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The gendered effects of the Covid-19 crisis in Iceland

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About this publication

The Covid-19 pandemic emphasised existing inequalities that remain in Icelandic society today. While schools were never fully closed throughout the pandemic and people were free to leave their homes, the restrictions on people's lives and movement did have a negative effect on gender equality. Unemployment rose among women who already had lower labour participation. Women were still responsible for the majority of unpaid domestic labour, and 2020 and 2021 saw a significant increase in domestic violence.

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THE ICELANDIC CONTEXT

The first Covid-19 case in Iceland was detected on February 28, 2020. Legislation in response to the pandemic first came into effect on March 16, 2020 with restrictions on schools and gatherings of 100 people or more banned (Heilbrigðisráðuneytið 2020). Secondary and higher education institutions were instructed to shift primarily to remote learning, while primary education (which in Iceland is obligatory for children aged 6–16) and preschools (for children aged 1–6) were kept open at limited capacity. This meant that no more than 20 children were allowed in the same classroom and no mixing between groups outside of classrooms. To fulfil the distancing requirements schools shifted to online learning at various capacities, depending on the size and organisation of the institution. It was the responsibility of each individual school to plan lessons so as to fulfil the distancing requirements.

From March 24 there was a partial lockdown where people in Iceland were encouraged to shelter at home but not restricted from leaving the home. During this time, no more than 20 people could gather. Secondary and higher education were completely online. Many workplaces closed, as people were encouraged to work from home where possible. Swimming pools, gyms, bars, beauty salons, and other equivalent activities where people would gather were all directed to close (Embætti Landlæknis 2022).

Restrictions were lifted over the summer of 2020 but were increasingly hardened from July onward as the pandemic resurged. The greatest restrictions since the beginning of the pandemic were instituted on October 31, 2020 and lasted until November 18. Pre-and primary schools were still partially open. A maximum of 10 people were allowed to gather at one time. Covid restrictions would not be as severe as they were at this point during any other point in the pandemic.

INITIATED VACCINATION PROGRAMME

Vaccination against Covid-19 began on December 29, 2020. First to be vaccinated were nursing home residents. New regulations for schools took effect on January 1, 2021. Secondary schools were enabled to reopen (with restrictions) and restrictions on pre-and primary schools were further loosened.

Emergency level was declared for the third time since the outbreak of the pandemic on March 25, 2021. Tighter quarantine rules took effect, including another ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. All domestic restrictions were lifted in late June 2021. This included the full elimination of requirements to wear masks and the bans on gathering.

However, restrictions were reinstated a month later and slowly lifted during subsequent months. Schools stayed open. Again, domestic restrictions were tightened on December 23, 2021 with another partial lockdown. Restrictions were tightened again for the last time three weeks later with a ban of 10 people or more gathering taking effect (Embætti Landlæknis 2022).

All Covid-19 measures, both domestically and at the border, were lifted on February 25, 2022. At the time of writing (August 24, 2022), a total of 204,268 cases of Covid-19 have been confirmed in Iceland with 54.3 per cent of the population confirmed to have caught the virus at some point. At the time of writing there were 179 confirmed deaths due to Covid-19 in Iceland (Embætti Landlæknis 2022b).

CHANGES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the inequalities that remain in the Icelandic labour market. Comparatively, women's participation in the labour market is very high in Iceland, ranked as 14th in the world in 2021 (World Economic Forum 2021: 215). However, women in Iceland are still more likely than men to work part-time and are more likely to reduce their working hours after having children (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 6–8; Gíslason and Símonardóttir 2018: 463). Furthermore, the Global Gender Gap report shows that in Iceland women were more likely than men to drop out of the labour market following the Covid-19 pandemic (World Economic Forum 2021: 44). This is based on statistics from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) between April and June of 2020. This might be partially explained by the fact that women in Iceland are significantly more likely to work part-time than men, by the fact that they are still responsible for the greatest share of household duties and by the still prevalent gender pay gap (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 6–8). Furthermore, women in Iceland were more likely to be employed in the areas of the labour market that were affected most by the pandemic.

Unemployment rose alongside the progression of the Covid-19 pandemic across the country according to data from The Icelandic Directorate of Labour (Vinnumálastofnun). The yearly average unemployment rate was 3.6 per cent in 2019 and more than doubled in 2020 and 2021 (Vinnumálastofnun 2022b). Rates peaked in January 2021 at 11.6 per cent but fell as the year progressed and measured 5.2 per cent in March 2022 (Government of Iceland 2022).

