

Stereotyping and Gender gap During COVID-19: Backlash or Gender Convergence? A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: What have been the short- and medium-term net effects of the pandemic on working mothers, both in the early stages and over the course of the pandemic? The goal of this paper, positioned within the research field of stereotyping and gender discrimination, is to provide an updated view of academic studies investigating the dichotomy “backlash vs gender convergence” in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic shock. The paper has been structured as a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA Statement approach. We found a complex but, to a certain extent, predictable picture, with COVID-19 unable to produce strong and consistent macrodynamic changes on gender gap. Ultimately, therefore, the existing research seems to conclude that there is no support for either the backlash or the gender convergence notions; rather, there seems to be an equilibrium characterised by stability in gender roles, especially medium-to-long term. Other major findings include i) There seems to have been a general increase in equal childcare responsibilities even though, on average, mothers still carry the heavier load; ii) Mothers in dual-career couples were more exposed to work-hour reductions or losing their job completely; iii) Temporary gender convergence shifts were largely motivated by female working arrangements and/or necessity; iv) A new gap in psychological distress emerged for working mothers compared to both men and childless women.

Keywords: stereotyping, gender gap, COVID-19, systematic literature review, PRISMA

1. Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, resulting in intensive containment measures to prevent the spread of the disease. This led to the closure of most workplaces, schools, and day-care facilities, putting entire industries at risk. Many working parents have since been affected, for example through reductions in work hours, furloughs or work-from-home arrangements (Reichelt *et al.*, 2021). The closure of schools and day care, in particular, has been identified as a potential cause for a widening of the gender gap, as women are often responsible for most of the unpaid work at home (Zamarro and Prados, 2021).

Early works on the topic found women and more specifically, working mothers, to be more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic (Alon *et al.*, 2020; Heggeness, 2020; Gatto, 2020; Sevilla and Smith, 2020). Multiple reasons have been named for this: i) Closures of support facilities led to an increase in household work and, subsequently, in the burden for women regarding family chores and childcare; ii) The service industry and related sectors are typically predominantly female; therefore, statistically, the economic downturn hit women harder than men; iii) Working mothers, who are often devoted to family work, tend to be employed in low-wage jobs and/or flexible arrangements (e.g. part-time, teleworking, etc.).

Since the distribution of paid and unpaid work within the family boundaries as well as the stereotyping and discrimination of women in the work environment had already been identified as two important antecedents for gender inequality even pre-COVID-19, we asked ourselves whether this divide could have been affected or disrupted as a consequence of the pandemic-related shock to the labour market (King *et al.*, 2020).

The goal of this paper, positioned within the research field of gender gap, and more specifically stereotyping and discrimination, is to discuss the net effect of the pandemic on female labour supply in the short and medium term. By doing so, the authors aim to provide an updated view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the gender gap and, tentatively, derive the possible impact on gender convergence.

The paper, structured as a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA Statement approach (Moher *et al.*, 2009), has been analysed using a qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2015). In this regard, the references returned from the database were sorted according to a set of codes, from which originated a number of main and sub-categories.

This paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, we present the theoretical framework of the gender gap, focussing, in particular, on stereotyping and discrimination in the disruptive socio-economic context presented by COVID-19; in Section 3, we outline the methodology; in Section 4, we present the findings of our systematic literature review, discussing the arguments for the “backlash” and “convergence” hypotheses regarding the gender care gap during COVID-19 as well as the expected long-term effects of the pandemic on the same variable.

2. Theoretical background

The so-called “gender care gap”, defined as the gap between men and women in the contribution to domestic unpaid work, explains further phenomena such as gender inequality in the labour market and, more specifically, the motherhood penalty (Bertrand *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, despite gender convergence in education, in most developed countries women are still responsible for the majority of unpaid work at home (OECD, 2020). In the same vein, the United Nations (2020), confirmed that although the number of women working outside the home is higher than ever, gender expectations still play a major role, with a slow gender convergence in paid and unpaid work, even during recessions (Czymara *et al.*, 2021).

