




“You’re a teacher you’re a mother, you’re a worker”: Gender inequality during COVID-19 in Ireland

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared a global pandemic in March 2020. Unlike previous highly contagious diseases that brought the threat of global instability this century such as SARS-CoV, Zika virus (ZIKV), Swine flu (H1N1), and the Avian flu (H5N1), COVID-19 was unable to be contained. Global restrictions were implemented to curb the spread of the virus, which included but were not limited to the closure of all educational institutions and the advice to engage in remote working. This study aims to understand the experience of working mothers who managed work and home duties during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. Thirty working mothers were interviewed in this study, and qualitative analyses were conducted to gain insight into their work and family life during the restrictions. The findings of the analysis indicate that working mothers have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 in relation to their psychological well-being, experiences of negative emotions, and the redefinition of family dynamics, in which working mothers have adopted additional and disproportionate care burden. These findings are consistent with the current research arguing that COVID-19 has highlighted an increase in the gender gap

in domestic labor as well as the undermining of career advancement for working mothers.

KEYWORDS

gender inequality, gender gap, working mothers, COVID- 19, coronavirus

1 | INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (SARS- CoV-2; COVID-19) a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Unlike preceding highly contagious diseases that brought the threat of global instability, this century such as SARS-CoV, Zika virus (ZIKV), Swine flu (H1N1), and the Avian flu (H5N1), COVID-19 was unable to be contained. The intensive lockdown measures taken by governments across the world introduced strict measures and interruptions to daily life incomparable in living memory.

Overnight, countries closed schools, higher education institutions, workplaces, and shut down borders. This left people scrambling to adapt, and remote work and distance learning became the new norm (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2020). This unique dynamic had a considerable impact on families, who now lived, worked, and educated in the same living space. Education was confined to the home; parents and caregivers now took up the burden of both educating children and the extensive changes necessitated by lockdown measures. For many, these changes caused financial stressors, inadequate space for work and study, higher childcare demands, and work–family conflict. Women were significantly affected by these arrangements (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; Biroli et al., 2020; Carlson, Petts, & Pepin, 2020; Costoya, Echeverria, Edo, Rocha, & Thailinger, 2020; Power, 2020), especially working mothers whose participation in the paid economy decreased while unpaid childcare increased during this time. The direct impact of these implications on working mothers is proving substantial and potentially in the medium to long term, making this study relevant and essential. To examine this topic, this article explores the experiences of working mothers in Ireland between 12 March and October 2020.

2 | GENDER DISPARITIES DURING COVID-19

In comparison to preceding epidemics or pandemics, the public health measures implemented by most governments to reduce transmission of COVID-19 have had inadvertent and disparate consequences on women. Shelter-in-place or stay-at-home orders were introduced on an international scale. These orders saw nonessential businesses shut, restricted movements, and limits on social interactions. The industries most impacted by these measures were those with high proportions of the female labor force (Moore, Beebe, & Bakhiet, 2020).

Furthermore, the closures of schools and childcare services increased caregiving obligations, with women assuming more of the care responsibilities than men (Darmody, Smyth, & Russell, 2020; Moore et al., 2020; Reichelt, Makovi, & Sargsyan, 2020). In the United States, studies show that during the pandemic, fathers were less likely to reduce work hours than mothers, reinforcing the distribution of childcare responsibilities already existing in most families (Reichelt et al., 2020). The United Nation (UN) confirms that the inability of families to access institutional and community childcare provisions during the lockdown has put a heavier burden on women, restricting their capacity to work (Power, 2020).

The types of domestic tasks engaged in by mother and father also show an unequal distribution of labor. Evidence suggests that fathers are more likely to engage in domestic duties that offer a higher reward, such as child supervision and recreational activities. Mothers, on the other hand, are often involved in tasks that significantly

increase their workload and create additional stressors. However, it is acknowledged that this effect is mediated by parental financial status and time availability (Carlson et al., 2020). Del Boca, Oggero, Profeta, and Rossi (2020) found that working mothers of children between the ages 0 and 5 suffered the highest increase in workload regardless of whether they or their partner worked remotely or were required to travel to work.

