The Division of Domestic Labour Before & During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada*

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Research Issues

Several scholars and commentators have argued that the COVID-19 global pandemic may prompt a return to traditional gender roles for heterosexual couples that place responsibilities for housework and childcare squarely on the shoulders of women and mothers. Indeed, a headline in *The Atlantic* argued that “the coronavirus is a disaster for feminism” (Lewis 2020). Similar articles and headlines have been included in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Globe & Mail* over the last two months, as well. At the same time, many men are spending substantially more time at home during the pandemic than before. As a result, they may be more directly exposed and encouraged to increase their domestic labour now than in the past—potentially narrowing the gender gap. Of course, whether the current pandemic will magnify gender inequalities at home is an empirical question. Has the transition to at-home schooling, at-home work, and self-isolation hurt mothers more than fathers?

There are good reasons to suspect the answer is yes. Traditional norms for managing work and family tend to place men’s careers ahead of women’s—especially if they have children. These persistent expectations often lead mothers to take on the primary parental role, while fathers are assigned the role of secondary parents or even “helpers.” Many social institutions, including schools and the workplace, often reify these norms; making them appear as necessary or inevitable. Research from the United States has indicated substantial gender inequalities in housework during “normal” times. In 2015, American fathers spent slightly more than half the time on housework and childcare that American mothers did. Meanwhile, mothers spent less than 60% of the hours fathers did on paid work (Pew Research 2017). Yet, gender inequities in domestic labour and paid work tend to be more pronounced in the US than in many other high-income countries—including Canada. For example, Canadian fathers do more domestic labour than their American counterparts. Fathers in Canada spend almost 70% of the hours mothers do on housework and 60% of the hours on childcare. Meanwhile, maternal working hours in Canada are three-quarters that of fathers’ average hours in paid labour (Statistics Canada 2016). Canada also scores better than the United States on many measures of gender egalitarianism and provides paid family leave for both mothers and fathers (Abraham and Tastsoglou 2016; Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development 2017). Thus, understanding gendered patterns of domestic labour during the COVID-19 global pandemic in the Canadian context is valuable for understanding the gendered division of household labour.

Data

Our data was collected using a Qualtrics online panel approximately a month and a half after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID-19 was a global pandemic. We surveyed 1,249 Canadian parents with a residential partner of the opposite sex and at least one residential child under age 18 during early May 2020. To be eligible for the survey, respondents had to be: (1) in a residential opposite-gender relationship; (2) 18 or over; (3) have at least one residential child under the age of 18; (4) have English or French language proficiency; and (5) have the ability to access an online survey.

The data is a quota sample drawn from approximately 1.5 million panelists who are randomly selected and proportioned for surveys according to the demographics of the general Canadian population. Panelists are recruited through both online and offline advertising, complete a registration form that must be regularly updated, are restricted in the how many surveys they may complete in a given year, and have their answers monitored for consistency across surveys.

Prior work has found that quota samples often produce results that are substantively similar to those obtained via random samples (Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014). However, the representativeness of such data is limited to the population with regular Internet access via computer, tablet, or smartphone (Tourangeau, Conrad, and Couper 2013). Thus, marginalized populations may be underrepresented in this

sample. The Canadian Internet Registration Authority estimates that slightly more than 90 percent of Canadians have regular access to the Internet, but there are important gaps across income, education, race/ethnicity, and rural/urban residence (Canadian Internet Registration Authority 2019). As a result, we caution that our results may not be representative of the Canadian population at-large.

We focused on how the division of household labour and childcare may have changed since the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March 2020. We analyzed subjective reports about changes in routine housework, childcare with children less than six years of age, and childcare with children aged 6 to 17. Table 1 provides a list of measures included in the data set. Panelists were asked to assess the division of household labour before the global pandemic (March 11th was the date the WHO it was declared a pandemic) and at the time of the survey. They were also asked to assess the level of change (more, equal, or less) in their participation and their partner's participation in a given task between those two time periods.

Table 1. Housework and Childcare Tasks Assessed

Housework	Childcare
Preparing and cooking meals	Bathing, feeding, dressing, toileting child (physical care)*
Washing, folding, and ironing clothes	Talking to/listening to children
Shopping for groceries and household essentials	Looking after/monitoring children
Cleaning up after meals and washing dishes	Putting child to bed*
Housecleaning	Reading to child
Driving and transportation	Playing with child
	Scheduling appointments, activities, etc. for child
	Enforcing rules/punishment
*Only assessed in children under six	

Results

Housework has become slightly more equal

Figure 1 indicates that the percentage of respondents agreeing that various household tasks have become more equally divided between partners has increased slightly for most tasks. These increases, however, are modest—suggesting that domestic routines stayed fairly similar during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the percentage of Canadians agreeing that housework is divided equally increased between two and four percentage points for most tasks. Notably, shopping and driving/transportation have declined slightly, which is potentially more indicative of self-isolation than changing patterns among partners.

