Gendering the pandemic: the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown on female students' household labor allocation in Morocco

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Abstract

As the Covid-19 spread across the world, it has affected the lives of people from all walks of life. While confined to home after the imposed lockdowns and closure of educational institutions, girls were called upon to perform family chores and assume caregiving roles. This may result in limited time and energy to continue their learning at a distance. Using survey data collected in April and May 2020 from a sample of Moroccan female first year university students, the present paper analyzes the effect of household labor allocation during home confinement on female students' remote learning. Findings demonstrate how the immediate effects of covid-19 pandemic showed themselves in education with girls being left behind, and display how the crisis has widened gender inequalities and created new challenges in a society where gender-based discrimination and traditional social norms already exist. Understanding the gender-differentiated impacts of the Covid-19 crisis is necessary to design policy responses that reduce pre-existing social and educational vulnerabilities and ensure that the gender parity progress achieved in recent decades is not reversed.

Keywords: Covid-19, Gender roles, equality, education, household labour

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has spread rapidly around the world, sending billions of people into lockdown. Therefore, the measures implemented by most governments to contain the outbreak have had a profound impact on all countries and sectors. In Morocco, the pandemic has exposed and magnified all kinds of inequalities including gender inequality that was already worrying before the pandemic. In other words, there is a strong evidence to suggest that the Covid-19 outbreak, like other previous similar health crises, would intensify existing gender and social disparities and/ or create new ones (UNFPA,2020). In fact, the wide school closures are likely to present a risk for female students in particular. Universities, our concern here, have moved rapidly from face to face courses and programs to online delivery mode; this implies

that students had to study from home and had to acquire and understand the academic content independently. However, as unpaid care work increases during the pandemic, the gender imbalance is likely to be further intensified if girls, confined to home, are called upon to cook, clean, care for the elderly and/ or sick relatives and assist younger siblings with assignment, jeopardizing their own time for learning. Research shows that as girls stay at home because of school closures, their household work burdens might increase, resulting in more time spent on household chores and childcare responsibilities instead of studying. As a result, some female students might be seen lagging behind in education, others might sometimes drop out of college or sideline their education plans. These effects are likely to be present in vulnerable households where the resources are scarce or in those where parents put a lower value on girls' education. While child labor continues to be a great concern in many parts of the world, less attention has been paid to the effect of girls' daily domestic work on their educational attainment. In this paper, we attempt to investigate the extent to which female students' housework allocation impedes their distant learning during the home confinement. By doing so, we try to bring the issue into the spotlight.

Household Labor and Gender Roles

Household labor entails different forms but it is typically referred to as being composed of housework and care work (i.e. childcare or care of the elderly and/ or the sick). Nevertheless, a reasonably consistent conceptualization refers to it as unpaid work done to maintain the well-being of family members and the maintenance of the home. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this research, household labor operationally includes housework only and is thus distinguished from all other activities and social interactions that might occur in the home. In her distinction between work and labor, the political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt considers housework as a form of labor defining the latter as the cyclical, repetitive, and unending satisfaction of life's basic needs and consumption necessities producing no permanent products and, contrary to work, having neither a beginning nor an end (Arendt, 1958). Quantitative studies about housework tend to be more explicit. They define housework, be it paid or unpaid, most often as the five most time-consuming, routine and necessary household tasks, including a variety of activities such as meal preparation or cooking, housecleaning, laundry (including washing, ironing, folding and mending clothes), dish washing and/ or cleaning up after meals, and shopping for groceries (Coltrane, 2000). In other words, it is work that someone else would have to be hired to do if members of the family do not do it themselves for one reason or another. In Morocco, men and women approach their daily life quite differently; girls and women are

often responsible for looking after children, cleaning the house, cooking and doing the laundry. Boys and men, however, would rarely or never be seen performing housework chores in the presence of a female around. Although gender-associated beliefs seem to be blurring nowadays, many traditional social groups are quite strict about maintaining gender-based differences. In late adolescence, the burden of domestic work on young women in developing countries generally grows heavier. Moreover, with the pandemic that disrupted schooling, the problem can only get worse. The vast majority of studies analyzing girls' housework have focused on the paid market work. In other words, the employment category for girls as domestic workers has received the most empirical attention. Family unpaid work has been left out of analysis. It is indeed considered a hidden form of labor because it is unpaid work, thus it often goes unreported (Webbink et al., 2010).

