



Susana Elisa Pavlou

Covid and Gender in Cyprus

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About this publication

In this paper we analyse the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and measures implemented to contain virus on gender equality in Cyprus. The COVID-19 pandemic and related policy measures appear to have affected women disproportionately and exacerbating labour market inequalities and work-life balance. The existing childcare gap widened due to the suspension of in-school teaching and, as a result, women have been filling the gap in childcare, with consequences on their careers, wellbeing, and safety. Furthermore, as a result of the health measures taken by the government to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, reported domestic violence increased in Cyprus by up to 58%.

Policy responses under the Emergency Measures Taken to Cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic Act lacked a gender perspective. They focused mainly on leave allowances for parents during the suspension of the in-school operation of public and private schools. The childcare policy gap was not addressed in response to the pandemic as there was no provision was made for access to childcare services for children and other dependent people.

About the author

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Covid and Gender in Cyprus

INTRODUCTION

When the pandemic first began in March 2020, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) like many other countries in Europe and around the world, introduced emergency measures to contain the spread of the COVID 19 virus. Measures included restrictions on the freedom of movement, social distancing requirements and limits on gatherings, as well as the closure of public spaces and certain businesses, government institutions, and facilities. On the 31 March 2020, the Cyprus government instituted a general lockdown and an overnight curfew, closed all businesses except those providing essential services, introduced fines for non-compliance, and limited movement to once per day.

Policy responses under the Emergency Measures Taken to Cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic Act¹ focused mainly on leave allowances for parents during the suspension of the in-school operation of public and private schools. In response to the economic crisis that has accompanied the pandemic, the RoC government has released a number of aid packages, pledging millions of EUR for support schemes and financial incentives to keep businesses afloat and ensure employment.²

COVID AND CHANGES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Female participation in the labour market in the RoC is significantly lower than that of men (76,5% vs 87,1% for the age group of 25–54 in 2020).³ According to Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, the labour market situation in Cyprus deteriorated following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic as a result of the economic contraction (negative growth rate of –5,1% in 2020) resulting in an upward trend of unemployment, especially amongst the most vulnerable. The unemployment rate (15+ years old) increased to 7,6% in 2020 from 7,1% in 2019. The youth unemployment rate (15–24 years old) increased to 18,2% in 2020 from 16,6% in 2019. The unemployment of women in the age group 25–64 was higher than that of men of the same age group (7,3% vs 6,5% in 2020).

As regards to employment rates, there was a slight increase of the number of employed of 0.02% while the employment rate (20–64 years old) dropped to 74.9% in 2020 from 75,7% in 2019 (69.1% in 2020 from 70.1% in 2019 for women and 81.1% in 2020 from 81.7% in 2019 for men). The youth employment rate (15–24 years old) also dropped to 31.3% in 2020 from 32.4% in 2019.

New data emerging from Eurofound's unique e-survey, "Living, Working and COVID-19"⁴, showed that job loss in the EU continued to rise one year on with nearly 10% of those with work pre-pandemic becoming unemployed – an increase from 8% reported in summer 2020 and double the figure of spring 2020. For Cyprus, in April/May 2020 36.2% of respondents reported losing their jobs temporarily, while 7.4% stated that they had lost their jobs permanently, among the highest rate of job loss in the EU27 for that period.

¹ The Act is available [here](#) in Greek.

² "Support Measures to Address the Consequences of the Covid-19 Coronavirus as Regards Employment and Enterprises," Press and Information Office of Cyprus, September 3, 2020, https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/press/3092020_3.pdf

³ Republic of Cyprus, (2021). Cyprus Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026, [http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kypros-toavrio.nsf/all/B37B4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/\\$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement](http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kypros-toavrio.nsf/all/B37B4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement)

⁴ Eurofound (2020), Living, working and COVID-19 dataset, Dublin, <http://eurofound.link/covid19data>

A survey carried out to analyse the impact of the pandemic on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Cyprus,⁵ showed that asylum seekers suffered financially, with the loss of livelihoods and delays in receiving welfare benefits as well as lost opportunities for education and further development. They also found it difficult to communicate with authorities and to receive medical care, all compounding to affect their mental and physical wellbeing. From a gender perspective, more men than women were likely to have lost their jobs or livelihoods.

