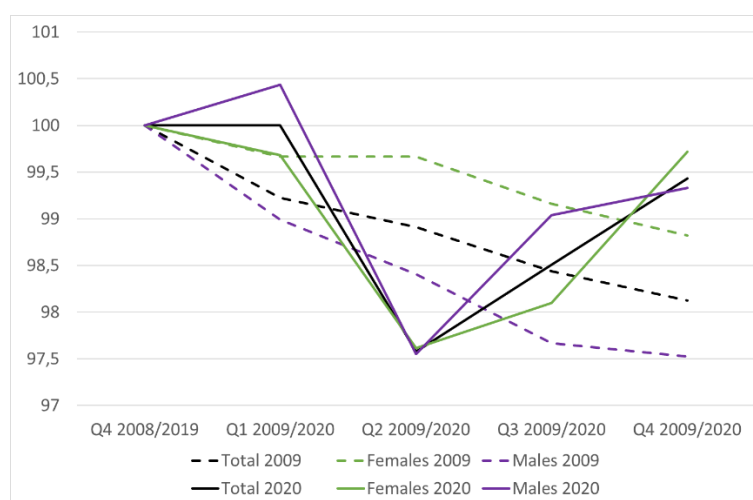


# Women and labour during the Covid-19 crisis

By [Clémence Berson](#)

*The Covid-19 crisis has had a profound impact on the organisation of labour. Women have been on the front line both in tackling the virus and in looking after their family and relatives in these difficult times. Their participation in the labour market has not been significantly affected, thanks both to public aid policies and to their efforts in balancing their professional and private responsibilities.*

**Chart 1: Change in the employment rate by gender, comparison between the Great Recession and the Covid crisis – Q4 2008 and 2019 = 100**



*Source: INSEE.*

*Key: The female employment rate fell by 0.3 percentage point between Q4 2019 and Q1 2020.*

In March 2020, the complete stoppage of activity to combat the pandemic triggered a highly atypical economic crisis, especially with regard to the labour market. In France, unlike in the [Great Recession](#) of 2008, there was very little difference in the evolution of unemployment and employment rates for men and women (Chart 1), even though the 2020 crisis primarily hit more “female” sectors such as services, and not industry as in 2008. This phenomenon can be explained by several factors:

- In the spring of 2020, due to the gender distribution of jobs, women found themselves on the front line in combating the virus. Health care jobs are primarily female: the majority of nurses are women, gender parity has almost been reached among doctors, and carers and home helpers are predominantly female. Other highly feminised occupations were also highly exposed, such as supermarket cashiers or cleaners who continued their activities at a time of major uncertainty over the illness.

- The widespread roll-out of the short-time work scheme, its adaptation to cover childcare, and the major support given to firms that were forced to close all helped to avert massive job losses and prevent large numbers of women from leaving the labour market, as occurred in the United States, South Korea and Japan (Djankov et al. 2020). The reopening of schools and childcare facilities after the spring 2020 lockdown also made it easier for mothers to (tele)work.

### **A major shift in women's professional and private lives**

For those women carrying out jobs deemed essential, one of the positive consequences of the health crisis has been the increased recognition and value given to their roles. The downside, however, is that they have been actively exposed to the virus and to the correlated fear of transmitting it to their families or to the vulnerable people they encounter in their work. For other women, the widespread switch to teleworking for those jobs that are eligible, and the massive use of the short-time work scheme – in particular during the first lockdown from March to May 2020 – have prompted a major shift in the organisation of labour and in their work-life balance.

