
Gender Equality and Public Policy during COVID-19

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 has affected men and women worldwide. The gender dimension of COVID-19 has attracted the attention of researchers and policy-makers: while women seem to be less severely hit by the virus and are more compliant with the restricting rules imposed to reduce the spread of the contagion, they risk to suffer more the economic consequences of the pandemic, because they are more vulnerable on the labor market and because they are carrying on most of the burden of housework and childcare which increased substantially during the lockdown. Public policies are required to address the emergency and to deal with its gender implications. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women leaders have performed better than men in dealing with the emergency. This paper explores the evidence on the gender dimension of the pandemic under a new perspective proposed by Profeta (2020), focused on the double relationship between gender equality and public policy: on one side, I show which policies can support gender equality in times of COVID-19 and, on the other side, I explore whether women leadership can promote successful measures. While the evidence provided is only suggestive, future studies should assess causal relationships. (JEL codes: J16 and J18)

Key words: female employment, housework, childcare, female leadership

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus has affected men and women worldwide. The gender dimension of COVID-19 has attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers. Several interesting regularities have emerged. First, women are less affected from the virus than men and they are dying less (Global Health 50/50; Wenham, Smith and Morgan 2020). Second, women are more compliant with the rules imposed on individual behaviors (Galasso et al. 2020), such as isolation at home or wearing masks. In all the countries analyzed by Galasso et al. (2020), women are more likely to perceive COVID-19 as a very serious health problem, to agree with restraining public policy measures, and to comply with

them. These facts are likely to have important implications on the design of policies and open the avenue to gender-based measures.¹

Public policy measures have also to take into account the evolution of gender gaps in the economy along two fundamental dimensions. The first one is related to how women are affected economically and on the labor market. Working women are more exposed to the risk of contagion, since the female-dominated sectors such as education and health imply huge and risky interactions. Working women are also more vulnerable than working men, since they have lower income and lower prospects of career. These arguments point to a negative effect of coronavirus on gender gaps, which risk being amplified. The second and related dimension is the change of family relationships. If working from home for men and women increases the sharing of housework and childcare, the coronavirus crisis and the consequent induced home-office has the potential to reduce the gender gaps in the long-run. Which policies are more appropriate to reduce the risks of larger gender gaps and amplify the opportunities of lower gender gaps?

The relationship between gender equality and public policy is 2-fold (Profeta 2020). Not only public policy may support gender equality, but women leadership itself can be fundamental in promoting successful measures which, in turn, promote gender equality. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women leaders have performed better than men in dealing with the emergency. The COVID-19 pandemic offers the possibility to explore this two-sided relationship.

This paper reviews the evidence on the gender dimension of the pandemic by showing how public policy is shaping gender gaps in times of COVID-19 and how women leadership can play a role in dealing with the pandemic. The evidence reported is purely descriptive, but it sheds lights on interesting patterns, which are worth investigating in order to assess the relationship between gender equality and public policy.

The paper is organized as follows: next section analyzes the effects of COVID-19 on gender gaps in the labor market, Section 3 explores the changes in family relationships induced by COVID-19, Section 4 explains how public policy measures introduced to react to COVID-19 can affect gender equality, and Section 5 how women leadership can affect outcomes. Section 6 concludes.

2. Gender Gaps in the Labor Market during COVID-19

The public health crisis of COVID-19 has rapidly turned into a job crisis (OECD 2020), with crucial economic consequences. The GDP substantially dropped in the first quarter of 2020 in all OECD countries and, on average, GDP is projected to have fallen by 13.2% in the second quarter of 2020.

The pandemic crisis has an impact on the labor market much larger than the previous global financial crisis: in OECD countries, taking into account both the drop in employment and the reduction in hours worked among those who remained in work, total hours worked fell by 12.2% in the initial 3 months of the pandemic, compared to 1.2% in 2008. Many countries had to stop sectors of their economy in order to contain the spread of the virus.

1 Policies include rules and communication about them (wearing masks, reduce mobility). Since men are less compliant than women in all countries (Galasso et al. 2020) communication differentiated by gender is recommended.

Vulnerable workers are more seriously hit by the crisis: low-paid workers have suffered greater job or income losses, workers in non-standard employment have been particularly exposed to the crisis, young people risk a reduction of their future prospect of jobs. Differently from the past financial crisis, which had a greater impact on male-dominated sectors (construction, manufacturing, finance), the COVID-19 crisis is likely to have a similar impact on male and female employment (Alon et al. 2020; Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020), since the social measures taken have affected sectors where both genders are employed (ILO 2020).