The burden placed on working mothers is causing adverse psychological outcomes and higher rates of severe psychological distress caused by the pandemic compared to fathers (Hamel & Salganicoff, 2020), with mothers displaying higher stress levels than women without children (Zamarro Perez-Arce & Prados, 2020). According to a study done across the United Kingdom looking at chronic stress levels, working women with two children, pre-pandemic, had stress levels 40% higher than the average person (Power, 2020). Other research in the United States found that parents with under-18s are experiencing increased stress due to the pandemic. Thirty-two percent of fathers and 57% of mothers reported a deterioration in mental health, suggesting mothers may be taking on a significant proportion of the burden (Power, 2020).

3 | THE “MOTHERHOOD GAP”

Women in the workforce who are mothers experience additional disadvantages compared to male counterparts and women with no children. The “motherhood gap” may account for inequalities in pay and promotion opportunities (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Research shows a correlation between the number of children a woman has and the significance of the gap. In European countries, having one child has only a slight impact, but having two and, particularly, three children cause substantial wage penalties. This phenomenon is occurring more frequently in developing countries (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015). Though there are supports for working mothers to help with work–life balance, including flexible hours and remote working opportunities, there may be unintended consequences (Galea, Houkes, & De Rijk, 2014). Some of these include a lack of presence in the workplace, leading to disrupted social capital development and the perception of being less committed than their colleagues. As a result, there is an expectation for contemporary women to strive for personal, career, and family success, often without the adequate tools and supports to do so (Coogan & Chen, 2007; Correll et al., 2007; Guendouzi, 2006; Hays, 1996).

4 | METHODS

A qualitative approach and interpretative phenomenological method of analysis (IPA) was employed. Researchers used open-ended interviews to explore mothers' experience of COVID-19 and home-schooling. This approach allowed for the generation of rich information about the experiences of interest. The study will be conducted and reported in line with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ). The authors developed a set of questions based on their academic expertise and methodological literature on the development of IPA interview schedules. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed for the purpose of this study. A “funneling technique” guided the development of an interview schedule. This method moves from general topics to more specific themes. This type of schedule provides structure but also allows for the emergence of rich data; it also maintains consistency across participants.

Working mothers were recruited to participate with their children. Recruitment was a convenience sampling procedure, and the snowballing technique was used. Recruitment was done through social media and through the research team networks. For this study, volunteers were telephoned or emailed to schedule an information conversation. One semi-structured recorded video interview was conducted with each families. This method was selected to avoid person-to-person contact that may increase the likelihood of transmission of COVID-19. This pandemic has created a challenging environment in which to conduct qualitative research. The use of video and telephone is not new; however, it comes with its drawbacks. Recent research has shown this method to have some

benefits, including participants being more comfortable, the feeling that it is non-intrusive and safe, and the perception that the research process is engaging and convenient. However, the limitations include lack of non-verbal communication and privacy and access issues. To minimize these challenges, the researchers sought to ensure that the families were comfortable and able to access the content. The interview schedule was developed with attention to the experience of and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the family. Information on family structure, work life, ages, gender, living situation, and employment status will also be gathered at the outset of the interview.

4.1 | Data analysis

A thematic approach to IPA was undertaken, and the analysis was situated within a realist theoretical framework. Data analysis was guided by the six steps proposed by Smith and Shinebourne (2012):

1. Reading/re-reading: The research team will become familiar with interviews and immerse themselves in the transcripts.
2. Coding: The research team will begin to identify themes and code data into initial themes.
3. Clustering: Codes are grouped into common themes and subthemes.
4. Iteration: There is an iterative process that often has several revisions, and there is a process of checking themes, subthemes and quotes.
5. Narration: The research team begin to tell the story from the findings in narrative form-this involves the description of themes and uses quotes to support themes.
6. Contextualization: The researcher interprets the findings in relation to the existing knowledge on the topic.

This approach recognizes that knowledge is subjective. A reflexive approach was undertaken, which acknowledges the researchers' own subjectivity. At the start of the research, the researchers discussed their own relationship with the topic and their own families' experiences. This was an effort to consider their views on the topic and how this may skew the study's design. This allowed the researchers to ensure that the interview schedule considered broad topics and offered the ability to respond to the families' experiences. Reflexivity continued throughout data collection and data analysis. The study received ethical approval from The Social Research Ethics Subcommittee, ***** University (2407411).

