

Time Allocation of Married Mothers and Fathers in Hard Times: The 2007-09 US Recession



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Did the 2007-2009 US recession affect how men and women divide household tasks and allocate leisure and personal time? While several studies have examined the labor market impacts of the recession, studies of change in time allocation within the family have been sparse. Using the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), Günseli Berik and Ebru Kongar examine whether the US recession of 2007-09 served as a force for more equitable sharing of workload in the household. To tell the gendered time-allocation story of the recession the authors focus on married mothers and fathers who live in the same household with their spouse and at least one child.

The US recession of 2007-2009 hit when trends in mothers' and fathers' paid and unpaid work hours were relatively stagnant. After decades of steady increases in women's labor force participation, the early 2000s actually saw a slight reversal. The movement toward greater sharing of housework and childcare stalled even earlier. The recession jumpstarted the gender convergence in paid work: men were laid off earlier and experienced higher unemployment rates than women, and women entered the labor force to make up for the shortfall in family incomes. As a result, in 2009 women's share in payrolls reached the 50 percent threshold for the first time in US history. In theory, these asymmetric employment effects should have created room for more equitable sharing of household tasks. Did they?

Using trend analysis that isolates the recession's effect from the prerecession trend, Berik and Kongar show that during the US recession married mothers increased their paid hours mainly by spending less time on household

tasks – childcare, housework, shopping. Married fathers, on the other hand, worked fewer hours in the labor market but were not led to do additional unpaid work, which meant their total work hours declined. As a result, mothers and fathers worked similar numbers of paid hours. Since mothers were doing less unpaid work than previously, the recession contributed to greater equality in unpaid work hours in the household. However, the convergence in unpaid work hours was considerably smaller than that in paid work hours, which meant total workloads (combined hours of paid plus unpaid work) became unequal.

Total workload inequality was even larger (about 4.5 hours per week) when the combination of the recession and the subsequent jobless recovery (December 2007 –December 2010) is considered. Berik and Kongar show that during the extended recession, with the decline in their total workload, fathers had more leisure time than before the slump and relative to mothers.

Thus, the extended US recession did not provide the context for greater equality in unpaid work; and it created greater equality in paid work only through the hardship of lost labor market hours for men. Berik and Kongar attribute the resistance to change in the realm of household work to the shift in the unemployment burden from men to women over the course of the prolonged stagnation in the labor market, which likely undermined the impetus for change in the household. They point out that the path to achieving gender equality in unpaid work requires policies to ensure gender-equitable job growth, decent pay, and work-life balance.

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