

POLICY BRIEF

FEMINISM

WHEN CRISES DISCRIMINATE

OVERVIEW -THE EFFECT OF CRISES ON WOMEN IN THE CASE OF COVID-19

Summary

This policy brief focuses on how **women are specifically affected by crises** and what can be done to protect vulnerable groups. During crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional **gender roles are reproduced** and women are pushed back into the domestic sphere. Since ideas about traditional gender roles start at an early age and are institutionally reproduced in schools, we recommend implementing **gender inclusive curricula in schools**. Another issue for women that has been exacerbated because of the pandemic is the division of unpaid labor in European societies. Women often times perform far greater unpaid care work compared to men, which places significant additional burdens on women. Therefore, we recommend that **unpaid care work is legally recognized as work**. Furthermore, most leadership positions are still held by men, even though we have just described that women face unique hardships during crises. This is why we recommend the **implementation of a women's quota** in management positions in order to include women in the decision-making process of important changes in their own lives. One more problem impacted by covid is the increase of domestic violence against women due to measures such as lockdowns and contact restrictions. Our recommendation is to **improve the system of shelter accommodation for the victims of domestic violence**.

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KEY POINTS

- **Feminism** for an equal treatment of women and men in times of crisis
- **Covid-19 Crisis** as a cause of why women fall back into stereotypical gender roles
- **Education** as an opportunity to educate students to be tolerant without stereotypical gender roles
- **Care Work** which is fairly distributed and recognized as work
- **Domestic Violence** as an increasing threat to women in crisis who need a higher range of support services
- **Decision-Making Processes** as an opportunity to increase women's involvement in crisis responses

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The **implementation of gender inclusive curricula and teaching materials** across a wide range of school subjects to educate young people from an early age to world openness without stereotypical gender roles
2. The development of a concept that **recognizes unpaid care work** such as caring for relatives as work
3. The **implementation of a women's quota** in management positions in order to include women in the decision-making process
4. The **improvement of the system of shelter accommodation** for victims of domestic violence

Introduction

In the globalized world of the 21st century, the member states of the **European Union will have to face many different crises**. In the past years, the international community has faced the global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted the **vulnerability of European society to global shocks**. However, not all population groups were equally affected during the crisis. **Women in particular suffered from the economic and political consequences of the pandemic**. However, as **gender equality is one of the fundamental values of the EU** as an international organization, the European Commission developed its *Gender Equality Strategy* in 2020, which is to be pursued until 2025. Among other things, it states that gender-based violence continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing our society.¹ Intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic, it has therefore become even more **important to overcome this challenge and to be able to ensure equal rights for women and men in the future** by implementing appropriate and effective measures.

Gender norms still shape our society

During the Covid-19 pandemic, **traditional gender roles were increasingly reproduced** in society. Women stayed at home, took care of their children and therefore limited their working hours, while men generally continued to work to earn money for their families (see figure 1). But the **reason for the reversion to traditional gender roles begins in education**. Even at a young age, children are taught stereotypical roles through teaching materials, for example, which they more or less already have to fulfill or will have to fulfill in the future. Girls play with dolls, mothers take on the role of housewife and men have the task of earning money for the “mother, father, child family”.

For this reason, it is **necessary that children and adolescents are sensitized to this topic** as early as possible during the socialization phase. Already in their school years, children should be **educated to promoted tolerance, respect, and world openness without stereotypical gender roles**. Gender-inclusive teaching materials, for example, would help to start educating people about this topic at an early age. In addition, this topic should be taken into account across all subjects and can also be addressed with the involvement of experts.

In this way, it can be **prevented that the adoption of traditional gender roles is magnified in times of crisis** and that women are better protected against this in the future.



Figure 1: Gender-based stereotypical expectations of Europeans in 2017 ²

Division of unpaid work in European societies

Unpaid care work is a cultural norm in European societies which remains relevant today. Women are expected to take care of their children, relatives, and households while men are responsible for earning money. During the COVID 19 pandemic this role distribution tightened even more.

