

Chapter 4

The Covid-19 crisis and gender equality: risks and opportunities

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has not just interrupted but disrupted the normal functioning of our economies and societies. Disruption provides an opportunity for progressive change but also engenders the risk of significant reversals in social progress. In this context, this chapter aims to assess the gendered impact of the first stage of the public health crisis, that is, the period from the beginning of significant Covid-19 outbreaks in Europe in March 2020 to the loosening of lockdowns in May and June 2020, with precise timing dependent on the country. The focus is on the initial policy responses and what they tell us about both the potential for positive change and the risks of reversals in progress towards gender equality.

All crises have gendered impacts, and Covid-19 is no exception. Differences in women's and men's positions in the employment and social protection system as well as in the division of unpaid household work and care result in gendered socio-economic impacts. Nevertheless, the extent to which the burden of crises falls on men and women depends both on their pre-crisis roles and how policies to address the crisis mitigate or exacerbate these effects. This crisis differs from others in that it has a health cause, not an economic one, even if the dominant neoliberal economic model and austerity policies that have squeezed expenditure on public services and social protection may have contributed to its impacts (Saad-Filho 2020). This health issue is also gendered, with men much more vulnerable to hospitalisation and death from Covid-19, although this goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Another key difference is the impact – at least in the short term – on the household. With the closing of schools and childcare facilities, the confining of people to their immediate households and the widespread adoption of teleworking, suddenly the home arena has moved centre stage. While in most crises the spotlight tends to be on the economy and paid employment, in this crisis the unpaid care work done in the home has gained unprecedented visibility, particularly as it is being done alongside wage work and other commitments. As a result of the pandemic, the contributions of professionals to care and education have also become more visible by their absence. The dark side to this centrality of the home is the increased risk that women face from domestic violence (ILO 2020a).

This new focus on the home also comes alongside major impacts on employment, social protection and public services that are proving different from those observed in previous recessions and austerity crises (Karamessini and Rubery 2013). For example, jobs mainly done by women – such as those in health and care services, routinely considered low-skilled and unproductive – are now being recognised for their key value

for society. At the same time, many men have had to increase their engagement in home life, even if women retain the main responsibility for care. In addition, as the analysis below shows, there have been explicit efforts in some countries (see Table 2) to support jobs and employment arrangements that have traditionally been excluded from social protection and where vulnerable women may be located, whether domestic workers or those self-employed in freelance or gig economy jobs.

Despite these changes, many of the policy responses – however apparently innovative and comprehensive – may still retain their inherent gender biases, as we explore below. Moreover, as in all crises but further intensified under Covid-19, women often play a key role in keeping the household and family going, adjusting to reduced income and managing the increased need for food and care support. Major concerns are emerging that this concentration on home life and the extra care burdens that have emerged may reverse progress in gender equality, particularly if women also prove to be more vulnerable to job loss in the medium term.

At the time of writing (August 2020), it is too early to predict the medium- to long-term gender equality impacts. Instead, the main focus here is twofold: to identify the key short-term impacts on women’s position in paid and unpaid work and to identify how far the policies to address the crisis have mitigated or exacerbated gender inequalities in wage work, social protection and unpaid care work. These concerns are of direct relevance for the European Commission’s new Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 that seeks to promote higher female employment, equal pay, greater economic independence for women, and gender-equal parenting and care. A key question here is whether the policies enacted reveal the continuation or the erosion of long-held gendered values, including the low valuation attached to women’s work, women’s income needs and women’s time. This should indicate both the progress made in gender equality attitudes and actions across the EU and the progress still required to realise equality goals. The task is also to identify any risks that the Covid-19 pandemic may cause reversals in progress towards gender equality. The inequalities associated with Covid-19 are by no means restricted to gender and are also strong by class, ethnicity and migration status.¹ These intersectional patterns cannot at this stage be investigated due to data limitations but will be highlighted where possible.

The analysis in this chapter draws firstly on a rich set of data that has emerged rapidly since the beginning of the crisis, mainly but not solely in Covid-19 response databases made available by the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2020b), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2020a) and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound 2020a). We complemented these data sources with requests to a network of country-experts to answer specific queries about the policies reported in the international databases and fill any gaps.² To unravel the different gendered impacts, we review changes across three domains: the labour market and the position of women as key workers in health

1. See the evidence of the impact of Covid-19 on racialised communities gathered by the European Network Against Racism (ENAR). <https://bit.ly/34FtUSA>

2. See acknowledgements at end of chapter.

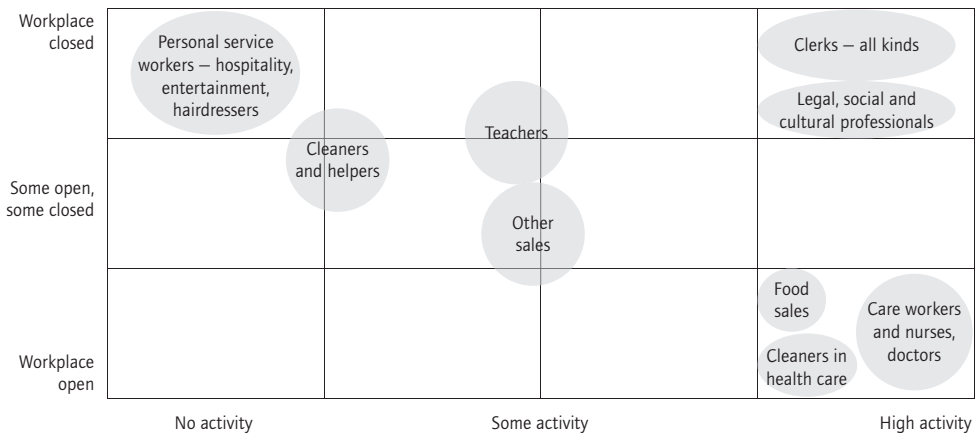
and other essential services³ (Section 1); social protection policies (Section 2); and the work-care interface and social support for parents (Section 3). We conclude by arguing for the development of a stronger and more ambitious programme for gender equality at EU and Member State level through the comprehensive gender mainstreaming of the Covid-19 recovery policies and the development of a new agenda for sharing both wage work and unpaid care work.

1. The labour market, gender and the valuation of key workers

1.1 The labour market

Three factors have shaped the Covid-19 labour market during lockdown and the early stages of reopening (the timeframe considered here): whether the physical workplace is closed or open, whether the level of demand for services is zero, reduced, unchanged or above pre-Covid-19 levels and whether work can be done from home. Figure 1 plots the characteristics of the main occupations with a majority female workforce (EIGE 2017).

