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# *Care Tasks and New Routines for Italian Families during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from Women<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

The lockdown management during the COVID-19 pandemic has been very complex for families. The present study is part of a broader interdisciplinary research and follows the gender perspective, which has made it possible to bring a focus on the pandemic starting with women who, within family dynamics, have suffered most from

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<sup>1</sup> FL, IC, RP, NR conceived the original idea of the study and supervised the findings of this work. NR and IC contributed to data processing and analysis. All wrote and organized the manuscript, in particular FL developed the paragraphs 1.1; 1.2; 1.3, RP the introduction and the paragraph 1.3, NR and IC presented the methodology, procedure and data analysis. All authors discussed the results, presented the conclusion and writer reviewed the document and approved the final version for submission.

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the effects of the lockdown, having to manage multiple roles simultaneously and in the same place. The data were collected through an on-line survey. The aim is to understand how family routines were structured during the lockdown and how women's emotional regulation developed during this period. Moreover, a further area of investigation focused on the distribution of domestic work and childcare among partners and on the relationships between smart working and the family dimension. The participants are 300 women living in different Italian region. The data highlights how during lockdown women with children have more regulatory and relational routines than women without children and that during this period both regulatory and relational routines become less consistent. It also emerges that women perceive that they dedicate more time to domestic activities and childcare than their partners do and that the time dedicated to childcare is greater in the 0-6 year range. Moreover, it emerges clearly how reconciling the smart working with the family dimension is not always easy.

Keywords: COVID-19 lockdown, family relations, smart working.

## **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown has created new situations and family balances that have required the ability to renegotiate and rethink mutual roles within the family. The period of forced co-presence at home has led to inevitable changes in family organization and in the management of daily life, spaces and use of the house. Starting from this premise, we reflected on family dynamics and consider the changes that the family has experienced in recent decades. Among these changes, family routines play an important role that allows not only the development of family interactions but is also a protective factor that promotes family well-being (Passini et al., 2003) as well as improves children's social skills (Spagnola, Fiese, 2007) and mental and physical health (Worthman, 2011). Moreover, routines have a scaffolding function that favours adaptive behaviour by the child in their own life (Migliorini, Cardinali, Rania, 2011; Migliorini, Rania, Cardinali, 2015; Rania, et al., 2015). Therefore, the analysis of family routines during lockdown is an interesting time period for understanding how regulatory and relational dimensions of routines may have changed.

Furthermore, lockdown management has been very complex for families facing the fear of not only contagion (Porcelli, 2020) but also relational changes. In particular, school closures were carried out due to health issues without organically addressing the problems that families would have to face in managing their children for a long time while still having to work (Save the Children, 2020). The parents of young children played the roles of parents and teachers at the same time to help their children carry out online educational activities. Furthermore, even in public and political debate, the difficulty of

reconciling smart work with the management of young children at home has been completely overlooked. Instead, the focus has been on the possibility of using smart work and completely failing to recognize the needs of parents who use smart work with young children at home.

### ***1.1 Fathers and mothers handling care and housework***

In recent decades, the family has seen important and significant transformations. Although the family continues to represent the central place where reproduction takes place (Di Nicola, 2011; Solinas, 2013) and ‘above all, the subject that dispenses care’ (Di Nicola, 2015: 191) it appears strongly transformed compared to the past. If we consider parenthood, the literature (Ruspini, 2011; Grilli, 2019; Satta, Magaraggia, Camozzi, 2020; Lee et al., 2014; Mathieu, Gourarier, 2016) reveals a change that affects the roles and identities linked to motherhood and fatherhood, which has led to a redefinition of intergenerational relationships and of questioning sexual complementarity as the basis for parenting skills and of the relationships between partners in the care of children. It is important to underline that the concept of care should not only be understood as material care, but above all in terms of attention, emotional and affective consideration, taking charge of the management and organization of all aspects related to the relationship. The care ‘concern that form the basis of the processes of individualization and the formation of self-confidence in modern times’ (Di Nicola, 2015: 191). It is only through care that the bond can be created (Bramanti, 2001). A further change related to families with heterosexual parents concerns the slow advancement of more participatory forms of fatherhood that redefine the role of fathers. Compared with the recent past, contemporary fathers appear to be more involved in caring for children both from an ideal point of view – that is, they recognize that it is also their duty to take care of young children – and from a material point of view. However, the literature underscores that in many cases, fathers are mostly involved in playful, recreational and movement activities, whereas mothers are engaged in more demanding tasks and, above all, the work of ‘directing’ the management of all family activities (Alby, Di Pede, 2014; Bosoni, Crespi, Ruspini, 2016; Craig, Powell, Smyth, 2014; Barbeta Viñas, 2019). Nevertheless, despite the greater involvement of fathers, childcare and domestic work remain mainly female tasks (Tanturri, Mencarini, 2009; Lasio, 2011; Carriero, Todesco, 2016; Cunha et al., 2016).