COVID AND POVERTY

According to the results of the Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2020,⁶ with income reference period the year 2019, based on the revised definition, 17,6% of the population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE). Namely, 17,6% of the population was living in households whose disposable income was below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold or was severely materially and socially deprived or was living in households with very low work intensity. The respective rates for men and women and stood at 16,6% and 18,6% respectively. This indicator exhibited an improvement in comparison with the previous year when it stood at 18,6%.

In relation to income inequality, the mean annual disposable income of the household for 2020, with income reference period the year 2019, was €33.862, exhibiting an increase of 0,8% in respect to that of the previous year, which was €33.584.

Cyprus' spending on social protection is low relative to the EU. Compared to an EU27 average of 19% of GDP in 2018, Cyprus spent 12,5% of GDP, which accounts for around 29% of total government spending, significantly less than the 41% of total EU government spending on social protection. Most of social protection expenditure in Cyprus goes to pensions and healthcare, with relatively less being spent on benefits such as, family, unemployment, disability and housing.⁷

Based on the above data, the impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions is not yet visible in official statistics. One can assume that this is due to the fact that the support packages provided by the Cyprus Government in response to the pandemic cushioned the economic impact on households to a large degree. It is expected that any economic effects of

the pandemic on risk of poverty and social exclusion will be visible when data is available for 2021 and 2022.

COVID AND HEALTH ISSUES

INFECTION, HOSPITALIZATION AND DEATH RATES

As of 28 April 2022, 457,257 cases of COVID-19 were diagnosed and 1015 associated deaths were reported in the Republic of Cyprus until February 16th, 2022. Among cases diagnosed, 986 COVID-19 associated deaths were reported in the Republic of Cyprus until April 13th, 2022. The COVID-19 associated mortality is 111 per 100,000 population. Deaths occurred in 585 men (59.3%) and 401 (40.7%) women; the median age of death of persons whose death was associated with COVID-19 was 79 years (IQR: 69-86 years).⁸

In total, 2.6% (n = 7,632) of people with COVID-19 received hospital care, as of February 16th, 2022. The median age of hospitalized patients was 61 years (IQR: 47-73 years). Excluding 157 cases (2.1%) for which sex information is not available, hospitalized cases were mainly males (n = 4,183; 56%).⁹

MENTAL HEALTH

A study aimed examining the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the population of Cyprus suggest that age, gender and place of residency influence the experience of the pandemic.¹⁰ The study found that Cypriot women, compared to Cypriot men, reported higher levels of anxiety, stress, fear, worry, or despair. Therefore, women clearly experienced greater psychological impact due to the pandemic. Additionally, the results showed that females displayed greater personal disinfection habits. That is, women were more likely than men to take preventive measures and engage in hygienic behaviours, such as using hand sanitizer and disinfecting surfaces. A possible explanation of this finding is that frequent disinfection may be a way in which women dealt with the threat of the spread of the virus, as well as the reported emotional distress they experienced regarding the outbreak.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

While data and research on the impact of sexual and reproductive health is limited, according to a survey carried out on the impact of the pandemic on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers found that a large proportion of female respondents indicated that they were unable to access contraceptives (or had irregular access to contraceptives) during the pandemic. Of the 15 respondents who used contraceptives prior to the pandemic, indicated that they had experienced

5 Chatzipanagiotou, K., Akoni, S., Morsheimer, S., Sandilya, H., 2021, A systemic analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Cyprus, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Cyprus. Accessed at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Part%202%20-%20The.%20Survey%20-%20A%20Systemic%20Analysis%20of%20the%20Impact%20of%20the%20COVID-19%20-%20Final%20-%20June%201.pdf>

6 <https://www.cystat.gov.cy/en/PressRelease?id=65452>

7 Cyprus Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026 [http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kyprostoavrio.nsf/all/B37B-4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/\\$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement](http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kyprostoavrio.nsf/all/B37B-4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement)

8 https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/SHORT%20ENG_Report%20COVID-19%20Cyprus%2014April_FINAL.pdf

9 <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea>

10 <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/8/3868/htm>

difficulty accessing contraceptives.¹¹ Data on access to sexual and reproductive services among the general population is not available.