Figure 1 Working patterns in the most common female-dominated occupations in the EU during the Covid-19 lockdown



Source: Author's own elaboration (size of circles not based on detailed statistical data) based on EIGE (2017) for EU's most common female-dominated occupations and on Fana *et al.* (2020) on closure and activity levels by sector.

Figure 1 shows that the most common feminised occupations are largely concentrated in three poles: a) closed workplaces (personal services, non-essential retail, many cleaners and helpers) and where activity could not be performed at home and had to be reduced or stopped due to the health risks; b) closed workplaces with usual levels of activity but carried out from home (administrative and professional occupations); and

3. We refer to key workers as those employed in activities key to sustaining life and security, including health and social care activities, agriculture, production and distribution of food and other essential goods, utilities, defence and public administration activities (as in Eurofound 2020b: 17).

c) open workplaces with high activity (mainly health care, social care, related cleaners and helpers, and food retail). Only a few occupations are located in the middle, with some workplaces open and others shut and with reduced activity – examples here are teachers (some of whom provided care for key workers' children) and workers in non-food shops that were allowed to open but operated under capacity due to physical distancing and reduced demand. A similar polarised pattern could be drawn for men. Male-dominated sectors that remained open and in high demand included logistics, police, agriculture, engineers associated with utilities, and telecommunications and information technology. In some countries, those closed included manufacturing and construction but, depending on the rules and the specific sectoral conditions, some of these may have remained open but only partially active due to physical distancing or low demand. Most administrative, professional and managerial jobs could, however, be done from home.

The analysis of activity patterns in Figure 1 fits closely with that of Fana *et al.* (2020) that categorises sectors as 'essential and fully active', 'active but teleworkable', 'mainly essential and partly active', 'mainly non-essential and partly active', and 'fully closed'. Women are overrepresented relative to their share of the workforce in all categories except for non-essential, where their representation is only 24% compared to 46% in the overall labour market. Fana *et al.* argue that while men may have been strongly affected by their concentration in non-essential manufacturing and construction in the very strict lockdown period, women who account for 56% of the closed sectors' workforce may face more long-term problems as these sectors such as accommodation and food services (from here onwards referred to as 'hospitality' sector) are likely to remain only partially active for longer.

These variations in the impact of lockdown on both male- and female-dominated sectors and occupations also have implications for the impact of school closures: while those laid off or unemployed could in principle look after children, those who moved work to home may have needed to combine work with care, while those in front-line jobs would need either another parent to be at home or continued external care to be able to work. Though it is too early to determine the gender impact on working patterns across the EU, surveys in France, the UK and US indicate that women in these countries are more likely to have lost their jobs in the immediate phase of the crisis, particularly lower educated women (see Adams-Prassl *et al.* 2020a, b for UK and US; Lambert *et al.* 2020 for France). The surveys by Adams-Prassl *et al.* (2020a, b) reveal that while UK and US women were less likely to say they could do part of their work tasks from home even after controlling for occupation and education, in Germany gender was not significant with respect to either job loss or ability to work from home.

The widespread use of job retention and short-time work schemes makes it even more difficult to determine the longer-term impact on prospects for women's employment. There are, however, several good reasons to be pessimistic. In the short term, women's overrepresentation in non-standard forms of employment makes them more vulnerable to job loss, as these groups are usually laid off first, that is treated as a buffer to protect the core workforce in any downturn (Karamessini and Rubery 2013). However, in the medium term, the outcomes are less predictable as employers may hire mainly

contingent workers due to the economic uncertainty, thereby possibly boosting women's employment opportunities but also their precarity. Second, women are overrepresented in many of the sectors that are likely to shrink even in the medium term, particularly hospitality and other activities associated with tourism and business travel. Moreover, the growth in women's employment in personal and consumer services has often been attributed to their perceived higher social skills compared to men. However, since the Covid-19 crisis, instead of face-to-face contact being regarded as a basis for competitive advantage in services, it may be considered as exacerbating health risks. Thus, employers may try to design out this aspect of work, possibly through accelerating automation. Another legacy of Covid-19 is likely to be changes both to care arrangements and to how work and care are organised. In principle, greater acceptance of telework could boost women's employment opportunities, but there are also risks (see Section 3).

1.2 The valuation of key workers

One possible silver lining to Covid-19 is the greater visibility and appreciation of workers in health and care services, one of the most feminised sectors of the labour market. Women not only account for the majority of nurses and care workers, but increasingly also for medical doctors. Nurses tend to be generally low-paid relative to their skills, particularly in Member States with a legacy of feminisation of public services from the socialist era and a tradition of low pay (Rubery 2013; Rubery and Johnson 2019). Relative pay for care workers also varies across countries (ILO 2018: Figure 4.5), reflecting differences in minimum wage floors and variations in both qualification requirements for care workers (Baltruks *et al.* 2017) and in their employment as public- or private-sector workers. The new-found appreciation of key workers has been manifested in public expressions of thanks (clapping, singing, gifts etc.) and in many EU countries in special bonuses or other benefits paid to health and care staff (see Table 1). In some cases, only doctors and nurses have benefitted, but in others, sometimes as a result of union or public pressure (see for example UNISON 2020 and Financial Times 2020a),⁴ the bonuses or benefits have been extended to care workers and ancillary staff. While these actions are beneficial in the short term, they do not necessarily herald any long-term change in the gendered undervaluation of care work. Bonuses in some cases vary according to earnings levels, possibly suggesting that low pay at the bottom of the hierarchy is unlikely to be addressed. Indeed, despite the warm words about care staff as heroines, it was those working in care homes – the least well-paid women workers – who were often left without appropriate protective equipment (ECDC 2020). Also, not many examples are emerging of longer-term changes to terms and conditions for health and social care staff, even in countries where health and social care work is very poorly paid. One exception could be Hungary, where not only has a bonus been paid but a pay rise of 20% is promised from November 2020 onwards. However, this is occurring alongside a ban on medical staff leaving the country. One positive example is France, where the government has improved pay for health and care

4. For example, care bonuses were extended to all staff in Wales after public pressure. Likewise, the UK government reversed an earlier decision and extended visas and waived health care costs for all groups of migrant workers in the health service.

work (BBC 2020). Another positive story is the offer of permanent contracts to social care workers in Greece. Examples where Covid-19 has had negative impacts on pay and conditions include enforced delays in action by trade unions to try to improve pay for nurses in Finland (UUTISET 2020), the loss of overtime opportunities for health workers in Croatia (Telegram 2020) and new nursing recruits being given precarious contracts in Ireland (The Irish Times 2020).

