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GENDER AND ECONOMIC DOWNTURN. THE FOCUS ON WOMEN AND THE PANDEMIC CRISIS

Abstract. The goal of the paper is to consider whether women are vulnerable or protected on the labour market during the pandemic crisis, seeking answers in the wider context of previous downturns and economic theory. In times of crisis, female employment is likely to be more susceptible to cuts, for several reasons explained i.a. by the flexible buffers hypothesis or sex segregation hypothesis. Since the pandemic crisis is still unfolding, many of its effects are still unknown but it can be expected that the COVID-19 crisis may have an unequal impact on women and men. Additional challenges in this crisis can be found in the home. Gender effects vary across EU countries, however, it is essential to develop at both the European and national level effective policy responses leading to gender balance in various dimensions (including paid and unpaid work).

Keywords: crisis, COVID-19, gender balance, labour market, unemployment rate.

Introduction

Since the outbreak was first reported in China at the end of 2019, the COVID-19 virus has spread all over the world. In the absence of a vaccine (in 2020) and effective treatment, many governments implemented unprecedented containment measures in social and business life. This “Great Lockdown” forced a majority of people to stay home and impelled companies from a variety of industries to shut down or re-orient their working arrangements. This resulted in large short-term economic losses and a decline in global economic activity (Deb et al., 2020, Eurofound, 2020a) compounded by the uncertainty (Baker et al., 2020). Economic shocks impact the world of work across three key dimensions: the quantity of jobs, the quality of work, and effects on specific groups who are more vulnerable to adverse

labour market outcomes (ILO, 2020a). In the context of the last dimension, “gender creates a cleavage of vulnerability that cuts across all other groups” (Townson, 2009; Leschke, Jepsen 2011; Blenton et al., 2018; ILO, 2020a; Kristal, Yaish, 2020). Thus, the pandemic has provided a timely opportunity to return to theory that explores the extent to which women’s position is vulnerable to the economic cycle. A gendered understanding of the crisis is crucial to avoid an unintended increase in inequality. The analysis is narrowed to the selected work issues and it covers European Union (EU) countries. The EU consists of different types of economic systems, however, gender equality is a key element of the EU’s programs applicable to all Member States (MS).

The goal of the paper is to consider whether women are potentially exposed or protected on the labour market during the pandemic crisis, attempting to locate the problem in the wider context of previous downturns. The research is not meant to predict the future, rather to denote possible changes in female unemployment and to identify the reasons for gender differentials arising from economic theory. Given the short time frame, the findings must be considered more suggestive than definitive. There is also a hypothesis formulated: the pandemic crisis can have a disproportionate impact on women (in terms of paid and unpaid work) through various transmission channels, however, this impact varies across EU countries.

The article is based on the literature, documents, articles, statistical database and other online sources. The research methods used are the critique of the literature covering the subject matter, comparative analysis, statistical data analysis and deduction.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section highlights several studies that have looked at the impact of previous economic crises on both sexes. The theoretical foundation of the gendered nature of job losses is described in the second section. Some statistics referring to the subject are presented in the subsequent part. Since the labour market is only one dimension of human work, in the fourth section the topic of unpaid work is discussed. The last part embraces conclusions and general policy implications.

1. Evidence from crises in developed countries with focus on gender – literature review

The employment impact of COVID-19 is described as the most severe crisis since World War II (CCSA, 2020). The effects seemed to be unevenly distributed between the sexes, which has raised legitimate questions about