¹ European Commission 2020, p.3: A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. COM(2020) 152 final. At: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=DE>, (Retrieved on 22.07.2022)

² Figure 1: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=DE>

European Commission (2022): 2022 Report on gender equality in the EU. Brussels. At: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/2022_report_on_gender_equality_in_the_eu_en.pdf (Retrieved on 22.07.2022)

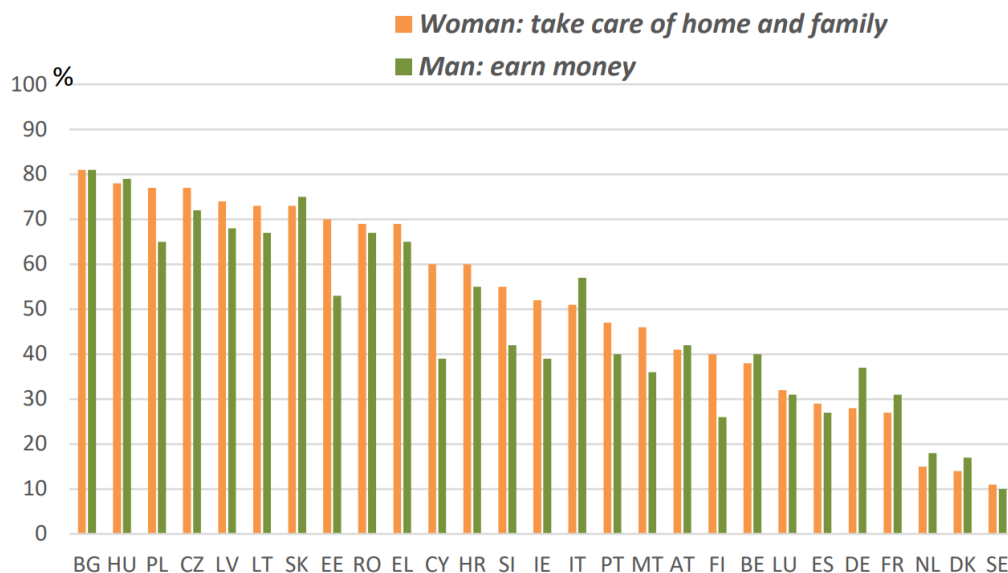


Figure 3: Percentage agreeing that “the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family” and that “the most important role of a man is to earn money” by country.³

Schools were closed all over Europe and children needed more support and supervision from their families. **Women**, who on average earn less money than men, are **more likely to stay at home** and do the **extra care work**. At this time, it is not uncommon for women to **give up their jobs** to ensure that their family issues are solved. The chances in the job market are given in comparison to men are worse.

Several employers make it possible for their employees to work from home. For women, often that means they must deal with their usual work and care for their children simultaneously or be afraid of **disadvantages in their jobs**, which can increase their mental stresses. Aftereffects of this issue can be **psychological strains**.

A more positive outcome of the Covid-19 crisis is that many fathers were introduced to the topic of care work for the first time even though they dealt with it on a much lower level than women. That new potential could be used to foster a more gender equal division of labour possible in society. On the one hand, this should be about **enhancing the chances for women** in the **job market** and on the other hand, care work in general should be revalued.

Therefore, it is important that **kids** of all ages have the possibility to be **supervised** well throughout the whole day. Furthermore, the concept of care work must earn more appreciation in European societies. Due to that, unpaid **care work** such as taking care of relatives should be legally **recognized as work**. A concept should be created which relieves people who do unpaid care work, especially **in times of crisis**, when the **amount of care work increases**.

Men making Decisions for Women

During crises, decisions need to be made quickly in order to prevent further damage and to bring stability and security to affected groups. Currently, **men hold the majority of positions of power** in European countries (see Figure 3) and therefore dominate the decision-making process. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many time-sensitive decisions were taken in the global health sector. Men hold 72% of executive positions in global health while 70% of the world’s healthcare staff are women.⁴ Hence, these male-dominated decisions affected mostly female employees, who were **under-represented in the decision-making process**. **Implementing a women’s quota** would help represent women in the decision-making processes in order to reach more viable solutions for women in times of crises.