### ***1.2 Work-family conciliation***

In the contemporary dual-career family, most couples juggle work and family and experience challenges that in the period of quarantine were even

more demanding than at other times, as highlighted in some Italian studies (Ferrario, Profeta, 2020; Fondazione Libellula, 2020; Rania et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2020, Centro di Ateneo Studi e Ricerche sulla Famiglia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore 2020). This situation may contrast with the fact that both partners were often present at home, carrying out remote work or not working for different reasons (e.g., unemployment, layoffs, no previous job, drastic reduction in their activity). Therefore, in this context, conciliation might have appeared easier to manage. In fact, if we focus on pre-COVID times, we observe that reconciliation between work and family is certainly one of the most complex challenges, especially in a country such as Italy, where it is difficult for families to rely on adequate public services (Naldini, 2003; Del Boca, Rosina, 2009; León Migliavacca, 2013). Although conciliation cannot be understood only as a conflictual situation between the management of extra-domestic work and family organization (Ghislieri, Colombo, 2014), both from an empirical point of view and in theoretical reflection (Del Boca, Rosina, 2009; Saraceno, Naldini, 2013), the focus on the difficulties of managing private life and work predominates.

Difficulty that, beyond the will of the partners, must deal with the fact that they hold different positions of power within the family and that there is still a situation of mutual dependence, material or psychological (Di Nicola, 2017).

In Italy, the index of work asymmetry in childcare for children 0 to 17 years for couples with women aged 25 to 64 years is higher than 60% for couples with both partners employed and 75% for couples with unoccupied women (Ferrario, Profeta, 2020). The scientific literature highlights how the transition to parenthood and the phase of the life cycle with young children have a large impact on the family-work ecosystem (Bianchi, Milkie, 2010; Martinengo, Jacob, Hill, 2010; Villa, Ciccarelli, 2015). Musick, Meier and Flood (2016) suggest that mothers appear to be more susceptible to the norms of 'intensive parenting' and that the balance between work and maternal responsibilities may be more difficult to manage. On the other hand, the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children leads them to much more significant work-family conflict than in the past (Kaufman, 2013). In a recent Istat report (February 2020), it was highlighted how both mothers and employed fathers have equal problems with reconciliation, but in the end, it is mainly mothers who have changed some aspect of their work activity to better combine work with childcare needs.

Furthermore, Menniti and Demurtas (2012) show that the time devoted to domestic activities depends in part on the educational level of the partners, highlighting an inverse behaviour between men and women. As the level of education increases, women reduce time devoted to domestic activities, whereas men increase it. Additionally, families with higher incomes tend to spend less

time on domestic work because they can pay someone to carry out these activities (Kofman et al., 2000; Sarti, 2006; Farvaque, 2013) by choosing to outsource both domestic and caretaking services (Lagomarsino, 2004; Todesco, 2013; Farvaque, 2013). This choice can reduce internal conflict within a couple with respect to the division of domestic or care tasks or the reorganization of these roles in a model of greater sharing (Kofman et al., 2000; Treas, De Ruijter, 2008). The lockdown combined with the difficulties of outsourcing domestic and care services has forced even higher-income families to deal with issues related to gendered division of domestic and care tasks.