the causes of this problem and inspired a search for answers in the experiences from previous downturns. Aside from the 2007+ crisis, there is only limited evidence concerning the labour market for women in developed countries in response to past crises, one reason for this being that in the 20th century women were not as important a force in the labour market as they are nowadays. During the Great Recession in the 1930s, men fared worse than women and the latter were even encouraged to leave the market in favour of men (Smith, 2009). Job losses also hurt men more than women in three recessions in the US: 1969–70, 1973–75 and 1980–82 – women actually gained jobs as they ventured out from the home to the office (Taylor et al. 2011). An analogous tendency was observed for the 1980s recession (Bouillaguet-Bernard, Gauvin, 1988) in France. However, job opportunities for women continued to grow as a result of a differential demand and a protection afforded them by a kind of segregation at the time, they were not compensating for male job losses. In Australia, while female unemployment was higher on average in the 1980s, male unemployment was more volatile – it increased more rapidly during the early period of recessions and it fell more quickly during the subsequent recovery periods (Richardson, 2009). Opinions about gender impact of the 2007+ crisis in the US and European countries are ambiguous – some authors suggest that men were hit harder while others present contradictory evidence. This turns out to be dependent on timing (Bettio et al., 2012). During the first stage of the crisis female employment in general was less affected than male employment since men were mostly employed in the construction and durable goods manufacturing industries hit by a sharp drop in demand (Seguino, 2009; Christensen, 2014). Moreover, there was a much sharper increase in the percentage of men who – prompted, perhaps, by a decline in household liquidity – rejoined the labor force but failed to find a job (Sahin, Song, Hobijn, 2010). Then, during implementation of stimulus packages, male employment recovered faster than that of females. When austerity plans were introduced, women's overrepresentation in a normally-stable public sector led to job losses (Seguino, 2009; Taylor et al., 2011; Leschke, Jepsen, 2011; Lethbridge, 2012; Hoynes et al., 2012; Rubery, Rafferty, 2013; Périvier, 2014). The final effect seems to confirm the view of a “she-session”, not a “he-session” (Christensen, 2014).

The magnitude and types of gender effects of the crises were context-specific. They were likely to vary across countries, depending on structure of the economy and employment, economic systems, the extent of protection of women or policy measures. Although lessons from the past cannot provide

universal and sufficient insight into the gender impact of every crisis, such experience can form the foundation of theories that help to understand changes in the current economy.

2. Patterns in women's employment during a downturn – theoretical explanation

There are three main hypotheses that can explain why employment of both genders is not affected in the same way by crisis, namely: the buffer (flexible reserve) hypothesis, the job segregation (sex segmentation) hypothesis and the substitution hypothesis (Smith, 2009; Leschke, Jepsen, 2011; Périvier, 2014).

The first hypothesis refers to the view that women are in the front line of unemployment and thus are drawn into the labour market during upturns and expelled during downturns (pro-cyclical female employment). The hypothesis is linked to the theory of dual labour markets (Périvier, 2014). Women are overrepresented in the secondary labour market (Piore, 1978), associated with precarious employment such as part-time jobs or temporary contracts¹. This segment is characterised by high flexibility and a high degree of competition between workers – with relatively low: earnings, quality jobs, social and labour protections and with weak bargaining power, representation or limited access to training (Smith, 2009). Another gender interpretation of the buffer hypothesis is that women are more sensitive to a discouragement effect because of the lesser importance that has historically been attributed to their employment, and the social norms supported by the male breadwinner model. Following this approach, during a crisis when jobs are scarce, men have “more right” to a job than women (Floro et al., 2009; Smith, 2009; Périvier, 2014). Also outright discrimination reinforces the role of the buffer. The part of employers who regard women as secondary income earners use crisis as a pretext for dismissing them first when their enterprises experience difficulties (Blanton et al., 2018).

The second hypothesis refers both to the theory of rational choice and the socialization processes. According to them women tend to “choose” gender-typical occupations (Becker, 1962, 1985; Leuze, Strauß, 2016) leading to two types of sex segregation in the labour market:

- 1) sectoral (women are overrepresented in specific sectors such as education, health care, social services, and under-represented in others – manufacturing, construction, etc.),

- 2) occupational (women dominate in such occupations as child-minders, cleaners, and under-represented in others – like electricians, enginemen) (Floro et al., 2009; Périvier, 2014).

