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How will the COVID-19 crisis affect existing gender divides in Europe?

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Abstract

The present report is a first attempt to assess potential consequences of the covid-19 outbreak on women and on gender equality in Europe. The report was produced in April 2020, with the aim of informing policy making about the possible impacts of the crisis. Timing does not allow for reporting about actual impacts, as there is hardly any data available on the topic yet. Instead, this work provides an overview of the status quo in some relevant aspects of gender inequalities before the crisis and makes informed predictions on what is likely to happen during the crisis and also after.

The outbreak has increased the need for care work both outside and inside homes in an unprecedented manner. As “normally” women do a disproportionately large share of the unpaid work in most of the EU countries, there is a great risk that they will take up the major part of the increased responsibilities as well. If forced to reduce work hours or unable to deliver properly while teleworking – not only their wellbeing but also their longer-term labour market prospects will suffer. Moreover, the current crisis is not only – and not even mainly – threatening men-dominated employment sectors, but is likely to hit women (at least) as much as men. Coping with the increased burden at home and making ends meet at the same time can be particularly difficult for already vulnerable groups such as single mothers.

However, the crisis did not induce risks only, it also created some new opportunities to move towards a more gender-neutral distribution of work. Teleworking men are in a very good position to observe the unpaid labour usually carried out by female household members and to start sharing these duties. A shift in the distribution of work in these households may last after the crisis – especially if newly evolving teleworking opportunities will be maintained and used both by men and by women once the crisis will be over. At the time being it is hard to predict if the negative or the positive effects will dominate in the longer term. The report argues that variations by social groups as well as across countries can be expected and a lot can depend on how policy making responds to these challenges.

In times of crisis and social isolation, the risk of domestic abuse increases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, each country is asking its citizens to stay at home, which implies sharing the same space with one’s abuser if one is experiencing domestic violence. Several Member States have acknowledged the risk and introduced various measures to better support potential victims – but more needs to be done. Importantly, the role of women’s shelters should be reinforced as it is a valid means of reaching out to women out and making citizens more aware of gender-based violence.

An important crosscutting theme in gender-equality that affects all the aspects discussed in this report is the unequal representation of males and females in decision-making processes. The lack of gender balance and gender lens in global COVID-19 decision-making drives away from making gender equality a reality. The COVID-19 crisis should be seen as an opportunity to challenge the social dynamics in a way that benefits both women and men.

The report concludes with a set of policy recommendations that can help mitigating the damages and realising the potential benefits that the COVID-19 outbreak has brought about on the equality between men and women in Europe.

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The Authors would like to thank JRC colleagues Beatrice D’Hombres, Frank Neher and Zsombor Cseres-Gergely as well as Éva Fodor, Ligia Nobrega and Roberta Paoletti for their valuable comments on the earlier versions of this report.

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1 Introduction¹

Despite some positive trends, gender differences and inequalities remain an important issue in Europe as it is well acknowledged in the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025². Primary concerns include massive gender segregation in several employment sectors and occupations, unequal distribution of household duties and care work as well as the most brutal manifestation of gender inequality: violence against women. It is precisely for these differences that **the current COVID-19 crisis creates new and imminent challenges to the provision of equal rights for men and women**. The present report tackles the most significant gender issues induced by the crisis in Europe.

The first part of this study looks at the possible consequences of the uneven division of labour between men and women. The COVID-19 crisis not only affects the various labour market sectors differently, but it also has a significant influence on the amount of care work that the households need to provide. It is still to be seen how these short- and medium-term impacts will develop and whether, in the long run, they will reshape existing division of labour across the genders. Highlighting the main tendencies that evolve at the time of the crisis is essential for rethinking the strategy Europe has to take to handle the situation.³ The second section discusses the state of domestic violence during the lockdown period and calls for attention and action for the most vulnerable ones. Finally, the third part reflects on the chronic underrepresentation of women in decision making both in the health system and in the political sphere. The brief concludes by highlighting some possible actions, which could be implemented in the short-and in the long-term period.

¹ The views expressed here are solely of the authors and do not preclude a policy position of the European Commission of any kind. The brief was prepared to inform policy-making and can not be considered as a completed research product.

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

³ For an extensive (but not complete) list of resources related to the gender aspects of pandemic see https://data2x.org/resource-center/gender-and-data-resources-related-to-covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR1eos0OSTKZ_tWQ3sivCa1XCWdNEEbHPNKWGqVqFm-FnYk31BMar_VdaMc For a summary of the most critical issues from a European perspective: <https://eige.europa.eu/news/coronavirus-puts-women-frontline> According to our knowledge, the most complete and systematic report so far that focuses on the labour market consequences of the crisis in the USA is: Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., & Tertilt, M. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality. Manuscript <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~mdo738/research.html#covid19gender>