In their meta-analysis focussed on working mothers, Cukrowska-Torzewska and Matysiak (2020) confirmed that the main drivers responsible for the motherhood gap are the loss of job experience (Gangl and Ziefle, 2009), the decrease in productivity at work (Anderson *et al.*, 2002), accepting mother-friendly jobs (Felfe, 2012), and being discriminated against by employers (Budig and England, 2001; Correll *et al.*, 2007). The last antecedent, in form of both direct and indirect discrimination, is strictly connected to the concept of stereotyping, with high levels of stress and potential burnout for working mothers (Clark *et al.*, 2021). Flexible work arrangements have been found to be beneficial when it comes to women attaining a better work-life balance, yet remote work options still reflect biases and gender stereotyping, as they are generally perceived to be connected to a decrease in productivity (PWC, 2018). The stereotype of the ideal worker still seems to be rooted in being physically present at the office, meeting high-set targets by working long hours, and interacting with colleagues (Barhate and Hirudayaraj, 2021). Organisational policies and norms tend to promote the separation of work and family, thus reinforcing the traditional “male breadwinner model” with the man usually taking on the paid work and the woman shouldering the bulk of unpaid work at home, including childcare (Fisher and Ryan, 2021). Even when the work environment seems to be in tune with a working mother’s needs, family dynamics can potentially hinder career choices and relegate women to the family domain (Gatto, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably acted as a profound disruptor in the labour market, since it has presented both employers and employees with unprecedented organisational and economic challenges. Academic debate has formulated two opposing expectations regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the aforementioned gender gap, namely the “backlash notion” and the “convergence notion” (Boll *et al.*, 2021). The latter view assumes that, after a certain period of adjustment, where fathers start appreciating unpaid work at home, gender role attributions will return to the male-breadwinner norm, leaving women in charge of the “sudden spike in childcare needs” (Alon *et al.*, 2020). The convergence notion, on the other hand, presumes that fathers will come to spend more time with their children, permanently increase their share of family care duties, and in doing so, reduce the gender divide with mothers (Kreyenfeld and Zinn, 2021). The question of which of these two expectations has prevailed over the course of the pandemic and what are, tentatively, the academic projections regarding any post-COVID effects will be the focus of Section 4.

3. Methodology

In order to present a structured and coherent picture of the effects of COVID-19 on stereotyping for working mothers, we adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA Statement (Moher *et al.*, 2009). This methodology includes three main steps, namely *identification*, *screening* and *eligibility*; a fourth step, “inclusion”, is mandatory for meta-analyses only.

The first step, “identification”, entails finding a set of keywords consistent with the research aim. After preliminary research on the *status quo* of the topic and a consultation with research domain experts, we decided to adopt the following query string:

(stereotyp OR gender roles OR working mothers) AND (pandemic OR covid-19 OR corona*)*

We then implemented all nine possible permutations in the database of our choice, Business Source Premier (via EBSCOhost), obtaining 382 results.

In order to ensure the relevance of the references retrieved, we applied two main filters embedded in EBSCOhost:

- *Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals*: By including only those papers which passed the rigorous peer review process, we aimed to increase the reliability of the references returned
- *Time-window*: Ideally, the newness of the topic would be enough to control for publications older than 2020, but to further increase the consistency of results, we excluded references older than 2020.

As a result of the aforementioned filters, the total number of results was reduced to 172.

Within the second step, “screening”, we assessed the substantive relevance of the references retrieved by reading all abstracts for substantive context, leading to a total of 24 results. We then integrated the obtained results by conducting further research on Google Scholar, snowballing (i.e. citation searching) the most relevant papers we retrieved. This produced an additional 17 references.

Finally, in the “identification” step we started by eliminating all duplicates. In addition, we read through the most relevant sections of each paper and finally confirmed their eligibility for inclusion in our systematic literature review. At the end of the process, a total of 27 papers remained for consideration and review, and were included in the software Citavi 6.0, which in this instance was used both as a reference management software and as a coding software for the themes identified. The following Figure 1 exemplifies the PRISMA statement approach we adopted in this work.

