

# THE COVID-19 MIRROR

VISIBILITY OF GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURES  
DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE HAGUE



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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Since early 2020, the whole world has been in the grasp of the covid-19 pandemic which has already caused tremendous amounts of casualties among mostly the senior and medical vulnerable populations. Apart from the health impact, the covid-19 crisis also highlights the vulnerability and resilience of unequal social structures in society that influence the extent of this disasters' impact on men, women and child. At this point in time (Autumn 2020), the full health and socio-economic impact of the corona-virus is not yet known and (successive) waves of infections are still impacting societies globally. This research aims to contribute to filling the unknowns about the pandemic's impacts and studies the socio-economic impact of the spring 2020 lockdown on gender and household dynamics in two distinct neighbourhoods in The Hague (Den Haag) in The Netherlands.

The Dutch governments' first response to covid-19 in spring 2020 has been to contain the health impact by issuing, for example, 'the 1.5m-distance law' and a so-called 'intelligent lockdown' in order to prevent further spreading and an overload of the hospital's intensive care (IC) departments (Rijksoverheid, 2020). And with success, the number of deaths and infected people on the IC departments and in society decreased and parts of Dutch daily life was unlocked and allowed to be resumed (with caution) from early June onward.

This narrative, so far, could be placed in a book or political campaign as it describes the successful tackling of the pandemic in The Netherlands in terms of health impact (not including the second wave of infections that flared up after summer 2020). This story nevertheless fails to address the glimpse of society's vulnerability and structural inequalities that have become visible during this crisis and affect people's lives based on their socio-economic status and/or gender. Thus, the magnitude of the covid-19 pandemic does not 'just' consist of the health impact of the virus in itself.

Within the disciplinary field of disaster studies, crises in societies are considered to be twofold. Namely, the catalyst of a crisis is first caused by a (1) natural event such as a pandemic, but its magnitude depends on the (2) socio-economic situation of a society. Therefore, one could argue that a disaster is often more of a symptom of the society's underlying vulnerability (Wisner et. al., 2004). Following this line of thought, this means that vulnerabilities, like structural socio-economic and gender inequalities, are already present in society and these are highlighted during a crisis. Verveer et. al. (2020) mention that during the corona-crisis women are facing

two to three times more pressure in their daily lives. Thus, making the covid-19 pandemic a gendered pandemic. The main domains in which women face increased pressure mentioned by literature are: (1) Care work; (2) Economic impact; (3) Health impact; (4) Gender-based Violence (GBV) and (5) Humanitarian impact (Verveer et. al., 2020; UN, 2020). Furthermore, organisations deplore that, despite these gendered impacts, women are left out at the decision-making table in the measurements taken against the spreading of the pandemic (Verveer et. al., 2020).

Apart from the socio-economic situation of families, vulnerability in society also becomes visible when specifically looking at structural gender dynamics within these families and in society in general. The Dutch labour market is famous for the number of parttime workers of which the majority is female (Pool & Lucassen, 2005). Women thus have a more unequal work/family balance compared to men as they spend more hours in informal care, childcare and housework (Wattis et. al., 2013). Men, on the other, hand have limited possibilities in caring because of social norms and socio-economic conditions. Sociologist Mara Yerkes adds in an online interview that some consequences of this gender inequality include the wage gap, economic dependency, insecurity and decreased career opportunities for women (Maas, 2020). This research further analyses these structural gender inequalities among parents in The Hague in light of the covid-19 crisis.

Yet, during crises situations, opportunities for structural change in society might occur in the so-called ‘window of opportunity’. Such a window of opportunity is defined as a way to transform social structures —such as gender roles— through active engagement as men and women take on different roles out of necessity (Bradshaw, 2014). This might lead to either superficial, fundamental or no change in gender roles when the crisis is over. Academic sources mention new gender roles but also critically pose the question whether this change would be temporary or not (Schulte, 2020; Carlson et. al., 2020)?

This thesis aims at uncovering to what extent gender relations and household dynamics were affected by the covid-19 lockdown of spring 2020 in The Hague. Semi-structured interviews with parents at two different childcare centres were conducted, situated in two distinctive neighbourhoods in The Hague: (1) *Schildersbuurt* and (2) *Centrum*. These neighbourhoods differ from each other in terms of socio-economic indicators such as income, work sector and family composition (denhaagincijfers, 2020). This case study is supplemented with theoretical concepts on gender and disasters to provide the contextual frame and methodology which are explained in chapter 2. In chapter 3 the socio-economic situation pre-corona and the response

to the crisis in both neighbourhoods are addressed, followed by a gender analysis of these neighbourhoods and their response in chapter 4. Chapter 5 concludes with findings on to what extent gender relations and household dynamics were affected by the covid-19 lockdown during spring 2020 among two childcare centres in The Hague.

## Chapter 2: A case study of covid-19 in The Netherlands

This chapter sketches the theoretical and methodological context in which the research takes place. First, theoretical concepts are explored to provide the necessary knowledge on disasters, socio-economic structures and the gender discourse in the Dutch society. Secondly, this chapter shows *the field* of this case, drawing on the two childcare centres in distinct socio-economic neighbourhoods in The Hague at which interviews with parents were conducted. The methodology on how and why information on parent’s socio-economic situation and gender dynamics during the corona-crisis was gathered, is explained in the end.

### The Corona “Disaster”

As introduced before, this research aims to uncover systematic socio-economic structures and vulnerabilities among household and gender dynamics in The Hague during the corona-crisis. The reason stems from the main idea that in crisis-situations societies show their vulnerabilities and resilience due to the extra pressure on its social structures caused by this crisis. This might show in further socio-economic and gender inequalities but might also show in families’ coping mechanisms and societal structural change as patterns are broken.

In disaster studies, there is much debate on the exact definition of a *disaster* due to the many disciplines and actors involved in defining, dealing with and preventing a disaster (Alexander, 1997). Disasters are induced either by natural hazards, are man-made, or both. The first part and catalyst of a crisis is often caused by a natural event that puts immediate pressure on a society. This includes earthquakes, tsunamis and also our current pandemic. The

Underlying Causes	Dynamic Pressure	Unsafe Conditions
Limited access to resources	Lack of:	Dangerous location
Illness and Disabilities	Institutions	Dangerous buildings
Age/Sex	Education	Low Income level
Poverty	Training	
Others	Skills	
	Population explosion	
	Urbanization	
	Uncontrolled development	
	Environmental degradation	

Figure 3 Vulnerability definition (Khan et. al., 2008, p. 44)

second part that shapes a disaster is conceptualized by Khan et. al. (2008) in the degree of *vulnerability* (of a society). Multiple scholars define vulnerability as consisting of a society’s (1) underlying causes; (2) dynamic pressures and (3) unsafe conditions (Khan et. al., 2008; Wisner et. al., 2004). Figure 3 shows some of the possible causes, pressures and conditions that make up the socio-economic structures in society and which thus influence the magnitude of a

disaster. And so, according to theory, the way the Dutch society is organized both shapes the scale of a disaster and at the same time shows the system's vulnerabilities and/or resistance against it. What this really tells us about the Dutch socio-economic situation and gender dynamics in practice is what is further examined here.

It is evident that the event of covid-19 in The Netherlands has enormous impact on society as basically all close social contact has been restricted and/or limited to suppress the number of infections. Examples from parents' experiences include *thuiswerken* (working from home) and less concentration; increased care for children without childcare centres or grandparents; limitation of social contacts; fear of and concern for the virus, (distant) family members and the following (economic) insecurity; loneliness; cancelation of social events, ceremonies and celebrations; grief; stress and distraught in daily life; and so on. This already displays the different emotions people experience that result from their particular context influenced by their socio-economic situation, family composition and...gender.