### ***1.3 Smart work or forced work from home?***

During the COVID-19 emergency, many companies, also at the suggestion of the government, facilitated or imposed forms of smart working on their workers. On the one hand, this option has highlighted the advantages of technology and undoubtedly allowed many productive activities to continue, limiting the spread of the contagion to a minimum. Smart working refers to a different organization of work based on flexibility with time and space and with a focus on results rather than on presence in the workplace during a specific time. In recent years, an increasing number of workers are hoping to access more flexible forms of work. According to recent US research (Dean, Auerbach, 2018), 96% of participants said they wanted flexibility. The 2017 Gallup report conducted with more than 195,600 employees finds that flexibility plays an important role in an employee's decision to take or leave a job. According to data from a study carried out before the COVID-19 emergency (Angelici, Profeta, 2020), employees using smart work were more productive, more satisfied and had better work-family balance than those who did not use this option. In particular, male smart workers have increased the time they spend on care and household activities. Based on the results of this survey, the authors hypothesize that by removing the rigidity of working hours, smart work contributes to reducing the gender gap in the labour market (Goldin, 2014). The possibility of organizing work time according to family time allows women to not resort to part-time work as happens in normal working conditions. However, this research was conducted in a pre-COVID period in which only one day per week was dedicated to smart work, and adults' work of adults did not overlap with the distance learning needs of any young children. Research carried out during the lockdown period (Ferrario, Profeta, 2020; Fondazione Libellula 2020; Rania et al., 2020; Saban Orsini, Barone, 2020; Collins et al., 2020) has instead indicated that even in the presence of both parents/partners at home, it has been women who have reduced time devoted to work to take care of children or others non-self-sufficient family members

or to do housework. In Italy, the possibility of working at home during the lockdown, such as smart working, was presented by the media and by the government itself as an excellent solution for work/family reconciliation, underestimating or completely neglecting the fact that the presence of children is not compatible with carrying out a job that requires attention and concentration for a long time. This situation occurred in a working context that maintained job performance expectations equal to expectations pre-lockdown. For example, in the case of intellectual work, many academic women, especially mothers, have reported a drastic decline in the publication of scientific articles during this period (Fazackerley, 2020; Cordero, Granados 2020; Minello, 2020; Oleschuk, 2020). If working from home has allowed many workers to be present with their children and not to lose their jobs, however, the reconciliation of these two activities was much more complex, burdensome and highly stressful than it might have appeared.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1 Aims***

The work we present is part of broader interdisciplinary research and involves sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists. The research that we present was started in the first moments of the Italian lockdown (March-April 2020) and built on the results of a previous survey of 1250 men and women (Rania et al., 2020) that revealed interesting data on the role played by women in couples and on their level of well-being during the lockdown. We therefore decided to administer a second survey to only women to deepen our understanding of their perspective. We focused on family routines, which are daily practices, regularly repeated within families; in this lockdown situation, these routines have necessarily been reviewed and restructured due to forced coexistence. In light of these changes, attention to emotional regulation is another significant dimension that has been investigated. Therefore, another aim of this study is to understand whether and how forced co-presence for a long period has facilitated the development of new, fair sharing of domestic work and childcare among partners. Moreover, a further area of investigation focuses on the relationships between smart working and family.

### ***2.2 Method and measures***

A quantitative approach was used, and the protocol included some scales of measure and some questions created ad hoc by the research team following some focus groups and based on the results of the previous research developed



during lockdown, which made it possible to identify the areas to be investigated listed below:

*Family routine*

- Sharing time with people who live with the participant was assessed with a multiple choice question created ad hoc by the research team.
- A modified version of the Family Routine Inventory (FRI) (Jensen et al., 1983) was used in relation to the situation linked to the COVID-19 pandemic; this inventory was translated and adapted to the Italian context by Emiliani, Melotti and Palareti (1998). Therefore, the scale used in this study included 10 items in total, including 5 items related to behaviours that facilitated meeting and communicating between family members (relational routines, such as '*in your family, there is space dedicated to communication every day*'; alpha .76) and 5 items that referred to more strictly organizational activities (regulatory routines, such as '*in your family, you eat at the same time every night*'; alpha .71). For each routine, in this study, only the frequency with which the routine occurred was investigated rather than the importance that the subjects attributed to it in promoting family cohesion as envisaged by the initial scale. Women had to think about the period of the lockdown and indicate how often the routines occurred. For each statement, compliance is rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*).

