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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 on gender equality

The Portuguese Presidency has prepared the attached set of draft Council Conclusions on the Socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on gender equality. This document will be discussed in the Working Party on Social Questions at a meeting provisionally scheduled for 31 March 2021.

The Conclusions are partly based on a research note prepared by the European Institute for Gender Equality¹ and on an exploratory opinion prepared by the European Economic and Social Committee² at the request of the Portuguese Presidency.

Written comments are welcome even before the meeting and should be sent to the following email addresses:

PT-PRES-equality@reper-portugal.be and LIFE.social@consilium.europa.eu

¹ See doc. 5955/21 Addendum 1.

² See doc. 5955/21 Addendum 2 (doc. to follow).

Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on gender equality

Draft Council Conclusions

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT

1. Equality between women and men is a fundamental principle of the European Union, enshrined in the Treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which has led and should continue leading Member States to expend efforts on monitoring and tackling gender inequalities in the distribution of the risks and benefits that arise from broad social and economic developments.

TAKING NOTE OF

2. The Research note by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) entitled “Gender Equality and Socio-Economic Consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.”
3. [The Opinion by the European Economic and Social Committee on “Teleworking and gender equality – conditions so that teleworking does not exacerbate the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men and for it to be an engine for promoting gender equality.”]
4. The Resolution of the European Parliament entitled “The gender perspective in the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period”.

CONSIDERING THAT

5. The COVID-19 pandemic and the containment measures are having disproportionate negative socioeconomic effects on women, including as a result of pre-existing structural gender inequalities in the labour market.

6. Exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, deep-rooted gender stereotypes at individual, institutional and structural levels are causing profound and long-lasting damage to women and men, and to society as a whole, including by hampering sustainable growth, thus also endangering the moderate advances in gender equality made so far.
7. Persisting gender inequality in the form of horizontal segregation has meant that women are overrepresented in sectors particularly affected by the crisis.
8. Employed in essential jobs, women are on the frontline of the fight against the pandemic, representing between 75% to 95% of healthcare workers, personal care workers in home-based settings or institutions, childcare workers and teachers, domestic cleaners and helpers, and carers working with older people and people with disabilities. This has meant higher infection rates, more sick leave, higher reported stress levels, a greater workload and long working hours, and related difficulties to reconcile work, family and private life. Yet many of these occupations continue to be undervalued and underpaid, and characterized by precarious employment conditions. The Covid-19 crisis has clearly illustrated the extent to which society and the economy depend on these sectors and that they have been undervalued.
9. Moreover, women are overrepresented in economic sectors that were hit hard by lockdowns, and often work in temporary, part-time and precarious employment. With the first wave of the pandemic, women registered a higher reduction in total actual hours worked in their main job and moved from unemployment to inactivity more often than men. Among the most negatively affected, the share of young women available to work but not seeking work increased strongly (+6 pp compared to 2019) and non-EU foreign born women's employment rate fell to under 50%.

10. Jobs lost in retail, accommodation, residential care, domestic work and clothing manufacturing accounted for 40% of all women's lost employment during the first wave of Covid-19. Domestic and care services in households (with an 89% share of women) registered an 18% decline in employment. Women accounted for 69% of the losses registered among part-time workers, 48% of the losses in temporary work, and 34% of the losses registered among the self-employed. And the employment recovery in the summer of 2020 was stronger for men than for women.
11. Moreover, the digital gender gap limits women's access and individual capacity to respond to the demands emerging from the dramatically increased use of telework, not only during the current crisis but also in the future, considering that women are significantly under-represented among graduates in ICT related fields (only 20%), in ICT jobs (only 18%), among scientists and engineers in high-technology sectors, and in platform work, which has increased with the crisis. This is of particular concern for older women, who have persistent gaps in digital skills. Continued implementation of telework in the future world of work must address this digital divide's underlying lifelong causes relating to gender stereotypes, cultural norms, lack of role models, lack of confidence, anxiety and risk aversion.
12. Women were more affected by decreasing salary levels in the first half of 2020³ and the type of income support received reflects their worse labour market conditions, which risks widening the already high gender imbalance in pension incomes and quality of life after retirement.⁴ More women are on paid sick or care leave or receiving assistance for living expenses or household needs, whereas more men are receiving -- usually more generous -- unemployment benefits or wage support. During the crisis, more women, especially women of working age, reported financial difficulties, ranging in severity from inability to maintain their standard of living to inability to make ends meet.

