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Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Working of Saudi Women, and her Role in Confronting Them

Haifa Abdulrahman Bin Shalhoub¹, Mohammad Ahmed Hammad^{2*}

¹Social Planning department, Faculty of Social Services, Princess Nourahbint Abdulrahman University, Saudi Arabia; ²Faculty of Education, Najran University, Saudi Arabia; Assiut University, Egypt.

ABSTRACT

Background: The COVID-19 epidemic has undoubtedly affected the working conditions of large segments of society. More specifically, a growing body of studies has raised the possibility that precautionary measures and closures, as a result of, the COVID-19 crisis could affect women and men working in different ways, mostly due to the traditional division of domestic work between the genders in Saudi society.

Objective: In this study, we are trying to explore how the impact of the closure epidemic on domestic responsibilities and the work from home on men and women.

Methods: The researchers developed a questionnaire to identify the impact of the closure on childcare, domestic chores, and the work environment within the home, and applied it to 370 faculty members and teachers, with an average age of (38.5±9.6).

Results: The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences between men and women in childcare and domestic chores, which affected in favour of women. Additionally, the results indicated that the sample of students with children was significantly affected during the lockdown compared to peers without children. However, there were no differences between the faculty staff and the teachers on the dimensions of the questionnaire. In addition, there were no differences in the level of age over the questionnaire dimensions between them.

Conclusion: Based on these results, the study recommended the importance of urging university officials and the Department of Education to provide a range of rescue and stimulus packages, including support to faculty members and female teachers by providing flexible working hours after the epidemic, part-time work arrangements, telecommuting, support during pregnancy, and parenting. In addition, they should take into account the disparity between women and men in domestic responsibilities when evaluating for scientific promotion or managerial positions.

Key Words: Saudi women, Crisis confronting, working conditions, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

By late December 2019, the COVID-19 epidemic, which is so lethal, plagued the entire world in Wuhan city and rapidly worsened around the world in the first three months of 2020.^{1,2} Therefore, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia government has imposed a policy of strict quarantine and physical separation between its people through towns and cities. To, control the infection source, and reduce the spread of the epidemic in society. Likewise, implemented various emergency measures, including government agencies with employees working from home via the Internet. On March 8, 2020, The Ministry of Education announced that, under preventive and

precautionary measures to control COVID-19, it was decided to suspend the study in all regions and governorates of the Kingdom and to activate the distance learning system during the suspension period.³

MacIntyre, Gregersen state that online teaching is the dominant method of teaching now, as it replaced the traditional method of teaching.⁴ As well as, the lack of external activities for children to vent all suppressed energy has increased the competition between siblings. The fact that the house was quarantined escalated the situation. As a result, children get out of their tension through tantrums and violent outbursts., marking an escalation of the crisis among parents.⁵ In

Corresponding Author:

Mohammad Ahmed Hammad, Faculty of Education, Najran University, Saudi Arabia; Assiut University, Egypt.

Tel: 966-59-679-9414; E-mail: mahammad@nu.edu.sa, hammadeg73@yahoo.com

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line with, Boretti despite unprecedented national measures to combat the spread of the disease which have contributed to reducing the increase in the rate of infection and fatality, as well as to reducing the prevalence of the epidemic within the Kingdom.⁶ These precautionary decisions have had a significant impact on changing the daily lifestyle both within the family and the work within Saudi society. Furthermore, there was a significant negative impact on the level of job performance from home during the closure period.⁷ Many recent studies have shown that the boundaries of work and family are becoming blurred, and the gender distribution of responsibilities within the family is becoming clearer.⁸⁻¹⁰ In the same place, Zamarro, Perez-Arce point out that gender inequality has worsened during closure.¹¹ More specifically, strike a balance between personal professional roles is a challenge for many women, especially working women, who had children who needed their attention. In particular, the global epidemic, COVID-19, has caused a lot of difficulties for women: health concerns for self and loved ones, social and material divergence, travel restrictions, closed borders, lack of daily necessities, work pressures, and demands.^{4,12} Accordingly, Increase women's responsibilities as primary caregivers and as employees who need to work from home. This was previously described as the double burden or second shift, increasing demand for both family and work.¹³