*Emotion Regulation*

- The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ: Gross, John, 2003) consists of ten items across two scales corresponding to different emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and expressive suppression (4 items). Participants respond using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

*Housework and family care*

- Time dedicated to domestic activities was evaluated through a question with a Likert scale response from 0 (I do not have time) to 4 (I dedicate 4 hours a day).
- Time dedicated to the care of children was evaluated through a question with a Likert scale response from 0 (I do not have time) to 4 (I dedicate 4 hours a day).
- During the lockdown, a multiple choice question was used to assess which children's activities the respondent spent the most time doing.

*Family and smart working*

- A multiple choice question was used to assess whether someone in the family had switched to smart working during the quarantine.

- In relation to the smart working experience during the lockdown, respondents had to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (totally): '*Smart working allows us to reconcile work time better with time for family*', '*With smart working, I never stop working*', '*Smart working is difficult to do if you have small children*', and '*At the end of the day, I feel more tired than before*'.

*Sociodemographic variables*

- Sociodemographic questions included educational qualifications, age range of children, and type of work during the COVID-19 health emergency.

### **2.3 Procedure**

The questionnaire was administered online through a link sent through email, WhatsApp, discussion forums and social networks such as Facebook to reach a wider number of participants. The sample was a convenience sample. Indeed, the first participants were people known by the researchers, and these respondents sent the questionnaire to their acquaintances. Therefore, the sampling method was random cascade sampling. The inclusion criteria were being a woman, being at least 18 years old, and living in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are aware of the limitations of using random cascade sampling and online questionnaires that may have hindered the participation of those unfamiliar with these tools, however due to the contingent period, which imposed social distancing, it seemed the only way to reach a large number of subjects. We are also aware of the exploratory nature of our survey, which does not want to return a representative image of the population, but to propose a picture of the experiences of Italian women during the lockdown. Furthermore, during the lockdown, conducting an online search allowed us to quickly reach a rather large and geographically distributed population on the Italian territory, involving people otherwise unreachable given the pandemic situation. The rigor of the methodological choice and of the procedure implemented have made use of recent reflections on the design and application of online questionnaire surveys (Regmi et al., 2016) which consider six methodological components to successful online surveys: user-friendly design and layout; selecting survey participants; avoiding multiple responses; data management; ethical issues; and piloting tools. The questionnaire was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Education Sciences of the University of Genoa, and the data were collected in compliance with the privacy and research ethics code of the Italian Association of Psychology.

The data were collected during the last week of the 40-day lockdown before people could start moving freely. In line with other research conducted online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Rey, Garrido-Hernansaiz, Collado, 2020), the questionnaire was completed on the first day of its dissemination in more than half of the cases.

#### **2.4 Participants**

A total of 300 female adults living in different Italian regions took part in the research. The subjects involved had an average age of 41.09 years (SD = 15.29, range 18-83); 39.9% were single, 51.0% were married/cohabiting, and 9.1% were separated/divorced. Only 13.5% of the participants lived alone, and the majority (78.3%) said they lived with 1-3 people (23.6% with one, 31.1% with two, 23.6% with 3), whereas only 8.1% lived with more than 3 people. In 44.9% of cases, the participants had children, of which 86.4% had one child and 13.6% had two children. Considering the age range of the children, 22% were 0-6 years old, 15.2% were 7-11 years old, 12.1% were 12-14 years old, 13.6% were 15-18 years old, 25.0% were over 18 years old and lived at home, and 25.8% were over 18 years old and did not live at home.