³ ILO (2020), Global Wage Report 2020-2021.

⁴ Eurofound (2020), Women and labour market equality: Has COVID-19 rolled back recent gains?, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

13. Persisting gender inequality in the form of unequal sharing of domestic and care tasks within the household meant that women shouldered a disproportionate share of the unpaid work that increased during the Covid-19 crisis following the reduction in the supply of care services, school closures and the demands of online schooling, the increase in usual household tasks and the unavailability of external paid housework, and lack of access to informal help. This reinforces stereotypical gender roles, with a potentially damaging impact on women's wellbeing and longer term labour market prospects, especially of those with caring responsibilities (which was already among the main reasons for women's inactivity even before the crisis). It also clearly underlines the importance of the availability of affordable and high-quality care services for children and dependents for the labour market participation of women.
14. During the first Covid-19 wave, women spent more hours than men caring for and educating their own children/grandchildren (12.6 hours per week, against 7.8 for men) and caring for elderly or relatives with disabilities (4.5 hours per week, against 2.8 for men), as well as cooking and doing housework (18.4 hours per week, against 12.1 for men). The closure of schools and of childcare services has increased the childcare burden, especially for employed women with children under 12 who reported spending around 54 hours per week on childcare, compared to 32 hours for employed men (summer 2020). Moreover, more women than men reported a general deterioration of work-life balance, including more difficulty in concentrating on the job because of family responsibilities as well as feeling more prevented from giving time to their family and more tired after work when performing household tasks. Mothers were more engaged with online schooling which meant added pressure. Particular pressures are felt by single mothers who cannot share care demands and generally have lower financial resources, women in essential jobs who cannot stay at home to care for children, as well as women teleworkers, especially those with small children, whose productivity is affected by increased multitasking and interruptions, an additional workload and a greater mental burden.

15. In fact, evidence gathered during the pandemic casts doubt on the idea that telework, namely home-based work, offers a viable care solution in response to the closure of educational or care facilities, an assumption that privileges economic concerns over the need to ensure equality between women and men and to facilitate the reconciliation of work, family and private life. Similarly, flexible working time arrangements are not a feasible tool for facilitating work-life balance unless they are accompanied by gender equality measures and family-friendly policies and organizational practices.
16. A clear concern for the future of equality between women and men emerges in connection with the tendency to use telework as a tool to facilitate the reconciliation of work, family and private life (which might explain the higher share of women than men working from home on a regular basis) and the estimation that 45% of women compared to 30% of men are in teleworkable occupations. Thus there is a need to address certain risks associated with telework that were revealed by the Covid-19 crisis, including in particular the risk of reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and of telework becoming a feminized alternative to office-based work; the risk of an increase in the amount of unpaid work performed by women, including housework and care; the risk of increasing work intensity and of a blurring of the boundaries between paid work and private life; the risk of reducing women's visibility in the work community; and the risk of increasing online violence and harassment towards women, as well as the risk of domestic violence.
17. A higher participation of men in unpaid care and domestic work has been seen in some situations during the Covid-19 crisis – for example, where fathers were working from home or men had to contribute to care tasks because women were employed in essential jobs. However, lasting changes would require overcoming persisting attitudes towards stereotypical gender roles and earnings imbalances.

18. Finally, persisting gender inequality in the form of vertical segregation has meant that women continued to be underrepresented in decision-making during the crisis and in its aftermath when recovery measures were designed.
19. Although in the EU women make up the majority of health professionals and are on the frontline of the battle against the pandemic, they are under-represented in leadership and decision-making processes in the health care sector⁵. Moreover, only 3.5% of 115 identified Covid-19 decision-making and expert task forces have gender parity in their membership, while in 85.2% of cases the majority are men⁶. In addition, and in connection with tendencies emerging from the crisis, vertical segregation risks being reinforced by the digital gender gap and by the increased use of teleworking which reduces women's visibility and career perspectives.
20. In the light of the already identified and still emerging impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on women, there is now an urgent need to integrate a gender equality perspective in short-term emergency and long-term reconstruction measures as well as a need to ensure a balanced representation of women and men in Covid-19 crisis management, including in order to prevent further exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities and to ensure that previously made gains are not lost.
21. This is a precondition for the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 17 November 2017, in which gender equality and work-life balance are affirmed in Principles 2 and 9 respectively.

