



## **Covid-19, gender and work**

*October 2021*

### **The State of Play**

- COVID-19 has impacted women's employment more than men's across the globe.
- In Australia, the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 produced the first national recession in which women lost more jobs than men.
- 2020 showed us that women fare much worse than men under lockdown in terms of: job loss, work intensification in frontline work, loss of hours of work, underutilisation, unemployment<sup>1</sup>, increase in unpaid work<sup>2</sup>, domestic violence<sup>3</sup>, exhaustion<sup>4</sup>, poor mental health<sup>5</sup> and lower access to<sup>6</sup> and take up<sup>7</sup> of income support.
- Women's employment bounced back strongly once the 2020 lockdown was lifted, posting historical highs in participation and hours worked, demonstrating that Australian women have a strong connection to the labour market.
- Major lockdowns in 2021 have seen women's employment again severely disrupted, especially in New South Wales and Victoria.

**This GEWL Insights paper provides a high-level summary of the evolving impact of the 2021 lockdowns on workforce gender inequality. We include a special focus on NSW, home to about one third of the national workforce.**

**Suggested citation:** Elizabeth Hill & Rae Cooper, 2021, 'Covid-19, gender and work, October 2021', *Gender Equality in Working Life Research Initiative Insights Series*, The University of Sydney. doi: 10.25910/xn8z-zp22.

## The National Picture

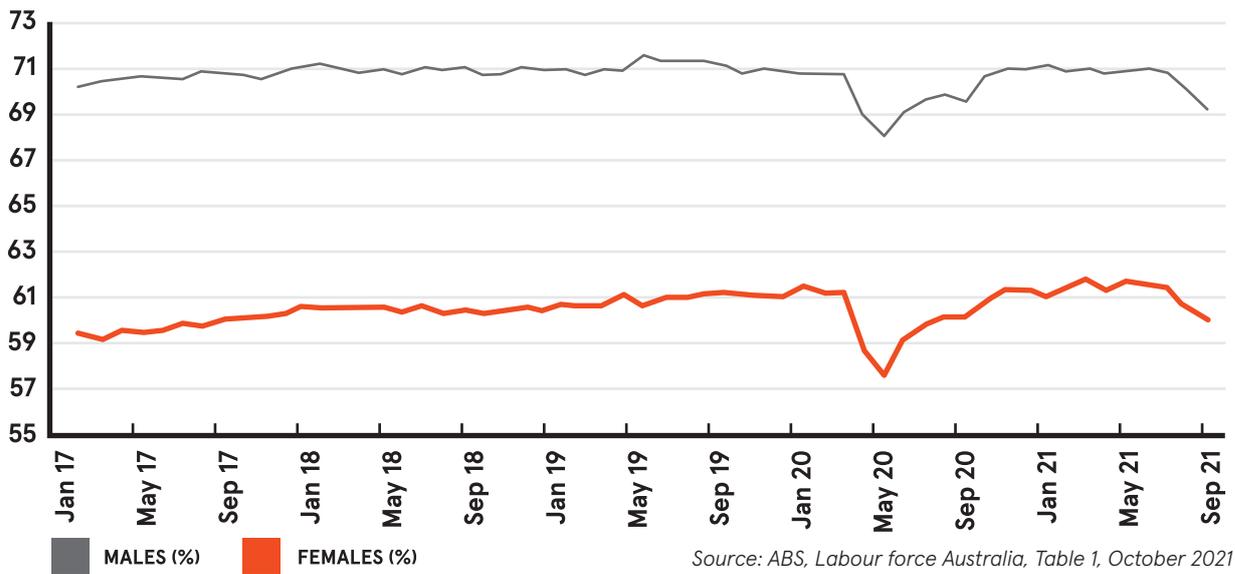
The 2021 lockdowns have seen a rapid decline in labour market participation and hours of work.

Total labour force participation fell to a low of 64.5% in September and total monthly hours of work in all jobs declined by 102.5 million hours between May and August, or 5.6%. The fall stabilised in September which showed an increase of 15 million hours of work across the nation.

As in 2020, women have been hardest hit by the 2021 lockdowns showing a more rapid and pronounced drop in participation and loss in hours of work than men.