³ Figure 2: Eurobarometer 2017: <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2154>

⁴ European Commission (2022): 2022 Report on gender equality in the EU. Brussels. At: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/2022_report_on_gender_equality_in_the_eu_en.pdf (Retrieved on 22.07.2022)

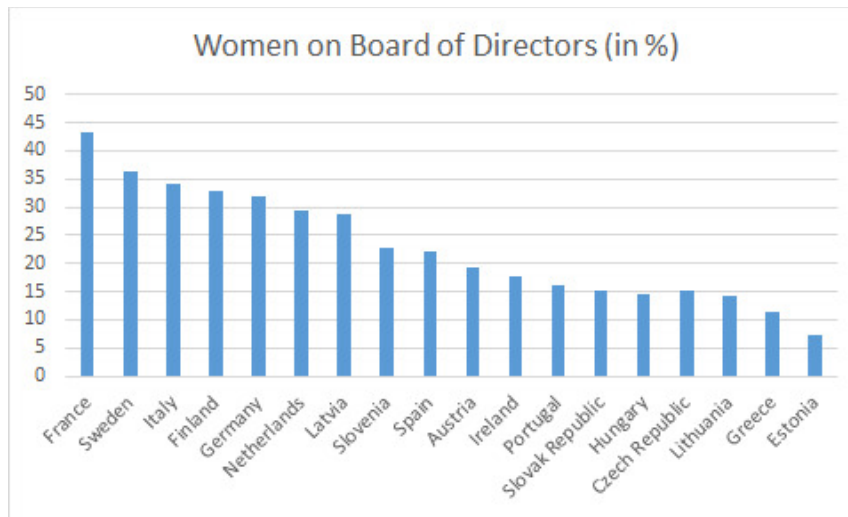


Figure 4: Women on Board of Directors in European Countries in 2020 ⁵

Hence, having women in company leadership roles not only **improves the working conditions** of vulnerable groups within the company but also **leads to an economic boost**. The implementation of a women's quota can help build **internal and economic resilience** to protect both women and the company in times of crisis.

The increase in domestic violence

Covid-19 impacted all spheres of life, bringing about **new challenges**. One of them is **combating the level of domestic violence against women**, which surged during government measures such as lockdowns, restrictions on contact, and moving out to slow the spread of infection. At the same time, **the pandemic increased the level of aggression in homes** as uncertainty about the future and unstable financial situations impacted individuals' emotional states and fueled further domestic attacks. It brought about a case when the victim was locked in with their abuser without an opportunity to ask for and find help. Statistics show that during the pandemic, the level of domestic reports rose by 30% in France in 2020 compared to 2019,⁶ 20% more cases in Lithuania in the first three weeks of lockdown compared to the same period in 2019, and a 23% growth in Spain during the first month of a pandemic. The World Health Organization member states reported a **60% increase on average in emergency calls from women concerning domestic violence**.⁷ As we can see, the problem of raising the level of reported violence is common for all European Union countries. At the same time, we must not forget that the statistics only reveal reported cases, and that the true number of confirmed cases of domestic violence is much more significant, as the Covid-19 pandemic also influenced the ability of victims of domestic violence to ask for and receive help.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed and **increased issues of gender inequality**, which had already existed in society. Finding solutions for these problems is a relevant task for the future in order to **be prepared for upcoming unpredictable crises** and to work towards the declared **goal of gender equality in the EU as stated in the Commission's Gender Equality Strategy**. Women's rights and the ongoing discrimination in many different parts of our societies finally have to be taken seriously in our shared community of values. Our policy recommendations help embrace women as valuable members of society and empower them to shape a more resilient future.

⁵ Figure 3: World Economic Forum (2020): Percentage of women in companies' board of directors. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020. Available online at <https://assets.weforum.org/editor/YV12FuogEkEfCTcWVHzYmgzYTgNFe97mtKl4qpYVlg8.png>

⁶ FRANCE, 24. "French Domestic Violence Cases Soar during Coronavirus Lockdown." France 24. France 24, April 10, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200410-french-domestic-violence-cases-soar-during-coronavirus-lockdown>.

⁷ Graham-Harrison, Emma, Angela Giuffrida Helena Smith in Athens, and Liz Ford. 2020. "Lockdowns around the World Bring Rise in Domestic Violence." The Guardian, March 28, 2020, sec. Society. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>.