5 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 | Psychological well-being of working mothers

The psychological consequences of previous epidemics or pandemics show that during these crises, people experience significant psychological distress and mental health problems such as during the Ebola epidemics in Africa or the SARs outbreaks in 2003 (Petzold et al., 2020). Like previous pandemics, early evidence demonstrates that SARS-CoV-2 presents many potential stressors that may cause psychological distress and mental health issues. These stressors arise from measures to the suppression of the virus, impacting people on a global scale, including in Ireland. Though the psychological consequences of the pandemic affect different groups, the impact on women has been significant. Women are reporting higher rates of psychological distress resulting from life under COVID-19 than men (Keeter, 2020), and among these are working mothers. In this study, most participants reported increased levels of psychological distress caused by new challenges of the pandemic and changes to the dynamics of family-work life.

I was very distressed and I'm sure most parents were because it's like what do we do now? And everything was just everything was all. Everybody was worried, you know, 'cause we didn't. We've never experienced this before so it was all thrown up in the air and then we were left to deal.

Women, mainly working mothers, may be disproportionately affected by adverse consequences arising from the pandemic. The additional tasks placed on working mothers, like increased childcare and domestic responsibilities, place further constraints on mothers' time. The findings in this study suggest that strain was placed on the psychological welfare of mothers, maybe more so than they could successfully psychologically manage.

I think that, um, I think it's. I think it's too much. I think it's too much. My mother had a stroke last year. My mother in law died last year. You know, we've had we've had some challenges, but nothing like the psychological challenge of this.

Beyond these pressures placed on the mental health of working mothers, they must also manage the psychological welfare of their children, who are also impacted by COVID-19. They experience fear, uncertainties, and both social and physical isolation; mothers are conscious of this and are shouldering their children's mental well-being. Nearly all mothers stated they had to help manage their children's welfare and help them cope.

And as a mother when you see your children upset and crying, and I found it myself. I'm not gonna, like some days I felt like crying...because I'm telling (my child) no don't be silly. Everything is going to be fine but inside I'm going is it, you know?

People are experiencing grief and trauma during the pandemic and may have lost the loved ones. The psychological burden of being a working mother during COVID-19 can be compounded by this reality, as some participants in this study articulated.

No, she had been- She's only 54. She had only been diagnosed with, um, cancer, um and they couldn't get her pain under control, so she had to go back into the hospital, and she caught it in the, and she was gone within three days and she had to ring her four girls to tell them not to ring her because she couldn't catch her breath. So, it was horrific for her. It was just horrific, and they couldn't dress her in her clothes, or they couldn't touch the coffin, they couldn't- There was loads they couldn't do, and even her stuff. It was brought, but they couldn't open her stuff for three weeks.

5.2 | Experiences of negative emotions in the early stages of the pandemic

In considering psychological stress at the beginning of the pandemic, the data in this study shows that more than half of the participants experienced negative emotions in the early stages of the pandemic, resulting from the perceived consequences of COVID-19 on their life. These emotions consist of higher levels of stress, guilt, increased pressure, disconnectedness, and isolation. The initial stages of the lockdown in Ireland were challenging for many families and mothers as they tried to adjust to life under the new restrictions.

So, ...initially there was the first stage which was just terrible, um, there was so much pressure, particularly from Paul's work, and I was trying to hold things up a little bit and Paul's really hands-on, like he's the most hands-on person so that that was kind of hard. Paul was like a zombie with working.

Though COVID-19 affected all genders, it had a high impact on women, especially those with careers. The public health crisis meant an increased burden of childcare on women, who before the crisis already shared a higher percentage of domestic responsibilities. This dynamic can be detrimental for the female supply of labor.

I know, I know in the first few weeks, I was stressed I was giving out to the kids and then I just had to say, listen, I have to stop. Just stop because nobody knows what we're doing, no ones totally and if I can't be online for 8 hours a day, I can't be on line 8 hours a day. Yeah, it's so mixed because You're a teacher you're a mother, you're a worker. You're doing the laundry, you're cooking lunch are you're not taking a lunch break. You're all in the one room, nearly. It was, it's just mad.

This research suggests that the heightened obligations of childcare are placing strain on the family unit. However, mothers reported having higher rates of managing childcare provisions than their partners. These added responsibilities made it difficult to manage both being a mother and having a career successfully.

So he only like you know, every time I back turned, he was in some um online on YouTube watching some playing fortnight or something. You know he's absolute nightmare so or or beating up his sister one or the other. I was on many calls where like my boss would say, do you want to go and sort that house because you could hear the fighting from 2 rooms away.