Segregation may protect women against job loss by shielding them from competition from men (Rubery, Rafferty, 2013) and by placing women in protected sectors. However, it might be perceived through a prism of socially shared stereotypes about male and female traits and skills legitimated by various ideologies (di Stefano, 2019). According to the hypothesis, employment trends are related more to trends in occupational and, primarily, sectoral structures than to cyclical factors. Depending on the gender structure of employment and according to the sectoral nature of a crisis the trend in female employment might be pro- or counter-cyclical (Walby, 2009; Bettio et al., 2012; Périvier, 2014).

The third hypothesis predicates counter-cyclical trends for women's employment. During a recession, employers who want to minimise their costs intensify the search for "cheaper labour". As women are paid less, they might replace their male counterparts (Périvier, 2014). The hypothesis seems to be controversial since it is belied by many facts (Baden, 1993; Bouillaguet-Bernard, Gauvin, 1988). The effect might occur at the micro level: in a couple, if the man has lost his job the woman might be encouraged to compensate for the loss of income (Greenhouse, 2009), especially in countries where female participation was low before a crisis (Périvier, 2014). Evidence of women acting as a cheap labour substitute is hard to detect at the macro level and over a short time period (crucial from the point of view of this article) which is characterised more by job destruction than restructuring. (Rubery, Rafferty, 2013).

Although these three hypotheses appear to be at odds with each other they can be simultaneously valid. For instance, some occupations "typical" for women as a caretaker or aid are assigned to the secondary labour market. The final net effect will therefore depend on specific factors of the crisis and economy and can be measured *ex post facto*.

3. A gendered vision of the labour market in European Union countries

Some statistics concerning vulnerable employment in EU countries² can be a starting point for analysis of which gender is put at higher risk of dismissal. Figure 1. presents data on a gender gap in the level of employment: part-time work and temporary contracts³ (before the pandemic). Eurostat

Figure 1. Gender gap (between females and males) in part-time employment and temporary contracts in EU countries in 2019 (pp based on the gaps between % of total employment in the group on females and males, 15–64 years)

Source: Author's elaboration, Eurostat 2020a [lfsi_pt_a] (10.07.2020).

also publishes data concerning some employees with a short-term contract of up to 3 months, deemed in its nomenclature “precarious employment” which is worthy of attention (Fig. 2).

Part-time work is the female domain – in each of the MS the percentage of women working part-time exceeded that of men. This gender gap varies substantially within the group – from 47,3 pp in the Netherlands⁴ and 37,6 pp in Austria to 0,2 pp in Romania. The average gender gap in the EU28 is 22,6 pp (Fig. 1). Female workers spend on average 34 hours per week in paid employment (Eurofound, 2018). Women also hold a temporary contract on average more often than men (in 22 countries), however, gender gaps are not as great and not as varied as in the case of part-time employment. In 3 countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia) more men than women hold a temporary contract and also in 3 countries there is no gender gap at all (Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg). The gender gap in the EU28 is 1,8 pp (Fig. 1).

The situation looks slightly different when it comes to precarious employment (Fig. 2). In 13 countries a greater percentage of precarious workers are men, in the Netherlands, Romania and the UK there are no gender gaps

Figure 2. Gender gap (between females and males) in precarious employment in EU countries in 2019* (pp based on the gaps between % of total employment in the group on females and males, 15–64 years); NACE Rev. 2 activity (Total – all NACE activities).

* Cyprus data for males: 2018, Romania, data for females: 2013

Source: Author's elaboration, Eurostat 2020a [lfsa_qoe_4ax1r2].

and in 12 women dominate. However, none of the gender gaps is significant (the average gap between females and males is $-0,1$ pp for the EU28). More noticeable are the differences between countries in terms of levels of precarious employment in general (for instance: Croatia vs Czechia).

Part-time and temporary forms of employment are in certain respects insecure by definition, thus, the implications of these statistics are that women are more likely to be affected by loss of employment than men. However, “the net effect” is volatile, especially having regard to data presented on Fig. 2. As the pandemic recedes, part-time work for women may also be a source of job growth as in previous recessions (Smith, 2005). Still, in the beginning it presents certain risks in terms of redundancies.

