

A tale of two pandemics? Covid-19 and gendered policy responses in the EU

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Abstract

Pre-existing imbalances between women and men in European societies do not bode well for gender balance throughout the pandemic and its unequal pressure. The unprecedented tragedy of the Covid-19 outbreak highlights and exacerbates long-established challenges for the path towards gender equal societies. In this context, this analysis asks what women's place in the pandemic response is, highlighting cross-country differences in France, Germany, Italy and Spain on the basis of the UNDP Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker. The assessment identifies the key drivers deteriorating women's welfare across the labor market, family balances and gender-based violence, comparing how variations in risk factors (e.g. length and intensity of the pandemic and derived restrictions) match to policy responses catering for the needs of women. Findings reveal that the worst hit countries are not unambiguously those with the starkest policy effort to mitigate any negative outlook for women. The place for women in the crisis-management and recovery remains fairly limited, especially in those countries already lagging behind in ensuring equal economic opportunities. The evidence suggests that in the absence of a strong prioritization of gender parity, the turbulent road ahead may be even more tumultuous for women, resulting in a concrete risk of a heavy Covid-19 legacy reversing the patchy

progress of the latest years. While the situation is still unfolding, it is crucial to closely monitor the gendered initiatives while at the same time promoting a deeper policy effort towards equality. The analysis investigates gender parity in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic through a comparative assessment of outbreak and restriction severities – with well-established risks concerning parity – together with (gendered) responses in selected Member States. The four countries, namely France, Germany, Italy and Spain include some of the worst-hit societies within the EU while allowing for the homogeneous comparison across the big Member States across the core and periphery of the Union. Pinpointing the gendered impact of crises as emerged in the literature on the Great Recession and early evidence from the pandemic, the analysis identifies the areas in which policy measures are most needed to counteract the negative impact of the health crisis and its broad implications for work, life and societies. The starting point of the analysis is the benchmark of the pre-pandemic status of the countries of interest in terms of progress toward equality, as evidence by international cross-country tracking of gender parity (WEF 2019) to derive a view of the situation of women and policy preferences and actions in this regard across the four countries. The overview is enriched with a cross-country comparison of the scale of the outbreak in the four Member States with special attention to (i) discrepancies in dynamics which may increase the negative outlook for women in some of the countries in the sample and (ii) early findings on the economic and policy responses and the preliminary picture they draw on potential divergences in accounting for and catering to women's needs.

From such premises the paper assesses discrepancies in gendered policymaking concerning the pandemic crisis management, considering cross-country trends and the contribution of factors such as the pre-existing family and social structure – with its implications for parity – and the scale of the Covid-19 tragedy. Based on the data from the UNDP (2020) Gender Covid tracker, the research further assesses the alignment between factors heightening the burden on women – such as length of restrictions and in particular school closures and stay-at-home orders – and the gender-sensitive policies. A further element of consideration is the place for women leadership both in crisis management and in the public debate surrounding the pandemic response and gender parity.

Gender and crises: lessons from the Great Recession

When gendered societies enter times of economic downturns, the divide between women and men is bound to increase at the hands of the well-established inequality enhancing the pressure of the recession. In addition, the prioritization of more urgent economic and social concerns runs the risk of sidelining any focus on gender and its mainstreaming throughout the response to the crisis. In this context, the copious literature on the Great Recession and its consequence for women and the struggle for gender equality may shed some light of the risks of a further widening of the gender gap through the Covid-19 pandemic. The well-established gendered impact of past crises complements the early warning of the asymmetric cost of the pandemic to the disfavor of women and the somewhat limited gendered approach to its mitigation.

On such premises, widespread negative trends for gender equality and a greater burden for women have emerged in several aspects of life, with far-reaching consequences beyond the labor market. In this context, the Great Recession has been associated with a “gendered housing crisis, increases in the

levels of feminized poverty, precarization of female labor, and privatization of care” (Kantola, Lombardo 2017: 216). If crises dynamics put women in a particularly precarious position, the gender divide in the EU during the Great Recession and the Euro crisis has been partially linked to the Union-driven austerity-centred approach. On one side the recovery turned the focus to gender and socially-blind macroeconomic policies that failed to account for the impact on women (Kantola, Lombardo 2017), while on the other the austerity paradigm facilitated and justified welfare and services cuts across the Member States, often at the expense of policies such as, for example, care services which are a preliminary condition for gender parity (Kantola 2015). Against this backdrop, the Great Recession and Euro crisis can be considered in several dimensions as a U-turn away from the road towards gender equality (Rubery 2014).

Crises and women in the labor market

In this context, the impact of the crisis on women’s position in the labor market has been widely researched (e.g. Maier 2011, Périvier 2018, Kushi, McManus 2018, Martínez-Tola, Luz de la Cal-Barredo, Alvarez-Gonzalez 2018, Peinado, Serrano 2018, Perugini, Rakić, Vladislavjević 2019, Barba, Iraizoz 2020, Perugini 2020). Women had it worse for multiple reasons, starting from their own segregation into vulnerable lower paid and precarious jobs, together with the public sector which was itself the target of austerity-driven spending cuts (e.g. Rubery 2014, Wöhl 2014). In addition, the participation of women to the labor is highly dependent on the availability of care services with substantial differences remaining across the Member States before the crisis and in the subsequent cuts to spending (Walby 2009, Karamessini and Rubery 2014, Wöhl 2014). For instance, in Portugal, segregation into precarious and part-time positions has increased during the Great Recession, along with the pay gap (Prata 2017). Similar dynamics emerged even in Scandinavian countries, with Finland sacrificing the welfare of the most precarious and vulnerable women-dominated positions to the altar of competitiveness (Elomäki, Kantola 2017). In Spain, low-educated women were especially penalized, subject to the worst conditions and stability, with the further balkanization of their position in the labor market, while overwhelmingly remaining the sole or main provider of unpaid work (Sánchez-Mira 2020, Lombardo 2017). At the same time, consolidation to public spending in slashing public sector jobs came markedly at the expense of women employment (Lombardo 2017). In the UK, the Recession worsened conditions of women in the labor market and their employment prospects as previously segregated sectors were flooded by unemployed males (Rubery 2014). The segregation, precarization and displacement dynamics are of high relevance also of the current economic crisis. In fact, Covid-19 is bound to lead to the extensive restructuring of part-time, seasonal and atypical work positions in which women are often overrepresented, and which are especially jeopardized by the restrictions imposed to control the outbreak.

Austerity cut to services and unpaid work

Women were penalized also outside of the labor market, bringing back or reinforcing their primary role as caregivers and in unpaid work (e.g. Walby 2011, Pearson, Elson 2015). Evidence emerged in the gendered allocation across paid and unpaid work for example in Portugal (Prata 2017). In this context, austerity measures negatively impacted women both directly, through consolidation of social spending which often substituted for women unpaid work (e.g. child and elderly care services) and, more in general, the retrenchment of policies promoting gender equality and funding to institutions and organizations dedicated to women issues (Klatze, Schlager 2014, Lombardo 2017). As a result, recovery policies failed to mainstream gender equality, only in sparse cases accounting for any gender awareness of their impact (Bettio *et alii* 2012, Klatzer, Schlager 2014, Karamessini, Rubery 2014, Villa, Smith 2014). For example, in Spain, spending cuts axed away most institutions devoted to promoting

equality, along with the parallel reversal of several policies promoting equality, severely putting at risk any recent progress in the country (Lahey, De Villota 2013, González, Segales 2014, Lombardo 2017). Similarly in Italy, cuts to public spending especially in areas of care services worsened employment and pay gaps pushing women back toward traditional gender roles (Karamessini 2014b, Verashchagina, Capparucci 2014). Also, the less economically impacted Poland slashed public spending privatizing care services with negative impact on women's place in the labor market (Zbyszewska 2017). The detrimental impact of the increased burden of unpaid care with the slashing of public spending is of high relevance in the context of the pandemic, with lockdowns and school closures forcing children to stay at home, posing the question of how unpaid work within the family shifted to adapt to the new circumstances.

