

Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

5. Domain of time

The unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work along gender lines is considered one of the root causes of gender inequality in society as a whole and in the labour market specifically, as it raises questions about women's exposure to the risk of poverty, access to decision-making and political representation.

In 2019, the adoption of the Work–Life Balance Directive for parents and carers showed strong political will to facilitate better distribution of care and household work between women and men. Among the provisions are new or harmonised labour market rights, such as the right to flexible working arrangements for workers with care responsibilities, carer's leave, parental leave and increased job protection. The directive also includes non-legislative aspects, such as investment in infrastructure for care, particularly long-term care.

The newly released EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 includes closing gender gaps in caring roles as one of its priorities. It proposes a series of measures, such as the transposition and implementation of the Work–Life Balance Directive, greater investment in quality care infrastructure for children, older people and people with disabilities, and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2020c).

The COVID-19 pandemic in Europe brought with it the closure of schools and early education facilities and a lack of availability of social support systems (carers, childminders, grandparents); thus, it has exacerbated the pressure on families – especially women and lone mothers – to combine work caring for children and older family members with paid work (Fodor et al., 2020). Eurostat data show that, in 2019, about 13.4 million adults lived in households with young children where all the adults were working full-time^[1].

The shift to telework in response to the pandemic has affected women and men differently, with preliminary data showing that, among 18–34 year olds, more women than men started teleworking during the pandemic (50% and 37% , respectively)^[2], which could reflect women taking on a disproportionate share of childcare and education while maintaining their paid work.

Research from the United Kingdom carried out during the lockdown has shown that, while women were still spending more time on childcare than men, the gender gap in childcare was smaller than before the pandemic. It highlighted that the division of childcare had grown more equal in households where men either were teleworking or had lost their jobs (Sevilla and Smith, 2020).

In several Member States (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom), people living in residential care facilities have suffered a very high death toll as result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Data from May 2020 show that mortality in long-term care facilities has accounted for a significant share of all COVID-19 deaths, from 21% in England to 66% in Spain (Comas-Herrera et al., 2020; ECDC, 2020).

This tragic loss of life has highlighted the systematic understaffing and underfunding of most residential long-term care institutions. This could create an upswing towards autonomous living and prompt families to move away from residential care and intensify their efforts to provide home-based long-term care (EIGE, 2020e), potentially further aggravating the disproportionate burden of informal care shouldered by women (EIGE, 2019b).

More generally, lockdown situations have highlighted that, despite being invisible, devalued and unaccounted for in GDP measures, daily unpaid care shouldered disproportionately by women is essential to the functioning of society.

Footnotes

[1] Of the nearly 42 million adults living in households with at least one child aged less than 6 years, 32 % were in a situation where all the adults were working full-time. Data from Eurostat for the EU-27, 2019, `lfst_hhwhacc`.

[2] Eurofound, 'Living, working and COVID-19 data' (<http://eurofound.link/covid19data>).