## Gender

The way a disaster impacts women's lives, differs from the impact on men due to the society they are in. In other words: gender creates unequal social structures in societies among men and women due to power relations, culture and norms that create gender roles in families. Therefore, disasters are gendered. A quote from Gustafson in Bradshaw (2014) explain it as:

“Being a woman does not in itself lead to greater vulnerability, but women may be more vulnerable to hazards than men, given the *unequal gendered power relations* [own marking](...). Vulnerability to an event is not based on sex or biological differences between men and women, but rather due to *how society constructs what it means to be a man or a woman*—i.e. what roles they should play and how they should behave—and this also influences how risk is perceived and responded to, with the concept being understood differently by men and women (Bradshaw, p.54)”.

So, the social construction of gender and gender roles increases women's vulnerability, risk perception and response to a disaster. The critique and at the same time recommendation heard from organizations such as International Refugees, UN Women and various NGOs is to involve women at the decision-making table in the measurements taken against the spreading of the pandemic (Verveer et. al., 2020). Also, in The Netherlands this is the case as both during press-conferences and in the media the prime-minister, the minister of the Department of Public Health and the director of the RIVM (research institute of aforementioned department) are depicted as leading-figures in tackling this crisis and they are all men.

The vulnerability for women in (Dutch) society is shaped by a complex historical, intersectional and political economy. Though, in order to understand the effect of covid-19 on the gendered

vulnerability in society, the following section analyses some of the gendered historical structures in The Netherlands. Nowadays, in The Netherlands it is perceived as ‘normal’ by most people that women are part of the labour force. However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was regarded a luxury and symbol of status if the husband was the sole breadwinner of the family so his wife didn’t have to work and could focus her energy on the household and children. Studying the development of female labour participation in The Netherlands, it becomes evident that resulting from this social norm, most women withdrew from the labour market completely after or just before their marriage (Van Poppel et. al., 2009).

Nowadays, the typical Dutch gender division is still dominated by the male breadwinner idea according to Yerkes (2009). She states that most men in families with young children still work fulltime and women parttime. Yet, in some families women work more hours than their partners. But in most cases the parents are younger (or without children) or the adults and children are older. So, with the arrival of children, the general pattern is that women work less hours and men work more. Findings from a study performed in Sweden by Almqvist and Duvander (2014) confirm this change in attitude once parents have children. Thus, apart from the increased gender inequality in terms of work/care distribution, opinions of both mothers and fathers on this distribution changes once children arrive. This change in attitude is very complex and context dependent.

Next to the attitude of parents, the work/care distribution is also affected by the national *arbeidscultuur* (working culture) (Maas, 2020). Compared to countries such as Switzerland, the UK, Australia and Germany, the number of Dutch women working parttime is higher. Further, countries in Scandinavia are renowned for their more equal distribution of work and care among couples since care is arranged by the governments (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Den Dulk & Yerkes, 2016). Another trend shows that next to parttime work, women spend more hours in the informal economy and household. These activities are not recognized officially by the labour market wherefore no safety nets are in place. Examples of this are house cleaning and sex workers. (UN, 2020; WomenInc, 2020).

Apart from the amount of time spend on working and caring, the amount of leisure time differs as well between men and women. Yerkes et. al. (2018) calls this the quality of leisure time, defined as the uncontaminated time an individual takes to recover from tasks. The quality of leisure time differs among men and women due to the difference in norms, time availability and time constraints. Women’s leisure time is argued to be of a lesser quality than men’s, as women often combine their leisure time with caring tasks. Thus, women have less time to completely



recover from their tasks. Reasons for this unequal quality of leisure time is related to unequal power relations in negotiating among partners, societal norms, feelings of guilt and a sense of *responsibility* towards their children.

Adding to this argument, responsibility in childcare is also argued to be different among fathers compared to mothers (Almqvist and Duvander, 2014). Governmental policy aimed at gender equality, such as paternal leave, allows fathers to spend more time at home. However, still the majority of women take on the childcare role and work parttime. If fathers take on paternal leave, this is done mostly among couples who are both highly educated and have high incomes (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014). Even when fathers are at home, this does not necessarily mean they take on housework or responsibility in childcare. Responsibility is defined as taking the initiative to buy your child new clothes or arrange a dentist appointment. In this responsibility department women still arrange the majority of it, leaving fathers to ‘just’ be the helpers.

This also raises the question whether a more equal distribution of work and care among men and women thus attributes to an increase in structural gender equality. Almqvist et. al. (2011) mention the extend of parental leave being influenced largely by what women want. Furthermore, breast-feeding adds to the image of the mother as primary carer and more so than fathers, mothers saw responsibility and joy as motivators to take on more parental leave. Other reasons for mothers taking up more parental leave are influenced by previous generations and social environment. Women working, while fathers taking care of their children, is also not always socially accepted (Almqvist et. al., 2011). So, both the cultural norms of fathers as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers influence prejudice and affect the choice parents make in the distribution of work and care.

The consequences of these unequal gender distribution in hours spend on work, care and household are far-reaching, especially during this pandemic. First of all, women still earn less than men which is called the *loonkloof* (en: wagegap). Secondly, women encounter limited career opportunities as women are less likely to be addressed for promotions etc. compared to their male colleagues (Yerkes & Visser, 2006; Yerkes, 2009). Thirdly, data from various sources mention specific work sectors, such as professional health care, education, retail and hospitality business, in which Dutch women are disproportionately overrepresented. These sectors are characterized by high workloads compared to low wages and flexible insecure contracts (CBS, 2016; WomenInc, 2020; Verveer et. al., 2020). And fourth, women have less uncontaminated leisure time which increases the pressure of daily life under ‘normal’ circumstances which increased during the pandemic. Thus, resulting in increased vulnerability.

In practice, a higher vulnerability due to economic insecurity and/or dependency means a lesser capacity to absorb shock or crisis such as the pandemic or the (sudden) loss of the partner. With statistics on divorce nearly reaching 40% in 2019 (CBS, 2019, July 16), this is not an unlikely scenario. Thus, single parents are more likely to experience more stress and pressure during the covid-19 crisis compared to households with two parents. Yet, due to traditional gender roles the majority of these single parents are female which increases the gender vulnerability gap as women “...earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, are more likely to be employed in the informal sector(...) have less access to social protection and are the majority of single-parent households (UN, 2020, p.4).

Nevertheless, disasters might also provide for a window of opportunity (Warner et. al., 2002; Bradshaw, 2014). A disaster, such as this pandemic, disrupts or shows social structures that may initiate change if people use their agency. People are not just passive actors but take action based on their personal strategies or social networks which is called *human agency* (Warner et.al., 2002). Female human agency thus may initiate a change in gender roles. Mothers using their agency in conversations with their partners during this covid-19 pandemic have for example already led to fathers spending more time in the household. In this case women’s agency reduces vulnerability and increases resilience. Though, it remains to be seen whether or not this example is a temporary or a structural change. Warner et. al (2002) highlight that opportunities might lead to change, but can also reinforce power structures. Bradshaw (2014) also argues that policies and changes during windows of opportunity have failed to address structural gender inequality as they moreover focus on efficiency and women’s practical needs while they should focus on women’s strategic interests (Bradshaw, 2014). Therefore, she adds, it is important to include women on strategic positions in disaster reduction agendas. In chapter 3 and 4, human- and in particular women agency and the window of opportunity are more closely discussed in relation to parents’ experiences of the two childcare centres in The Hague.

