



Work and Care: Gender Inequalities in the COVID-19 Pandemic in El Salvador

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Abstract

Care work is vital for social reproduction but relies almost exclusively on women; in addition to this, social reproduction activities are generally unpaid, undermining their role in sustaining the economy and life itself. This historic burden on women impacts their access to the labor market, the quality of their jobs, and their physical, mental, and emotional health. In this paper, we find evidence of gender inequalities in the labor market and their relationship with time allocation and unpaid care work in El Salvador, a Central American country. We use the Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples for 2019 and 2020 to identify the hours women and men spent in care before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they differ according to their position in the workforce, the presence of children, and their ages. According to the results, in 2019, female workers allocated 22.6 hours per week to care activities and 26.8 hours when they had children, while men spent 7.6 hours per week and 8.8 when they had children. This shows that women work three times more per week in care activities than men, and even more when they have children. Additionally, the care workload increases to up to 33.6 hours per week for women with children of 5 years old or younger. Since many women had to work from home during the pandemic, social reproduction activities overlapped with their job responsibilities. In fact, in 2020, the care workload demanded up to 24 hours per week from female workers' time, 28 if they had children, while men allocated 8 to 9 hours per week to these activities. This work intensity requires women to stop working or to become self-employed, more likely in the informal sector.

Keywords: Economics; El Salvador; time allocation; social reproduction; women.

Introduction

Life is vulnerable, and we require assistance to get through it sometimes. The need for care work will always be a reality of modern society, and social reproduction relies on that certainty, yet the impact is invisible and disregarded as a viable contributor to a capitalist society (Federici, 2013; Perez Orozco, 2014).

According to Nancy Fraser (2016), there is an underlying and threatening contradiction between capital and social reproduction itself in the capitalist society. Capitalists need the social reproduction processes to continue to support an unlimited accumulation model, but it endangers the conditions and foundations of social reproduction on which it relies. Among the prerequisite conditions that make life and the capitalist system possible are all the activities of childbearing, caregiving, cleaning, feeding, and maintaining human beings to constitute them as social subjects ready to produce in the capitalist industries (Perez Orozco, 2014).

Despite their importance, these activities are regarded as unproductive labor, as they cannot be monetized, and have been separated from the domain of economic production. Moreover, they are considered feminine, and as such, they are the exclusive responsibility of women (Fraser, 2016). Therefore, Capitalism simultaneously depends on the provision of care work and undermines its value in economic production, while declaring the superiority of men over women, making the latter perform enormous unpaid work for the benefit of capital accumulation.

The COVID-19 crisis is the perfect scenario to showcase this contradiction. As part of the neoliberal model, governments have downsized, and social protection systems have been weakened, providing little aid for the millions of people who lost their jobs, got sick, or had to work from home. In El Salvador, there is no unemployment insurance scheme, and social protection systems have limited coverage. Erazo (2020) finds that three out of every four workers (74.1 %) had informal employment, meaning that their jobs were not covered or protected by formal arrangements (International Labor Organization ILO, 2007), such as social security schemes.

For example, according to the national household survey (*Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples*), in 2019, only 23.5 % of the employed population were covered by the Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social (ISSS), the primary health insurance scheme in the country. In the absence of institutional safety nets, the burden of the additional care work is expected to be taken over by the “background” or invisible sphere, which is overrepresented by women (Fraser, 2016).

On the other hand, El Salvador is a Central American country where gender gaps in participation rates and wages continue to be a challenge. In 2019, 80.5 % of men were in the labor market¹, whereas only 46.8 % of women had a job or were seeking employment (Digestyc, 2020). According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2022), in El Salvador, for every US\$1.00 a woman earns, a man earns US\$2.00. In addition, the literacy rate for women is 85.6 % and goes up to 90.1 % in the case of men.

Time is a limited resource that is divided between paid work, leisure, and reproductive activities. Every additional minute a woman spends in unpaid care work is a minute less she

¹ Either employed or seeking employment.

can spend at a job or leisure, including self-care activities. The increased demand for care work can consequently push women to search for more flexible—and precarious—jobs or to stop working altogether. In this context, it is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will have different impacts on men and women, which could stall advancements in gender equality.

