

Coronavirus has left Australian women anxious, overworked, insecure — and worse off than men again

[abc.net.au/news/2020-05-24/coronavirus-has-set-back-progress-for-women-workplace-equality/12268742](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-24/coronavirus-has-set-back-progress-for-women-workplace-equality/12268742)

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Political leaders have found it hard to resist the temptation of characterising the COVID-19 pandemic in military terms.

Donald Trump — eager to self-apply a Rooseveltian shimmer in advance of November's scheduled presidential election — designated himself "a wartime President". "We are at war," declared France's Emmanuel Macron. "In this fight, we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly enlisted," announced the British Prime Minister and Churchill nut Boris Johnson, shortly before he joined — unforgettably — his own casualty list.

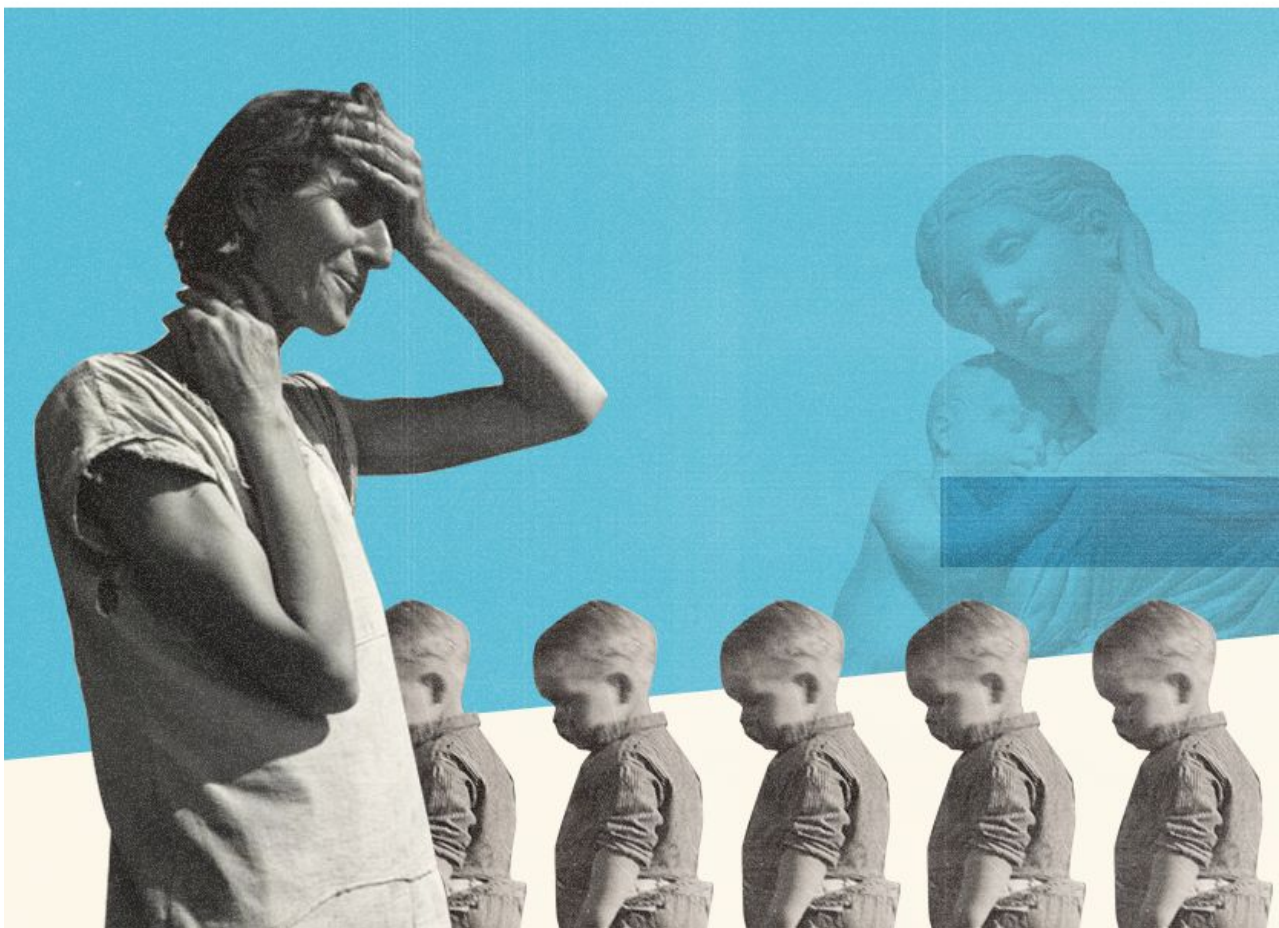
And sure — the parallels are superficially there. An attack by a foreign and inscrutable enemy. An apprehension of shared peril that's prompted a partial abandonment of entrenched political positions. A sharp uptick in backyard gardening and the home preparation of stodgy or indigestible loaves. Check, check, check.