Table 1 Treatment of key workers in health and social care in the Covid-19 pandemic

Bonuses to key workers	Pay rises or new collective bargaining over pay	More secure contracts	Stalled/postponed bargaining over pay or less good employment conditions
Bulgaria, Czechia*, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, UK*	France (pay rises agreed July 2020), Hungary (20% pay rise November 2020)	Greece (for social care workers)	Croatia (loss of overtime), Finland (no improvements in pay for nurses), Ireland (new hires on precarious contracts)

Note: *Some regions only, or only staff who are nationally but not municipally employed.

Source: International policy databases (ILO 2020b; OECD 2020a; Eurofound 2020a plus information from national experts (see acknowledgements at end of chapter).

2. Covid-19 policy responses: gendered differences in support for income and employment

All Member States are providing some support to those at risk of loss of wage income due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This represents a major expansion of such support schemes beyond the countries with long histories of short-time work schemes. As Müller and Schulten (2020: 4) point out, while these schemes can be considered to share the same or similar objectives, they ‘differ considerably in their institutional design and underlying logic’. These differences in institutional arrangements towards the same goal of supporting those at risk of loss of wage income and jobs make it difficult in this context to distinguish between social protection and employment protection schemes. In Table 2, where we summarise these schemes, we do not make that distinction. The key differences include whether they are wage subsidies to employers or payments made directly to employees (for example, via national employment agencies or trade unions), and the scope and generosity of the support (including how responsibility is shared between the state, the employer and employees). Also, schemes vary in whether jobs are protected for those on support and whether support depends on complete cessation of work or whether work can or must be ongoing but short-time: for this reason we refer to them as ‘JRS/STW’, i.e. job retention schemes (JRS) or short-time work schemes (STW). Table 2 also indicates whether they are known as temporary unemployment (TU) schemes.

Women's access to income support through these schemes risks being more limited than that for men for interconnected reasons that reflect gendered employment patterns and the specifics of policy design. In 2019 the EU adopted a recommendation that Member States provide more universal protection, especially for those in non-standard forms of employment or self-employed (Council of the EU 2019). Nevertheless, major gaps remain (Spasova *et al.* 2019; Matsaganis *et al.* 2016; Rubery *et al.* 2018), with women particularly likely to fall through the cracks for a range of reasons, and with low-educated, ethnic minority and migrant women even more at risk. The three most common problems are:

- Working in countries, sectors, types of firms or jobs not covered by specific crisis-related job protection schemes;
- Not meeting eligibility employment record conditions for either standard unemployment benefits or in some countries access to crisis-related schemes (due to too short or interrupted participation, too low income, too short hours or the form of employment – for example, informal work) or being ineligible due to not being available for employment due to care responsibilities (see Section 3);
- Receiving low benefits (due to no or low minimum benefit levels, low earnings when benefits are earnings-related, or low contribution record even if above the threshold for some benefits).

Our assessment of the Covid-19 policy response from a gender perspective therefore considers how far the policies have aimed at or succeeded in mitigating these three risks and improving women's access to protection: see the detailed discussion in Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 respectively. One positive outcome from Covid-19 is that it has demonstrated the possibilities of radical and rapid development of stronger and more inclusive social protection systems, contrary to pre-Covid-19 assumptions that reform takes years rather than the days or weeks it took to design new schemes under the Covid-19 pandemic. There have been three types of innovation under Covid-19. First, new wage compensation schemes for employees in countries with no tradition of their use (Müller and Schulten 2020; see also Myant, this volume). Second, changes to eligibility for coverage, even in countries with longstanding schemes to include workers traditionally excluded (details in Section 2.2; see also Eurofound 2020c). Third, and perhaps most innovative of all, there has been a widespread development of schemes to provide some income protection (whether through new rights to unemployment benefits or compensation for lost profits) for the self-employed who have often been excluded from access to unemployment support (Spasova *et al.* 2019; Matsaganis *et al.* 2016; Eurofound 2020c; see also Tables 2 and 3). In assessing the adequacy of these policy approaches for protecting women, we need to consider both progress towards more comprehensive and more equality-focused systems and evidence of remaining gaps and continuing tendencies to undervalue women's contributions in both paid and unpaid work.

2.1 Gender and sectoral and firm coverage

With regard to the first risk, i.e. working in countries, sectors or firms not covered by such schemes, it is notable that almost all European countries have introduced wage

compensation at a relatively high percentage of earnings – normally with state support of 60% to 80% of wages (often up to a cap), with requirements for the employer to top up the wage further in some countries (see Table 2). Those providing less generous support include Croatia, Greece and Malta (all providing flat-rate benefits and initially no support for reduced hours in the first two cases), while Poland and Portugal provide lower state support (below 50% of wages though workers receive 80% and 67% respectively). The schemes are generally universal by sector coverage but eligibility conditions (e.g. extent of business downturn) vary. These schemes are being used extensively in the services sectors particularly affected by lockdown, in marked contrast to the 2008 financial crisis when, for example, in Germany, a country much praised for its short-time work scheme, take-up of the scheme was concentrated in construction and manufacturing. At that time, women accounted for less than a quarter of recipients due to both their concentration in different sectors and their underrepresentation relative to their employment share within these male-dominated sectors (Leschke and Jepsen 2011). While data is not yet generally available on take-up, in some cases – for example, Hungary – this bias towards manufacturing and construction may be continuing according to OECD data.⁵ By contrast, in the UK (New Statesman 2020) and Germany (Hammerschmid *et al.* 2020), for example, the hospitality sector has the highest rate of employees supported by JRS/STW schemes. There have also been efforts to expand coverage by firm size – for example Italy under Covid-19 covers all sizes of firm down to one employee while in the financial crisis although the scheme was temporarily extended to SMEs in the tertiary sector access was limited to firms with a minimum of 15 employees (Boeri and Bruecker 2011: 43).

One exception to universal sector coverage is domestic work, an overwhelmingly female-dominated area, which was excluded explicitly not only in Bulgaria but also in Italy, where public pressure led to its belated inclusion at the end of May 2020, with cover backdated to April 2020. However, it is notable that the scheme introduced in Italy paid a lower amount – €500 compared to €600 per month for the self-employed and 80% of wages for employees. Spain provides support for domestic workers under a special scheme which has a slightly lower maximum than for other employees. By contrast, France has a special scheme but pays the same as for other employees, although with a much longer delay in paying the benefits, which might have reduced take-up (data not yet available).

