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Biscuits and unicorns: shifting meanings of domestic space in a post-lockdown world

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ABSTRACT

Women's lives have been affected exponentially by the COVID_19 pandemic. In this paper, we explore some of the ways in which women's everyday experiences of paid and unpaid labour have exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities. We examine the impact that the pandemic has had on women's experiences within the domestic sphere, as hyper-normative and historical representations of women as the 'natural' primary carers for children and the home have resurfaced. For many, this has led to an almost unbearable pressure to provide full-time domestic care while simultaneously holding down paid work. Drawing on theoretical feminist debate, which has emphasised the importance of intersectional approaches to gender, the paper shows how the fusion of domestic worlds and public lives has brought domestic issues and challenges to the fore and has meant that women's participation in paid work has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic in a number of ways. Women have an increased likelihood of, first, furlough and redundancy; second, of working in 'high-risk' jobs; third, of experiencing poverty; and fourth, of bearing the brunt of domestic labour and childcare intensified during the pandemic. Written by both an academic and practicing full-time politician, it offers a unique perspective on this subject.

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Introduction

On 23 March 2020, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in a very rare public service broadcast made an address to the nation. The decisive Tory victory in the December 2019 election (the third in 4 years) had heralded a new 'macho' and bombastic style of leadership, which was supposed to have put paid to what Johnson called the 'dither and delay' of the Theresa May minority years. The address was made in highly official sombre tones, head-on to camera and devoid of any of Johnson's usual trademark gags. In it, 'Lockdown One' was announced outlining what was to be the first in a number of new rules and regulations enforceable by law in direct response to the risks posed by the COVID 19 virus. As part of a statement outlining some of the toughest restrictions on people's everyday lives since WW2, the Prime Minister told the UK public that they were only able to leave their homes for a very limited set of 'essential' and unavoidable reasons, including for

shopping, exercise once per day, medical need and travelling to and from work but only where 'absolutely necessary', for example, for front-line, 'key workers'. Furthermore, all shops selling non-essential goods were told to close, gatherings of more than two people in public were banned, and events including weddings – but excluding funerals – were cancelled. With pictures dominating TV screens of overflowing hospitals in northern Italy superseding the earlier panic in the hitherto unheard district of China Wuhan, a compliant nation followed suit, despite sources close to the government later admitting a degree of surprise at how keen people were to obey.

2020 witnessed Covid 19 casework from MP's constituents soar as the complex new set of rules was introduced for every aspect of life (Halliday, 2021). Changes that used to seem glacial in pace were speeded up significantly, via for example, virtual participation in questions to ministers and in committees. Given that televised House of Commons debates were not allowed until 1989, the speed of these changes has been remarkable, with some arguing that ten years of decisions took place in two weeks similarly across all big organisations, including local authorities and government financial support measures.

The unparalleled and sweeping severity of these new rules meant that the impact and transformation of the lived reality of everyday life was dramatic and unprecedented. In this paper, we explore how the physical shift of almost *all* life back to the domestic sphere had a profound impact on the experiences within and relationships to the home. We argue that the pandemic has opened up new narratives, discourses and meanings of 'the home'. In particular, we show how the home has garnered a new hyper-visibility, and alongside this, renewed accounts and popular discourses of the home have developed. The old modernist boundaries and dichotomies of public and private, home and work, domestic and corporate have increasingly become blurred and have inevitably triggered new ways of occupying and making sense of domestic space. We show how the pandemic has not only helped to illuminate pre-existing gendered inequalities around the home but also how the various periods of 'lockdown' have exacerbated these inequalities.

As coronavirus took hold throughout 2020, it quickly revealed its capacity to afflict all regardless of wealth or status, including world leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro (more than once), Boris Johnson and Prince Charles. The new state-imposed lockdowns were similarly egalitarian, necessitating new ways of being, including staying indoors almost all the time and conducting business meetings, blended learning, remote working and family gatherings by video call. Much of our once familiar and recognisable landscape abruptly changed as travel was shut down and shuttered up shops dominated high streets. This was punctuated with functioning supermarkets with often long queues outside to enter and mask-wearing within them – all part of the biggest peacetime restrictions on daily life Britain has ever experienced.

In this paper, we consider how women have shouldered the burden of extreme multi-tasking in this 'new normal' spanning domestic work as well as paid employment with additional Covid 19-induced responsibilities of home-schooling and supporting elderly family and neighbours who might be shielding. It explores the implications of video-conferencing frequently accompanying the instruction to work at home for those who could – a technology even applied to the proceedings of that most notoriously resistant-to-change of workplaces, the UK Parliament, for committees and chamber business. As the crisis unfolded, a number of disparities were laid bare: in particular, the Black Lives

Matter protests of summer 2020. This paper focuses on the perhaps less newsworthy stark binaries in gender terms, particularly as relating to the world of work, incorporating both paid and unpaid labour.