Once women have children and take care of their responsibilities, gender inequality is further strengthened.¹⁰ This double burden is one of the obstacles to work-life balance where the negative impact between work and domestic duties has a significant effect on women.¹⁴ Moreover, some studies have indicated that the boundaries of work and family are becoming blurred, and the gender distribution of responsibilities within the family is becoming clearer.^{9,10} Besides, some recent studies point out that gender inequality has worsened during the quarantine period.^{15,16} Adisa et al. suggest that if state governments do not undertake proactive interventions to reduce these consequences, the COVID-19 crisis and beyond will have many negative consequences for women and families for many years.¹⁷ Likewise, Zhou indicates that many families need to raise and educate their children without the support of educational and educational institutions, which will put more pressure on mothers than men inside the house.¹⁸ However, if parents do not increase their household contributions, the epidemic may exacerbate gender gaps in childcare and the burden of domestic work at the expense of women's work obligations. Furthermore, Thébaud et al. imply that women and men in some countries may assert that the domestic tasks, which should be performed will be equal for each, but men are likely to ignore these responsibilities, leaving them to the wife.¹⁹ From this perspective, greater clarity in the distribution of childcare and domestic work responsibilities may not be a motivation for men to fulfill their homework responsibilities. Instead, the loss of childcare sup-

port through educational institutions may increase women's unpaid domestic as well as job work, causing further disruption to their jobs and working lives.²⁰

This study assumes that actions resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic have increased the couple's time at home with family and children, while reducing time in paid work for many people. However, the main question is whether moving to work at home, home education and self-isolation hurt women more than men. For instance, Jessen and Waights report that working mothers combine their paid work with the care and education of their children during the COVID-19 crisis by working long hours in the evening.²¹ In the same context, Andersen et al. express that the spread of COVID-19 has led women to devote more time to caring for and educating their children, while men remain relatively less affected.²² In addition, Collins et al. point out that when examining a sample of couples from February to April 2020 in the United States of America, mothers with young children reduced their working hours from four to five times more than fathers. As a result, the gender gap in working hours had widened by 20-50 percent, which had a negative impact on women.²⁰

Likewise, while women were already doing most of the unpaid care work in the world before the emergence of the COVID-19 epidemic, emerging research suggests that the crisis and its post-closure response have significantly increased the burden on women.⁸ In particular, women suffer a greater reduction in well-being than men during the crisis.²³⁻²⁵ According to other results, Andrew Set up that women bore the majority of overtime (childcare and domestic work) in Italy and the United Kingdom.²⁶ As well, Adams-Prassl state that women were more likely to lose jobs than men.²⁷

The authors argue that the epidemic had a clear impact on the parents' work and that women were more affected in their careers than men during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, we join this growing body of research in trying to illustrate gender differences in employment during the COVID-19 crisis. As far as we know, there are no published studies showing gender differences in job performance during the COVID-19 epidemic in Saudi Arabia. Thereby, this study aims to measure the degree of gender differences in the level of job performance during the COVID-19 epidemics in Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, the problem of the study could be formulated in the following main question: Are there differences between males and females in the level of job performance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Sample

This study uses data from a CT survey conducted in Saudi Arabia, following the end of curfew and closure. More spe-

cifically, the authors used an online questionnaire distributed through social media apps, and participants were encouraged to distribute the questionnaire. Participants received the request for a survey through WhatsApp groups of colleagues, family or friends, faculty, and teachers in Riyadh and Najran, Saudi Arabia. Informed approvals were obtained via the Internet before questions were followed up. In this case, informed consent offered two options of “yes,” for those who volunteered to participate in the study, and “no,” for those who did not want to participate. Only those who chose the positive answer were taken to the questionnaire page to complete the questionnaire.

Respondents were clearly informed of the purpose and objectives of the study and they were free to withdraw at any time, without giving reasons, and all information and opinions provided would be anonymous and confidential. The study protocol was approved by the Board of Institutional Audit of Princess Nourabint Abdurrahman University in Riyadh. Surveys were completed by 380 responding parents. A total of 10 cases were excluded because the response was contrary to the attached instructions with the questionnaire, of the remaining 370 respondents, 244 (76%) were women, and 126 (34%) were men, with an average age of (38.5±9.6). as well as, 67% of faculty at Princess Noura and Najran Universities, 32% of teachers in Riyadh and Najran education. 86% have children, 89% work in the government sector.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire has been built to collect data by researchers after reviewing relevant literature.^{7,8,17,22,25,26} The questionnaire consists of two main sections: Section I, collected information on the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, including age, gender, marital status, level of education, and employment status. Section II, collected information on significant changes in domestic work and working conditions after closure, consisting of three dimensions: the first dimension, measures the impact of the work from home on performance during the COVID- 19 crisis, it has 7 items. For example, I have to complete my job work at night when the boys go to sleep. The second dimension measures the usual role in doing the domestic work and caring for children, and it contains 5 items. For example, the COVID- 19 crisis has greatly affected my habits in caring for my children. The third dimension measures the contribution to domestic work and childcare after the COVID-19 crisis and contains 6 items. For example, my contribution to domestic work takes more time after the COVID-19 crisis.