2 Division of work between men and women

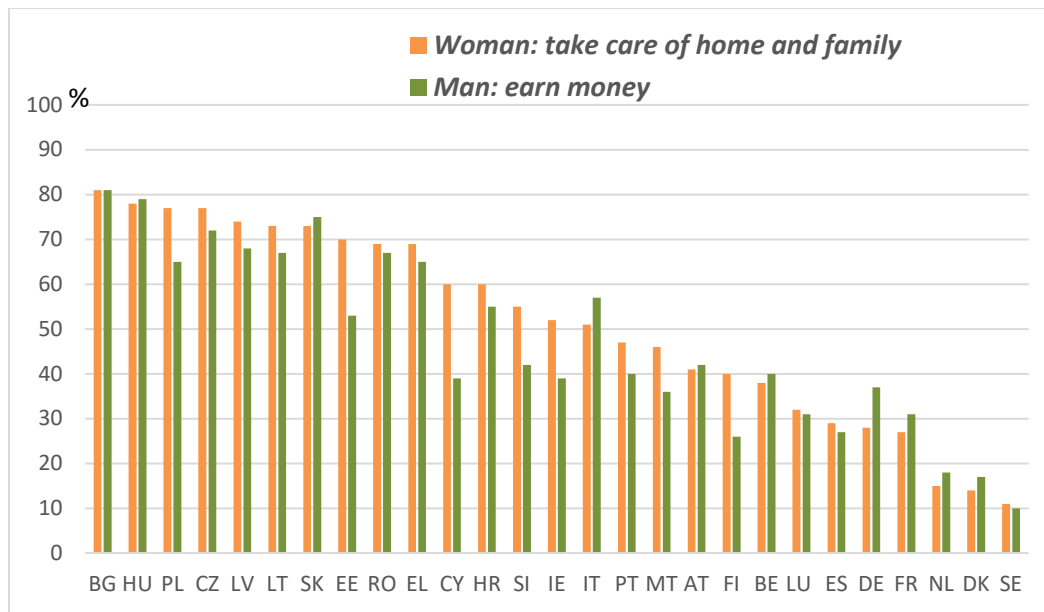
2.1 Gender norms and the division of unpaid work

Women traditionally do a disproportionately large share of care work and also other duties in households, and they are also likely to be more affected by increased care duties during the crisis. With schools and childcare institutions closed down all over Europe, and with also the sick and the elderly in need for more support because of the outbreak, the total amount of care work in households with children is likely to grow massively.

School closures across Europe leave millions of young and school-aged children to the full responsibility of their parents for 24 hours per day, seven days a week for a period of time the duration of which is still not known. This is so also because grandparents' support is not an option any more as the elderly is at particular risk of the virus. The need to self-isolate also makes other support – friends, neighbours – mostly unavailable. Besides physical and emotional caretaking, children also need educational support to follow the school-curriculum in the form of distance learning. At the same time, the need for in-home care for the sick and the elderly is also increasing. Elderly people are staying at home and many rely on younger family members to take care of grocery shopping and other smaller duties. To free up hospital beds for those suffering from the virus, chronically ill people not necessarily in need of hospitalisation are being sent home in some countries and new patients are only accepted in the most serious of cases. Finally, people infected by the virus are in need of in-home care in growing numbers as well. Long-standing gender norms, well reflected in the existing distribution of housework and childcare activities, make it very likely that in most cases, **women also take up a disproportionate share of these additional caring duties.**

Traditional gender norms that expect women to be caretakers and men to be breadwinners still prevail in Europe. Only supported by a minority in Northern and Western Europe, they remain dominant norms **in Eastern Europe, and also in some Southern European countries.** As shown in Figure 1, according to Eurobarometer data in 2017 at least two-third of the adult population in Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Estonia, Romania and Greece believed that „*the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family*”. A somewhat lower share, but still the majority holds such a view in Cyprus, Croatia, Slovenia, Ireland and Italy. In most of these countries, the dominance of the traditional female role is coupled by the belief that „*the most important role of a man is to earn money*”. Again, Eastern European countries, as well as some Southern European ones, are among the most conservative ones supporting a patriarchal division of roles.

Figure 1. Percentage agreeing that „the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family” and that „the most important role of a man is to earn money” by country.