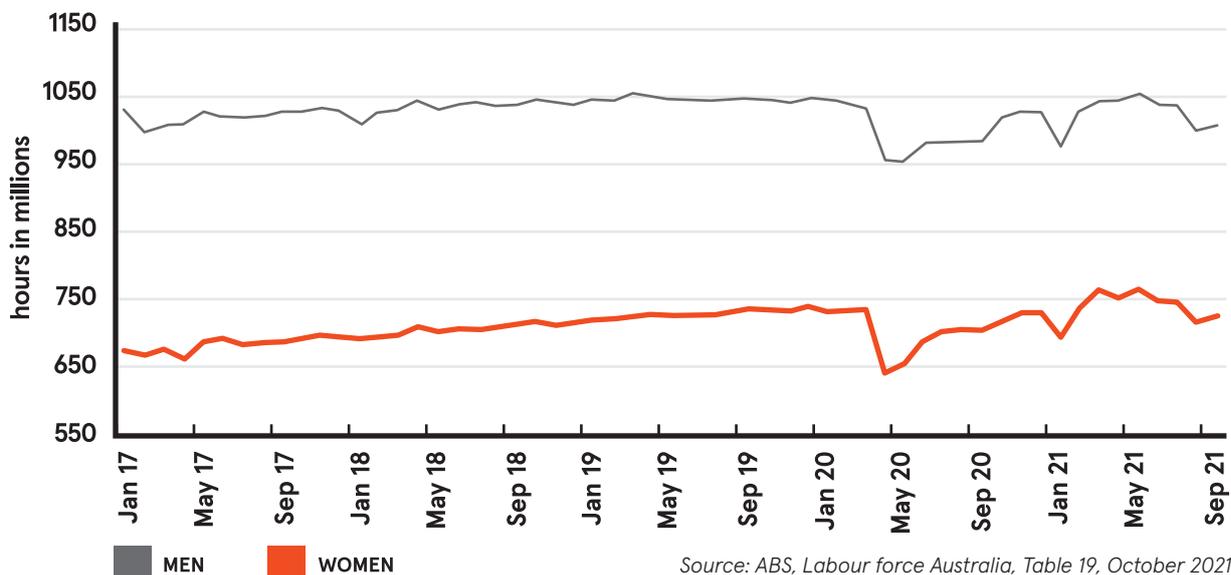
Women's participation rate has fallen more quickly and steeply than men's. In March 2021 women's labour force participation reached an historical high of 61.9%. By September 2021 it had declined by 1.9 percentage points to 60%, with the greatest decline in August. Men's participation was hardest hit in September, registering a participation rate of 69.3% off a 2021 high of 71.1% (January).

**Figure 1. National: Labour Force Participation rate for men and women, seasonally adjusted, 2017-2021**



The impact of lockdowns on employment and economic security is best reflected in monthly hours of work (See Figure 2). Since the 2021 lockdowns began women have lost a greater proportion of hours than men: 5.1% compared to 4.6% for men (May-September 2021) with the largest decline for both groups experienced in August.

