

Teaching Girls to Care: Gendered Labour is not Unique to a Global Pandemic

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Since March 2020, concerns about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on women and girls have grown.¹ Journalists and activists have gone so far as to suggest that the pandemic, combined with years of Austerity, has the potential to push gender equality back decades.²

To commemorate the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the Living Assessments project, Postdoctoral Research Associate Dr Emily Bartlett reflects on the historical dimensions of unequal domestic responsibilities.

A recent study conducted by children's charity [TheirWorld](#) found that girls are doing more housework in Covid lockdown than boys. According to the survey, girls between the ages of 14 and 24 spent more time cooking for their families, cleaning their houses and caring for younger siblings and sick relatives than boys in the same age bracket.³ These caring responsibilities are detrimental to girls' education and future career prospects: the Children's Society have suggested that child carers 'have significantly lower educational attainment at GCSE level – the equivalent of nine grades lower overall than their peers.'⁴

Although the Covid-19 crisis has shone a light on social inequalities, the startling trend of girls missing out on valuable schooling to undertake domestic duties is by no means unique; in fact, these expectations have changed very little in the last fifty years.

The unequal caring responsibilities and domestic expectations placed on girls in the 1970s are starkly apparent in a Secondary Education Survey undertaken by the Department of Education and Science. The survey included a sample of ten percent of secondary schools in

England, and was carried out between the beginning of the Autumn term 1975 and the end of the Spring (or 'Easter') term 1978, in preparation for a proposed new system of examinations. Crucially, the report drew particular attention to the gendered divisions of education. The results of the survey are dismaying, if unsurprising.

Despite the passing of the Sex Inequalities Act in 1975, which specifically made it illegal to discriminate against girls in education, the survey found significant differentiation in the curriculum according to 'sex'. Sciences – and especially physics – were more readily provided for boys, while girls were taught subjects more typically associated with femininity and homemaking, such as crafts.

In a further disparity, where a range of 'craft' subjects were on offer to students, the Schools Inspectorate found that girls were far more likely to be taught traditionally gendered skills. While boys learned typically masculine subjects like woodwork and metalwork, girls, once again, were taught to sew and cook. In general, differentiation by sex in the craft subjects occurred in over 65 per cent of the schools surveyed.⁵

Even in schools where pupils were able to choose from a variety of 'craft' subjects there was still clear gender separation following this pattern. This was, in part, due to broader social ideas about 'girls' and 'boys' subjects, but was also, upsettingly, promulgated by teachers, who offered little encouragement to girls who wanted to study 'masculine subjects', and who even claimed that these were 'too difficult for girls'.⁶

Despite the notable growth of feminism in 1960s and 70s Britain, the survey demonstrates that girlhood in this period maintained many of its previous associations with traditional femininity; girls, to a large extent, were expected to behave according to traditional gender roles, and their schools, accordingly, trained them for domestic chores and caregiving.⁷ Teaching young women 'girls subjects' not only segregated them from their male peers, but also placed extreme pressure on girls to both make the most of the growing opportunities available, *and* fulfil their duty as caregivers to the rest of the nuclear family.⁸

Will the Covid-19 crisis set gender equality back decades? Yes. It already has. (Or perhaps we were already there?)

...Girls in 2021 are being stereotyped in much the same way as those in the 1970s. Caring for others during lockdown is, apparently, their responsibility – just as cooking, cleaning and sewing was that of young women 50 years ago. From 1975-1978 girls' responsibilities to care for others were prioritised over their broader education. In lockdown, girls' education continues to suffer, as they likewise clean, cook, and place others before themselves.

The Living Assessments project will delve into these histories further, to uncover the intricacies of caregiving and child welfare, and offer an intersectional analysis of care inequality among children and young people in twentieth century Britain.

References

- ¹ Alexandra Topping and Niamh McIntyre, 'UK school closures mean mothers will take twice as much unpaid leave as fathers – poll', *Guardian*, 8 January 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/08/uk-covid-school-closures-mean-mothers-will-take-twice-as-much-unpaid-leave-as-fathers-poll>> [accessed 19 March 2021].
- ² Ian Johnston, 'UK Risks Turning Clock Back on Gender Equality in Pandemic', *Guardian*, 9 February 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/feb/09/uk-risks-turning-clock-back-on-gender-equality-in-pandemic>> [accessed 29 March 2021]; Natasha Preskey, Sophie Gallagher and Harriet Hall, 'The Pandemic of Inequality: How Coronavirus is setting women's rights back decades', *Independent*, 5 March 2021 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/coronavirus-womens-rights-pandemic-b1813019.html>> [accessed 29 March 2021].
- ³ Rachel Hall, 'Girls doing more housework in Covid lockdown than boys', *Guardian*, 3 March 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/03/girls-doing-more-housework-in-covid-lockdown-than-boys>> [accessed 19 March 2021].
- ⁴ Ben Quinn, 'Thousands of children as young as five act as family carers, figures show', *Guardian*, 16 May 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/may/16/thousands-children-caregivers-family-data>> [accessed 19 March 2021].
- ⁵ Department of Education and Science, *Aspects of Secondary Education in England: A Survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*, December 1979, p. 15.
- ⁶ Department of Education and Science, p. 169.
- ⁷ Ying-bei Eldridge, *Between Feminism and Femininity: shifting Cultural Representations of Girlhood in the 1960s* (doctoral thesis, 2017), abstract.
- ⁸ Eldridge, p. 101.