



Changes in the work routine of mothers in times of COVID-19 pandemic

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The following is the executive summary of a research work done by Shushan Ghahriyan with the support of the Women's Fund Armenia, within the framework of a research grant. The aim of the research grant was to determine the impact of the coronavirus on women. The views expressed in this study belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Women's Fund Armenia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The unexpected arrival and the fast expansion of Covid-19 affected all spheres of life including the labor market. In order to contain the virus, the Government of Armenia adopted several anti-epidemic measures among which were the closure of educational institutions (kindergartens and schools) and distance working. Since traditionally the responsibilities of childcare and household chores are ascribed to women, it was assumed that the additional chores occurred due to the pandemic would also become their responsibility. Before Covid-19 women used to work two shifts, one was their paid work and the other unpaid work (household chores and childcare). After Covid-19 women's paid work mainly remained as it was, however, the load of unpaid work increased.

More than half of Armenia's population are women. Women also prevail by the number of receiving higher education. However, when it comes to the labor market, the number of employed men is more than the number of employed women. The difference between men and women in the labor market is indicated by the size of salaries as well with men receiving more in every sphere. If working women have small children, then their responsibilities increase and it becomes even harder for them in the labor market. Due to these factors, women are more vulnerable in the labor market as they have to combine their paid work and household chores and childcare. This vulnerability becomes more acute especially in the times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

What are the main problems that faced women with small children in the times when the childcare institutions were closed and women had to work from home? How they tried to combine their family and household chores? This research aims at revealing how the pandemic has changed the daily life and work experience of mothers in Armenia. In order to learn about their experience and collect in-depth data on the topic, the qualitative methodology was applied. The method of in-depth interviews was chosen. The interviews were conducted with mothers who have children under age ten living in two cities of Armenia (Yerevan, the capital and Gyumri). Overall, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted.

WORK EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERS BEFORE COVID-19. Mothers participated in the interviews faced and still face such problems in the labor market as the difficulties of returning to work after giving birth to a child and employment, obstacles concerning promotions and career growth, overwork, absence of people who could support them in

the household etc. Usually, women cannot stay at home during the whole time of the maternity leave that they receive. This is due to the fact that the labor market changes and develops fast. If they miss work for a long time, they would be left behind the labor market. Besides, employers usually see women as someone who will marry one day, have a child, and thus, will create additional expenses and problems for them.

In addition, there are also some stereotypes in the society regarding women's work. Less than before but some people still think that women pay less attention to their child if they return to work shortly after their child was born. According to these stereotypes, women with children should have "easy" and part time jobs, such as, the job of teacher.

There are some differences in the labor market between Yerevan and Gyumri. For the same position the salary is higher in Yerevan than in Gyumri. Thus, the promotion opportunities also vary in both cities. Unlike in Gyumri, opportunities in the labor market are bigger and promotions are happening more often in Yerevan. However, this refers not only to women but also to men.

THE DESIRABLE WORKING CONDITIONS FOR MOTHERS. Among the desirable working conditions women mention the flexibility of working hours, the compliance of the working hours of kindergarten with the end of their work day, the development of childcare institutions and extracurricular groups at schools. Besides, they would like to see more engagement from their husbands in childcare and household chores.

THE CHANGES OF DAILY LIFE AND WORK EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERS AFTER COVID-19. The first thought of women about staying at home and working from home was that everyone in the family would be at home, they would interact with each other more and would spend the whole day together. However, after a while mothers understood that both their workload and the amount of household chores and childcare have extensively increased. The pandemic has changed the lives of everyone in the families. Therefore, the everyday practices and schedules that existed before Covid-19 have changed as well. The borders separating work, household and family have vanished or intertwined.

Combining work and household chores. It was difficult for women to adapt to distance working at first as they had to adjust their new schedule to the schedule of other family members as well. Mothers came up with some ways in order to be able to combine their paid work and household chores and childcare. Firstly, they used to work when their child was sleeping, be it daytime or nighttime sleep. Sometimes, when husbands were at home, they helped women by looking after the child while the wife was working. Another solution was hiring a nanny, although at first, they were avoiding contacts with other people in order not to be infected. The third option was to allow the child to watch cartoons for rather a long time than they usually allow. It should be noted that it was much harder for single mothers if they did not have anyone to help them with the household and childcare.

Work Efficiency: The increased load affected the work efficiency of mothers in a negative way. Among the mentioned factors affecting the efficiency were the difficulties of focusing on work, the inefficient communication with colleagues and the uncomfortable working conditions at home. Women did not have a fixed place at home where they could work from. They worked wherever was convenient at that moment by adjusting their work with childcare or other household chores. However, in the majority of times, that place coincided with the kitchen.

Many of them noted that their employers supported them by providing all the necessary equipment to work comfortably from home, including computers, desks, chairs, etc. However, it would be better if they could provide more flexibility to their employees and adjust the working process with the new conditions.

Besides the quality and efficiency, the increased load of mothers also affected their mental and physical health resulting in fatigue and stress. The latter also created tension in the relationships in the family. Part of the interviewed women who still worked from home and could afford, hired a nanny in order to overcome the stress and fatigue. Some of them came to mutual agreement with their husbands so that they started providing more time to their children. Some of them, if possible, preferred to take their child to kindergarten and return to office work.

In the long run, if the situation created by the pandemic lasts longer, it would be hard for mothers to combine work, household chores and childcare if they do not receive support from their employers, families and state institutions. As a consequence, they may be forced to leave their job.

Thus, based on the research results, the following recommendations were made. The recommendations not only concern the times of the pandemic but also are general in nature.

To state institutions

- Adjust the working time of kindergartens to the end of the workday. The kindergartens work until 17:30 while the workday ends at 18:00. It is true that kindergartens have special groups where children can stay by the end of their parent's workday, however, they are not provided with food or other activities during that time.
- Create extracurricular clubs for school children so they can stay there until their parents will pick them up.
- Carry out information campaigns which would highlight the importance of more participation of men in the childcare and household chores.

To employers:

- Provide more flexibility in the time of pandemic. This flexibility suggests prioritizing the completion of the tasks rather than working fixed hours.
- Provide working mothers with flexibility in general. This assumes that they can control their working hours so that they will be able to combine work and household (for instance, if the working hours are from 9:30 until 18:30, they could come at 9:00 and leave at 18:00 or they could skip the break time and finish work one hour earlier).
- Include sick leave and day offs in the organizations' policies. The latter will provide free days which employees can use for family matters if such will occur. In this case they would not be afraid that their salary will decrease or their employer will be displeased.