This paper aims to investigate the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the labor market and time allocation arrangements regarding care work between men and women in El Salvador. The paper is organized as follows: in the first section, we describe the data source and methodology used; in the second section, we present the most relevant results. Finally, we conclude and provide recommendations.

Methodology

We used the national household survey “*Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples*” (EHPM) for 2019 and 2020 to find evidence of gender inequalities in the labor market and their relationship with time allocation and unpaid care work in El Salvador. The EHPM is a nationwide probabilistic survey with a two-stage sampling. Based on a representative sample, it is the most important source of employment indicators in El Salvador.

The EHPM has an employment section that collects information about hours worked, occupations, wages, and secondary employment. It also includes a survey regarding time spent in unpaid care activities. We consider care work any activities that preserve human lives and take care of others (Fraser, 2016; Perez Orozco, 2014). In this case, we considered the time the respondent spent (i) taking care of children; (ii) maintaining the household, vehicles, and furniture; (iii) doing housework; (iv) carrying water; and (v) carrying firewood.

In addition, the EHPM collects information about household members, including the presence of children and their ages. We use this information to group adults according to if they have children and the children’s ages. Kleven et al. (2019) found evidence that having to take care of children negatively affects women’s participation rates and earnings in the short term when collating surveys that were given to several English and German-speaking countries. Moreover, the authors find that the effects of child-rearing influence the participation rates and earnings extend in the long run. The International Labor Organization’s *Global Wage Report 2018/19* also concludes that there is a significant deficit for mothers in participation rates and earnings, whereas fathers are rewarded in the labor market, which is common among high-income countries as well as low-income countries (ILO, 2018a).

Other studies (Bruce, 1978; ILO, 2018b; Mateo y Rodriguez, 2013; Mora et al., 2011) find a relationship between the age and number of children with women’s participation rates. These findings support the need to address the presence of children as a relevant variable for our analysis.

The target population was the working-age population, aged 16 to 54², that are not currently studying. Since the EHPM collects transversal data, comparisons between 2019 and 2020 show a trend of changes in relevant variables; however, to make a more definite conclusion there would need to be panel data to infer changes at an individual level. The results presented are statistically significant, using 95.0 % confidence intervals.

² In El Salvador, women can retire at 55 years old.

Results

The COVID-19 crisis had an important impact on employment. Before the pandemic, 69.3 % of the target population was employed, and 58.2 % were men. The unemployment rate for men was 6.5 %, and 3.6 % in the case of women. 6.3 % of men were out of the labor force, while 42.5 % of women were in the same situation. In 2020, the employment rate decreased to 68.7 %, and the unemployment rate for men was 6.8 %, whereas the unemployment rate for women was 4.4 %, meaning that the unemployment rate increased faster for women. These results are consistent with the findings of Bergallo et al. (2021), who found that millions of women in Latin American countries lost their jobs due to the pandemic and that the job recovery for those women has been slower than that of men.

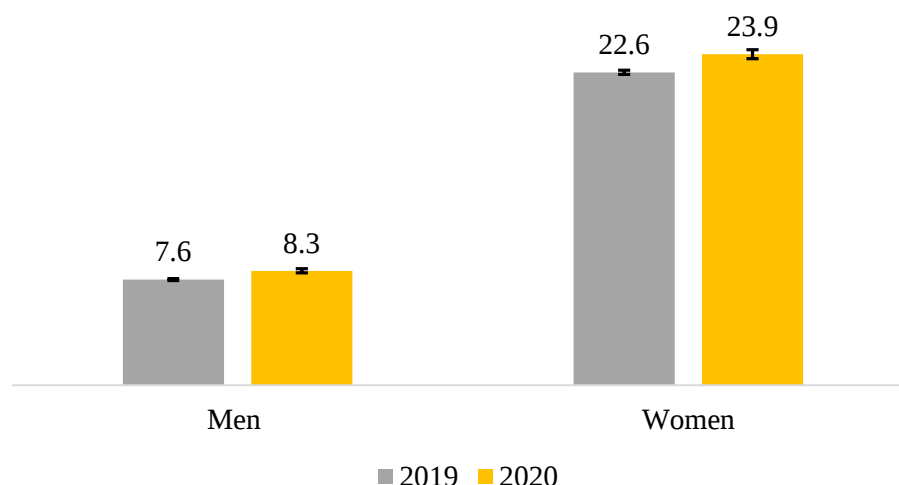
Given the current sexual division of labor³, women are often employed in low-productivity sectors that are considered feminine, such as education and social services, retail sales, the food industry, and tourism, among others (Peña & Uribe, 2015), which were particularly affected by the confinement measures adopted by governments around the globe (CEPAL, 2021). As a result, women were more vulnerable to the effects of the crisis on employment, and a minority of governments adopted gender-sensible policies to address this situation (Bergallo et al., 2021).

