

# Chapter 9: Gender Roles and COVID-19

Evidence is still being collected, but, as of July 2020, it appears that men are dying of COVID-19 in greater numbers than women. How much greater? Well, as early as February 2020, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention offered the estimate that men were twice as likely to die as women. Many speculated that this statistic was skewed by the far greater proportion of [male smokers](#) in China. Perhaps they were [right](#). As of July 2020, with 53 countries reporting sex category data, it appeared that while men accounted for 51% of coronavirus cases, they made up [58% of deaths](#). One country appears to be an exception: Canada. As of May 15, [more Canadian women](#) had contracted the disease (55%), and more had died from it (53%). Epidemiologists offered a couple theories: a greater number of women live in care homes, where the majority of cases and deaths occurred; and women are more likely to work in “caring” professions, putting them on the frontlines of the pandemic response.

Even if they have not died in greater numbers worldwide, in other ways women have borne the brunt of the pandemic. As discussed in this chapter, pre-COVID, women took on the majority of childcare and housework duties in families. When schools closed and children were sent home, these duties increased



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and a new one was added: home-schooling. While men and women both took on shares of this unpaid labour, evidence suggests the burden mostly fell on women. One [survey](#) of people in the US and Europe found working women performed 15 more hours of unpaid domestic labour each week during the pandemic than men. The disparity appeared to be constant across all wage brackets. In Canada, a [survey](#) found that women were experiencing high levels of stress and fatigue due to the additional unpaid domestic work they did. And as usual, minoritized and racialized women faced the greatest challenges: while 34% percent of white women reported struggling financially due to the burden of extra care work, that number rose to approximately 50% for Indigenous women and 55% for Black women.

Some feminists warn that the pandemic may have costly lingering effects on gender equality. Women are more likely to [quit](#) their (generally lower-paying) jobs than men if the juggling act becomes too much. They are more likely to be laid off (because they represent the greater proportion of part-time workers and work in hard-hit sectors like

hospitality and retail). Once you leave the workforce, it can be hard to re-enter it. So, women who do leave to support their children will have their lifetime earnings negatively affected. The pandemic may also entrench more [traditional gender roles](#); when men started to work from home, employers expected them to work the same hours. In contrast, women even before the pandemic were more likely to take flexible jobs, allowing them to assume greater at-home responsibilities. An alternative perspective is that fathers naturally take on more home responsibilities when they can work at home and that new flexible working conditions for both genders might lead to more equitable home arrangements.

## As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- What does the example of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention overestimating the ratio of male to female deaths due to COVID-19 say about gender roles, cultural perceptions of masculinity and femininity, and the challenges of interpreting gender-based statistics?
- Describe how each type of feminism (liberal, essentialist, socialist, postmodernist) would view the fact that women took over the majority of home-schooling and childcare responsibilities while schools were closed during the pandemic.
- What unique challenges do you think have increased the rates of depression and fatigue among racialized women during the pandemic?
- In this chapter, we discuss the gender pay gap. How might the gender pay gap have contributed to the extra domestic work that women took on during the pandemic? Imagine an alternative world where men and women are paid the same for doing the same work. How might this have affected gender roles and impacts during the pandemic?
- Do you think the myth of the “real man” and other narratives around masculinity may have played a role in the disparate numbers of deaths of men due to COVID-19? Develop a hypothesis and explain how you might test it.



## Additional online resources

This article describes some of the many challenges the pandemic posed to trans people in Canada.

- Donato, A. (2020, March 25). [Health-care access was already hard for trans Canadians. Then COVID-19 came](#). Huffington Post.

This author worries about women leaving the workforce due to the pandemic. What does this say about the role schools play in childcare?

- Goldberg, J. (2020, May 15). [Moms are leaving the workforce to care for their kids—and it's not okay](#). Chatelaine.

This article chronicles several gender-related impacts of the pandemic.

- Henriques, M. (2020, April 12). [Why Covid-19 is different for men and women](#). BBC.

This article draws on previous pandemics to make an argument that the pandemic may have long-term negative effects for women.

- Lewis, H. (2020, March 19). [The coronavirus is a disaster for feminism](#). The Atlantic.

What do you think men and women’s perception of the amount of domestic work they do differs?

- Miller, C. C. (2020, May 6). [Nearly half of men say they do most of the home schooling. 3% of women agree](#). Boston.com.