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Just like wars, the virus is more deadly to men in the short term. While men and women appear to be at equal risk of catching COVID-19, men are — according to gender and health tracking agency Global Health 50/50 — consistently more likely to die. In Australia, men are 57 per cent of the dead. In Italy, they're 61 per cent.

(Why this disparity? When it first emerged in China, the best guess was that it had to do with Chinese men being enormously more dedicated cigarette smokers. But with men still dying faster in countries with negligible difference in smoking rates, the range of proffered theories has retreated, via immunology and hormones, to a generalised "we just don't know".)

Women — again, just like in the global conflicts of our shared generational memory — are doing the bulk of the clean-up at home. And while high hopes were entertained for the crisis to bring new hordes of home-based workers and thus a significant rearrangement of workloads within the home itself, early signs are that the gendered patterns remain all too familiar.



Housework is up around an hour and 10 minutes every day for women, but less than half an hour for men. *(ABC News: Emma Machan/New York Public Library)*

The division between men and women

Professor Lyn Craig, famous for her research into the gendered division of labour in the home, is currently conducting a study with University of Melbourne colleague Brendan Churchill of behaviour among families in COVID-19 lockdown.

Provisional results from the 2000-odd responses received so far indicate that for households with children, social isolation and school closures have created an extra six hours every day spent on caring for or supervising them. Of those six hours, the survey's responses suggest that for heterosexual nuclear families, around four hours are being done by women, and two by their male partners.

Housework, meanwhile, is up around an hour and 10 minutes every day for women, but less than half an hour for men.

"Shoving everybody into the house makes more work, especially for women," says Professor Craig.

There is a weary familiarity to the two-to-one division of these additional child care hours; two to one is roughly the division of domestic work that women have shouldered in Australia for generations.

Professor Craig says from a researcher's point of view, the COVID-19 crisis was a chance to observe how men would behave once they were able to work flexibly or from home, free from the constraints that traditional workplaces may impose on men in caring roles.

"So far, we're not seeing that if you take away the constraints on men from the workplace that it just suddenly becomes more equal," she says. "There's something going on, but it's not just the structure. They certainly are participating more, but it's not rewriting the gender relativities."

Of course, as the Workplace Gender Equality Agency points out in its recent paper Gendered Impacts of Covid-19 the demands on single parents — most of whom are women — are even greater. "With schools closed and other childcare arrangements, such as assistance from family and friends, discouraged due to social distancing measures, single mothers will have less ability to work and are at greater risk of poverty."



Men haven't picked up as much of the extra household load brought on by the pandemic (ABC News: Emma Machan/New York Public Library)

An emerging spinoff

With so much changing so quickly, it's hard to track the serpentine implications of this vast escalation in domestic workload, and the asymmetric style in which it is divided.

But the question of whether lockdown has been a blessed opportunity for quiet work and contemplation in the home office or a nerve-jangling exercise in multi-tasking at the kitchen table more or less necessitating a 5pm glass of wine does appear to be a gendered one.

"The next person who tweets about how productive Isaac Newton was while working from home gets my three-year-old posted to them!" threatened Sam Giles, a Birmingham-based fish palaeontologist, in March, in a viral tweet accompanied by a photo of her home office, in which the toddler on offer romps adorably in what is left of a cardboard box.

The deputy editor of the British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, meanwhile, Elizabeth Hannon, found herself swamped with spirited responses when she tweeted this observation: "Negligible submissions to the journal from women in the last month. Never seen anything like it."

Columbia volcanologist Einat Lev responded: "I just received an email from a male colleague of my same rank and family status (young kids). Except he has a full time stay at home wife. His email read 'This is a strange time but at least now, away from teaching, I can focus on writing'. Sigh & Scream."

This is the gradually emerging spinoff from the extra domestic load: what are women doing less of outside the home, in this time of doing more within it?

"Writing papers" is one small part of the answer.

"Running for public office" may be another.

In October, Victoria will be the first state to attempt a round of local government elections in the COVID-19 recovery. There are 79 councils across Victoria and 648 elected councillors, of whom 240 — 38 per cent — are women.

But Ruth McGowan, gender equality advocate in local government and author of the book *Get Elected*, reports that there has been a collapse in interest from female candidates.

