

CORONAVIRUS: COVID-19

The Coming Setback for Women in the Workplace

Countries across Europe are setting out schedules for reopening businesses, yet schools remain closed. How will that work?

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An executive at a major French cosmetics company told me she's been running a team of 70 and overseeing her kids' schooling while her husband, a nurse, works long hours treating coronavirus patients in a Paris hospital. Another executive, at an energy company, has been working full-time—as well as doing all the cooking and cleaning, and making sure her kids take their online classes—because her husband doesn't pull his weight. The chief executive of a French lifestyle website and her partner have managed to take care of their young daughters only because she isn't working full-time and has put her employees on France's part-time-unemployment scheme.

All three say their career has been under strain since France went into lockdown in March. All three have struggled to balance responsibilities at home. And with

restrictions slowly lifting, all three hope the government and the country's workplaces will ensure that they and other women don't burn out or leave the labor market.

France is an important bellwether in this respect. More than Germany and Italy, its extensive state child care and mandatory early-childhood education have helped keep female-employment levels high. But today, businesses are reopening nationwide while many schools are not. With women still the default caregivers for young children and aging parents, a disproportionate number of women might stay at home while men go back to work. The problem extends beyond France—a recent United Nations study warned that COVID-19 risked reversing decades of progress concerning gender equality in the workforce.

[Read: The coronavirus is a disaster for feminism]

Governments play a huge role in shaping the labor market, through enforcing labor laws, providing paid time off, and requiring that workplaces offer parental leave. Yet policy makers must now consider another issue that affects whether women are able to go back to work: child care and reopening schools.

Sending kids back to school is, at present, a chaotic process that varies widely across Europe. France has so far opened schools only for some younger grades with reduced class size, and made attendance voluntary. Germany has opened largely for students finishing high school. Britain will reopen its schools for some grades starting in June, but Spain and Italy won't reopen theirs at all this academic year. And yet all of these countries have been reopening their economy and businesses. How will this possibly work?

Even before the pandemic hit, gender imbalances in French households were pronounced. French women are “a walking paradox,” Garance Watez-Richard, another executive at a major French company, told me. France has good infrastructure—tax breaks for parents and widespread state child care for children from the age of three months, as well as public pre-K and kindergarten. “You see a lot of very successful women who have three, four, even five kids—and they all weigh 36 kilos [85 pounds] and have perfect nails,” Watez-Richard joked. “But at the same time what we're still hiding is a form of inequality, because it's not true that ultimately we've reached our objective ... We've earned the freedom to have

children and a successful career, but it's still us doing a lot of the housework and cooking and cleaning."

All the women I spoke with reiterated that sentiment. Céline Orjubin, the co-founder and CEO of My Little Paris, a lifestyle website, retreated to a family home with her partner and two daughters and put herself and her employees on part-time unemployment. Anne-Laure has had to cook and make sure her children, aged 8 and 18, do their homework, all while working remotely full-time from the south of France. "There's no real share of the burden in our couple, to be honest," she said, asking to withhold her last name and the name of her company so she could speak freely about her work and husband. "All of it is on me." Carine, who also asked that she be identified by only her first name, has been working remotely from Paris while keeping an eye on her two kids so that her husband, a nurse, can make it to work. Early on in the lockdown, she stopped holding video meetings between 11:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. to let employees on her team care for their children and help them with lunch.

[Derek Thompson: Social distancing is not enough]

"My biggest worry," Sophie Binet, who is in charge of women's rights at the CGT labor union, told me, "is a violent return of women to the home." Binet fears an erosion of the support offered to working mothers in France and elsewhere as countries, desperate to bring moribund economies back to life, look to reopen businesses without addressing shortfalls in child care. The longer schools are closed, the more women will "be forced to leave work," she said. If women, who are mostly responsible for homeschooling, can't take on additional work, "their careers will suffer"; "working-class women, or factory workers, are the most precarious, and they may have to leave the job market." (At the other end of the age spectrum, nearly half of all COVID-19 deaths in France have been at retirement homes. If families stop entrusting their aging loved ones to such homes, the burden of taking care of the elderly will likely fall on women, too.) Even an ostensibly subtle shift will have consequences, leading to what Binet called a "German" system—schooling starts at age 6 in Germany, whereas France mandates it from age 3; German pre- and elementary school ends in the early afternoon, while France offers extensive public day care.

Other issues will affect levels of female employment in France, and around the world. French workers, for example, have been able to work from home during the lockdown because the government put emergency measures in place, but working from home typically has to be negotiated in an employee's contract, and most companies don't allow it for more than a few days a month. Many crucial jobs that can't be done remotely—teachers, nurses, home-health-care aides, day-care providers, supermarket clerks—are also often filled by women. Underpaid and undersung in the best of times, these jobs are now considered “essential” to keep society going, but they are also highly precarious. Chances are good that many of these women will choose to leave their jobs to manage their household, lowering female-employment levels along the way.

[*Annie Lowrey: Don't blame Econ 101 for the plight of essential workers*]

The lack of attention given to the links between child care and levels of female employment is partly due to the fact that most decision makers in government and at the top levels of business are men. Germany has had a lower coronavirus death count than other major European countries. But even though it's led by a woman, it lags on gender equality. When German government officials invited Julia Jäkel, the head of the Gruner + Jahr publishing house, to a meeting discussing the impact of the coronavirus on the publishing industry, on the line were “only deep male voices,” she wrote in *Die Zeit*. “Where did the women go?” Where they went, she determined, was home, to take care of their children, with schools closed. “For thousands of women, home office means mainly home and little office,” she wrote.

The columnist Margarete Stokowski hit the same theme in *Der Spiegel*: “Many people are now noticing that it is women who more often have to reduce their working hours to reconcile work with child care,” she wrote. In a column in *Die Zeit*, Antonia Baum examined the resentments that grow with the imbalances between a couple working from home with two young children. He's worried about keeping his job; she's angry that she has to take care of the household and the homeschooling, and can focus on work only in the evenings. “Whom should she resent? The Federal Republic of Germany? Capitalism, corona?” Baum wrote.

The situation is far worse in Italy. Traditional gender roles and a lack of state child-care support weigh on Europe's fourth-largest economy, and will hinder its economic recovery. Barely half of Italian women work with a legal employment

contract, one of the lowest levels in Europe, compared with 68 percent in France and 80 percent in Sweden. With schools closed but businesses reopening, a recent headline in *La Repubblica* read “Phase 2: Eight Million Children Forgotten.” Italian parents received a “babysitter bonus” of 600 euros that covered the first two months of lockdown, and could also apply for parental leave at 50 percent of their salary. But that time passed quickly. It was a Band-Aid, not a permanent solution. It’s not clear if the Italian government is paying attention. Task forces and expert committees about reopening are almost entirely male—after some public outcry, the government added a handful of women. “It’s a scandal that all the experts are men,” Chiara Saraceno, a sociologist and an expert on gender relations, told me. “Not only all men, but economists and doctors,” she said. “There isn’t anyone who’s an expert on family-work relations. They didn’t even think of it.”

In France, a study of 34,000 management-level workers by Binet’s labor union found that women who worked through the lockdown and had children under the age of 16 reported an additional four hours of domestic work a day, while men reported three. Nearly half of women said they spent an additional four hours a day looking after their kids, compared with 26 percent of men. France’s gender-equality minister commissioned a study during the lockdown that also found working women carrying the weight at home. When I asked Anne-Laure, in the south of France, whether she had considered taking a break from work, she said no. “If I didn’t have my job, I’d just be the cleaner, the cook, the one who tidies the house,” she said. “I need my job; I like it.”

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