

PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT IN THE EU THROUGH GENDERED LENSES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS USING THE OXFORD COVID--19 GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TRACKER

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and outbreak containment measures have reshaped substantially our daily lives. At the same time, marked heterogeneities - even within the EU - have characterised the strength of the outbreak and the stringency of the restrictions across the Member States. The scholarly debate has devoted extensive attention to the consequences of the pandemic across several dimensions, from the narrow economic one to the threats to democratic institutions. Restrictions generally have a role to play in such an assessment, especially in view of the cross-country heterogeneities highlighted above.

In this context, gender parity has emerged in the early literature of the pandemic as a visible casualty of the health crisis. While the negative impact of women is likewise heterogeneous cross-country, the havoc of stay-at-home restrictions has overburdened women multidimensionally. On the employment front, increased care work has fallen predominantly on women's shoulders. Similarly, confinement in the home has increased the isolation of vulnerable women, reducing the accessibility of support services and conversely increasing that to violent partners. The literature has put forward linkages between such negative gendered outcomes and policy measures such as school closures and lockdowns.

Nevertheless, analyses so far are often case-based, with limited effort in comparatively assessing cross-country containment efforts from a gendered perspective. The work contributes such a comparison within the EU27, providing a gendered scoreboard of pandemic responses based on cross-country data from the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale *et al.*, 2021) for 2020. Variable choice for the scoreboard is supported by the review of the early literature on the gendered impact of the pandemic, highlighting the linkages between specific indicators within the response tracker - namely school closures and lockdown - and negative implication for women. In doing so we contribute an early assessment of the research question of how outbreak responses across the EU compare for their gendered implications.

2. Policy measures with gendered implications

There is a growing body of literature dedicated to gender parity in light of the unbalanced additional burden of the pandemic together with the danger of confinement for vulnerable women. We survey the literature to highlight the linkage between detrimental outcomes for gender parity in terms of employment and violence and policy measures in response to the pandemic.

2.1 Gendered care and employment

Considering gender implications of the Covid-19 a major area of concern in the emergency relates to closures (Sun *et al.*, 2021; Ziedan *et al.*, 2020) halting various working and leisure activities, including schools and childcare or their relocation to within the homes with the support of digital technologies. Together with virtual learning, many workplaces turned to distance working during and following the first lockdown. Technologies supported continuation of work during lockdowns, shielding – unequally – some employees from risk of Covid exposure (Bonacini *et al.*, 2021). In parallel, lockdowns limited outsourcing of care work (e.g., schools or other extracurriculars) increasing the burden on parents – in particular mothers (Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020). As such, the pandemic worsened problematic pre-existing challenges for female employment, markedly in Italy already displaying the lowest participation rate (less than 50%) in Europe before the outbreak (Lagomarsino *et al.*, 2020). Before looking closely at the Italian example, it should be noted that in numerous countries the incidence of the suspension of work activities, the reduction of hours and wages and unemployment affected disproportionately female workers. The Bureau of Labour Statistics data (2020) in the US showed that 59% of applications for unemployment benefit came from women in March and April 2020.

In Italy, after the strict lockdown exiting restrictions in May 2020 men returned to work overwhelmingly more than women (72.4% compared to 27.6%) – partially linked to their concentration in restarting manufacturing activities - while the return to the labour market was slower for women (Casarico and Lattanzio, 2020). Istat data in the second quarter of 2020 record a decrease of 470 thousand units among employed women compared to the same period of the previous year, of which the majority is composed by people employed with fixed-term contracts, and the rate of employment under the 50%. The risk is therefore that the - albeit slow - trend of a growing labour participation of women in the last ten years will be interrupted and reversed. Considering the last available data for the 2020 (Istat, 2020a), the percentage of women who lost their jobs in 2020 was double than males. Focusing