COVID AND COMBATING THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

The Cyprus National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)¹² does not include any measures to ensure that gender will be mainstreamed in the implementation relevant reforms/investments, and there is no information on how women will benefit, as no specific measures have been put in place to ensure this. Furthermore, significant and longstanding gender challenges are not addressed by the NRRP, such as women's low participation in decision-making and the gender pay gap, nor gender challenges which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as violence against women. Thus, a gender perspective is absent from the measures proposed in the reforms/investments, making it unclear how they will contribute to gender equality. There is also a lack of intersectional analysis, and limited understanding of the needs or challenges faced by women from specific social groups or diverse socio-economic backgrounds in the plan.

COVID AND SCHOOLS

The availability of affordable, accessible, and free/low cost childcare is limited in Cyprus creating a burden for families (European Commission, 2020). Childcare policy gaps have a disproportionate impact on women keeping them out of the workforce; 57.6% of inactive women in Cyprus are out of the labour force due to caring responsibilities while the percentage of inactive men for the same reason is significantly lower (13.5%) (Eurostat, 2020). In addition, Cyprus is among the three countries in Europe with the greatest gender inequalities in the domain of care as women dedicate more hours in unpaid care work compared to men (EIGE, 2020). Women's disproportionate burden of care work is the root cause of gender inequalities in pay (EIGE, 2021). Although women's participation in the labour market is relatively high, women are concentrated in poorly paid occupations, and disproportionately undertake unpaid care resulting in an increased gender pay gap (10.4%). The lack of quality and affordable childcare compels many grandmothers to leave the labour market in order to take care of their grandchildren. This is one of the root causes of the pension gender gap that was also higher in Cyprus (39%) than the EU average (29%) (Eurostat, 2021).

The pandemic caused additional difficulties for parents as supporting measures for affordable early child education and care were and are still lagging behind (European Commission, 2020). Cyprus relies heavily on informal settings for childcare as well as long-term care for the elderly, people with disabilities and other chronic conditions. During lockdown, caregivers were granted exemptions from restrictions on movement, to take care of elderly and disabled family members. Movements of divorced or separated parents that were necessary for the uninterrupted communication and contact of parents and children were exempted from the general prohibition. Also, there was a creation of mobile units for servicing elderly and vulnerable populations with consumer goods.

Home schooling was provided using online tools and platforms. In order to counter the COVID-19 emergency, the Government of Cyprus decided to suspend the in-school operation of all public and private schools at all levels on 11 March 2020. Within a few days after school closure, teachers (except those belonging to vulnerable groups) were recalled to schools to create their school specific action plan for distance synchronous and asynchronous learning options. Priority was given to learners' access to a computer/tablet and internet at home. A distance synchronous education programme was implemented, using Microsoft Teams and more than 110,000 teachers and learners gained access to this software. Supportive educational material for all learners was uploaded onto the Ministry of Education's web page and on individual school web pages. Public and private television channels supported overall efforts by broadcasting lessons and other educational programmes, especially for younger learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic and related policy measures appear to have affected women disproportionately and there was a backlash on labour market inequalities and work-life balance (EIGE, 2021). The difference between men and women in terms of work-life balance, particularly for parents of young children, has been well documented and confirmed in all three rounds of the Living, Working and COVID-19 e-survey.¹³ As the pandemic progressed, the biggest increase among parents reporting they were too tired after work to do household tasks was found among women with young children, particularly women with young children who worked only from home. The data for Cyprus showed the highest increase among the EU27 with 49.5% of respondents feeling too tired 'always' and 'most of the time' (data for women and men not available). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities in Cyprus; the existing childcare gap widened due to the suspension of in-school teaching. Women have been disproportionately filling the gap in childcare both before and during the pandemic, with consequences on their careers, wellbeing, and safety.