Looking at the overall yearly average unemployment rates, no specific gender difference can be detected. Before the pandemic, in 2019, a slightly higher percentage of women were unemployed in Iceland than men, or 3.7 per cent while among men it was 3.5 per cent (Vinnumálastofnun 2022b). The yearly average in 2020 was 7.9 per cent for both men and women. In 2021 an average of 7.6 per cent of men were unemployed and an average of 7.7 per cent of women.

Looking at the increase in the number of people registered as unemployed segregated by gender we find that the number of unemployed men increased by 77 per cent between 2019 and 2020. Meanwhile, the number of unemployed women increased by 83 per cent (Vinnumálastofnun 2022b). In January 2020, just over 15 per cent of the Icelandic population were immigrants (Hagstofa Íslands 2020).¹ Already before the pandemic, unemployment was disproportionately high among foreign nationals (Vinnumálastofnun 2022c). Looking at the average unemployment of foreign nationals in Iceland we see that the number of men registered as unemployed increased by 141 per cent from 2019 to 2020 and the number of women registered as unemployed increased 158 per cent from 2019 to 2020 (Vinnumálastofnun 2022c).

In January 2021, at the peak of unemployment in Iceland during the Covid-19 pandemic, 33.3 per cent of the unemployed individuals were of foreign origin, 14.9 per cent were foreign women and 18.4 per cent foreign men (Vinnumálastofnun 2022b; 2022c).²

In considering the research carried out on the pandemic it appears that Covid did not necessarily create inequalities where there were none before. The pandemic exaggerated and compounded pre-existing inequalities. This is true for people of foreign origin who were already in more precarious working conditions.

GENDER-SPECIFIC POVERTY AND INCOME INEQUALITY

Poverty as another societal inequality was also exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. A report conducted by the Icelandic Labour Market Research Institute (Varða - rannsóknastofnun vinnumarkaðarins) found that nearly a third of workers reported financial difficulties and reduced financial standing from 2020 to 2021 (Staub and Gísladóttir

2022: 2). This is based on the results of a survey posed to members of The Icelandic Confederation of Labour (Alþýðusamband Íslands) and The Federation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB) between November 24 and December 9, 2021. This was the second time that the same group was surveyed. The findings reflect the changes in answers between 2020 and 2021. According to the report, about 3 in 10 workers belonging to these two unions found it very difficult, difficult or somewhat difficult to make ends meet (Staub and Gísladóttir 2022: 2). Single parents were those worst off financially. It is also reported that the financial standing and mental health of immigrants is poorer than that of native Icelanders and has deteriorated from 2020 to 2021 (Staub and Gísladóttir 2022: 2).

According to the latest findings from 2020, the pandemic has not affected the gender pay gap. According to the data, the gender pay gap is still decreasing steadily and was found to be 12.6 per cent in 2020 (Hagstofa Íslands 2022). It should be noted that obligatory equal pay certification took effect in Iceland in January 2018. All companies and institutions employing 25 people or more are required to obtain the certification. The implementation of the certification is still ongoing and continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2022).

THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

Women use the Icelandic public health service more than men (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 101). Although women's life expectancy is greater than men's, their life expectancy with good health is shorter, or about 66.2 years for women and 71.5 years for men (Steinþórsdóttir 2021: 9). According to a routine survey by the Directorate of Health, men are generally more likely than women to rate their physical and mental health as good or very good (Embætti Landlæknis 2020).

However, the number of women who rated their physical and mental health as good or very good was lower in May to August 2020 compared to the same months in 2019 (66.2 per cent to 72.1 per cent in 2020 compared to 76.8 per cent to 78.3 per cent in 2019). Meanwhile more or the same share of men rated their mental and physical health as good or very good between May and August 2020 and May and August 2019 (74.2 per cent to 71.2 per cent in 2020 compared to 74.0 per cent compared to 66.8 per cent in 2020) (Embætti Landlæknis 2020: 2). According to this data, the pandemic has had more of a negative effect on women's mental and physical health than men's. Significantly, the proportion of men and women who rated their physical health as good or very good rose from March–April of 2019 to March–April of 2020. It went from 62.4 to 75.1 per cent for men and from 62.0 to 63.6 per cent for women (Embætti Landlæknis 2020: 1). The same trend was the case for those who rated their mental health as good or very good.

Covid-19 infection rates did not differ significantly between genders. Data from the Icelandic Directorate of Health (Embætti Landlæknis) shows that 47.6 per cent of registered Covid-19 cases were men, 51.6 per cent women and 0.8 per

¹ An immigrant is here defined as a person who was born abroad and whose parents and grandparents were all born abroad.

