

COVID-19 and the Crisis of Childcare: Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment in the United States

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September 16, 2022

Abstract

By exacerbating a pre-existing crisis of childcare in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many parents to renegotiate household arrangements. What shapes parents' preferences over different arrangements? In an online conjoint experiment we assess how childcare availability, work status and earnings, and the intra-household division of labor shape heterosexual American parents' preferences over different situations. We find that while mothers and fathers equally value outside options for childcare, the lack of such options – a significant feature of the pandemic – does not significantly change their evaluations of other features of household arrangements. Parents' preferences over employment, earnings, and how to divide up household labor exhibit gendered patterns, which persist regardless of childcare availability. By illustrating the micro-foundations of household decision-making under constraints, our findings help to make sense of women's retrenchment from the labor market during the pandemic: a pattern which may have long-term economic and political consequences.

Word Count: 4315

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected men and women in systematically different ways, with potential long-term implications for gender equality (Alon et al., 2020). In the United States and elsewhere, social distancing measures coupled with school and daycare closures took away many parents’ options to outsource childcare, a task disproportionately performed by women under traditionally gendered household arrangements.¹ How did working parents weather this shock?

As access to safe and affordable childcare became uncertain², working parents were faced with having to renegotiate their household arrangements. Lewis (2020) describes the pandemic as a “disaster for feminism” as it “smashes up the bargain that so many dual-earner couples have made in the developed world: We can both work, because someone else is looking after our children. Instead, couples will have to decide which one of them takes the hit.” However, it may also be an opportunity to renegotiate towards more gender balanced arrangements (Seiz, 2020). Indeed, evidence from across contexts shows that men increased their contributions to carework during the pandemic (Oxfam International, 2020). However, women continued to shoulder the larger burden in many cases, leaving inequalities unchanged or even exacerbated.

In the United States, the pandemic has had deleterious effects on women’s labor force participation. Between February and April 2020 mothers with young children had reduced their work hours four to five times more than fathers (Collins et al., 2020) and were more likely to have exited the labor force altogether (Landivar et al., 2020); mothers working from home in April-May 2020 spent more time on housework than fathers (Lyttelton, Zang and Musick, 2020); in September 2020, four times as many women as men dropped out of the

¹The Center for Global Development estimates that “school and preschool closures created the need for 672 billion hours of additional unpaid childcare in 2020 through October” (Kenny and Yang, 2021)

²In April 2020, researchers at the Early Childhood Policy at the Center for American Progress estimated that the pandemic could lead to the permanent loss of 4.5 million childcare slots since many childcare providers who operate on the margins would be unable to survive closures without extensive government support (Jessen-Howard and Workman, 2020)

labor force (Kashen, Glynn and Novello, 2020). Even as jobs return, women - and Black and Latina women in particular - remain excluded from the recovery (Ewing-Nelson, 2021). The wins of the gender revolution of the 1960s, already stalled and uneven (England, 2010), now stand threatened.

In this study, we seek to understand how one aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic – the shock to the availability of childcare – shapes American parents’ preferences over how to divide work inside and outside the home. What arrangements are considered “fair” under a situation of unusual strain on the usual options? Understanding these micro-dynamics can help make sense of the visibly gendered impacts of the pandemic.

To answer this questions, we conducted a conjoint survey experiment with an online sample of nearly 2000 parents in the US during August 2020. Respondents were shown vignettes depicting different household arrangements, asked to choose which arrangement they would personally prefer to be in, and to rate the perceived fairness of each. Each vignette describes the situation of a heterosexual married couple with two children, and has five randomly varied attributes: the availability of childcare, the wife’s work status and income, the husband’s work status and income, how they divide time spent on household chores, and the frequency with which the husband contributes to traditionally “feminine” chores. The conjoint design allows us to estimate how each of these features affects parents’ preferences and fairness perceptions, and how sensitive these preferences are to childcare availability.

Unsurprisingly, we first document that men and women prefer situations where options for childcare are available, and deem situations where it is unavailable as relatively unfair, all else equal. However, contrary to our expectations, we find that the unavailability of childcare, a key shock associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, does not seem to change how parents weigh other aspects of household arrangements. We take this as suggestive evidence of the persistence of preferences over other aspects of household arrangements in face of a shock to childcare availability. Given overwhelming evidence that women continue

to shoulder the disproportionate burden of childcare in the United States, we expected that they may value the availability of childcare options more highly than men. However, we do not find a gender gap in preferences over childcare availability.

Second, we document a gendered pattern in respondents' evaluations of income and employment. While respondents strictly prefer situations where the husband or wife is employed and earning to those where they are unemployed, this employment and earned income is not valued equally. Both men and women respondents' preferences are more sensitive to husband's earnings than those of wives. American parents in our sample value equal dollar amounts less when earned by wives. Moreover, in line with existing scholarship around the gendered stigma of unemployment, situations where men are unemployed are far less preferable than those where women are unemployed. Notably, women respondents evaluate situations where the husband is unemployed even more negatively than men do.

Third, we document a gendered asymmetry in preferences for equality within the home. On the one hand both men and women respondents overall prefer – and perceive as more fair – situations where husbands and wives spend equal times on housework, and where husbands contribute to traditionally feminine tasks of cooking, cleaning and housework relative to unequal divisions. However, women respondents value equal time spent on housework and husbands' regular contributions to feminine tasks more highly than their male counterparts.

Our study provides timely evidence on individual preferences and perceptions of fairness over household arrangements at a moment where such arrangements are subject to renegotiation. These preferences also have potential relevance for distributive policy outcomes. Individuals' perceived fairness of socioeconomic circumstances is shown to have a direct line to public support for re-distributive government programs (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Krimmel and Rader, 2020). The perceived fairness of different aspects of household arrangements may similarly have implications for whether the US government will face pressure to reform its social safety net.

