Women in Poverty
The Labour Market

2020
Despite all the progress attained in the last decades, women are still far from achieving economic equality with men. Gender segregation in the labour market, both horizontal and vertical, the lack of sufficient and affordable educational and care services, difficulties for work-life balance and the unequal sharing of households and care responsibilities between women and men are key factors behind gender inequalities and employment gaps, preventing women’s real economic independence, due to gender patterns of socialisation, roles and expectations of what traditionally is seen as ‘women’s work’ or ‘men’s work’.
Some of the main characteristics and consequences of gender inequalities in employment translated in greater gender pay gaps, and poor labour rights and/or working conditions can be considered structural:

**Gender segregated labour market** and the **gender employment gaps** are a reality in Europe. As indicated in the Gender Index 2019, women are less likely to participate in the labour market than men, with employment rates for women still 12% lower than for men. While female activity and employment rates have increased over the past years, women’s access to certain occupations and sectors is limited (e.g. in ICT or STEM sectors, with greater potential for growth and employability in the future), remaining overrepresented in other less-valued sectors, such as care and social work activities, education and human health, which means lower current and future earnings (leading to higher gender pay and pension gaps). Women also outnumber men in the so-called "5Cs" occupations: catering, cleaning, caring, clerical and cashiering.
The gender gaps in employment also widen for Roma women (more than twice as many Roma men are in employment compared to Roma women), women with disabilities, migrant women, women with a minority ethnic background, women aged 55-64 years old, and women in rural areas.

The gender digital divide is also undermining women’s possibilities to cope with digitalisation and new forms of work. The gender digital gap is a major issue for women in rural areas, women with disabilities, older women, migrant women or women with a minority ethnic background.

In general terms, younger women are better educated than men. The gender gap for tertiary educational attainment, favourable to women in the EU, is 10.5% and women are on average also better qualified. However, this is not reflected in the labour market (vertical segregation), which means that there is a vast pool of untapped potential, an under-utilisation of female talent, and a waste of resources and investment. In the case of Roma and migrant women, or women with disabilities, the barriers they face to reach leading positions, including discrimination in education discussed below, are even more present and they rarely participate in economic decision-making.

Women continue to carry out most of the unpaid care and domestic work, doing at least twice as much as men, which subsequently reduces their ability to work in the paid sector on an equal footing with men. Additionally, they are also exposed to a higher mental and health burden and the risk derived from it. In 2018, a third of employed women had work interruptions for childcare reasons. On the contrary, this percentage for men is at 1.3%. In Europe, according to Eurostat, foreign-born women are three time more likely than native-born women to never work due
Roma women may face different types of discrimination that can occur within the mainstream society in a context of growing racism and xenophobia, but also within Roma communities, which are dominated by patriarchal norms. The employment or economic status of Roma women is worse in comparison to that of Romani men, and they suffer from high rates of extreme poverty and exclusion.

Very much linked to the lack of sharing care and household responsibilities between women and men, women are more likely to have greater precariouslyness and in-work poverty (uncontracted, informal, insecure, non-standard or atypical employment contracts or forms of work, involuntary part-time work and lower-paid and undervalued work), and thus with less access to employment and social protection rights, are often not paid enough to be economically independent and to escape poverty.

Through self-employment and entrepreneurship, some women find their way to economic independence. However, even if women are generally more purpose-driven than men, gender disparities in entrepreneurship are still there. Women face greater difficulties, such as in access to credit.

Special mention should be given to the additional barriers faced by women belonging to more vulnerable groups that often limits their access to employment or their working conditions, because they are usually exposed to multiple discrimination:

- Roma women may face different types of discrimination that can occur within the mainstream society in a context of growing racism and xenophobia, but also within Roma communities, which are dominated by patriarchal norms. The employment or economic status of Roma women is worse in comparison to that of Romani men, and they suffer from high rates of extreme poverty and exclusion.
• **Migrant women** face racism and xenophobia in employment. They also have a lower employment rate than migrant men. When they find work, they are often employed in precarious jobs. Others are unemployed, taking care of children or elderly family members, and thus not economically independent. Additionally, access to formal employment is still very conditioned and limited by migration regulations which can be very restricted in some contexts. Therefore, it is not only a matter of social norms and practices that might uphold racism, but also about some potential discriminatory frameworks that are being denounced by migrant organisations.