on new hires, women are also penalized: in the first nine months of 2020 compared to the same period of the 2019 there was a decrease of more than 26% for new job position for women compared to a 20.7% decrease in contracts activated for men (Istat, 2020b). Moreover, women are the category with the lowest number of re-entries into the labour market. Considering the period from 4 May to 30 September 2020, 67,000 people, who had lost their jobs during the period 1 February - 3 May, returned into the labour market but only the 42.2% of women had this opportunity (Istat, 2021). Furthermore, the reduction in women's working hours can generate a decrease spiral that can lead to exit from the job market (Berardi *et al.*, 2020) or penalties in terms of career and salary (Rhubart, 2020). A survey conducted in Italy by Antonietti *et al.* (2021) highlighted how 30% of women with school-age children considered the option of leaving work if the children did not return to the classroom in the new school year and that 65% considered online teaching to be not compatible with their job. Another factor affecting work during the pandemic, with specific gender repercussions with substantial implications for the future is the "home-family-work" relationship. For many women the crisis has generated a serious challenge of reconciliation between family and working needs, changing the trend of the recent decades with an increasingly consistent outsourcing of domestic and care work to the market and public agencies (Alon *et al.*, 2020). Schools closures has significantly increased the burden of domestic work and care of younger children, especially in helping with distance learning, redefining the balance within the household also on the basis of the work of women and men, nonetheless with linkages to the pre-existing division of labour (Waddell *et al.*, 2020).

As argued by Rhubart (2020) in the US about 80% of adults who did not work because they had to take care of children at home from school or kindergarten were women. The Italian data likewise show how domestic and care activities have continued to be a women responsibility in the majority of the cases. Even before the crisis the burden fell exclusively on women in 74% of cases (IPSOS Mori, 2019) in 27% of cases resulting in leaving their jobs to take care of children. The increase in care responsibilities of employed parents has pushed many to change their working hours in order to respond to the changing needs of their family. Data from international research (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021) but also from Istat surveys, highlight how women have had to redefine, more than men, their schedules and other aspects of their employment, with inevitable implications also in terms of the wage gap (Istat, 2020b). For example, a survey conducted by Del Boca *et al.* (2020) showed that 68% of working women with partners spent more time on housework during the lockdown than before, 29% the same time, only 3% have less commitment than in the past. Looking towards the future, it is clear that these repercussions on the job market will be relevant for a long period. In

particular, the scenario is that of an increase of imbalances to the detriment of women, linked in particular to different dimensions such as precariousness, difficulties in work-life balance, lack of support services (including in particular those for early childhood) and the greater rigidity of women's job market (Istat, 2020b).

2.2 Gender based violence in lockdown

Confinement and social isolation may be essential for pandemic management, while bearing substantial psychological and social consequences. Past natural disaster such as the eruption of Mount st. helens, Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti have linked stay-at-home restrictions with gender-based violence (Palermo and Peterman, 2011; Enarson and Fordhman, 2001). Globally, similar patterns emerge for the Covid-19 pandemic (Waksman and Blank, 2020). Spain, France, India, Australia, United Kingdom, USA, Argentina reported a 60% increase in calls to victim support lines: "upwards of 25% in some countries and in other ones the reported cases have doubled" (United Nations, 2020). Table 1 to follow presents a cross-country overview during the first wave of 2020.

Table 1 – Increase in gender-based violence in selected countries

Nation	Gender-based violence trends
Spain	+30% in domestic violence (Sharifi <i>et al.</i> , 2020)
France	+18% in domestic violence (Sharifi <i>et al.</i> , 2020)
United Kingdom	there was a 25% increase in phone calls to anti-violence lines in the first 2 weeks of the lockdown (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020)
Mexico	March was the month with the most violence against women, on average in 2020 there was an increase of 25%. (De la Miyar <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
Brazil	Registered an increment of 17% in the number of calls denouncing violence against women in March 2020 (Marques <i>et al.</i> , 2020).