## The Hague

The Hague, *Den Haag* or ‘*s Gravenhage* in Dutch, is situated at the Western coast in the province of *Zuid Holland* and is the third largest city of The Netherlands with 545.838 inhabitants (CBS, 2019, December 31). The city is also home to the international court of justice, the international criminal court, Dutch governmental institutions and contains the royal work palace and multiple embassies (Gemeente Den Haag, 2018). This historical and international character of The Hague is also visible in the variety of citizens and neighbourhoods in terms of nationality and migration backgrounds. Numbers from the Dutch

national database indicate that in January 2019 of all residents in The Hague, 33.6% (180 857 in actual numbers) have a foreign country of birth (CBS, 2019, January 1). This appears in the distinctive neighbourhoods as one would pass by China Town, the *Haagse Markt* (market) and various Polish, Turkish, Antillean, Indonesian, Surinam, etc. stores and supermarkets. The Hague can be seen as the political and one of the most culturally diverse cities in The Netherlands.

### Schildersbuurt & Centrum

Among the neighbourhoods within The Hague, sometimes just one street apart from each other, large socio-economic differences are visible that are associated with this very cultural diversity. The white triangle in both figure 1 and 2 shows the location of childcare centre X located in de Schildersbuurt and the orange triangle shows the location of childcare centre Y, located in de Centrum. Hereafter called ‘X’ and ‘Y’. The real names of childcare centres won’t be mentioned for reasons of privacy and integrity towards the locations and respondents.

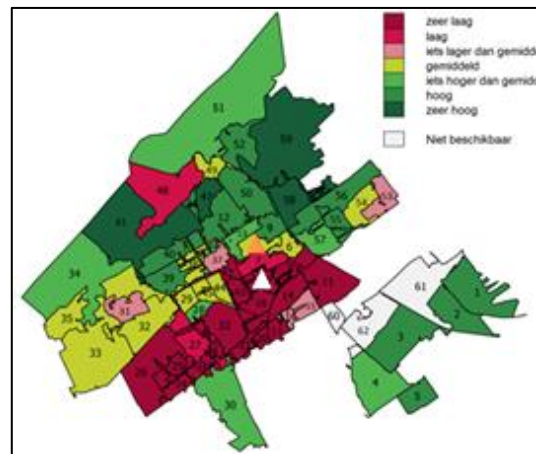


Figure 1 Disadvantaged neighbourhoods (gezondheidsmonitor, 2017)

Both figures shows in green and red the different socio-economic situations of the neighbourhoods in the Hague. This is measured for example through the social *achterstandsscore*<sup>1</sup> (disadvantage-score) and the social-economic status (SES) (gezondheidsmonitor, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows the socio-economic difference in the red-coloured disadvantaged neighbourhoods compared to the socio-economic situations in other neighbourhoods. Figure 2 shows the socio-

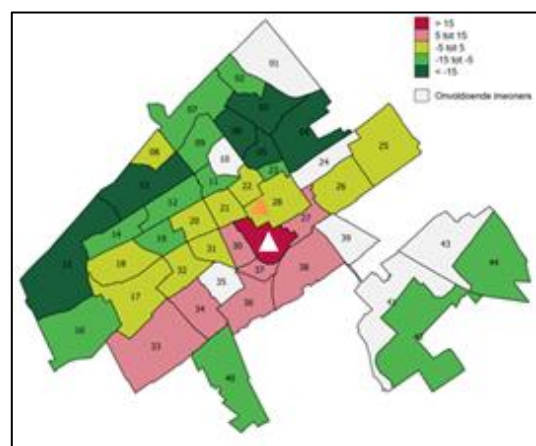


Figure 2 Socio-economic status per zip code (gezondheidsmonitor, 2017)

<sup>1</sup> The *achterstandsscore* is calculated by using the indicators: (1) share of ethnic cultural groups; (2) average individual income; (3) share of long-term unemployment, 4+ years; (4) average WOZ-value of houses; (5) number of movement over a period of three years.

<sup>2</sup> The SES is a score that indicates the position of the inhabitants on the so-called ‘social ladder’. This status is calculated every four year by the Social and Cultural Plan bureau (SCP), using multiple indicators such as education, income and profession.

economic status (SES) per zip code zone and this more or less shows the same neighbourhoods that rank low on the social ladder indicators.

While measurements such as the *achterstandsscore* and the SES do not reflect absolute truths in the categorisation of the neighbourhoods, the indicators clearly show a division in socio-economic conditions.

Just by looking at figure 1 and 2, one gets a sense of the socio-economic differences in the two neighbourhoods based on the **red** coloured Schildersbuurt and the **green** coloured Centrum. On denhaagincijfers (2020) additional data can be found which is visualized in the table below.

	Schildersbuurt	Centrum
A. Share of 1-parent households	14.5%	6.3%
B. Top 5 work-sectors	1. Health care 2. Education 3. Construction 4. Business 5. Retail	1. Government 2. Retail 3. Health care 4. Horeca 5. Research
C. Average income in €	€28.200	€35.400
% low income	66%	56.7%
% average income	27.2%	29.7%
% high income	6.7%	13.6%

D.	Centrum	Schildersbuurt
% Turkish	2,9%	26,7%
% Moroccan	5,3%	21,7%
% Surinam	6%	15,6%
% Antillean	3,5%	2,6%
% Other non-western	17,7%	16,1%
% Western	23,5%	8,6%
% With migration background	58,8%	91,4%

(Denhaagincijfers, 2020)

These tables show, together with the indicators of the SCP, that the Schildersbuurt has lesser socio-economic conditions compared to Centrum. Single parent households are less economically secure compared to households with two parents and two incomes (A). The most represented work sectors in Schildersbuurt are characterized by relatively hard work conditions, low wages and flexible contracts compared to the sectors in the Centrum (B). This results in a yearly income of households in the Schildersbuurt that is less compared to the Centrum (C). Though, when comparing both incomes with the average modal income in The Netherlands, €36.500 in 2019, both neighbourhoods earn less than average (CPB, 2019). The last table shows

the distribution of migration background per neighbourhood (D). In the Schildersbuurt 91.4% has a migration background that largely consists of people with Turkish, Moroccan, Surinam and other non-Western descent. People with a non-western migration background are considered part of vulnerable groups in The Netherlands due to various reasons (SCP, 2020). The high percentage of non-western migration backgrounds is thus related to the lesser socio-economic situation in the Schildersbuurt.

## Childcare Centres

The childcare centres in both neighbourhoods are expected to show similarities with neighbourhood characteristics that have just been explained. Over a period of four weeks, various interviews were conducted at two childcare centres, situated in different neighbourhoods in The Hague. The first motivation for choosing childcare centres is the role they fulfilled during the lock-down of the corona-crisis in March 2020. Childcare centres had to remain open for children of parents who have vital professions. So both the childcare centres and the parents played vital roles during the lockdown and are interesting to investigate for this research. Secondly, parents that bring the children to the care centres participate in the labour market and have been under increased (childcare) pressure during the lock-down. Thirdly, childcare centres are historically significant for the labour market in terms of gender equality. Studies have shown the connection between childcare centres (based policies) and increased female labour market participation. This has been key for women's economic development and independence as they were able to transfer care work to the childcare professionals (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014). However, parents are still critical towards Dutch childcare centres as governmental policy focusses on the efficiency of childcare centres as instruments to *promote labour*, instead of being *pedagogically 'just'* like other countries did (Maas, 2020). This, among other factors, influences parents' decisions in how to distribute childcare and labour between parent.

Two important factors thus contributed to the gender relations in households during the Covid-19 crisis. There is a difference in (1) what partners within a family want in terms of task distribution and the (2) opportunities / choices they have based on the context they live in. This trade-off is impacted by socio-economic situations such as educational level, income differences, cultural norms, governmental policy and profession. This is what has been analysed based on the interviews and research conducted among two childcare centres in the neighbourhoods Schildersbuurt and Centrum, The Hague.