• **Women with disabilities** also face more difficulties in accessing the labour market than men with disabilities, and when women with disabilities work, they often experience unequal hiring and promotion standards, unequal access to training and retraining, to credit and other productive resources, unequal pay for equal work and occupational segregation, harassment and sexual harassment, and they hardly participate in economic decision-making.

• **Older women** experience aggravated discrimination compared to older men as a result of inequalities accumulated during their whole life in accessing education, employment and occupational training, and due to a lack of work-life balance policies and of an equal sharing of care and household responsibilities between women and men. According to Eurostat, in some countries, the employment rate of older women aged 55-64 is significantly lower than that of older men. As a result of intersectional discrimination faced throughout their lives, older women belonging to the groups mentioned above face a significantly higher risk of experiencing severe poverty and social exclusion.
In addition, the COVID-19 outbreak has serious social and economic effects, affecting women and men differently, placing care at the centre and women on the frontline response to the pandemic. And unlike in the previous crisis, women are experiencing greater declines in employment than men and a worsening of their working conditions.

COVID-19 has shown how vital the work performed by those providing essential services is, such as health care, care, maintenance of communication, or the food-trade industry. The pandemic has placed health professionals on the frontline of the disease responses, especially nurses, geriatric assistants, and doctors, many of whom (and in certain professions overwhelmingly) are women. Cleaners, shop assistants and cashiers at grocery stores and supermarkets, are also essential in the frontline response to the crisis. But even if those jobs are considered essential, they are often not adequately valued and paid with low salaries, characterised by a very heavy workload and long hours, like other feminised jobs, therefore, also undermine the capacity of some of these workers to be economically independent and to obtain care for their family
members. Furthermore, many essential jobs implied continuous close contact with customers or patients. The women in frontline, undervalued jobs were also exposed to higher risks of getting infected by the COVID-19 virus.

The confinement restrictions and the partial, total, temporary, or permanent interruption of childcare, schools and business activities are having and will have different effects for each economic sector, and for female and male employment in the short, medium and long term. Some of them, leading to a major vulnerability of women and, in particular, of women belonging to vulnerable groups can be summarised as follows:

- Many women, especially in low paid sectors or professions are being forced to quit their jobs or ask for special leave due to the closure of schools and care services and the difficulties for work-life balance, thus with an important impact for their earnings. Teleworking while ensuring the education and care of children and dependents at home has not always been an option for many women. Single-parent families, most of whom are women, are being disproportionately affected and particularly vulnerable, especially where public income support is weak.

- The crisis has raised unemployment rates in many sectors, some of them also highly feminised, such as commerce, tourism and hospitality. In its latest employment report, the OECD said that women, low-paid, the self-employed, migrants and temporary workers are among the hardest hit by the crisis. The same has been stated by the ILO and UN Women.

- Many domestic workers and caregivers, jobs mostly done by women, often women of colour or done in the unregistered economy by migrant women, have not been able to continue
with their work during the lockdowns. In many cases they were left **without access to unemployment benefits**, leaving them in a situation of extreme vulnerability. Additionally, in some countries, those who work as domestic caregivers for older or dependent people, had to remain in the houses in which they worked due to confinement restrictions, sometimes without adequate protection and without the possibility of returning to their homes and attending to their own needs. NGOs are denouncing cases of domestic workers who are continuing to work and use public transport, without being provided with adequate protective personal equipment.

- **Women with disabilities or with chronic illness** and who could not work during COVID-19 are at a high risk to be dismissed.

- **Older women** who lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19 face an increased risk of long-term unemployment due to more limited job opportunities and persisting negative age/gender selection practices in recruitment. This might lead some to opt for pre-retirement despite the lower pension outcome.

- Many women in high-risk sectors are **self-employed or owners of micro or small-sized enterprises** and will have more difficulty maintaining their business.

- **Seasonal workers** supporting tourism and agri-food sectors in Europe, most of whom are women, and often from a migrant status, are working in precarious jobs and sometimes working in the informal market being deprived of social and work rights. The heavy working conditions and poor housing conditions make workers in seasonal agriculture one of the 'most vulnerable' communities. The COVID-19 outbreak makes existing conditions more difficult, particularly if they are
suffering from particular health conditions. In some cases, female seasonal workers have been unable to work but also to go back home because their government has kept its borders sealed since mid-March, such as in the case of many Moroccan fruit pickers in Spain.