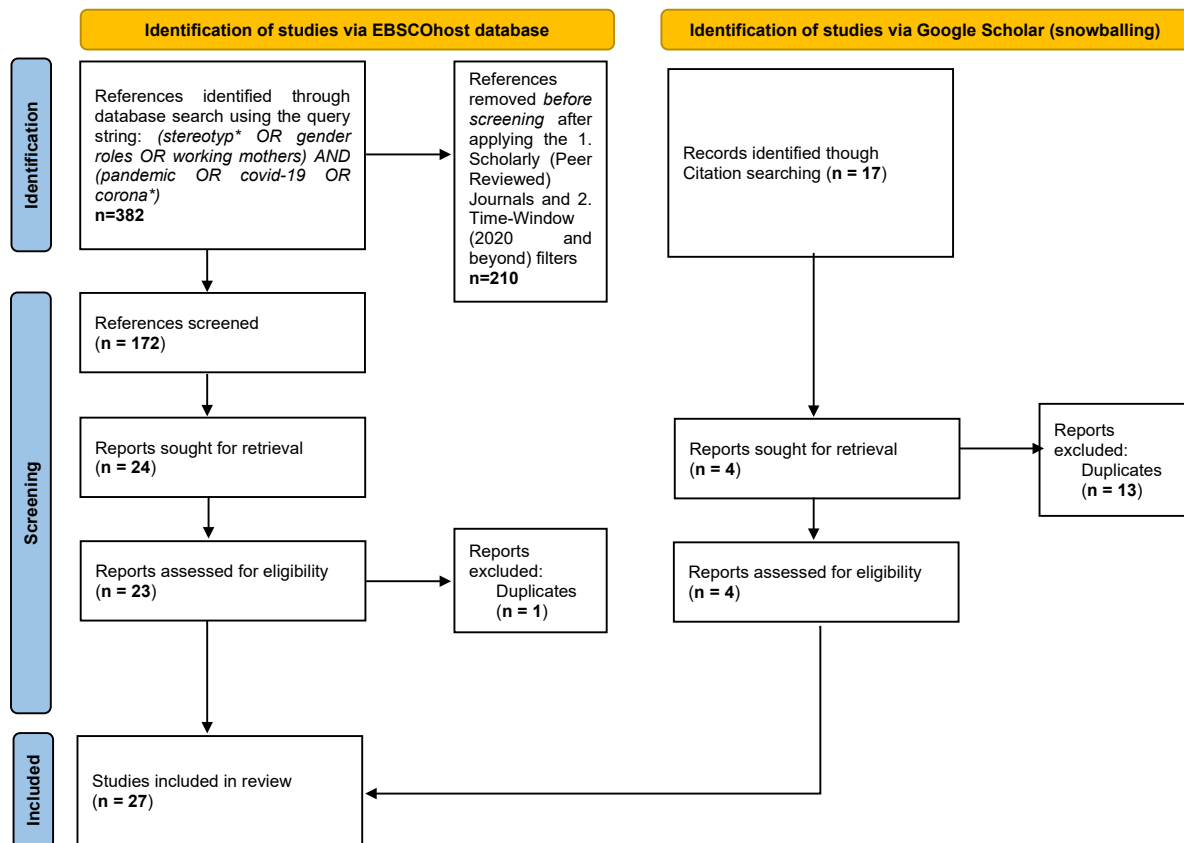


Figure 1: Mapping citations result with PRISMA information flow

4. Findings

4.1 The early stage of the pandemic

An early study by the World Bank predicted that men and women would be affected differently by the pandemic, and that intra-household allocation of resources would play a major role in achieving a higher degree of gender equality in the long run or rather in further confirming and reinforcing stereotyping and gender discrimination (Paz *et al.*, 2020). The relevance of the impact of COVID-19 on gender roles has also been confirmed in seminal academic research (Alon *et al.*, 2020). Initial investigations in the early stages of the pandemic across different countries and industries, however, resulted in a confirmation of the gender gap: i) Women took on more childcare responsibilities than men even when both were working from home (Adams-Prassl *et al.*, 2020), ii) Mothers in dual-career couples were more likely to quit working or to reduce their work hours than men, with the gender gap in work hours growing by 20–50 per cent (Collins *et al.*, 2020), iii) Men increased their participation in housework and childcare slightly, but most of the burden still fell on women (Farré *et al.*, 2020). Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2021), in the early stages of the pandemic, found confirmation of the traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In the same vein, Czymara *et al.* (2021) found confirmation of gendered patterns relating to perceptions in the early stages of the pandemic, with women worried more about childcare and men more about paid work, even within well-educated couples. In Italy, Del Boca *et al.* (2020) showed that the amount of childcare/housework men would shoulder depended largely upon their partner's working arrangements (Del Boca *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, in cases where the mother works on-site only (and the father stays at home at least one workday a week), gender differences have been found to be less pronounced since fathers are more likely to increase their share accordingly (Alon *et al.*, 2020; Arntz *et al.*, 2020). However, Sevilla and Smith (2020) found an asymmetric response in cases where both partners work from home: women are then still in charge of 65.5 per cent of the additional childcare. Nevertheless, the disruption of daily routines with forced remote work and increased childcare time could potentially lead to overcoming, or at least mitigate, the classic dichotomy in gender role attribution. For this to be possible, however, both the family domain (Fisher and Ryan, 2021) and the work domain (Barhate and Hirudayaraj, 2021) would have to internalise changes in culture, norms and attitudes that would allow for a higher degree of equality. In the following paragraph, we review the academic works which have investigated these dimensions over the course of the pandemic.