The new COVID 19 lockdown rules meant that almost immediately people began to re-think the organisation of every aspect of their lives, with the old physical separation between public and private life for many almost completely eroded. The historical separation between paid and unpaid work, housework and corporate 'business' work has for centuries and in various guises underpinned historical processes of industrialisation, with no separation between home and work, the defining feature of pre-industrial societies (Kamerman, 1979). The concept of 'home' and the domestic work required to produce it, which Friedrich Engels terms 'unproductive labour', thus emerged as a key means through which the paid (male) worker is able to temporarily escape and recuperate to a space of domestic calm, cosiness and order, where his private needs are met away from the stress and drum of his industrial, paid labour. Thus, as Marxist feminists such as Christine Delphy (1984) later observed, an effectively ordered and smoothly operating capitalist system depends on the hidden and unpaid labour of women. As lockdown took hold, for the first time in living memory, these historic dichotomies that have come to define work in late modern industrial societies evaporated. The first notable transformation was the shift for almost all workers with the exception of 'front-line' workers to 'working from home', primarily via the introduction of online working practices. Many are now familiar with seeing the domestic trappings of home rather than a corporate office setting as we meet and converse online with colleagues.

Feminists have long argued that unpaid domestic labour is a key feature of support for a capitalist system of work that favours a conventional heteronormative nuclear family model, whereby traditional '9 to 5' working day are structured around the assumption that someone (probably a woman) is at home looking after the home and children. This assumption is exacerbated by recent neoliberal narratives around presenteeism and of working 'over and beyond' contracted hours seen as the expected standard (Collins et al., 2021). In her seminal study of white middle-class suburban women in 1960s North America, Betty Friedan noted the post-war nostalgia for domestic life and the way in which women's return to the domestic sphere was part of a broader project centred around the American Dream, a highly commercialised version of modern industrial society which relied on women's willingness to partake in unpaid domestic labour (Friedan, 1964). As demonstrated in Friedan's classic study, in times of social and economic crisis or flux, women are often coerced back to the domestic and gender norms become increasingly rigid. Hence, the post-war glow of new hyper-consumerism and advertising relied on women's mass investment in the home as a space of creativity, sanctuary and care, whereby the new norms of mass consumption could be reproduced and became entwined with everyday identity practices. This led to a rolling back of advancements around women's equality in the workplace similar to those described in the immediate aftermath of the COVID 19 pandemic. As Friedan remarks:

'It is more than a strange paradox that as all professions are finally open to women in America, 'career woman' has become a dirty word.; that as higher education becomes available to any woman with the capacity for it, education for women has become so suspect that more and

more drop out of high school and college to marry and have babies; that as so many roles in modern society become theirs for the taking, women so insistently confine themselves to one role.'

(Friedan, 1964; p. 60)

Friedan's study is often critiqued for playing down the privilege of the women participants who were able to afford to stay at home and who did not face racial or classed injustice. bell hooks points out that Friedan's account overlooks the experiences of non-white and poor women for whom the feminine mystique would be a material impossibility. She writes:

"[Friedan] did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labour and given equal access with white men to the professions ... Although many women longed to be housewives, only women with leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique."

(hooks, 1984, pp. 1–2)

In this paper, we show how the pandemic has featured a show of renewed gendered visibility within the domestic sphere including numerous hyper-normative representations of women and housework of the type reflected in earlier studies. We do so while also demonstrating that the pandemic has affected poorer women and BAME women in notably different ways. The new reifications of the domestic as seen in the aftermath of Covid_19 are, we argue, a key site for both reflecting and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities.

'Absolute scenes!'

One of the most interesting features of the pandemic has been the ways in which home and work lives have for many merged to become almost indivisible. This is part of a process that has been underway since the advent of mass email via broadband that could be read anywhere, rapidly replacing the old paper memo. Subsequent phases in this process have been swift and various – for example, the technology of the handheld BlackBerry once lauded as the peak of modern 'on-the-go' communication technology now seems curiously quaint. Following Covid 19, the extensive and widespread use of Teams and Zoom meetings saw this process reach its apogee, with the amalgamated home/office very much on show for white collar workers. For women working the 'double' shift and suffering the 'motherhood penalty' associated with the deep demands of combining unpaid domestic and paid work duties, where women have long taken the bulk of responsibility for cleaning, cooking and child-rearing even after a day of paid work, the pandemic simply exacerbated these pre-existing inequalities. However, perhaps for the first time, the pandemic brought this dual burden into sharp focus by increasing the visibility of the coalescing of home and work life with the 'Zoom boom' that ensued. Share prices quite literally surged as this new video-conferencing application became a daily reality for many white-collar workers. This was perhaps most clearly and visibly played out in a number of unprecedented and noteworthy TV moments during the first lockdown of 2020 where the tensions around paid and unpaid labour were laid bare.