The gendered risk of poverty and social exclusion

An additional way in which the past crisis has been far from gender-neutral is poverty and social exclusion. The elements highlighted above, which see women disproportionately hurt in the labor market and by budget cuts, shifting toward unpaid work suggest what has been largely confirmed in the literature on the gendered impact of crises: women fared worse than men in terms of unemployment and poverty, especially single women both caring for children and in old-age (Karamessini 2014a, Pearson, Elson 2015). An example is how the housing crisis and welfare cuts in Ireland came at the primary expense of vulnerable groups such as poor single moms, which slipped further down the social scale (Wöhl 2017).

A Gendered impact of the Covid-19 pandemic: the early literature

The existing literature has identified three main gendered issues that have been particularly relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent recession, namely housework and childcare burdens and, more broadly, women participation in the workforce, the exacerbation of domestic violence and the lack of gender balance in decision-making processes.

Division of work and employment

The pandemic has impacted women in a twofold manner. On the one hand, the closure of economic activities during lockdown periods has affected sectors with a high percentage of female employment. On the other, social distancing measures together with the closure of schools have increased the burden of homework and childcare for women, who still play the role of the main caregiver of the household. According to a report by the JRC, (Blaskò *et alii* 2020), traditional gender norms that expect women to be caregivers and men to be breadwinners are still persisting in the majority of EU countries, although women's employment has been increasing. During the spring and - at least for some countries - the fall of 2020, millions of school-aged children were left to the full responsibility of parents, who could not count on grandparents' or external support. Aside from childcare duties, the gender divide persists also in terms of hours devoted to housework, which is consistently put on the shoulders of women.

A growing number of studies has analyzed changes in parents' caregiving responsibilities during the outbreak of Covid-19 and the impact on women work hours. Several lines of evidence (see *inter alia* Adams-Prassl *et alii* 2020; Cannito, Scavarda 2020; Collins *et alii* 2020; Cowan 2020; Farre *et alii* 2020; Frodermann *et alii* 2020; Kristal and Yaish 2020; Montenovo *et alii* 2020; Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020) suggest that during the first and second wave of Covid-19 women, and in particular mothers, have been more likely to exit the workforce and have decreased their work hours compared to men.

Collins *et alii* (2020) found that in the United States mothers' work hours decreased four to five times more than fathers', leading to an increase in the gender gap in work hours by 20 to 50 per cent. Similarly, in Germany women are reducing paid work hours and are more worried about childcare work, while men are more concerned about paid work (Czymara *et alii* 2020). Alon *et alii* (2020) showed that the economic recession caused by the pandemic has impinged more severely on sectors with high participation of women in the workforce. Furthermore, the closure of schools and daycare centers has had an impact on working mothers. However, some indirect effects of the recession, such as an incremental adoption of flexible work arrangements, might eventually benefit women.

A survey conducted in Italy during the first wave of the outbreak confirmed that work from home arrangements and housework responsibilities have fallen upon women (Del Boca *et alii* 2020). In the same vein, as reported by Farre *et alii* (2020), in Spain, women were more likely to work from home than men and carried most of the burden from housework and childcare during the spring lockdown. Such studies found that, unlike previous recessions, the current crisis exacerbated gender inequality in paid and unpaid work in the short-term, harming female labor market prospects. According to Adams-Prassl *et alii* (2020), real-time survey results from the UK, US and Germany indicate that, despite a considerable variation among countries concerning the impact of the pandemic on labor markets, women and less-educated workers are in general more affected by the crisis and that smart working provisions have harmed more severely women than men. When it comes to job loss probabilities, while gender matters in the US and UK, in Germany gender does not predict significantly job loss.

Other evidence (Reichelt, Makovi, Sargsyan 2020) from the US, Germany and Singapore reiterates similar messages, namely women are more subject to unemployment, reduction in working hours and transition to smart working and that gender-role attitudes change according to the employment status of female and male partners. In particular, female partners who became unemployed during the crisis show a more traditional attitude, while male partners who became unemployed display a more egalitarian mindset. In addition, Mongey and Weinberg (2020) point out that since women are more likely to be employed in "high work-from-home" and "high physical-proximity" sectors, their working conditions might be less affected by social distancing policies on the short term. Nevertheless, this might result in a more difficult integration into the economy at a later stage. A further interesting contribution (Bertocchi 2020) sheds light on the level of exposure to the disease within segments of the population and finds that working-age women in Italy are more susceptible to SARS-Cov-2 than working-age men, most likely because of the female overrepresentation in healthcare and education jobs, which expose them to a higher risk of contagion. Finally, preliminary research from the UK (Sevilla and Smith 2020), Spain (Farré and Gonzalez 2020) and Italy (Del Boca *et alii* 2020), shows that the pandemic may have partially led to a shift towards a more equal allocation of duties between partners.

Violence against women

One out of three women in the EU experiences either physical or sexual violence in their life (EIGE 2017). Yet, violence against women (VAW) is the least reported form of human right abuse (WHO 2013). The pandemic has forced millions of people to stay at home, contributing to an increase in the risk of domestic abuse. According to the European Parliament, during the first wave of the outbreak, cases of domestic violence have risen by a third in some EU countries. More specifically, in the EU, the number of reports to police authorities or support helplines has increased by a third since the start of the pandemic. Countries have reacted to this emergency in different ways. For instance, Spain

launched a national plan and is strengthening coordination among health, judicial and police authorities. In France, during the spring lockdown, a provision provided women who were experiencing abuses at home with alternative accommodation. Many countries have adopted legislation to make hotlines and shelter essential services (EIGE 2020). However, all in all, the pandemic shed light on a shaky support system for women exposed to domestic abuses.

Leadership

Gender equality is hindered also at the decision-making level, where women are left out from any policy responses that affect them directly. The UN Gender Social Norms Index (UNDP 2020) reports that the majority of men and women around the world consider men better political leaders than women. This misconception is reflected in the scarce presence of women in parliaments globally (on average, only 24 out of 100 members of parliament worldwide are women). Unfortunately, such unbalance is reflected also in the fight against Covid-19. In fact, although there is growing evidence that women are more likely to comply with restraining measures such as social distancing and they tend to perceive the pandemic as a serious problem (see for instance Galasso *et alii* 2020), their leadership skills during the Covid-19 crisis are far from being taken into account seriously.

Several elements suggest that the glass ceiling keeps female experts away from any leading role also in the response to the current recession. First, women have been excluded from decision making bodies established specifically for COVID. For example, the United States Task Force was composed exclusively by men, raising many criticisms from the public opinion. Second, while the majority of healthcare workers are female, only 25% of top managers in healthcare are women, as reported by the WEF (2020) as well as the Global Health 50/50 report (2020). Third, as stressed in a report published by the French Ministry of Culture and Equal Opportunities (2020), women are under-represented also in the journalistic and mediatic discourse around the pandemic, with few experts being interviewed by TV and radio outlets. Needless to say, such imbalance influences the extent to which women's needs are taken into account when designing support measures. Nevertheless, preliminary evidence points out that female leadership has been beneficial. Garikipati and Kambhampati (2020) assess the association between female leadership and countries' response to the spread of the pandemic. They find that, in general, countries led by women perform better in terms of COVID-cases and deaths during the first wave of the pandemic.

Before Covid-19: existing gender gaps

To assess the gendered policy responses to Covid-19 s, it is worth considering how the selected countries used to perform in gender parity prior to the pandemic. One of the widest frameworks to evaluate gender gaps persisting in several aspects of societies and economies is the Global Gender Gap Report developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF 2019). The report, issued for the first time in 2006, provides on an annual basis an evaluation of 153 countries' progress toward the achievement of gender equality, aiming to draw a complete picture of the state of the art on gender issues. The Global Gender Gap Index captures the extent of gendered disparities and tracks countries' performance over time, ranking them from the most gender-balanced to the least one. The index identifies gender gaps in four categories, namely educational attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment. In addition, the report integrates the data used to build the index with a list of contextual data which provides a broader overview of countries' gender gap in several subcategories, highlighting a plethora of factors that contribute to widening or closing existing gaps. *Table 1* below displays a selection of indicators for our sampled countries.

