

COVID-19 and gender-blind responses: key policies adopted across the UK and EU put many women at risk



Katerina Mantouvalou surveys three common policy responses to the novel coronavirus outbreak. She explains why there is an urgent need to incorporate a gender analysis into both the development and implementation of such policies, as they currently put certain groups of women at risk.

With over half of the world's population under lockdown and much of the global economy at a standstill, it is legitimate to ask whether the policies adopted to tackle COVID-19 give equal consideration to the health, economic, and wider societal needs of both women and men. I analyse three policies that have been adopted widely across EU Member States and beyond and argue that policymakers need to adopt a more subtle response that considers the different needs of women and men in these unprecedented circumstances.

1. Stay at home orders increase the risk of domestic violence

Governments around the globe have issued 'Stay at home' orders to their citizens in response to COVID-19. 'Rester à la maison', 'Quedate en casa', 'Restiamo a casa', 'Μένουμε σπίτι', 'Zostań w domu' – all relay the same, most common piece of advice given to EU citizens by their governments to protect themselves and their national health systems from the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, an increasing number of organisations stress that this advice puts the life of domestic violence victims, who are predominantly women, at risk. While reliable data are not widely available, it is commonly accepted that in the time of COVID-19, being quarantined with an abusive partner poses greater risks, and victim support appears to be inadequate. A [threefold increase in domestic violence cases](#) has already been recorded in China. Charities and police forces across the UK and the US have been warning of a [potential rise in cases of domestic and intimate partner violence](#).

As attention is currently focused on curbing the public health crisis, the problem of domestic violence risks being overlooked by authorities and the general 'stay at home' advice puts women's lives at risk. A more nuanced response is needed that takes women's specific situations into consideration. This should include [explicit acknowledgement](#) that domestic abuse victims are 'still allowed to leave home to seek help', that 'essential services' provided to women victims will continue to operate and that domestic violence professionals are recognised as key workers performing essential services, so that they can continue to support victims through their day-to-day work.

2. School and nursery closures increase the risk of poverty, especially for lone mothers

On 23 March, schools in the UK closed. Similar policies have been adopted across Europe to halt the spread of the virus in educational settings. While this was considered an essential measure, it does raise questions about how to mitigate its impact on working parents, many of whom already struggle to combine work and family responsibilities. It is a well-established fact that women are the primary caregivers for children and dependent adults. Women are significantly more likely than men to work part-time to take care of children or dependant adults.

While part-time work arrangements often provide much-needed flexibility to working parents, they are also [linked to lower pay](#), and unavoidably increase women's risk of poverty. Specific sub-groups, such as lone parents, the vast majority of whom are women, [are at a greater risk of poverty](#) when options for formal childcare are unavailable because they are not able to work their normal contractual hours. According to 2018 data, having children increases the risk of poverty for lone parents across the EU. According to Eurostat, in 2018 [45.2% of lone parents](#) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared with 17% of households with two adults and two children.

While official data are not available on the percentage of employees by sex and household status who reduced their working hours to take care of dependents during this period, it is reasonable to expect that school closures will disproportionately affect women (especially lone mothers) unless more flexibility is afforded to them to combine work and childcare responsibilities. School closures and other measures to halt the spread of the virus [could last six months](#); to protect the most vulnerable individuals with caring responsibilities from such measures, there is a need to provide flexible work arrangements and other support measures to working parents, especially lone mothers. For example, governments could include lone parents in the list of personnel who can still send children to school or introduce a statutory right to pay for time off taken to care for children under these exceptional circumstances. This would allow employees to more effectively combine their work and childcare responsibilities.

3. Working from home increases the risk of unemployment for working mothers and pregnant women

A third, widely adopted policy to halt the spread of the virus is ‘working from home’. Governments have encouraged businesses and workplaces to allow their employees to work from home, unless it is impossible for them to do so. The question arises of whether employers are equally willing to provide this flexibility to male and female employees. In particular, two groups appear to be at risk of discrimination because of poor implementation of this measure: mothers with school-age children and pregnant women.

According to a [2016 survey conducted on behalf of the UK government](#), 77% of mothers said they had a negative or possibly discriminatory experience during pregnancy, maternity leave, or on return from maternity leave, while 11% reported they felt forced to leave their job, either because they were dismissed, were made compulsorily redundant, or felt so poorly treated that they had to resign. 20% of respondents also reported experiencing harassment or negative comments related to pregnancy or flexible working from their employer or colleagues, while just over half (51%) who had a flexible working request approved said they felt it resulted in negative consequences.

Organisations providing legal advice and support to parents and employers of mothers with school-age children [point out](#) that the situation is exacerbated by the current COVID-19 measures. They argue that employers are less willing to allow mothers with school-age children to work from home during the coronavirus pandemic than their male counterparts. Representatives of legal advice lines in the UK [have also recorded cases](#) of pregnant women being made redundant while male employees are not subject to the same measures, and others have been asked to work in the office despite being categorised as a vulnerable group in the UK government guidance.

Cases of discrimination against working mothers and pregnant women are another unintentional consequence of governments' efforts to halt the spread of the virus. To reduce the risk, governments should remind employers that they could be exposing themselves to sex discrimination cases if they do not apply the measures in an equitable manner to male and female employees.

To sum up, there is an urgent need to incorporate a gender analysis into both the development and implementation of COVID-19 policy responses. Organisations are raising alarm bells about the [risks that gender-blind policies have on women](#), particularly those belonging to potentially vulnerable groups. The European Institute for Gender Equality will soon publish a [webpage](#) with more information about the coronavirus pandemic from a gender perspective. Others have called on governments to [learn from gender analysis of past outbreaks](#) to ensure that interventions affect women and men equitably. Governments should listen to them before further damage is done.

About the Author



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