

Gender parity in the wake of COVID-19: In need for a “new normal”

Take-aways from #FlorenceLive conversations season II

#FlorenceLive 8 on “Women at 2020: Between Progress, Gender Backlash and (Post-)COVID Realities”, 24 September 2020

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The second season of the #FlorenceLive conversations kicked off with a panel discussion on “Women at 2020”, the progress of gender equality and the specific consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the position of women in society. The panellists were Maruša Gortnar, Head of Operations at the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Nahla Valji, Senior Gender Adviser in the United Nations’ Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG) and coordinator of the UN-EU Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence against Women and Girls, and Simonetta Zarrilli, chief of the Trade, Gender and Development Programme of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The discussion was moderated by Ruth Rubio Marín, part-time Professor on Gender Governance at the EUI’s School of Transnational Governance, Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Sevilla, and member of the Faculty of The Hauser Global Law School Program at New York University.

Central themes were

- difference in the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on men and women,
- the deficits and the potential of post-COVID recovery plans,
- the increase of violence against women in the context of the pandemic,
- the need for women leadership in managing the pandemic and beyond.

10 key take-aways:

Analysis

1. **The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the socio-economic conditions of women** for a number of reasons: Women occupy the majority of temporary, casual or part-time positions. In the crisis, such insecure jobs were among the first to be cut. Women are also overrepresented in economic sectors hit by social distancing measures and the limitation of movement such as tourism and services. In many developing areas, women are predominantly employed in the informal sector, e.g. 90% of the working women in sub-Saharan Africa. They were unable to benefit from rescue measures or unemployment benefits. As women experience greater difficulties in accessing credits, they also faced greater difficulties in protecting their businesses. Furthermore, with the closure of schools and care facilities,

women were more likely than men to leave their occupation in order to support children and persons in need for care at home. Finally, the psychologically straining conditions of the closure have led to an increased level of domestic violence. The unequal socio-economic effects of the COVID crisis risk reversing much progress on gender equality that has been achieved over recent years.

2. **The health and care sectors show that COVID-19 poses new challenges but also exacerbates existing problems.** Despite 70% of the workers in this sector being female, most Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is fitted to a standard-sized man, leaving women sub-optimally protected. Unpaid care work disproportionately hinders women to access education, employment or leisure activities. Reflecting the value a society accords to the care of children and of the elderly or sick, investment at the macro-level is needed to reduce unpaid care work and mitigate the long-term consequences for women's position in society and economy. The pandemic has not only highlighted the importance of the care sector but also increased visibility of its challenges.
3. **The proposed European recovery instrument "Next Generation EU" lacks gender sensitivity and may widen the gender employment gap.** A [recent impact study conducted for the European Parliament](#) shows that the EU recovery plan favours industries with high male employment rates, like energy, transport, IT, construction and agriculture. Creating jobs in which women are unrepresented may widen the gender employment gap. In Germany, for example, investment in the care sector could offer as many new jobs to men as investment in construction, while it creates six times more jobs for women. Such investment would have a higher employment potential and positive recovery effects.
4. **Trade is not gender neutral.** Given inequalities in women's economic position within countries, benefits from trade agreements are also distributed unequally. UNCTAD has developed a [methodology for ex-ante gender impact assessments of trade agreements](#) ("new generation agreements"), which the European Commission is already integrating in its sustainability studies in trade negotiations. Increased gender sensitivity in trade negotiations can increase the economic dynamic by enhancing women's beneficial participation in trade and contribute to post-COVID recovery efforts.
5. **The "Shadow-pandemic"– violence against women:** In the wake of the pandemic, increases in domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation, trafficking, online abuse and femicides have been recorded. Available data shows that in the UK calls to help hotlines have increased by 60%, in Myanmar they have tripled, reported cases of domestic violence have doubled in Samoa compared to last year. The pandemic brought to light that levels of domestic violence are still high and that prevention measures of the past haven been insufficient to avoid a further rise in times of crisis.

Recommendations

6. **Women and leadership.** Women business and community leaders have been reported to be particularly successful in managing the COVID-crisis. Yet, at the decision-making level for national and European recovery efforts they have been underrepresented – as generally still tends to be the rule for political and business leadership positions. To address this issue, UN Secretary General António Guterres has rolled out in 2017 a UN system wide [Gender Parity](#)

Strategy. Already today, one year ahead of schedule, this Strategy has achieved gender parity at the UN's some 180 most senior leadership posts, including heads and deputy heads of peace keeping missions. System wide parity remains the goal for 2028. This role model strategy shows that gender parity is possible given institutional and political will. Its success sets important precedents for the leadership in public and private institutions around the globe as well as for male dominated domains, such as the field of security and peace keeping.

7. **More data needed to understand differences in the impact of COVID-crisis on women and men.** The [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE) is currently preparing studies on (1) the crisis' implication on intimate partner violence (to be presented on 18 November), (2) on the gender disparity in the socio-economic impact of the crisis (in support of the upcoming Portuguese presidency of the European Council and potential Council conclusions) and (3) on how accelerated digitalization during the pandemic has changed the work life (due end of October). Yet, still more sex-disaggregated socio-economic data is needed in order to, for example, understand the impact of trade on gender (dis-)parity or to formulate gender sensitive public procurement rules as part of recovery efforts.
8. **“Build back better” – through gender budgeting:** To exploit fully the opportunities of the “build back better” approach to the crisis management, recovery plans need to apply gender sensitive budgeting and decision making. EIGE has developed a [toolkit](#) to assist the gender mainstreaming in the budget processes of the EU and its member states. Recovery efforts cannot mean “going back to normal”, reproducing the deficits of the past. They should prepare a “new normal” laying the ground for the systemic changes needed to secure greater gender parity.
9. **Violence:** To fight the “shadow-pandemic” of violence against women, more coordinated efforts are necessary. The [Spotlight Initiative](#), a partnership of EU and UN, serves as a role model and facilitator and makes valuable contributions to this fight. While assuring accountability remains an immediate necessity, profound cultural changes, encompassing society, media and patterns of social behavior, have to be the long-term goal.
10. **Stem the global backlash:** For the first time in history, the promotion of gender parity faces a global, co-ordinated coalition of populist actors that fight what they consider “gender ideology”. Evidence-based counter narratives must stress the socio-economic necessity as well as the benefits of gender mainstreaming and gender parity for societies as a whole. They should also promote a modern understanding of democracy that recognises continuing gender imbalances as a fundamental democratic problem as they threaten the lives, health, security and economic position of half of the world's population.

Online reactions: The event was livestreamed on YouTube and followed by an international audience. It elicited numerous comments and questions. As of 1 October, the video has been viewed some 400 times.

(Re)watch the conversation at <https://stg.eui.eu/events/FlorenceLive>