Distance Learning amid the Covid-19

On 11 March 2020, the world Health Organization has declared the Covid-19 as a major public health challenge worldwide. To help control the pandemic situation, compulsory physical distancing has been implemented in many countries including Morocco, resulting in nationwide school and university closures. At the level of higher education, a digital approach to instruction was abruptly adopted to enable students to complete the 2019-2020 academic year. This dramatic and unplanned transition from traditional in-person classroom instruction to a full distance-teaching mode through digital platforms presented many challenges for both teachers and students. In fact, a defining feature of distance learning is the physical separation of teachers from students during the process of instruction. As a result, what has always been the backbone of academic education at the university level has been missing. Faculty lecturing in a classroom setting, where students listen, take notes, ask questions, and get those questions answered have been replaced by web-based learning platforms. In addition, the educational exceptionality that has been experienced due to the pandemic has raised doubts and uncertainty about the usual different processes in the educational system and has affected students' concerns about future learning and employment plans. Students' mental health was also largely affected as a result and anxiety levels rose as quickly as infection and mortality rates. Indeed, the role of schools and universities extends beyond the subjects studied and the exams taken; they are indeed important contexts for socialization. Therefore, it is quite understandable that students felt lonely, missed the interaction with and support from their peers as well as the environment at college and the freedom they had before the imposed lockdown of going out

and about. These are not only important for young people's academic, social and personal development but also for their mental health and psychological well-being.

The Study

The study is exploratory in the sense that it seeks to describe processes and patterns common to a little-studied group then formulates hypotheses to test for the larger population. Students were informed about the study and its purpose through a WhatsApp group that was created at the beginning of the semester to enhance communication among them in relation to their Business Communication S2 course. WhatsApp was preferred over emails as it is user-friendly, easy to use and more flexible in time and place (Motterman, 2013; Sharples, et.al, 2007). These advantages have made this social-networking application more popular among the students who are often inseparable of their smart phones. Beside the possibility to send and receive instant messages, the WhatsApp application also affords technical ability for the researcher to track whether the delivered message was read or opened by the potential participants. Overall, 38 of the 186 female students, enrolled in the two groups the researcher taught and invited to participate in the study, completed the online survey and sent it back. They completed a one-time 10-minute online survey that was shared in a new WhatsApp group composed of the participants only. To ensure the scholarly value of the research, those students also received a consent form that included explanations of the purpose of and rationale for the study, anonymity, confidentiality of the data as well as other information regarding the researcher's expectations. Restricting analysis to the female gender is common practice in research about household division of labor (Pina & Bengston, 1993; Stohs, 1995) as they are generally more dissatisfied with family chores and more often desire a change. The self-designed questionnaire was a fully qualitative survey; the qualitative approach was opted for since the concern is on examining some constraints of life and capturing the individuals' point of view. The survey comprised different open-ended questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants. They were generally short, and expressed as clearly and unambiguously, as possible. Answers to these types of questions provide depth, richness, and new understandings of social issues even if the responses are brief, and usually help uncover opportunities that may have been overlooked by the researcher. In fact, based on their feedback, the researcher could gain rich insight into the social-psychological processes of interest to the study. Online qualitative surveys can indeed offer advantages for researchers and participants

