



European
Commission

Coronavirus Pandemic

IMPACT ON GENDER EQUALITY



17 June 2020



“We continue mobilising funding and supporting researchers and innovators across Europe to defeat this pandemic and prepare for any future outbreaks. This includes supporting a study on “The sex and gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic” which helps us better understand disease-specific mechanisms, thus benefitting all citizens”.

Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth

Why sex & gender matter in research & innovation

Sex refers to the biological attributes of women and men in terms of reproductive organs and functions based on chromosomal complement and physiology. As such, sex is globally understood as the classification of living things as male and female, and intersexed. Gender refers to socio-cultural norms, identities and relations that, together, shape and sanction “feminine” and “masculine” behaviours and also affect products, technologies, environments, and knowledge. Taking into account the “gender dimension” – that is, ensuring that the biological characteristics as well as the social and cultural features, behaviours and needs, of both women and men are taken into consideration – is vital for the societal relevance and quality of research and innovation.

Why sex & gender matter in the COVID-19 disease

Although infectious diseases can affect everyone, sex and gender can significantly impact immune responses and the course of the disease in the human body. Worldwide statistics show that more men than women suffer severe effects of the COVID-19 disease and are dying of acute infection. Women appear to be producing more antibodies in response to infection. The reasons may be hormonal, genetic or even related to differences in intestinal bacteria. Behavioural differences have also been put forward, for example, men are more likely to be smokers and women wash their hands more often. At the same time, women also experience more medication side-effects than men, which calls for close attention to be paid to dosing and sex-specific side effects of vaccines and therapeutics.

The gender-sensitive impact of pandemics

Biological impacts of the pandemic intersect with broader social and systemic challenges, such as limited healthcare, and economic and logistic resources, and women are projected to suffer more than men from the health, economic and social consequences of the pandemic in the long term.

Gender-sensitive impact of pandemics



© European Union, 2020 | Adapted from "The impact of sex and gender in the COVID-19 pandemic – Case study" | DOI: 10.2777/17055

Impact on gender equality beyond health



Care and service professions & economic equality

In the EU, women represent 76% of healthcare workers, roughly 90% of other caring professions (childcare, elderly care) and 95 % of domestic cleaners and helpers. They are on the frontline and thus more exposed to COVID-19. These care and service professions are also some of the most undervalued and under-paid jobs in the EU. Moreover, women are more likely than men to be non-salaried employees, self-employed or in part-time and precarious employments, and thus more vulnerable to job losses as an economic consequence of the pandemic. The COVID-19 emergency is also accelerating the transition towards digital economies, generating a higher demand for digitally-related jobs and skills, and increasing the risk for the existing digital gender divide to become an even greater source of economic inequality.

Work-life balance and gender roles



Women perform the majority of unpaid caring and educational duties in families and immediate communities, with even harder situations for single parents – a larger majority of which are women. While increased involvement of male partners in these duties has been observed in some households, a reinforcement of traditionally stereotyped gender roles during the COVID-19 pandemic has actually been observed in most EU countries.

Existing inequalities are exacerbated



This concerns gender as well as intersecting social imbalances related to e.g. age, ethnicity, social origin, poverty, disability. A COVID-19 outbreak response and post-pandemic recovery strategy that leaves no one behind – including innovative solutions beyond health, such as economic re-entry strategies, product development and AI solutions – needs to adopt an intersectional approach.



Sexual and gender-based violence

A surge in domestic violence has been recorded in Europe due to the confinement and weakened means to effectively address this issue. The World Health Organisation reported that calls to European domestic violence hotlines had spiked by as much as 60% in April 2020. Making the prevention and redress of genderbased violence a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19 is increasingly being recognised by Member States, and supported by the European Commission. The pandemic has also negatively impacted reproductive health and rights in most EU countries.

Research funding process and impact on women researchers



The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown conditions are disproportionately affecting women researchers' activity and productivity, and research funding organisations are increasingly acknowledging that researchers with caring responsibilities are facing unprecedented challenges, and recommending grant extensions among other measures.



What the EU is doing

The European Commission has been at the forefront of supporting research and innovation and coordinating European and global research efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and preparedness for other outbreaks. This also includes a strong emphasis on addressing the gender equality impacts of the pandemic.

In the framework of the ERAvsCORONA action plan for short-term coordinated research and innovations actions agreed upon by the Commission and national ministries, a dedicated website for Coronavirus-related EU supported projects and initiatives has been established, which includes a specific section on gender equality, featuring in particular a [case study on the impact of sex and gender in the COVID-19 pandemic](#) developed by the EC Expert Group on 'Gendered Innovations'.

[The special calls for expression](#) of interest launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic also included gender as a crosscutting issue, and the recovery package is calling for an inclusive strategy also addressing gender equality. Beyond this, Horizon Europe (2021-2027) will support the integration of the gender dimension into research & innovation content across the whole programme.

The need to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in relation to all relevant aspects of the response to the COVID-19 crisis has been put forward at different EU levels. For example, through guidelines to EU Delegations, and initiatives developed by Member States, including a proposed resolution from the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.



More information:

[Coronavirus research and innovation and](#)

[Projects and initiatives related to gender equality and the outbreak of coronavirus](#)

© European Union, 2020

Reuse of this document is allowed, provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license). For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the EU, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective right holders. © Flaticon – all rights reserved.