How can we measure vulnerability of women's work during COVID-19? First, existing gender gaps on the labor market matter. Women's labor market attachment is weaker than men's, especially for mothers. Gender gaps in participation to the labor market and in hours worked are still high in OECD countries: on average, in 2019 the OECD labor force participation rate (15–64 years old) was 65.1 for women and for 80.6 men. Women's income is lower than men's and their poverty rates are higher. Single mothers are particularly vulnerable.

Second, sectors of activity dominated by women are particularly affected by the crisis of COVID-19. Women represent two-thirds of the health workforce worldwide, including 85% of nurses and midwives (Boniol et al. 2019), and account for 90% of long-term care workers across OECD countries (OECD 2020). Women in these sectors have lower risks of unemployment as the demand for healthcare workers increases with the pandemic. However, these works pose women at high risk of contagion. Similarly, women are dominant in the education sector: when school re-opens, women are on the front. It is also worth noticing that these jobs and many others female dominated belong to the public sector, which offers more protection to workers than the private sector in times of recession. While we know that in general women have been so far less affected by the virus, there is no clear evidence that working women are in a better position than men in the fight against COVID-19, at least in terms of susceptibility. According to Bertocchi (2020), when we consider overall gender differences in diagnosed COVID-19 cases (with women less affected than men by the virus), we cannot disregard socio-economic and demographic factors: working-age women are more susceptible to the disease than working-age men, likely due to women's over-representation in jobs—namely, health and education—that expose them to a higher risk of contagion. Women are also the majority in food and beverage, accommodation, retail, and services which require high interaction with other people. Thus, when we consider age and occupations, working women are not less susceptible than men. Rather the contrary, that is working women turn out to be more at risk than men.

Third, the impact of coronavirus on gender gaps in the labor market depends on the nature of work and type of occupation, namely whether an occupation is considered critical and thus not affected by stay-at-home restrictions and whether the nature of the work in the occupation allows for telecommuting. According to Alon et al. (2020), in the USA, a greater share of men (52%) than women (39%) work in telecommutable and/or critical occupations, suggesting that women are more exposed to unemployment risks during this crisis than in past recessions. Galasso and Foucault (2020) report that in several OECD countries (Austria, Canada, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden) women stop working more than men, while the difference is not significant in the other countries they analyze (Australia, Brazil, France, New Zealand, UK, and USA). Since the job losses during recessions produce persistent, negative effects, in countries where women stop working more than men existing gender gaps are likely to be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

Fourth, since women bear most of the burden of housework and childcare, the lockdown, the closures of schools, and working from home have increased the burden on the family, with serious consequences especially on women (Queisser, Adema and Clarke 2020). This point introduces to the issue of family relationships which I develop further in the next section.

3. Family Relationships during COVID-19

On average, in OECD countries, women spend 2 h per day more than men in unpaid work at home (OECD 2020). This asymmetry is likely to produce part of the gender gaps that we observe on the labor market: if women take care of most of the family responsibilities, their career expectations are reduced, as firms anticipate their likely reduced effort on the job. Gender gaps depend crucially on the unequal division of housework and childcare. Moreover, mothers are more likely to be employed full-time when fathers are more involved in the family (Fanelli and Profeta 2019).

The outbreak of Coronavirus and the consequent lockdown and closure of schools has increased the amount of work for families. Moreover, grandparents are discouraged to interact with children and thus they have reduced childcare. How is this increased work shared between men and women in the family? If the extra work is an additional burden for women, gender gaps are expected to enlarge. However, as pointed out by several authors (Alon et al. 2020) an opposite outcome is also possible. Working from home, in fact, as all types of flexible work arrangements, is proved to be particularly beneficial for women who struggle to combine professional and personal life, because it promotes work-life balance. Goldin (2014) defines the changes in how jobs are structured and remunerated to enhance temporal flexibility as the ‘last chapter’ of the great convergence towards equality between men and women. Similarly, if fathers are forced to stay at home for work, they have the opportunity to be more employed in domestic work and childcare, especially in dual-earner couples where the mother has to continue to work outside home and the father becomes the only parent at home, thus changing traditional sharing of home responsibilities and traditional social norms. To the extent that this new equilibrium emerges, gender gaps are expected to reduce.

