

## Unpaid Domestic Work and Gender Inequality in the Time of COVID-19 in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected how we spend our time in the workplace and at home. Moreover, it caused employed couples to simultaneously work from home and deal with unpaid work due to Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO). What happens to housework and childcare responsibilities when women and men are required to work from home due to an abrupt lockdown? Who is doing the housework and childcare? Who should be responsible for unpaid domestic work? What are the factors that affect men's share in housework and childcare? This paper reports the early results of an online survey conducted on Malaysian men and women during the nationwide imposed lockdown in May 2020. In addition, it discusses how the pandemic affected unpaid housework and childcare time and responsibilities in Malaysia. The findings suggest that women spend more time on housework and childcare than men and are responsible for most unpaid domestic work during COVID-19. These findings are consistent with those obtained before the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings also suggest that the time availability perspective

affects men's share in housework and that the relative resources perspective affects their share in childcare during COVID-19. Overall, the results call for policy attention to the factors that narrow gender inequality in unpaid domestic work.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, gender inequality, Malaysia, unpaid domestic work

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed how we live. Workplace lockdowns caused employees to work from home. School and daycare closure caused children to stay at home, thus increasing the time for childcare. Dining restrictions also caused people to cook more frequently because no dine-in is allowed in restaurants and food stalls. It indicates that people are spending more time together at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a major shift from the working sphere to the private sphere when employed men and women must work from home because of the restrictions. According to a survey conducted by JobStreet Malaysia (2020), 67% of employees have worked from home during the restrictions. The survey further reported that the time spent on paid work when employed men and women work from home varies depending on the employers' attitudes in small and large organisations. As a result, some employees are contributing few hours in paid employment when working from home. Similarly, a survey conducted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020b) also reported that 43.7% of the employees were required to work from home. About 16.2% were working shorter hours in the workplace during the restrictions. Both survey reports indicate that employed men and women spend more time at home and less time in the workplace or in paid work-related matters.

The public working sphere and private domestic spheres become difficult to

distinguish when paid work and unpaid domestic work are performed simultaneously in the same place. The convergence of working and private spheres also causes the paid work and home responsibilities to be performed simultaneously when employed men and women spend most of the time at the same space, which is at home (see López-Garza [2002] for an overview). Research in Malaysia shows that most employed men and women find it easier to cope with domestic responsibilities when working from home. However, women still carry more responsibilities and burdens than men during the pandemic (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). The UNDP survey (2020) reported gender differences in the difficulty in managing domestic responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey reported that women aged 35 to 44 years old carry more significant domestic burdens than men. It implies that women were still responsible for most of the unpaid domestic work even though men pitched in more during the COVID-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific (Mercado et al., 2020; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020).

According to previous research, two theoretical perspectives dominate the empirical literature on the gender division of household labour: (1) time availability and (2) relative resources (see Bianchi et al. [2000], and Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard [2010] for an overview). These scholars claim that the two theoretical perspectives have different explanatory

power in the division of household labour. For example, in Malaysia, a study shows that the time availability and relative resources perspectives are essential factors affecting men's share in housework and childcare before COVID-19 (Boo, 2018).

Thus, in Malaysia, who is doing and is responsible for housework and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic? Is there any gendered line in the housework and childcare responsibility when couples stay home together even if they are still employed? What are the factors that affect men's share in housework and childcare? This paper reports early results of an online survey ( $N = 467$ ) conducted between 11 May and 5 June 2020 on how COVID-19 affected paid work, housework and childcare in Malaysia. This online survey investigated whether COVID-19 affected gender differences in (i) the time spent in paid work, housework and childcare, (ii) employment status and location of work and (iii) housework and childcare responsibilities. Moreover, this online survey investigated the factors that affect men's share in housework and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As context for the findings, a brief overview of the government response to the pandemic and prior gendered patterns in housework and childcare responsibilities in Malaysia are provided.

### **Government Response to COVID-19**

Malaysia's first recorded case of COVID-19 was in late January 2020. The numbers of daily new cases were in single or double

digits. However, a massive spike in local cases in late February and early March led to a nationwide lockdown, referred to as 'Movement Control Order (MCO)' (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020b). The MCO was implemented between 18 March and 31 March 2020 and further extended until 12 May 2020. Malaysia enforced (i) preventive measures; (ii) social distancing measures; (iii) national and state border closures; (iv) religious, sport, social and cultural places closures; (v) all government and private premises closures (except for essential services) and (vi) all government and private nursery centres, kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, pre-university and higher education institutions closures (Povera et al., 2020). During the MCO, the work-from-home arrangement has been required for all workers, except for essential workers. Malaysia had implemented the 'Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO)' in May 2020. It changed to 'Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO)' in June 2020. By the end of June, 8,639 cases and 121 deaths had been reported (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020).