Additionally, our findings help illuminate the micro-foundations of women's labor force

participation in the United States, and the hit it has taken during the pandemic. Persistent gender wage gaps, occupational segregation, coupled with a particular lack of childcare support relative to other high-income countries mean that most married American women earn less than their male partners (Blau and Kahn, 2013). For dual-earner households, this may make mothers’ retreat from the labor market relatively less costly in terms of income loss than that of their husbands. However, a purely income-based explanation is incomplete: a rich literature in political economy and sociology establishes how the symbolic value of employment and income is deeply gendered, and how the ubiquity of “male breadwinner norms” shape women’s labor market outcomes (Bertrand, Kamenica and Pan, 2015; England, 2010; Gonalons-Pons and Gangl, 2021; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2006; Rao, 2020). Our study contributes to this understanding: men and women in our sample simply attach a lower value to the same dollar amount of income when it is earned by a wife than a husband, and this is more pronounced among women respondents. Our findings confirm the persistence of these gendered norms during the pandemic in the United States.

2 Theoretical Framework

Despite having made major strides in labor force participation, women in the US continue to perform the ‘lion’s share’ of household labor (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010). This situation of persisting inequality within the home is reinforced both by individually held attitudes about how household labor should be divided,³ and the unique policy environment of the US in which individuals make these choices. In this section, we discuss theoretical predictions around how a set of individual-level factors and structural conditions shape heterosexual individuals’ preferences over household arrangements, and how fair they perceive different arrangements to be. We are interested in how the specific constraint of childcare

³For instance, in a 2017 Pew survey, 80% of respondents said that the ideal situation for a two-parent household would be for one parent to work full time and one parent to not work outside the home or only work part time. Among these, 39% of respondents said that it ought to be the mother who does not work or works part-time; 56% were indifferent and *only 1% said it ought to be the father* (Pew Research Center, 2017)

availability during the COVID-19 pandemic may shape these preferences. Our predictions, and in line with this, our sample of respondents do not extend to individuals in same-sex partnerships, which differ in fundamental ways with regards to the the gendered dynamics of their household arrangements (Solomon, Rothblum and Balsam, 2005; Brewster, 2017).

Childcare Availability and COVID-19

Families’ access to childcare for young children encompasses a set of options, including care provided through facilities like day-cares and childcare centers, and the de-facto care provided through in-person schooling. It may also include care provided by other family members such as grandparents, or hired help such as nannies and babysitters. American parents’ limited access to affordable care is a longstanding structural problem. School and daycare closures alongside social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic further limited access to all of these options to varying degrees and pushed the childcare crisis to a brink.⁴

Findings from political science, economics, and sociology provide crucial insight into how structural constraints and institutional environments shape the decisions that families make. Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) find that women’s propensity to take on the “second shift” at home is determined by their bargaining power within the household, which is in turn shaped by a set of macro-level variables including the legal ease of divorce, the size of the public sector, and availability of part-time employment. Pedulla and Thébaud (2015) find that when individuals are randomly primed with information about low institutional constraints (supportive workplace policy), they are more likely to prefer an egalitarian relationship model.

The sudden removal of the means of outsourcing the traditionally feminine task of child-care represents a potent shift in the institutional environment. For the past half century,

⁴In a survey of US households with children ages five and under conducted by the University of Oregon’s RAPID-EC Research Group in April 2020, researchers found that of 47% of respondents had lost the childcare arrangements that they had been using prior to the pandemic. 48% of lower-income households and 25% of middle-upper income households reported that not being able to return to their previous child care arrangement (RAPID-EC Research Group, 2020).

the bargain that couples strike on who does what in the home and the labor market has been based on the availability of childcare and in-person schooling. It is an open question as to what will happen to gender equity in the home, labor market, and in politics when this key institutional feature is abruptly altered, or when states decide to “re-open” the economy even as childcare facilities remain closed.

We predict that access of childcare will condition individuals’ preferences over different household arrangements, and that this effect will be stronger for some: namely women, who perform most of this care-work, and those who hold gender-equitable attitudes.

The conjoint experiment also allows us to test the extent to which individuals value childcare relative to other factors such as couples’ earnings. Moreover, we are able to test whether the unprecedented inability to outsource this care-work leads individuals to value egalitarian divisions of labor and men’s contribution to traditionally feminine tasks more highly. Given the existing evidence that the additional burden of childcare when outside options are unavailable is likely to be borne disproportionately by women, we also expect to see interactive effects between gender and childcare availability on respondent preferences.

Division of Household Labor

Despite persisting gender inequality in the actual division of household labor, there is also a documented preference for more equitable and egalitarian distributions as the “ideal” Pedulla and Thébaud (2015); Gerson (2010); Nordenmark and Nyman (2003). We thus expect that individuals will on average prefer an equitable division of time spent on household chores by male and female partners in a couple, relative to inequitable divisions where either the male or female partner spends more time.

While men’s time spent on housework has been increasing steadily since the 1960s in the US,⁵ the composition of tasks that men and women spend time on remains gendered.⁶

⁵Analysis of the American Time Use Survey finds that “Men’s housework time has doubled from four hours per week in 1965 to about nine hours per week in 2011” (Pew Research Center, 2013)

⁶A Gallup survey of 3062 heterosexual married or cohabitating adults in the US finds that women continue to be “primarily responsible” for laundry, cleaning the house and meal preparation, while men take primary

Importantly, the composition of household tasks performed by each partner seems to matter for whether individuals perceive an arrangement as “fair.” Blair and Johnson (1992) find that men’s contribution to “female dominated tasks” such as meal preparation and cleaning is an important predictor of their wives’ perception of fairness. However men’s contribution to “male dominated” or gender-neutral tasks, such as yardwork, does not show a similar relationship. We thus expect that all else equal, individuals will prefer a situation where the male partner contributes to “feminine” tasks, and that this preference will be stronger among women and among individuals who hold gender egalitarian views.