As emerged from the table, domestic violence has grown all over the world during forced segregation at home as it becomes very difficult for victims to report and flee their homes. In Italy, according to Istat statistics (Istat, 2020c), calls in the first two weeks of March – compared to those of the same period of 2019 – decreased by 55.1% to reverse upward during the second half of March. As argued by Ruspini, using Di.Re data (Istat, 2020c) there was an exponential growth with

about 2900 cases of women who turned to anti-violence centres in March – more than 74% compared to the monthly average recorded in 2018. A further element emerged from these data it is that 98% of the women who have asked for help are Italian: migrant women could be invisible to this control system. Intersectional challenges – such as migrant background, socio-economic disadvantage or disability can further compound discrimination and difficulty in escaping violence. During the first full pandemic period – 1 March-16 April 2020 – the Italian toll-free anti-violence and stalking number (1522) received over five thousand calls, 73% more than in the same period of 2019 (Istat, 2020a). Between March and June 2020, the number of calls recorded compared to the same period of the previous year increased by 119.6%, going from 6956 to 15280 cases. A further change potentially linked to is important that communications using chats compared to calls have increased fivefold starting from 417 (2019 data) to 2666 messages (Istat, 2020d).

The resulting picture evidences the negative gendered implications of lockdowns for gender-based violence and of school closures for the labour market prospects.

3. Data and methodology

The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) methodically collects data on different common policy responses deriving from governments' pandemic management (Hale *et al.*, 2021). It is based on 20 indicators with data from more than 180 countries, measuring the severity of the outbreak (e.g., deaths and cases), enacted restrictions (e.g., lockdowns, travel bans, school closures, etc.), non-medical health interventions (e.g., testing and tracing policies) and economic support measures. Additionally, it provides several indices aggregating – for example – all containment and health measures, described in Table 2 below, together with indicators selected on the basis of the literature evidence on the impact of given restrictions on gender equality.

The selected variables allow to map the two key gendered dimensions of containment measures, while comparing it through the indices to the overall strictness of restrictions (Stringency and Containment) and to the severity of the outbreak (cases and deaths). The analysis employs a scoreboard methodology well-established for comparative policy analysis across the EU Member States, ranging from the longstanding and widely known Digital Economy and Society Index and European Innovation Scoreboard to most recent efforts such as the EU Justice Scoreboard and the Social Scoreboard which is included in the assessment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

Table 2 – Variable description.

Variables	Mean	Max	Min	Description
Stringency	56.86	67.95	43.52	Index aggregating all eight restrictions (e.g., schools, stay-at-home, workplace closures, travel limitations, etc.) indicators and information campaigns
Containment	54.50	66.71	39.72	Index aggregating all contained in stringency plus additional health measures indicators (e.g., testing, tracing, facial covering; vaccination, etc.)
Schools	1.85	2.59	1.23	Coding: 0 - no measure; 1 - recommended; 2 - required some; 3 required all
Lockdowns	0.91	1.46	0.33	Coding: 0 - no measure; 1 - recommended; 2 - required some exceptions; 3 required minimal exceptions
Cases	36773	74148	6516	Cumulative cases per million people from March 1 to December 31, 2020,
Deaths	721	1684	101	Cumulative deaths per million people from March 1 to December 31, 2020,

Our scoreboard is generated by mapping across each variable the relative comparative position in the top, middle or bottom third marked visually through a traffic light indicator. On such a basis, we single out and mark as “green” countries that comparatively (considering outbreak severity and stringency of restrictions) rely less on measure with a particularly negative gendered implication – giving a higher relevance to school closures when conflicting with performance in terms of lockdown given the broader audience affected. Countries over relying on such problematic measures are conversely marked as “red”. The analysis considers the pandemic over 2020, starting from March to guarantee full coverage across the EU27, while also differentiating across the two waves with August 31 as a cut-off.