During the pandemic and the MCO, the Malaysian government announced the PRIHATIN Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package worth RM250 billion to support individuals, households and businesses (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020a). For example, the government provides one-off cash assistance to medium-income (RM1000) and low-income (RM1600) households. The government also

introduced the Wage Subsidy Programme to help employers retain their workers, with a salary of RM600 per month given to every employee for three months. However, no childcare subsidy was given on this Economic Stimulus Package.

The government has started to recognise the care burden after three months of the MCO. To assist working parents during this crisis, the government finally introduced several incentives during the RMCO in June 2020 (Povera et al., 2020). Examples of these incentives are vouchers for mobile childcare services and income tax relief for parents using childcare services. Likewise, the government gave a one-off grant for registered childcare centres to comply with the healthcare Standard of Procedures (SOPs) as a way to encourage parents to send their children to childcare centres during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Gendered Patterns in Unpaid Work**

Housework and childcare most often refer to unpaid domestic work and are dominant tasks for women despite their high educational attainment and increases in labour force participation (Choong et al., 2019; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the United Nations, 2014). Performing unpaid domestic work is a burden, especially for married working women as they are mainly responsible for unpaid housework and childcare (Abdullah et al., 2008; Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019; Choong & Tan, 2018; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978; Ng, 1999; Noor, 1999). Owing to the burden and difficulties

in juggling work and family responsibilities, most unemployed women chose family responsibilities as the main reason to stay out of employment in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019).

In Malaysia, outsourcing housework and childcare can reduce the housework and childcare responsibilities among couples (Choong & Tan, 2018). For example, couples can seek outside help from live-out or live-in foreign domestic helpers. Likewise, couples can outsource childcare by sending children to nannies, public and private childcare centres or immediate family members. However, housework and childcare outsourcing can only be afforded by a small number of families in Malaysia.

In short, these findings generally suggest that most of the unpaid domestic work is performed by women in Malaysia. Studies on housework in Malaysia generally reported that women perform most of the housework, with men spending only a tiny amount of time doing housework (Abu Bakar, 2009; Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978; Noor, 1999). On average, women spend almost twice as much time each week doing housework as men (Boo, 2018). Apart from housework, studies on childcare in Malaysia generally found that mothers spend significantly more time on childcare than fathers (Boo, 2018; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978; Juhari et al., 2013; Noor, 1999). On average, studies found that women spend almost 65.5% more time on childcare than men (Boo, 2018). The findings in past research are consistent with the findings in the pilot time-use survey,

which was conducted by Choong and colleagues (2019). They found that women spend almost 63.6% more time on unpaid housework and childcare than men.

## METHODS

An online survey, 'Housework and Childcare During the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic', was developed and conducted between 11 May and 5 June 2020. The respondents were given information on the research, information related to informed consent, the expected time needed to complete the survey and the researcher's contact details before taking part in this online survey. The study protocol was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee USM (Protocol number: USM/JEPeM/COVID19-05).

This online survey drew 467 responses from a non-probability sample of current Malaysian residents. A sample size of 467 respondents is good, which exceeds the required number of 384 for a population survey at a 95% confidence level and 5% confidence interval using Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977). This online survey used a purposive sampling design to target couples with children living in households with housework and childcare responsibilities. The respondents were identified through social media. Couples who are working or not working are eligible to take part in this study. Participants were self-selected into the study.

The respondents were asked to provide demographic information and employment arrangement during the pandemic.

Demographic information includes age, ethnicity, educational attainment and monthly income of each of the couple, and household compositions include additional adults, age and the number of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employment arrangement includes employment status and location during the pandemic.

