

Towards Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions: Equal Female Academics in the Mediterranean during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Abstract. This work reflects on the COVID-19 impact on women scholars and suggests gender equality related some policies for the universities. The questions of a) how the current pandemic perpetuates existing gender injustices, and b) whether these can be mitigated through new caring social norms and soft leadership in Mediterranean universities, are addressed. Gender norms, roles, and relations that influence women's and men's work-life should be addressed if we want to use the lessons that the outbreak has brought. Some recommendations for policies are added. We can emerge from this pandemic more equal.

Keywords: COVID-19; Gender Equality; Higher Education; Mediterranean; Women.

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1. Introduction.

COVID-19 is affecting men and women differently ([Henriques 2020](#)). The social distancing and lockdowns associated with the pandemic crisis has hit higher education, has added teleconferencing, remote teaching, and furthermore has increased the childcare services for women scholars. The increased childcare needs that are shaped by the household's composition and type, are having impacts on the gender distribution of home production ([Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020](#)).

Little has been done to ensure that women's differentiated vulnerabilities and inequality are reflected at the higher education sector when analyzing recent emergencies. It is important that gender norms, roles, and relations that influence women's and men's work life should be addressed in the decision making during the post-COVID-19 phase and after ([Wenham, Smith, Morgan, 2020](#)).

The scope of this paper is to address the question of how the current COVID-19 pandemic perpetuates existing gender injustices, and to investigate whether these can be mitigated through new caring social norms, by taking the case of female academics at the Mediterranean context. The author wants to put forward ideas, as the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) is putting for the university leaders to ensure that the gender perspective is not forgotten when it comes to making important decisions during and after the pandemic crisis ([EIGE 2020](#)).

2. Methodology of the study

The author of this article sought to contribute to the evidence-base by taking an empirical approach of searching the latest findings and reports on coronavirus disease

(COVID-19) affecting gender equality. Bibliographic databases, tables of content of relevant journals were searched.

Furthermore, the author as member of the Network of Mediterranean Engineering Schools (RMEI) <http://www.rmei.info/index.php/en/>) built upon the lens of TARGET project (<https://www.gendertarget.eu/>), ‘*Taking a Reflexive Approach to Gender Equality for Institutional Transformation*’ where RMEI is partner.

3. Reflections and Discussion

Any effort to mitigate the socio-economic cost of COVID-19 without the gender lens dilutes its efficacy (Roy 2020).

3.1 COVID-19 and female academics

Women in academia and research are disproportionately affected by the school closures. The home has been a sphere of a caring labor, but also of power relations. Female academics are struggling with work and family balance, bearing the professional brunt of social distancing during COVID-19, in the form of decreased research productivity (Caron 2020). While men faculty members would be more likely to see this as an opportunity to focus their time on articles, research projects, etc., women faculty would have a tendency to care for activities related to family, children, elderly (Henriques 2020), demonstrated also by a report using data from repositories of working-paper publications, (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020).

3.2 COVID-19 and Mediterranean academics

In Mediterranean women already juggled more domestic and affective or emotional labor with their actual work prior to the pandemic (Flaherty 2020). Care work is unbalanced even among highly educated couples. If we add the fact that silence and concentration are pivotal for thinking and teaching, and face-to-face online meetings with international collaborators require individual's space and time, that women have less (Minello 2020).

While in the EU's Mediterranean countries inequality is mostly linked to the social sphere, in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) countries the situation is more complicated, as the social and private spheres overlap especially for women. Cultural and religious factors have a great impact on women's autonomy beyond the family (Talani and Giusti 2017).

3.3 COVID-19 and positive aspects

A positive aspect of this crisis that is particularly important for potential cultural shifts is that crisis turn some fathers into the primary or equal childcare providers. In some cases, women may be more beneficially affected by remote working opportunities because they profit from the flexible work schedules and shorter commuting time (Mas and Pallais 2017).

Policy experimentation with paternity leave suggests that even short engagement of fathers can bring long-term changes in the division of childcare responsibilities. By promoting flexible work arrangements and putting the childcare obligations of both genders into plain sight, the crisis may reduce unfair gender inequality in the long run (Farré, González 2019).

5. Policy options proposal

In the post COVID 19 era, it is crucial to scale up institutions' preparedness and response operations, including the rapid identification of gender inequalities and take the lens of gender dimension at all levels of the operation and performance.

We suggest some general policies and more specific policies to be considered by higher education institutions (Table 1).

Table 1. Policies suggestions

General Policies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing family responsibilities, including family-care leaves and institutional support for child and elder care. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design paid parental leave schemes based on caretaking status. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in social norms and role models. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-term invest in gender equality. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparing budgets from a gender perspective towards a more inclusive world. 	
Institutional specific policies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Equality in academic community.</i> 	Every institution should create an academic community in which all members are treated equitably.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Integration of work and family responsibilities.</i> 	A more responsive climate for integrating work and family responsibilities is essential for women professors.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>More flexible work arrangements.</i> 	Faculty members and academic professionals should have flexibility in scheduling to enable them to respond to family needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Take advantage of legal change.</i> 	Both women and men can take advantage of legal and institutional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Stop the tenure clock for new parents.</i> 	This is useful for faculty members who are primary or co-equal care-providers for newborn children.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Control gender bias.</i> 	Offering gender bias training to faculty committees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Eliminate gender bias.</i> 	Use clear policy communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Take advantage of legal change.</i> 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Strengthen transparency, communication and outreach.</i> 	

• <i>Take advantage of legal change.</i>	
• <i>Use art to dismantle gender stereotypes and ideas about traditional gender roles for students.</i>	
• <i>Encourage more men to take their fair responsibilities of unpaid work at home.</i>	
• <i>Collect gender-disaggregating data</i>	These data will serve as the basis for gender budgeting.

6. Conclusions

Governments and higher education institutions must consider the gender dimension of the COVID-19 outbreak, both direct and indirect if the response to disease outbreaks is to be effective and not reproduce gender inequities in the future.

We can emerge from this pandemic more equal, compassionate, and stronger and caring also for the most vulnerable members of our communities.

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