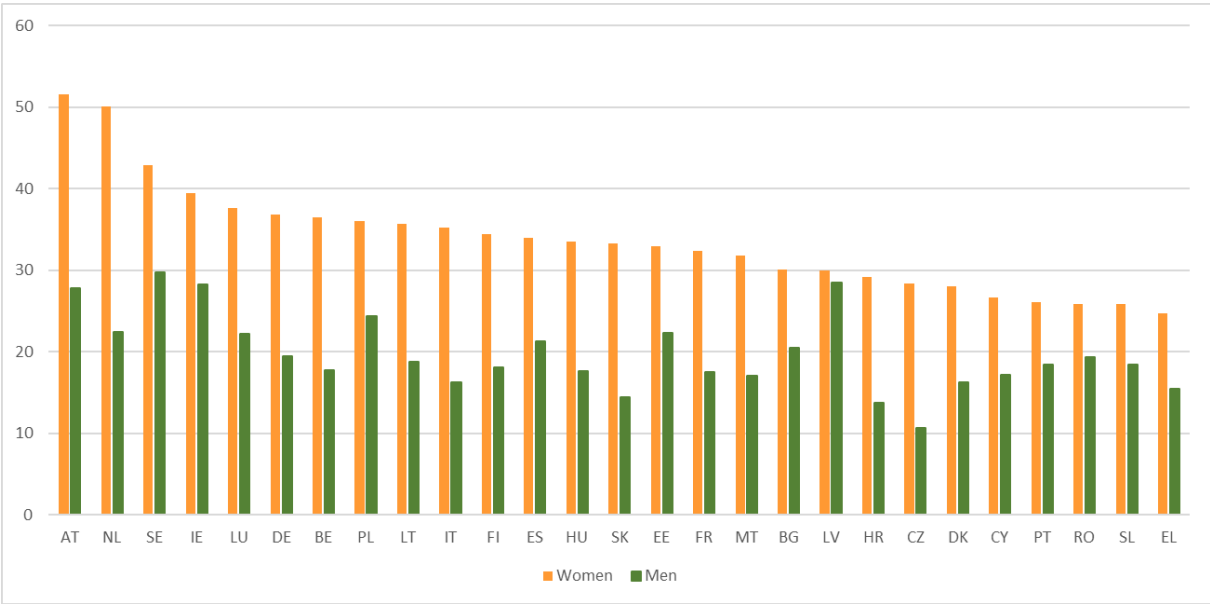
Source: Eurobarometer 2017

<https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2154> Own compilation.

Note: percentages of respondents agreeing with the statements that „the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family” and that „the most important role of a man is to earn money” by country. (Alternative options: „disagree”, „do not know” „it depends”.)

Although women’s employment has been on a constant increase and the double-breadwinner model is increasingly becoming the dominant one across Europe, the division of unpaid work remains in line with the prevailing cultural norms. With significant variations across the EU countries, women in all EU MSs are still spending far more time on housework and childcare than men do. Differences in childcare activities are illustrated by Eurofound 2016 data (Figure 2). Among working parents, women reported significantly more hours spent on childcare and education in all EU countries, but Latvia. In particular, in almost half of the EU countries, women spend at least twice as much time caring for their children as men do. Mothers spend between a maximum of 50 hours per week (Austria) to a minimum of 24 (Greece) as opposed to men with a range that goes from 29 hours (Sweden) to 10 hours (Czechia). The biggest gap between women and men is recorded in the Czechia, where women dedicate 45% more time than men to looking after children, followed by Slovakia, the Netherland (40% more), Italy and Croatia (with 35% more time).

Figure 2. Weekly number of hours spent on caring for own children by gender in the EU MSs 2016

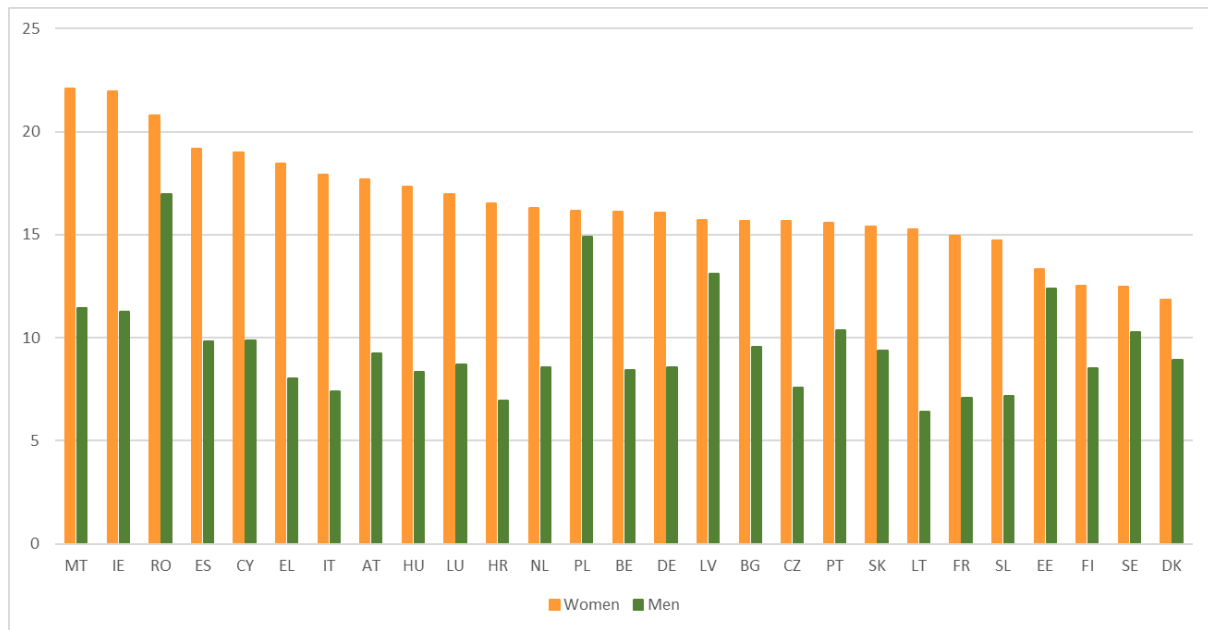


Source: Eurofound European Quality of Life Survey 2016. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/european-quality-of-life-survey> Own compilation from microdata.

Notes: Respondents' report the number of „Hours spent caring for and/or educating your children” among those employed and with children.

Similarly, housework also remains a predominantly female duty in Europe. To assess the gender-divide in this, we again use Eurofound’s European Quality of Life Survey from 2016, where we explore the distribution of weekly hours spent on cooking and housework in the same population: working men and women with children. Again, parity is never achieved as women are disproportionately more committed to it than men. In more than half of the countries, women spend more than twice the time men spend on this activity. In Italy, Croatia and Lithuania, women spend 140% more time than men on housework. It is promising though that in Estonia, Poland and Latvia the gap is very small.