Existing evidence across several countries suggests that we are still at an initial stage of this possible transformation. In Italy, one of the countries more seriously hit by the pandemic, Del Boca et al. (2020) analyze a sample of 1000 representative Italian women and show that the distribution of the extra family work between women and their partners depends on the work arrangements of each partner during the lockdown (working from home, at the usual place, not working). However, they find that the burden is still taken mostly by women. While childcare is more equally shared within the couple, housework is predominantly a female task. Yet in couples where the woman works at the usual place and her partner works from home, 55% of men increase their participation to housework against only 40% of women. In couples where the woman works at the usual workplace and her partner stops working, 54% of men increase their time spent on childcare versus only 31% of women. These results suggest that working from home for men may have some positive implications on their involvement in housework and childcare, thus potentially alleviating the gender gaps. In symmetric situations, however, when both partners work at home, the extra burden falls clearly on women: 65% of women increase their

housework versus 40% of men. The corresponding percentages for childcare are 77% for women and 60% for men.

Similar results are obtained by [Biroli et al. \(2020\)](#): using a survey on Italy, UK, and US households, the authors find that intra-household cooperation is still low and it is associated with great tensions. [Farré et al. \(2020\)](#) use survey data collected in May 2020 in Spain to show that women are more likely to lose their job than men and that, while men increase their participation in housework and childcare, most of the burden falls on women. [Sevilla and Smith \(2020\)](#) focus on childcare in the UK and show that women bear the majority (around 63%) of the extra burden during COVID-19. This is partly due to the fact that during the pandemic women are less likely to work than men. However, they also show that fathers increase the time they spend on childcare, particularly non-working fathers and fathers working from home. When fathers are not working, as a consequence of the lockdown and the reduction in hours worked, childcare is equally shared between fathers and (working) mothers. Thus, the gender gap in within-household allocation of tasks decreases.

All these results point to the unintended consequences of measures such as the lockdown to a change in the division of intra-family distribution of work. These measures in fact do not have the goal of reducing gender gaps, but of reducing the spread of coronavirus. Yet their unintended consequences on gender gaps are of a fundamental importance and have to be recognized. Overall, COVID-19 gives the possibility to massively experience flexibility of work, in particular working at distance. The research I mentioned shows that flexibility of work (for mothers and fathers) improves work–life balance for women while, at the same time, it increases the involvement of men in housework and childcare. The final result may have positive long-term implications for gender equality.

What will happen when back to normal times? Even in normal times, flexible work arrangements can potentially reduce gender gaps. In a paper with M. Angelici ([Angelici and Profeta 2020](#)), I have analyzed the introduction of flexibility of time and place of work (which we call ‘smart-working’) before COVID for a randomized sample of workers of a large Italian company. Following the methodology of randomized control trials, we have selected a sample of 310 workers (containing both white- and blue-collar workers) and randomly divided it into two groups; the workers in the first group (the treated group) had the option to work ‘smart’ (i.e., with no constraints on the place or time) 1 day per week for 9 months in agreement with their supervisors, while the workers in the second group (the control group) continued to work traditionally. We show that, for the same number of hours of work, workers involved in smart-working increased their productivity compared to that of workers who continued working traditionally. Positive effects on their well-being also emerged: workers who experienced flexibility were more satisfied with their social life and life in general, they claimed to be more able to focus, make decisions, appreciate their daily activities, overcome problems, and experience reduced stress and loss of sleep. In terms of gender effects, on one side flexibility is particularly useful for women, because it alleviates the work-family trade-off which women experience. On the other side, flexibility increased by almost 50% the time men spend in housework. This implies that, although not being a gender policy, even outside the pandemic emergency, flexible work helps increase the balance of roles within the family, which is an essential step toward gender equality. Thus, flexible work has unintended consequences on gender equality, even in normal times, which can be recognized and exploited.

4. Public Policy and Gender Gaps

Countries have reacted to the outbreak of coronavirus through a series of policy measures of unprecedented amount. OECD countries have introduced several measures: financial support to firms, income support to people losing jobs and income, to quarantined workers and to people in care needs (including families with small children), job retention schemes and retention regulations, extensions to paid sick leave. They have also encouraged teleworking and increased the health and safety standard of firms, helping workers stay at home.

Are these policy measures gender neutral? Do they promote or challenge gender equality?

Income support to vulnerable workers is expected to be more beneficial for women than for men, as women are more likely to be vulnerable, especially in times of losing jobs and low income. Programs of job retention to preserve jobs are also useful. However, it will be important to monitor what happens when firms will return to normal business activity and will be able to dismiss workers. Plans which guarantee gender equality in restructuring of firms and firing procedures are not common in OECD countries, but are needed to ensure that gender gaps on the labor market will not enlarge.

