A Glimpse on Gender Inequality in Paid and Unpaid Works During Pandemic Times

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyse the different challenges that the pandemic crises and lockdown measures have on women lives and works. Pandemic crises ask for carrying activities, both paid and unpaid, works that are usually done by women. The focus of the paper is on the impact of the apparently gender-neutral measures adopted by the Romanian government on the lives and careers of women. We find women as majority both in the frontline services, but also in the sectors that are most affected by lockdown measures. Also we find women as major caregivers in their families, as mothers or grandmothers. Starting with the challenges that we are all currently facing, the last part of the paper aims to portrait the gender roles after lockdown ends and economic crises will take the place.

Keywords: *gender inequalities; women work; unpaid work; gendered impact.*

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1. Introduction

Quite soon after the lockdown measures were announced around the world, the news on their harder impact on women lives were constantly emerging (Data2X, 2019). A lot of articles asked for proper assessments of the short and long term impact that apparently “gender neutral” lockdown measures have and will continue to have after pandemic ends on men and women lives (CARE & IRC, 2020; EIGE, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). Statistically we know that women are more exposed to disease, as they are in the so called “essential” or “frontline” services during pandemic, even if mortality among them is at a lower level. But women are the most important caring providers not only in paid works, but also in the large amount of invisible and unpaid works. The lockdown measures are on definite time, but their social and economic effects already started to picture a deep and long term crisis. As the public discourse is developing, the gender impact during pandemic is severely overlooked by the preeminence of public health problems, and then will be shadowed by the economic crises.

Even if the impact of the lockdown measures exceeds the area of paid and unpaid works, I will focus only on carrying responsibilities for this short communication. The data and arguments will be mainly based on the Romanian case, even if the situation is similar around the world. The paper questions the gender roles from a postmodern perspective, emphasizing the need to address specific needs of women with different occupations, therefore with different socio-economic backgrounds. Also, it points to the reinforcements of gender inequality during crises, irrespective of how other individual and societal values are evolving (Ahmed & Khatun, 2008). All carrying activities, paid and unpaid, are “essential” not only during crises, but also during economic recoveries, but the interests of women in their diversity remain invisible and overlooked by the public policies (Harman, 2016).

2. Women jobs during lockdown in Romania

Pandemic response asks mainly caring services, both paid and unpaid and mostly provided by women, irrespective of age, health status, ethnicity, etc. The large majority of jobs in caring sectors are paid under the average wage and as the budget constraints will continue to increase, is hard to expect improvements on this issue (except the health sector workers that received a bonus up to cca. 500 euros per month). Public services such as health, social assistance and education register high numbers of employees and any increase in their wages could have a significant budgetary impact.

Women represent the vast majority of workers in the so-called “frontline” services. They represent cca. 70% of health workforce worldwide (UNFPA, 2020) and up to even 80% in Romania. Their working conditions are more than scarce during pandemic mostly due to the lack of adequate protective equipment, the increasing workload while working arrangements changed significantly and in some cases the links with families were practically suspended (ILO, 2020a). The physical and emotional burden increased exponential, and at least in Romania no adequate counseling or psychological support was put in place, even if this could be a critical part of a coherent response able to be maintained on a medium and long term (UNFPA, 2020).

Women have to continue to provide their services in hospitals, centers for persons in need (children, elderly, persons with disabilities, homeless people, etc.), but also in some parts of the retail sector, being highly exposed to infection and illness. Women are the majority of the civil society engaged in social causes and they continue to be exposed during pandemic by direct contact to the vulnerable communities they are working with. Volunteers’ work during lockdown remains mostly invisible and unvalued. Also, the social assistance workers are essential for local authorities in order to enforce measures that aim to protect or to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of their communities.

Women as educators and teachers, as well as employees in local and central public administration had to facilitate the shift from face-to-face services to online ones, even if the process was barely prepared. In general the pressure to quality and right-in-time public services increased exponential during lockdown.

Flexible, distance or working from home arrangements were promoted as desirable in the context of covid-19 response. But working from home also asks for both adequate logistics and skills. According to Eurostat (2020a), in Romania in 2019 only 34% of total employees used computers and internet at their job, while EU-27 average was up to 54%. So the opportunity of working from home was not in fact available to so many employees. Moreover women have lower access to computer and lower level of skills as against the male counterparts. For instance, in 2017 only 63% of women aged 25-64 years old declared they used computer during the last 3 months, while the EU-27 average was up to 80% (Eurostat, 2020b).