"We're heading for a precipice," she says.

"A lot of women are looking at it and they're facing economic insecurity and more demands on their home lives. Not to mention worries about going out and campaigning where you can't go to public meetings, you can't stand outside supermarkets, you've got to be super savvy to run an online campaign. A lot of them are just going: Stuff it."

Local government organisations have lobbied the State Government to defer the elections, but have been rebuffed.

Thirteen councils presently have just one elected woman. "I reckon we are going to go back to having some with no women at all," is Ms McGowan's prediction.



Familiar patterns are being magnified by the corona crisis, with women picking up more of the slack at home.(ABC News: Emma Machan/New York Public Library)

A 'pink-collar recession'

What else will women do less of during this period, as they bunker down to keep their families stable? No doubt, the picture will become clearer over time, like a Polaroid.

But what is obvious right now is that COVID-19 is not like a war in one very important respect: it is destroying the employment of women.

"World War II was a driver of female empowerment," says Bianca Hartge Hazelman, founder and editor of Financy, which tracks women's financial independence.

"Women got a taste of money in their pocket and that really drove a great push towards financial independence and equality.

"What we are having now is almost the reverse. I've been tracking the financial progress of women for many years, and this is the slowest start to a year since 2015."

The social and economic commentator George Megalogenis has dubbed the COVID-19 contraction a "pink-collar recession", pointing out that unlike the 1990s recession in which men lost 85 per cent of the jobs, and the 1980s recession in which they lost 76 per cent of the jobs, more than half of the direct workforce victims so far in this event are female.

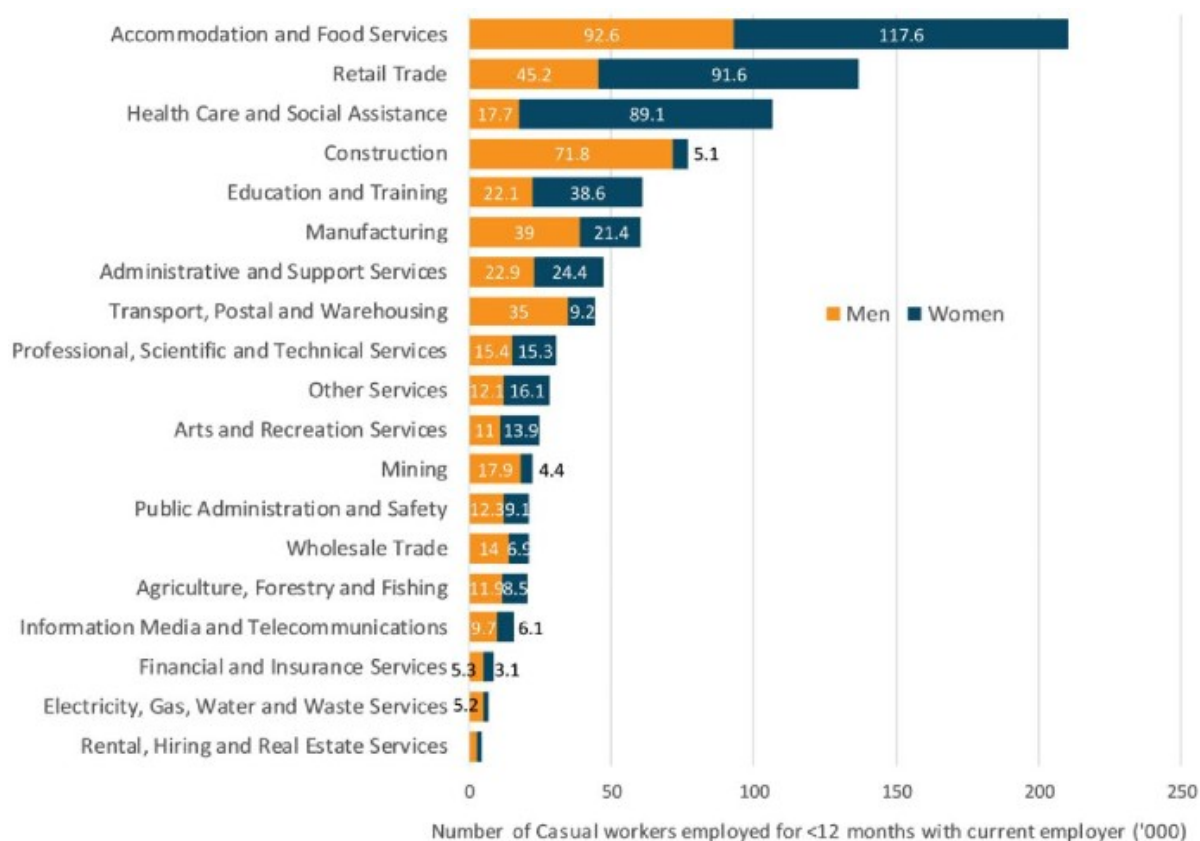
Three unintended consequences

COVID-19 and its attendant gang of unintended consequences have a number of bad news items for women.