## Methods

In the summer of 2020, over a period of 4 weeks, interviews were conducted at the entrance of childcare centres X in the Schildersbuurt and Y in the Centrum of The Hague. The data, gathered from all interviews with parents, provide insights on how their experiences during the lockdown mirror the struggles of their daily lives, how the lockdown has impacted these struggles and what this tells about their socio-economic situation and gender relations.

### I. Observation

This method is used to ‘explore the field’ and used in cultural anthropology to getting close to people and making them comfortable with you being there (Russell Bernard, 2011). This was especially used at the first days at childcare centre X in the Schildersbuurt. In the month of July 2020, five days were spent both at the entrance and inside the centre observing the day care’s surrounding area, the parents and the childcare dynamics. For example, observing resulted in an adjusted timeframe of being present at 7:30am in the morning, just before the parents would drop by and be there again at 3:30pm when parents would pick up their children. The remainder of the time was used for semi-structured interviews. Observation was also important in registering physical characteristics of parents. This allowed for specific questions about parents’ migration background. Observation also led to the conclusion that more mothers dropped their children off and picked them up in the Schildersbuurt compared to the childcare centre in the Centrum. Studying the surroundings also proved useful in analysing the residential area. In the Schildersbuurt the majority of inhabitants have a migration background, and the housing quality indicates small spaces. Another observation was that a significant amount of adults were seen on the streets during workhours.

### II. Interviews

I carried out interviews to collect the personal experiences of parents as well as childcare centre employees. These data have been analysed in light of the contextual frame from the previous chapter to uncover socio-economic structures and gender patterns. In the month of July, I spend five days at childcare center X in the Schildersbuurt and 3 days at childcare center Y in the Centrum to conduct interviews with parents. These interviews were conducted face-to-face first at childcare centre X in the Schildersbuurt and second at childcare centre Y in the Centrum. Two types of interviews were conducted. (1) the semi-structured interview where the parent was interviewed for 15 minutes and (2) the in-depth interview where the parent was interviewed for about 30 minutes. The different types of interviews produce different types of data needed for the research (Russell Bernard, 2011).

### *Semi-structured*

This type of method is advised when there is only one chance to interview someone. Unstructured interviews is a useful interview method in getting people to open up but not so applicable in this research because of the limited time available. This is why a semi-structured framework is chosen that includes a prepared interview agenda with topics related to the theoretical concepts to get the answers on specific topics (Russell Bernard, 2011). During the short semi-structured interviews with the parents, who drop off/pick up their child at the beginning of the day/at the end of the day, topic-based questions are asked to gain insight in the impact of the corona-crisis on the parent that is interviewed. However, questions also need to be open-ended so that the respondents can elaborate on their answer and provide for additional information. 20 interviews from childcare centre X were conducted and 17 interviews from childcare centre Y. These interviews however often exceeded the amount of 15 minutes and often evolved into longer in-depth interviews. Most questions were focused on people's experiences of daily life and the change that happened due to the impact of the corona-crisis and its direct impact on gender dynamics in their families. During these interviews, only keywords were written down and further elaboration was completed the same day.

### *In-depth*

The in-depth interviews were crucial in obtaining qualitative data and the deeper meaning behind the first answers given. In these interviews focus was put on the personal experiences of men and women during and after the lockdown measures. In-depth interviews are essential in understanding and interpreting the other data and to really understand what is going on in family dynamics in terms of socio-economic pressure and gender roles before and during this specific crisis. Questions had been prepared, but the parent was allowed to answer freely, followed by follow-up questions. *Probing* tactic was used when a topic or experience was introduced by a parent and not yet exhausted. This is defined by Russell Bernard (2011) as *stimulating a respondent to produce more information, without injecting yourself so much into the interaction that you only get a reflection of yourself in the data* (p.161). Examples of this are the use of 'Uh-huh' and the 'Tell-Me-More' probe. These examples allow for continuation of the response and to figure out the why behind the answer. Furthermore, some questions may trigger sensitive and personal experiences, especially when lock-down measurements increased the pressures at home. For these types of situations, personal contact through in-depth interviews was necessary. During these interviews, some parents were very open about the stress and pressure they encountered in their daily life and/or relationship. At childcare centre

X three in-depth interviews were conducted of which one with an expert. At childcare centre Y two in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews occurred randomly and did not need to be scheduled in. The parents' responses were written down in short notes on paper and digitally processes immediately after the interview.

### Ethics & Validity

The topic of gender equality is a sensitive topic that needs to be addressed carefully and respectfully when entering the field. In advance, the childcare centres need to be informed of the aim and purpose of this research. Anonymity, confidentiality and professionalism are three important aspects to keep in mind when approaching respondents and processing data in order for no one to be harmed by this research (Russell Bernard, 2011). The responses of the in-depth interviews were written down with the parents' permission and is solely used for this research only. Parents were notified of the research before my arrival at the childcare centre via an introductory mail and most were very eager to share their experiences.

It is furthermore crucial to be aware of the validity of the data acquired and not to draw overhasty causal relations or conclusions. It is therefore important to be aware of the validity of parents' experiences and conclusions tied to the childcare centres in the particular neighbourhoods of the particular time (spring 2020). For example, similarities in findings might not be necessarily true for all parents' experiences who drop their children off at a childcare centre. Thus, claims based on data found at the childcare centres are solely valid for the childcare centres researched for those particular parents. Since the pandemic is still on-going, the conclusions drawn based on the parents' experiences are only a snapshot of the full narrative.



## Chapter 3: The Corona crisis in The Hague

The covid-19 pandemic and the corresponding spring 2020 lockdown has affected families differently in two neighbourhoods in The Hague. To a large extent this depended on their specific characteristics. Experiences from parents of both the Schildersbuurt as the Centrum childcare centre are analysed and sorted according to four aspects. The first aspect that influenced parents' different experiences is the (1) distribution of hours spend on work vs. childcare. Furthermore, this work/family balance was impacted by (2) family composition and (3) informal care by grandparents. Besides the work/care balance, the impact of covid-19 has been influencing family-life in terms of (4) emotional distress and child behaviour. All aspects are discussed for both childcare centre X (Schildersbuurt) as for childcare centre Y (Centrum), followed by a general conclusion on how covid-19 has affected family dynamics based on their socio-economic context. The gendered impact of these aspects are discussed in the next chapter.

### Work/Care Balance

The distribution of hours spent on working vs. childcare is impacted by not only the work sector specifically but also the amount of contractual hours parents make and whether or not their sector was labelled 'vital' by the government. During the *intelligent*<sup>3</sup> lock-down, children of parents with vital professions were still allowed to go to the childcare centres, while parents with other professions just 'had to make it work'. The sectors of health care, childcare, education were labelled as vital, so parents could still take their children to the childcare centre. Overall, just looking at the work/care distribution, these families were able to be flexible with the extra pressure. This may be due to the fact that families already had a work/care distribution between them meaning fathers working more hours vs. less care and mothers working less hours vs. more care.

At childcare centre X, most mothers work parttime in the healthcare or childcare sector and many of their partners in construction. Also, two mothers were interviewed who were still studying. One is a single mother and has to manage a balance of study-work/care which she experienced not to be that flexible. The lockdown is therefore causing study delay. The other student has a partner that could share in care work.

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<sup>3</sup> *Intelligent lock-down* has been defined as the measures taken to lock different parts in Dutch society necessary to prevent the further spreading of the virus, but not the whole country, in order to achieve the desired effect (Trouw, 2020).

