more fundamentally reshaped by the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas it is vital to further monitor this issue closely, more caution in current public debates (e.g., Allmendinger 2020) seems appropriate: Only future observations of the pairfam sample – from the survey's Wave 13 onwards – will allow us to investigate possible longer-term effects on gender relations in intimate relationships and, consequently, society as a whole. Moreover, it will be important to relate findings from Germany to such from other countries, like Italy or Spain (e.g., Del Boca et al. 2020; Farré et al. 2020), which were hit even more severely by the Corona crisis and might thus also experience more severe consequences.

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Das Virus hat alles verändert, oder? Die Aufteilung von Hausarbeit und Kinderbetreuung in Paarbeziehungen vor und während der Corona-Krise

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Wir untersuchen Veränderungen der Aufteilung von Hausarbeit und Kinderbetreuung in Paarbeziehungen vor und während der Corona-Krise.

**Hintergrund:** Der vorliegende Beitrag trägt damit zur Diskussion über mögliche Auswirkungen der COVID-19 Pandemie auf Ungleichheiten zwischen den Geschlechtern bei.

**Methode:** Die deskriptive Analyse basiert auf Vorabdaten des Beziehungs- und Familienpanels (*pairfam*; Welle 12) und dessen internetbasierter COVID-19 Zusatzstudie ( $n=3.108$ ), die eine erste Betrachtung unmittelbarer Dynamiken der häuslichen und familiären Arbeitsteilung im Verlauf der Pandemie ermöglichen.

**Ergebnisse:** Obwohl sich im Aggregat keine grundlegenden Veränderungen etablierter Muster geschlechtsspezifischer Arbeitsteilung zeigen, gibt es dennoch Hinweise auf gewisse Verschiebungen hin zu den Extremen („traditionell“ und „Rollentausch“) der Verteilung. Betrachtet man Veränderungen innerhalb von Paarbeziehungen, finden sich etwa gleich große Anteile an Paaren, in denen der relative Beitrag der Partnerin gestiegen bzw. gesunken ist. Insbesondere in zuvor eher egalitären Beziehungen haben Frauen stärker die überwiegende oder gesamte Verantwortung für die Hausarbeit und Kinderbetreuung übernommen. Wenn männliche Partner ihren Anteil gesteigert haben, geschah dies meist nur bis zum Schwellenwert einer gleichgewichtigen Arbeitsteilung (50/50). Veränderungen im zeitlichen Umfang der Erwerbstätigkeit führten zwar beim Mann zu Anpassungen seines relativen Beitrags zu Hausarbeit und Kinderbetreuung, aber nicht bei der Frau.

**Diskussion:** Insgesamt weisen unsere Befunde eher auf heterogene Anpassungsprozesse in Partnerschaften als auf eine generelle Re-Traditionalisierung der Geschlechterbeziehungen während der Corona-Krise hin.

**Schlagwörter:** Geschlechtsspezifische Arbeitsteilung; COVID-19; *pairfam*

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