Work and Earning Status

A joint household income maximizing perspective suggests that individuals should prefer situations where male and female partners in a couple earn greater amounts and household income is maximized. However, earning status may also shape preferences over types of household arrangements. For instance, within-couple disparities in earnings and assets may prompt the relatively deprived partner to consider inequitable contributions to household tasks as “fair.” In a study of couples in the United States, Lennon and Rosenfield (1994) find that when accounting for actual time-use, women who have more economic options outside of marriage are more likely to view the inequitable division of labor in their own households as unfair: earning and resources thus shape perceptions of fairness. This implies that the gap in men and women’s earning status within a couple may condition the effect of other factors (like time-use) on preferences and perceptions. In this study, while we do not interrogate predictions about these conditional effects, we simply test the prediction that on average individuals will prefer arrangements that maximize household income.

responsibility for keeping the car in good condition and doing yardwork, i.e. dividing up chores along traditionally gendered lines (Brenan, 2020)

Gender Ideology

We expect that individual’s predispositions towards gender equality will shape their preferences for more/less gender equitable arrangements in a household. Moreover, we expect that gender ideology will shape how individuals make subjective assessments about the fairness of objective distributions of household labor. We operationalize “gender ideology” using a subset of the Modern Sexism Scale, which is used in the American National Election Studies (ANES).⁷ Existing evidence suggests that in heterosexual couples, the female partner’s gender ideology is particularly influential in determining the relationship between marital satisfaction, perceptions of fairness, and the division of labor in the home (Greenstein, 1996*a,b*; Lavee and Katz, 2002; Lee, 2002).⁸ We expect those who score lower than the median within our sample on the sexism scale to have relatively stronger preferences for arrangements with a gender equitable division of household labor and for arrangements where men contribute to traditionally feminine tasks. One caveat to this prediction is that measuring gender ideology and sexist attitudes in a survey context prior to asking respondents to state preferences over different household arrangements may “prime” these attitudes and make them especially salient to the choice. We would therefore interpret any estimated effects of these attitudes, measured as such, on stated preferences as being an upper bound of the potential effects.

2.1 Testable Predictions

The design of our conjoint experiment study reflects the above set of factors that can be expected to affect individuals’ preferences over household arrangements and their perceived sense of fairness of these arrangements. Table 1 describes the attributes and levels included in the experiment; Table 2 summarizes our predictions about 1) the direction of the aver-

⁷Political science research shows that the Modern Sexism Scale is highly relevant to and predictive of many political attitudes and political behavior. Valentino, Wayne and Ocen (2018) finds that sexist attitudes, as measured by the modern sexism scale, predicted voting behavior in the 2018 election. Moreover, Reny (2020) finds that sexist attitudes are a consistently strong predictor for coronavirus-related attitudes, behaviors, policy preferences, and the contraction of the virus.

⁸There is also some evidence that the male partner’s attitudes towards household chores, distinct from gender ideology, is more influential than the female partner’s preferences (Poortman and Van Der Lippe, 2009)

age marginal component effect of each of these factors on respondents’ preferences, 2) the conditional effect among subgroups of interest, and 3) the effect of randomized attributes in situations where childcare is unavailable. We also expect that the unavailability of childcare will have interactive effects with gender given strong evidence that women are likely to bear the brunt of additional childcare in the absence of outside options. While we will estimate these interactions, we are pessimistic about the power for this particular analysis.

Table 1: Attributes and Values for Conjoint Profile Vignette

Attribute	Possible Values
Wife’s Work/Earning Status	Wife does not work
	Wife works and earns 50k
	Wife works and earns 100k
Husband’s work/earning status	Husband does not work
	Husband works and earns 50k
	Husband works and earns 100k
Division of household labor	Unequal – wife does much more
	Equal – wife and husband do about the same
	Unequal – husband does much more
Husband’s contribution to “feminine” tasks i.e. cooking, cleaning, childcare	Contributes rarely
	Contributes sometimes
	Contributes regularly
Childcare availability	Couple has determined that there are no childcare options available
	Couple has determined that at least one childcare option is available

Table 2: Hypotheses of Average, Conditional and Interactive Effects of Attributes on Respondents’ Personally Preferred Situation and Perceptions of Fairness

Attribute	Effect	Conditional Effect		Interactive Effect
		<i>Among Women</i>	<i>Among Low Sexism</i>	<i>Childcare Unavailable</i>
Wife’s earnings	+	?	?	?
Husband’s earnings	+	?	?	?
Equal sharing of chores	+	higher	higher	higher
Husband’s contribution to feminine tasks	+	higher	higher	higher
Availability of childcare	+	higher	higher	not estimated

Note: “+” in Column 2 indicates expectation of a positive effect; “higher” in Column 3 indicates that we expect the size of the effect to be larger among women than men; “higher” in Column 4 indicates that we expect the size of the effect to be larger among individuals who score low on the sexism scale relative to those who score high; “higher” in Column 5 indicates that we expect the size of the effect of to be larger when childcare is unavailable. “?” indicates that we are agnostic about the direction of the effect but will estimate it.

3 Study Context and Design

We use a paired vignette conjoint experiment fielded online in the US to test the predictions laid out in the prior section. The US is the only OECD country that does not mandate paid family leave for new parents; it also lags behind the OECD average for public expenditure on early childhood and educational care as a proportion of country GDP (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). England (2010) describes the lack of family friendly policies in the US following terms: “One form the devaluation of traditionally female activities takes is the failure to treat child rearing as a public good and support those who do it with state payments.” The exacerbated crisis of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic may also be a tipping point: issues of childcare and the division of labor within the home achieved prominence on the national political stage during this time.

Our experiment was administered as part of an online survey conducted on the Qualtrics platform with 1,938 respondents recruited through the Lucid Marketplace on August 19 -

23rd, 2020. The survey was targeted to adults aged 18-45 in heterosexual partnerships with at least one child under the age of 12. The characteristics of the target sample were intended to closely mirror the characteristics of the couple described in the hypothetical profiles in the conjoint experiment. Summary statistics of key background characteristics of our sample are provided in Appendix C.

Upon consenting to participation, recruited respondents answered a set of background questions, followed by the conjoint experiment. Table 1 details the 5 attributes and the possible values that each attribute could take (either 2 or 3). Respondents were presented with four pairs of hypothetical vignettes, thus completing four “choice tasks.” Vignettes were presented side by side, with each pair displayed on a separate screen. The attributes were presented in a randomized order that was fixed across the 4 pairings for each respondent to “ease the cognitive burden for respondents while also minimizing primacy and recency effects” Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014). A sample vignette is reproduced below:

After viewing each pair of profiles, respondents answered three questions that serve as the primary outcome measures for the study. They were first asked to choose which situation they would personally prefer to be in themselves (Outcome 1), and then to rank the perceived fairness of each profile on a 5-point scale (Outcome 2). The first outcome, which is a forced choice, allows us to assess the effect of each attribute value in the evaluation of one profile relative to another. The second outcome, which is measured separately for each profile, allows us to evaluate the perception of fairness of each profile (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014).