Based on the interviews, most partners worked full-time in the construction sector and during the lockdown they had to continue working on site. However, couples of which partners worked in the construction sector appeared to be flexible in adjusting their work/care balance or fortunate in their personal circumstances. Two couples were able to take days off or had already planned a holiday. Two partners of construction workers were on maternity leave and one partner, a hairdresser, was at home full-time during the lockdown. So, even though the construction sector requires fulltime labour, couples were able to adjust their work/care balances according to their particular contexts. For example, partners of these construction workers who work in the healthcare sector were able to work the extra irregular shifts. Yet, mothers described their work in the healthcare sector as chaotic during the pandemic. Also, the education sector was impacted. Teachers were dealing with irregular hours, different (online) teaching methods and concerns for children who ‘fell of the grid’. This increased the pressures during working hours due to a higher and more challenging workload.

At the childcare centre Y in the Centrum, the profession-pressure differed from parents’ experiences in the Schildersbuurt. There was no profession sector that was overrepresented and compared to the Schildersbuurt more parents had a so-called ‘non-vital’ professions, which resulted in more children being at home because childcares were closed for kids of parents without vital professions. Another difference in work/care balance is the amount of hours both parents work in a family. In general, especially mothers worked more hours compared to the mothers in the Schildersbuurt, which provide a joint balance of parents in the Centrum of more hours of work / less hours of care. Parents at the Centrum also make more use of the childcare centre and less of grandparents.

A similarity in experiences of parents at both childcare centres concerns the increased pressure of working in the healthcare and education sector. Parents with other professions had to *thuiswerken* (work from home). These parents mentioned that there was no clear distinction between work, home and caring for the children. For example, normally they would work eight hours straight at the office. Due to *thuiswerken*, they spread these eight hours over the day, evenings and even weekends. Parents defined this as stressful as they often did not make the required hours as they did not have enough time. The flexibility of profession sector impacted the time distribution of parents in work and care. This thus emphasizes the role and dependence of a childcare centre in families of which both parents work more than parttime. Also, the increased pressure due to new work/care balances was experienced more intensely by parents

in The Centrum compared to parents in the Schildersbuurt which was highly impacted by the governmental decision of only allowing children of parents with vital professions.

## Family composition & grandparents

Stress on households was further impacted by the family composition. A first family composition type that had been impacted a great deal were single-parent households. At the childcare centre in the Schildersbuurt all the single parents were single mothers. Apart from the balance between work and care, these mothers experienced increased pressure caused by the economic insecurity that was already present before corona. Balancing income and childcare in their experience is ‘tough’ as working more hours are at the expense of hours spend with their child. Often these mothers are dependent on their own parents’ help in caring for their child (*oppassen*). However, during the lock-down this was diminished or stopped completely. The type of profession also impacted the single-mother households at childcare centre X. Two mothers work in the healthcare sector and had to deal with increased and irregular shifts. At childcare centre Y in the Centrum only one single-mother household was accounted for. However, she was not single in caring for her children as a co-parenting agreement with her ex-partner was already in place before corona. In the Schildersbuurt a mother explained that she worked parttime, while her partner was at home for medical reasons. During the lock-down she had to take care of her partner, her son of 16, her toddler and work parttime from home. While officially not being a single-mother, the pressure on her was enormous she mentioned.

Apart from single-headed households, also the amount and age of children impacted on the stress of parents. Parents with children in primary school experienced increased pressure as they had to, as they describe it, ‘home-school’ their children, in addition to normal care and work. In the Centrum, parents were in general older compared to the Schildersbuurt and also had more children. A father described that the age of children influenced the amount of pressure. His 2-year-old demanded for example *a lot of attention as he was less challenged at home compared to the childcare centre*, while his 8-year-old understood the seriousness of the crisis. His 5-year-old didn’t understand why they didn’t go to his favourite (and very busy) playground. But also having three children at home automatically increases the amount of time a parent spends on childcare, especially if they do not have a ‘vital profession’.

Pre-corona a lot of grandparents were involved in *oppassen* (childcare). Though, during the lockdown this diminished or even stopped due to infection risks. As elderly people are more vulnerable to corona, parents from both the Schildersbuurt as the Centrum initially chose social distancing from their parents. Especially parents from the Schildersbuurt were impacted by this

decision as their parents are more involved compared to parents from the Centrum. Two single mothers mentioned their parents being part of the *risico-groep*<sup>4</sup>, wherefore they stopped seeing them even though they are dependent on them. But not only the pressure increased for parents, also grandparents and children were impacted. This is why many parents and grandparents decided to resume the *oppassen* after a couple of days or weeks knowing the risks and consequences. But it is a risk they are willing to take over not seeing their grandchildren.

Thus, the difference in family composition, children's ages and number of children led to an unequal pressure on families which is not per se in relation to the neighbourhood they live in. An exception are the single-mother-households that are overrepresented in the Schildersbuurt. When at first care by grandparents was stopped due to infection risk, families and single mothers especially in the Schildersbuurt had been impacted. Though, this decision was reversed in some families.

## Emotional impact

In the previous sections, the words pressure and stress have been used frequently. This is further examined in this section. The emotional impact of the lockdown has been different for families based on their living situation. *Fear* was frequently mentioned by parents when talking about the initial situation of the lockdown. More parents in the Schildersbuurt compared to the Centrum indicated the fear of the virus itself that they experienced at the initial lockdown. This was expressed in cleaning the house from top to bottom with vinegar and chlorine, leaving the children at home when doing groceries, wearing protective face masks and gloves, or not bringing the children to the childcare centre. Other dimensions of fear were about family living abroad, or *fear of economic insecurity*. A mother in the Schildersbuurt explained she owns a barbershop which had to close down during the lockdown. For now she was compensated by the government but she was afraid this would stop. Another single mother mentioned insecurity in combination with her 0-hours work contract and the permanent employers being favoured over her.

Words like *tough* and *tired* were mentioned by both single-mothers and parents who had multiple children at home and/or a child in primary school while they had to work from home. Tough was mentioned by single mothers in relationship to the choice between work and childcare. *Boring* and *quiet* was used by a father who didn't experience increased stress or

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<sup>4</sup> A Dutch term used concerning covid-19 to indicate a group of people who have an increased risk when infected due to medical reasons (diabetes, immune diseases, asthma, vascular diseases, etc.) or old age.

pressure since his girlfriend was on maternity leave and he was at home doing nothing due to the lockdown. *Delightful* is what others used in the extra time they had at home with their family, while being paid. These were all situations where parents were at home due to the lockdown and couldn't work from home, while being paid fully. Two other mothers liked their temporary 'jobs' as full-time housewives. One added that she didn't mind being full-time at home as she experienced a lot of free time for herself. The other didn't mind either as long as it was only temporary, since she became bored in the end. Multiple parents from both neighbourhoods, but more from the Centrum, mentioned the word *gezellig*<sup>5</sup>. Parents acknowledged the lack of time they spend as a family pre-corona which was the opposite during the lockdown as they were forced to cooperate and spending time together. The mother whose partner can't work due to medical issues feared for her husband's health, wherefore the whole family was under strict social distance quarantine. She also mentioned that she enjoyed the extra time together as a family. However, with a toddler and a teenager this also resulted in more tensions.

*Tensions* are a logical consequence when many people share a small apartment while being under increased pressure. As mentioned before, domestic violence and tension are shadow components of this pandemic worldwide, though this was not uncovered during the interviews. Parents did not specifically mention their conflicts at home. However, a father hinted he felt relieved to sometimes get out of the house and walk the dog. Also, one mother indicated the increased tensions between her partner and herself in the distribution over who worked when and who took care of their daughter. Furthermore, employees of childcare centre X in the Schildersbuurt noticed behavioural change of the children. But this is something that also occurs without a lockdown. This indicates that pressures are already more present among families in the Schildersbuurt under normal circumstances.