Table 1 - Selection of indicators of countries' gender gap prior to Covid-19

	Spain		Italy		Germany		France			
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male		
Work participation and leadership	Unemployment, % of labour force (15-64)	17.12	14.21	11.94	9.99	2.96	3.9	9.18	9.12	
	Workers employed part-time, % of employed people	39.73	20.34	32.4	8.3	57.47	26.29	48.62	30.39	
	Proportion of unpaid work per day, female/male ratio	19.36	9.01	20.4	8.4	16.4	10.4	15.77	9.49	
	Boards of listed companies,% board members	22	78	34	66	31.9	68.1	43.4	56.6	
Family and care	Length of parental leave, weeks		16	2.1	47	0.4	58	8.7	42	28
Violence against women	Prevalence of gender violence in lifetime, % women		13		19		22		26	

Source: Global Gender Gap Index (WEF 2019)

Spain

According to the latest WEF report, in 2019 Spain has seen the largest improvement compared to previous years, jumping from the 29th position to the 9th, entering the top 10 of the most equal countries worldwide. Such advancement has been mainly due to a substantial gain in the area of political empowerment. In fact, the country has closed its gap in women's representation in institutional settings thanks to wider participation of women in the political sphere, with around 65% of female ministers and an almost equal share of female and male members in the parliament. However, women's leadership seems to be limited to the political sphere, as the proportion of women in managerial positions is still limited. In fact, only one out of three executives in the country are women. Moreover, with regard to economic participation, despite the improvement in female participation in the workforce, gaps still persist on wages (115th position) and income (55th position). When it comes to family and care, women are granted 16 weeks of parental leave, while men only 2.1. Finally, in Spain, 13% of women report having experienced violence at least once in a lifetime.

Germany

In a similar vein, Germany has closed 78.7% of its gender gap thanks to improved female participation in the political sphere, with 40% of female ministers and 30.9% parliamentarians. The index also considers the number of years with a female head of state and in this respect, Germany ranks 8th. The country performs well in both educational attainments, where it has closed 97.2% of its gap and in health and survival, where it has reached gender parity. On the economic level, both wages and income see a 67.1% and a 69.5% gap, with few women in charge of top management roles. Gender parity at work is further hindered by the limited parental leave granted to fathers (only nine weeks). Finally, in Germany, 22% of women experience violence at least once in a lifetime.

Italy

Among the considered countries, Italy is the least gender-balanced state, ranking 76 out of 153 in the WEF report. In particular, in 2019, the country places itself at the 117th place for economic participation and opportunity, and 44th for political empowerment. Looking at the trend from 2006 and 2020, Italy jumped from 77th to 76th in the ranking, worsening especially in the field of women's participation in the economy and female leadership (from 87th in 2006 to 117th in 2019) while improving at the political level (from 72nd to 44th). Female presence in boards of directors has seen - to a limited extent - an improvement thanks to the introduction of gender quotas. In companies not subject to the provision, however, only 18% of board members are women (Bellisario-Cerved Foundation Report 2020). The country performs particularly badly in wage equality, where a 56% of gap persists, and in the proportion of women in top executive roles (27% as opposed to 73% men). According to the national institute of statistics (ISTAT), the gender pay gap is higher in managerial positions, where it is equal to 23%. In addition, while women benefit from 47 weeks of maternity leave, men have less than a week for parental purposes, which widens the gender disparity in family and care. As for VAW, 19% of them report having experienced violence at least once in a lifetime.

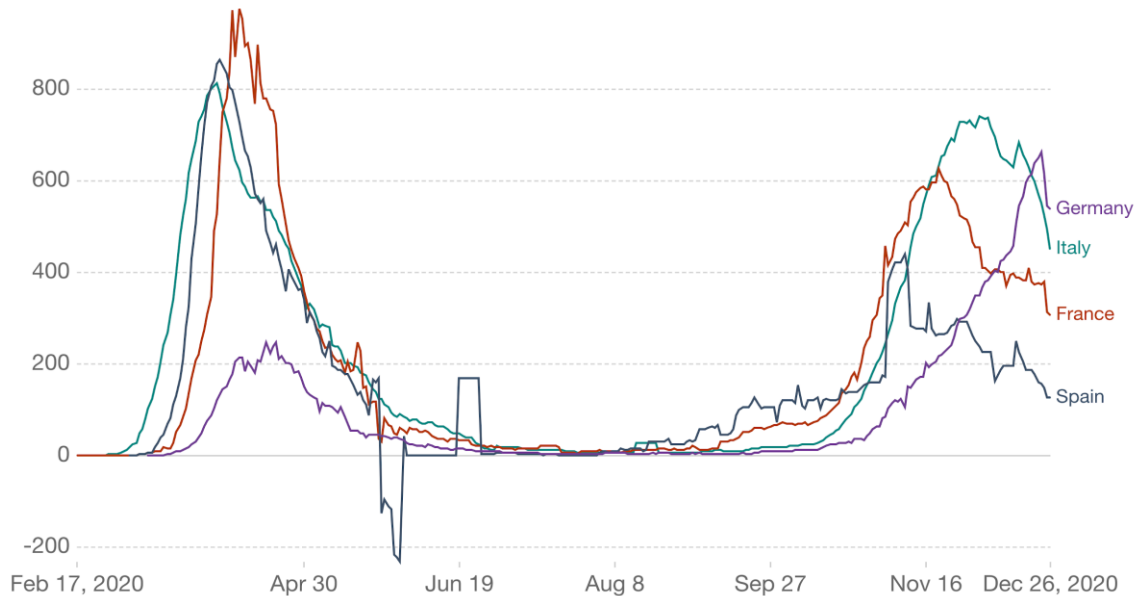
France

France ranks 15th in the worldwide benchmark and has closed its gender gap in the field of education, where both women and men display the same literacy rate and enrollment in all the levels of education. To some extent, gender parity is achieved in politics as well, where half of the ministries of the French government are women, and 65% of the gap in female presence in the parliament is closed (the proportion of women elected in the parliament is around 40%). With regard to economic participation and opportunity, in 2019 the country has closed 69% of its gender gap, but there is still room for improvement. In fact, wage equality is far from being achieved, with the country scoring 3.69 out of 7 and ranking 127th globally. Finally, the presence of women at the decision-making level is still scarce, as only one out of three top managers are women. With regard to family and care, France is the country where parents are granted the highest number of weeks of parental leave, with women having the right to 42 weeks and men to 28.

The diversity in pandemic responses

Daily confirmed COVID-19 deaths, rolling 7-day average

Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death means that the number of confirmed deaths may not be an accurate count of the true number of deaths from COVID-19.



Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data – Last updated 27 December, 06:06 (London time)

Note: The rolling average is the average across seven days – the confirmed deaths on the particular date, and the previous six days. For example, the value for 27th March is the average over the 21st to 27th March.