Being a lone mother can exacerbate challenges in managing career and parenthood during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, lone mothers were more likely to be in the labor force than married mothers and more likely to be in poverty. They also may face greater financial instability, isolation, or difficulty maintaining work-life balance. Almost all participants who identified as lone mothers reported challenges around these topics.

I do all them things. I had to do because kids weren't allowed in the shops in the early days so I would, I wouldn't be able to bring the Twins with me. So I was very lucky I had him with me (her older son) 'cause I had no other support. Basically 'cause my parent couldnt come near me. My sister couldn't come near me. The Twins dad couldn't come up because he lives with his mother is vulnerable - So it was absolute. It was very stressful. - 3 1/2 months they couldn't see him.

This data in this research show that these difficulties arising from the pandemic resulted in many participants reporting feelings of guilt, a common emotion experienced during COVID-19. There are many different reasons for this guilt, such as children not being able to play with friends or participate in everyday activities, seeing other people unemployed or ill, or issues arising from work-family conflict. Often working mothers were unable to manage boundaries between work and family life.

You know you kind of felt when you were working. You were feeling guilty because you weren't. You know, helping you know? With them with more structure and then when you were doing that then you're kind of going. Oh my God, I hope nobody's looking for me....But at the same time it was tricky because and you know, I suppose you have a good work ethic and you want to do the best that you can do and it was really difficult to draw the line between being Mammy and being at home, but also having a work identity.

Guilt can also arise from the societal expectation that to be a good mother, a woman must dedicate significant emotional and physical resources to childcare, a concept known as "Intensive mothering." Here, child development must outrank personal or career development as women must expend their emotional, labor, and financial

resources on their domestic duties (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Medina & Magnuson, 2009; Schiffrin, Rizzo, & Liss, 2012).

Huge guilt yeah... you were like OK I'm allowing myself not to do that, but then you just have like the other kind of like guilt and thoughts that come in, like what should I be doing and like, what are they missing out on and how am I going to get them to catch up like so? All of that would come into play as well. Yeah, so it didn't really help with people saying like oh don't worry about it, you're like but I am so.

Though COVID-19 is a shared human experience, it translates differently for each person. There is no manual for being the model mother or worker in the pandemic environment. Participants found comparisons between mothers who led to feelings of shame and guilt.

There was a lot of pressure from the WhatsApp's over what people were doing. Oh we bake and this time bake together again and it was like this guilt as well. This huge guilt of like other people are embracing this time and having this lovely special time. And I'm up here barking at them to just leave me for 10 minutes because I need to do something. And so, there was a constant feeling of your maybe letting them down a little bit as well.

Feelings of isolation were also common in the study. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a sense of community—"In this Together." However, once society began to reopen that same sense of community disappeared for some mothers.

...and I noticed, you got, we got really to know our neighbours an awful lot and now they're are seeing their family, because they're in Dublin and we haven't yet. [Mam] we got family in Donegal and my sisters are in Cork. So I have a niece that's 13 weeks old today and I haven't seen her. You know physically, so you know, I'm trying to organize that, but I find that. Our neighbours, the local ones, you know. They who who have local family. They don't know you anymore, if that makes sense.

Like most countries, the education system in Ireland moved to remote learning. This change created significant challenges for schools, teachers, and mothers. Most mothers in this study reported increased pressures to provide an adequate education for their children without the credentials.

You're concerned about the child's development and you want them to do well at school and you don't want them to start falling behind and regressing. So I think it's more an internal pressure that, um, I would put on myself to say God there. We have to keep up at least English, Irish, maths, and we can skip the un stuff. Um, and the extra subjects, but I think that was more my own.

5.3 | COVID-19 and redefining family roles

Globally, school closures and public health measures are placing increased pressure on families, with mothers bearing the brunt of the new burdens around work, education, and family life. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that during the pandemic, working mothers in the United Kingdom are more likely to have lost their job or been furloughed. The study also shows a more significant decrease in hours worked and higher rates of interruption by childcare, proportionately to their male counterparts (World Economic Forum, 2020). This finding could have adverse outcomes in terms of their prospects in the long term. In line with these findings, this study found that working mothers in Ireland reported that the domestic responsibilities in their households fell primarily on them,

impacting their ability to perform professionally. Though research demonstrates that both women and men equally recognize the need to fulfill domestic duties, men are more likely to ignore these responsibilities (Thébaud, Kornrich, & Ruppner, 2019).