Figure 3. Weekly numbers of hours spent on cooking and housework by gender in the EU MSs 2016



Source: Eurofound European Quality of Life Survey 2016. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/european-quality-of-life-survey> Own compilation from microdata.

Notes: Respondents' report the number of „Hours spent caring cooking and housework' among those employed and with children'

Even if currently we do not have data to assess how much women are caring for children and doing housework in comparison to men during the lockdown period, we have little reason to expect a rapid and significant shift in these long-existing patterns. While gender norms have been subject to significant changes over time⁴, short-term shifts both in these norms and the consequent behavioural patterns are not likely to take place – at least not in all segments of society. If no, or just very little positive change occurs during this crisis, and the additional burden will be as unevenly distributed between men and women as unpaid work was distributed before, then working mothers and also other **women with caring responsibilities are carrying an excessive burden during lockdowns**. This can cause massive damages not only to their wellbeing but also to their longer term labour market prospects.

However, COVID-19 has also induced some particular improvements that might, at least to some extent compensate for these negative tendencies. These include the pressure on at least a small fraction of men to take over part of the traditional female duties; the increased visibility of several feminised and under-recognised occupations; and the rapid spread of telework opportunities, which could potentially reshape men's and women's work-life balance in the future.

In the followings paragraphs, we first look at the possible damages the increased burden can make on women's labour market situation and career, and then we turn to the more optimistic scenarios.

⁴ See, eg. Carly R. Knight and Mary C. Brinton, "One Egalitarianism or Several? Two Decades of Gender-Role Attitude Change in Europe," *American Journal of Sociology* 122, no. 5 (March 2017): 1485-1532. <https://doi.org/10.1086/689814>

2.2 The increased burden and the damages it can make

The massive increase in the „traditional” double burden can put working mothers and also other **women with caring responsibilities in a difficult situation**, to which they might adapt in different ways depending on their circumstances. Reducing working hours or even temporarily giving up paid work can be necessary in order to meet growing household demands in extreme cases. They can reduce the number of hours worked either formally or informally when working from home; ask for paid or unpaid leave when it is possible; or even temporarily quit their jobs.⁵ Reducing or even giving up the female’s – rather than the male’s – paid work better fits still existing traditional gender norms (as we saw in the previous section), but it can also be financially more rational as shown below.

The choice to adjust the woman’s working hours is also often financially rational as women usually contribute less to the household income than their partners do and are also in more flexible jobs. While the incidence of temporary work in the EU is similar among men (14.8%) and women (16.1%),⁶ women are much more likely to work in part-time jobs (30.2%) than men (8.5%). Part-time work is particularly common among women in the Netherlands (75.8%) but is also frequent (exceeding 40%) in Germany, Austria and Belgium.⁷ The average gender pay gap equals 14.8% across the EU⁸ and in the majority of households with couples; the male partner has a higher income. In 2010, 21% of the European households⁹ relied solely on the male partner's income, and in another 37%, the woman contributed less than 40% to the total household income. The share of households with a low¹⁰ female-contribution was over 50% in the Netherlands and close to 50% in Austria, but it also exceeded 40% in Germany and Sweden. Although gender imbalance has most likely reduced, data from 2010 is still indicative.

A continued inequality in the distribution of **unpaid work can also be detrimental for women for whom teleworking is possible** and who therefore do not necessarily have to formally reduce working hours, or quit their jobs temporarily to respond to household- and caring needs. If the male partner does not share her caring responsibilities actively, teleworking women's effectiveness might be put at risk due to constant disruptions, the additional workload and the mental load that they need to handle while also working from home.

Reducing working hours or temporary quitting work to be available for home activities can impose **long-term adverse effects on women's labour market outcomes**. A prolonged period of enforced career break might even lead to some wage penalties for affected women in similar ways as motherhood related career breaks lead to a motherhood wage gap. This wage gap between women with children and women without children is mostly due to the loss of human capital that women suffer when on maternal leave¹¹- an effect that will eventually occur for any career break enforced by the coronavirus situation as well.

The increased pressure on women to reduce paid work or even quit their jobs temporarily is potentially further intensifying the already present pattern of **job losses** – which in the case of the current crisis seems to be **more**

⁵ In the USA, it is envisaged that women will respond to the crisis by quitting their jobs e.g. in <https://www.fastcompany.com/90479204/why-women-will-be-hardest-hit-by-a-coronavirus-driven-recession>

⁶ <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

⁷ EUROSTAT EULFS data from 2018. <https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/datASET/TfgiUubhKGofk3II8I14LA>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics

⁹ 27 Members States in 2010 plus Ireland and Norway. Kohle et al. (2014): Gender equality in the workforce reconciling work, private and family life in Europe.