² Numbers are from the Directorate of Labour, the calculations are made by the author.

cent other or not registered by gender (Embætti Landlæknis 2022).³

According to the Icelandic Labour Market Research Institute report on workers' experiences in Iceland in 2021 and 2022, workers' mental health deteriorated in those two years. Just over three in ten women, and almost three in ten men report poor mental health in the 2022 report. That is a year-to-year increase of 50 per cent. In the 2021 report the ratio was just over two in ten women, and almost two out of ten men (Staub and Gísladóttir 2022: 2). Although the increase in poor mental health is similar among men and women, women still report a higher level of poor mental health.

COVID AND COMBATING THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

The Icelandic state responded to the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic with a range of measures. All Covid-19 responses are reported on the government of Iceland's website (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2022b). One part is dedicated to examining the impact of these government measures on gender equality in Iceland and on reporting on the measures specifically aimed at promoting gender equality. It is stated that one of the government's most important measures against violence has been to minimise the societal impact of Covid-19 measures which is in part why preschools and primary schools were kept open and no curfews set as in many other parts of the world. Furthermore, anti-violence services did not close during the pandemic and adapted their operations to quarantine rules (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2022c).

The most costly parts of the government interventions were an investment scheme (45 billion Icelandic króna / 317 million euros), authorisation to withdraw private pensions (32.7 billion Icelandic króna / 230 million euros) and a scheme that paid unemployment benefits to workers while they were still employed (28 billion Icelandic króna / 197 million euros) (Fjármála- og efnahagsráðherra 2021: 10).

The government investment scheme is a measure to create jobs, combat unemployment and increase economic productivity (Fjármála- og efnahagsráðherra 2021: 23–24). The withdrawal of private pensions meant that individuals could withdraw their private pensions as an effort to alleviate household income loss during the pandemic (Fjármála- og efnahagsráðherra 2021: 35). Sixty-five per cent of those who made use of the private pension withdrawal scheme were men and the total number of women's withdrawals only made up about 85 per cent of the withdrawals made by men (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2022c), meaning that more men than women benefited from this costly government measure. Because men still earn more than women on average, their private pensions are higher than women's. Finally, the third, most costly intervention was the payment of unemployment ben-

efits to employees of companies who were struggling as an effect of the pandemic. The aim of this measure was to keep people in employment and support employers through the economic struggles caused by pandemic restrictions (Fjármála- og efnahagsráðherra 2021: 29–30). The gendered division of those who received these benefits reflects the gendered division of the workforce (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2022c).

There were nine interventions directly aimed at supporting the most vulnerable groups in society, costing a total of 4.2 billion Icelandic króna (30 million euros) (Fjármála- og efnahagsráðherra 2021: 39). Some of these were direct support to carers of vulnerable children or to those on disability support while others were to organisations and special programmes working to support e.g. mental health care, vulnerable children or immigrants. For example, support was given to low income homes with children to participate in sport and leisure activities, support was increased towards language education for immigrants and health care support was increased in local public health care facilities (Stjórnarráð Íslands 2021: 14–19).

GENDER-BIASED GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS

The Icelandic NGO Feminist Finance produced a report in April 2021 analysing the Icelandic government's measures to ameliorate the economic and social consequences of the pandemic in 2020 from a gender and equality perspective (Femínísk fjármál 2021). The report addresses a gender bias in a number of the government's interventions meant to tackle the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

For example, the extension of income-related unemployment benefits disproportionately benefits men because of the gender pay gap. They point to research showing that women received only about 30 per cent of all income-related benefits in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis because of the gender pay gap (Femínísk fjármál 2021). According to the report, it is estimated that around 85–90 per cent of the jobs created through the Icelandic government's investment scheme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic were jobs in heavily male-dominated sectors, i.e. transport infrastructure, real estate renovation and IT. Furthermore, capital allocated in investment funds to alleviate a stagnation in the economy during and after the pandemic went disproportionately to male innovators and funds. The group highlights in the report the fact that essential workers or frontline workers as they were called during the pandemic are majority female. Significantly, little was done by the government to compensate for the added physical and mental strain experienced by these workers during the pandemic (Femínísk fjármál 2021).

At the beginning of 2021, the City of Reykjavík presented a report on the status of the implementation of gender budgeting in the municipality, including a gender assessment of the city's first responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (Reykjavíkurborg 2021). The City of Reykjavík is the country's largest employer and has around half of the country's population

³ Information obtained through the author's e-mail correspondence with the Directorate of Health (Embætti Landlæknis) in April 2022 as gender segregated data on Covid cases was not available online.

within its catchment area. In this report it is stated that there were no indications that the city's interventions had considered gender and equality perspectives despite that being part of the city's financial policy and despite the local equality authority offering support and advice (Reykjavíkurborg 2021: 19). Sixty-four per cent of the total amount of the city's first Covid-19 response interventions went to construction and maintenance, sectors heavily dominated by men.