alike. First, in time of health crises, like the Covid-19, that mandate social distancing and lockdowns, online surveys make an ideal alternative. Second, they are well suited to sensitive research since they offer a feeling of anonymity (Terry & Braun, 2017); this is likely to make participants more comfortable in expressing their views and sharing their reflections. The flexibility offered by online surveys is also to be valued as they do not necessarily take place at a particular time or location. Participants can choose when, where and how they complete the survey. Also concerning is the length of the qualitative survey. In fact, in determining length, we have taken into consideration students' motivation, commitment and mental health during the lockdown. In other words, we have tried to make our survey short, brief and concise for two reasons. A first reason was to avoid burdening the students, who would likely managing anxiety, distress, isolation and other disorders related to the home confinement. Second, we think that the longer the survey, the greater the probability for participants' disengagement or fatigue, which often results in shorter or incomplete responses. In other words, since our questions are concerned about lived experiences and seek detailed and elaborate responses, a smaller number of questions seemed to work best. Moreover, although we believe that those engaged in online social media platforms are generally comfortable with communicating online and will likely be similarly comfortable expressing themselves in an online survey, we have found it important to reassure participants not to worry about correct spelling or grammar and invite them to use audio messages if they prefer speaking to writing. With regard to question wording, all the questions were very detailed and carefully developed and we have managed to define key terms or concepts as clearly as possible to achieve maximum clarity and avoid having different understandings of a particular term or phrase.

The results of the open-ended questions were transcribed and coded to facilitate analysis. Some compelling responses and/or vivid excerpts are presented in verbatim quotations in order to convey exactly what students said while explaining certain questions. Accordingly, thematic analysis is thought to be the most appropriate for studies, which seek to discover using interpretations (Marks and Yardley, 2004). Participants' responses were therefore interpreted using a thematic framework; that is the survey data were closely analyzed for recurrent and comparable topics, opinions or concepts with the aim of finding connections, and were grouped into categories based on their similarities. After identifying interrelations, a road map of issues emerged, from which we could build a conceptual coherence that have confirmed our hypotheses and communicated the essence of the research.

Findings and Discussion

Participants' responses revealed four themes that may be categorized into unfair division of domestic chores between sisters and brothers, heavy workload during the month of Ramadan, Inability to concentrate on online courses, due to the presence of all family members at home and feelings of apathy due to quarantine and radical lifestyle changes. This section provides an elaboration of each factor with identified emerging themes, if any, and includes illustrative statements from the participants.

A. Unfair division of domestic chores

There are claims that gender differences in household labor have been reduced; gendered differences in the performance of household work are narrowing and becoming less gender-typed (Gershuny and Robinson, 1988). Recent findings indicate that males are no longer less competent to complete household and childcare tasks (Parke, 1990) and a growing body of research examines egalitarian behaviors through household labor division (Barnett and Rivers, 1996; Belkin, 2008; Risman and Sumerford, 1998). However, in many families, we still notice that the position of each member within the family, his or her duties have always been unquestioned and that attitudes seem to be more egalitarian than behavior. Society is continuously expecting men and women to act and behave in certain ways according to already defined stereotypes. In fact, while the Covid-19 crisis affects everyone, women and girls face specific and often disproportionate social risks due to deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms, and unequal power relations. A 17-year-old student explained how difficult it was to study while being in charge of everyday housework tasks. In her words:

> *"How could I devote time to online learning if I am faced with never-ending chores every day? Now with the confinement, my father, uncle and two brothers are always at home, so they take breakfast, lunch and dinner every day at home. Before it was just my father who used to come home at lunchtime, my brothers used to eat at work". So, my mother and I sometimes spend all day in the kitchen. She is sick, so I help her as much as I can. Even the things that we did not do before the corona, like baking bread, have become a routine in these days. We no longer buy bread from the bakery; every morning, we have to bake eight or ten.*

The girl's version of the facts clearly shows that household labor, which is still largely considered a "female duty" in Moroccan society, negatively affects the time that girls or young women were able to allocate for education during the lockdown. Another student, on the other

hand, complained about how her parents treat her differently than her brother and how they overestimate him and underestimate her.

> *My brother is in at "...." School of engineering, he had a scientific baccalaureate. My parents are always worrying about him, he has a laptop, I don't. My father just bought him an expensive headphone for his Zoom classes. Me, I use my mobile to connect. They encourage him and motivate him non-stop. He always hears nice words; they never ask him to do anything at home. Even for groceries during this confinement, my father prepared the paper allowing to go out for me so that I take care of that; so, it's either me or my father, never him. He is the spoiled one. For them, I could not pass entry exams for public schools, I just did the faculty and I'm sure they think I can do nothing with my BA.*

It follows from the above statement that some parents respond and react to their children based on their gender. In fact, when sex-biased parental concern is observed, it is most commonly biased in favor of sons. Examples of biases exist in the extent to which they deem schooling of equal importance for sons and daughters. Based on traditional beliefs about perpetuating family name and perceived financial returns to the family, the education of sons seems more attractive and valuable to some parents. These traditional sex-role beliefs about the status and role of women are among the many obstacles that stand in the way of women and girls fully exercising their right to participate in, complete and benefit from education. These ideologies are likely to obliterate, as a result, decades of effort and resources put in place to ensure gender equality in all spheres of public and private life.