Change in child behaviour due to the lockdown is the last aspect that parents from both neighbourhoods shared. Children's behaviour was impacted as children spend more time with one or both parents or no time anymore with their grandparents. Children emotionally attached themselves more towards their mother or father. Also, children expressed anger, sadness or confusion about not seeing their grandparents anymore. After the lockdown, children sometimes were hysterically crying as they had developed shyness towards other adults. The change in children's daily life further showed in bustling and bad listening behaviour. Parents could not give the children the attention they needed. A mother in the Centrum said that she felt

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<sup>5</sup> Non-translatable Dutch word that indicates a place, event or situation being cosy, nice, heartening and often associated with companionship of other people.

it was no good that her child was home with them all the time. *“We as parents are only two people and at the childcare centre my child learns quicker from peers and encounters traits and views from other employees, I think that is pedagogically better for a child”*. So, the absence of the steadiness of a childcare centre might indicate this has also impacted children negatively.

Socio-economic vulnerabilities of the neighbourhood were also visible at the distinctive childcare centres. An employee of childcare centre X explains that the amount of children each day is irregular. Parents simply forget to unsubscribe their children for the day or can no longer afford it. This has consequences for the whole group of children and for the child itself. The children in the group get used and bond with each other and the pedagogical employees. Suddenly withdrawing a child thus impacts the children and most of all the removed child itself. Compared to childcare centre Y this has never happened (assistant manager childcare centre Y, 2020). If your child is scheduled to be present, parents unsubscribe them online if the children do not come for whatever reason, as is the centres policy. Childcare centre Y explains that they also have a regular flow of children every week.

The municipality of the Hague is also aware of the different socio-economic situations of parents in both neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods such as the Schildersbuurt is named a *probleemwijk* (disadvantaged neighbourhood) (manager of childcare centre X, 2020). Therefore, there are regulations and subsidies in place for inhabitants of the Schildersbuurt that allow parents free childcare. This is called a VE-indication. VE-indication stands for pre-school activities that are arranged at some childcare centres to help children with their development. This indication is normally assigned to children that are expected to be disadvantaged in their development. For example, if parents are not native Dutch speakers, the child is expected to have not fully developed the Dutch language needed for primary school. According to childcare centre X in the Schildersbuurt, the neighbourhood as a whole is regarded ‘disadvantaged’ and therefore every child residing in the neighbourhood automatically receives a VE-indication under certain conditions. Nonetheless, this arrangement is not actively promoted and to parents this is not common knowledge (e.g. it cannot be found online). Secondly, applying for free child day care with a VE-indication is bureaucratically hard. This shows a gap between policy and practice. A local governmental policy subsidy aims at reducing a neighbourhood’s vulnerability, though the access that parents have to this subsidy is lacking.

## Conclusion

After discussing the narratives of parents from both the Schildersbuurt and the Centrum, one of the first saliences is the variation in how people experienced and described their lockdown

situations. Some families have had it more difficult than others. The increased pressures and stress, deriving from these particular contexts, caused negative emotions and experiences. The causes of parents' particular contexts leading to this increase in pressure are various, complex and not one-sided (meaning the most disadvantaged neighbourhood as the most negative experiences). This means that this crisis either not reflects the different socio-economic situations completely, or that vulnerabilities exist outside of the sketched socio-economic contexts in chapter 2.

One explanation for this variation might be dependency and resilience in daily life that absorbs the extra vulnerability caused by a crisis. Here dependency refers to dependency on others for childcare or economic dependency. Both parents from the Schildersbuurt as the Centrum depend on grandparents and childcare centres to care for their children a certain number of hours per week. However, the Schildersbuurt is less dependent on these external caregivers because in general mothers spend more hours in childcare compared to mothers in the Centrum. This increased a family's resilience for the lockdown.

Additionally, a lot of these parents are employed in vital professions wherefore their children were still allowed to go to the childcare centres. Parents in the Schildersbuurt also make more use of grandparents in childcare and although initially the risk of infection put an end to this, most parents mention this decision was reversed. Thus, the social capital of these parents is an important feature in their response and resilience during this lockdown. Parents in the Centrum experienced an increase in stress and pressure during the lockdown due to the limited amount of time they had for work and their children. Their normally balanced lives, were out of balance due to the extra amount of childcare they encountered. The ability to handle extra childcare during the crisis for parents in the Schildersbuurt shows a better resilience in this department compared to the Centrum, which was not expected.

Nonetheless, socio-economic inequalities also did become visible based on parents' experiences. In the Schildersbuurt, the precarity of parents' economic situation, medical situation, personal situation (or a combination of these) were mentioned, and most of these factors has been present since before the pandemic. For example, almost all single-mother households experienced extra pressure and stress and hardly any leisure time during the covid-19 pandemic. Even though most mothers were able to make use of the childcare centre, they still have to cover the work-for-income part by themselves instead of households with two parents. Pressure intensified for the mother with a child in primary school which had to be home-schooled by this mother in her free time. The different vulnerabilities of both

neighbourhoods during the pandemic can be compared with the concepts on societies' underlying causes; dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions (Khan et. al., 2008)'. Based on this comparison a distinction can be determined between short-term and long-term vulnerability and resilience. Parents' experiences of the Centrum could be defined as short-term stress to which they could relatively easily adapt, as most of the direct time pressure was lifted as soon as childcare centres re-opened for the non-vital professions. Parents in the Schildersbuurt in general encounter more struggles in daily life during society in a 'normal situation' that result in more stress and pressure compared to parents in the Centrum. Long-term covid-19 measurements that further restrict economic and personal opportunities and decrease resilience might therefore result in more vulnerability and inequality among families from different neighbourhoods.



## Chapter 4: Genderedness of the crisis

This chapter analyses the extent to which the lockdown in spring 2020 affected gender relations of parents interviewed at the childcare centres in The Hague. How gender relations contribute to vulnerability and resilience in family dynamics but also how the lockdown affected these gender relations by analysing experiences of mothers and fathers separately and under different socioeconomic conditions. The theoretical framework on gender relations in Dutch society and gendered disasters is applied in the analysis of parents' experiences. The following section is arranged according to two topics: (1) the gendered work/care balance; and (2) the gendered lock-down impact.

### Gendered work/care balance

The first observation from parents' experiences in The Hague is the gendered work/care balance in families at both childcare centre locations. This means that the balances of work/care are different for men and women due to the role fathers and mothers have in their families. The size of the gap of the different balances between men and women is impacted by socio-economic cultural factors, work sectors, the number of working hours and other conditions.

Based on parents' experiences from both childcare centres, the *arbeidscultuur* (working culture) is an important contributing factor to unequal and different work/care balances among partners. In general, women are employed for less hours a week compared to their partners and the difference in hours spent on work/care between men and women is larger in the Schildersbuurt in comparison to the Centrum. The socio-economic factors in the Schildersbuurt and Centrum that have been explained in the previous chapter therefore affect the gender differences as well.

A reason for this might be the cultural environment. Most parents I spoke with at childcare centre X have a non-western migration background and most were female. In the Schildersbuurt, gender role distribution in households seems more traditional compared to the Centrum and mothers confirm they prefer spending more time on childcare and household chores. At the Centrum some parents are of other European nationality or Dutch and claim to have a more equal distribution of childcare and work. This indicates that the socio-economic and cultural context in the Schildersbuurt and The Centrum affects the gender relations of the families. Though, during the lockdown initially mothers took most responsibility in childcare.

The reasons for these unequal distributions are varying. Most mothers in the Schildersbuurt mentioned personal preference as a reason for wanting to spend more time on childcare compared to their husbands. This results from either a feeling of responsibility or occurred as they said ‘naturally’ in their families. By naturally is meant that in mothers opinions it is ‘normal’ that women spend more hours in childcare compared to men. Most mothers in the Schildersbuurt have never worked fulltime and as soon as children were born, they also reduced their working days to three. This indicates that cultural beliefs on gender roles are an important factor in parents’ choices to divide the role of work and care. Though, one mother mentioned that she and her partner both work four days a week. However, during the lockdown she had taken up all the care work due to her pregnancy leave.