Gender implications are expected to come also from policy measures which support family needs and their work–life balance, such as the additional time period of parental leave or in-kind benefits (such as baby-sitter vouchers) which have been introduced in several countries, in particular after the closure of schools. In fact, the closure of schools and childcare facilities has caused serious problems for working parents, especially in presence of small children. Parents had to supervise home schooling and to arrange care for their children during the working day, making it very difficult for them to work full time. Periods of special leaves, which were not very common across OECD countries (OECD 2020) have thus been introduced as a possible solution to this emergency. If these periods of extra leaves are equally shared among men and women, they may be useful for families and for gender equality. However, if they are taken only by women, they risk posing women out of the labor market for a prolonged period and reduce the potential to share workload at home with men, thus compromising even more the return to work of women. It is therefore very important to monitor that men and women equally benefit from these programs.

As already mentioned, working from home may also have important consequences on gender gaps. It has the potential to alleviate work-family trade-offs for women and to induce a better sharing of family work within the couple, with an increased participation of men. However, there is also the risk that working from home becomes a female-dominated option, with men going back to work at the usual workplace and women continue working from home and enjoying the advantage of flexible work. If this is the case, the apparent advantage will fire back against women: working from home will become a marginalized scheme of work, with lower opportunities of career, while, at the same time, the advantage of equal sharing given by the presence of men at home will disappear. Again, it is very important to monitor that men and women will continue to equally and symmetrically use the flexible work which has been experienced during the lockdown. Many countries had pre-existing regulations of teleworking and flexible work arrangements. Yet take-up rates were quite low: around 17% of workers in Europe (Eurofound 2017) and 16% of workers in the USA (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019) used telecommuting. This is not only because

several jobs cannot be done at distance, but also because of the resistance of firms, which we now expect to be reduced after the recent massive experience. Simplified procedures were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the consequence that the share of workers working from home in mid-April amounted to between 30% and 60% of the workforce (Galasso and Foucault, 2020). An appropriate regulatory framework has still to be developed to guarantee an equal use by men and women, as well as the right of disconnecting, which risks otherwise to disproportionately affect women.

Overall, the gender implications of the enormous effort of countries in policy reactions to COVID-19 are not obvious. While the policies implemented help the more vulnerable groups of workers, including women, a careful monitoring on how measures such as job retention, parental leaves, and home-working target men and women is needed, in order to ensure that these measures support gender equality and the reduction of gender gaps instead of enlarging them. This is the time to propose and make fundamental adjustments to our public policies and welfare state and prioritize the reduction of gender gaps, in order to turn risks into opportunities.

5. Female Leadership and Policy

Turning to the second part of the relationship, how is female leadership related to measures to react against COVID-19? In this section, I review the (few) existing contributions on the role of female leadership in public policies. I point out that the evidence proposed is suggestive and based only on correlations. Future studies will carefully provide causal evidence.

A recent study by Coscieme et al. (2020) analyzes 35 countries and shows that countries led by female leaders experienced fewer COVID-19 deaths per capita and were more effective and rapid at flattening the epidemic's curve, with lower peaks in daily deaths. They argue that this is because countries led by women introduced earlier restrictive measures and were more successful in obtaining the collaboration from the population. However, they also argue that countries led by women are in general more focused on social equality and environmental issues in their policymaking, thus suggesting a problematic endogeneity issue, that is it is not women's leadership driving the outcome, but rather having a female leadership is itself the result of a socio-political context where health and social issues are more important. From an economic point of view, understanding the causal impact of women's leadership on outcomes is a difficult task, yet necessary to draw policy conclusions (Profeta 2020). To this respect, the study by Coscieme et al. (2020) is not conclusive.

In a similar spirit, evidence is also provided by Garikipati and Kambhampati (2020), who construct a dataset for 194 countries including the gender of the leader and major socio-economic variables. They explore the existence of significant and systematic differences by gender of the national leader in the number of COVID-cases and deaths in the first quarter of the pandemic. They find that countries led by women have better performance related to COVID and they associate this correlation to the style of policy response adopted by men and women, with policy responses by women being more proactive and coordinated. They argue that this different style of leadership is rooted into well-known behavioral evidence.

Sergent and Stajkovic (2020) focus on the USA and compare leadership of men and female governors in dealing with COVID-19. They show that states with women governors

had fewer COVID-19 deaths and introduced restrictions earlier. They also conduct a qualitative analysis of governor briefings which show that female leadership was more effective than the male one.

Gender differences in leadership may also be associated to a different public attention. According to [Aksoy, Ganslmeier and Poutvaara \(2020\)](#), Germany, which suffered less COVID-19-related deaths than most Western European countries, has very high public attention. France, Spain, the UK, and the US, instead, have been characterized by low levels of public attention. One can notice that Germany has a female political leader, while the other countries a male one, thus suggesting that the difference in public attention may be related to the gender of the political leader.