Many subjects (60.5%) had a high qualification (40.8% graduate and 19.7% postgraduate specialization); only 2.7% had only a junior high school education, and 36.8% had a secondary school education. The participants reported incomes of up to € 15,000 in 16.3% of cases between 15,001 and 28,000 in 36.9% of cases, between 28,001 and 55,000 in 31.9% of cases, and between 55,001 and 75,000 in 10.2% of cases, whereas only 4.7% declared a family income over 75,000. However, for income received during the pandemic, the majority of women (65.4%) reported that their income did not change, whereas 33.2% declared that they received less income than before (16.4%) and were supported by state aid, and 16.8% were not supported by state aid. Only 1.3% had a higher income than before the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the working situation for most women turned into smart working (59.6%), remained unchanged compared to before (13.6%), or reduced or changed hours (13.6%). In the remaining cases (13.1%), there was a change in role, job loss, parental leave, leave, vacation, layoffs, or COVID-19-related leave.

### **3. Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were calculated for sociodemographic characteristics. We investigated the differences between participants with and without children, the differences between those who have children in different age groups and

the differences between those who have a child and those who have more than one child in terms of family routine (regulatory and relational) during lockdown, emotion regulation, housework and child care and smart work. T-tests were used for independent samples. To compare differences between the results for family routine (regulatory and relational) and emotion regulation (reappraisal e suppression) during lockdown among our participants and a normative Italian sample (Rania, Migliorini, Rebora, 2016; Balzarotti, John, Gross, 2010), one-sample t-tests were conducted. A paired samples t-test, on the other hand, was used to analyse differences in means for family conflict (before and during lockdown), housework and childcare (difference in time invested between women and their partners). The  $d_{\text{cohen}}$  was used to calculate the effect size. Analysis of variance with post-hoc Tukey's test for homogeneous variances and Games Howell's test for non-homogeneous variances was used to investigate differences between groups (educational level, age of the children for housework and childcare variables and age of children for family routine and emotion regulation variables). Finally, chi-square analysis was performed to investigate the relationship between causes of conflict and activities carried out with children and children's ages. All tests were two-tailed with a significance level of  $p < 0.05$  or  $p < 0.01$ . Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics 18.0.

#### **4. Research findings**

##### ***4.1 Family routine during lockdown***

Women during the lockdown mainly share meal times with the people who live with them (90.2%), watch TV programmes (71.5%), cook together (64.1%), play board games (47.1%), participate in sports (27.5%), gardening (23.4%), engage in musical activities (singing, dancing) (21.0%), seek information on COVID-19 (19.0%), pray together (8.8%), and meditate (3.3%).

Regarding routines, the findings revealed that the women in the sample did not have substantial differences between regulatory routines ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and relational routines ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ). However, comparing women with children with those without children, the independent-samples t-test reveals that there is a significantly higher average for regulatory routines ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .67$ ;  $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = .70$ ,  $t(275) = -.31$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d_{\text{cohen}} = 0.45$ ) and relational routines ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = .61$ ,  $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .69$ ,  $t(282) = -.22$ ,  $p > .01$ ,  $d_{\text{cohen}} = 0.32$ ) among women who have children. Furthermore, the analysis of variance reveals that there are no significant differences in the means of the regulatory and relational routines among the different child age groups, and the independent-samples t-test shows that there is no difference in the

construction of those routines between those who have a child and those who have more than one child.

Therefore, since there are no differences in the different age groups, we compared our data with an Italian normative sample with preschool children (Rania, Migliorini, Rebor, 2016) from which significant differences emerge both in the regulatory routines (lockdown period  $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .67$  vs not lockdown period  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .34$ ,  $t(118) = 8.006$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $d_{\text{cohen}} = .92$ ) and relational routines (lockdown period  $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = .61$  vs not lockdown period  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .35$ ,  $t(124) = -13.981$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $d_{\text{cohen}} = 1.54$ ). The one-sample t-test revealed that during the lockdown period, both regulatory and relational routines become less strict. Staying at home and the forced sharing of spaces seems to have reduced the attention that families normally attribute to the function of both regulatory and relational routines with a reduction in the frequency of routines that give certainties and mark everyday life. Forced quarantine has reduced the frequency of regulatory routines leading families to slow down the routines that give meaning and safety to family boundaries and mark the day. The same happened with the relational routines that normally in conditions of forced sharing could increase, but in the lockdown, rather than increasing, they have been transformed by distributing themselves throughout the widespread and shared everyday life. In the literature, family routines are described as significant factors in children's development and contribute to their well-being (Chen, 2017). However, during the lockdown, the parents found themselves covering multiple roles, and the boundary between work and family became increasingly blurred, thus leading to inter-role conflict, family-work interference and emotional tension (Restubog, Ocampo, Wang, 2020), which may have interfered with family routines.