⁵ OECD (2020), "Women at the core of the fight against Covid-19 crisis", OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (Covid-19). Version 1st April 2020.

⁶ Van Daalen, K.R., Bajnoczki, C., Chowdhury, M., et al. (2020), Symptoms of a broken system: the gender gaps in Covid-19 decisionmaking, BMJ Global Health.

22. Also, according to the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, "increasing women's participation in the labour market has a strong, positive impact on the economy, notably in the context of a shrinking workforce and skills shortages. It also empowers women to shape their own lives, play a role in public life and be economically independent."
23. This set of Conclusions builds on previous work and political commitments voiced by the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and relevant stakeholders in this area, including in the documents listed in Annex.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their respective competences and taking into account national circumstances and respecting the role and autonomy of the social partners, to:

24. Strengthen concrete action to combat structural inequalities between women and men, including vertical and horizontal segregation, and especially the digital gap, as well as the gender pay and pension gaps, and the unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic tasks, as well as in the context of the reconciliation of work, family and private life.
25. Ensure that the implementation of their national Recovery and Resilience Plans⁷ fulfils the commitment to mainstream gender equality and equal opportunities for all, in accordance with Principles 2 and 3 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 and, where relevant, with the national gender equality strategy.
26. For this purpose, make use of specific gender analysis methods and tools, such as gender impact assessment, quality sex-disaggregated data and relevant gender equality indicators and intersectional analysis in all sectors.

⁷ See Regulation (EU) 2021/241 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Article 18(4)(o).

27. Mainstream gender equality in national regulations and instruments implementing the European structural funds, and monitor impacts on women and men.
28. Actively address equality between women and men in the design and implementation of recovery measures, across all sectors and based on existing data on the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Relevant measures include:
- a) Measures in support of workers in hard-hit economic sectors such as retail and accommodation that address the particular needs of women, including the large number of women with reduced work hours, women moving into inactivity and unemployed women, and especially young and migrant women who are unemployed, focusing on aspects such as reskilling and upskilling, active labour market policies, and entrepreneurship.
 - b) Measures to enhance the status of essential workers, including workers in care-related occupations and sectors, whose fundamental importance has been writ large during the Covid-19 crisis.
 - c) Measures to tackle undeclared work and to improve the employment situation and social protection of domestic workers.
 - d) Measures to promote a more gender-balanced uptake in crisis-related care support measures.

29. Address the reconciliation of work, family and private life, based on equality between women and men, as a central policy objective through measures such as the following:
- a) Measures to ensure that all workers, including teleworkers, are able to access support from a service provider, institution or organisation providing help in looking after children or other dependants and to ensure that the support services provided are accessible, affordable and of high quality.
 - b) Measures to ensure that all workers, including teleworkers, have the same conditions for career advancement, including equal access to management and decision-making positions.
 - c) Measures to promote the equal sharing of care and domestic tasks between women and men.
 - d) Measures to ensure the prompt and efficient implementation of the Work-Life Balance Directive, taking into account concerns arising from the Covid-19 crisis.

INVITES THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their respective competences, taking into account Member States' national circumstances, and respecting the role and autonomy of the social partners, to:

30. Step up gender equality policies and strengthen the empowerment of women and girls as a political priority, including especially in the context of policies responding to the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath.

31. Develop and disseminate more data, information and research on the impact of Covid-19 on gender equality, including:
- a) The implications of increased telework for equality between women and men, including in the context of the reconciliation of work, family and private life, taking into account the relative prevalence of teleworking among women and men, as well as different household configurations and their work arrangements.
 - b) The implications for women and men and teleworking under conditions not dominated by the pandemic and taking into account long-term developments in different sectors of the economy and society.
 - c) The extent of men's increased participation in domestic and care work during the pandemic and its impact.
 - d) The impact of the crisis on working patterns, including working hours, inactivity and work interruption.
32. Undertake research on the value of unpaid care work, and where appropriate, include unpaid care work in macroeconomic and labour market analyses, as well as in the design of labour and employment policies, and develop additional indicators for measuring macro-economic performance including paid and unpaid care work, the care economy, and gender gaps in time use.
33. Collect and disseminate existing good practices for promoting gender equality in the context of telework.
34. Strengthen concrete action to combat structural inequalities between women and men, including vertical and horizontal segregation, especially the digital gap, as well as the gender pay and pension gaps, and the unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic tasks, including in the context of the reconciliation of work, family and private life.