Home metamorphosing into work was crucially a privilege of the white-collar worker. The luxury of being able to work at home via laptop was not available to all but it did reorient the work-life balance of the commentariat to the point that the visual format of many TV news programmes changed quite dramatically. At one level, coronavirus signalled the end of the diktat from Michael Gove during Brexit that the nation had 'had enough of experts'. Instead, the insistence was that we were 'following the science' and a news rhythm dictated terrestrial TV programming revolving around a daily press government conference with ministers flanked by a new cast of characters: government scientists who became known to viewers for their 'next slide please' stat-heavy podium PowerPoint presentations imparting hospitalisation and fatality figures: the knighted Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance with their dour warnings and the more animated JVT (Jonathan Van Tam) with his limitless supply of colourful metaphors. The female experts included Dr Jenny Harries and the less medically qualified Dido Harding and Kate Bingham who coincidentally or not were both married to Tory MPs and found themselves responsible for the rollout of track and trace and vaccination, respectively. Indeed, as the move to a vaccinated future came into view as December 2020 turned into 2021, the figure of vaccinations performed replaced the daily death toll. Of the scores of press conferences undertaken, only a minute number were headed up by women: Priti Patel (Home Secretary) was far outnumbered by Robert Jenrick (Communities Secretary), Grant Shapps (Transport), even Dominic Raab (Foreign Office) and with decreasing regularity Johnson himself. Alas for the other type of non-official expert, the trappings of the wood panelled Downing Street briefing room festooned with Union Jacks were not available, and as we describe below, women particularly with small children disproportionately found themselves scrutinised for allowing too much of 'the domestic' slip into their public, work lives.

The dangers of home/work merging were most pronounced for women with young children. This has been captured in the pre-Covid term 'motherhood penalty' coined by US sociologists (Correll et al., 2007) and also that of the 'double shift' (Hochschild, 1989), which connotes the notion of women undertaking the duality of breadwinning duties alongside domestic chores. The 'working day' is thus supplemented after hours with cleaning, cooking and child-rearing/care roles. Such tensions and disparities experienced by women with children were most visibly on display in news channel coverage on 2 July 2020, which provided two of the most memorable televisual moments of lockdown. Sky and BBC News items featured female experts who were also mothers. Sky's Foreign Correspondent was mid-way through a live televised interview about Hong Kong's democratic processes when interrupted by her young toddler son asking for first one then two biscuits. Clearly confounded by the unfamiliar situation, the Sky presenter Mark Austin sharply terminated the interview with the coverage quickly moving back to the studio and Haynes herself later describing it as 'the stuff of nightmares'. On social media, Austin was much criticised for pulling the plug on the item with the words 'We'll leave Deborah Haynes in full flow there, with some family duties,' as the coverage switched to himself in the studio. On the same day, LSE assistant professor of global health policy, Clare Wenham, was interrupted by her daughter who wanted to show her the drawing of a unicorn during a BBC News interview. Again this media moment was mediated by a male anchor in the studio. The gatecrasher – Scarlett – then found herself in an exchange between her and

presenter Christian Fraser who was commended for engaging with the girl and complementing her sketch, which provoked the riposte ‘mummy what’s his name?’ In both instances, it is notable that a working mother is the first port of call for children confined to the home, but in addition, the media response to both cases included a mixture of humour and shock, with for example, the Twitter capture of the Sky footage that netted 11,000 retweets and over 59,000 likes had just a two word caption describing Haynes’s interruption as ‘absolute scenes’. What this response demonstrates is how unusual it is in advanced capitalist societies to see the worlds of home and public paid work collide.