2.2 Gender and access to support

With respect to coverage of support schemes by types of workers, the policy direction is towards wider inclusion. Many countries make explicit reference to inclusion of those on fixed-term or other types of insecure contracts and to possibilities to include staff already dismissed before schemes were introduced (for example, the UK) – though there are some exceptions to this – for example Hungary and Slovenia. Several countries have also relaxed rules for access to unemployment benefits or social assistance where

5. According to the OECD country tracker for Hungary, as of 8 May, 62% of furloughed workers were employed in the processing industry and in trade and repair of motor vehicles. Only 9% of furloughed workers worked in the heavily affected tourism and hospitality sectors.

this is the main support (for example, Finland) or supplementary support for those not covered by the JRS/STW schemes (for example, Germany). The most notable inclusion efforts relate to the self-employed who are normally not eligible for protection against job or income loss. Although support in this crisis has primarily benefitted men, as they outnumber women among the self-employed, this extension of the social protection net, if maintained and built upon, is likely to be of long-term benefit for women, especially vulnerable women such as single parents who may be more likely to be dependent upon the growing platform economy, particularly crowdworking, because of difficulties in working outside the home. Although income support for the self-employed (i.e., not including support for expenses or tax relief) is more patchy than for employees, only four Member States – Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary and Sweden – provided no new income support, although Hungary has compulsory and Sweden voluntary unemployment insurance for the self-employed (Spasova *et al.* 2019). Support was more often flat-rate and, when turnover- or profit-related, had lower maximum limits than employees (see Table 2). Only a few countries treated employees and the self-employed roughly the same way (Finland, Ireland, Romania, Slovakia, UK). It is difficult to identify how far the support schemes for the self-employed have covered the most vulnerable. Irregular or informal workers will in general not be covered by schemes, in part because of their unrecorded status, a problem especially affecting migrants. The extent of the informal workforce and the share of women in this group clearly varies across Member States, but data is lacking.

There are also several holes in the protective net that are likely to particularly affect women due either to longstanding social protection policies or to specific characteristics of Covid-19-related policies. Hungary provides an example of the latter, with part-time workers simply excluded from the JRS/STW scheme; while part-time is not a common employment form in Hungary, most part-timers are women. Countries vary in their contribution requirement for social protection. As women are more likely to be both low-paid and have interrupted employment, they are more at risk of exclusion: in the UK, for example, it is not possible to meet eligibility requirements for social protection if one earns less than €131 per week. As a consequence around two million people, 70% of them women, according to estimates by the Trade Union Congress (TUC 2020), have no rights to statutory sick pay and a similar number would also not have access to contribution-based unemployment benefits. In Germany there is a specific category of employment known as mini-jobs (with an earnings limit of €450 per month and exempt from income tax) where workers are generally not covered by social security; payment of contributions is voluntary and only 15% in practice are covered (Hammerschmid *et al.* 2020). Over 60% of mini-jobbers are women, due in large part to the income tax splitting system in Germany which imposes high taxes on second-income earners entering regular work. Mini-jobbers are not eligible either for the JRS/STW scheme support or for the basic income support for the unemployed that many solo self-employed have been able to claim under Covid-19.

In some of the Nordic countries, membership of unemployment schemes has remained voluntary and low-paid and casual workers, particularly in sectors like hospitality, are less likely to have opted to join such schemes. In Finland, the eligibility condition for earnings-related unemployment benefits was reduced from 26 to 13 weeks of

contributions in the past year but those who opted out – many of them women or young people – are only eligible for the much lower first-tier minimum benefit (Shin and Böckerman 2019), leading to a national debate on whether all should be covered by earnings-related benefits which are in practice primarily paid for by the tax system, not membership fees (Helsingin Sanomat 2020). Likewise, in Denmark, while casual workers were eligible for full lay-off protection, among those put on short-time work only members of an unemployment scheme would receive compensation for reduced wages.

2.3 Gender and the level of Covid-19-related income support

The third way in which women may be disadvantaged is through the level of benefits to which they are entitled under the support systems. Of course, as this varies considerably across Member States for all groups, comparing the generosity of protection is complex due to differences in individual contributory benefit entitlements versus household means-tested benefits and the relative generosity of unemployment benefit and social assistance. Some groups of women – for example, single parents – are likely to be particularly affected by social assistance provision. And in some countries that support is both low and patchy. This is the case in Spain, for example, which has been developing a new national minimum income scheme (El País 2020) to address the growing problem of poverty (United Nations 2020). However, our concern here is not primarily with the overall level of protection for women against poverty but with women's access to protection for their own wage income. Many of the JRS/STW schemes protect a higher share of women's wages than men's. This is due to a) maximum protection caps; b) the use of flat-rate payments in some countries, including Croatia, Greece, Malta and Slovakia (for short-time work); and c) higher percentage wage compensation for low-income workers (for example in Austria, Denmark and Lithuania), with the minimum wage acting as the minimum floor for support in France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal and Slovakia. We have already mentioned the lower payments for domestic workers in Italy and Spain, and in other cases the method of calculating benefits may also disadvantage flexible and casual workers, another job area where women are overrepresented. For example, in the Netherlands, flexible contract workers ('flexwerkers' in Dutch) who are often seasonal workers were disadvantaged by wage compensation systems tied to off-season earnings before the Covid-19 crisis and were only protected after protests in June (DutchNews.nl 2020).

Where women need to claim unemployment benefits, another issue is whether there is a minimum benefit level which reflects some recognition that each claimant has minimum consumption needs; improvements in minimum benefit levels can be found in some countries, but others, such as Germany, maintain a strict contribution-related approach to benefit levels (Rubery *et al.* 2018). It is also the case that in some countries the support provided for those undertaking parental care responsibilities – including home schooling under Covid-19 – may be lower than that provided for under JRS/STW schemes, as we discuss in Section 3.2.