However, as Ferrant et al. (2014) affirm, these labor outcomes are also linked to unpaid care work and their unequal distribution between men and women. Back in 2019, employed men spent 7.6 hours per week on care work, while employed women spent 22.6 hours doing these activities. This time spent was up to three times more than men. In 2020, both men and women experienced an increase in the hours spent in unpaid care work. On average, time spent in care work increased by 5.9 % during the first year of the pandemic. However, the average time spent in unpaid care work increased by 1.31 hours per week for women, and less than an hour (0.64 hours) for men. Women spent approximately 24 hours per week solely doing care work (see Figure 1).

These results show that the increased need for care work was unequally distributed between men and women, where women had to spend more time cleaning, feeding, maintaining the household, and taking care of children, the ill, and the elderly during the pandemic than men. In other words, gender inequalities in time allocation were not questioned nor addressed, and therefore increased in 2020. This is true regardless of the education level of men and women (see Figure 2).

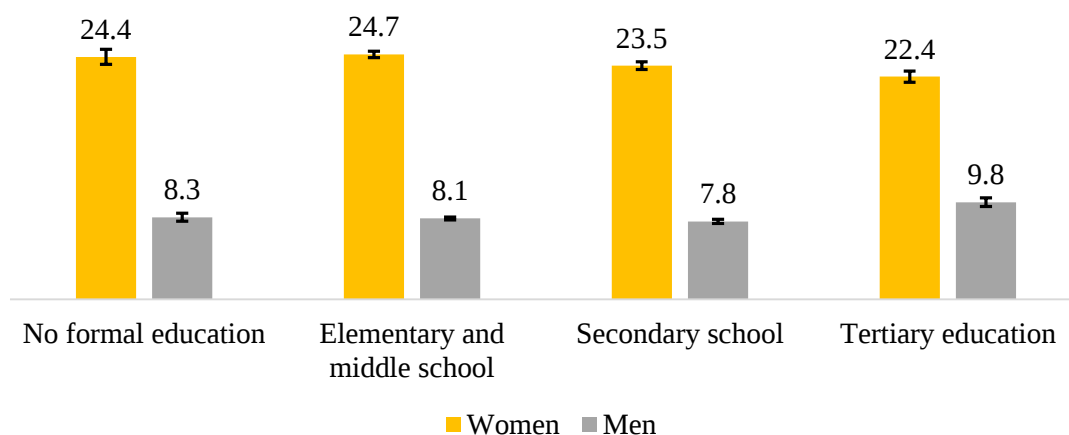
³ The sexual division of labor refers to how society divides work between men and women according to socially-established gender roles (Reskin, 2001).

Figure 1. Time spent in care work for men and women (2019-2020) (95.0 % CI)



Source: EHPM for 2019 and 2020.

Figure 2. Time spent in care work for men and women, across education levels, 2020 (95.0 % CI)