The online survey asked the respondents the average hours they spend in a week on (1) paid work, (2) housework and (3) childcare. Housework includes meal preparation, dishwashing, laundry, ironing, house cleaning, buying groceries, paying bills, gardening and throwing garbage. Childcare includes feeding, bathing, dressing, soothing, carrying, telling stories, reading, helping children learn, talking with children, teaching, putting children to bed, playing games and supervising games. For both housework and childcare, the respondents estimated the time allocated for the component tasks in housework and childcare separately. The online survey questions were adopted from the International Social Survey Programme (International Social Survey Programme Research Group, 2016). The instrument has gone through numerous pilot studies to make it a valid and reliable instrument. Furthermore, it should be noted that the ISSP approved the use of this questionnaire.

To determine whether gender differences were statistically significant in the paid work, housework and childcare time during the COVID-19 pandemic, t-tests were conducted based on the respondents' reported time. Moreover, two Chi-squared tests were

conducted. First, a Chi-squared test was conducted to determine whether gender differences were statistically significant in the employment status and paid work location during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, Chi-squared tests were conducted based on the respondents' response to the question 'Who should be responsible for doing housework/childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic?' to determine whether gender differences were statistically significant in housework and childcare responsibilities. Ordinary least-square (OLS) regression models were run to test the factors affecting men's share in housework and childcare based on the predictors used in the most gendered division of housework and childcare (see Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard [2010] for an overview). The OLS regression models accounting for couples and household characteristics: age, monthly income, women's proportion of household income, education (tertiary = 1, no tertiary = 0) and paid work hours; control

variables of age, the number of children at home (one child [omitted]/two children/three children), children aged below 12 years old (yes = 1) and parents/parents-in-law/maid living in the household (yes=1).

## RESULTS

### Respondents' Characteristics

A total of 467 responses have been obtained in this online survey. The sample characteristics are listed in Table 1. The proportion of Malay, Chinese and Indian respondents is similar to that of ethnic groups in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020a). However, the sample was skewed towards employed women and those with higher educational attainment. Moreover, the sample was skewed towards nuclear families and those households with children aged below 12. These characteristics align with most online surveys (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Kellner, 2004).

Table 1  
*Sample description (means and proportions)*

Variable	Women	Men
Ethnicity		
<i>Malay</i>	59.6	68.6
<i>Chinese</i>	27.2	19.6
<i>Indian</i>	7.0	9.8
<i>Others</i>	6.3	2.0
Household composition <sup>a</sup>		
<i>Living with parents/parents-in-law</i>	24.0	21.6
<i>Living with maid</i>	6.0	2.0
<i>Living with children aged below 12</i>	82.0	70.6

Table 1 (Continued)

Variable	Women	Men
Average number of children in household	2.4	2.6
Average number of people in household	4.7	4.8
Average monthly earnings during the COVID-19 pandemic	3779.6	5940.2
Average age of respondents	35.3	40.3
Employment status during the COVID-19 pandemic <sup>a</sup>		
<i>Full-time</i>	65.4	78.4
<i>Part-time</i>	9.1	13.7
<i>Not working</i>	25.5	7.8
Employment location during the COVID-19 pandemic <sup>a</sup>		
<i>At home</i>	55.0	66.7
<i>At the workplace</i>	45.0	33.3
Highest level of educational qualifications		
<i>Master's degree or PhD</i>	15.1	33.3
<i>Bachelor's degree</i>	38.9	39.2
<i>Graduate Certificate or Diploma</i>	25.7	23.5
<i>Pre-university or below</i>	20.2	3.9

Notes. <sup>a</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100. Source: Author's survey, Housework and Childcare in the Time of COVID-19 (Movement Control Order)

### Time in Paid Work, Housework and Childcare During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 2 presents the time allocation to paid work, housework and childcare during the

time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The *t*-tests show significant differences between men and women in housework and childcare times but not paid work time.

Table 2

*Respondents' mean hours a week in paid work and unpaid work during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Activity	Women	Men	Sig diff
Paid work	18.3	22.1	n.s
Housework	18.6	11.7	***
Childcare	22.4	14.5	**

Note. \*\*\*, \*\* denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively. Source: Author's survey, Housework and Childcare in the Time of COVID-19 (Movement Control Order)

Women spent significantly more hours per week on housework than men (18.6 and 11.7, respectively). As expected, women averaged more time each week doing housework than men during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with previous research in Malaysia that women averaged more time on housework than men before COVID-19 (Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978; Noor, 1999). According to previous research, women spent an average of about 11 hours per week on housework and men about 5 hours per week (Boo, 2018). More importantly, this finding is consistent with previous research in Malaysia that there are gender differences in terms of housework time before COVID-19 (Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019). According to Boo (2018), women averaged almost twice as much time each week doing housework than men at the time of the survey. However, this study demonstrates that women averaged approximately 1.5 times each week doing housework than men during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As was the case for childcare, women averaged significantly more hours per week than men (22.4 and 14.5, respectively). This finding is consistent with previous research in Malaysia that demonstrated that women spent more time on childcare than men (Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978). In addition, past research found that, on average, women spent almost twice as much time each week doing childcare as men (Boo, 2018). However, Table 2 demonstrates that women spent almost 1.5

times more than men on childcare during the pandemic.