COVID, SCHOOLS AND THE DIVISION OF CARE

Icelandic pre- and primary schools were never fully closed during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, all school operations and related activities were strongly reduced and much school activity was moved into the home for extended periods of time. Currently available research on the effects of the pandemic on the division of care is focused on the first wave of the pandemic. Moving forward, it will be important to view the long-term effects of the pandemic restrictions as these will vary from the research summarised below.

No official data is systematically collected that directly measures the gendered division of unpaid domestic labour and care in Iceland. However, academic research has shown that in Iceland, like most parts of the world, women perform and are responsible for a majority of unpaid household tasks (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 18).

A range of policies is in place to indirectly combat this gendered division, e.g. public daycare services, equal division of parental leave support, and workers' rights to take time off from time off from work in case of their children's illness. Furthermore, changes to Iceland's parental leave policy took effect in January 2021 and included an increase in paid leave as well as a more equal division of leave between parents. Since 2021, both new parents are entitled to six months of paid leave, paid in full by the state, with an option to "give" up to six weeks of their parental leave to the other parent. The intended goal of the policy is to encourage a child's connection with both parents and to improve parents' work-life balance (Alþingi 2020).

Some research carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic measured the gendered effects of the pandemic on the division of unpaid domestic labour and care. These are summarised below.

A survey on the gendered division of childcare in Iceland during the Covid-19 partial lockdown in April and May 2020 showed that 42 per cent of women who work for the state or a municipality stayed at home with their children, whereas only 30 per cent of men did so (BSRB –The Federation of State and Municipal Employees 2020). This again supports the hypothesis that women disproportionately took on childcare and domestic duties during the pandemic.

Another empirical study conducted in March and April 2020 with 37 mothers in heterosexual relationships found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the mothers took on more work

in the home than before. They also described intense emotional labour as they worked to keep everyone safe (Bjarnadóttir, Valgerður & Hjalmsdóttir, Andrea 2020: 268). According to the researchers, the partial lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 highlighted already existing structures of inequality in Icelandic households (Bjarnadóttir, Valgerður & Hjalmsdóttir, Andrea 2020: 279).

Researchers from the University of Iceland and Statistics Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands) conducted a survey in May–June 2020 following the first wave of the pandemic on the effects of the pandemic on working parents' work-life balance, and the division of household and care work. The data was collected using a survey from a multinational study entitled "Gender (In) equality in Times of COVID-19".

The research found that the changes in the gendered division of labour during the pandemic were different for care work and domestic work. Both men and women in the survey agreed that women are responsible for a larger share of domestic and care work. Changes in the gendered division of domestic work were related to whether the parents were working from home or not. Fathers who worked from home while their spouse was in the workplace tended to perform more domestic work, while mothers who remained in the workplace but had a spouse at home reduced their share of domestic work. However, the main responsibility of domestic work still lay with the mothers. However, the research showed no significant changes in the gender division of care responsibilities during the pandemic which remained the responsibility of the mothers (Eydal, G.B., Gíslason, I.V. and Bjarnason, T. Forthcoming).

In early 2021 a few questions were added to Statistics Iceland's yearly Income and Living Conditions Survey (EU-SILC) in an attempt to record the changes of the Covid-19 pandemic to the gendered division of household work (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 18). According to the survey, women spend on average 10.1 hours a week on domestic work while men spend on average 7.8 hours. However, the gender division increases in households with children, where women spend an average of 22.4 hours and men 26.8 (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 19). Respondents of the survey were among other things asked to assess whether the load of domestic labour had changed with the Covid-19 pandemic. Fifteen per cent of respondents considered the load to have increased while 76 per cent of women and 80 per cent of men considered the load to be similar than before the pandemic. Furthermore, 83 per cent of respondents with children in the home and 89 per cent of respondents without children said the division of labour was similar now to before (Forsætisráðuneytið 2022: 20).