¹⁰ Low contribution: less than 40 per cent of the total household income

¹¹ See e.g. Cukrowska-Torzewska, E., Matysiak, A., The Motherhood Wage Penalty: a Meta-Analysis, Social Science Research, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2020.102416> and also Cukrowska-Torzewska, E., Lovasz A: The role of parenthood in shaping the gender wage gap – A comparative analysis of 26 European countries, Social Science Research Volume 85, January 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2019.102355>

or less gender-neutral. As pointed out in a US analysis¹², unlike previous more „classical“ economic crises, this one will most probably hit women and men in more similar ways. While in the recession of 2008, male-dominated sectors such as construction and manufacturing were more severely affected, this time, this is not the case. Several service sectors, e.g. tourism and hospitality, are already in big trouble and are likely to remain so for a more extended period of time. According to ILO data, in 2018, 84% of the employed women while 61% of men were working in the service sector across Europe.¹³ At the same time, there were 30% more women than men working in accommodation and food service activities.¹⁴

But again, traditional gender norms might make the situation even more severe for women. Besides these structural factors, women also have a higher risk than men do to lose their jobs if their employers share the common beliefs about men's primary breadwinner role described above. Indeed, in those societies, where earning money is considered mainly a male duty, employers are likely to fire women first. Women might also get trapped in the stereotype as when losing their jobs or seeking for a new one; they are also less likely than men to immediately start searching for new job opportunities when they have children to look after. Either, they will take a more extended career break to respond to the care-work demand in their households, putting their long-term career prospects at an increased risk again, or they could be victims of employers' or job hunters' bias. All in all, **the labour market shock due to this crisis looks at least as severe for women as it does for men.**

The pressure to respond to the increased care duties by reducing employment can be **especially severe for single mothers.** Across the EU-27 in 2018, 15 % of all households with children were single-parent households – a total of 7 Million 893 thousand households across Europe.¹⁵ Particularly high shares of such households can be found in Denmark, Estonia and Ireland. Based on EU-SILC data in 2016, it was estimated that around 85% of these households were headed by a woman.¹⁶ Single-parent households are already at an increased risk of poverty: on average across the EU-27 countries, in 2018 42.8% of them were at risk of poverty or social exclusion – as opposed to 15.6% of households with two adults and one dependent child. The estimated risk of poverty among single-parent households exceeded 50% in Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, Croatia, Lithuania and Malta.¹⁷ The risk is significantly higher in female-headed households than for male-headed ones¹⁸. Thus the COVID-19 crisis will further **increase existing vulnerabilities** of already vulnerable households.

Despite the situation described above, it seems there is very little attention in the political discussions on what a prolonged block of kindergartens and schools could mean for female workers or job seekers. More than ever, there is a need for targeted policies on those vulnerable families to intervene to ease their situation as soon as possible.

Finally, the COVID-19 outbreak created an overwhelming burden on the health system causing consequences on some non-urgent medical services. For example, this situation made access to abortion even more difficult, especially in those countries that suffer a huge presence of conscientious objectors. In Italy, for example, only 64.5% of hospitals have a department of obstetrics and gynaecology or only gynaecology, that would carry out abortions. In 2017, the percentage of conscientious objector gynaecologists in the country reached 68.4% and anaesthesiologists 45.6%.¹⁹ While the suspending of abortions - even temporarily - is a human rights violation, a

¹² Titan Alon, Matthias Doepke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey and Michèle Tertilt: The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality.

March 2020 Manuscript. http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~mdo738/research/COVID19_Gender_March_2020.pdf

¹³ <https://databank.worldbank.org>

¹⁴ Eurostat 2018

¹⁵ Own calculation based on <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

¹⁶ EIGE, 2016: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/poverty-gender-and-lone-parents-eu>

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion

¹⁸ EIGE, 2016: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/poverty-gender-and-lone-parents-eu>

¹⁹ http://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pubblicazioni_2807_allegato.pdf

“non-planned” baby can affect the prospects of women and men unevenly, at the disadvantage of women – as demonstrated in the scenario described above,

2.3 Some more promising tendencies

However, some particular trends in the labour market can potentially at least slightly **counterbalance the adverse effects** discussed above and give some hope for a decrease, rather than an increase in gender inequalities across Europe.

First, women are overrepresented in several **occupations** that are **vital** and require continuous work during the crisis. These include several caring occupations – nursing in health care as well as elderly care – but also specific segments of retail work, in particular pharmacy and food/grocery. In human health and social work activities, there were four times as many women as men across the EU27 countries in 2019, while the respective ratio was 1.7 among service and sales workers (EU LFS own calculation). Maintaining activity in the workplace in these occupations is critical to cope with the crisis, teleworking is not a possibility and – unless absolutely forced to leave them for household duties – women will continue working in them far away from their homes. When the male partner is not in a similar situation himself (e.g. because his job offers the possibility to telework), households of these women might even face a temporary **situation of reversed gender roles**, with men practically forced to take over a large share of the household and caretaking duties.

Second, female-dominated occupations that are vital to coping with the outbreak are often poorly paid and socially not well recognised. The commitment of care workers in the health care system but also outside - e.g. elderly- and social care - is undoubtedly key for a successful fight against the pandemic. Care work has for long been considered a female job, characterised by low social prestige and low pay in many countries. The WHO reports an increasing shortage of nurses (and midwives) across the European Region and shows that nurses’ salaries remain below the national average in most places.²⁰ A 2018 report found women’s overrepresentation in Education, Health and Social Work activities being one of the major contributing factors to the gender pay gap in many European countries²¹. Being in the front lines of the outbreak gives **more visibility** to the tedious work and often poor working conditions of women in the care sectors than ever before. In a best-case scenario, this situation will increase their bargaining power, leading to **better social and financial recognition** in the future.²²