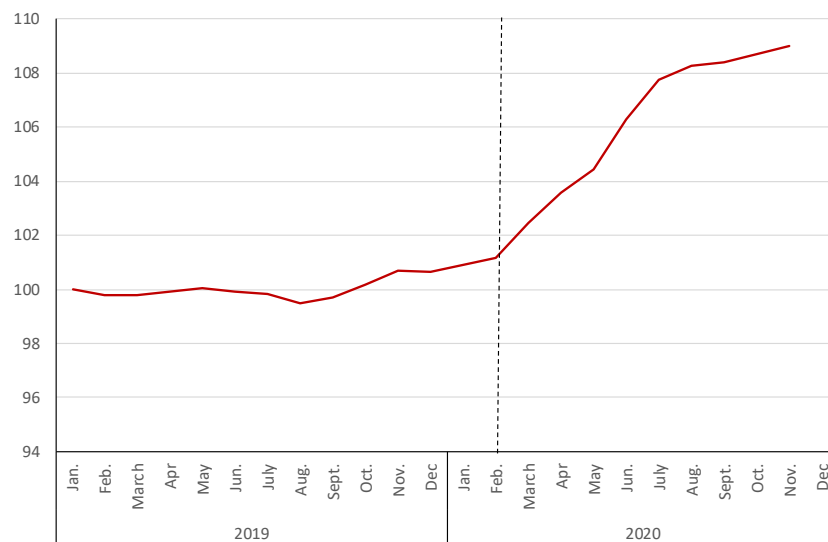
Initially, working mothers may have struggled to cope with both teleworking and household chores. Albouy and Legleye (2020) have shown that mothers shouldered more of the burden of homeschooling than fathers, while at the same time continuing to do their usual unpaid chores, which also increased as a result of families being stuck at home (meals, food shopping, housework). Data collected by the OECD show that, well before the pandemic, mothers already performed the vast majority of household chores and childcare. Indeed, in developed countries, women spend two hours more than men each day on these tasks. The most significant item is childcare, with women devoting an average of 35 minutes a day to this task, more than double the amount spent by men (15 minutes per day). Mothers are also twice as likely as men to give up work to look after their children.

The positive side of the lockdowns and curfews is that many partners have now realised how big a burden domestic tasks are, and how difficult it is to combine them with a professional life. In the longer term, regular teleworking could lead to a better work-life balance and a fairer distribution of household chores within couples (Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020).

## Women and precarity during the Covid-19 pandemic

Despite the numerous public aid schemes put in place, the restrictions introduced to combat the pandemic have increased the number of people who are economically vulnerable. According to [data](#) from the *Caisses d'allocations familiales* (French family benefits office), the number of households claiming the *revenu de solidarité active* (RSA or income support) increased by 9% after the introduction of the lockdown and has since stabilised at this level (Chart 2). Among those in difficulty, income [data](#) from the OECD show that women are on average worse-off financially than men, especially those who are single parents (they accounted for 18% of [overindebted](#) households in 2020). The current crisis has exacerbated this situation. The closure of schools and childcare facilities in the spring of 2020 forced women to look after their children during the day, often at the expense of their job and income. Restrictions on contact with the elderly, who could have provided help, also led to women exiting the labour market or prompted a sharp fall in their income ([Givord and Silhol 2020](#)). Women are also generally the main caregivers for adult relatives who are unable to cope on their own. During the pandemic, many women have had to combine their jobs with additional family care responsibilities, limiting their availability in the labour market.

**Chart 2: Change in households claiming the RSA between January 2019 and November 2020; Jan. 2019 = 100**



*Source: CAF, Allstat FR2.*

*Key: In November 2020, the number of households claiming the RSA was 9 percentage points higher than in January 2019.*

## Public policies must take care to encourage female inclusion

In France, public policies such as short-time working to enable childcare have succeeded in keeping women in the labour market since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the crisis could have long-term effects on female labour market participation. In particular, to safeguard against current and future pandemics, some types of jobs may become more automated (automatic checkouts, digitalisation of orders, conferences, property viewings, etc.). Historical examples such as the automobile or the introduction of cash dispensers

(Autor 2015), have shown that automation is generally accompanied by a rise in employment. However, workers' ability to adapt to the newly created jobs, which are often more qualified and better-paid, varies depending on their profile. In particular, Chernoff and Warman (2020) show that occupations held by females with low to mid levels of wages and education are at the highest risk of being destroyed by automation after the Covid-crisis.

The analyses conducted by the *Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes* (HCE – High Council for Gender Equality) will enable us to verify whether women are fully participating in the recovery. Part of the HCE's role is to examine whether gender equality is taken into account in impact studies of legislative texts. Analysing the measures introduced to support the recovery from this perspective will make it possible to ensure that their effects do not differ according to gender, and thereby increase the inclusion of women in the labour market.