In the Centrum the work/care balance between men and women is more equal compared to the Schildersbuurt, though among most couples, men are employed for more hours compared to women. The reasons for this unequal distribution are varying. Most mothers who work less than their partners indicated their own preference in working less hours to care for their children. One father indicated that this choice was made financially as his wages are higher compared to his wife’s, though he wouldn’t mind being home more. One father mentions his wife working more hours compared to him and that was largely due to the work sectors. His wife works at a pharmacy company and is required to make that much hours, whereas he is a university teacher and works four days a week.

The work sectors are therefore also playing a part in the balance-gap. As mentioned in the previous chapter men and women work in different sectors in the Schildersbuurt. Most women work in health/childcare and education and men work in construction. Health care and education are sectors known for lower wages and higher workload. This only intensified during the lockdown. Though, fathers working in education and health care also experienced these problems in the Centrum. The couples with fathers working in health care and education said they have equal work/care distributions with their partners. These different reasons for the work/care distribution among couples shows the complexity of parents’ decisions and many factors that influence these decisions. Women’s personal preferences play an important part in them wanting to work less which derives from cultural norms and values, but also financial reasons or work sector influences this decision.

Yet, the consequence of unequal work/care balances result in economic insecurity and dependency of women to men. Fathers’ share of the family income is in general larger compared to the mothers’ income due to unequal wages and more hours of employment. Women on the

other hand spend more time in care work. This shows a gendered vulnerability in society as women spend more time in the informal economy of care which is not compensated the same as work performed within the market economy. Economic dependency therefore is a liability in case of partner loss due to separation, divorce or sickness. This showed among the single mothers. Most single mothers did not have sufficient financial aid or help in sharing childcare from ex-partners in the Schildersbuurt. A single mother and student was hereby not able to apply for a job and two other mothers had to make tough decisions between work and their child due to their insecure financial situation. Another mother mentioned her child being at her father's once in two weekends, but he does not take responsibility in her upbringing.

Traditional gender-roles distribution is thus visible and increasing women's vulnerability as children are brought up by their mothers after parent-separation. But also among couples in the Schildersbuurt the distribution of tasks in work and care are still largely traditionally organised. In the Centrum, the distribution of work and care is more equally divided among partners in a family. Both mothers and fathers acknowledged that they purposely chose this more equal distribution which shows a change in the culture. Women in the Centrum work and want to work more hours compared to women in the Schildersbuurt which increases their economic security. Though, during the lock-down the question of who should care for the children at home became more of an issue in families in the Centrum as both parents needed to work from home. There is one exception of a single mother that shares parenting with her ex-partner, highlighting that childcare is not always traditionally perceived to be only a woman's responsibility. This woman purposely shared responsibility with her ex-partner and father of their children.

## Lockdown

During the lock-down in spring 2020, parents' daily routines were ruptured or adjusted and men and women were impacted differently on segments such as work/care balance, work sectors, *thuiswerken* (working from home) and leisure time.

As mentioned before, work/care balances of partners in the Schildersbuurt are under normal circumstances unequally divided resulting in unequal gender relations in households. During the lockdown this both intensified and diminished. The unequal division of work and care intensified in cases where women were at home fulltime and could take care of the children. One woman explained that she was with pregnancy leave during the lockdown which she experienced as drastic but also *gezellig*. She mentioned her diminished energy levels due to the approaching delivery in combination with her other child at home, taking up more domestic

chores and a husband working from home in education. Normally, she explains, the distribution of work and care is equally divided among them, but during the lockdown and because she wasn't working due to her pregnancy, she became a fulltime housewife. Her work/care balance shifted towards a complete care system and due to the lockdown her child was not at the childcare centre. Another woman was home fulltime as her barbershop was closed. She also became a fulltime housewife. Both women emphasized that they were relieved this was only temporary. For parents in vital professions, their work/care balance also changed as in health care and education the workload and shifts intensified. Women in the Schildersbuurt are overrepresented in these sectors, so they experienced an increased pressure from work. In cases where women in the Schildersbuurt were not able to take on the extra care work caused by grandparents who no longer could babysit, having a non-vital profession or increased workload due to a vital profession, fathers contributed by taking on free time and reorganize their shifts.

In the Centrum some women but also men experienced an intensification of unequal work/care balance compared to their partners. This were all cases where both parents had non-vital professions and the extra hours of childcare were taken up by mothers. Multiple mothers expressed their irritation about their partners not contributing enough or taking responsibility. A mother mentioned her and her partner both worked from home, but he just settled in the study and let her deal with both work and childcare. She automatically took on childcare out of feeling of responsibility. He ordered for example Sushi take-out that their daughter can't eat. She said in the future, communication needs to be improved as she disapproved of the increased pressure she had experienced. But fathers too experienced an unequal work/care balance compared to their partners. Two fathers were not able to work their required hours because their partners had to work on location. They ended up working in the evenings and weekends. One of the fathers also needed to work on his evening studies. For him, it was too much to combine and he temporarily worked less hours.

In the Schildersbuurt, women employed in health and childcare mentioned having to work more shifts due to the pressure of the pandemic on health services and colleagues getting sick. This also increased their own risk of infection which two mothers said to fear. Two single-mothers that work in health care experienced exhaustion due to the increased workload and shifts as their leisure time was diminished. One of the two mothers had a child in primary school that she also had to home-school. This diminished her leisure-time even more. In the Centrum, both fathers as mothers handed in leisure time. Especially for couples with non-vital professions, whose children weren't allowed at the childcare centre.

The type of work sector mothers and fathers work in, further influence a lockdown impact. Economic insecurity in the Schildersbuurt was noticed among a single mother who has a flexible contract, but also the mother who was at home fulltime as her barbershop was closed and her partner did not earn enough for both. Also in the Centrum women experienced economic insecurity. One mother feared for her job in the tourism sector and another for her job in a museum.

No father spoken with had personal financial concerns during the lockdown. This however does not mean that men have secure financial positions. The average yearly income of the Schildersbuurt is lower than in other parts of The Hague. Also retail and the hospitality industry are overrepresented in the Centrum neighbourhood. These sectors have been impacted as well during the lockdown which is not necessarily gendered. What is gendered, is the number of women having flexible contracts in these sectors according to WomenInc (2020) as in general women work less hours compared to their partners. Also parents with a non-vital profession experienced more or less pressure depending on their work sectors. Some employers were flexible when parents were not able to work the hours required due to childcare. Other parents said they had a problem managing their lives due to *thuiswerken* (working from home).

## Thuiswerken

In the Centrum, both parents working from home increased their cooperation and flexibility in gender relations during daily life routines and might contribute to the window of opportunity. Fathers come into contact with the traditional roles of women by spending more time at home. For example, two fathers spend more time with their children outside at playgrounds so their partners' could work. Another father learned how to change his child's diaper since his wife had to work. Three fathers also mentioned they liked spending more time with their children than before. This indicates that fathers took more responsibility during the lockdown but also were able to be involved in their children's' lives now they worked from home. Also in the Schildersbuurt fathers were more at home than before even though mothers mostly took on the extra childcare. An exception was a mother with corona in quarantine whose partner had to care for their 2-year old. He already was on holiday leave so this was convenient. A last interesting finding is that in the Schildersbuurt, apart from one, no fathers worked from home. The father that worked from home, was the only male working in education. Even though the other fathers did help in families where extra care was needed, they did not have the 'chance' to work together with their partners at home in dividing work/care tasks. For example: a father going to a playground with his child while the mother can attend to her conference call, where after the

mother can feed the child and the father can attend his meeting. The mother can then finish some emails and the father can do groceries and starts preparing dinner. Cases in which fathers would go outside with their children during the day were therefore also not mentioned.