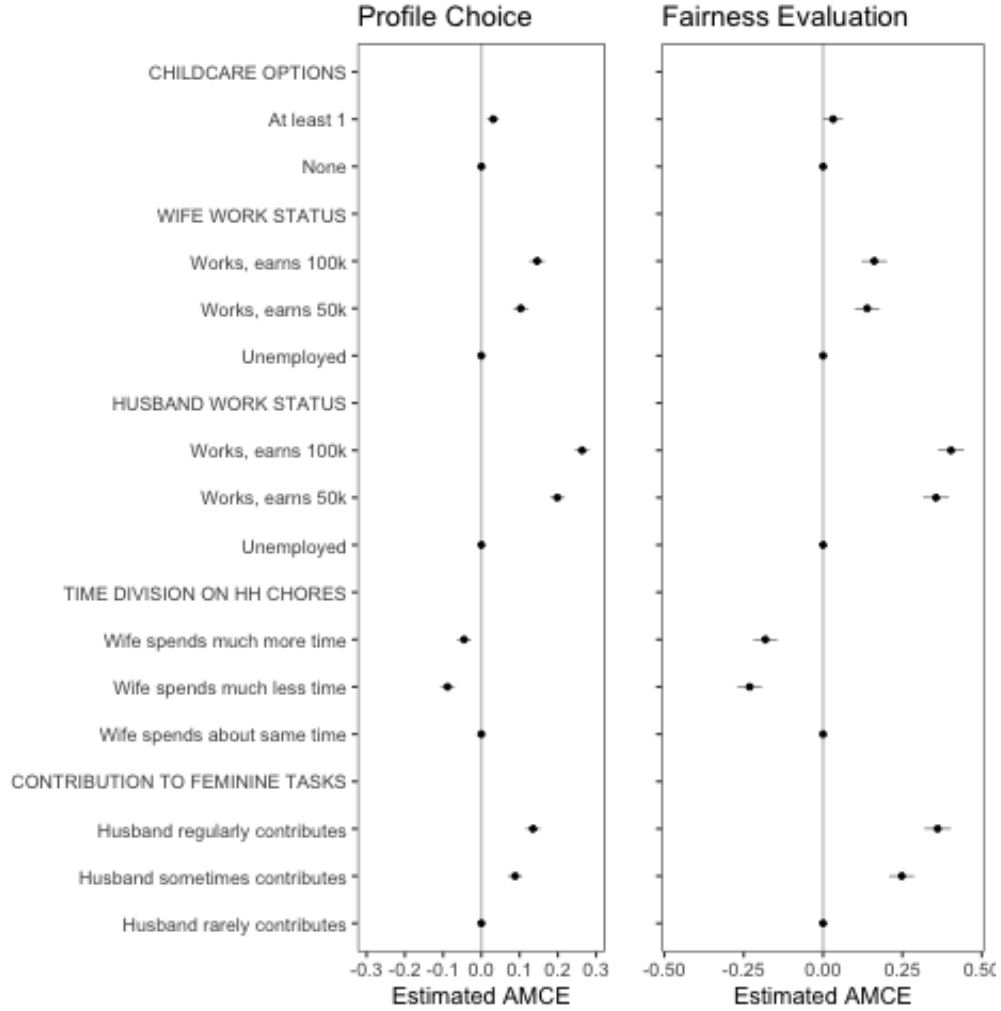
The initial study design received conceptual approval from the [institution][institution redacted] COVID-19 Research Oversight Committee, and was deemed exempt by the [institution] [institution redacted]IRB on June 24, 2020. We registered the design of the study and hypotheses with the EGAP registry prior to the collection of any survey data. A copy of the registered report, which includes the text of background questions, the conjoint experiment, and the two outcome measures, is reproduced in Appendices A and B.

4 Findings

This section presents the results from the pre-specified analysis for our conjoint experiment.

Figure 1 shows the main AMCE results for the two outcome variables (probability of choosing a given profile and perceived fairness of a profile). We find, in line with our prediction, that all else equal, respondents prefer household arrangements with least 1 option for childcare. However the magnitude of the effect of the childcare availability attribute, relative to that of other attributes is quite small. To illustrate, the effect of the male partner in a couple earning 100k (relative to being unemployed) is nearly 10x greater. In fact, male earnings are the attribute with the largest effect on respondent preferences, and these effects are also large relative to those of the female partners' earnings. A respondent is 20% more likely to choose a situation where the husband earns 50k a year (relative to not working); the effect of a wife earning 50k a year (relative to not working) is half that: 10%. With regards to the division of household labor, a clear preference for an equal gender division of time spent on household chores emerges. Situations where the wife spends much less (or much more) time than the husband on housework are less preferable to those where the times spent is equal. However, respondents prefer situations where women spend more time relative to those where women spend less time than husbands. Equality may be preferable to inequality, but an unequal burden borne by women is still preferable to one borne by men. However, men's contribution to "feminine-coded" tasks has large effects, comparable in size to those of women's earnings.

Figure 1: Conjoint Analysis Results: ACME, OLS Regression



Our findings on fairness evaluation follow largely similar pattern. However some informative differences emerge. While the effect of childcare on respondents' preference for a situation is negative and statistically significant, it is smaller in magnitude and barely significant in the case of fairness evaluations. While respondents perceive unequal time spent on household chores to be less fair, in this case a wife spending "much less" or "much more" time is seen as equally unfair. Taken together with the previous results on preferred situations, this points towards a possibility of divergence between fairness perception and preferences in some domains: respondents rate women spending much more or much less time on household chores as similarly unfair situations, but when forced to choose, prefer the former.