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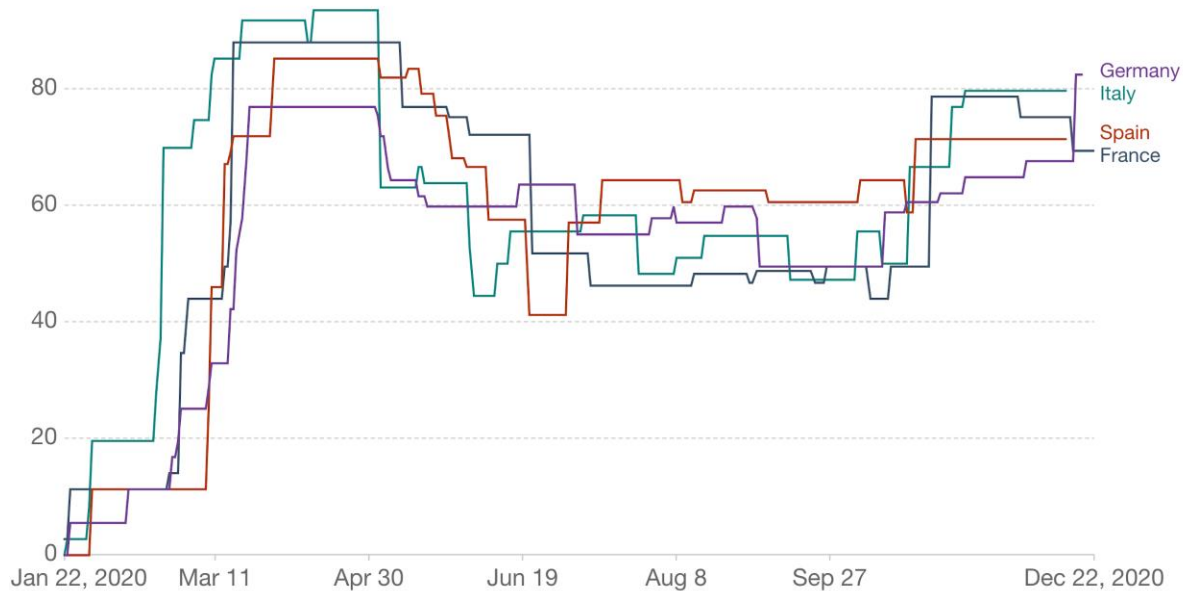
Figure 1: Covid-19 Pandemic waves dynamics across the four Member States¹

Marked differences also emerge in general terms across the four countries in terms of their response to the pandemic. While a definitive comparative picture is yet to emerge in the ongoing evolution of the outbreak, early analysis of the first wave and resulting response highlight the stark gaps across the four countries in terms of the severity of the health crisis together with the imposed restrictions as well as the scale and composition of economic support measures. Cross-country tracking allows for comparison of impact and restrictions across the Member States, shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (Hale *et alii* 2020). Beyond the absolute number of cases shown in Figure 1, the ranking of countries at the beginning of April in terms of cases per million inhabitants see Spain on top with over 2200 cases, followed by Italy with about 1800, nearly doubling the little over 900 of Germany leaving last France with 875 cases (Hale *et alii* 2020). Restrictions to some extent reflect the severity of the outbreaks with Italy dominating the early months of the series alike Spain for a period in which it also came first in several cases. While close alignment of the two trends is not a given, they jointly provide an insight into the worst-hit countries, with the two southern countries shown little mercy especially during the first wave.

¹ Roser *et alii* 2020; raw data from COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University <https://github.com/CSSEGISandData/COVID-19>

COVID-19: Government Response Stringency Index

This is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest). If policies vary at the subnational level, the index is shown as the response level of the strictest sub-region.



Source: Hale, Webster, Petherick, Phillips, and Kira (2020). Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker – Last updated 26 December, 23:01 (London time)

Note: This index simply records the number and strictness of government policies, and should not be interpreted as ‘scoring’ the appropriateness or effectiveness of a country’s response.

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Figure 2 - Covid-19 derived restriction across the four Member States²

Shifting the focus to the economic response to the pandemic substantially changes the ranking across the Member States, with the worst-hit countries putting together in both absolute and relative terms more modest reliefs for businesses and people (Ceron, Palermo, Salpietro 2020). Early comparison of economic packages stopping short of the beginning of the second wave at the end of summer quantifies the aid packages as spanning from a remarkable 8.3 per cent of GDP in Germany, nearly halved to 4.4 in France, leaving Spain and Italy far behind with 3.7 and 3.4 per cent respectively (Anderson *et alii* 2020). As a result, the worst-hit countries were also those with more tepid measures and less ambitious packages, especially in relation to cash and fiscal measures in comparison to liquidity support and guarantees (Ceron, Palermo, 2020). A further distinction - of potential relevance to a gendered perspective - marks the balance in labor and social policies between in-job measures (e.g. firing freezes and hours reductions) rather than unemployment, with Italy and Spain at the two extremes respectively and France and Germany taking a middle ground (Ceron, Palermo, Salpietro 2020). An in-depth analysis of the pandemic responses can give a non-systematic hint in how funds alone may not give a full picture of measure (and their gendered impact). For example, in France, in addition to an additional Covid-19 paternal leave with a 90 per cent replacement rate, a further measure was the abolishment of waiting periods and in Italy, the right to telework was introduced to aid in reconciling work and care responsibilities in a time of school closures (Ceron, Palermo 2020).

² Roser *et alii* 2020; raw data from Hale *et alii* 2020

In addition to the differences in the policy mix, the emerged patterns signal the concrete risk of long-lasting divergence across the four Eurozone countries, with the legacy of Covid-19 resulting particularly detrimental to the periphery both in terms of their economic performance and further increased debt burden (Ceron, Palermo 2020). In this context, fragile countries with precarious economies will find it especially hard to bounce back from the pandemic tragedy, leaving behind painful social scars within their societies and creating a further challenge for progress towards gender parity, as evidenced in previous large-scale crises.

The gendered pandemic response

Efforts to account for the gendered dimension of the pandemic response have gone beyond country-level case studies, with systematic tracking of public policies addressing gender parity worldwide enacted by the UNDP (2020) *COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*. The full sample covers 2517 policy measures, of which 496 concentrated in Europe. Within the continent, a simple numerical comparison favors the South (151 measures) and West (136), followed by the North (117), with Easter Europe lagging behind stopping at just 92 measures. The four countries of the case studies, in the European context allowing for coverage of both the core and periphery as well as different family and welfare systems, account for 110 policies, fairly evenly balanced across France (31), Spain (30), Italy (26) and Germany (26). Of them, 44 have a gender-sensitive dimension, which in most cases pertains to VAW (30), followed by unpaid care support (12) and economic stability solely directed at women (2). Among such measures the podium goes to Spain (16) followed by France (12) with Germany and Italy both stopping at 8.

Nevertheless, given that gender unsegregated measures do contribute to the welfare of women throughout the pandemic and recovery, it is of value to present an overview of policy choices across the four Member States, before tuning in to the details of gender-specific policies. In particular, the gender relevance of measures relating to care, schools and children are of high relevance even when not directly aimed at supporting women unpaid care.

Table 2 - Breakdown of policies relating to social protection

social protection	care services	2		
	social assistance	22	cash transfers	13
			cash for care	3
			in kind support	3
			school feedings	2
			utilities	1
	social insurance	10	parental leave	2
			paid sick leave	3
			social sec subsidies	2
			unemployment benefit	3

Outside of a gendered lens, social protection measures are the most common (34), followed by VAW (29), with labor policies coming last (8). Table 2 shows the breakdown of social protection policies across their type and subtypes. The most represented group is that of social assistance reaching 22 policies out of the 34. Spain has the most policies within this group (8) followed by Italy (6), France (5) and Germany (3). Of particular relevance for the perspective of the analysis, within this group is

cash for care measures enacted in all countries except France. A further area of interest in the context of family policies is that of school feedings, continued or substituted by transfers in France and Spain. The second most widely represented (macro)category is that of social insurance amounting to 10 measures evenly distributed among France, Germany and Italy (2) with the sole exception of overrepresented Spain (4). Within this context, Covid-related paid parental leave was introduced in Italy and Spain. The sparsest category is that of care services, which include two measures: childcare in France for essential workers old-age and disable care services in Spain.