One: They are over-represented in the fields most affected by an economic shutdown. The hardest-hit sector, food and accommodation services, for instance, is a heavy employer of women and has shed a third of its workforce since March, according to the latest information available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The next worst hit is the arts, which has lost a quarter of its total jobs — again, more of them from women.

Two: Women are over-represented in casual employment, and thus more likely to both lose their jobs during the COVID-19 contraction *and* be ineligible for support under the Government's Job Keeper package.

Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre researchers Rebecca Cassells and Alan Duncan crunched the numbers of casual workers employed for less than the 12 month benchmark required to receive JobKeeper.



Short-term casual workers by industry and gender (Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre/ABS)

They report that in the food and accommodation sector, there are an estimated 92,600 men who are casuals of less than a year's tenure, but 117,600 women. And in the health care and social assistance sector, the disparity is astonishing; 89,100 women, compared to 17,700 men.

Sometimes, the data on casual workers is hard to winnow out; in the university sector, for example, which has long been accused of casualising its workforce, job figures tend to be reported in terms of full-time equivalent positions, cloaking the actual number of precariously employed teachers and administrative staff.

The National Tertiary Education Union has estimated that women are around 58 per cent of casual employees in Australian universities. This matches the general pattern of women occupying more junior and less well-paid jobs in the sector; while more women than men are employed at universities, for example, the number of men employed at senior lecturer level or above is 9002, compared with 4685 women (on 2018 figures).

Universities are not eligible for the JobKeeper program, so significant ongoing job losses are expected in a sector suffering an extreme impact from the loss of international student fees.

Opposition education spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek said 66 per cent of non-academic positions at Australian universities were held by women.

"Universities are like small towns," she said. "There's hospitality, there's admin, there's the cafeteria and student services ... when you look at, for example, 600 job losses at Central Queensland University in Rockhampton, they are not professors. There are a lot of middle-paid and low-paid workers there too."

A third significant factor for women is that they are hugely dominant in the (often low-paid) fields which during this crisis have qualified as "essential services". More than 75 per cent of "health professionals" — which includes everyone from pharmacists to social workers to medical scientists, according to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency — are women. This group, like teachers, is more likely to be called upon to keep working through the crisis, often putting their own health at risk, while simultaneously obliged to shoulder the previously discussed increase in domestic work.



Women make up a lot of healthcare jobs, nurses, teachers, hospitality, lower paid and casual jobs. (ABC News: Emma Machan/New York Public Library)

The paid/unpaid nexus

How to summarise this fusillade of data erupting from this extraordinary period in our nation's history, and the world's?

Perhaps like this: Women right now are more likely to lose work that is paid and also more likely to pick up work that is unpaid.

Coronavirus questions answered



Breaking down the latest news and research to understand how the world is living through an epidemic, this is the ABC's Coronacast podcast.

[Read more](#)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in view of all this, women are feeling distinctly more anxious and stressed than men right now.

The COVID-19 Monitor Australia, a research project conducted by Vox Pops Labs in partnership with the ABC, asked respondents in its more recent survey to describe their own state of mental health.

More than a third of women — 35 per cent — said they very frequently felt stressed in the past week. This was a significant escalation from reported stress levels before the outbreak, when only 17 per cent of women classified themselves as very frequently stressed. And stress levels among men were lower than women's in both cases — 13 per cent pre-COVID, rising to 22 per cent now.

According to the survey, women have also experienced a slump in optimism over the course of the pandemic. Pre-COVID, 65 per cent of women said they felt optimistic, but in the most recent survey that fell to 47 per cent. Men's rate of optimism fell too, but less markedly; from a pre-COVID level of 56 per cent down to 52 per cent.

Anxious, overworked, insecure; it's not where Australian women hoped we'd be, going into this new decade.

"I think it's not going to be a good year for progress," says Bianca Hartge Hazelman.

"One thing we really need to do is understand the real extent to which women carry the burden of unpaid work and support the economy. If they weren't doing that, the country would be in a worse place than we are now. Maybe we need that national call out, that recognition, like we did in wartime; this time to support women, who are statistically taking the brunt of this."