Table 2 Covid-19-related income support (March to May/June 2020) in EU28 through Job Retention Schemes (JRS), Short-Time Work Schemes (STW), Temporary Unemployment schemes (TU) and self-employment income support schemes

	Type of scheme JRS /STW /TU	Wage compensation for employees* – flat-rate or % of regular pay	Self-employment income support	Specific inclusions of significance by gender	Specific exclusions of significance by gender
Austria	STW	90% max 80% min	Support for subsistence costs – max €6k over 3 months	90% for lower-paid workers cf. 80% others	
Belgium	TU	80%	Income compensation but maximum €300 below maximum for employee support		
Bulgaria	JRS/STW	100%	No income support		Domestic work excluded
Croatia	JRS	Up to minimum wage (raised in April)	Self-employed except for freelance workers covered by minimum wage protection	Permanent seasonal workers but only up to 50% of minimum wage	Freelancers excluded from SE support; companies that dismissed workers prior to the scheme coming in
	STW from June	€256 per month			
Cyprus	JRS/STW/TU	60% min. €356 to €1216 max.	Also eligible for special unemployment benefit		
Czechia	JRS	100%	Income compensation up to €845	Initially temporary agency workers excluded but then included	Those on temporary work agreements (often including part-timers) and those earning <€400 excluded from social protection and scheme. End of July 2020 exclusions partly reversed.
	STW	60-80%			
Denmark	JRS	100%	75% of loss compensated – lower maximum than for employees	90% compared to 75% for hourly paid	STW – low-paid less likely to be member of UB scheme – so no STW compensation
	STW	Compensation through unemployment scheme			

	Type of scheme	Wage compensation for employees* – flat-rate or % of regular pay	Self-employment income support	Specific inclusions of significance by gender	Specific exclusions of significance by gender
Estonia	JRS /STW/TU	70% plus €150 from employer	No income compensation		Self-employed not covered unless voluntary contributors, and employees must have worked 12 out of last 36 months for earnings-related benefits
	JRS /STW/TU	70% plus €150 from employer	No income compensation		Self-employed not covered unless voluntary contributors, and employees must have worked 12 out of last 36 months for earnings-related benefits
Finland	TU	Earnings-related unemployment benefits	Temporary relaxation of eligibility requirements for earnings-related unemployment benefits	13 instead of 26 weeks' contributions needed for earnings-related UB (26 instead of 52 for SE).	Low-paid less likely to be members of unemployment schemes so only eligible for low flat-rate benefit, not earnings-related benefits
	JRS /STW/TU	100%-70%	Compensation of €1500 per month	Minimum wage floor: Domestic workers have specific scheme same as other employees.	
Germany	JRS /STW	60%-87%, Relaxation of eligibility requirements for benefits	Relaxation of eligibility requirements for social assistance helps self-employed without employees	Relaxation of eligibility requirements for UB	Mimi-jobbers not eligible for JRS/STW and contributory UB
	TU	Relaxation of eligibility requirements for benefits			
Greece	JRS	Flat-rate of €534 per month	Eligible for €534 per month subsidy	Those with insufficient contributions included after initial exclusion	
	STW March-May	No subsidy but maximum reduction 50%			
	STW June	60%			
Hungary	STW	70% of net wage for reduced hours	No additional income support but eligible for UB		Part-time workers excluded, as well as those dismissed before scheme opened
	JRS /STW	85%-70%	Eligible for flat-rate temporary unemployment benefit increased by 70% to €350 per week		
Ireland	JRS /STW	85%-70%	Eligible for flat-rate temporary unemployment benefit increased by 70% to €350 per week		
	TU	Flat rate temporarily increased by 70% to €350 per week			

Italy	JRS-/STW	80% (those not eligible €600 per month)	€600 per month income compensation	Domestic workers included after initial exclusion (subsidy for April/May but only introduced end of May)	Only €500 for domestic workers compared to minimum for self-employed of €600
Latvia	JRS-/STW	75% + child benefits	Eligible for support of 75% if income declared for tax or for the basic €180 support		If companies do not meet strict eligibility criteria only eligible for €180
	TU	€180 where no support or low support			
Lithuania	JRS-/STW	100% minimum wage, 90% to 70%	€257 flat-rate support	Higher % for the low-paid, minimum wage floor. Flat-rate support extended to groups exempted from social contributions including new starters	
Luxembourg	JRS-/STW-	100% minimum wage -80%	€2500 lump sum	Minimum wage floor	
Malta	TU	€800 or €500 for part-time workers,	20 %-40% (one or two days' support)		Low support for all groups
	JRS	Minimum 40%			
Netherlands	STW	Minimum 20%			
	JRS-/STW	100%	Social minimum wage up to €1500		
Poland	JRS-/STW	80%	Up to 80% of minimum wage (100% if earnings < 50% of minimum wage) or €290		
Portugal	JRS-/STW	100% minimum wage, 67%	Support up to €438 – social assistance minimum	Minimum wage floor	
Romania	JRS	75%	Those whose activity closed - 75% of average wage		

	Type of scheme JRS /STW/TU	Wage compensation for employees* – flat-rate or % of regular pay	Self-employment income support	Specific inclusions of significance by gender	Specific exclusions of significance by gender
Slovakia	JRS	100% minimum wage, 80% for full lay off	Same support as for employees	Minimum wage floor	Activation work schemes for long-term unemployed (many Roma) ended, reducing income for the most vulnerable
	STW	Flat-rate matching % decline in activity – €180 20% to €540 80%			
Slovenia	JRS/STW	80%	Support up to 70% of net minimum wage		Those already dismissed not included
Spain	JRS/STW/TU	70%	Compensation if loss is 75% – minimum of €661	Special scheme for workers plus new national minimum income	No national social assistance pre-Covid-19, so patchy support
Sweden	JRS/STW	90%	No specific income support but relaxation of eligibility rules for members of unemployment fund	Those dismissed before scheme introduced allowed to be covered	No specific support for freelancers/gig workers. Relaxation of eligibility rules for unemployment fund members.
	TU	Relaxation of eligibility rules for members of unemployment fund			
UK	JRS/STW	80%	80% of profits	Those dismissed before scheme introduced allowed to be covered	Up to 2 million not covered by UB
	TU	Small temporary increase in basic UB	Relaxation of eligibility for benefits		

Note: * Figures given relate to amount received by employees. Compensation paid to employers by the state is the same as what workers receive except in the case of Bulgaria (employee receives 100%, state pays 60%); Denmark (employees 100%, state pays 75%); Estonia (employee receives 70%+€150 – state pays the 70%); Malta (state subsidy is for 40% time full closure and 20% for partial reduction – not clear if employers have to pay in addition); Netherlands (employee receives 100%, state pays up to 90%); Poland (employee receives 80%, state pays half, i.e., 40%); Portugal (employee receives 67% state pays 70%, i.e., 47% of regular wage); Sweden (employee receives 90%, state pays up to 70%).