Figure 1. Percent of Canadians Agreeing Housework Task is Divided Equally Between Partners, Before & During Covid-19 Pandemic (n= 1,249)

Canadian mothers and fathers have different perceptions of equality

Figure 2 reports perceptions of equal household labour before and during the pandemic, by gender. There are sizeable gaps between the reports of women and men. For all tasks but driving, fathers were more likely to report that household tasks were divided equally than mothers. In many cases, the figures are about double those of maternal reports. Despite these gaps, there is some agreement that the division of household labour has become slightly more equal during the pandemic than before it. In some cases, the percentage increase from before to during was larger for mothers than fathers. This was particularly notable for cooking, cleaning up after meals, and cleaning.

Parenting During a Pandemic

Figure 3 is similar to Figure 1, but for parenting tasks. Here, the increases in the percentage of Canadian parents agreeing that tasks were divided equally before and during the pandemic are slightly larger than for household tasks. The increases are particularly notable for bedtime routines, physical care, and organization.

Figure 2. Percent of Canadians Agreeing Housework Task is Divided Equally Between Partners, Before & During Covid-19 Pandemic, by Gender (n= 1,249)

Figure 3. Percent of Canadians Agreeing Parenting Task is Divided Equally Between Partners, Before & During Covid-19 Pandemic (n= 1,249)

* Question asked only for parents with children 6 and younger

Figure 4 indicates that the gender gaps in parenting equality are smaller than the gender gaps in housework. Nevertheless, fathers tend to indicate more equality in tasks than mothers do. For example, the increase in the percentage of mothers indicating that physical care has become more equal during the pandemic is larger than the same jump among fathers. Generally speaking, both mothers' and fathers' reports indicate that parenting has gotten slightly more equal during the pandemic than before it.

Figure 4. Percent of Canadians Agreeing Parenting Task is Divided Equally Between Partners, Before & During Covid-19 Pandemic, by Gender (n= 1,249)

The best way to assess whether domestic labour has become more equal during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, is in assessments of whether fathers are doing more work now than before quarantines, remote schooling, and doing paid work from home became the norm for many parents. Figure 5 looks at paternal assessments of self and maternal assessments of partners. In other words, the percentage of fathers saying they are doing more housework since the pandemic started and the percentage of mothers saying fathers are doing more. Generally speaking, there is some disagreement on whether fathers are doing more. Nevertheless, many mothers and fathers believe dads are more invested in household tasks since the pandemic began.

Another question to consider is: how many fathers are doing less? In results not shown here, the percentage of mothers and fathers saying dads are doing less is nearly identical and ranges between 9 and 13 percent depending on task. Only driving/transportation declined more (28% of fathers and 29% of mothers indicated fathers were driving less now than before the pandemic), indicating changes in routines and schedules more than anything else.

Figure 5. Percent Indicating Fathers are Doing More Housework During Pandemic than Recent Past (n= 1,249)

Figure 6 presents a similar analysis for parenting tasks. Again, the level of agreement between fathers and mothers is higher for parenting than for housework. Also, a substantial number of fathers and mothers believe that dads are more invested in parenting now than before the pandemic. In supplementary analyses, our results show substantial agreement on whether fathers are doing less parenting since the pandemic. Depending on task, it appears that 5 to 9 percent of fathers are doing less now than before the beginning of pandemic in March.

Overall Assessment

Overall, it appears that Canadians are doing more domestic labour than before. This is perhaps not surprising, given that life has become more home-centred in the past few months than at any time in the past several generations. In general, the household division of labour appears to have remained static or become slightly more equal during a period of quarantine, remote work, remote schooling, and social distancing. Questions remain about the persistence of these trends and whether the current public health crisis will accelerate greater gender equality at home, have no effect, or lead to a regression of paternal investments at home. However, our analyses suggest that a regression toward traditionally gendered domestic and childcare roles is not currently the case in Canada. The initial evidence suggests that the size and scope of increased gender inequality because of the pandemic forecasted by many commentators may not come to pass. Indeed, some have argued that the pandemic would set advances in housework and childcare equity back decades (Blatchford 2020; Lewis 2020). Yet, it appears that Canadian fathers are increasing their involvement in domestic labour and comparatively few are doing less. Future work, both in the short- and long-term, will be needed to understand the many changes to home life caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic, similarities and differences across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and other characteristics, and many other dimensions of family life.

Figure 6. Percent Indicating Fathers are Doing More Childcare During Pandemic than Recent Past (n= 1,249)

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