It is crucial to refer to the sectoral nature of the crisis. The list of sectors, respectively, with the level of risk of dismissal and share of female employment is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

**Women workers at risk – sectoral perspective
(prior to COVID-19; 2019)**

Sector	Level of risk	share of women, UE28 average	share of women – extreme values in EU28
wholesale and retail trade, repair of motors	high	49%	from 41% in Malta to 59% in Latvia
manufacturing	high	30%	from 22% in Netherlands to 48% in Bulgaria
real estate, professional, scientific and technical activities	high	49%	41% in Netherlands to 66% in Bulgaria
accommodation and food services	high	54%	from 35% in Malta to 80% in Latvia
transport; storage and communication	medium-high	25%	from 18% in Romania to 29% in Latvia and Lithuania
arts, entertainment and other services	medium-high	48%	from 30% in Cyprus to 65% in Latvia
mining and quarrying	medium	14%	from 10% in Poland to 26% in Sweden*
financial and insurance activities	medium	51%	from 38 in Netherlands to 70 in Bulgaria
construction	medium	10%	from 6% in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania to 15% in Germany
agriculture, forestry and fishing	low-medium	33%	from 13 in Ireland to 42 in Austria
utilities	low	26%	from 15% in Romania to 39% in Denmark**
public administration and defense, compulsory social security	low	49%	from 35 in Italy to 61% in Sweden
human health and social work activities	low	79%	from 62 in Malta to 88 in Latvia
education	low	72%	from 57 in Luxembourg to 83 in Latvia

* data are not available for many countries

** data for Cyprus, Malta, Luxembourg are not available

Source: own elaboration on the basis of ILO 2020b and own calculations Eurostat 2020a [lfsa_egan2, Employment by sex, age and economic activity (from 2008 onwards, NACE Rev. 2) – 1 000]

Figure 3. Change in employment – 2020Q1 – 2020Q4 (pp. based on % of total employment in the group on females and males, and in general 20–64 years)

Source: Author's elaboration, Eurostat, 2021 [lfsi_emp_q]

At first glance, the position of women does not exactly pale in comparison to men since the former hold a majority in only one high-risk sector (accommodation and food services), and dominate in low-risk sectors (health care, education). However, the conclusions may be slightly different taking into account the specificity of each MS (for instance, the share of women workers from Latvia in both high-risk and medium-risk sectors is relatively high). Some details might be also missed at a given level of aggregation, especially if not all sectors are affected in the same way. For example, women's share in *wholesale and retail trade, repair of motors* is 49% and 30% in manufacturing (Table 1), therefore, they do not constitute a majority. However, women are heavily over-represented in the retail and garment manufacturing industry. In the retail sector, on average, 62% of workers are women, rising to 75% or more in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The garment manufacturing industry has faced heavy disruption from both the supply side (e.g. forced factory closures) and the demand side (closure of retail stores)

Figure 4. Change in unemployment (seasonally adjusted unemployment rates, %), April 2020 – April 2021 (pp. based on % of total employment in the group on females and males, and in general, 20–64 years)

Source: Author's elaboration, Eurostat 2021 [une_rt_m]

(OECD 2020). Regulations implemented to apply social distancing have impacted primarily businesses with face-to-face contacts, for which telework is not possible (Gregory et al., 2020; Queisser et al., 2020). This includes branches where women tend to dominate numerically. These gender imbalances, sometimes combined with precarious employment, may explain why the pandemic effects are likely to take a disproportionate toll on women, but for some of them, the public sector may offer some protection since women make up a disproportionate share of public sector employees, rising even to roughly 70% in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (OECD, 2019).

The longer-term net gender employment effect will depend upon elements resulting from a mixture of conditions, possibly also beyond vulnerable employment and sex segregation issues. For the time being, some changes in the labour market show a pattern (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Employment rate in the EU-27 declined by 0,5 pp. from 2020Q1 to 2020Q4. The decrease in employment rates for women were more numerous, 23 MS (and average change of female employment was -0,3 pp) compared to 21 MS for men (but the analogous change was -0,6 pp.).