4.2 During the pandemic

Hennecke and Pape (2021) used German survey data to investigate the short- and long-term effects of an exogenous shock, namely paternal job loss. They found a positive impact on time allocated to childcare and housework on weekdays (respectively, +1.2h=+58%, and +1.7h=+79% relative to baseline). However, these short-term effects were offset after the re-employment of the father, especially when his partner was not working. In fact, in this specific circumstance, the net medium- to long-term effect is a *lower* involvement of the father, even compared to pre-job loss periods. Ultimately, time availability and financial constraints inhibit persistent change in gender role attitudes. Another study investigated the backlash-vs-convergence dichotomy by analysing three waves of survey data from a non-probability sample from Germany (Hipp and Bünning, 2021). The results suggested that while the division of childcare was more equal in the early stages, during and after the lockdown gender stereotyping within the household still persisted, with women reporting lower levels of satisfaction with their work, family and life in general. The net result seems to lean toward an increase in gender inequalities within the time-period investigated, albeit with considerable temporal dynamics. Hank and Steinbach (2021) based their analysis on pre-release data from the German Family Panel (pairfam; Wave 12) and its supplementary COVID-related online survey (n=3,108). They found no consistent changes in intra-couple division of labour. Some directionalities at the extremes of the distribution were reported (i.e. more couples conforming to “traditional” gender role attribution accompanied by more couples showing “role reversal”), but, on average, the “COVID shock” confirmed a stable framework rather than fostering gender convergence. Again in Germany, Jessen *et al.* (2021) found that working mothers have been left completely or almost completely alone with the care work. Naujoks *et al.* (2021) found that men receiving short-time work benefits triggered more gender-equal behaviours, albeit moderated by their level of education. An interesting cross-national study by Reichelt *et al.* (2021) investigated gender-role attitudes during the pandemic in the US, Germany, and Singapore. After controlling for the higher share of flexible work arrangements for working mothers (i.e. part-time), the employment risk remained, on average, unchanged compared to the baseline pre-COVID. Women in Germany and Singapore, however, are more likely to transition to unemployment as a consequence of the COVID-19 shock to the labour market. Yamamura and Tsustsui (2021) further analysed the impact of school