This last remark is connected to the window of opportunity that may or may not exist that couples or women use to establish change in their gender relations. In the Schildersbuurt the work/care balance is often unequally distributed, even during the lock-down. This increases women's vulnerability as they are often economically dependent on their partners. Though when problems arise in families, fathers are willing to take on free time but this does not lead to structural change as mothers mention this is temporary. This indicates that these families are *resilient* in dealing with a crisis in their work/care balances, though women continue to remain vulnerable as they have the dependent economic position looking at the traditional gender role distribution. In the Centrum the window of opportunity might be used in *thuiswerken* situations. During *thuiswerken*, fathers experience they enjoy spending more time with their children, both parents have to cooperate more in managing the household and mothers express their frustrations on the fathers' lack of responsibility in childcare. This can bring about a negotiation between partners about a more equal redistribution of their work/care balances and household chores. Furthermore the lockdown and *thuiswerken* may contribute to a change in people's traditional and cultural opinions on gender relations.

## Conclusion

Among families in both the Schildersbuurt as in the Centrum of The Hague gender relations differ due to socio-economic contexts and circumstances that influence a parent's choices, values and opinions. These differences in gender roles within family dynamics demonstrate both vulnerability as well as resilience. This showed during the lockdown of spring 2020 in The Netherlands as this pandemic has affected these gender relations due to multiple reasons. A first conclusion is that this crisis is gendered due to the different impact this crisis has on both men and women. In general, the work/care balance among partners in both the Schildersbuurt as the Centrum is unequal as men work more and women care more. Due to working-culture men are employed more hours and days compared to their partners in the Schildersbuurt. In the Centrum women are employed more hours compared to women in the Schildersbuurt which makes these parents more dependent on childcare centres. The reasons for unequal division of work and care within households are personal preferences by women to care more, feeling more responsibility for their children, cultural norms and values or financial reasons. In Schildersbuurt traditional culture impacts their decision, in the Centrum the difference is based on personal preferences

or financial reasons. As a result of this inequality in role distribution within families, women are economically dependent to their partner which increases their vulnerability and socio-economic insecurity. The single mother households in the Schildersbuurt attest to this as women are often the sole responsible care taker of children after separation and are the ones that have experienced the most stress during the lockdown.

A second conclusion is that the lockdown in the spring 2020 has caused intensified unequal gender relations depending on families' specific context. Increased unequal gender relations showed in the unequal work/care balances for women both in the Schildersbuurt as in the Centrum. Women gave up most leisure time as they felt most responsible for childcare. In the Schildersbuurt women already spend more hours on childcare, but the lockdown increased these women's pressures and economic dependencies. In the Centrum, in families with no-vital professions, mostly women were under a lot of pressure as work and family care needed to be combined. Though, also fathers in the Centrum experienced the same in management of time spent on work and childcare. So it is important to note that gender inequality in some families can also be the other way around. This resulted in parents working more irregular, in evenings and in weekends which increased their stress. The work sectors also influences gender relations among these families. The health care and education sector had increased and irregular workloads and are overrepresented by women. In case where fathers work in these sectors, the work/care distributions are divided more equally with their partners.

Third, has the lockdown in the spring 2020 also decreased unequal gender relations depending on families' specific context. A factor that further contributed gender relations during the lockdown was *thuiswerken*. This was, except for one case, a phenomenon only mentioned in the Centrum (as parents did not work from home in the Schildersbuurt). Parents that both worked from home, experience increased flexibility and alignment who works when and who cares for the children. Fathers expressed enjoying the time spend with children and came into contact with caring jobs they didn't do before. *Thuiswerken* thus provides a window of opportunity for structural and more equal change in gender relations. A couple is able to renegotiate their work/care distribution, irritations on fathers' lack in childcare responsibility can directly be communicated and this may bring about a change in cultural values on gender roles.

To conclude, the Schildersbuurt shows resilience in cases that fathers helping out with childcare in families when mothers worked increased shifts in the health care sector. Though, at the same time mothers expressed that this was temporary as they cling to the traditional gender role

distribution. In the end, this makes them vulnerable due to economic dependency. In the Centrum, the importance of childcare centres is seen in women's emancipation to work more hours which contributes to a more equal work/care distribution in a family. Furthermore, *thuiswerken* may contribute to a cultural value change in how parents perceive gender relations. Also *thuiswerken* provides more opportunity for couples to renegotiate their work/care balances and fathers feeling more equally responsible in childcare. Nevertheless, further research is needed to see whether or not these decreasing or increasing unequal gender relations in families is temporary or will lead to structural change.



## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Dutch society, and The Hague in particular, has unequal social structures that are rooted in a complex political economy which impacts the extent to which a society is vulnerable. This vulnerability has shown to be visible in unequal gender relations and socio-economic household dynamics. Based on disaster theory such vulnerabilities are highlighted during a crisis and directly impact families' coping mechanism. In this research, I looked into this theory by asking to what extent gender relations and household dynamics were affected by the covid-19 spring 2020 lockdown in The Hague.

In confirmation, the experiences of parents during the lockdown do show that gender relations and household dynamics have been affected, though some families —and especially women— have been impacted more than others, based on socio-economic context and gender. The socio-economic differences between the Schildersbuurt and the Centrum have been reflected in structural socio-economic inequality in parents' daily lives since before the pandemic. Therefore, struggles described by 'underlying causes, dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions' are more present in the Schildersbuurt compared to the Centrum (Khan et. al., 2008). This affects the structural and long-term vulnerability of households and coping mechanism in times of crisis. Between the different socio-economic neighbourhoods, gender relations differ as well. Culture and agency impact not only the extend of traditional gendered work/care distributions but also the resulting vulnerability. In the Centrum, childcare centres play an important role in the equal division of work and care and therefore decreases women's economic vulnerability. In the Schildersbuurt men and women divide work and care more traditionally compared to the Centrum. This increases the economic insecurity and dependency of Schildersbuurt women and increases vulnerability in times of crisis, especially for single mother households.

The impact of the pandemic did not necessarily reflect the unequal socio-economic structures acknowledging the short-term response. Families in the Schildersbuurt showed resilience, while parents in the Centrum struggled with extra childcare. Due to the traditional gender relations, the professions of the parents and social capital in the Schildersbuurt, men and women flexibly arranged the extra care work. However, the Centrum showed gendered vulnerability due to the high dependency on childcare centres for equal work/care distributions. The extra care work emphasized that men often still allocate childcare automatically to women.

Yet, the pandemic also reflected unequal social structures when looking at vulnerability and resilience in the long-term. The initial resilience and possible change towards more equal gender relations in the Schildersbuurt seems to be mostly of a temporary nature. Women, and especially single mothers remain more vulnerable. In the Centrum, economic security and a possible more equal change in gender relations due to *thuiswerken* indicate more long-term resilience. *Thuiswerken* has empowered women to use this window of opportunity to renegotiate gender relations and increase and enable a father's responsibility in childcare. Though, the lack of *thuiswerken* situations in the Schildersbuurt may increase the inequality between women in the Schildersbuurt and the Centrum. Thus, the unequal socio-economic situation between the Schildersbuurt and the Centrum might contribute to unequal opportunities and/or agency for women to renegotiate gender relations.

Concluding this thesis, the importance of government policies that address socio-economic and gender inequalities needs to be stressed. Structural gender inequality related to socio-economic situations that increase women's vulnerability should be included by policy makers. As crises can also be opportunities to change unequal social structures, it is crucial to include female advocates in crisis-response to create policy that improves women's strategic positions in Dutch society.

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