B. Heavy workload during Ramadan

As people spent time at home more than ever in Ramadan 2020 in light of the Covid-19 situation, one of the things that piled up is routine household chores. Home confinement and closures of academic institutions push significant care and household work onto women. When meal preparation, for example, is required, it usually takes much more time than often assumed. Doing the dishes and cleaning are also done more frequently, especially if one lives with a big family. Accordingly, the pressure on girls during Ramadan was found to be heavier than the rest of the year. Many participants claimed they were overwhelmed by the amount of work they had to do every day. Two examples were:

> *"Simply thinking about what meals to prepare for the day can be an added burden in Ramadan. My father is very demanding especially when he is fasting. He wants to have different dishes*

> *every day; instead of focusing on my lessons, I go to the net to look for new recipes".*

> *"I don't worry about the situation a lot. The problem is that because of this virus, I am in the house all day and I am the only one doing all the housework from morning to evening; my mother is busy all day preparing Chebbakia for sale to neighbors and acquaintances. So, I am obliged to help her. She can't manage it alone. And in the mornings, I can't get up before eleven thirty or twelve, so if there is an online course in the morning, I usually miss it, and I can't go to the lessons in Moodle often because I'm always very busy especially in the afternoon doing housework and preparing Ftour and dinner".*

C. Inability to concentrate on courses online

The effectiveness of online learning depends on the designed and prepared learning material, the teacher's engagement in the online environment, and teacher- student or student-student interactions. It also requires students' motivation, engagement and self- discipline. Many students, nevertheless, said they were not able to maintain the same work hours as in class and/ or set time aside to focus on lessons and do their assignments. Some claimed they could not or did not remember to log in to take scheduled video-conferencing courses, if any, when they are busy performing household tasks.

> *"I have four siblings; our house is not that big. It's just a two-bedroom apartment on the ground floor. The TV is all day on, my brothers are always watching videos on their phones at a loud volume. I try not to miss scheduled virtual sessions if I can but it's difficult to concentrate with all the noise around…otherwise I try to read my lessons before I go to bed, but I'm already tired by then especially when it is my turn to prepare the meals".*

The switch from in-person instruction to remote learning has definitely been a challenge. Past research suggested that quarantined students tend to spend less time in learning compared to when schools are open. Similarly, following the physical closure of colleges, many students experienced a learning loss. Several arguments can explain that loss; for example, the home setting during the confinement was found to be a major source of distractions. With all family members at home for an extended period, students were less likely to have a suitable learning environment and found it hard to sit down and tackle their work in an effective way.

Moreover, stress, frustration or the inability to understand the material put in the platform, with no explanation sometimes, as many participants claimed, could have had an impact on students' ability to concentrate especially when they feel isolated and alone in the learning process. A student wrote:

> *I work hard because I am conscious of the difficulties that will face me in the future if I don't. This new learning model isn't good. Online teaching is not simply sending PowerPoint presentations to students and leave them alone. We want to study but we need explanations at least…. although exams were postponed, I revise the lessons in the platform but sometimes I can't understand.*

Online teaching actually requires a multi-faceted investment from both students and teachers. It necessitates adequate mentoring, follow-up, support and a strengthened communication with students in order to get them through this unprecedented crisis. It is worth noting, however, that the adoption of online or remote learning was decided during a situation of emergency as it represented the only solution that ensured both social distancing and continuous learning (Hodges et.al. 2020). Nonetheless, since it was not prepared for, it left both instructors and students with unclear expectations. It follows from this that when unprepared for change, students may display negative attitudes and low motivation (Du & Chaaban, 2020) as this statement from a participant suggests: "*I don't feel like doing anything, we haven't even finished the catch up of the first semester*". On a positive note, the lessons learnt from this worldwide experience enable us to reflect on the different approaches and strategies to develop for any other emergencies that can potentially happen in the future.