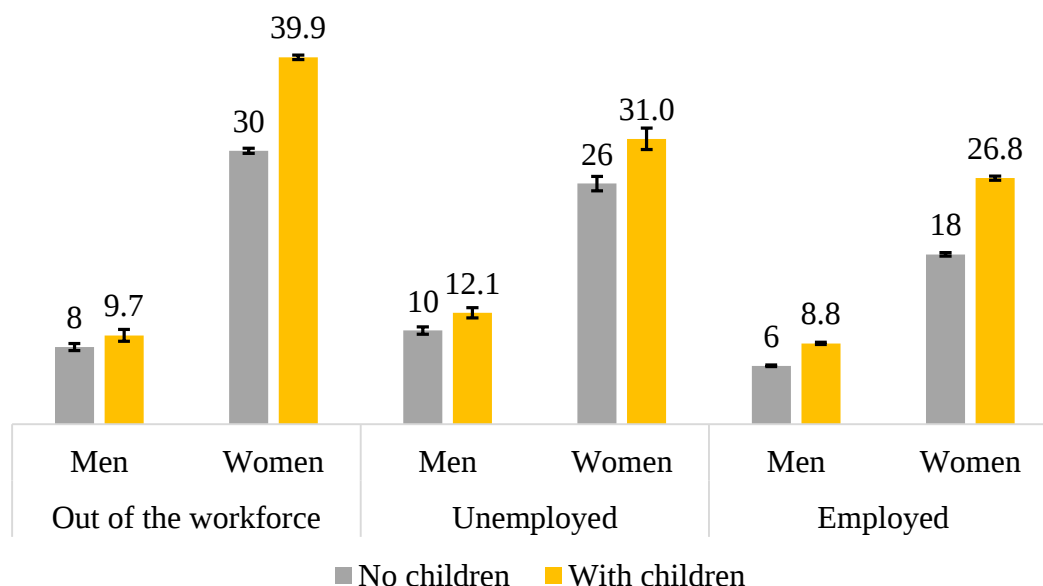
Source: EHPM, 2020.

As stated before, time is a limited resource, and the increase in the care workload translates to less time spent on other activities. Time allocated to unpaid care work decreases when women are employed, increases when they are unemployed, and even more when they are out of the labor force. In all cases, women spent more time in unpaid care activities than men. However, when we separate the time spent in care work between men and women with and without children, the gender disparities are more pronounced. Having children increases significantly the hours spent in care work, but the increase is higher in women as if taking care of children was predominantly a responsibility of women.

The differences in 2019 are shown in Figure 3. Women out of the workforce without children spent 30 hours per week on care activities, which is equivalent to a part-time job. Nonetheless, employed women without children spent 18 hours per week taking care of others, still three times more than employed childless men. Having children increases on average up to 10 hours per week the care workload for women, while men are burdened with

less than 3 additional hours. This is true regardless of the position of men and women in the workforce.

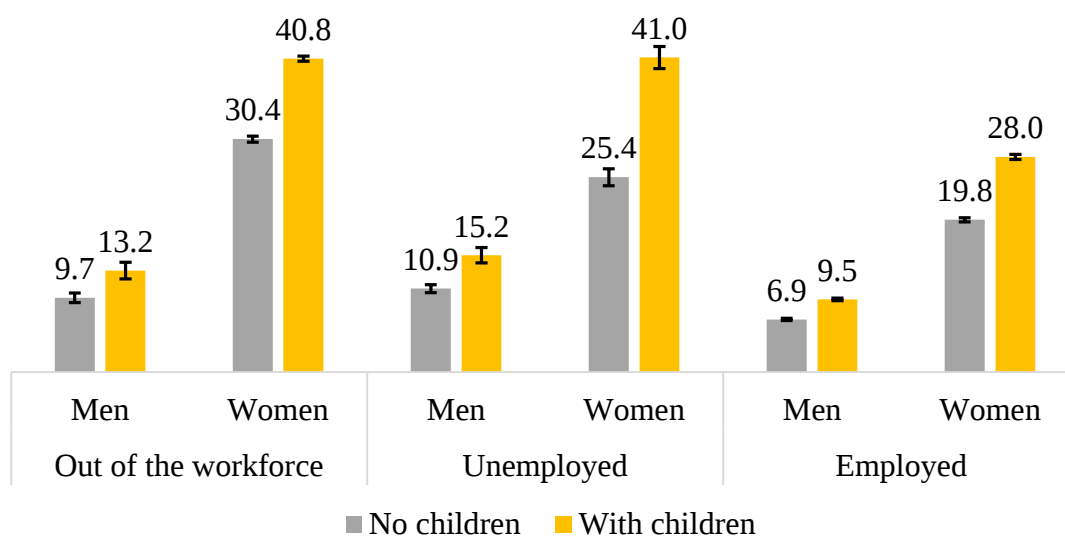
Figure 3. Time spent in unpaid care work, across sex, position in the workforce, and presence of children in the household, 2019 (95.0 % CI)



Source: EHPM, 2019.