And finally, after even the WHO recommended²³ to do so, a large number of employers now made teleworking available for their employees, making social distancing possible also for those who would typically spend their days in their workplaces²⁴. While before the crisis working from home was almost equally rare among men and women in Europe, the situation is likely to change with the crisis. The overall share of the workforce teleworking was around 5% in 2017 across Europe (4.7% for men and 5.3% for women).²⁵ These figures are most likely to have multiplied by now²⁶. Mid-March and early-April surveys in Hungary (a country with rather low occurrence of telework before the crisis) for example suggest that by then 30% to 50% of the employed population was

²⁰ <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Health-systems/nursing-and-midwifery/data-and-statistics>

²¹ [Boll, C. and Lagemann, A \(2018\): Gender pay gap in EU countries based on SES \(2014\). European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/report-gender-pay-gap-eu-countries_october2018_en_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/report-gender-pay-gap-eu-countries_october2018_en_0.pdf)

²² [In Scotland, a pay rise given to adult social care workers was announced on the 12th of April 2020 https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-scotland-52264870/coronavirus-social-care-workers-given-pay-rise](https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-scotland-52264870/coronavirus-social-care-workers-given-pay-rise)

²³ <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/mar/13/covid-19-could-cause-permanent-shift-towards-home-working> and <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-11/coronavirus-latest-europe-isn-t-ready-to-work-from-home>

²⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20180620-1>

²⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-covid19-internet-data-work-home-mobile-internet/>

working from home²⁷. Importantly, from a gender perspective, this increase is also forcing hundreds of thousands of men to stay at home during the day and spend time with their children, or other relatives with care needs. If this occurs, **teleworking men** might **increase their contributions** to housework and caring duties – even if their female partner is also staying at home and continues to take up the majority of this work. Such a behavioural shift is even more likely as teleworking is more frequent among those with higher levels of education²⁸, who are generally also more open towards a gender-neutral division of labour²⁹.

Both reversing the traditional roles and just increasing the male partners' involvement in traditionally female activities could potentially lead to even long-term changes of gender norms and behaviours. Research looking at the division of childcare- and household duties after a period of parental leave shared between the mother and the father suggests that the experience of sharing unpaid work can indeed lead to a more even division of labour in the household also in the longer term³⁰. This also gives hope that a period of enforced responsibility sharing during the crisis could generate lasting changes and these new agreements will not be fully reversed when the crisis is over. Such a positive change is even more likely **if a sizeable share of the newly developed flexible working arrangements remains**, providing better opportunities for men and women alike to balance paid and unpaid work after the COVID-19 crisis.

²⁷ Survey carried out by Zavec Research.

https://index.hu/techtud/2020/03/21/sokkal_jobban_tartanak_mar_a_magyarok_a_koronavirustol/ Online survey by the Ipsos Market Research: <https://www.ipsos.com/hu-hu/elerheto-valsag-hatasait-fogyasztoi-szemponbol-vizsgalo-kutatassorozat-also-heti-riportja>

²⁸ As it is indeed shown in the Ipsos survey Hungary as shown here: <https://www.ipsos.com/hu-hu/elerheto-valsag-hatasait-fogyasztoi-szemponbol-vizsgalo-kutatassorozat-also-heti-riportja>

²⁹ See e.g. Carly R. Knight and Mary C. Brinton, "One Egalitarianism or Several? Two Decades of Gender-Role Attitude Change in Europe," *American Journal of Sociology* 122, no. 5 (March 2017): 1485-1532. <https://doi.org/10.1086/689814>

³⁰ See e.g. Anna-Lena Almqvist & Ann-Zofie Duvander (2014) Changes in gender equality? Swedish fathers' parental leave, division of childcare and housework1, *Journal of Family Studies*, 20:1, 19-27, DOI: 10.5172/jfs.2014.20.1.19

3 Violence against women

In Europe, one out of three women experience physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence during their lifetime³¹ (EIGE, 2017). This makes **violence against women one of the most widespread but at the same time the least reported human right abuse**³² (WHO, 2013). It is rooted in unbalanced gender power relations, social norms and gender stereotypes³³ that make the promotion of respectful relationships between women and men, or girls and boys since early age, gender equality and women's empowerment the best way to eradicate violence against women. EIGE³⁴ reports that in times of crisis and social isolation, the risk of domestic abuse increases. During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, each country is asking its citizens to stay at home, which **implies sharing the same space with the abuser for those experiencing domestic violence**³⁵.

In a recent communication³⁶, EU parliament stated that cases of domestic violence rose by a third in some EU countries following lockdown. In Cyprus, helplines have registered a 30% increase in calls and in France reports of domestic violence have also grown by 30% since the lockdown of March 17th³⁷. Similarly, in China, activists reported that in February, as a result of the lockdown, the number of domestic violence incidences reported to the police tripled.³⁸ Those numbers show only the cases where women can seek for help; many of them however cannot make calls, as they fear being overheard by their abusive partner, or are stopped from leaving home. Increase in reports of domestic violence is happening at the same time that services are being disrupted. The health system is overwhelmed with coronavirus infected people, which might imply more difficulties in finding available medical care and therapists. Seeking for a refuge at the victim's elderly parents may increase the risk of infecting them with the virus. Women's shelters might be either overcrowded in this period or closed down to minimise the risk of infections. It is very likely that victims are unable to have a phone conversation when the perpetrator is nearby as abusers often monitor the phones of their victims. The abusive partner might leverage the COVID-19 crisis for fear, isolation from friends and relatives and manipulation.