It has been recognised that making a conclusion based on the findings of this study and the previous one is not definite for at least one reason. The respondents who participated in this study may not be the same person who participated in the previous research. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to claim conclusively that the gender gap in housework and childcare time has become narrower during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic based on the online survey. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the crisis may encourage men to pitch in more when they spend more time together with their partners at home. Hence, the gender gap slightly becomes narrower.

#### **Employment Status and Location of Paid Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, about 78.4% of men and 65.4% of women were in full-time employment, and 13.7% of men and 9.1% of women were in part-time employment. No significant differences were observed in gender for employment status (results not shown). As was the case for paid work, there were no significant differences in gender for the work location (at home or the workplace) (results not shown). These suggest minimal differences between men and women in terms of the employment status and work location during the COVID-19 pandemic. This result might be related to the restrictions during the pandemic, which can be applied to men and women.



### Housework and Childcare Responsibilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 3 presents the housework and childcare responsibilities during the time

of COVID-19. The Chi-squared tests demonstrate significant differences between men and women regarding who should be responsible for housework and childcare during the pandemic.

Table 3

*Respondents' housework and childcare responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (%)*

	Women	Men
Housework responsibility		
<i>Me</i>	41.6	19.6
<i>My spouse</i>	4.8	19.6
<i>Equal</i>	45.7	54.9
<i>Others</i>	7.9	5.9
Chi-sq test		***
Childcare responsibility		
<i>Me</i>	47.6	29.4
<i>My spouse</i>	8.9	19.6
<i>Equal</i>	36.8	45.1
<i>Others</i>	6.7	5.9
Chi-sq test		*

*Note.* \*\*\*, \*\*, \* denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels, respectively. Source: Author's survey, Housework and Childcare in the Time of COVID-19 (Movement Control Order)

About 41.6% of women perceived housework as their sole responsibility, whereas 45.7% perceived it as a shared responsibility between spouses. Less than 5% of women perceived that their husbands should be responsible for the housework. Conversely, 54.9% of men perceived housework as a shared responsibility between spouses. However, less than one-fifth of men perceived that housework as

their sole or their wives' responsibility. These results indicate most women perceive that housework is their sole responsibility or the responsibility between them and their spouses. Contrarily, the majority of the men tend to perceive housework as a shared responsibility between spouses.

In terms of childcare, most women perceived it as their sole responsibility. In contrast, about 36.8% perceived it as a

shared responsibility between spouses. Less than 9% of women perceived childcare as their husbands' responsibility. Conversely, about 45.1% of men perceived childcare as a shared responsibility between spouses; moreover, one-third of men perceived it as their sole responsibility. However, less than 6% of men perceived that others should bear the childcare responsibility.

Table 2 demonstrates that most women tend to perceive housework and childcare as their sole responsibility or a shared responsibility with their spouses. Contrarily, most men perceive that housework and childcare responsibilities should be shared between spouses. These findings are consistent with previous research that women tend to perform unpaid domestic work alone and that men tend to share it with their spouses (Choong et al., 2019).

It is important to note that a small number of men and women perceived that housework and childcare should be performed by other people, such as domestic helpers, nannies or immediate family members. It is in line with previous research indicating that only a small number of households can afford to outsource housework (live-in and live-out foreign domestic helpers) and childcare (immediate family members and nannies) in Malaysia (Choong & Tan, 2018).

It is saddening to see that even though the COVID-19 restrictions required men and women alike to stay at home, most women still perceived unpaid domestic work as their sole responsibility. However, less than one-fifth and less than one-third

of men perceive housework and childcare, respectively, as their sole responsibility. Hence, it is applauding to see a small number of men taking up the housework and childcare responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, it is essential to note that the sample is skewed towards those women who have tertiary educational qualifications. It is not surprising that they may have a more egalitarian gender role ideology than those who do not have tertiary education qualifications (see Coverman [1985] and Presser [1994] for an overview on the relationship between education and gender role attitudes). Women who have more egalitarian gender ideology believe in equal sharing among couples in unpaid domestic work. However, most of them believe that housework and childcare should be shared among couples. This finding may only be specific to the sample of this study due to sample skewness.