Table 3 - Breakdown of policies relating to violence against women

Violence vs women	Strengthening of services	18	Hotlines and reporting	9
			Police & justice response	5
			Cont psychological support	3
			Cont functioning\expansion shelters	1
	Awareness campaigns	5		
	Integr. VAWG COVID-19	3		
	Collection\use of data	1		

Within the realm of policies pertaining to VAW, the geographical ranking sees the shared first place of France and Spain (10), followed by Germany (6) and Italy (4). In this domain, the dominant category is that of strengthening of services (18) and within the latter measures relating to hotlines and reporting (9), the sole category with a comprehensive cross-country representation, It is followed by policy and justice response (5), where only Germany fails to enact any measure. The least common measures are a continuance of psychological support - with three measures across France and Spain - and the continued functioning and expansion of shelter, enacted solely by France. The second most common macro-type of measure to prevent VAW is awareness campaigns (5), enacted by Germany and Spain. To follow is an overarching measure which is adopted in three out of the four countries with the sole exception of Germany: the integration of VAW within the context of Covid-19 response plans. Finally, data collection measures are introduced by France to monitor, together with women's right networks the situation regarding VAW.

Table 4- Breakdown of policies relating to the labor market

Labour market	Wage subsidies\support (self-employed)	3
	Reduced work time & telework	3
	Activel LM policies	1
	Labor regulation adjustment	1

Finally, only 8 measures fall within the labor market category, dominated by Italy that accounts for half (4), followed by Spain (2) leaving France and Germany at the bottom with one measure each. Within them, wage subsidies (3) are the most comprehensive covering the full sample with the exclusion of Spain. Reduction of working time and telework follows (3), concentrated in Italy and Spain. One sole measure relates to labor regulation adjustment in Italy, enforcing a firing ban until March 2020.

Disregarded in this closer overview of the types and sub-types are the 38 measures pertaining to economic, financial and fiscal support to businesses and entrepreneurs, excluded from further consideration as they never feature a gendered dimension within the database. A full overview of the Covid-19 response policies enacted across the four Member States is presented in Figure 3- Word cloud of the policy measure categories, showing the relative frequency of each policy measure type (including those in the economic and businesses support dimension).

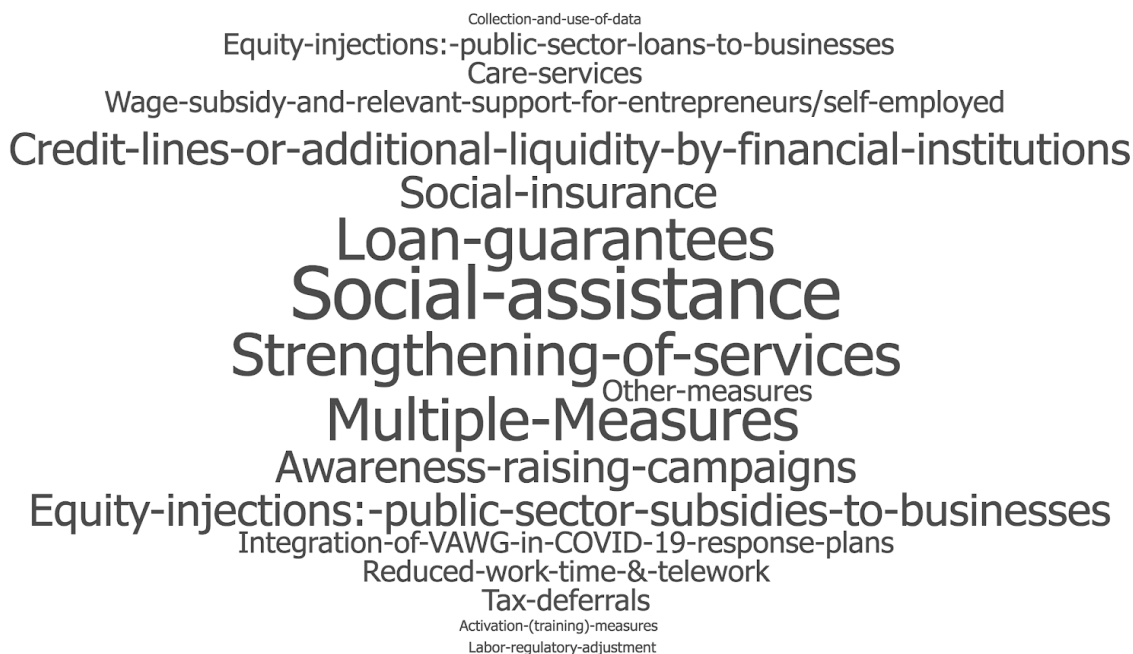


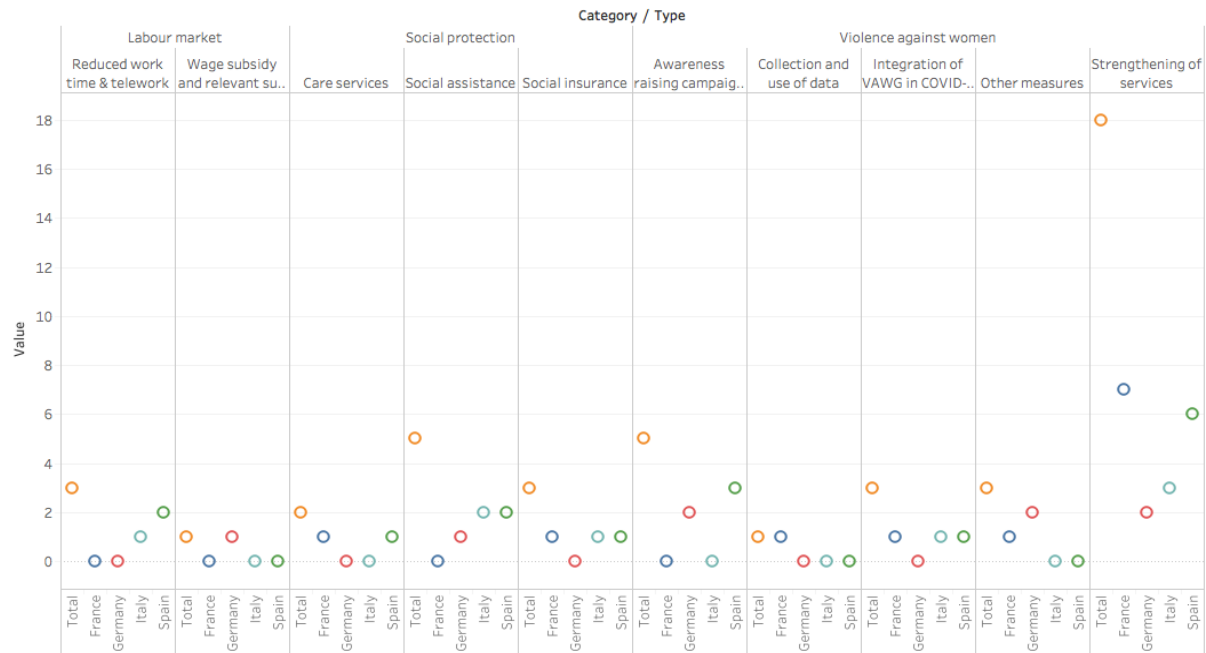
Figure 3- Word cloud of the policy measure categories

Assuming a gendered perspective, VAW becomes the most common category, with its 29 measure, followed by social protection with 10 measures (less than 30% of the total) and 4 relating to the labor market (falling short of half of the overall measures). Without any additional insight offered by VAW which by definition fully reflects policies with a gendered dimension, the sparse policies that qualify across the other two categories deserve a closer look. Within social protection, social assistance comes once again first with 5 measures dominated by Italy and Spain with two each, leaving one for Germany and none for France. The 5 include the geographically diverse cash for care (3) which sees France as the only absence and cash transfers (2) concentrated in the two southern countries. Social insurance follows with three measures covering the sample except for Germany, with paid sick leave in France and parental leave in Italy and Spain. Finally, the two care measures devoted to children of front-liners in France and elderly and disabled in Spain remain within the gendered sample, an indicator per se of how women have the worst deal when it comes to making up for disappearing or closing care institutions. The very sparse labor measure remaining when focusing on gender-sensitive measures see the absence of France, with two reduction of work time and teleworking measures in Spain, one in Italy and wage subsidies for self-employed in Germany, grating more generous income replacement rates to those with dependents. The dataset sub-sample carrying a gendered dimension is represented in Figure 4, depicting the relative frequency of each measure types, identified with a prefix according to their category across violence against women (VAW), social protection (SP) and labor market (LM), showing the dominance of the first dimension.