Sources: ILO (2020b), OECD (2020a), Eurofound (2020a), information from national experts.

3. Care, the gender division of labour and parental leave provision

3.1 The challenges of reconciling care and paid work under lockdown

The risk that the Covid-19 crisis could reverse progress towards gender equality in employment arises not only because women are over-represented in jobs where telework is not possible but also because of the increase in unpaid work caused by school and nursery closures. Due to the prevailing unequal gender division of care and domestic work, this additional unpaid work is likely to fall mainly on women. Emerging data from some EU Member States confirms this expectation. A survey in Italy in April 2020 revealed that women were shouldering most of the additional childcare and housework, with 74% of men devoting less than one hour a day to housework compared to 28% of women (Del Boca *et al.* 2020). Three large surveys in Germany, USA and the UK conducted at the end of March and April 2020 also found women typically spending on average one hour more than men caring and home-schooling their children (Adams-Prassl *et al.* 2020a). Similar findings were also reported by a survey in Spain (Sevilla and Smith 2020) and another in the UK (IFS 2020).

Women are therefore facing greater challenges in reconciling work and family life. Women still working outside the home risk an extremely long double shift due to, for example, home schooling, even if childcare is made available to key workers (see Section 3.2 below). Research in the UK suggests that fathers' level of involvement in these activities during Covid-19 is highly sensitive to their own employment status and patterns, but that is less so for mothers (IFS 2020). For mothers working from home, the challenge is to work productively while providing care and home schooling their children. If the other parent is also at home, some sharing is possible but preliminary evidence suggests that women still do more childcare and domestic work (Del Boca *et al.* 2020; IFS 2020). A Eurofound (2020c, 2020d) study reveals that among European parents of children under 12, 29% of women compared to 16% of men found it hard to concentrate on their work, while 24% of women compared to 13% of men reported that family responsibilities prevented them from giving time to their work. UK-based evidence also reveals that before the pandemic mothers and fathers reported a similar tendency to be interrupted during their work hours, but during the lockdown period mothers were interrupted over 50% more often (IFS 2020).

On the positive side, despite women shouldering more of the additional unpaid work, some preliminary evidence from the UK, Spain and Italy indicates that this is being shared more equally than before the pandemic, particularly childcare (Sevilla and Smith 2020; IFS 2020; Del Boca *et al.* 2020; Farré and González 2020). One UK study comparing time use (IFS 2020) in April 2020 to data from 2014–2015 found that fathers nearly doubled the time they spent on childcare: fathers reported engaging in childcare in 4.2 one-hour slots per day in 2014–2015, but this increased to eight during the 2020 lockdown. This increase was proportionally lower for women who reported engaging in childcare in 6.7 one-hour slots each day in 2014–2015 and 10.3 during the lockdown. There were smaller gaps in hours spent on childcare between mothers and fathers who were either not working or working from home than was the case when mothers and

fathers working outside the home were compared (IFS 2020). The study thus suggested fathers' contributions were higher when they themselves were at home, either not working or working from home. This could have a particularly strong effect when the mother is the only one working outside the home, estimated to apply to around one fifth of couple households in the UK (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020). A significant increase in fathers' involvement in childcare during the Covid-19 confinement could have lasting effects on social norms and the gender division of labour (IFS 2020; Alon *et al.* 2020). This expectation is supported by a growing body of research on fathers taking parental leave, which suggests that periods of intense involvement in domestic and care work can lead to men's long-term engagement in these activities (Tamm 2019; Albrecht *et al.* 2017; Huerta *et al.* 2013).

Telework has been widely encouraged or even mandated by governments to stop the spread of the virus. A Eurofound survey found that around 37% of workers in the EU started teleworking during the Covid-19 outbreak, but this proportion varies widely across Member States, from below 20% in Romania to nearly 60% in Finland (Eurofound 2020b). Eurofound reports a slightly higher share of women starting telework than men (39% compared to 35%), but the proportion for mothers of young children is higher still at 46% (Eurofound 2020a). Among all those working from home during the pandemic, 26% lived in households with children under 12 (Eurofound 2020d). While the widespread adoption of teleworking has been regarded as a solution to the problem of care, this approach failed to appreciate the extent of childcare required after the closure of schools and nurseries. Teleworking parents in these circumstances are dependent on their employer's understanding to be able to continue working. If this is not forthcoming, they may lose their jobs, feel obliged to resign, or take parental leave where this is available and permissible. Yet in a significant number of countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, France, Malta, Portugal and Romania, not being able to work from home was an eligibility condition for parental leave (Eurofound 2020a).

Nevertheless, this growth in home-based telework may lay the foundations for more enduring work transformations (OECD 2020b). If flexible working and home-based telework become normalised and more widely available for both sexes, this could further facilitate fathers' involvement in care and co-parenting. It could also erode gender differences in employment patterns and reduce the stigma and career penalties associated with flexible working. This would, however, apply only to those in jobs in which most tasks can be done from home, mostly highly educated professionals.

In the next section, we examine the policy responses of governments across the EU to support parents with their additional care needs during the pandemic lockdowns.

3.2 Care support and special parental leave schemes under Covid-19

Gender inequalities in the sharing of unpaid work, coupled with the extra childcare brought home by the outbreak, mean that the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on women's employment prospects is dependent on the policies enacted to enable parents to provide or arrange alternative childcare while protecting them against job and income loss.

The most common parental support measure across Europe was special parental leave arrangements when neither parent was able to provide childcare due to both being employed.⁶ Table 3 summarises these arrangements. Among the 27 EU Member States, 20 provided a parental leave scheme of some description, while in the UK parents could ask their employers to use the JRS scheme to furlough them for childcare reasons. As being furloughed in order to provide childcare is in practice similar to parental leave, for the purpose of this analysis we treat it as such. These leave schemes were in most cases for parents with children aged 12 or younger, although the age limit was much lower in Poland (8) and higher (14 to 16) in Austria, Cyprus, France, Finland and Malta. In some cases, leave could be used to care for an older disabled child (e.g. Belgium, Cyprus and Portugal) or a disabled adult (e.g. Slovakia). There was also considerable variation in how the leave was paid, whether it required employer consent and whether the jobs of those taking leave were protected. In countries where parental leave is paid at the same or higher level than job retention schemes, this could be considered an indicator that the government is not only attaching comparable value to care work but also recognising the importance of both parents' earnings for the family income and the right of both women and men to an independent income. As shown in Table 3, this applied in 10 of the 21 countries with special leave schemes (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, France, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, UK). In the other 11, pay for parental leave is lower than for job retention schemes, indicating an undervaluing of care; where this is unpaid (as in Spain) or means-tested and very low-paid (as in Bulgaria), the result is to make those providing care, normally women, economically dependent on other family members. These problems are exacerbated for single parents who are mainly women and reliant solely on their own income to support their families. Some leave schemes (e.g. in Belgium and Cyprus) recognised this higher vulnerability and provided higher rates for single parents.