**Figure 2. National: Monthly hours of work in all jobs for men and women, seasonally adjusted, 2017-2021**



### Focus on New South Wales

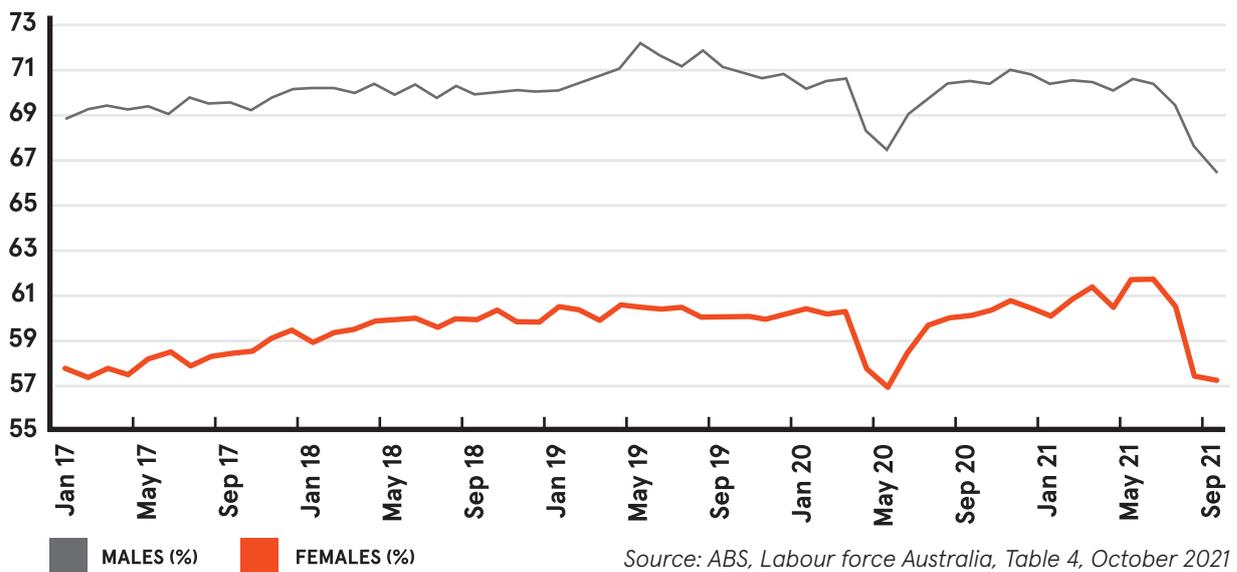
In 2021, NSW was the first state to go into extended lockdown, beginning on June 24th. The impact on workers was immediate, registering a 4.3 percentage point drop in total labour force participation (May-September) and a 12.7% decline in the number of hours of work lost across the NSW between May-August, recovering slightly to register a decline of 9.3% by September.

The largescale withdrawal of people from the workforce these figures reflect is significant. Since May around 244,000 workers in NSW have left employment.

Women have borne the brunt of the impact.

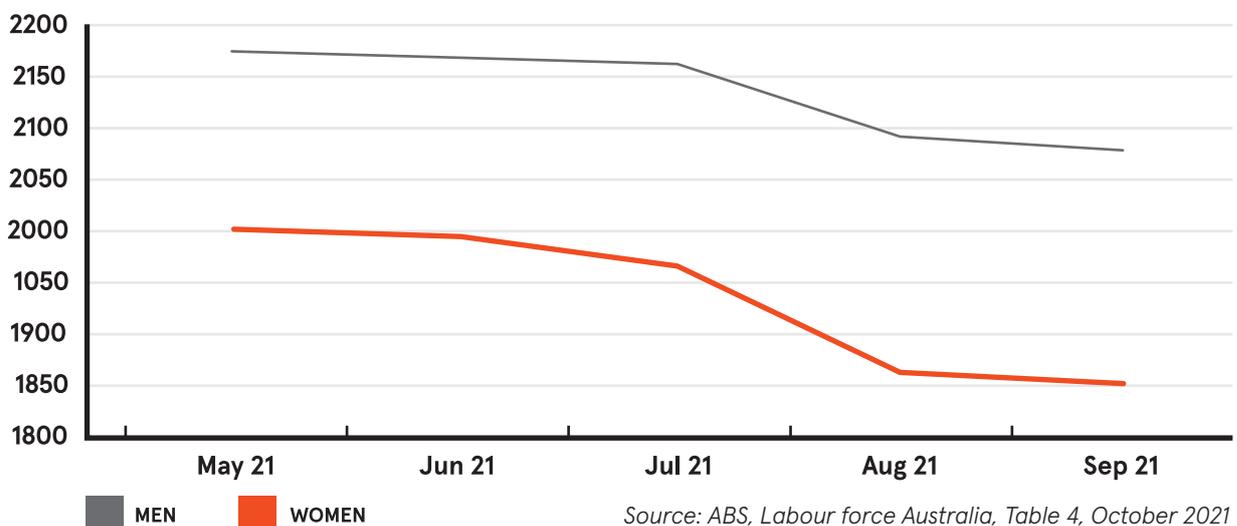
Women's labour force participation in NSW was hit earlier and harder than men's declining 4.3 percentage points, compared with 2.8 points for men between June and August (See Figure 3). Men's participation took a dive in September registering a further 1.1 percentage point decline compared to a small 0.1 decline for women.