In terms of the number of countries, those with an increase in unemployment are dominant. Unemployment rates rose for both sexes. The increase in unemployment rates for women were more numerous, 18 MS (and average change of female unemployment was 0,7 pp) compared to 15 for men (and 0,5 pp). It should be noted that statistics concerning the decrease sometimes are misleading – the unemployment rate measures active job-seekers while many people stopped looking for work due to the virus emergency. However, these signs seem to show the recession having a negative effect on both women and men⁵.

4. Gender gaps in unpaid work in the EU countries – pandemic and pre-pandemic issues

As a result of school and nursery closures and teleworking, an additional tremendous responsibilities have been imposed on families. Some studies appear to indicate that women in particular have been overwhelmed by new duties (Del Boca et al., 2020; Mascherini, Bisello, 2020) which disturb their work-life balance, but such a statement seems to be an oversimplification without a starting point analysis. The gender imbalances in part-time work (Fig. 1) suggest that generally women are more involved in household and care activities than men. Indeed, according to data from surveys (pre-pandemic) by Eurofound (2018), working women average 17 hours weekly caring for (grand)children, 12,9 hours on cooking and housework and 5,7 caring for elderly or disabled relatives, whereas men respectively: 10,6, 5,5 and 4,8. There are some differences between the activities undertaken by both sexes. Women perform more food management, cleaning, ironing and laundry, while men are more involved in construction and gardening. When it comes to childcare, women are relatively more involved in physical care, supervision and accompanying their children, while men seem to participate relatively more in teaching, playing and talking with their children (Eurostat 2020b).

What significantly contributes to the gender balance and the division of duties are institutions: formal ones (affordable child-care and long-term services) and informal conditions resulting from tradition and culture. Thus, the total time spent in paid and unpaid work varies across MS, as does the gap between women and men in both of them. There can be distinguished four groups in the EU (Eurofound, 2018):

- 1) Countries which display the most equal distribution of working time between men and women:

- a) the Nordic countries (relatively small gaps in paid work, unpaid work and in work overall),
 - b) France, Latvia and Slovakia: both their gaps in terms of paid and unpaid work are smaller than the EU average, but in terms of total time they have similar or larger gaps than the EU average countries.
- 2) Countries with a relatively smaller gap between women and men in terms of overall weekly time, but with a gender “division of labour” in which men mainly perform the paid work while women tend to undertake unpaid work:
- a) Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands;
 - b) Austria, Italy and Malta (all three gaps – paid work, unpaid work and total – are larger than the EU average).
- 3) A group of countries where, despite a relatively small gender gap in paid working hours, the gap in terms of unpaid work is around the EU average, leading to a relatively large gap in the average total time spent at work per week: Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Spain.
- 4) Countries where, while there is a relatively more equal situation in terms of paid work, the bulk of unpaid work falls on women’s shoulders, resulting in very large gaps in terms of total time spent working: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal and Slovenia.

The grouping might be used as a kind of matrix. Depending on the affiliation to a group and on a new division of duties, the effects of the pandemic might vary among countries. Women from the countries belonging to the 4th group have the highest risk of even greater work overload if additional chores are not shared based on this new division. The initial situation is also grievous for women from the 3rd group of countries. There could be potentially beneficial consequences of social distancing if couples would take the opportunity to share the burden more equally. Actually, the mentioned gender division of care responsibilities can implicate that in the face of an increased number of teaching home hours (whereas time spent in total on food management, laundry etc. is more or less constant regardless of the pandemic) there is a chance for greater gender balance in unpaid work. Obviously it is difficult in families with young children or when only one of partners can telework. In the first group, especially in the Nordic countries, the basic situation is the most desirable.

It would be irresponsible at the moment to look for regularities between the grouping and place in the rankings (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6) constructed on some initial research from April (especially that the data for all MS are not available), but their comparison tentatively shows that affiliation to

Figure 5. Difficulties in concentration on job because of family responsibilities

Source: Own elaboration on the basis <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19/working-teleworking> (15.07.2020)

a group does not unequivocally determine the gender division of new obligations. The Figures show⁶ the proportion of answers “always” and “most of the time” of respondents in the EU27 when asked respectively “How often in the last 2 weeks have you found it difficult to concentrate on your job because of your family responsibilities?” and “How often in the last 2 weeks have you found that your family responsibilities prevented you from giving the time you should to your job?” (regardless of the mode of work).