The Likert 3-point scale was used (agree - neutral - disagree), the scores were distributed from 3 to 1, 1 to “disagree,” 3 to “agree.” The questionnaire was tested in terms of face, content, and constructiveness by an arbitration panel of 3 specialists in sociology and psychology. Instrument reliability was done using Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient test, indicating

high reliability of three dimensions (0.88, 0.92, 0.89, 0.91), total questionnaire (R = 0.90)

Data analysis

We applied descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The descriptive statistics included frequency, percentage, average, and standard deviation; these were analyzed using SPSS 21 (IBM., 2012). To address the research question, we conducted a univariate analysis to compare the differences between participants’ characteristics based on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their professional work.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the main variables. A total of 370 parents from Riyadh and Najran participated in this study. The number of men was lower than the number of women, which was 126, with an average of (33.06%), and the number of women was 244, with an average of (66.94%). All of the sample members were employed in the field of education, both the 250 faculty members in universities, with an average of (66.94%), and the rest of the sample of teachers in general education schools, the age of the sample was divided into four levels, with the highest number in the sample aged 40-49, reaching 34.5% of the total sample. As well, the number of parents with children was more than the number of parents without children, parents with children accounting for 86.4% of the total sample.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Demographic Variables

Variable	No (370)	Percentage %
Sex		
Male	126	33.06%
Female	244	66.94%
Profession		
Faculty member	250	67.56%
Teacher	120	32.53%
Age		
20-29	82	22.1%
30-39	94	25.4%
40-49	128	34.5%
50-60	66	17.8%
Child		
With child	320	86.4%
Without child	50	13.6%

Table 2 shows how the closure period has affected the level of work performance of faculty staff and teachers differently

for both men and women, as demonstrated by the responses to the three questionnaire dimensions. The first dimension, the performance has been affected by your work from home. The second dimension, your routine in doing your domestic work and caring for children. The third dimension, your contribution to domestic work. The gender variable in the three dimensions of the questionnaire is statistically significant, indicating that the COVID-19 crisis disproportionately

affected the working conditions of female faculty members and teachers, compared to their male counterparts. In addition, faculty staff and teachers with children report that they were significantly affected during the closure period compared to peers without children. However, there were no differences between the faculty staff and the teachers on the dimensions of the questionnaire and no differences in the level of life of faculty staff and teachers.

Table 2: The impact of COVID-19 on respondents' professional work during the outbreak of COVID-19 (n = 370)

Variables	N	The level of achievements has been affected by your work from home M (SD)	P-value	Your routine in doing your domestic work and caring for children M (SD)	P-value	Your contribution to domestic work M (SD)	P-value
Gender							
Male	126 (33.06%)	12.6 ± 2.01	<0.001	8.29 ± 1.78	<0.001	10.16± 2.30	<0.001
Female	244 (66.94%)	15.07± 3.45		11.60± 2.42		13.93± 2.36	
Profession							
Faculty member	250 (67.56%)	13.02± 3.09	0.90	10.01± 2.85	0.53	11.71± 3.28	0.15
Teacher	120 (32.53%)	13.46± 3.88		10.20± 3.08		12.57± 3.42	
Age							
20-29	82 (22.1%)	14.08± 4.03	0.61	10.11± 3.21	0.62	12.50± 3.31	0.48
30-39	94 (25.4%)	13.68± 3.53		10.35± 2.64		11.87± 3.18	
40-49	128 (34.5%)	13.30± 3.38		9.95± 2.12		12.36± 3.81	
50-60	66 (17.8%)	13.76± 3.62		10.18± 2.95		12.17± 3.37	
Child							
With child	320 (86.4%)	13.33± 3.44	<0.001	12.73± 2.92	<0.001	13.54± 3.02	<0.001
Without child	50 (13.6%)	11.02± 3.05		9.65± 2.65		10.88± 2.82	

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 crisis caused radical changes in the working life of most parents within and outside the family. Therefore, many measures have been taken; its impact on Saudi society has been significant, such as closure, social exclusion, and self-isolation. According to the evidence, the impact of the epidemic on families with children in education was more severe, especially when educational institutions and child-care places were closed down. The impact on parents within the family working as teachers or faculty members may reasonably be expected to be uneven.

Based on a survey of faculty staff and teachers in schools in Riyadh and Najran, Saudi Arabia, the gender gap in the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the working conditions of academics has been notable and statistically significant.