Figure 2: Conjoint Analysis Results: ACME, OLS Regression

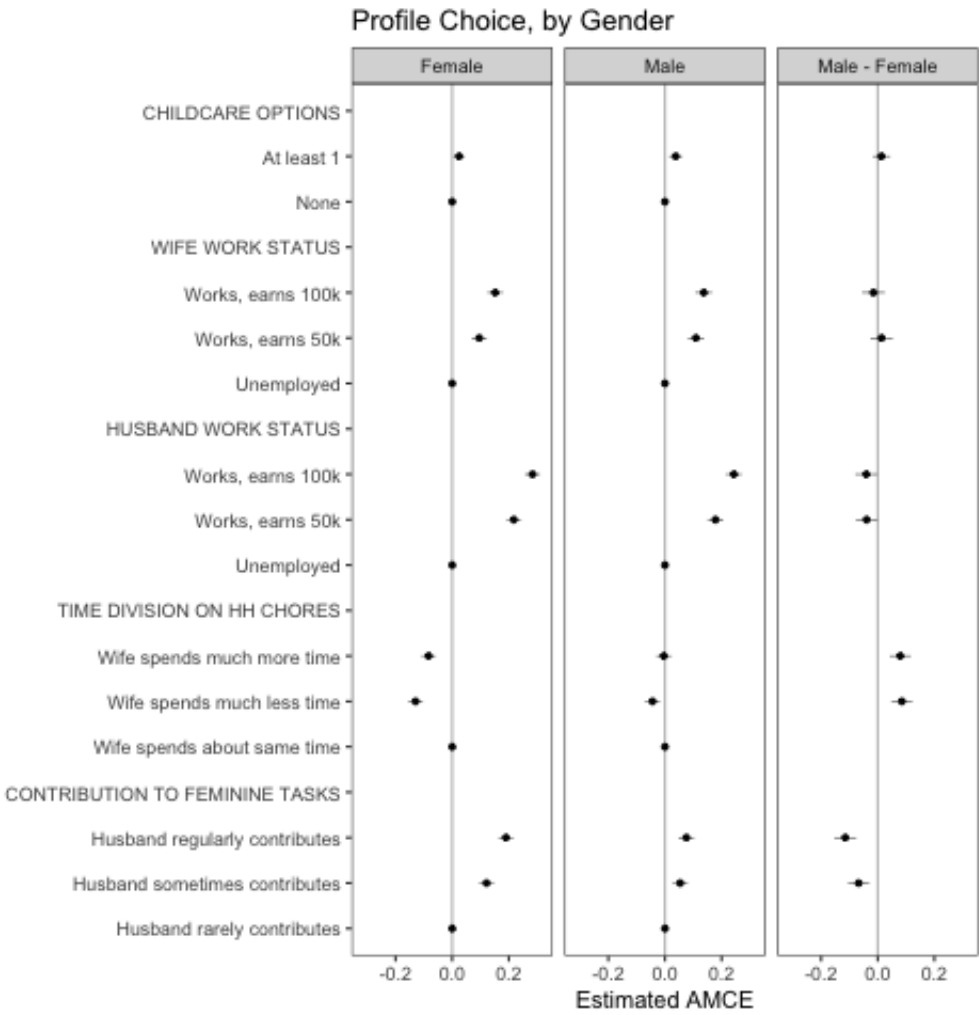
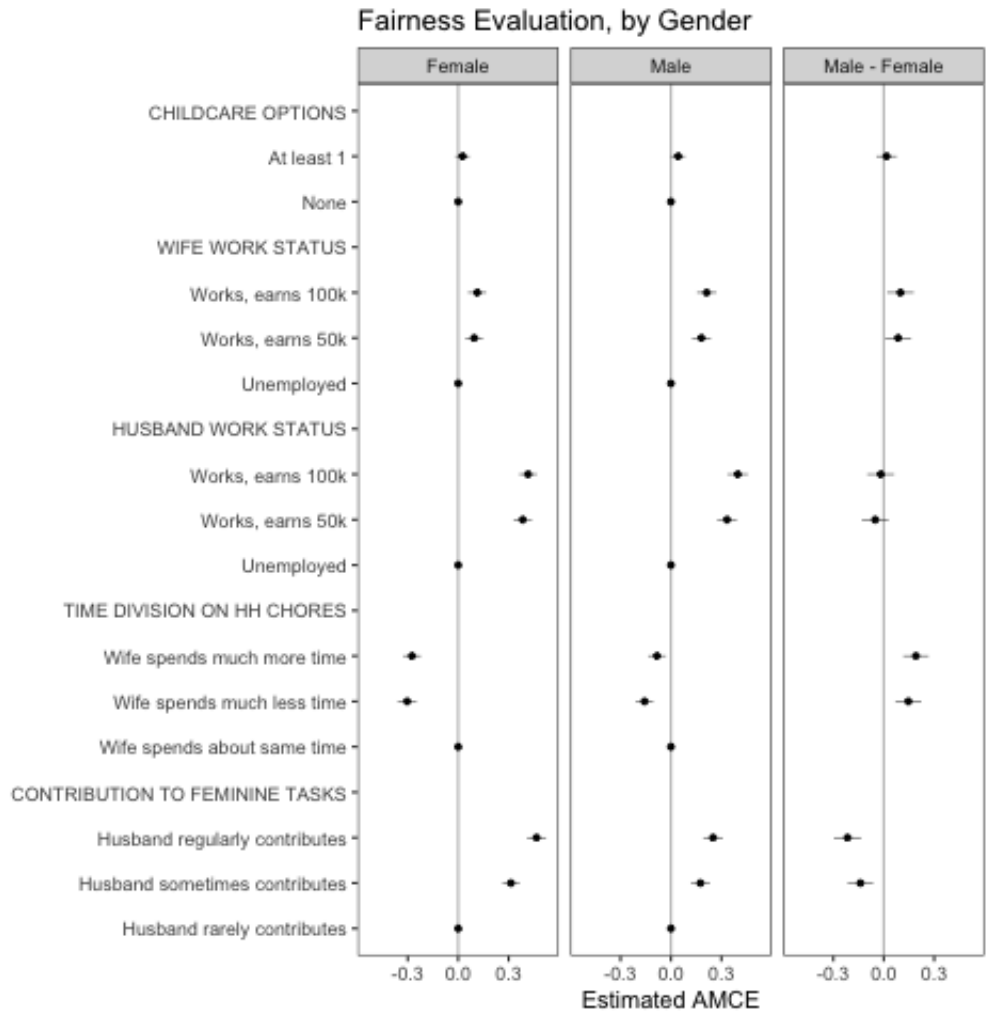