Where taking leave requires employer consent, such as in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus and the UK, if refused one of the parents may have to resign. This may mainly affect women both because of their role in childcare but also because they normally earn less than their male partner and are more likely to be single parents. If jobs are not protected, those taking leave risk unemployment in an uncertain economy. This could have long-term consequences for women, scarring women's employment and earnings prospects.

Although parental leave schemes risk reinforcing the gender division of labour and women's economic dependency if unpaid or paid at a low level, not providing leave carries the even worse risk of forcing women to resign if alternative childcare is not available. The way the leave scheme is designed can also either further reinforce the unequal division of care or provide incentives for more balanced sharing. In Bulgaria, employers are only obliged to give parental leave to mothers and single fathers, reinforcing women's role as primary carers. By contrast, parental leave schemes in Belgium and Italy are designed to encourage parents to share: in Belgium, parental leave can only be taken on a part-time basis, enabling each employee to reduce working time up to 50%, ensuring full-time care only if both parents take leave; in Italy each parent is entitled to 15 days, with both expected to alternate so that care can be provided for a total of 30 days.

6. In some countries, not being able to work from home was also a condition of eligibility – see Section 3.1.

Table 3 Special parental leave schemes under the Covid-19 pandemic*

	Features and payment	Pay compared to JRS measures	Inclusivity	Employer consent needed	Jobs protected
Austria	3 weeks fully paid (only 1/3 reimbursed by state to employers)	Higher	Self-employed excluded	Yes	Yes
Belgium	Leave only part-time up to 50%, rate depends on age and higher for single parents. For a 50% reduction, rates are €532.24; single parents: €875.00.	Lower	Self-employed covered	Yes	No
Bulgaria	Leave is unpaid except for a one-off means-tested payment of 375 BGN (€188)	Lower	Self-employed excluded	No (for mothers or single fathers)	Yes
Cyprus	60% for the first €1,000; 40% for those earning up to €2,500 but benefit not to exceed €1,000. Higher rates for single parents: 70% and 50% with a €1,200 maximum benefit	Equal	Self-employed excluded	Yes	Yes
Czechia	Employees: 60% then raised to 80% of 'reduced assessment base' Self-employed: flat rate €510 / month	Lower	Self-employed covered but lower payment	No	Yes
Germany	67% net income for six weeks	Equal at first but lower after STW was increased	Self-employed covered Mini jobs covered	No	Yes
Greece	Special leave in which 1 in 4 days is annual leave 2 in 4 paid by employer 1 paid by state	Higher	Self-employed excluded	No	Yes
France	Up to 1 May 2020 paid as sick pay (90% of gross wage). Employees then moved to STW scheme (70% gross wage but 100% if on minimum wage). Self-employed remained on sick pay	Higher at first and then equal	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Finland	€723 per month	Lower	Self-employed excluded	Yes	Yes
Italy	15 days to each parent paid at 50% of salary or €1200 lump sum for childcare Unpaid leave available for caring for older children	Lower	Self-employed covered	No	Yes

Lithuania	Paid as sick pay for 60 days at 65.94% rate	Lower	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Luxembourg	Full salary	Equal	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Malta	€166 per week for full-timers, €104 for part-timers – same as unemployment benefits under Covid-19	Lower	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Poland	28 days in addition to 60 days family leave paid at 80%	Equal	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Portugal	Employees: 66% of wage (state pays half) with minimum wage (€635) and cap of 3 times that value. Self-employed: 33% with €438 floor and €1097 cap	Equal	Self-employed covered but with lower pay	No	Yes
Romania	75% of wage up to 75% of national average or alternative childcare subsidy for low income families with pre-school children	Equal	Self-employed covered	No (only in essential services)	Yes
Slovakia	55% of gross wage	Lower	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Slovenia	50% of earnings with floor of 70% of minimum wage	Lower	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
Spain	Unpaid right to adapt/reduce working hours up to nil	Lower (unpaid)	Not applicable	No (but employer can object if damaging for business)	Yes
Sweden	90% of wages	Equal	Self-employed covered	No	Yes
UK	80% of wages as part of the furlough scheme	Equal	Self-employed covered	Yes	No

Note: *The table excludes the countries that did not provide special leave for parents: Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Croatia, Latvia, Hungary and Malta.

Sources: ILO (2020b); OECD (2020a); Eurofound (2020a) plus information from national experts.

Parental leave systems also varied in their inclusivity. In Germany, despite mini-jobbers not being covered by the job retention or unemployment schemes, they are entitled to take parental leave. In Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus and Finland, parental leave is restricted to employees, but in most countries the self-employed are also covered, although sometimes at reduced pay. For example, in Portugal, leave is paid at one third of earnings compared to two thirds for employees, while in the Czech Republic they receive a fixed amount below the national minimum wage, compared to 90% of net pay for most employees. Domestic workers throughout Europe were often excluded due to being informally employed. As migrant women and ethnic minority groups are often employed in domestic work with informal arrangements, their exclusion is likely to exacerbate intersectional inequalities (ILO 2020a).

While parental leave was the main policy measure to support parents across Europe, some governments opted instead for ensuring the availability of childcare to families where both parents needed to work outside the home (for example Croatia, Denmark and Hungary), whereas in Sweden there were no nationwide school and nursery closures and so childcare remained available as usual. From a gender perspective, the childcare solution is preferable to parental leave because it better supports the continuing employment and earnings of both men and women, whereas parental leave tends to reinforce the gender division of labour unless it contains incentives for equally sharing care. However, from a health perspective, parental leave schemes and the encouragement of teleworking appeared safer options. For that reason, in most countries, childcare was only guaranteed for workers in health care and other essential services. This was normally provided through some schools and nurseries remaining open with a skeleton of staff, but while in some countries this was a nationwide policy (e.g. Portugal, UK) in others provision was more variable, dependent upon region or local authority (e.g. Estonia, Latvia). A few Member States provided alternative solutions. For example, in Italy, a lump-sum babysitting subsidy of €1,200 was provided as an alternative to parental leave, with health care workers entitled to €2,000; in Romania, alternative financial support for childcare was generally available to low-income families with pre-school children, while health care workers received a 75% pay increase to cover childminding costs. By contrast, in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Ireland and Spain, no childcare arrangements were put in place to support those working in health care and other essential services.