D. Feelings of apathy

Since March 2020, our life has been transformed in different ways over the course of few short weeks. Many countries throughout the world, including Morocco, have been in lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The quarantine experience has had a significant psychological impact at all ages but has been particularly hard for young people who could no longer go to college, play sports, and meet their friends. These changes resulted in the prevalence of symptoms of psychological distress, such as irritability, anxiety, anger, apathy and other mood disorders. It has also been found that such mental health disorders are likely to influence the emotional responses to the prevention measures and the acceptance of behavioral limitations (Commodari, et.al, 2000). Fourteen respondents of the 38 students reported that they were depressed, more irritable than usual and cried frequently; and only one girl reported

difficulty sleeping. The responses of the young women surveyed clearly showed a need for socialization.

> *I feel I am in a prison, locked between the walls, nothing interesting to do. My father has a grocery store, so he is not at home until 6h, I am the youngest, my three sisters are married and my brother lives in Spain. ......I'm all day in my pajamas, eating and watching Netflix or sleeping, this makes me really bored. There are no virtual classes, just few lessons in Moodle. At least Netflix helps me to improve my English. I watch dozens of series.... I don't do anything at home, we have a maid, I just take care of my own room actually.*

For university students, the college is not only a place to learn, but also a space to establish social contact. For some girls, it is a legitimate reason to go outside without the questioning and supervision of male family members. Some participants reported heightened intra-household tensions: "…*I always quarrel with my sister because of the household chores, she is younger than me and always tries to do less*" a student declared. Another student who could not express herself in English, preferred to send Audio messages in Arabic to answer the researcher's questions. In one of her messages, she complained about the treatment she receives from her elder brother who constantly shouts at her, looks through her phone and beats or slaps her for trivial things. She also explained how his attitude has worsened during the lockdown period. In sum, during the period of closure, our female participants were living in environments with varying circumstances, which clearly influenced their emotional wellbeing and motivation for learning.

Strengths and Limitations

The major strength of the study concerns the timing of the survey; the latter was carried out in real time during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, a fact that is likely to provide an accurate insight into the experiences of higher education female students during the lockdown period. In addition, the present study is, to our best knowledge, the first to focus on the extent to which the burden of household labor, already feminized, affects girls' time for distance learning. However, despite all the above-mentioned findings, the present study encountered a number of limitations concerning theory and methodology that need to be pointed out and acknowledged. First, because data collection has been conducted remotely, only girls who have sufficient access to internet or phone connection could participate in the study, which means that others who are vulnerable were not able to share their accounts of how the Covid-

19 lockdown has affected them. In other words, given the widely recognized digital divide, online surveys inadvertently exclude some of the least privileged and most vulnerable groups in society. Under normal conditions, such factors need to be considered in future research. Second, even though we admit that early adolescence is also a critical period in a girl's life, data was collected from young women between 17 and24 years old due to ethical considerations related to conducting online research with a younger age group. Third, the geographic location of the sample was restricted to the city of Casablanca where both the researcher and the participants live, hence the limitation in the possibility to generalize the findings to female students living in other semi-urban or rural areas in Morocco. Notwithstanding the above-cited limitations, we believe that this research is a preliminary attempt to draw the relatively unexplored area of the gender distribution of domestic tasks during lockdowns and its impact on girls' education in Morocco. It thus points to avenues for more in-depth research in the future.

Conclusion

Physically closing educational institutions proved to be an efficient way of minimizing the spread of the virus, yet it has led to many challenges. Although the adoption of distance virtual instruction has a lot of potential, we argue that it has had a detrimental effect on female university students' learning, well-being and social life. The immediate adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on gender inequality have shown themselves not only in education but also on the burden of domestic work and gender-based violence. We therefore warn that distance instruction, which is still adopted in most Moroccan universities until today, may bolster gender gaps in education and impede girls' empowerment dampening, as a result, any progress already made.

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