Figure 3: Conjoint Analysis Results: ACME, OLS Regression



Figures 2 and 3 show the AMCE results, conditional upon a respondent's self identified gender. We do not find significant differences in the effect of childcare availability on men and women's evaluations. The effect of time division shows a stark gendered pattern. Women are equally averse to situations where wives spend more or less time than their husbands on household chores. While men have a preference for equal division relative to a situation where the wife spends less time, they are in fact indifferent between an equal division and a situation where a woman does more, even though they see these situations as similarly less fair relative to equal divisions. The effect of husband's contributions to feminine tasks is much larger for women than it is for men both when it comes to preferences and fairness

evaluations, moreover the jump in this effect from husbands contributing "sometimes" to "regularly" is large and significant for women, but insignificant for men. There is also an interesting result on the effects of earnings by the male and female partner on men and women's likelihood of choosing a profile. Firstly the effect of men's earnings is simply larger than that of women's earnings, as in the pooled results. In the case of the male partner's earnings, both men and women are significantly more likely to prefer a situation where the man earns 100k relative to when he earns 50k. However, when it comes to the female partner's earnings, the effect of 100k is significantly greater than that of earning 50k among women, but this difference is not significantly different among male respondents. That is, in situations where a female partner is working, male respondents seem to be indifferent between a situation where she earns 50k vs. 100k.

Figures 4 and 5 show the AMCE results, conditional upon a respondent's self identified gender ideology. This measure is based on responses to four attitudinal questions from the Modern Sexism Scale. The responses are scored on a 0-4 scale where a respondent receives a score of 4 if they strongly agree with a sexist statement, and 0 if they strongly disagree. The scores for 4 such statements are summed and we use the median of this summed quantity to categorize respondents into "High Sexism" vs. "Low Sexism". The differences in effects by this measure of sexism emerge in the household time division and men's contribution to feminine tasks attributes. The negative effect of unequal situations where women spend less time than men on household chores is higher among those who score low on the sexism scale, and this is especially pronounced in the case of fairness perceptions. The effect of men's contributions to feminine coded tasks on both preferences for a situation and perceived fairness is substantially larger for those who score lower than median on the sexism scale.

Figure 4: Conjoint Analysis Results: Conditional AMCE, OLS Regression

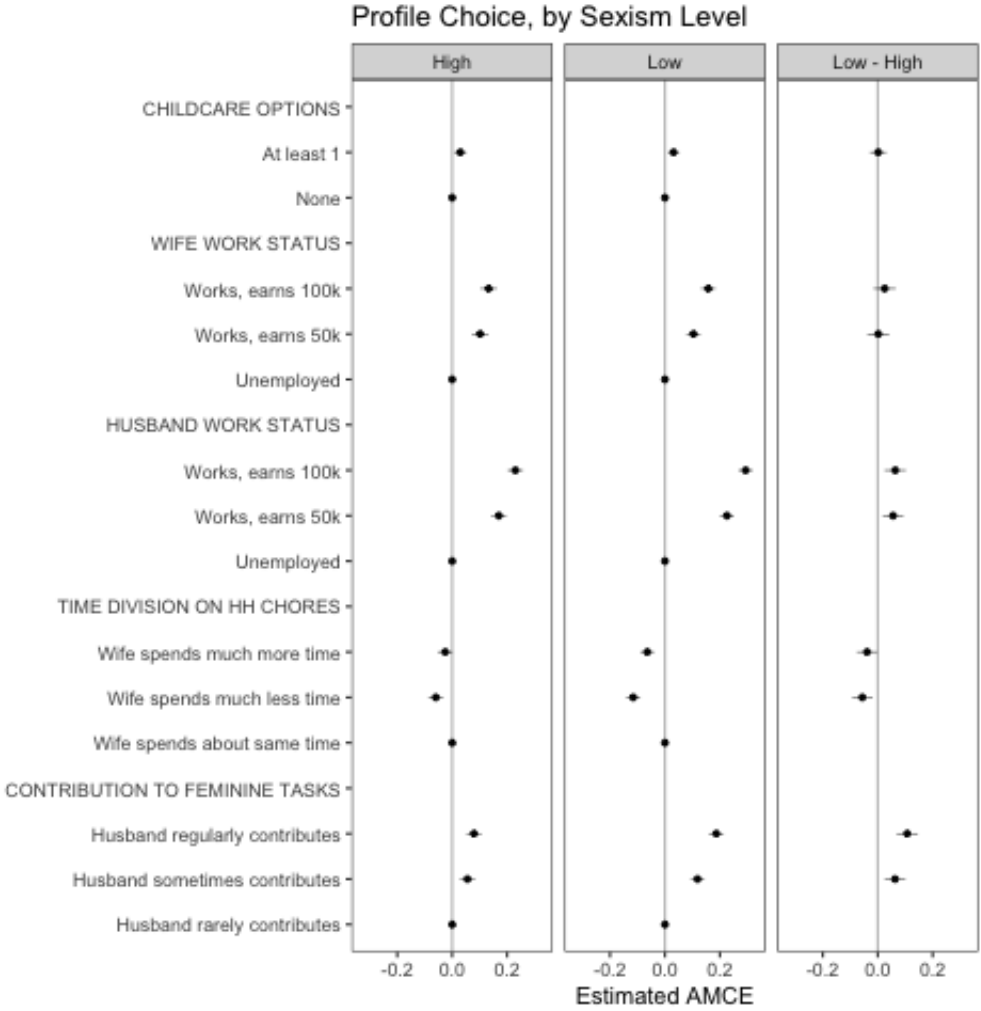
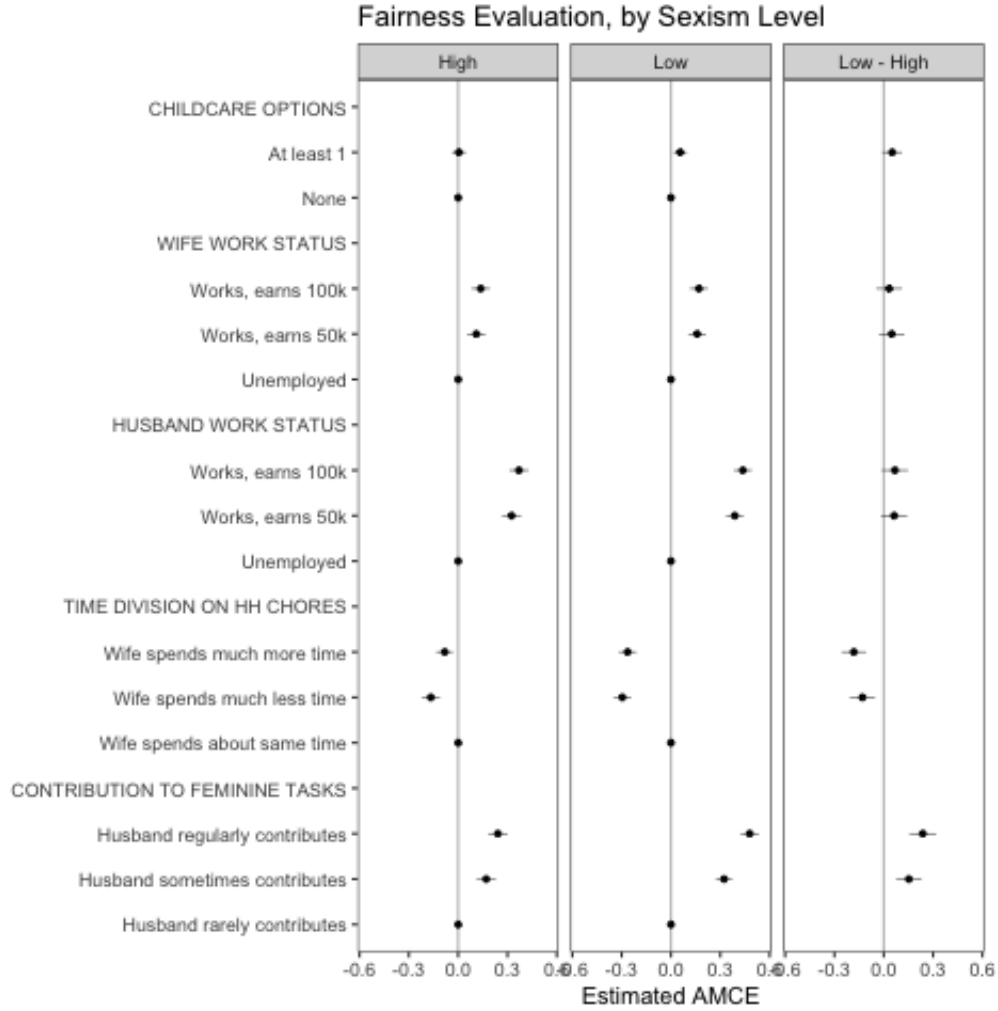