#### **4.2 Emotion Regulation**

Regarding the regulation of emotions, women had higher scores on the reappraisal dimension of the ERQ ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) than the suppression dimension ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ), which is in line with previous research (Balzarotti, John, Gross, 2010; Gross, John, 2003). Furthermore, an independent samples t-test was performed to examine differences between our data and normative Italian samples (Balzarotti, John, Gross, 2010). The women in our sample scored higher than women in the normative Italian sample both on the reappraisal scale ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ,  $t(260) = 4.45$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $d_{\text{cohen}} = 0.28$ ) and on the suppression scale ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $t(255) = 3.62$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $d_{\text{cohen}} = 0.23$ ). The emotional attitude of reappraisal used by women during the lockdown, to a greater extent than previously collected data, highlights an emotional activation to cope with stressful events by looking for something

good and by taking an optimistic attitude and reinterpreting what they find stressful. However, the high suppression scores highlight a behaviour that masks their feelings and avoids outward displays of emotions. Therefore, women seem to balance these two ways most likely to protect and support not only themselves in facing this particular moment of pandemic but also the people who are close to them. In support of this finding, another study carried out during the lockdown showed that parents' emotion regulation was found to be fundamental for children's emotional adaptation, especially younger ones, during periods of stress (Shorer, Leibovich, 2020). However, further analyses show that there are no significant differences in the emotion regulation dimensions between those who have children and those who do not have them, those who have a child and those who have more than one, or those who have children in different age groups.

#### **4.3 Housework and family care**

Women say they spend 1.68 (SD = 1.26) hours on housework and 1.47 (SD = 1.52) hours on average on childcare, and they claim that their partners spend 1.23 (SD = 1.35) hours on housework and 1.13 (SD = 1.33) hours on childcare, with a minimum of 0 hours and a maximum of 4 hours.

Considering only women who have children (N = 132) and the child age groups, women who have children in the 0- to 6-year-old age group dedicate more hours on average to childcare compared to those who have children in other age groups (Table 1). In addition, there is a significant difference between those with children 0 to 6 years and the other age groups starting from 12 years.

TABLE 1. Hours dedicated to the childcare by women.

Age of children	M (SD)	Df between-within	F	p	$\eta^2_p$
0-6 years	3.46 (1.07)	5-113	14.30	.037	.39
7-11 years	2.70 (1.30)				
12-14 years	1.64 (1.63)				
15-18 years	1.38 (1.12)				
Over 18 years old and live at home	1.58 (1.41)				
Over 18 years old and don't live at home	0.63 (.89)				

As we have highlighted in the previous paragraphs, these data are consistent with the literature on this topic, which highlights the greater commitment of women compared to partners in this type of activity. The changes that families have experienced can also be better understood if we consider the different phases of the life cycle that they were going through at