COVID AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

There was an increase in domestic violence cases in 2020 and 2021 according to data from the Icelandic Law Enforcement Agency's (Rískislögreglustjóri) annual report 2021 (Lögreglan 2021: 2). Domestic violence is defined by the Icelandic Law Enforcement Agency as "related to e.g. spouse/

former spouse or family ties” (Lögreglan 2022b: 1). There was, according to police reporting, an increase in violence at the hands of a spouse/former partner over the two years and also an increase in cases of violence by a family member. The number of cases of violence at the hands of a spouse/former spouse in the last two years had never been higher according to the police case file, around 750 both years, or about 68 per cent of the total amount of reports. The total number of domestic violence cases in Iceland was 1,050 in 2020 and 1,058 in 2021 (Lögreglan 2022b: 1). In 2019 the total number of domestic violence cases was 935, meaning a 12 per cent increase from 2019 to 2020. It is worth noting that there has been a steady increase in reports of domestic violence in Iceland since before the pandemic. However, the police data notes that it has never been as high as in 2020 and 2021.

Seventy-eight per cent of perpetrators in domestic violence cases in 2020 were male and 22 per cent were female; 79.5 per cent in of perpetrators in 2021 were male and 20.5 per cent were female. The police data does not take into consideration other gender categories than male/female. Similarly, 31.5 per cent of victims of domestic violence were male in 2020 and 68.5 per cent were female; 32.8 per cent of victims in 2021 were male while 67.2 per cent were female. (Lögreglan 2022b: 2–3).

Shifting the focus to sexual violence, an unusually low number of rape cases were reported in 2020. This could possibly be attributed to restrictions on gatherings, events and bars etc., according to the Icelandic Law Enforcement Agency (Lögreglan 2021: 2). The total number of reported rape cases was 161 in 2020, a 34 per cent decrease from the previous year. In 2021, the total number of reported cases was 220, a 37 per cent increase from 2020 (Lögreglan 2022c: 2).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Covid-19 pandemic amplified existing social inequalities. This can be seen in the changes in the labour market throughout the pandemic, in the recorded experiences of parents, and in official surveys on people's physical and mental health. It should thus be recommended that policy officials recognise existing social inequalities when researching and making new policy and actively work at eliminating these. As has been reported by the City of Reykjavík and the organisation Feminist Finance, Icelandic authorities fail to do this even when it is part of official policy. Thus, special intervention should be made to strengthen the structures that record and respond to social inequalities.
- As reported by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, by the City of Reykjavík Human Rights and Democracy office, and the NGO Feminist Finance, investment in construction to create jobs as a response to Covid-19 is gender-biased. More men than women were expected to benefit from such interventions. Thus, investment in construction should not be the sole or the main response to a crisis in the labour market or it will create greater gender inequalities.
- The Covid-19 pandemic heightened pre-existing social

inequalities, including the gendered division of labour. If there is a willingness of policymakers to work towards a more equal position of women and men in society then this particular gendered aspect needs to be addressed in policy. Furthermore, routine surveys on the gendered division of unpaid domestic labour and care should be implemented by authorities to combat the inequality this is creating.

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EUROPA

The gendered effects of the Covid-19 crisis in Iceland

Executive summary

- The report summarises statistics and research related to the status of gender equality in Iceland during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic emphasised some existing inequalities that remain in Icelandic society today. This can be seen in the changes in the labour market throughout the pandemic, in the recorded experiences of parents, and in official surveys on people's physical and mental health.
- Statistics from the ILO, World Economic Forum and Statistics Iceland show that women in Iceland were more likely than men to drop out of the labour market following the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Unemployment is disproportionately high among individuals with a foreign background in Iceland and the proportion increased during the pandemic.
- Nearly a third of workers reported financial difficulties and reduced financial standing from 2020 to 2021, according to the Icelandic Labour Market Research Institute.
- Women in Iceland have a longer life expectancy than men but a shorter life expectancy in good health. Men are generally more likely than women to rate their physical and mental health as good or very good. Furthermore, fewer women rated their physical and mental health as good or very good in 2020 compared to 2019. Meanwhile, more or the same number of men rated their mental and physical health as good or very good in 2020 compared to 2019.
- 85-90 per cent of the jobs created through the Icelandic government's investment scheme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic were jobs in heavily male-dominated sectors.
- Expensive government schemes to alleviate the economic burden of the pandemic such as an extension of income-related unemployment benefits and an allowance to withdraw private pensions disproportionately benefited men because of the gender pay gap.
- Women perform and are responsible for a larger share of unpaid domestic and care work in Iceland. Women in the public sector were more likely to work from home than men. Men who did stay at home increased their share of domestic work. According to researchers, the partial lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 highlighted already existing structures of inequality in Icelandic households.
- Iceland saw an increase in violence at the hands of a spouse/former partner during the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic and also an increase in cases of violence by a family member.
- During 2020 an unusually low number of rape cases were reported which could possibly be attributed to restrictions on gatherings, events and bars etc.