closures on gender role attribution in Japan, where workers could freely choose their work arrangement even during the pandemic. The main findings were that in households with children aged under 12, fathers were less likely to work from home while the opposite was true for mothers. This implies that the pandemic has increased the gender childcare gap, since mothers have to shoulder both the higher childcare- and their remote work duties. However, grandparents were found to play a mediating role in arrangements where both parents worked. Fukai *et al.* (2021) reached similar results for Japan, estimating that the employment rate of working mothers decreased by 4 percentage points during the period April-December 2020. A further contribution from Zamorro and Prados (2021) for the US confirmed that women, even when still working, had a greater degree of responsibility for childcare during the COVID-19 crisis. This result was consistent even when controlling for their specific working situations; and a reduction in working hours and a higher probability of opting out were reported. As a consequence of higher stress levels, a small but new gap in psychological distress emerged between working and non-working women. Finally, Boll *et al.* (2021), after studying 1,120 parents, found only a small and temporary increase in father participation, which was mostly due to the impossibility of the mother working from home. This seems to suggest that the changes are motivated more by necessity rather than providing a real opportunity for gender convergence, with those variations levelling out once the necessity (i.e. pandemic shock) no longer applies. In addition, the authors found that maternal telework produces a counterintuitive outcome, with mothers taking on even more responsibility for childcare. Ultimately, this paper has not found strong support of either the backlash or the convergence theory, as it appears that gender role dynamics revert to their former state in the medium to long term.

5. Conclusions and future research

Overall, the pattern of results revealed a somewhat predictable picture regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender role attribution and stereotyping. By reviewing the most up-to-date literature on this topic, we ultimately found that the effects of the pandemic on both the labour market and familial arrangements did not produce strong and consistent macrodynamic changes as far as gender care gap is concerned. First, both during the early stages and the development of the pandemic, studies concur that, relatively and on average, the generalised increase in childcare was shouldered by the mothers rather than the fathers (Collins *et al.*, 2020; Farré *et al.*, 2020; Akuoko *et al.*, 2021; Yamamura and Tsutsui, 2021; Zamorro and Prados, 2021). Second, mothers in dual-career couples, a familial arrangement more and more common in developed countries, were faced with a higher work-hour gap compared to both men and childless women, as they reduced their work hours or quit working completely. Third, especially for the early stages of the pandemic, traditional gender role attribution has been confirmed, across countries and with different samples/methodologies (Czymara *et al.*, 2021; Rosenfeld and Tomiyama, 2021; Hipp and Büning, 2021). Fourth, any temporary shift and deviation from the traditional male-breadwinner model is usually caused by either the working arrangements of the female partner (Del Boca *et al.*, 2020), temporary paternal unemployment due to temporary shocks to labour supply (Hennecke and Pape, 2021), or the impossibility of the working mother being able to work from home (Boll *et al.*, 2021). Fifth, as a result of a higher level of stress at home and a lower level of satisfaction at work, a new gap in psychological distress has emerged for working women compared to both men and childless women (Zamorro and Prados, 2021). Sixth, at best, and in conclusion of this paper, the pandemic has not produced any substantial long-term effects on stereotyping, gender discrimination and gender role attribution at large (Boll *et al.*, 2021; Hank and Steinbach, 2021; Reichelt *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, we believe in the value of conducting much more research on this topic.

Future research could further investigate the role of individuals (familial level) and organisations (work environment) in reducing gendered roles, especially during times of prolonged uncertainty (Fisher and Ryan, 2021). In addition, the use of the difference-in-difference (DID) method or experiments has been suggested to further analyse the effects of COVID-19 in different cultural and economic background settings (Yamamura and Tsutsui, 2021). A cross-country evaluation of the impact of national culture on the evolution of the gender gap following a pandemic shock could also be a promising research avenue. Even if early evidences of maternal telework seem to suggest a negative outcome for gender equality (Boll *et al.*, 2021), we believe that further, more generalised, research on the impact of remote working and “the new normal” could lead to different results, especially in the long term. Finally, we recognise the potential value of deepening our understanding of the long-term effects of this unprecedented shock, since most of the contributions we reviewed were aimed at investigating the early stages of the pandemic and/or its close developments.

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