These two examples were not the first time that a live televised news report had been interrupted by children. Before the pandemic, in 2017, the American academic and expert on Korean relations, Robert Kelly, was interrupted during a live BBC interview by his toddler children. The print media were quick to point out the unusual juxtaposition of home and professional ‘important’, ‘serious’ work variously describing the incident as a ‘hilarious gaffe’ and Kelly himself going so far as to say that he and his partner ‘both assumed that was the end of my career as a talking head’. The assumption following this was a reinforcement of the adage that public and private worlds do not mix and that children and domestic life have no place in the professional world of paid work. A further assumption was that Korean Mrs Kelly had in fact been ‘the domestic help’, demonstrating how Asian women are often presumed to be in positions of servitude. By 2020, this expert ‘down the line’ scenario had become quite normal as opposed to a one-off to the point that the old studio debates had been replaced by presenters (sometimes themselves in home surroundings as on Channel 4 News and ITV’s Peston when the presenter himself had to isolate) plus a split screen of interviewees at different locations.

Numerous analyses show that the motherhood penalty plays itself out in wage terms (for example Correll et al., 2007; Taniguchi, 1999) while paradoxically men are less likely to be penalised for being parents. Indeed, parenthood can often provide a boon to them, as we see, for example, the ways in which male politicians are ‘humanised’ via curated images of themselves with their children, a classic example being agriculture minister John Gummer filmed serving up a beef-burger to his daughter at the height of the ‘mad cow’ disease crisis in 1990.

The popular media responses seen above, encompassing a combination of discomfort, awkwardness and humour to the coalescing of public worlds and private, domestic lives, demonstrates that the coalescing of public and private/domestic worlds remains a taboo and largely hidden issue. As Shani Orgad demonstrates in her recent study of middle-class professional mothers following the birth of their children, ‘heading home’ and relinquishing paid work was seen as an almost inevitable consequence of an impossible choice, given the seeming incompatibility of these two worlds (Orgad, 2019). One of the possible longer-term consequences of the increased visibility of this double burden and the disproportionate impact on women might be renewed debates, transformations and policy focus towards flexible working practices and a recognition of the motherhood penalty. As Wenham herself later pointed out; ‘If seeing something like this on screen makes employers realise that people have lives and are constantly juggling and need flexible working practices, it has to be a positive.’

The persistence of gender inequalities

As described above, Covid 19 has meant that every aspect of domestic and public life has undergone considerable change in recent months. As well as paid employment and home-schooling other unpaid work around the home that took place during the furlough period included DIY projects, making sourdough bread/baking and major decluttering during lockdown. During this time, there was also a rapid increase in popularity of online home, cleaning and childrearing accounts particularly on Instagram and TikTok, most often created by, featuring and followed by women (Casey & Littler, [forthcoming](#)). On one local chat forum, a poster commented 'I've found lockdown has given me ten-years worth of marital time in the last three months with my wife:}'. As lockdown began to unwind, government announcements promoted returning to the (newly socially distanced) office to encourage a more 'normal' existence while the commentariat declared we should not return to same-old business as usual with the possibility that things can change for good as a result of the crisis (Bryant, [2021](#)). Just as many found desk time more efficient at home with the removal of 'rat race' stresses of commuting, others inhabiting cramped conditions such as house-shares with little space to call their own yearned to return to the office for the sense of achieving in a team and camaraderie/sociability. Early evidence shows that lockdown adversely affected other groups too, including single women living on their own in terms of mental health and notably those in abusive relationships for whom there was no easy escape from the home. Thus, during lockdown, there was a notable increase in cases of domestic violence with traditional routes for reporting restricted (Gill & Sundari, [2021](#)).

Despite some of the longer-term benefits to women of being able to work more flexibly from home, early data demonstrates that some of the more detrimental impacts of paid work following Covid 19 have been experienced most acutely by women. A 2021 TUC report (TUC, [2021](#)) exploring work and paid employment post-Covid found that working mothers had borne the brunt of the pandemic. The report found that 70% of all requests for furlough made by working mothers had been turned down, with 'home-schooling' not deemed a valid excuse for furlough. As a consequence of the strain of balancing home-schooling, child care and paid work, 25% of mothers who replied to the TUC survey said that they were using annual leave to manage their child care, but that nearly one in five (18%) had been forced to reduce their working hours and around one in 14 (7%) had reported to taking unpaid leave from work and were subsequently receiving no income at all. The survey also demonstrated a parallel rise in levels of stress and anxiety, with 90% of working mothers reporting that the pandemic had had a detrimental impact on their mental health. This anxiety was often connected to wider feelings around insecurity at work, exacerbated by the feeling that they were unable to meet the demands of the job while simultaneously providing at-home care for their children. Indeed, 25% of mothers said that they were worried they would lose their job, that they were more at risk of being singled out for redundancy, sacked for being unable to meet their objectives or denied hours because of their at-home commitments. As the following quote from the survey illustrates, taking unpaid leave is often an option only available for those with financial privilege:

'I'm caring for a two year old full time and now my four year old [is] being home schooled on top of a 32 hour working week and no support from my husband as he can't work from home. I requested furlough and it was refused. [My manager] feared opening the floodgates, feared the wider business will think our team can manage without me and be subject to headcount reduction. Told to take unpaid leave which I can't afford. I work for a global multi-billion pound business. It's insane. Many others are in a similar situation.' (Private sector worker, working part time, two children under five).