**Figure 3. NSW: Labour Market Participation, men and women, seasonally adjusted. 2017-2021**



The decline in women's participation reflects the loss of 148,700 women's jobs since the employment high in May 2021. The impact on women was immediate with women losing 85% of all jobs lost in the first month of the lockdown (June-July 2021). Men's job loss was most acute in August. Overall, women have lost 61% of total jobs lost in NSW between May-September (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4. NSW: Change in total employment ('000), men and women NSW, May-Sept, 2021**



Job loss for NSW women is reflected in the number of women no longer in the labour force. After reaching a 5 year low in the number of women not in the labour force in May 2021 (1,291,500), the number of women reporting they are not in the labour force grew by 50,000 in the first month of the NSW lockdowns, to reach a total increase of 155,300 by August. Labour market disengagement appears to have abated in September.

Of women who remained employed during the lockdowns there was an 11.7% decline in the monthly hours of work done between May–August 2021. Men in NSW lost a greater proportion of hours, 13.5% over the same period, but were more likely than women to remain employed.<sup>8</sup>



## Action

Lockdown induced risks to women's long-term economic participation and security are high.

Prolonged online schooling and the increase in domestic and care work associated with the 2021 lockdowns have again seen many women radically reduce their paid work in order to undertake essential unpaid care work.

A gender equal COVID-19 recovery & an inclusive future of work requires urgent public and private sector investment in decent work for all. This can be achieved by:

- Designing gender equality into the future of work, including high quality hybrid work models.
- Facilitating women's access to male dominated sectors and revaluing highly feminised work.
- Building work/care regimes that support men, women and productive workplaces.

Failure to address these issues will stifle national productivity, slow the pace of the COVID-19 economic recovery, amplify socio-economic inequalities and reduce Australia's economic resilience.

To find out more, visit: [sydney.edu.au/business/gewl](https://sydney.edu.au/business/gewl)

## References

1. Foley M, Cooper R. Workplace gender equality in the post-pandemic era: Where to next? *Journal of Industrial Relations*. 2021;63(4):463–476. doi:10.1177/00221856211035173
2. Craig, Lyn, Churchill, Brendan. 2020a. Dual-earner parent couples' work and care during COVID-19. *Gender Work and Organization*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12497>.
3. Boxall H, Morgan A & Brown R 2020. The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Statistical Bulletin no. 28*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/sb04718> <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/intimate-partner-violence-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-survey-of-women-in-australia/> and Boxall, H., & Morgan, A. (2021). Intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic: A survey of women in Australia (Research report, 03/2021). ANROWS <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/intimate-partner-violence-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-survey-of-women-in-australia/>
4. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-17/stressed-out-women-burnt-out-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic/12847154>
5. Jane RW Fisher, Thach D Tran, Karin Hammarberg, Jayagowri Sastry, Hau Nguyen, Heather Rowe, Sally Popplestone, Ruby Stocker, Claire Stubber and Maggie Kirkman, *Med J Aust* 2020; 213 (10): 458–464. doi: 10.5694/mja.2.50831; AIHW 2021 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/mental-health-impact-of-covid-19>
6. Cassells R. & Duncan, A. 2020. Job Keepers and Job Seekers: How many workers will lose and how many will gain? <https://bcec.edu.au/publications/job-keepers-and-job-seekers-how-many-workers-will-lose-and-how-many-will-gain/>
7. Charlton A. 2021 Farewell JobKeeper, hello JobKiller: how bosses and workers are encouraged to part ways, SMH, September 17 <https://www.smh.com.au/national/farewell-jobkeeper-hello-jobkiller-how-bosses-and-workers-are-encouraged-to-part-ways-20210916-p58sar.html>; Wade, M. 2021 NSW disaster payment recipients top 1 million as men are getting the lion's share, SMH September 12. <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/nsw-disaster-payment-recipients-top-1-million-and-men-are-getting-the-lion-s-share-20210912-p58qzf.html>
8. ABS, customised data, Number of hours actually worked in all jobs in the week ('000 Hours), original, NSW, men and women, EM1b <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia-detailed/latest-release#hours-worked>