In 2020, this pattern persists, and the care workload significantly increases for women and men compared to 2019. Women with children employed in 2020 worked 28 hours per week taking care of others. This means that on average, women with children had a care workload equivalent to a part-time job, in addition to their paid job (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Time spent in unpaid care work, across sex, position in the workforce, and presence of children in the household, 2020 (95.0 % CI)



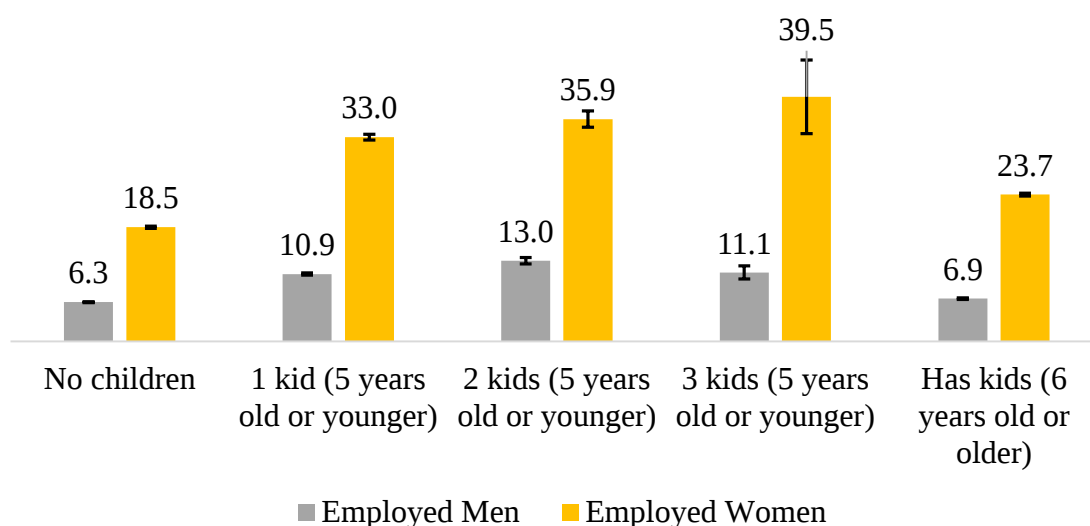
Source: EHPM, 2020.

Given that women with children spend more than 30 hours per week on average taking care of their children and others, it is clear that this workload may be incompatible with other activities, such as a paid job. Moreover, the time spent in unpaid care work is more involved when caring for children who are at a very young age, as they require more attention, and their food, cleaning, and sleep schedule is erratic.

Figure 5 shows that children at a younger age required more care from their parents than kids at 6 years of age or older, and more kids demanded more time spent in unpaid care work. In 2019, having three kids (5 years old or younger) made no difference (at 95.0 % CI) in time spent in care work for employed women, compared to having 1 or 2 infants in the household. However, having 1 or 2 kids (5 years old or younger) demanded significantly more time than having older kids or having no children at all for employed women. In all cases, women spent 2 to 3 times more time than men on care activities.