Other women reported being told by employers to 'make other arrangements' with the emphasis on personal responsibility for the home and children again, falling squarely on women's shoulders. The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted the persistence of gender inequalities particularly around women bearing the brunt of responsibility for providing care for children. Given the often unmanageable burden of combining paid work at home with providing full time child care, combined with the disproportionate expectations of women to provide this ('no support from my husband'), it is perhaps unsurprising that during the pandemic women were also disproportionately financially affected, with more women than men experiencing poverty as a consequence. The Institute for Fiscal Studies and UCL Institute for Education (Andrew et al., 2020) found that mothers were 47% more likely than men to have permanently lost their job or quit during the pandemic. The study also found that working mothers were 14% more likely to have been furloughed since the start of the pandemic. Previous research pre-COVID has shown consistently that women are more likely than men to live in poverty, to rely on public services and on social security. In times of economic crisis, such as during the 2007–2008 financial crash and during the period of economic austerity, women bore 86% of the brunt of austerity measures (ref, 2017). The Women's Budget Group's (2020) also point out that even before COVID, women were more likely to be in low paid and insecure employment; that 69% of low paid earners are women; that 74% of those in part-time employment are women and that 54% of those on zero-hour contracts are women. Women represent the majority of people living in poverty, and female-headed households are more likely to be poor. 45% of lone parents live in poverty in the UK and 90% of these are women. During the COVID 19 pandemic, the Trussell Trust (2021) reported a 61% increase in food bank use, primarily from families with children.

The COVID 19 pandemic then, has exacerbated women's experiences of poverty with women's paid work more likely to be affected than men's. It is also the case that women and, in particular, BAME and migrant women form the majority of 'front-line' workers (77%). In addition, as the British think tank Autonomy (Kikuchi & Khurana, 2020) found, of the three million people in the UK in 'high risk' jobs, 77% are women. Thus, out of 3.2 million workers employed in the highest-risk roles working closely with the public and people with infections and diseases including COVID 19, about 2.5 million are women who, additionally are among the lowest paid in the society. 89% of nurses and 84% of care workers are women, demonstrating that women predominate in some of the most high-risk work during the pandemic. In addition to performing some of the most high-risk work, women workers also dominate in many of the industries affected most severely by the COVID 19 pandemic, in particular, the retail industry within which the majority of those working are women. In 2020 177,000 jobs were lost on the UK High Street, and the Fashion and Textile Children's Trust, a charity established to assist children whose parents work in the retail sector but who are struggling to make ends meet, reported a 50% increase in the number of inquiries for its grants to 3,400 (Wood, 2020).

Domestic divisions and cultural practices

The national lockdown also necessitated the shift of all leisure activities to the domestic sphere. This parallels broader trends throughout the twentieth century whereby leisure activities increasingly shifted towards the private sphere as traditional community leisure venues particularly in working class towns such as working men's clubs and bingo halls lost their appeal, with people increasingly choosing to spend their leisure time at home with families. The home thus increasingly became a place for leisure, with for example, the rise of the dinner party in the 1970s, through to home entertainment systems and the widespread launch of the VHS in the 1980s, through to online streaming services in the 2000s. Following the COVID 19 lockdown, these shifts to the spaces of leisure became even more pronounced with some serious concern that people will never return to cinema film viewing for example. During the pandemic, we note that women also became increasingly visible in new online media cultures, especially Instagram and TikTok. Much of the new accounts launched and intensified in popularity in the past few years owe their popular appeal in part to their ability to connect with the stresses and strains of the renewed intensity of the domestic sphere and offer ways of coping and surviving in this new multi-purpose environment. The accounts increasingly offer a good-humoured protest at the stresses and anxieties of home life, particularly home-schooling during lockdown. So-called 'cleanfluencing' accounts also saw a surge in popularity particularly for women – offering a highly gendered and heteronormative version of domestic labour. Cleaning, tidying and domestic order became part of the coping strategy during lockdown – all online and also frequently entwined with narratives of self-help (see Casey & Littler, [forthcoming](#)). Thus, the pandemic has coincided with new ways of representing domestic labour which is both heavily gendered and also is repositioned as offering a space to cope with and ease the anxieties of the pandemic.