But women are not the majority only among those in the “frontline” services, but also among those significantly affected and with low prospects of rapid recovery after the lockdown measures will be relaxed. According to the press release of the Romanian Ministry of Labor and Social Protection,

after 1 month of lockdown, 1.046.527 labor contracts were suspended, while other 215.656 were terminated (Romanian Ministry for Labor and Social Protection, 2020a). Accommodation and food service activities represent 11.5% of suspended contracts, while wholesale and retail trade holds for 19% of both suspended and terminated ones, women being the majority of workforce in these sectors. Tourism, hotels and restaurants were hit the hardest by the lockdown measures and the data do not cover the whole seasonal workforce that would have been employed during the summer months. Women also register for high shares of employment in informal sectors that were strongly hit during lockdown, increasing the risk of severe poverty (ILO, 2020b). The impact of lockdown among informal workers is almost impossible to be estimated, and there are no public measures addressing the needs of these vulnerable workers.

In Romania, the “technical unemployment” was available during lockdown both to employees and self-employed, payments being made to cca. 1,3 million applicants (Romanian Ministry for Labor and Social Protection, 2020b). “Technical unemployment benefit” will be followed by other measures, such as subsidies to stimulate workforce retention or rehiring, but there is still no consensus among the public institutions on this issue.

3. Women and their exacerbated “double burden” during pandemic

Among the measures that affected the most the lives of women, definitely closing childcare services and moving education online are those with the highest impact (Alon et al., 2020). Women are those considered responsible for carrying out different house chores such as cleaning, cooking, laundering, but also they are carrying for children and other dependents. Also parents usually ask grandparents to look after the children when necessary. (Grunberg et al., 2018).

According to Eurostat (2020c), employment rate among women aged 15-64 years old that had at least one children was up to 62.3% in Romania. So closing childcare services and schools put an incredible burden on women that practically had to choose between work and childcare responsibilities. Moreover the shift to online education also increased the burden of assisting children in their educational process when staying at home. A similar impact on women is supposed to have the closing of some residential services for elderly in order to protect the most vulnerable. Another measure that affects women lives and increases their domestic responsibilities and emotional burden, is the one of postponing all the

medical interventions and treatments that are not an emergency. All those with chronic illnesses are now most probable under the invisible support and carrying of women members of their families. Also, the lack of access to adequate treatment even for a few months leads for some illnesses to lower prospects of recovery and on medium and long term to a heavier responsibility for women taking care of their chronically ill dependents.

In order to meet these unpaid domestic responsibilities a measure aiming to support families with paid leave during lockdown was promoted by the Romanian Ministry for Labor and Social Protection, but there are no available data on how the measure is practical implemented. But the existence of measure itself acts like a signal for individuals and companies that women are those mainly responsible for domestic house chores and disposable at the workplace.

4. Conclusions: more gender equality or inequality?

Even if measures are announced as temporary and different optimistic scenarios on the rapid recovery of the Romanian economy are announced, the shade of a deep economic crisis started to haunt us. The analysis of the impact that previous economic crisis had on women in Romania pointed out to the fact that women were more affected than men on the labor market (Baluta et al., 2011; UNAIDS, 2012). Unemployment rates increased more among women and the employment rates recovered after a longer time up to the levels they had before the crisis. The cutting of wages for the public employees was at the forefront of the policies aiming to balance the public budget. The budgets for education and health were also significantly reduced and still did not recovered the losses, leading to severe labor shortages coupled with increasing workforce migration in the health sector.

The sectors will recover step by step, with tourism and hotels and restaurants among the latest ones. So it is expected to whiteness an increase in the unemployment and long term unemployment for women after the lockdown ends. It is also expected that childcare services will continue to have their activity suspended, while education will continue to be provided mainly online. Thus the pressure for women to stay at home and take care of domestic responsibilities will increase. These dynamics will increase the vulnerability among families with more than 2 children and among single-parent families. The crises always come with opportunities such as increasing investments in education and healthcare services, but the policies promoted

during the last three decades never supported these opportunities, even if we are now confronting their long term negative effects.

A more conservative model in the private sphere is more probable to be adopted by families. Even if right now all the attention and energy is put on the pandemic management, the crises that will come will lead to significant restructurings and reforms in most public sectors. If public policies fail to address the different impact that lockdown and economic recovery measures have and will continue to have on women lives, then the most probable option for families to cope with all adversities will be based on the women withdrawal to house chores and to long term inactivity. The Romanian cultural model, mostly in rural and small urban areas, is based on traditional gender norms, so the current pandemic and crises represent only new opportunities for their reinforcement. Also, the gender impact of the above mentioned measures on women lives will also influence the choices that newly graduates are currently doing. As their access to labor market will be scarce, we could expect among young women on the one hand an increasing interest to continue education, coupled with high dropouts and long-term inactivity in deprived and excluded communities. These will lead to long-term increasing social inequalities.

Assessing the impact that lockdown measures and economic crises will have on women and girls, as well as how gender roles are affected are first steps that has to be done in order to design adequate policy responses and adequate social protection mechanism (UNAIDS, 2012). If the public policies will continue to be based on inadequate investments in public services, practically shifting the care responsibilities to women members of the families, unfortunately the society will continue to reinforce gender inequality (Harman, 2016) and the gains of the last decades in terms of gender equality could be challenged.

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