4. Covid-19 restriction in the EU: gender scoreboarding

Figure 1 below maps the severity of the outbreak, restrictions and specific containment measures carrying extensive gendered implications: school closures and lockdowns. As shown in Table 2, providing variable descriptive statistics, heterogeneities are substantial on all accounts. Countries range from suffering as little as 101 deaths per million in the full timeframe considered to the staggering 1684. Similarly, responses vary. Cross-country, the Containment index average over 2020 varies from below 40 to well over 65. Composition of the policy mix chosen to contain the pandemic is also heterogeneous: lockdowns average from as low as 0.33 to 1.46, while school closures from 1.22 to 2.59. Figure 1 below shows

how differences across all indicators do not necessarily align: some countries experiencing severe outbreaks display comparatively more limited stringency of containment efforts while others enact draconian restrictions for relatively limited contagion.

Figure 1 – Scoreboard of gendered pandemic responses across the EU27.

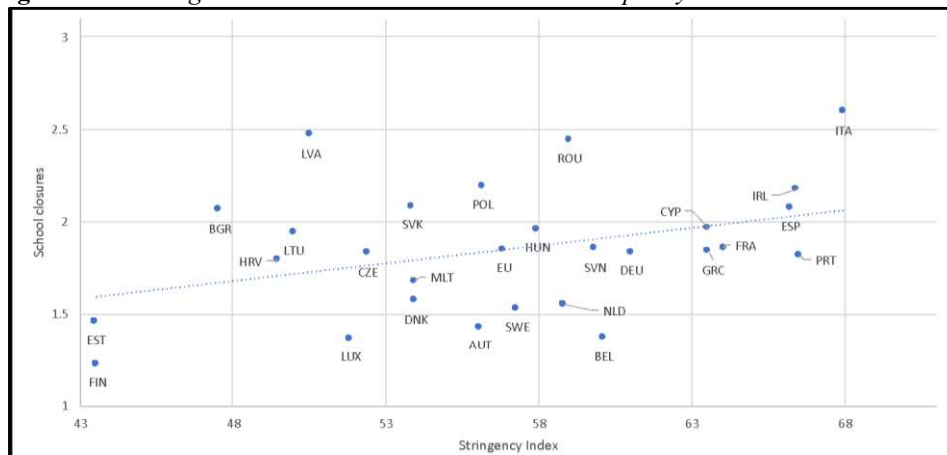
	2020						First wave						Second wave					
	SI	CI	Schools	Lockdown	Cases	Deaths	SI	CI	Schools	Lockdown	Cases	Deaths	SI	CI	Schools	Lockdown	Cases	Deaths
Austria	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Belgium	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Bulgaria	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Cyprus	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Czech Rep.	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Germany	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Denmark	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Spain	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Estonia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Finland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
France	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Greece	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Croatia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Hungary	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ireland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Italy	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lithuania	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Luxembourg	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Latvia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Malta	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Netherlands	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Poland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Portugal	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Romania	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Slovak Rep.	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Slovenia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sweden	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
EU	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

The data considers the period of 2020 from the first of March to the end of the year with August 31 as the cut-off between the two waves. SI and CI reflect Stringency and Containment Indices.

A similar reasoning applies to the key variables of interest, lockdowns, and school closures. A country like Belgium, with among the most severe outbreak is on the lower end of the school closure spectrum among the EU27. The exact opposite is the case for a country like Latvia, with a low outbreak and high school closures. From the perspective of how school closures compare to overall restrictions, Lithuania performs similarly to the other Baltic country: low for Stringency and Containment indices while middling for school closures. The opposite is the case for France among the highest for overall restrictions but not quite as much for school closures. In comparing the traffic-lights of the variables of interest – favouring the assessment of school closures when conflicting with lockdowns given the broader audience affected from a gendered perspective – Figure 1 singles out countries that by the level of their outbreak and restrictions

over-relied on such measures problematic for equality, marked with a red background. Those countries putting a premium on keeping school open compared to their ranking for outbreak severity and over-all containment measures are conversely singled out through a green background. Beyond the full length of the sample in 2020 a parallel reasoning is carried out across the first and second wave to pinpoint an evolution of approaches – as arguably more options to manage the pandemic without generalised school closures were available later into the crisis – and policy learning. Fewer countries over-rely on school closure in the second wave compared to the first, while there is an increase in the number of Member States sparing gendered measures compared to outbreak strength and other interventions. Hungary, Malta, and Portugal even move from the red to the green group regardless of the stability or worsening of their outbreaks. A few countries remain consistently in the high (Cyprus, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania) and low (Belgium and Sweden) gendered implication groups.