The Italian case seems to follow a different trend as compared to the other EU countries. In Italy, women's shelter institutions reported the number of requests for help drop down by 55% within the first week of lockdown, the police confirmed the number of reports for domestic violence dropped by 44% while the number of reports for crime raised by 64%³⁹. At the end of March, they registered a slight inverse in the trend, probably as a consequence of awareness campaigns the government launched on domestic violence and of a more rapid and coordinated intervention of the police. Experts exclude the drop of requests for help for domestic violence to be the signal of an effective decrease of the phenomenon⁴⁰ as they expect an escalation of violence as the quarantine period is prolonged. Institutions have the responsibility to reach out in these critical cases.

³¹ EIGE 2017 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2017/domain/violence>

³² WHO 2013 <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/violence-against-women>

³³ UNWOMEN (2015), A Framework to underpin actions to prevent violence against women

³⁴ EIGE 2020 <https://eige.europa.eu/news/coronavirus-puts-women-frontline>

³⁵ Gender based violence is violence directed against a person because of their gender. Both women and men experience gender-based violence but the majority of victims are women and girls. Usually gender based violence and violence against women are terms often used interchangeably as it has been widely acknowledged that most gender-based violence is inflicted on women and girls, by men. (<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/what-is-gender-based-violence>). Domestic violence are all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit, irrespective of biological or legal family ties, or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence as the victim (Council of Europe (2011). Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Council of Europe Treaty Series No 210.)

³⁶ European Parliament <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200406IPR76610/covid-19-stopping-the-rise-in-domestic-violence-during-lockdown>

³⁷ UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

³⁸ <https://www.axios.com/china-domestic-violence-coronavirus-quarantine-7b00c3ba-35bc-4d16-afdd-b76ecfb28882.html>

³⁹ <https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2020/04/08/crollano-denunce-e-chiamate-ai-centri-antiviolenza-col-covid-19-piu-rischi-per-le-donne/>
⁴⁰ <https://www.lavoce.info/archives/65605/violenza-domestica-quelle-donne-vittime-del-lockdown/>

Several Member States announced specific measures to tackle the increased risk of domestic violence. To name a few, in France it was announced that pop up counselling centres would open in stores around the country so women could drop in for help while getting groceries⁴¹. The government also announced financial support to anti-domestic abuse organisations to help them respond to increased demand for services. In Italy, media report⁴² that female victims of domestic violence are allowed to leave their homes and go to the nearest women-support service or to the police station, without being reported for violating the restriction measures. The government has also suggested the requisition of empty hotels, so to make them available as a temporary accommodation for women who are experiencing violence. The same measure has been adopted in Spain. In Portugal, the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality created an email service⁴³ for questions and requests for support related to domestic violence and in Austria, the government introduced a 24h help-hotline⁴⁴ for victims of domestic violence. Unfortunately, in the EU there are still six Member States⁴⁵ who have just signed the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence without any ratification, which practically means it will not enter into force. Legitimately, we wonder what the current situation of victims of domestic violence during the COVID pandemic might be in those countries, that have formally not recognised violence against women as a real threat.

⁴¹<https://www.france24.com/en/20200330-france-to-put-domestic-violence-victims-in-hotels-as-numbers-soar-under-coronavirus-lockdown>

⁴²https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/21/news/elena_bonetti_se_subite_violenza_chiedete_aiuto_andate_al_centro_antiviolenza_e_nessuno_vi_multera_-251867069/?ref=RHPPLF-BH-I251880435-C8-P3-S1.8-T1

⁴³<https://www.cjg.gov.pt/2020/03/covid-19-novo-email-apoio-na-area-da-violencia-domestica/>

⁴⁴<https://orf.at/stories/3157761/>

⁴⁵ The six countries which haven't ratified the Istanbul Convention are: Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/signatures>

4 Women in decision making

The lack of gender balance and gender lens in global COVID-19 decision-making⁴⁶ is another aspect that drives away from making gender equality a reality. The WHO recognised⁴⁷ that women must be included in decision-making; however, the decision-making bodies established specifically for COVID-19 do not reflect a gender balance between women and men. A notable example that received a lot of negative criticism is that 100% of the members of the original United States' Coronavirus Task Force⁴⁸ were male.

As stated in a recent World Economic Forum communication⁴⁹, 70% of the world's healthcare staff are women, but only 25% of global leaders are female. Similarly, the 2019 Global Health 50/50 Report⁵⁰ states that 72% of executive heads in global health are men. Women comprise the bulk of the world's frontline health workers, shouldering the burden of tireless work while increasing their own risk of getting infected. Still, it is mostly men holding the positions of power and making the essential decisions, which are going to affect all. This **imbalance in decision-making power impacts the degree to which women's specific needs are taken into consideration**⁵¹, both in the short term, as well as in the phase of the design and implementation of economic relief and other support measures.

According to the recently launched UN Gender Social Norms Index⁵², more than 50% of men and women around the world believe that men are better political leaders than women are. This belief is reflected in the representation in political institutions. In the European Union, recent data from EIGE⁵³ shows that in early 2020 only 32.3% of seats in national parliaments are held by women. Looking at regional data, we see that regional assemblies are, again, mostly (66.3%) comprised of men. Slightly better is the result of the European parliament, where 40% of members are female. However, the president and members of the two European Advisory committees – the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (COR) – are 74.4% male⁵³.