the time of the COVID-19 emergency and the resources they were able to put in place to respond to the challenges (economic, relational, emotional, health, etc.) that they had to face. Our data are in line with Italian research recently published and carried out during the lockdown period, which indicated that even in the presence of both parents/partners at home, it was women who reduced time dedicated to paid work to handle childcare and home care (Ferrario, Profeta, 2020; Fondazione Libellula, 2020; Rania et al. 2020; Centro di Ateneo Studi e Ricerche sulla Famiglia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2020). Especially for those families with small children or children who were not yet autonomous, the presence of at least one adult who dedicated time to the children almost exclusively was fundamental. Furthermore, women perceived that their partners spent less time than them with the different age groups of children (comparison of averages in Table 2 and Table 3). The paired samples t-test revealed significant differences in the perception of the hours that women spent caring for children compared to the time they attribute to their partners (women  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ; partner  $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $t(112) = 5.616$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $d_{\text{cohen}} = .54$ ). Moreover, they perceived that partners who had children in the 0- to 6-year-old age group dedicated more hours on average ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) than partner with children in the other age groups. Therefore, for fathers, the time dedicated to children decreased as the age of the children increased.

The analysis of variance also showed a significant average difference in childcare comparing the different age groups of children. In fact, from the post-hoc test, there were significant differences in the 0- to 6-year-old age group and the adults, whether living at home or away from home (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Hours dedicated to the childcare by partners in the perception of women.

Age of children	M (SD)	Df between-within	F	p	$\eta^2_p$
0-6 years	2.00 (1.36)	5-108	2.82	.020	.12
7-11 years	1.21 (1.08)				
12-14 years	1.36 (1.75)				
15-18 years	1.18 (.98)				
Over 18 years old and live at home	.90 (1.21)				
Over 18 years old and don't live at home	0.73 (1.39)				

These data confirm what has been said in the literature about the role of contemporary fathers who seem to be more involved in playful activities, entertainment, and above all, when their children are small, sleeping and

changing nappies (Raley, Bianchi, Wang, 2012; Alby, Fatigante, Zuccheromaglio, 2014; Bosoni, Crespi, Ruspini, 2016).

On the other hand, regarding the time dedicated to housework, there are no significant differences between those who have children in the different age groups, but differences emerge in the perception of time that women dedicated to this activity compared to that which they perceived was dedicated by their partners. The paired samples t-test revealed significant differences in the perception of the hours that women dedicated to domestic activities compared to those that they attributed to partners (women  $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ; partner  $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ;  $t(112) = 7.231$ ,  $p < .000$ ;  $d_{\text{cohen}} = .80$ ).

With regard to the number of children, the independent-samples t-test did not reveal differences between those who have one child and those who have more children both in relation to childcare and in relation to housework.

Regarding the time dedicated to the childcare by the partner, a significant difference emerged with respect to educational qualifications. From the post hoc analysis, it emerged that participants with the lower middle school certificates declared that their partner dedicated on average more hours to childcare ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) than those with higher educational qualifications (Higher school certificate:  $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ; degree:  $M = 1.05$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ; post graduate courses:  $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ).

These data appear to be in contrast with the literature, which underscores that it is often parents with higher educational qualifications who take care of their children more equally. However, it could be hypothesized that during the lockdown, fathers with lower educational qualifications were home without work (for example, in layoffs or they lost their job due to COVID-19, or their business temporarily stopped), and therefore, they had more time to take care of children. Furthermore, during the lockdown, the activities in which women dedicated more time to their children were mainly 37.9% school support, 33.0% nursing activities, 23.8% recreational activities, 11.7% sports activities, and only 1% declared that they were unable to dedicate time and 27.2% had independent children who did not need childcare activities. Furthermore, from the chi-square analysis, it emerged that there was a significant relationship between the activities that women carried out with their children (school support, play and care activities) and the age of the children, as presented in Table 3.



TABLE 3. *Activities carried out with children and the age of the children.*

	Age of children	%	gdl	F/ $\chi^2$	P	V di Cramer
School support	0-6 years	12.8	5	60.11	.000	.76
	7-11 years	48.7				
	12-14 years	23.1				
	15-18 years	15.4				
	Over 18 years old and live at home	0				
	Over 18 years old and do not live at home	0				
Playful activities	0-6 years	25.7	5	38.35	.000	.60
	7-11 years	19				
	12-14 years	10.5				
	15-18 years	13.3				
	Over 18 years old and live at home	18.1				
	Over 18 years old and do not live at home	13.3				
Care activity	0-6 years	41.2		15.53	.006	.38
	7-11 years	20.6				
	12-14 years	8.8				
	15-18 years	20.6				
	Over 18 years old and live at home	8.8				
	Over 18 years old and do not live at home	0				

#### ***4.4 Families and smart working: a possible reconciliation***

When asked directly during the quarantine if someone in the family switched to smart working, the participants replied as follows: me, 52.9%; partner, 20.3%; parents, 14.9%; brothers/sisters, 14.9%; cohabitant, 3.1%; children, 12.9%; and no one, 23.4%.