On average, 9,8% of women and 7,9% of men in the EU27 found it difficult to stay focused on their jobs because of chores. In 14 out of the 19 countries under research (from Austria to Bulgaria, Fig. 5), the proportion of female respondents reporting such problems exceeded the proportion of men. An opposite situation may be observed in Finland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Romania. Family responsibilities led to work neglect in the opinions of more women than men in 15 out of 18 MS (Fig. 6). The biggest gap between responses was noted in Austria, Hungary and Spain. In Finland, Slovakia and Greece (the latter with a slight gap) more men than women declared such a problem. In the EU27, an average 6,9% of women and 4,7% of men spent less time working than they should have. There are also some other

Figure 6. Men and women prevented from due time work because of family responsibilities

Source: Own elaboration on the basis <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19/working-teleworking> (15.07.2020)

findings. Namely, extreme positions in both rankings are occupied by the same countries (Austria and Finland). This is an indication of the most extreme gender imbalance. In Poland, the proportion of women and men is exactly the same (Fig. 5) and in Fig. 6 they are quite similar. There are also significant differences between MS in the number of women and men in total. Belgium and Portugal are countries with the highest proportion of people reporting problems with work-life balance during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Evidence from past downturns teaches us that a crisis can impact women and men differently and that the sex segregation of labour markets combined with the buffer hypothesis seem to be quite useful explanations for these tendencies. Women are expected to be dismissed first because of their vulnerable positions, but there are some exceptions in many countries. At sector level, the position of women in the EU countries does not

appear to be particularly exposed to the risk of dismissal, however, they have a significant share in more affected sectors. Moreover, the preliminary results confirm that the impact on people's quality of life and work as a result of the pandemic is more severe in the case of women (albeit not in all MS). However, it does not have to be solely the result of ad hoc circumstances, but a "traditional" asymmetry of chores distributed between partners. All the presented arguments do not provide grounds for rejecting the hypothesis.

The factors affecting female employment nowadays do not disappear in post-pandemic times. Thus, apart from emergency measures (such as access to caregiving support for people able to go back to work), it is essential to develop at the European and national level effective policy responses in both downturn and recovery. Structural adjustments should go through gender and intersectional analysis, so that differential effects on women and men can be assessed. It is also necessary to put childcare obligations of both genders into plain sight. During the pandemic-related restrictions, the view is commonly expressed that telework will soon become a reality for most workers. While promotion of flexible work arrangements is desirable, it would be important to take the needs of this group into consideration when designing arrangements for working time and workload.

Given that the current crisis is still emerging, there is a continued need to assess the impact of the pandemic crisis. More statistics are required not only concerning a proportion of women affected in terms of quality of work and a loss of income, but also the situation of self-employed or informally employed women. Comparison of the effects and policy developments by country related to gender regimes, family models and other institutional environments, would be an important contribution.

N O T E S

¹ Work outside formal labour market also could be mentioned. However, the importance of informal sector is particularly high in developing countries.

² UK is no longer a MS, but due to 2019 data, this country has been included.

³ They will terminate either after a period fixed in advance, or after a period not known in advance, but nevertheless are defined by objective criteria, such as the completion of an assignment or the period of absence of an employee temporarily replaced.

⁴ In statistics, the distinction between full-time and part-time work is generally based on a reply by the respondent. The Netherlands are the main exceptions where a 35 hours threshold is applied which may affect the result.

⁵ Since only the full-time unemployed are registered as unemployed, women's unemployment is underestimated in relation to men's. If men are unemployed they are usually unemployed full-time and classified as such. Women are often part-time unemployed and thus not classified as unemployed but as part-time employed (Smith 2009).

⁶ Countries are ordered by decreasing gap between the percentage of women and percentage of men.

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