35. Design and implement targeted measures to combat gender stereotypes that restrict the choices of girls and boys and women and men in educational and career paths.
36. Take steps to facilitate the reconciliation of work, family and private life, based on equality between women and men, as a central policy objective through measures such as the following:
- a) Measures to promote the equal sharing of unpaid care work and domestic work between women and men, and to incentivize men to participate in available family-friendly policies, including by taking up family related leaves.
 - b) Measures to develop telework, including especially with regard to home-based workers, and address changing working patterns, in ways that promote equality between women and men and the reconciliation of work, family and private life, including in terms of:
 - i. Reviewing the legal and regulatory framework. Relevant aspects include more flexibility between office and home-based work; time flexibility; tailor-made working time arrangements; care leave; protection against dismissal; surveillance and monitoring practices; protecting the occupational health and safety of workers, including psychosocial risks and ergonomic considerations; the right to disconnect; and social protection, particularly regarding compensation for withdrawals from the labour market in the case of eventualities linked to care.
 - ii. Investing in digital infrastructure and connections for all, including local shared spaces that facilitate teleworking outside the home.

- iii. Promoting an organizational culture, policies and practices among employers that are conducive to well-being and productivity, promote equality between women and men and combat gender stereotypes, including by promoting managerial training and encouraging managers to adopt a flexibility approach between office and home-based work, and to consider the variety of working patterns and family situations of workers, particularly of single mothers; by improving health and safety at work; and through training and skills development in the context of teleworking.
- iv. Ensuring the availability of high quality, affordable, accessible and diverse care services, at home or outside the home (outsourcing of care tasks), including by improving supportive care infrastructures (e.g. child and elderly care services), thereby responding to various demands and situations, so as to ensure that the work and care burden does not increase with telework to the disadvantage of women.

37. Continue implementing effective measures to address horizontal segregation in education, training and occupations at all levels, by promoting equal access to all educational fields and the diversification of women and men's educational and career paths. In particular, actively promote girls and women's access to information and communication technology, and address any form of digital divide, including by improving the digital skills of girls and women, challenging gender stereotypes and motivating girls to choose engineering and ICT study areas, and by incentivizing employers to consider the digital needs of different groups of employees, including older women, in order to enable them to fully participate in the labour market.
38. Increase the role and numbers of women in decision-making processes around prevention and response to Covid-19, and ensure the balanced representation of women and men in political decision-making as a means to ensure gender-responsive policies, legislation and implementation. This will allow for adequately translating women' and girls' needs, perspectives, knowledge and skills into policies which will be conducive to more equality between women and men.
39. Jointly work towards implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights, including Principles 2 and 3.

CALLS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION to:

40. Strengthen concrete action to combat structural inequalities between women and men, such as vertical and horizontal segregation, including the digital gap, as well as the gender pay and pension gaps, the unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic tasks, including in the context of the reconciliation of work, family and private life.
41. Develop a proposal for the revision of Barcelona targets to enhance upward convergence in the provision of childcare among Member States.
42. Take gender equality into account when setting the methodology for reporting social expenditure under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to be reflected in the review report on the implementation of the Facility.
43. Consider women's situation in the labour market and consistently follow a gender mainstreaming approach in all relevant aspects of the European Semester, including especially when addressing the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath.
44. Develop further research into the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on gender equality, including through EIGE.

CALLS ON THE EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE AND THE SOCIAL PROTECTION COMMITTEE to:

45. Within their mandates, support the Member States and the Commission in formulating concrete action to combat structural inequalities between women and men, including vertical and horizontal segregation, and especially the digital gap, as well as the gender pay and pension gaps, and the unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic tasks, including in the context of the reconciliation of work, family and private life.
46. Continue accommodating a gender equality perspective into their reflections on the policy fields within their remits, including when addressing the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

While fully respecting their autonomy, CALLS ON THE SOCIAL PARTNERS to:

47. Actively pursue gender equality when addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, and strengthen concrete action to combat structural inequalities between women and men, including vertical and horizontal segregation, and especially the digital gap, as well as the gender pay and pension gaps, and the unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic tasks, including in the context of the reconciliation of work, family and private life.
 48. Reshape the concept of telework, including especially with regard to home-based workers, and address changing working patterns, enabling combined office- and home-based work, in ways that promote equality between women and men and the reconciliation of work, family and private life, in the context of sectoral or company-level social dialogue, or bilateral negotiations with the employer.
 49. Promote collective bargaining with regard to organisational practices and culture that combat gender stereotypes and rules in working environments and promote well-being at work and productivity, including through equality-friendly organizational culture, policies and practices among employers, managerial training; ensuring telework as a voluntary option; ensuring that all managers adopt a flexibility approach and consider the variety of working patterns and family situations of workers, particularly of single mothers; prioritization of tasks; modalities of connectivity; health and safety; and training and skills development in the context of teleworking.
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References

1. EU interinstitutional

European Pillar of Social Rights

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf

2. EU legislation

Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services. OJ L 373, 21.12.2004, p. 37–43.

Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast) (*OJ L 204, 26.7.2006, p. 23–36*).

Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (*OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93*).

Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Recovery and Resilience Facility. (*OJ L 57, 18.2.2021, p. 17–75*.)

3. Council

All Council Conclusions on gender equality and other relevant subjects, including especially those cited below:

- Council Conclusions on Women and the Economy: Reconciliation of work and family life as a precondition for equal participation in the labour market (17816/11)
- Council Conclusions on Moving towards more inclusive labour markets (7017/15)

- Council Conclusions on Enhancing the Skills of Women and Men in the EU Labour Market (6889/17)
- Council Conclusions on Enhanced measures to reduce horizontal gender segregation in education and employment (15468/17)
- Council Conclusions on Closing the Gender Pay Gap: Key Policies and Measures (10349/19)
- Council Conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing (13432/19)
- Council Conclusions on Gender-Equal Economies in the EU: The Way Forward: Taking Stock of 25 Years of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (14938/19)
- Council Conclusions on Enhancing Well-being at work (8688/20)
- Council Conclusions on Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Valuation and Distribution of Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work (13584/20)

4. Trio Presidency

Trio Presidency Declaration on Gender Equality signed by Germany, Portugal and Slovenia (July 2020)

5. European Commission

Commission Recommendation 2014/124/EU of 7 March 2014 on strengthening the principle of equal pay between men and women through transparency (OJ L 69, 8.3.2014, p. 112–116)

Communication from the Commission of 26 April 2017: "An initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers" (COM(2017) 252 final)

EU Action Plan 2017-2019: Tackling the gender pay gap (COM(2017) 678 final)

Commission Recommendation (EU) 2018/951 of 22 June 2018 on standards for equality bodies (OJ L 167, 4.7.2018, p. 28–35)

Challenges in long-term care in Europe - A study of national policies 2018. European Social Policy Network.

Report on the development of childcare facilities for young children with a view to increase female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe (the "Barcelona objectives") (COM(2018) 273 final)

2021 Report on equality between women and men in the European Union (6774/21)

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Communication on A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions. (COM(2020) 14 final.)

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (6649/21 + ADD 1 + ADD 2)

6. European Parliament

Resolution of 30 January 2020 on the gender pay gap (2019/2870(RSP))

Own initiative report on Care services in the EU for improved gender equality
(2018/2077(INI))

Resolution of 21 January 2021 on the gender perspective in the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period” (2020/2121(INI))

7. EIGE

"Gender Equality and Socio-Economic Consequences of the COVID-19 crisis," 2021.
5955/21 ADD 1.

“Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work,” 2020.

<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>

8. Eurofound

“Striking a balance: Reconciling work and life in the EU,” 2019.

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“Long-term care workforce: Employment and working conditions,” 2020.

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“Regulations to address work–life balance in digital flexible working arrangements,” New forms of employment series, 2020.

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“Platform economy: Developments in the COVID-19 crisis,” 2020.

<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/platform-economy/dossiers/developments-in-the-covid-19-crisis>

“Labour market change: Trends and policy approaches towards flexibilisation, Challenges and prospects in the EU series,” 2020.

9. European Economic and Social Committee

"Teleworking and gender equality – conditions so that teleworking does not exacerbate the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men and for it to be an engine for promoting gender equality." (5955/21 ADD 2)⁸

10. Other

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment)

⁸ Doc. to follow.

The UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Sustainable Development Goal (SGD) 5.4 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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