Figure 5: Conjoint Analysis Results: Conditional ACME, OLS Regression



Figures 6 and 7 show the ACIE results, the effects of randomly attributes in the profile conditional upon the childcare availability attribute. We do not find evidence that the factors interact with childcare availability. We cannot reject the null hypotheses that these attributes have similar effects on respondent's preferred situation or their evaluation of fairness of other attributes.

Figure 6: Conjoint Analysis Results: ACIE, OLS Regression

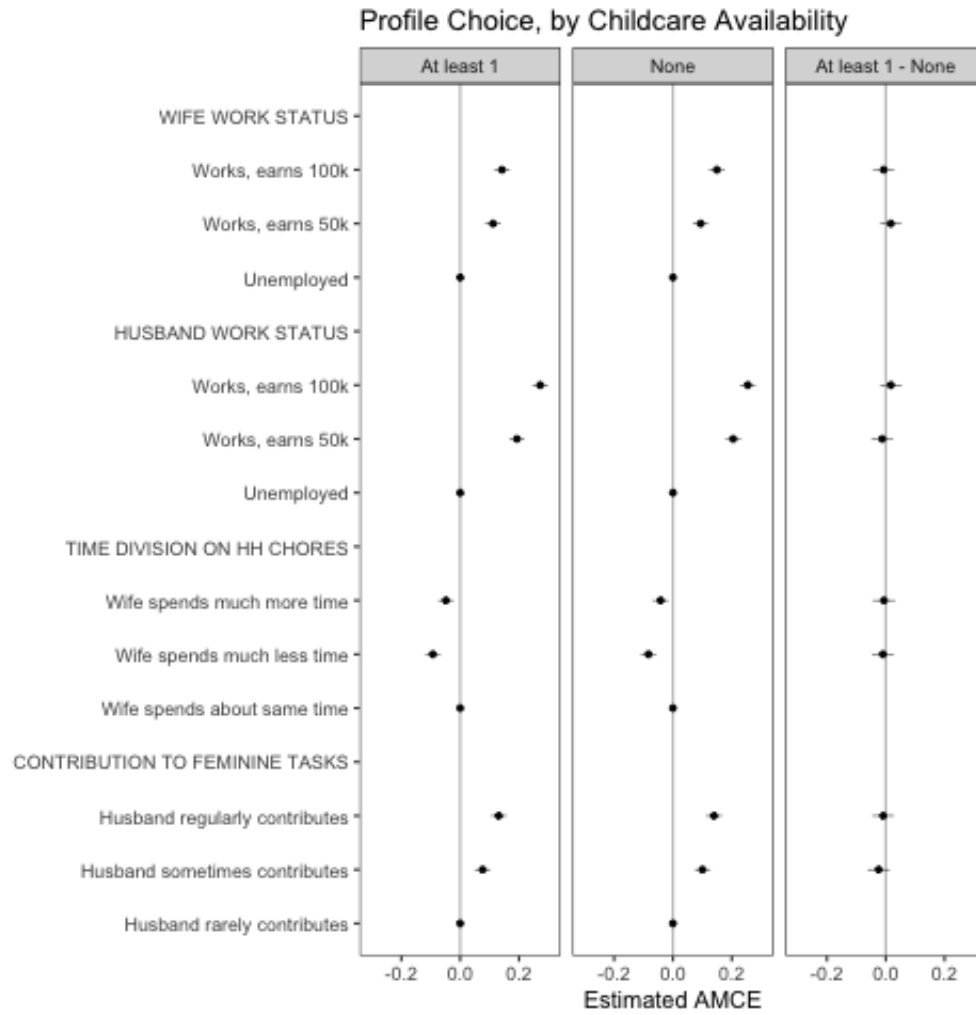
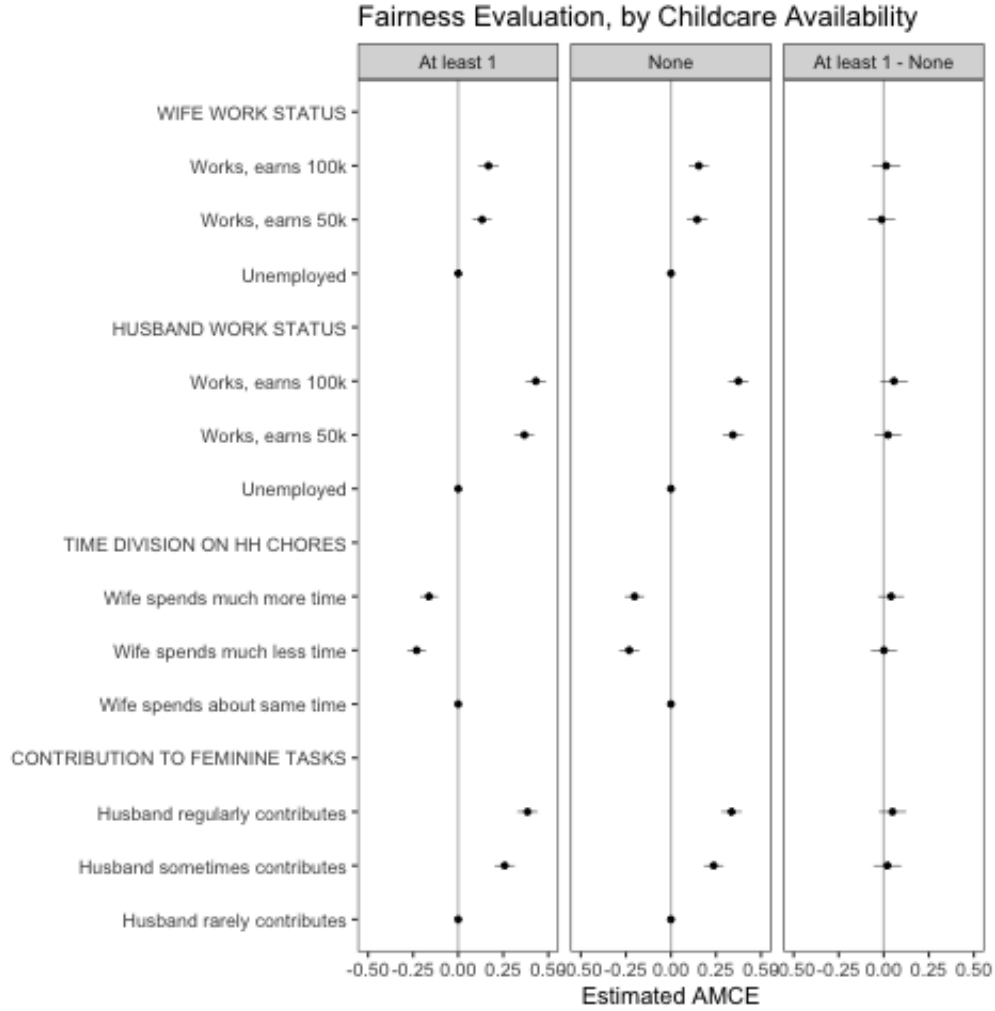


Figure 7: Conjoint Analysis Results: ACIE, OLS Regression



We interpret this to mean that a 'shock' to childcare availability (or here, whether the vignette is randomly assigned childcare or not) like the one that so many have experienced in the past few months does not seem to shift underlying preferences over the gendered division of labor or the value attached to male and female partners' incomes. On the one hand this is a positive story: in situations when childcare is unavailable, respondents continue to prefer (and perceive as fair) situations where wives and husbands spend equal times on housework to situations where wives spend much more (or much less) time; where husbands contribute to feminine coded tasks sometimes or regularly (relative to rarely). On the other hand, we also do not find evidence for a dramatic change in preferences towards more equal sharing

of burdens of household chores and care: it is not the case that the when childcare becomes unavailable and there is an objectively larger load to be shared, men and women place *higher* value on men’s contribution to these tasks; nor does the situation where a woman spends ”much more time than” a man on these tasks become *less* acceptable. This lack of change may help understand some of the descriptive patterns emerging on the division of household labor during the pandemic: men may be taking on a greater *volume* of chores and care work than before, but not large enough to actually skew the *division* towards a more equal situation. This, coupled with the higher value placed on men’s earnings, has stark implications for women’s participation in the labor force.

