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Gender Inequalities and Fertility

Pandemic Childcare Burden on Mothers: Study Reveals Increased Mental Health Strain

During the Covid-19 pandemic, parents suddenly had to cope without formal childcare, placing a significant strain on mothers in particular. A recent study from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) examines the changes in childcare arrangements during the pandemic and how this impacted parents' mental health. Mothers who continued to be primarily responsible for childcare experienced increased stress and exhaustion during the pandemic. Fathers, on the other hand, benefited in terms of health when their partner continued to provide the majority of childcare duties.

Rostock, Germany. In a quasi-natural experiment, working parents experienced the worst-case scenario for daily life with children during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overnight all childcare options disappeared: no school, no daycare, and no other childcare options. It was a burden that fell primarily on the mothers in the families. A recent [study](#) by Nicole Hiekel of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) in Rostock and Mine Kühn of Tilburg University examines how the childcare situation in German families during the pandemic affected the mental health of parents.

"We looked at how childcare arrangements in families changed when schools and daycare centers were closed," explains Nicole Hiekel, leader of the Research Group Gender Inequalities and Fertility at the MPIDR. "What were the childcare arrangements before the pandemic? Was the established division of childcare maintained, or did it change during the pandemic?"

The researchers also analyzed respondents' personal attitudes toward gender roles. "This allowed us to determine whether these attitudes impacted parents' mental health. Specifically, we examined how changes in their childcare arrangement affected individuals' mental health changed based on whether they viewed caregiving as the primary responsibility of the mother, or believed in equal caregiving responsibilities for both mothers and fathers."

The study utilized data from the Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics panel (Pairfam) a multidisciplinary longitudinal study launched in 2008 to examine partnership and family living arrangements in Germany. The research focused on people living in a household with the other parent of their children. The caregiving arrangements considered included scenarios where one parent was taking on more caregiving responsibilities and those where both parents providing equal care.



Parents in equal partnerships are more resilient

"For most parents, the way they share childcare did not change much during the pandemic. However, the amount of care work to be shared increased significantly during the pandemic," says Mine Kühn, Assistant Professor at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. The largest group is the one in which the mother did most of the care already before the pandemic. These mothers reported feeling more stress, exhaustion and loneliness during the pandemic. The same is true for women who had equal caregiving responsibilities before the pandemic but became the primary caregivers during the pandemic, experiencing a similar decline in mental health. The researchers found that this relationship is particularly evident among mothers who believe that both parents should share paid and unpaid care work equally.

While their partners experienced health disadvantages, fathers whose partners continued to provide more childcare during the pandemic benefited health-wise: "These fathers were less stressed, less exhausted, and less lonely. In some cases, they were even more relaxed, possibly because they no longer had to commute to work and were less exposed to overtime standards. Meanwhile, their partners experienced health disadvantages," says Kühn.

Only 26% of fathers and 20% of mothers said they shared caregiving responsibilities equally before and during the pandemic. This group experienced little change in their mental health during the school closures. "Sharing childcare more equitably makes both mothers and fathers more resilient despite the increased childcare burden," the researcher concludes.

The health costs of an unreliable childcare infrastructure

The Covid-19 pandemic is taught as a crucial lesson: "The pandemic is over, but many aspects of childcare, both institutional and family-based, remain unreliable and unevenly distributed. Many women and men experience a disconnect between aspirations and reality, struggling to meet their own needs and those of their families and employers. The shortage of skilled workers makes institutional childcare less reliable and creates a care crisis of which women are, and will continue to be, the victims. This not only jeopardizes women's gains in financial independence, but also takes a toll on their health", Hiekel explains. Greater gender equality among parenting couples could make a big difference for mothers. "However, families, especially mothers, also need better structural support. This will benefit society as a whole in the long run."

About the MPIDR

The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) in Rostock investigates the structure and dynamics of populations. The Institute's researchers explore issues of political relevance, such as demographic change, aging, fertility, and the redistribution of work over the life course, as well as digitization and the use of new data sources for the estimation of migration flows. The MPIDR is one of the largest demographic research bodies in Europe and is a worldwide leader in the study of populations. The Institute is part of the Max Planck Society, the internationally renowned German research organization. www.demogr.mpg.de



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