To be honest...it's definitely a feminist issue. Like it completely fell to the women in the house and everyone I spoke to, all my friends were the same. My husband worked from home a lot before. So, for him it wasn't as big of a transition and he was just basically like, well, I work from home and I'm working from home and he wouldn't have been as concerned about keeping a structure for the kids like he wouldn't have come in to the room, like I would've had a timetable up on the wall and they would of have post- it's for different things that they could have stuck in the different time blocks, like he would have just walked in to the room, getting coffee, getting whatever and he wouldn't have ever been like what are you meant to be doing. You know? Do you have schoolwork to do? Are you supposed to be submitting anything like nothing like it's just and I have to say that was across the board. All of my friends were in the same boat.

Evidence shows that the pandemic has increased gender inequalities in the labor force, and this is affecting working mothers (Thébaud et al. 2019). Working mothers that have lost their jobs may have trouble finding new ones, and those who have reduced hours may find it hard to increase them. Moreover, working mothers whose productivity has been affected by interruptions may be placed at a disadvantage when it comes to decisions around pay and promotion (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Also, you know you need to either take a part time job or you need to leave your job, which is just very worrying. To be honest, very worrying. So, if the winter shuts down the schools like it's really going to impact on predominantly females in a household because even if they are part time, they're the ones we're going to be the main carers and we have to end up not working at all. Or you know, and it's a big step back in your career to give up time and try and get back into the workplace after that. Especially again when you female.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 shows that women are continually less represented in the labor market than men. The research found that on average 78% of adult men aged from 15 to 64 are present in the labor market, compared to 55% of women in the same age category (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Because we're both full time, if I was part time, it would have been better. But definitely the two together was the issue with raises so many red flags with society, cause like you know, we're not in the 1950s anymore and we've done everything to educate females to get them into the workplace and to have good jobs and to be able to move up the career ladder. And then as soon as you get there, it's like, oh, you've got children when he can have it all.

As noted above, the pandemic has increased gender inequality in the labor force, with a notable impact on mothers. Regardless of the increased need and visibilities of domestic responsibilities caused by COVID-19-related public health measures, men seem to be less likely to reduce hours worked to meet domestic demands (Collins, Landivar, Ruppner, & Scarborough, 2020).

The whole thing is very challenging because there's so many women I know just dropping out of work and just kind of throwing in the towel and I have to say like I'm in a very comfortable job and I'm very flexible job and I'm older so I just work it to fit myself and I find it as a challenge so I just cannot understand how these other women are coping and I've spoken to some of them and they would just

say like you know, like, I know, a lot of women on antidepressants. They're having to go to the doctor and. Very mild, just kind of Relaxants and things like that, and I think it's terrible that as a society we're pushed to that. But Ireland is not good. I think we talk a good talk, but there still isn't an expectation of man doing more of the work role on the woman, and particularly like you know I might be doing part-time work, but I'm very well paid to do a quite responsible job in that part time.

Instead, mothers are reducing work hours to satisfy the new caregiver responsibilities of childminding. This means an increase in the gender gap in domestic labor and undermines career advancement of working mothers (Collins et al, 2020).

We would say on a Monday, okay you're doing that, I'm doing this and we would try and alternate. But then he'd say, oh I've got a meeting at that time and I'm thinking, who does your job think minds your kids? At no point did his job go, can I just check in with you to make sure you're okay with the times of these meetings...But em, I certainly think because he's in a male dominated industry...There was absolutely no consideration given with his role that he might have to work early morning or late evening to accommodate any kind of domestic duties. It was just a given that he was available all day between 9 and 5 for zoom calls. Which is ridiculous.

6 | CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has generated an international global health crisis, with measures to suppress transmission resulting in the closure of most workplaces and schools and a reduction in social interaction. These measures are affecting gender differences in both work and family arrangements. Emerging evidence in Ireland and internationally suggests that women, especially working mothers, are being disproportionately affected. Women with children are one of the most vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19 because they are often the primary caregivers for their children and are overrepresented in low-wage jobs (Moore et al., 2020). The direct impact on this population is substantial, potentially in the medium to long term, making this research essential. This study draws on data collected in interviews with working mothers in Ireland to document the impact of the pandemic on this population. The findings show the working mothers in Ireland are experiencing psychological distress, encountered negative emotions at the beginning of the pandemic, and are redefining family roles to account for consequences of COVID-19. As the crisis continues, these issues will likely persist, and as such, more consideration needs to be given to creating support systems for families and especially working mothers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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