Figure 2 – *Heterogeneous choices across the containment policy mix*



The data reflects the full timeframe of the analysis in 2020

Results highlight heterogeneity across policy choices along two dimensions: how stringently to respond for a given level of the outbreak and how much in obtaining a given level of containment to rely on measures of school closures and lockdowns. As shown in the literature review, the implication of resorting heavily to distance learning or rather preserving in-person attendance comes with substantial cost for women employment and hence gender equality. Figure 2 offers at first glance a comparison of how countries score across the preponderance of school closures among their policy choices to contain the spread of Covid-19 comparing scores in this measure to the overall Stringency index. When only

considering the choice among different policy options, problematic over-reliance emerges for several Central and Eastern European and (i.e., Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic) as well as Southern European (i.e., Italy, Spain, Croatia) Member States across very different levels of containment (and outbreak). The only Member States not belonging to the two groups is Ireland, suggesting a geographical divide.

5. A gendered pandemic response outlook

Mapping pandemic responses across the EU27 from gendered lenses reveals substantial heterogeneities in policy choices across the Member States. Countries vary for different levels of outbreak and containment responses in the extent to which they resort extensively to lockdowns – dangerously increasing the risk of gender-based violence – and school closures – negatively affecting women labour market prospects. Comparing results across the two pandemic waves signals partial improvement in the over-reliance on containment measures with negative gendered implications. Nevertheless, the cost of policy choices potentially pressuring women with care responsibilities out of the labour market may be substantial and long-lasting and vary substantially within the EU27. The marked cross-country differences show some geographical cohesion indicating the gendered outlook may be especially negative in the South and East of Europe. Such a pattern overlaps with pre-pandemic heterogeneities in progress in gender parity as progress towards equal societies lags especially in the European periphery. Further research should consider whether less equal societies enacted pandemic crisis management policy choices especially detrimental to women. There is a risk, linked to countries already lagging behind for gender equality will further slow or revert their progress at the hands of the pandemic. Results underline how policy choices such as pandemic management should carefully consider gender implications, while heavily correcting the course in the Covid-19 recovery effort. The question remains of whether countries with widened gendered gaps from the pandemic will compensate through higher salience of equality in their recovery or as suggested by our scoreboard, progress in gender parity may act as a precondition for sensitivity to gendered implications. Such a crucial question is particularly timely as Next Generation EU, enacted nationally by the Member States through National Recovery and Resilience plans, foresees gender mainstreaming across its priorities. Our findings highlight the importance of drafting and assessing the plans through the lenses of gender equality.

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SUMMARY

Pandemic management in the EU through gendered lenses: a comparative analysis using the Oxford Covid-19 government response tracker

The Covid-19 crisis has led to unprecedented containment measures, often at the expense of allegedly less urgent priorities, such as gender parity, raising a substantial risk of reversing the recent progress even in contexts – such as that of the European Union – which have long made female empowerment and an equal society a mainstreamed objective in all areas of policymaking. The contribution considers pandemic responses through gendered lenses to provide a cross-country comparison within the EU27 during the first year of the pandemic health crisis. On the basis of the early literature on the gendered impact of the pandemic, we single out particularly problematic containment measures for equality (school closures and lockdowns). Accordingly, we develop a scoreboard of the over-reliance on such measures across the EU27, showing heterogeneities which cannot be reduced to the different severity of the outbreak and containment effort. Results show best and worst performers from the perspective of a gendered response outlook, pinpointing how such negative dynamics are especially concentrated in the South and East of Europe. The work highlights the importance of evaluating gendered implications of all policy measures and the urgency to mitigate the legacy of Covid-19 restrictions by putting equality at the centre stage of the pandemic recovery effort.

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