Among the women who switched to smart working (N = 118) during the COVID-19 pandemic, how to reconcile smart working and family care was not always easy. If on the one hand, the perception is that of being able to better reconcile work time with those of the family (M = 3.10; SD = 1.48), on the other hand, with smart working, women have the perception that they never stop working (M = 3.39; SD = 1.26), to be more tired at the end of the day than when they did the work in their work contexts (M = 3.13; SD = 1.36), and believe that performing smart working with young children is difficult (M = 3.98; SD = 1.12). Furthermore, there are no differences between those who

have a child or more children from the analysis of the independent-samples t-test.

As we have seen previously, the literature has pointed out that it is mainly mothers who reduce paid work time to take care of children, dependent family members and housework, even during the lockdown period. This reduction has allowed them to reconcile aspects of care and new ways of working, such as forced smart working. According to Collins et al. (2020), during the COVID-19 emergency, mothers' work was much more fragmented and interrupted by the care needs of young children than that of fathers. More often it was mothers who reduced their work time or worked with less attention and concentration to attend to the needs of their children. As indicated, 'women say they have great concentration problems and that when the mother and father work from home, the boys and girls choose to always turn to their mother if they need say something. In short, "mom can interrupt dad cannot".' (Saban Orsini and Barone 2020: 14).

The E-learning activities proposed by many primary and kindergarten schools also required the continuous presence and help of parents, who in many cases had to support teachers in the activities to be carried out at home. According to data from the research conducted by the Fondazione Libellula in March 2020 (page 6), among those who have children, 30.6% of women dedicated the remaining time outside work hours to teaching support for their children compared to 18.1% of men. The use of digital technologies in school systems has seen growing interest from scholars (Limone, Toto, 2019), but until now, researchers mostly studied the use of technologies in school classrooms. In our research, instead, the interest turned to distance learning and how it interfaced with parents' smart working, in particular for mothers.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article on families during the COVID-19 lockdown introduces us to the core of a crisis that is unique in the way it presents itself and in terms of the social, psychophysical and economic consequences it has produced. This article looks at the issue from a gendered perspective, considering some of the problems that families faced during the period of forced and prolonged cohabitation during lockdown. On each of the topics explored, the results of the survey allow an advancement of scientific knowledge and submit some of the categories of analysis to critical rethinking. The research examines how families react and how relations between family members change when traditionally external areas, such as work and school, overwhelmingly invade the home and impact routines, including routines related to behaviours that

facilitated meeting and communication between family members and those relating more to strictly organizational activities, such as gender relations related to arranging domestic activities and childcare and of different strategies for regulating emotions, both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

The text discusses the results in detail, but here, we want to draw attention to the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and how it integrates with a gender-based approach. A multidisciplinary approach is a strength in terms of effectiveness in reading family and gender relations during the pandemic and consequent lockdown and allows better identification of critical points that might act as a starting point to hypothesize interventions aimed at improving family life in situations similar to the one just experienced. The gender perspective also allows us to focus on the pandemic by looking at individuals who, within the family dynamics altered by the pandemic, are among those who have suffered the most from the negative effects and at the same time have shown a huge capacity for innovation. We believe that the results of our survey may act as important points of reflection for decision-makers and politicians in planning interventions in relation to family routines able to support the psychophysical wellbeing of individuals in situations of high stress, the critical points of remote and smart working as it developed during the first lockdown, and the methods of reorganizing domestic and care tasks. The female point of view highlighted by the survey makes it possible to draw lines of action for family innovation and possible new forms of work/family balance.

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