As the sociologist C Wright Mills (1959) observed, economic, political and *structural* changes to society often leave their mark and are mapped onto everyday cultural practices and experiences. We argue that heightened uncertainty, precarity and sense of chaos underpinning people's everyday experiences and feelings around the pandemic is also reflected in the intensification of highly gendered popular representations of domestic labour during the pandemic. As argued earlier, as societies shift and change, so too do representations of women and in particular their relationships to the domestic sphere. One of the questions emerging from this is the extent to which these changes might become permanent. Rapid research findings following the March 2020 COVID_19 'lockdown' demonstrated that women were doing the lion's share of extra and pre-existing unpaid labour during the pandemic, including cleaning, cooking and home-schooling (Women's Budget Group, 2020). The study found that on average women were carrying out 60% more unpaid work than men during the pandemic. In February 2021, the Women and Equalities Committee and global data from UN Women warned that increasing inequalities around domestic labour following the pandemic could set women back 25 years. The collapse of child care during lockdown

disproportionately impacted women, with evidence suggesting that women were more likely to stick to part-time work and said that they were less likely to change their jobs or apply for promotion even post-COVID. The Fawcett Society noted that this could lead to the return of rigid gendered roles in particular in terms of the public and domestic divide, calling for government intervention and warning that:

‘... women’s workplace equality will have been set back decades by this crisis unless government intervenes to avert it. We’re looking at the prospect of a two-tier workplace where men go back and women stay home. It’s taken us 20 years to get this far on female participation in the workforce, but it could take only months to unravel.’ (Topping, 2021)

A similar study conducted in 2020 by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Andrew et al., 2020) found that mothers were looking after their children for an average of 10.3 hours per day; 2.3 hours more than fathers, and spending 1.7 hours more per day on housework than fathers. Even in families where the father had stopped work while his female partner continued, on average, they did the same amount of household work even while women were doing an average of five hours of paid work per day. Mothers were 23% more likely than fathers to have temporarily or permanently lost their jobs during the pandemic. Mothers were 47% more likely to have permanently lost their job or quit and were 14 % more likely to have been furloughed. Mothers were also overall 9% less likely to still be in paid work than fathers. According to the report:

‘Mothers are more likely than fathers to have moved out of paid work since the start of the lockdown ... They have reduced their working hours more than fathers even if they are still working and they experience more interruptions while they work from home than fathers, particularly due to caring for children. A risk is that the lockdown leads to a further increase in the gender wage gap.’

The implication here is that motherhood, though often grouped with ‘apple pie’ and Disney Princess-esque images of motherhood as highly desirable, even compulsory and long praised by right-wing politicians seeking ways of releasing the burden off the state for caring and childrearing, the reality is often exhaustion with little real reward (see also Glaser, 2021). Long before Covid, indeed back in 1894, the prototypical English feminist Mona Caird had written:

“Throughout history, ... children had been the unfailing means of bringing women into line with tradition. Who could stand against them? ... An appeal to the maternal instinct had quenched the hardest spirit of revolt. No wonder the instinct had been so trumpeted and exalted! Women might harbour dreams and plan insurrections; but their children – little ambassadors of the established and expected – were argument enough to convince the most hardened sceptics. Their helplessness was more powerful to suppress revolt than regiments of armed soldiers.” (cited in Heilmann, 1996)

Indeed in many ways, the Covid_19 pandemic seemed to reinforce the notion of motherhood as ‘bondage’ as domestic lives became increasingly governed by demands of children and home.

Political responses

The effects of Covid_19 have meant that the economically active have split into different categories including those furloughed, those working from home and 'key workers' exposing themselves to heightened risk of contracting the virus became venerated with weekly clapping if not remuneration. The hugely disadvantageous situation of precarious employment and particularly for women has been accentuated in lockdown. Sectors such as care-working and cleaning are frequently staffed by women who are agency staff on constraining zero-hour contracts or fixed term contracts and exposed to the virus as front-line workers who have continued working throughout the crisis. Indeed, when deaths in care-homes were reported, the adult social care sector – characterised by profoundly precarious conditions, a low-wage generally flat pay structure and unusually run via private companies yet commissioned through local authorities – was illuminated as never before. Following on from his earlier theorising on the sociology of risk and individualisation, Beck (1992) wrote of the 'Brazilianization of work,' in which workforce participants enter in and out of formal and informal employment mirroring wider changes in contemporary culture and society. His dystopian vision of casualised employment predicts a sharper divide between those in traditional regular employment and the expanding ranks of the insecure as experienced in emergent economies such as Brazil. At the same time, the panacea (along with a vaccination) of an effective test track, trace and isolate becomes less and less attractive if you have no guaranteed income throughout. Even the Health Secretary himself declared that the statutory sick pay of £93 a week was impossible to live on. The relatively recent system of universal credit came under stress as never before.