As well, the gap was worrying between teachers and faculty members with children compared to those without children. More specifically, the daily routine of female teachers and faculty with children has been disproportionately affected by the closure associated with the epidemic, as the burden on women has increased. Hence, these results largely correspond to the results of several studies indicating that mothers with young children have reduced their working hours from four to five times more than fathers work. As a result, the gender gap in working hours has widened by 20-50%.^{8,10,21,26}

These findings point to another negative effect of the COVID-19 epidemic, highlighting the challenges that pose to women's working hours and employment²⁰. Furthermore, these results are consistent with the results of other studies, which indicate that work in universities, where career advancement, depends on the number and

quality of a person's scientific publications, is not essentially compatible with childcare.¹⁰ In the same vein, Lutter and Schröder indicate that having children leads to a decrease in women's academic productivity compared to men's.²⁷ In this case, closing schools and caring for children means that children are at home, and need care, for at least six more hours a day. Mothers do less paid work two hours a day than fathers, but they do childcare work and domestic work within two more hours each. Accordingly, mothers combine paid work and other activities (almost childcare) in 47% of their working hours, compared to 30% of fathers' working hours.²² Likewise, women had significantly reduced working time than fathers, especially those with primary school-age children or younger children at home, whose care and home education requirements are severe.²⁰

Our results provide strong support for recent research that has found similar gender gaps.²⁰ Our findings indicate that the traditional gender distribution of work within the family disproportionately affects men and women working as teachers and faculty members. Despite the results of our studies may not allow us to explain the causal mechanism at work, one of the most acceptable possibilities, consistent with the culture of our Arab societies, is that closure may have forced women teachers and faculty members to give priority to home care and child care responsibilities, to promote traditional gender roles in the home.²⁰ We believe that, under the current circumstances of the absence of a specific date for the normalization of life, through the normal return of students to their schools and universities, the gender gap in the perceived challenges of family care and work requirements is unlikely to fade soon, if there is a disruption of educational institutions as a result of the worsening of the epidemic in the coming months. Moreover, there were no differences between the faculty staff and the teachers, due to the similar working conditions of both faculty and teacher, as students are taught online, each with a school schedule and required teaching hours, and they have the same household tasks and responsibilities.

Certainly, the increasing importance of distance learning by the Saudi Ministry of Education will require many faculty staff and teachers in educational institutions to reorganize their teaching strategy for Internet connectivity, which may come at the expense of faculty research activities or teacher promotion requirements. Thus, while it is too early to know the long-term consequences of this trend for faculty research activities or promotion requirements for teachers, the gender gap in perceived disorders in daily routines may translate into gender disparities in meeting fully occupational requirements. Future research that goes deeper into these possibilities may help us better understand how the COVID-19 epidemic affects families around the world.

CONCLUSION

Our paper adds to previous literature on gender equality, an important topic in the social sciences, and the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted a long-standing problem. More specifically, our Arab societies, as a result of, the culture of masculine society; the inequality faced by women, who often do more childcare and domestic work. We contribute to the literature by providing new studies illustrating the impact of the epidemic crisis on gender inequality in academia and education. According to the study results, female faculty members and teachers are unable to prepare promotion research or to promote as teachers to higher positions in a position of vulnerability compared to male faculty peers and teachers, as it is a justice issue that may expose women to higher unemployment or occupational risk in the future.

We hope that our findings will increase awareness of this problem. Some measures can be taken to ensure that domestic responsibilities are balanced between spouses. As a result, universities and education departments could provide additional support, such as childcare support, to female faculty members and teachers whose research productivity or promotion may be disproportionately affected. Universities and education departments should take this disparity into account when evaluating for scientific promotion or managerial positions. Despite the advantages offered by remote work of the opportunity for parents to take care of their children while completing their professional tasks, on the other hand, remote work may have unintended consequences for gender inequality. Thus, educational institutions should take gender equality into account when designing and implementing telecommuting policies. We hope that the results of this research will encourage officials to view this vital issue in greater depth, and to provide full support to female faculty and teachers by providing more flexible working hours after the epidemic ends, part-time work arrangements, telecommuting, support during pregnancy, and parenting. Thereby, supporting work-life balance and the quality of its practices are crucial factors in facilitating women's quality work. However, the study has a few limitations. Firstly, since the study is CT, the results may not be generalizable to other professions. Secondly, the small sample size means that the results cannot be disseminated to all female faculty and teachers in Saudi Arabia and Arab communities. However, if we want to circulate it within Saudi Arabia and other Arab communities, it will be cautiously.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

Author's contribution:

Haifa Abdulrahman Bin shalhoub: Project development, data collection and management, data analysis and manuscript writing.

Mohammad Ahmed Hammad: Data analysis, manuscript editing and Statistical analysis.

Both authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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