LM:Wage-subsidy-and-relevant-support-for-entrepreneurs/self-employed
 SP:Care-services
 VAW:Other-measures
 SP:Social-assistance
VAW:Strengthening-of-services
 VAW:Awareness-raising-campaigns
 VAW:Integration-of-VAWG-in-COVID-19-response-plans
 LM:Reduced-work-time-&-telework
 SP:Social-insurance
 VAW:Collection-and-use-of-data

Figure 4 – Word cloud of the gender-sensitive policy measure categories

A cross-country comparison of gendered measures and their prevalence further evidences at first glance how across the sample of 44 gendered measures for the prevention of VAW strongly dominates, and within it the strengthening of support services to victims, coming little short of half of the measures on its own. The implication is an indication of the dominance of the issue within the policy priorities in catering for gender parity during the pandemic, while cross-country coverage of the fairly diverse set of gendered measures introduced in the social protection and labor market categories often fails to achieve such a mainstreamed presence across the four countries considered. Figure 5 presents a comprehensive overview of the number of policies in total and across the four countries within each policy measure type, linked to their category of reference. The figure confirms how no type with the exception of the strengthening of VAW services obtains full country coverage within the sample. From such perspective, it is of view to conclude the dive into the gendered pandemic response with brief country profiles of the four Member States.



Total, France, Germany, Italy and Spain for each Type broken down by Category. Color shows details about Total, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

Figure 5 - Gendered policies across categories and the Member States

France

Of the 31 tracked measures, 12 have a gendered component, highly concentrated in the VAW category. Only two fall outside of the VAW group, both belonging to social protection. One covers social insurance with paid sick leave extended to parents of children in isolation, while the other addresses care services for essential workers. In the VAW group, seven measures relate to the strengthening of services within the police and justice (priority to VAW case and granting continuity to the issuance of protection orders), hotline and reporting (with an adaptation of the functioning of the existing hotline to the context of confinement and innovative ways of reporting such as through text messages and pharmacies) and continuing psychological support (e.g. through pop-up counselling in supermarkets). Further measures include the first hotline for perpetrators, capillary data collection and monitoring through women group and mainstreaming of VAW concerns in the Covid-19 response plans with one million Euros dedicated to guaranteeing continued support services and expansion of shelters capacity. Big absences in the French policy mix are any labor market policies (e.g. flexible and telework), parental leave and generalized care support beyond front liners also through cash support. With regard to parental leave, however, it is worth stressing that the current number of weeks granted to fathers (28) is significantly higher than the other countries.

Germany

Out of the 23 tracked policies in Germany, 9 are gender-sensitive, all but two related to violence prevention. Beyond such category one measure relates to social protection and the other to labor market policies. The first provides social assistance through a cash for care program enacted in May extending support for unpaid care compensation in the absence of services for up to 20 days until

September. Within the labor market measures, wage subsidies account for dependents increasing the replacement rate for short-time work from 60 to 67% for parents. Within the violence prevention arena, two strengthening of services measures cover hotline and reporting services, with the guaranteed continuation of the national helpline and a new pharmacy based reporting system. In addition, two awareness campaign measures are enacted with Coronavirus times specific information on access to support services through websites and campaigns in supermarkets. Paid sick leave and parental leave are the most striking absences in the economic arena, while in the gender-based violence prevention domain Germany is the only country not enacting any police and justice support measures while also being the sole exception to the inclusion of VAW in the Covid-19 response plans.

Italy

Of the 26 measures tracked in Italy, 8 are gender-sensitive. Unlike for other countries, only half are dedicated to violence prevention, while the remaining four are concentrated on social protection, leaving one labor market measure on reduced time and telework granting one of the parents of children younger than 14 the right to work from home in the absence of access to social assistance (e.g. cash for care) measures. Social protection measures are almost exclusively devoted to social assistance with the exception of parental leave granting 30 days of Covid-leave and the treatment of quarantine as sick leave. Social assistance measures include cash for care for parents not taking parental leave initially amounting to 600-euro vouchers (1000 for healthcare workers) further expanded to 1200 (2000 for healthcare workers). In addition, cash transfers programs which suspended conditionalities related to activation during the pandemic were called to pay special attention to vulnerable groups and in particular women and minors. Gender-based violence prevention measures - beyond the integration of VAW in the Covid-19 response plan - relate to the strengthening of hotlines and reporting services to account for the context of lockdown (such as through pharmacy-based reporting) and police and justice responses including a police reporting app aimed to minimize the risk of alerting partners and rulings that support victims of abuse forcing perpetrators to leave the family home during confinement. While no sticking absence emerges across the categories - with general coverage of measures present in the majority of the sample, Italy remains the country with the fewest gender-sensitive measures in the absolute sense and as a proportion of tracked measures. An additional peculiarity is the higher proportion of economic measures among the gendered ones compared to the dominance of violence prevention in the other Member States.

Spain

Of the 30 tracked measures, above half (16) are gender-sensitive, the highest proportion across the four countries. Well over the majority of measures (10) are devoted to violence prevention, with the remaining six split across social protection (4) and labor market policies (2). The latter both act in the area of reduced time and telework allowing to reduce working hours to reconcile care responsibility (children, elderly, dependents) up to temporary 100 per cent hours reductions. Among social protection measures, one is dedicated to care (elderly long-term care) while the remaining three to parental leave, cash for care when hit by school and care centers closures and cash transfer with a 100 euro increase for each minor in the Guaranteed Minimum Income scheme introduced to mitigate the Covid-19 shock. Violence prevention measures are split across strengthening of services (4), awareness-raising campaigns (3) and integration of VAW in Covid-19 response plans. Services are strengthened through hotlines and reporting (3) guaranteeing continuity of services also online in addition to via phone, through a police app SOS button and at pharmacies in addition to continued

psychological support (2) through WhatsApp and instant messaging, as well as providing continuity to the legal support hotline. In addition, awareness campaign measures (2) reiterated support and provided a Covid-19 specific plan. Finally, Spain integrated VAW concerns in their pandemic response including a specific contingency plan for gender-based violence during the outbreak. The emerging picture pins Spain not only as the country with the most numerous gender-based measure and the highest proportion but also with a balanced composition across the various areas of intervention, hardly leaving the country out of the most commonly enacted measures.

A visual recap of the country overviews is provided in Figure 6 which provides a country-level heatmap of measures across the main categories and their relative prevalence or absence.