### **Predictors**

In Table 4, OLS regression models were run on men's share in housework and childcare on the whole sample. Again, all else equal, the factors that affect men's share on housework and childcare are different.

Net of covariates, men who have children below aged 12 years old perform a higher share of housework than those who have children aged above 12 years old in the household. Also, men perform a higher share of housework when their wives spend long hours in paid employment. However, men reduce their share in housework when they

Table 4

*OLS regression estimates for men's share in housework and childcare*

	housework		childcare	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Men's age	-0.78		-0.24	
Number of Children (ref-one child)				
<i>Two children</i>	-0.86		-0.53	
<i>Three or more children</i>	3.25		-0.75	
Household contains				
Children above 12 years old	-5.78	*	-1.31	
Maid	-2.04		-0.78	
Parents/parents-in-law	-0.71		-2.53	
Women's paid work hours	0.13	*	0.03	
Men's paid work hours	-0.15	**	-0.06	
Men's monthly income	0.00		0.00	
Women's proportion of household income	0.08		0.11	**
Men's education (ref: no tertiary education)				
Has tertiary qualifications	1.26		2.18	
Constant				
R-square	0.05		0.05	

*Note.* \*\*\*, \*\*, \* denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels, respectively.

spend longer hours in paid employment. These factors are associated with the time availability perspectives emphasising that those who have more time will do more housework regardless of gender (see Coverman [1985] for an overview). These findings are consistent with Malaysia's past research indicating that these factors

influence men's share in housework before the COVID-19 pandemic (Boo, 2018; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978).

In terms of childcare, men perform more childcare tasks when their wives contribute more monthly income to the household. Table 4 presents a positive relationship between women's proportion of household

income and men's share in childcare. It indicates that men perform a higher share of childcare (11%) when their wives contribute more monthly income to households than them. This factor is associated with the relative resources perspective emphasising that those with more resources can bargain into or out from a task (see Bittman et al. [2003] for an overview). The result hints that power dynamics (women who contribute more income to the household are likely to use their bargaining power to bargain out of childcare and get their spouses to get more involved in childcare tasks) are relevant to the division of childcare in Malaysian families. This finding is consistent with the finding of the previous study in Malaysia (Boo, 2018).

It is important to note that OLS regression models demonstrate that the factors affecting men's share in housework differed from men's share in childcare. The time availability perspective has a predictive power for men's share in housework. The coefficients associated with men's paid work hours are negative and statistically significant. In contrast women's paid work hours are positive and statistically significant. Relative resources measured by women's proportion of household income has a predictive power for men's share in childcare but not for housework. The coefficients associated with women's proportion of household income are positive and statistically significant. These differences suggest that men and women perceive housework and childcare differently. This empirical evidence supports

the scholars' claim that housework and childcare should be analysed as distinct owing to their different nature (Bianchi & Raley, 2005; Hewitt et al., 2011).

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused men and women to juggle paid employment, housework and childcare simultaneously in the same place. The lockdowns had generated more housework and childcare tasks for couples, especially women. Women are responsible for most of the unpaid work during the pandemic. It is similar to the research focusing on unpaid domestic work during the pandemic (Craig & Churchill, 2020; Mercado et al., 2020; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020; UNDP, 2020).

First, the results indicate inequality. When men and women spent time together at home during the restrictions, women shouldered most housework and childcare. Although men pitched in the housework and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were still gender differences in time spent on the responsibilities (as shown in Table 2). This finding is consistent with previous research in Malaysia that women averaged more time on housework than men before COVID-19 (Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978; Noor, 1999).

Second, between housework and childcare responsibilities, most women tend to perceive housework and childcare

as either their sole responsibility or a shared responsibility with their spouses. In contrast, most men perceive that housework and childcare should be shared between spouses (as shown in Table 3). These findings are consistent with previous research that women tend to perform unpaid domestic work alone and that men tend to share it with their spouses (Choong et al., 2019). Interestingly, more men tend to perceive childcare as their sole responsibility than housework. It might be because childcare is more rewarding and fun than housework (Connell, 2009; Oakley, 1974). For example, men spend more time on fun and play activities compared with women. In terms of housework, more men tend to perceive it as a shared responsibility because, for many, they are more inclined to join in, backup rather than be the sole charging of housework.