Yet while for women in particular, work that fits around family and caring responsibilities, one person's flexibility is another's insecurity. These gradations usually depend on whether this is choice (consultancy) or compulsion (being forced into taking shifts with no certainty of definite work). Covid has been unremittingly cruel to those who have made the choice to operate in the category of self-employment/consultancy. Women have historically found this type of flexible working appealing, especially as it is often comparatively well paid work at a daily rate and is not shackled to any one institutional home. The arts sector contains large numbers of such freelancers including costumiers and make-up artists who have been left out of government support, with some 3 million falling through the cracks of furlough.

We have also seen at the very least a superficial revaluing of certain frequent women workers who hitherto performed the most thankless of thankless tasks and found themselves in the centre of the pandemic: frontline workers in health, social care, transport, retail, warehousing and factories. At the start of the pandemic, the weekly Thursday ritual of clapping on one's doorstep indicated public recognition of support for a public sector pay rise for NHS staff. Indeed, its title 'clap for carers' illuminates a category of workforce so often overlooked: the adult social care sector. This private sector agency work commissioned through local authorities be it domiciliary care or care-home staff is low paid and low status and is overwhelmingly performed by BAME women. The tasks comprises cleaning, feeding and even overnight turning of the elderly and frail who would be incapable of doing so alone is difficult, exhausting and undervalued. The scandal of care home deaths early on in the crisis as well as deficiencies in, for example, protective

equipment provided to staff propelled this sector momentarily into the media glare as never before. As patience with clap for carers wore thin the slogan 'claps don't pay the bills' became common currency on social media. While a different world to the stuff of biscuits and unicorns, this was again a visible reminder of working women under multifarious coronavirus-induced pressure.

The IFS statistics (Andrew et al., 2020) both support earlier pre-covid time-user surveys, which have long demonstrated that especially where multi-tasking is taken into account, women continue to do the bulk of unpaid domestic labour. The statistics also demonstrate that these inequalities are not only persisting, but moreover are being exacerbated during Covid. The pandemic has revealed that the domestic sphere remains in the popular imagination and increasingly played out in time-use surveys, firmly associated with the unpaid labour of women. This prevailing attitudes around gendered and domestic labour was echoed in a much-maligned Government coronavirus public safety poster produced as part of the 'Stay Home. Save Lives' campaign. The poster featured four cartoon images of a house within which 'everyday actions' were being performed, with a woman or girl depicted doing every one of the domestic duties; ironing in one, home schooling children in another and mopping in a third. The only image including a man was one featuring a heterosexual nuclear family relaxing on the sofa. Although the poster was quickly scrapped following online media campaigning, it offers up evidence of the ways in which highly gendered attitudes around responsibility for domestic labour prevail. This was echoed by the Chancellor Rishi Sunak in January 2021 in the House of Commons, who when responding to a question around the unequal balance of domestic labour and child care and the impact on prevailing gender inequalities during the pandemic remarked:

'We owe mums everywhere an enormous debt of thanks for juggling child care responsibilities alongside other duties during the pandemic.'

By 'thanking mums', Sunak reproduces rather than challenges inequalities, which appear to have become increasingly entrenched during the pandemic and also overlooks the fact that the majority of women also have paid work commitments. His comments overlook the variety of women's experiences of the pandemic, particularly those of poorer and black, Asian and minority ethnic women who have been disproportionately affected. A Fawcett Society report *Coronavirus: Impact on BAME Women* (Fawcett Society, 2020) found that more than four in ten BAME women reported that they would struggle to make ends meet over the next three months. BAME men and women also reported higher levels of anxiety around going to work during the pandemic. This might reflect the fact that BAME people are more likely to work in high-risk work environments and to be unable to work at home (ref). 45% of BAME women said that they were struggling to cope with the different demands on their time, while over half of disabled or retired BAME women said that they were not sure where to turn to for help as a result of the pandemic. Finally, life satisfaction and happiness were reported to be lowest for BAME women.