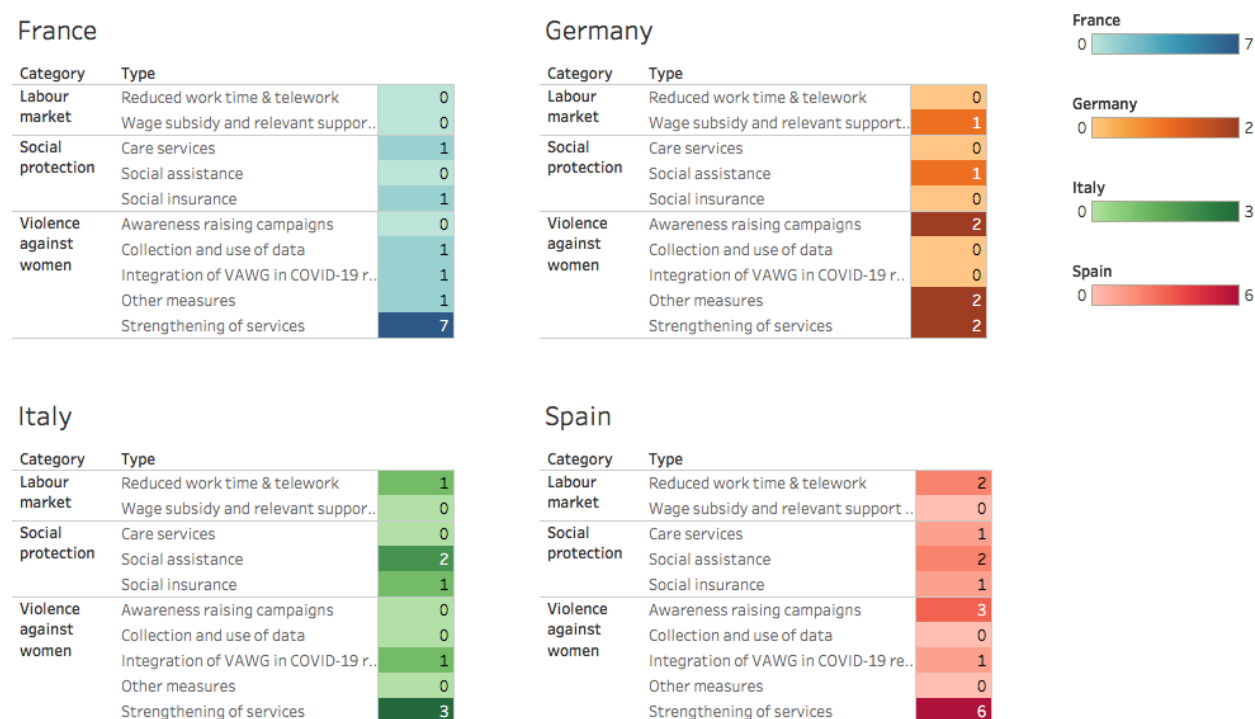
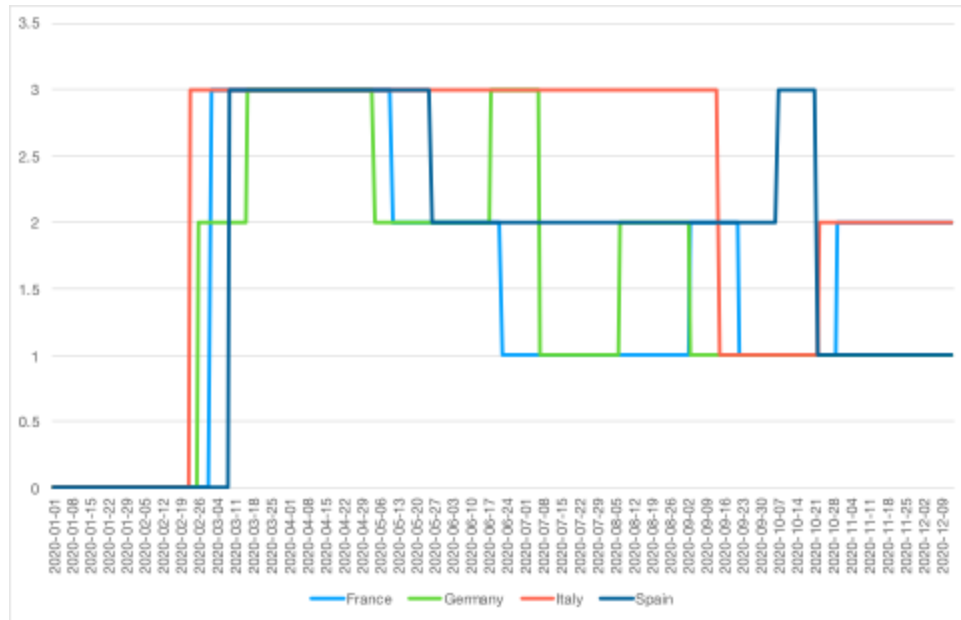


Figure 6 - An overview of gendered policies at the Member State level

The gendered impact of the pandemic restrictions

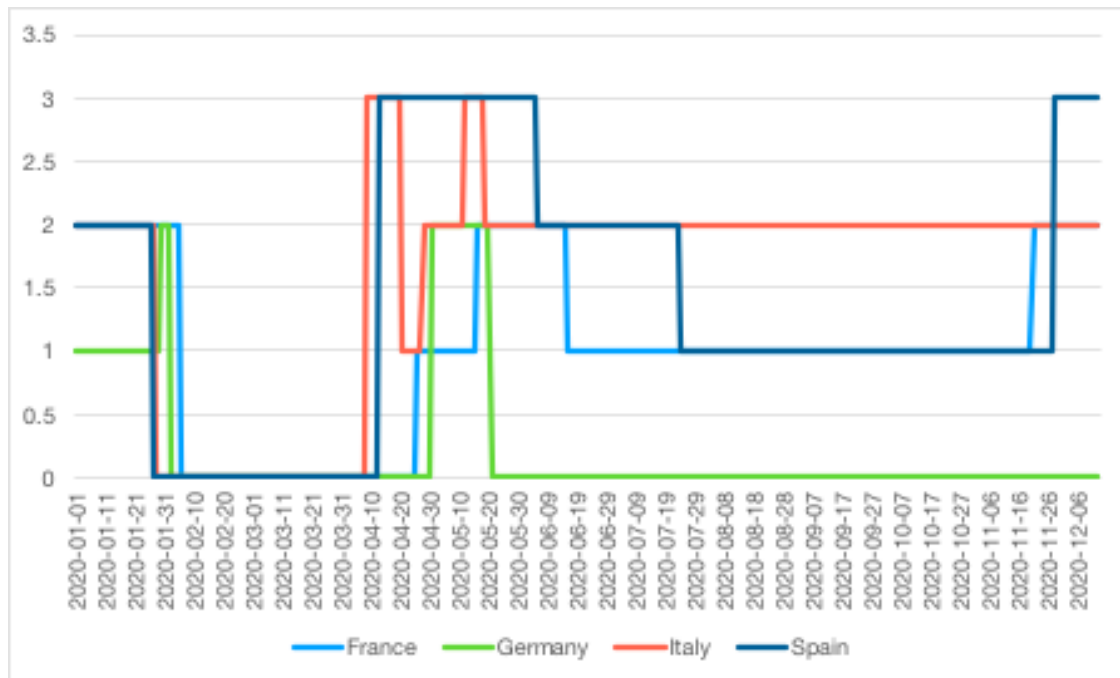
If in the ongoing evolution of the outbreak it may be hasty to derive clear conclusions on the gendered impact on the pandemic, emerged evidence within the literature has associated restrictions and lockdowns with especially negative consequences for women, both in relation to their employment status and work-life balance and in terms of the risk for gender-balance. In this context, it may be of value to compare the Member States' performances especially in the area of VAW and care services with the severity and longevity of closures and stay-at-home measures. The figure below, based on the data from the Oxford Government Response Tracker (Hale *et alii* 2020) shows the dynamics across the four Member States of school closures across the two pandemic waves. While at the heart of the first wave closures were widespread, their duration differs sharply across the Member States, with Italy displaying the longest span into September, with full reopening spanning only for little over a month at the beginning of the school year. France and Germany fall at the opposite hand of the spectrum.



Own representation, raw data Oxford Government Response Tracker (Hale *et alii* 2020)

Figure 7 - School closures across the Member States

With some differences, the ranking is to some extent unaltered when shifting the focus to stay at home restriction, with the leadership of Italy and Spain, while France and Germany sit at the opposite hand of the spectrum. How do they match the sensitivity of countries to enact measures to prevent gender-based violence? The only area in which one of the two most impacted countries - Italy - is absent is that of the provision of psychological support. However, while Spain tops the ranking for a number of measures, Italy sits at the bottom, as confirmed by previous research on government responsiveness in tackling VAW (Donato 2020). Shifting the focus for the conciliation of care and work responsibility, which early finding on the pandemic show especially a burden for women, even more so in countries with a more traditional and unequal family structure, labor market provisions do see the two countries as the most represented, especially in relation to the encouragement of telework for parents. In addition, they are also the two countries enacting special parental leave provisions, and among those - together with Germany - with cash for care measures, reflecting the greater need to mitigate the impact of school closures. Nevertheless, the expanded measures still run the risk of heightening the gender divide if care responsibilities do - as often emerge - fall primarily or predominantly on women's shoulders.