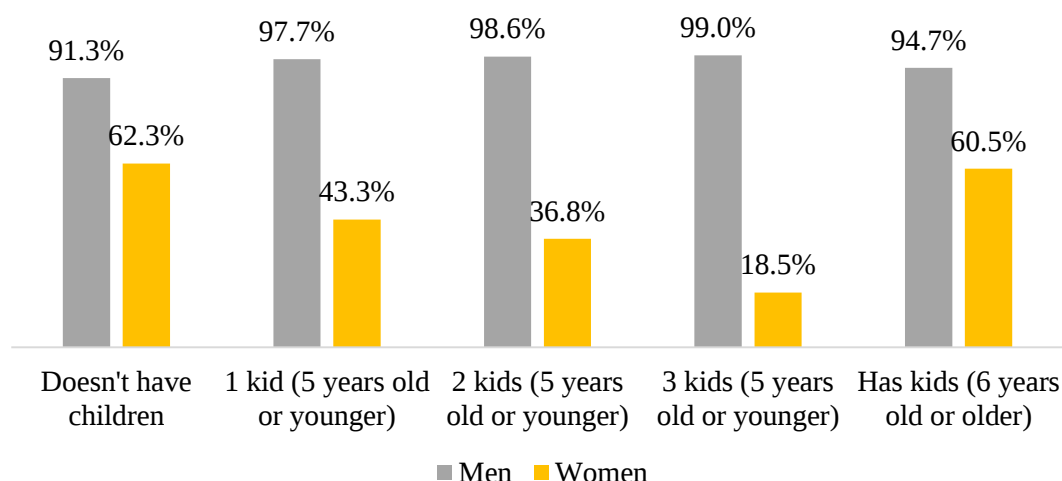
In 2019, the participation rate for men was over 90.0 % regardless of the number of kids and their age. However, the participation rates of women decrease drastically when a kid of 5 years of age or younger is in the household, from 62.3 % to 43.3 % respectively, and continues to decrease in the presence of more kids (5 years or younger) in the household, down to 18.5 %. The participation rate goes up to 60.5 % for women with kids at an older age, when their care needs are less intense (see Figure 6). As shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7, labor market outcomes are very different between men and women that are parents, as women's participation rates are very sensitive to the presence of young children in the household. The participation rates never go back to the level they were before children and clearly show detrimental effects of care work in the long run.

Figure 5. Time allocated in unpaid care work, across sex and number of young (5 years old or younger) kids in the household, 2019 (95.0 % CI)



Source: EHPM, 2019.

Figure 6. Participation rates according to sex, number, and ages of children in the household, 2019

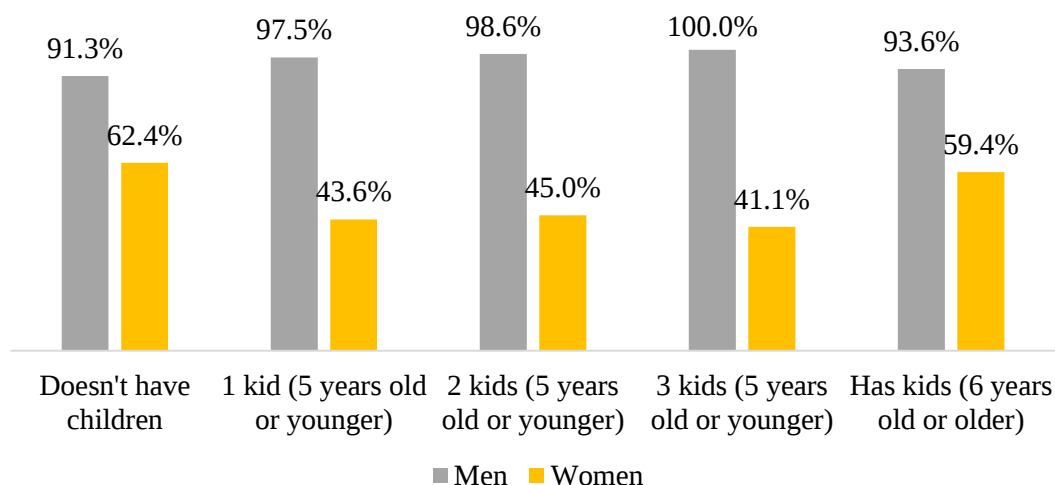


Source: EHPM, 2019.

As shown in Figure 7, in 2020, the stress on women persisted, although participation rates increased for women with two or three kids (5 years old or younger). This may suggest that women during the crisis were compelled to find a paid job regardless of their care workload, perhaps because of economic difficulties, considering the impact the COVID-19 crisis had on employment. However, gender gaps in participation rates are still above 40.0 % (see Figure 7).

Even in cases where participation rates become more evenly between men and women, it is not a result of better opportunities for paid jobs for women, but a result of an unequal distribution of care work between men and women in a moment of crisis. This is why it is important to include time allocation statistics: the results in the labor market by themselves would imply that the pandemic somehow contributed to close gender gaps in participation rates, but a wider perspective shows that women have a significant care workload compared to men, and this does not get better when they have a paid job. More women working at a paid job during the pandemic could mean that they were overworking at the sacrifice of their well-being. As Fraser (2016) states, Capitalism keeps taking women's unpaid care work for granted.