Equity issues are only meaningfully integrated into emergency responses when women and other vulnerable or marginalised groups, are able to participate in decision-making.⁵⁴ The COVID-19 crisis should be seen as an opportunity to challenge the social dynamics in a way that benefits both women and men.

⁴⁶ https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Global_RGA_COVID_RDM_3_31_20_FINAL.pdf

⁴⁷ https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/EB146/B146_CONF17-en.pdf

⁴⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-presidents-coronavirus-task-force/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/women-female-leadership-gender-coronavirus-covid19-response/>

⁵⁰ <https://globalhealth5050.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Equality-Works.pdf>

⁵¹ EIGE <https://eige.europa.eu/news/coronavirus-puts-women-frontline>

⁵² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/gsni>

⁵³ All data provided by the EIGE Gender Statistics database <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/wmidm>

⁵⁴ <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/gender-and-coronavirus-outbreak>

5 Conclusions

Biologically women are not more at risk to COVID-19 than men are, while it seems that mwn are slightly more affected by the virus⁵⁵. However, **women are risking to pay a higher price for the crisis than men**. This can be in the form of a massive physical and mental workload during the crisis, that can lead to career disruptions both in the short and the long run, and in extreme cases even of physical sufferings. In a recent UN communication⁵⁶, Secretary-General António Guterres noted that the pandemic is having devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls across the world. Indeed, several of the global concerns are valid for Europe. Unless successfully mitigated, these damages could even defer the slow improvements in gender equality. On the other hand, from a European perspective the **outbreak has also induced new opportunities**, which – if successfully managed – could even provoke some shift towards a more even distribution of unpaid labour between men and women.

The described forces will most likely not only hit different social groups in different ways, but we can also **expect significant cross-country variations throughout Europe**. Eastern and Southern European countries for example, where more traditional gender norms prevail, might be less flexible to change the dominant mode of labour division - therefore women there are likely to suffer more from the increased workload. The size of this workload also varies depending (among other things) on how long the school-closures will last. While Italy closed all its schools in the beginning of March, and does not (currently) expect to reopen them until September, other European countries only joined later, with some of them already considering to reopen in May. Furthermore, EU countries with a better-established aid system to prevent domestic violence are in a better position than others to prevent a rapid increase in the number of violent attacks against women. Finally, policy responses to the current crisis at the national level can make a great difference in how the burden will be (re)distributed between men and women.

To mitigate harmful consequences, a **constant awareness of the particular circumstances of women and gendered policy responses in all the policy areas are needed**⁵⁷. To strengthen this aspect, the availability and transparency of gender-disaggregated data are fundamental. Awareness goes hand in hand with information, and it is also firmly connected with reliable data. Moreover, data availability is the main element for the evaluation and monitoring of the progress of gender equality policies. From a concrete point of view, **a better representation of women in decision making** will facilitate and speed up this process along with a more consistent involvement of gender experts.

In terms of specific actions, the role of **women's shelters should be reinforced** as it is a valid means of reaching out to women in the territory and making citizens more aware of gender-based violence. Moreover, offering **small-group daycare for children whose parents can not stay at home**, making **special leaves** and **job-preserving support** available for those that have to reduce working hours for family commitments and taking care of the needs of single mothers are all important examples of how adverse effects can be mitigated already in the short run. Still in the short **term, sensitising employers to gender differences** and making them aware of the amount

⁵⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/07/coronavirus-hits-men-harder-evidence-risk>

⁵⁶ https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/put-women-and-girls-centre-efforts-recover-covid-19?mc_cid=9ed1fe2726&mc_eid=905a32c197

⁵⁷ For a similar call based on negative experiences from former outbreaks see also Wenham C, Smith J, Morgan R: COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak *The Lancet*, Volume 395, ISSUE 10227, P846-848, March 14, 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30526-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2)

of burden male and female employees handle during the crisis could make them more supportive of their female colleagues. Later on, when the imminent crisis is be over, and schools reopen, mothers might need additional support to return to the labour market to minimise the negative consequences of their enforced career gaps.

The crisis also offers **new opportunities** – but to fully benefit from these, again, policy support is needed. It is important to actively raise social awareness of what is going on in the households during the crisis – both acknowledging and fighting the inequalities and supporting the shift in gender roles that is taking place in some households. As explained by UN WOMEN, *“policymakers must pay attention to what is happening in peoples' homes and support an equal sharing of the burden of care between women and men. There is a great opportunity to **“unstereotype” the gender roles** that play out in households in many parts of the world.”*⁵⁸ Eradicating the gender stereotype will open the highway towards the realisation of gender equality. Men have a role in un-stereotyping the gender roles as they can act as role models to their male mates. Further, to maximise the benefits of the present spread of teleworking from a gender perspective, it is necessary to support employers to maintain the flexibility of working conditions.. Very importantly, men, and not only women, need to be encouraged to see working from home as an opportunity to achieve a better work-life balance, to support a more even share of paid and unpaid work between the genders. Gender equality is not only a women’s issue but a benefit to the whole society.

⁵⁸<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-women-and-covid-19-governments-actions-by-ded-bhatia>

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