Own representation, raw data Oxford Government Response Tracker (Hale et alii. 2020)

Figure 8 - Stay at home measures across the Member States

The place for women leadership in the crisis

Across the globe, women are involved in tackling the challenges of the pandemic both at the decision-making level and on the battlefield. As stressed above, if on the one hand preliminary literature on female leadership during the pandemic points out that countries led by women have performed relatively better than others in terms of deaths and number of cases (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2020), other studies suggest (see the section on Covid-19 early literature) that the bulk of the backlashes from the crisis is falling on female workers, exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities.

Women are heads of state in 21 countries worldwide. Countries such as Denmark, Finland, New Zealand and Germany, all led by female leaders, have been praised for reacting quickly and effectively to flatten the curve but also for their communication strategies, marked by empathy and based on facts. We all recall Angela Merkel’s press conferences filled with scientific facts and compassion. Even local leaders such as the Mayor of Barcelona have been recognized for their key guiding role during the critical months of lockdown. The leadership style of women facing the pandemic has been described as collective rather than individualistic, collaborative and not competitive (Zednik 2020).

Streams of literature on the Great Recession and the role played by men make us ask whether a more diverse composition of corporate boards would have led to more cautious decisions (True 2016). While the previous recessions saw a more marginal involvement of women in the decision-making process, leading many to deem them as “men’s crisis”, this time women have a more prominent role to play. In fact, at least in Europe, the narrative of austerity brought forward by political leaders a decade ago has been replaced by a sentiment of solidarity and cooperation, encouraged by female

leaders such as Ursula Von Der Leyen, President of the European Commission, Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank, and Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany.

In light of the heated public debate over women's role in the Covid-19 emergency, and thanks to a growing number of bottom-up initiatives that spread in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, countries are launching several projects to encourage female participation to decision-making processes. To push the political agenda toward a more gender-inclusive allocation of resources, in Italy a group of activists from the civil society started the grassroots initiative *il Giusto Mezzogiorno*. It is inspired by the European initiative #halfofit promoted by Alexandra Geese, Member of the European Parliament, created to ask the European Commission and the European Council to respect Article 23 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states that "equality between women and men must be guaranteed in all sectors, including employment, work and pay". The movement asks that half of the Next Generation EU funds should be allocated to gender policies and systemic interventions capable of activating a multiplier effect. More specifically, social infrastructures for early childhood care and family care should be strengthened, and fiscal incentives to support the entry of women into the labor market should be introduced.

Furthermore, among the many initiatives put in place by countries to tackle gender issues it is worth mentioning the Task Force "Women for the Renaissance" launched in Italy by the Department for Equal Opportunities. The Minister for Gender Parity, Elena Bonetti, set up a female team with the goal of coming up with concrete proposals to enhance gender equality in the country. Members of the task force were all distinguished women from several fields, including STEM, journalism, culture, academia and business. The proposals presented by the group of experts aim "to increase the percentage of women in every working sector, to overcome barriers that prevent the advancement of career paths, in particular in the fastest-growing fields (STEM, computing, cloud computing, data and artificial intelligence), to address gender stereotypes that prevent women to participate in leadership positions, to enable new energies and opportunities for all" (Italian Task Force Report 2020). One pillar of the report is devoted to female leadership and suggests establishing an Observatory on Gender Equality for monitoring purposes and introducing gender impact assessments. Furthermore, the report advocates the use of quotas in the appointment of scientific committees as well as in local and national governing bodies. Female leadership should be also promoted in schools by means of actions that would eliminate gender stereotypes at all levels of education.

Finally, as mentioned above, a prominent role is played by the media, where the expertise of women is often disregarded. In France, a report by the Ministries of Culture and Gender Parity mapped the level of under-representation of women in the media during the pandemic. In general, female experts were less present on audiovisual media during the first lockdown. During March, April and March, the study reports, the speaking time of men in 35 TV channels and 22 radio stations were between 57% and 77%.

Conclusions

Past crises teach us the hit of the recessionary shock is far from gender-neutral. Rather women see their perspectives for gender equality erode under the pressure of the recession and their often more unstable and precarious conditions. On such premises, the segregation, precarization and displacement dynamics emerged during the Great Recession are of high relevance also for the current crisis, as the Covid-19 outbreak is bound to lead to the extensive restructuring of our economies and societies. Part-time, seasonal and otherwise atypical work positions in which women are often

overrepresented account for jobs especially jeopardized by the restrictions imposed to control the outbreak, including in sectors such as tourism and hospitality that are to remain highly impacted by the pandemic throughout the recovery until sufficient vaccinal coverage allows for the full lifting of restrictions and precautions.

In this context, the pandemic has impacted women in a twofold manner. On the one hand, the closure of economic activities during lockdown periods has affected sectors with a high percentage of female employment. On the other, social distancing and the closure of schools has increased the burden of homework and childcare for women. Restrictions carry and the additional threat to women as the pandemic has forced millions of people to stay at home, contributing to an increase in the risk of domestic abuse. The number of reports to police authorities or support helplines has increased by a third since the start of the social distancing and self-quarantine measures.

The intensity of the outbreak and consequent severity of restrictive measures is widely heterogeneous across the four Member States considered. Previous research pinpointed governments' pandemic responses likewise vary, however not always reflecting the strength of the outbreak but rather highly dependent on the economic and social context preceding the onset of the health crisis. Similarly, the context in terms of gender parity is also divergent. Spain, Germany, France and Italy perform differently in gendered issues such as economic opportunity, leadership, health, education and political empowerment. If all of them have almost closed their gap in the areas of health and education, there is room for improvement for female participation to the workforce as well as political empowerment. To make matters worse, the storm hit the shores first and foremost in the two southern Member States, which – especially in the case of Italy – align the most negative context both in terms of its economic track-record and fiscal space and in relation to the progression toward gender equality.

Within such a scenario, the extent to which crisis management and policy-making have accounted for the gendered impact of the pandemic and introduced measures of mitigation is also far from homogeneous. While the multifaceted dimension of policy across the work, social and safety sphere do not easily lead to a synthetic univocal assessment, the exploration of policy choices makes it evident that one of the countries racking up all conditions (pre-crisis and in-crisis) to champion the worst impact on women has been the most tepid in enacting gender-sensitive countermeasures. The country also obtains another negative accomplishment: especially early on in the pandemic the exclusion of women in most if not all of the technical advisory boards supporting crisis management. While the public outrage partially corrected the course, the absence is highly indicative of how women may face the worst of the crisis while having little place in the recovery both in terms of policies catering their needs, together with voice and power to participate. At the same time, early evidence suggests female leadership in fighting the spread of the virus has been pivotal in several cases. Yet, the glass ceiling persists, and women play a marginal role in the decision-making processes.

If “women leaders aren't the cause of better government” but rather “they are a symptom of it” (Lewis 2020) the exploration of gendered policies in the recovery suggests Covid-19 may not be the only disease our societies are to face in the reconstruction. Rather, with non-trivial differences even within the EU and the Eurozone, the place for women in the crisis-management and recovery remains fairly limited. While at this early stage – in the continuous evolution of the outbreak and the effort to manage and overcome the crisis – a clear and definite picture is problematic, to say the least, the analysis contributes a panoramic of the multitude of factors at play in shaping the gendered impact and response to the pandemic through the UNDP Covid gender tracker dataset and a rich overview of the broader context. The evidence suggests that in the absence of a strong prioritization of gender

parity and likewise ambitious mitigation strategy the turbulent road ahead may be even more tumultuous for women with a concrete risk of a heavy Covid-19 legacy turning back even on the patchy progress of the latest years (Di Nicola, Ruspini 2020). In this context, close monitoring and further research is warranted on the policy effort to contain and reverse such trend, also given the investments Member States are planning in the context of Next Generation EU, which on paper are bound to strive to contribute to bettering gender parity and should be evaluated in the extent to which the objective is successfully mainstreamed in the National Recovery and Resilience plans.

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