In addition, these results could be related to the traditional gender roles that still affect the way men and women divide housework and childcare although. The pandemic warranted most men and women to work from home. The traditional gender roles are related to how men and women are socialised into male and female gender roles and are expected to behave accordingly (Cunningham, 2001; Epstein & Ward, 2011). For example, additional housework burdens brought about by children are not necessarily perceived as men's responsibility but women's (Bianchi et al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000). Moreover, women may do more housework because 'the cleanliness of one's home is a reflection

on women's competence as a "wife and mother", but not men's competence as a "husband and father"' (Bianchi et al., 2000, p. 195). Thus, the traditional gender norms seem to influence the division of household labour during the pandemic.

Third, even though employed men and women juggle work and unpaid work during the work-from-home arrangement, men only increase their share in housework when they spend less time in paid employment. Also, men increase their share in childcare only if women contribute more household income than them (as shown in Table 4). It indicates that women's higher relative income relatively induced more equality in households. The two predictive factors indicate that men's long hours spent in paid employment impede gender equality at home. Moreover, if women earn less than men, men can bargain out from childcare, impeding gender equality at home. These findings are similar to those of previous studies in Malaysia conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic (Boo, 2018).

Therefore, moving towards an equal division of labour in the household, recognising the importance of unpaid domestic work, changing traditional gender norms regarding women's and men's responsibilities, reducing the number of time men spend on paid work and increasing women's income seem crucial to achieving greater gender equality in households. In this context, housework recognition may shift the traditional gender norms around domestic work as housework is women's work. It should be emphasised

that housework is essential and needs to be performed to maintain a family, keep it functioning and avoid reassertion of femininity. Also, shifting the traditional gender norms that champion the traditional male-breadwinner and female-homemaker model seems crucial in encouraging men to share the burden.

Likewise, the work-from-home arrangement may be suitable for men to spend more time at home and less time in paid work. It demonstrates the need for the Malaysian government to encourage work-from-home practices for men after the pandemic to narrow the gender inequality gap in unpaid domestic work. It should be highlighted that the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (2016-2020), the most recent plan at the time of this publication, emphasised flexible working and work-from-home arrangements; however, these initiatives are targeted at women and not men (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2018). It is recommended that the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan should include men as one of the targeted groups in enjoying these initiatives so that men can share the unpaid work with their spouses. In this regard, the lockdowns have demonstrated that working from home is feasible for most jobs.

Also, family-friendly policies that allow women to balance work and family should be emphasised by policymakers because earnings are crucial for women to get their spouses involved in childcare. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan, initiatives including flexible working, work-from-home and returning to work are essential in encouraging women

to continue working in the labour force (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2018). These initiatives should be continued and highlighted because by encouraging women to stay in the workforce, they can earn income, negotiate with their spouses, and get them to participate in childcare. In addition, the government of Malaysia could encourage public and private sectors to provide flexible working and work-from-home arrangements to support women in balancing work and family responsibilities.

This study has methodological limitations, such as using the purposive sampling technique and the small sample size. Although the findings may not be generalised to the broad population, they provide preliminary results on the gender inequality in unpaid domestic work during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Malaysian context. It should be noted that the restrictions during the pandemic made it difficult for research to be conducted; hence, only a small sample size can be achieved.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, women are responsible for most of the unpaid domestic work during the pandemic. Most women perceive housework and childcare as their sole responsibility or shared responsibility with their spouse. In contrast, most men perceive housework and childcare are being shared between spouses. The study's findings suggest that men's paid work hours and women's earnings are two critical factors in narrowing the gender gap in the division of household labour among heterosexual couples.

These findings contribute to the literature on the gendered division of household labour during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study emphasises that gender inequality in household labour persists even though couples spend more time together during the restrictions. The findings indicate that the gendered division of household labour changed little during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this pandemic provides an opportunity to narrow the gender inequality gap when men and women spend more time at home.

Recommendations for future research include gender differences in unpaid work before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigating the division of household labour before and during COVID-19 would be valuable to examine the gender gaps before and during the pandemic. Moreover, couples' subjective experiences in household labour division during the COVID-19 pandemic are worth examining as they can add value to quantitative research.

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