While it is certainly important to understand whether being a female leader in times of COVID-19 has a causal impact on the number of deaths per capita, from a policy perspective it is also very interesting to analyze whether the gender of the leader is associated with a different design and type of anti-COVID economic measures ([Profeta 2020](#)). Given that, as I pointed out in the previous section, income support programs are expected to be beneficial for women, a natural question is whether countries led by women have been more oriented towards public policy which support income of workers and families, thus potentially alleviating the economically weaker groups of population, including women. To this purpose, I used data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT), which systematically collects information on several different common policy responses that governments have taken to respond to the pandemic on several indicators. I focus on the economic support index, which records measures such as income support: a higher score indicates more measures of this type. I collect the value of the index on March 2020 for 36 OECD countries and I match them with the gender of the head of government, collected by *Workbook Statistics*. Twenty-four countries are led by a man and 11 by a woman. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of the score of the economic support index in the countries led by men and by women. Although the figure is merely descriptive, it suggests interesting insights: the average score is about the same and thus the gender of the leader seems to be not significantly related to a different action. However, countries led by women have been more concentrated around a higher score of the economic support index, while the performance of countries led by men spread across a wider range of values, with some countries showing very high and others very low scores.

6. Conclusions and Future Developments

This paper has reviewed the evidence on the gender dimension of COVID-19. The pandemic has posed OECD countries at a crossroad: policy measures are introduced to reduce health risks, support the economy and work activities, keep workers safe and preparing the recovery. I have provided evidence on policy measures which have the potential to reduce gender gaps in the long-run, if appropriately targeted and monitored. Future studies will evaluate the efficacy of these measures. Similarly, I have argued that women leadership can contribute to orient policy measures ([Profeta 2020](#)). Yet future studies will investigate deeply into these findings and assess causal relationships.

This paper has not addressed other dramatic consequence of COVID-19 on gender gaps, such as the increase of domestic violence, which, according to estimates by ONU, amounts to 20% in the world.

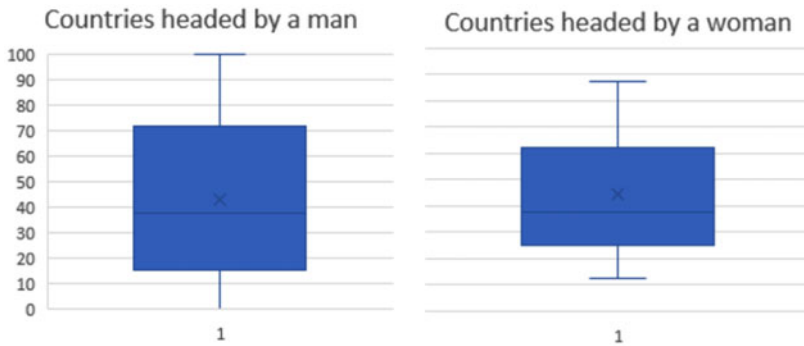


Figure 1. Economic support index (OECD).

Notes: The figure shows the distribution (and 95% confidence interval) of the score of the economic support index (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT)) in 36 OECD countries, grouped by the gender of the head of government.

Another important aspect which will need to be carefully analyzed in the future is related to school closure. The coronavirus is expected to have a dramatic impact on children. Although the virus seems to affect children less than adult and old people, children will suffer from the closure of schools and lockdown. The UN estimates that the pandemic has affected more than 1 billion students worldwide. Are boys and girls differently affected? If so, we should expect persistent implications on the gender gaps. UNESCO highlights that school closure is riskier for girls than for boys, especially in developing countries. In fact, as shown by a survey conducted by Save the Children (2020) on 8069 children in 37 countries, girls are more negatively affected than boys not only because of the gender digital divide, but also because of the increase of domestic duties (63% of girls are more often tasked to do more chores around the house, compared to 43% of boys), childcare and domestic violence. Different outcomes emerge in developed countries. For example, preliminary results from UK by National Literacy Trust (2020) suggest that boys have done less school work during lockdown than girls. Girls enjoy reading more than boys and this difference has increased from 2% to 11% during the lockdown. These results are in line with Poutvaara and Ropponen (2018) who find that young men are strongly negatively affected by a shock, which in their analysis is a school shooting, while women are not significantly affected. If the reaction to the pandemic turns out to be similar to what observed to the shock of school shooting, we expect a massive and costly negative impact in boys' and young males' educational outcomes that need to be addressed with adequate policies. How policy measures can contribute to limit gender gaps among children is an important question which needs to be addressed by future studies.

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