Figure 7. Participation rates according to sex, number, and ages of children in the household, 2020



Source: EHPM, 2020.

Conclusions and recommendations

The pandemic uncovered many governments' unpreparedness to protect their citizens' lives, health conditions, and jobs in times of crisis. It also showed that the "essential" workers were those fighting for human lives and those keeping the economy moving. However, the women doing care work and their contribution to society's preservation and sustainability remained hidden. National statistics all over the world kept close looks at employment and unemployment rates, but several countries keep ignoring estimations on care workload and time allocation (Waring, 1999).

From the beginning of the economics discipline, the labor theory of value excluded from the definition of work any activity that was not involved in the (industrial) generation of profit. Carrasco (2011) found it curious how the classic economists, like Smith, Ricardo, and Marx, that were concerned about the reproduction of the economic system, did not consider at all the work needed for the reproduction of the labor power, mainly that domestic and care work that takes place at the workers' homes. The marginalists, and later the neoclassic school of thought, totally replaced the concerns involving the labor theory of value and switched the emphasis to the market of goods and services, where they studied the behavior of producers and consumers and their rational choices.

Feminist economic theories reject this reduced definition of "work", and the systematic neglect of what should be the center of the economic discussions: the reproduction of life. By acknowledging care work as a fundamental activity for the reproduction of the capitalist system, the contradictions between capital and care become apparent: while the capitalist system needs women to continue taking care of all the workload required to reproduce the labor power, simultaneously make it harder and harder for them to carry out these activities along with their paid job, at least not without consequences on their physical and emotional well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic was a perfect scenario to showcase this situation.

In this paper, we have shown that in El Salvador, time spent on care activities is unequally distributed between men and women, where women had to take as much as three times more unpaid work than men. This gap does not get much better at higher education levels, where women with a college degree or higher education worked 22.4 hours in unpaid care work, and men worked 9.8 hours per week on average. As such, time allocation in care activities is systematically assigned to women as a biological destiny (Federici, 2013). Is this sustainable in the long run? At what cost?

Moreover, the gender gap in time allocation in care work persists even if women are employed, as women spend 22.6 hours per week in these activities, more than 3 hours per day in addition to their paid jobs. There is also evidence of child penalties for women in the Salvadoran labor market, as women with children participate less in the labor market, and they have more intense care workloads, which could cause their professional development to be stunted. This work intensity requires women to stop working or to become self-employed, more likely in the informal sector. Moreover, it can hinder these women's well-being, as they don't have time for self-care activities and leisure.

In 2020, the care workload increased significantly but increased more for women than for men. In addition to this, participation rates for women with younger children increased in the pandemic, which could result in mental and health issues for these women in both the short term and the long term. While governments all over the world tried to implement public

policy to protect the population from poverty and unemployment, the majority of measures (61.0 %) did not consider a gender approach. Furthermore, only 111 out of 2,517 measures assessed unpaid care work in their design (Bergallo et al., 2021). Altogether, gender inequalities in care work were not questioned nor assessed during the pandemic. There were still clear differences in time spent in unpaid care work between men and women regardless of the education level, position in the workforce, the presence of kids, the number of kids, or their age.

In this context, and given the systemic structure that assigns care activities almost exclusively to women, we cannot expect that time allocation in care work will go back to the pre-pandemic standpoint. The pre-pandemic situation was not an ideal situation, to begin with. The government needs to acknowledge this gender gap and design policies to promote care co-responsibility between men, women, and the private and public sectors, as care work systematically impairs women's capacity to find jobs and harms their general well-being.

The results of this study show that the presence of children imposes an additional burden on women to access the labor market. Consequently, women must have their body autonomy to choose whether they want children or not. In El Salvador, abortion is a crime, and it is punished with up to 50 years of jail time (Cardaci, 2014). To have a legal and safe abortion is a human right, and the government is compelled to guarantee that all pregnancies are desired (Human Rights Watch, 2022). As a society, we need to start questioning the traditional gender roles that are very present in the way we divide tasks between men and women.

Lastly, it is important to introduce in household surveys or other data collection projects questions regarding time allocation and unpaid care work, as they provide a wider perspective on the labor market and the economic system as a whole.

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