¹¹ Chatzipanagiotou, K., Akoni, S., Morsheimer, S., Sandilya, H., 2021, A systemic analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Cyprus, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Cyprus. Accessed at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Part%20of%20The%20Survey%20-%20A%20Systemic%20Analysis%20of%20the%20Impact%20of%20the%20COVID-19%20-%20Final%20-%20June%201.pdf>

¹² Republic of Cyprus, (2021). Cyprus Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026. [http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kypros-toavrio.nsf/all/B37B4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/\\$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement](http://www.cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kypros-toavrio.nsf/all/B37B4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement)

¹³ Eurofound (2020), Living, working and COVID-19 dataset, Dublin, <http://eurofound.link/covid19data>

COVID AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

As a result of the health measures taken by the government to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, reported domestic violence increased in Cyprus. During the first lockdown imposed in March 2020, calls to the National Helpline for Violence in the Family (1440) increased by up to 30% between 9 March – 17 March.¹⁴ According to information released by the Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO), during March 2020 alone, out of 2,075 calls received, only 921 were able to be received and addressed whilst the remaining 1,154 were left unanswered.¹⁵ Overall, the number of calls received by the national helpline for victims of DV during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had increased by approximately 47%.¹⁶

In relation to domestic violence, between the middle of March until the 22nd of April 2020, incidents of domestic violence increased by 58% during the imposition of the first lockdown.¹⁷ To make things worse, the telephone helpline run by this NGO did not have the resources to meet the surge in the number of telephone calls received during the lockdown and that as a result, many calls for help went unanswered.

As regards policy action in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, while no targeted coordinated action was undertaken by the authorities to comprehensively address the potential increase in cases of violence against women, the Ministry of Labour provided SPAVO with emergency funding within the framework of the State Aid Programme for the expansion of its services and channels for accessing services, including an SMS service, a live chat available on the organisation website, tele-counselling, and social media messaging. Also, with the assistance of the Ministry of Labour, SPAVO secured additional accommodation for victims and their children in order to ensure that there were available shelter spaces to meet demand.

Other than the above, there have been no specific measures taken by the government or State institutions/agencies on preventing violence against women as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to address the gap in work-life balance and childcare policies. It has also highlighted the importance of paid and unpaid care work. A gender-sensitive recovery must address the childcare gap especially in early childhood, invest in policies of care, as well as tackle gender inequalities in the labour market such as the glass ceiling, pay gap, precarious working conditions that are directly link with the policy gaps in care.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

GENDER MAINSTREAMING

- Gender mainstreaming must be at the heart of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) 2021–2026 ensuring that the diverse needs of women are met under all policies e.g. green transition, digital transformation;
- The foreseen measures under the NRRP addressing gaps in care policies must ensure that they address the needs of all the population including people living in remote areas and migrants;
- Future emergency responses must have a gender perspective with indicators to ensure that the needs of all citizens are met.

RESEARCH

- Implementation of regular time-use surveys to examine women's and men's average use of time, particularly on childcare or care of dependants (elderly, people with disabilities and other chronic conditions), household maintenance and other family tasks;
- Funding for national level research on the short term and long term impact of COVID-19 on work-life balance and women's rights;
- Evaluation of the support measures taken within the framework of the pandemic and their impact on the population (women, men, families, migrants etc.);

FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

- Legislation to give access to voluntary flexible working arrangements such as flexible working hours, condensed working, and remote/home-based working with measures adapted to this situation to ensure the right to disconnect and promote work-life balance;

INVESTMENT IN CARE ECONOMY

- Substantially increase investment in ECEC ensuring the availability of affordable and accessible childcare and long-term care services throughout Cyprus that are in line with the parents' typical working hours;

¹⁴ Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family, 19.03.2020: <http://www.familyviolence.gov.cy/cgibin/hweb?A=9741&V=covid19>.

¹⁵ Pilavaki A., (2020) Gender consequences of pandemic, Hypatia, p. 29. Available at: <https://www.hypatia.org.cy/assets/files/1-Covid19.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 28.

¹⁷ UNFICYP, 06.05.2020: <https://unficyp.unmissions.org/domestic-violence-and-covid-19>.

- Improve the systems of care for the elderly, people with disabilities and other chronic conditions with a financing system that responds to the needs reducing the weight of spending and efforts on their families, and particularly women;
- Address the unequal distribution of unpaid care work through awareness raising and educational programmes.

INCREASE PARENTAL LEAVE

- Increase the duration of paid maternity and paternity leave and provide paid parental leave.

MORE INCLUSIVE POLICIES

- Ensure maternity leave rights for migrant women;
- Revise domestic workers contracts ensuring their right to maternity leave and benefit;
- Ensure childcare policies are also available in remote areas.

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