5 Discussion

It is clear that the ongoing pandemic will have effects on gender equity within the home, in the labor market, and in the political sphere. The pandemic has also served to highlight the centrality of the home, and power contestations within it, for labor market outcomes (Kabeer et al., 2021). The political implications of women’s observed retrenchment from the labor force during this time cannot be overstated: women’s labor force participation is strongly associated with the formation of distinctive policy preferences and voting patterns and political participation (Togeby, 1994; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010, 2008; Andersen and Cook, 1985; Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1999). The personal choices that households make about the division of labor within and outside the home may thus have serious political ramifications down the line.

Our study provides evidence on the gendered preferences that underlie these choices, and also points to the prospects for change towards more gender equitable outcomes. On the one hand, the importance of better childcare support and family-friendly policy is clear and urgent, particularly in light of the US’ laggard status on this front. Yet, our findings show that while men and women may agree on the importance of having access to options

for childcare, they also seem to undervalue mothers' labor force participation and earnings vis-a-vis that of fathers, and men continue to value equitable divisions of household labor less than women do. Having access to outside options for childcare, at least in the context of our conjoint experiment, does not shift these evaluations. While this certainly does not rule out the possibility of family-friendly social policy shifting gendered norms and preferences around work and household labor in the longer term, it does suggest the need to take these underlying preferences seriously. As Htun (2021) notes: "Without explicit attention to cultural associations surrounding reproductive labor, there is a risk that the current moment will produce a limited effect on structures of inequality."

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