The headline of the weekly print newspaper 'Eastern Eye' 19/2/21 screamed in capitals 'PANDEMIC PRESSURE ON ASIAN WOMAN'. In the accompanying story Seema Malhotra MP was quoted as saying that intergenerational families were more likely to be from Asian

backgrounds with women suffering the burden of caring for elderly parents as well as worrying about catch-up for their kids – elsewhere termed the ‘sandwich generation’ (Chisholm, 1999) and Preet Gill MP that Asian women have a value system incorporating sense of duty that sees little regard for their own ‘me time’, a variation of the universal phenomenon of ‘mum guilt’. On top of this are mental health difficulties with interrupted work. As the early pictures of clinicians whose lives were lost to the virus, a number of BAME doctors were casualties. The government’s response seems to have been the traditional commissioning of a report where the results were a good fit for their policy preferences (e.g. stress on ‘nuclear family’) as was discernible by choice of chair, in this case Dr Tony Sewell.

Inequalities manifested themselves repeatedly throughout the 2021/21 period. As the pandemic wore on and it became less daring to leave the confines of the home, the death of George Floyd in Summer 2020 at the hands of racist police in the US proved to be something of a flashpoint event helping to galvanise the movement Black Lives Matter and ensuing widespread protests involving the taking of the knee (frequently for 8 minutes 47 seconds in memory of his asphyxiation). What began in Minneapolis had reverberations literally everywhere, striking a chord across the gender divide. Women were often part of these gatherings and the case of Breonna Taylor too cited, but women really came to fore in public protest later the following spring when the brutal murder of a woman who was walking home, again by a serving police officer, shocked and scandalised the UK. ‘She was only walking home’ became a catchphrase highlighting the absurdity of this needless death and determination of women to reclaim their bodies and culminating in the Clapham Common vigil of March 2021. In Summer 2020, the double murder of Mina Smallman and Biba Henry two sisters in a park in the suburban London borough of Brent was another shocking seemingly misogynistic homicide where the police were found to be at fault during the chain of events.

Conclusions

This paper has looked at the Covid 19 crisis through the lens of gender relations and the world of work. Studies of women’s work often emanate from the sociology of the family and centre on practices and policies surrounding stereotypes, diversity, fairness, hiring, exclusion and discrimination in terms of legislation as well as lived realities. Work-life balance has been massively disrupted by the pandemic, particularly in lockdown. Through the pandemic, pre-existing norms have sometimes been turned on their heads, particularly as we have seen around the traditional de-coupling of domestic and public spheres. Other trends already underway especially around gender inequality have simply accelerated. In some respects, the age-old idea of males as breadwinner and females doing nurturing and carer roles has been accentuated by coronavirus. It has also been observed that nations with women leaders have tended to fare better in terms of infections and death rate than those where men are head of state. This can be seen in comparing and contrasting for example, the records of say Germany, New Zealand and Taiwan with that of the UK or US, certainly up until Biden’s election.

In global capitalism, cultures of work play a big part in our lives even at a time when employment stability and security are less and less of a given. During coronavirus, workplace harassment has not evaporated but the isolation of home-working means women

historically reluctant to report issues of discrimination to HR may be even more cut off from these structures. Factors of job satisfaction, lack of transparency in differential earnings between employees in an organisation, sense of belonging, identity and work ethic all take on new implications in the global pandemic. Feeling a sense of alienation and the way work has turned 24–7 with technology and the omnipresence of work emails on devices have all been accentuated.

The end of Covid 19 has also heralded some more optimistic predictions, for example, that we must 'build back better' (a phrase used by everyone from Boris Johnson to Joe Biden) in a more sustainable, equitable way as part of the 'new normal', which one can only hope will encompass better gender equality in the home as well as workplace.

There has not been space in the paper to examine 'outsourcing' (subcontracting catering, cleaning and other tasks once carried out 'in-house') and the whole effect of #metoo in great detail. However, this paper has shown how the pandemic has reproduced many entrenched gendered norms particularly around femininities and domestic life. It has shown how gender inequalities not only persist within the domestic sphere but also how the pandemic has exacerbated these. Women and their role within the domestic sphere have been placed under increased surveillance. We have witnessed significant embedding of ongoing processes of social change, including around domestic space, renewed hyper-individualism and the entrenchment of online practices of community and shopping. The burgeoning list of social inequalities particularly around gender, race and class have been thrown into stark relief during the pandemic and have illuminated the real-world impact of the wider neo-liberal project of rolling back the welfare state and public services. Furthermore, the pandemic has given rise to new digital forms of commercialisation particularly around the gendered commercialisation of domestic life and the outlet of new communications including social media, Zoom and WhatsApp, which (it can be argued) offer women new ways of 'coping' and responding to the increased domestic anxieties, stresses and inequalities exacerbated by covid.

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