Table 4 provides a summary of the policy responses discussed throughout this section to support working parents in the 28 countries, combining parental leave schemes with the childcare provision during the lockdown period of the outbreak. The countries most supportive of working parents are found in or close to the cell in the bottom right corner of the table where both childcare and well-paid leave are available, whereas the least supportive are found in or close to the top left corner where neither childcare or parental leave was available. The Member State closest to the latter was Ireland, where only public-sector workers had access to special parental leave, whereas Spain was the only country where parental leave was unpaid. Even key workers had no access to childcare in either country. Only one country, Sweden (where schools did not close), provided well-paid leave while retaining the full availability of childcare for all parents, though potentially at risk to health.

Table 4 Summary of parental leave and childcare arrangements during the Covid-19 lockdown

Covid-19 support for working parents		Special parental leave		
		No leave	Pay below rate for job retention schemes	Same pay or higher than job retention scheme
Childcare	None	Ireland	Bulgaria (residual leave pay), Czech Republic, Spain (leave unpaid)	Cyprus, Greece
	For key workers (including subsidy)	Estonia, Latvia	Belgium, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia	Austria, France, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, UK
	For other parents	Croatia, Denmark, Hungary	Finland (nurseries open to all, schools for key workers)	Sweden (nurseries and schools stayed open)

Source: ILO, OECD and Eurofound Covid-19 databases (ILO 2020b; Eurofound 2020a; OECD 2020a); Eurofound (2020b); network of European experts.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted gender inequalities and raised the spectrum of possible reversals of progress on gender equality if women bear the burden of the upcoming job losses and continue to face increased burdens of care. At the same time, the crisis has demonstrated the potential for change and for new policy development. Not only did the crisis lead to the rapid spread of teleworking even in Member States where it was previously infrequent, but it also raised issues with respect to the fairness of existing wage structures and the need for the recovery to be aimed not at restoring the previous social support systems but at building back better.

These developments have implications for the EU, both for its recovery from Covid-19 and for its Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (for a further discussion, see Vanhercke *et al.*, this volume). The current proposed strategy for 2020–2025 was devised pre-Covid-19 for a period of presumed incremental change. There is an urgent need to raise its ambition, as much more is now at stake, requiring pre-emptive action to counter risks of reversals in progress and strategic initiatives to seize the opportunities for more systemic change in the gender model. There needs to be active gender mainstreaming of the ‘Next Generation EU’ recovery programme,⁷ not only to guard against negative impacts but also because accelerating progress towards greater gender equality provides a strong foundation for building back better.

7. The opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC 2020) on the proposed gender equality strategy also called for gender mainstreaming of the recovery programme in July 2020.

The importance of gender mainstreaming policy interventions applies to all four areas of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 that we have considered in this chapter: namely increasing female employment, equal pay, gender equality in care, and greater economic independence for women. Risks of declines in female employment opportunities can be anticipated due to women’s over-representation in those service sectors most affected by the shutdown and by the possibility that new school lockdowns or split schedules will make reconciling work and care more difficult in the medium term. These risks are skewed towards women with lower levels of education, migrant women and those from an ethnic minority background all of whom have been more at risk of losing their jobs and less able to work from home compared to highly educated and professional women. Being forced out of the labour market due to Covid-19 could also have long-term scarring effects on the employment and pay prospects of these women. We can also anticipate that high unemployment may lead to a deterioration in women’s pay, particularly if minimum wages are allowed to decline in real or relative terms.

Prospects for greater sharing of care may be more positive if telework becomes normalised, but there is also a danger that more care work will be expected of parents if there is an end to the impulse to expand childcare provision evident in Europe since the setting of the Barcelona strategy and childcare targets in 2002 (EIGE 2020). New forms of gender segregation could emerge if women are not only expected to telework but in fact remain home-based workers while men return to the office. With respect to economic independence, the main risk is the loss of employment opportunities, though there is also the issue of access to social protection. The messages from the pandemic are again mixed: on the one hand more provision was made to support jobs where women are concentrated, but there were still gaps in the social protection floor, often associated with women’s concentration in jobs providing only short hours, low incomes or insecure employment.

To counter these risks and take advantage of the unprecedented pace of and readiness for change, we suggest that there should be three main developments in EU policy. First there must be a serious commitment to gender-mainstreaming the recovery plan (Frazer 2020). Its complete absence from the recovery plan from the financial crisis (Villa and Smith 2013) revealed the dominant tendency to neglect the interests and needs of women in a crisis. If the EU is committed to gender equality, it must take steps to avoid a repetition. However, it needs to go further than that and set some more ambitious goals – for example to build on the Covid-19 experience to promote a wider sharing of both wage work and unpaid care work. This approach would address both the potential to promote equality through more shared care and the need for alternatives to mass unemployment in the face of medium- to long-term shortages of employment opportunities. Many countries are extending their short-time working schemes for a year or more (Financial Times 2020b; The Guardian 2020). This should be seen as an opportunity to move towards shorter and more flexible full-time working to enable more involvement in care of both women and men, while creating the conditions for moves towards longer hours of work for those in more casual and part-time jobs to promote greater economic independence for women, who tend to be over-represented

in these arrangements. The more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work by gender should also be accompanied by more universal social protection, again building on the experiments under Covid-19 where eligibility conditions were relaxed.

This ambitious plan may appear at odds with reported voices within the European Commission in the early stages of Covid-19 in favour of putting the gender equality strategy on ice (EPSU 2020). In the end the strategy was adopted, and at the time of writing the Commission was in the process of developing, as scheduled, a proposal for a pay transparency directive in the last quarter of 2020. There still remains a risk that Covid-19 will deflect attention from gender equality issues at the very time when gender equality ambitions need to be built into crisis response strategies to ensure that the EU is set on a positive track rather than on a defensive and negative path that risks undoing recent progress. Far from gender equality being a policy agenda only for good times, in a crisis we need more than ever to ensure that recovery strategies are grounded in the pursuit of a more sustainable and equal future for Europe.

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