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Report on Covid and Gender: Case of Lithuania

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About this publication

This report shed the light on negative consequences of COVID-19 pandemic more often experienced by women in Lithuanian society due to structural gender inequalities such as pay gap, care gap, pension gap, life expectancy gap and other structural reasons. On the one hand, women's unemployment grew significantly faster than men's, because they mostly work in the sectors, which were partially or completely closed during the quarantine period. On the other hand the risk to be infected by COVID-19 was higher to women because they mostly occupy the professions in health care and social work. Additionally, women mainly work in the grocery shops, drug stores and other places where work at home is not an option. Working mothers twice often than men experienced difficulties to balance work and caring duties while working at home when their children also stayed at home due to closed schools, kindergartens and informal education activities. Most often women are single parents and experienced more difficulties in labour market and taking care of their children. During pandemic their risk to poverty increased. COVID-19 pandemic had its negative effect on dynamics of domestic violence in Lithuania. Though in 2020 there were less registered crimes of domestic violence than in 2019, but number of murders at home increase from 21 cases in 2019 to 28 cases in 2020 as well as numbers on severe health impairment. Some experts noted that due to quarantine people were forced to isolation and this made an impact on increase of domestic violence but decrease in reporting about it.

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Report on Covid and Gender: Case of Lithuania

INTRODUCTION

The first case of COVID-19 in Lithuania was confirmed on February 28, 2020 (Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija, 2020). Soon after, on March 16, 2020 the first country-wide lockdown was declared. Initially, it was stated it would last for two weeks, however, it lasted until June 17, 2020 (LRT, 2020). During the summer pandemic measures were eased, but with the onset of the second wave of the pandemic in the autumn, lockdown was reintroduced on November 4, 2020. The second lockdown was extended multiple times and lasted until July 1, 2021 (Voveriūnaitė, 2021).

During the first lockdown all schooling activities in educational institutions were suspended, remote learning was introduced, and all schools remained closed until the end of the 2019–2020 school year. In the beginning of the second lockdown the majority of primary schools (grades 1–4) carried out contact learning; lower secondary school children (grades 5–8) were taught in hybrid mode (combination of in-person and remote learning); and gymnasium pupils (grades 9–12) were taught remotely (Information of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport). However, when the second lockdown was extended, all schools switched to remote learning from December 2020. The transition back to contact learning was very slow and uneven. Thus, for the majority of pupils the 2020–2021 school year was mostly spent in remote learning. Overall, Lithuania falls among the countries with the lengthiest school closures during the pandemic.

The vaccination campaign started on December 27, 2020 with healthcare workers (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020). Mass vaccination of the population started on May 31, 2021 (KoronaSTOP, 2021). As of May 2022, around 70 % of Lithuanians have had at least one dose (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2022).

1. COVID AND CHANGES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

In the area of labour force participation, equality between men and women in Lithuania is quite high – the Gender Equality Index in the field of “work” is as high as 74.2

points (European Gender Equality Institute, 2021) and the gender pay gap in 2019 was 12.4 % (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2020a), and thus lower than the European Union average. In 2019, before the pandemic, the employment rate for women (in the 20–64 age group) was 77.4 % and 79 % for men (a difference of only 1.6 percentage points).

However, during quarantine women’s unemployment grew significantly faster than men’s (Brazienė 2020). In the second quarter of 2020 around 33 % of the employed population did not work or worked fewer hours than usual. Women accounted for 60 % of these individuals. This growing registered unemployment of women is primarily due to the fact that they mostly worked in sectors which were partially or completely closed during the lockdown period (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2020).

Additionally, unemployed women often receive extremely low unemployment social insurance benefits or do not receive these benefits at all because they have not accumulated sufficient unemployment social insurance experience (Ekonomikos gaivinimo ir atsparumo didinimo planas, 2021). This issue is targeted by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which proposes to lower the requirements for social security benefits from having been employed for 12 months during the period of the last 30 months to 9 months.

In the context of the pandemic, the problem of gender segregation in the labour market has become particularly acute. In 2019, 27 % of women worked in education, health and social work, compared to only 6 % of men. However, only 8 % of women, compared to 33 % of men, worked in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Ekonomikos gaivinimo ir atsparumo didinimo planas, 2021). In terms of gender distribution in particular sectors, the construction sector and the armed forces remain nearly completely masculine, with 90.1 % and 93 % employees, respectively, being men. Men also dominate transport and storage activities (73.9 %), they constitute the majority of skilled workers and craftsmen (79.3 %), as well as operators and assemblers of equipment and machinery (79.2 %). Women are traditionally more commonly represented in education (79 % of employees are women) and health and social work (58.9 %). The largest share of women was in the service sector and

among sales staff and office workers, at 73.6 % and 69 % respectively (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2020). The average earnings are lower in the sectors dominated by women.

The sectors most affected by the pandemic and its containment measures are those where women constitute the majority of employees: women comprise 68 % of travel attendants, 70 % of travel consultants, 88 % of chefs, and 85 % of hotel administrators. For some sectors, the first lockdown had long-lasting effects – in September 2020, compared to January of the same year, the number of employees in hotels and similar temporary accommodation decreased by 16 %, in the manufacture of furniture for offices and shops by 19 %, in travel agencies by 23 %, and in the insurance sector by 16 %. Disproportionate numbers of women work in healthcare settings where the COVID-19 risk is the highest, and are directly exposed to the risks of the virus on a daily basis (SODRA, 2020a).

2. COVID AND POVERTY

According to Statistics Lithuania, the at-risk-of-poverty threshold in 2020 was 430 EUR per month for one person and 904 EUR for a family, consisting of two adults and two children under 14 years old. In 2020 around 585,000 people lived below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold in Lithuania. The share of people at-risk-of-poverty increased by 0.3 % compared to 2019 and amounted to 20.9 %. Lithuania's poverty risk indicators remain among the worst in the European Union (Nacionalinis skurdo mažinimo organizacijų tinklas, 2021).

The most vulnerable groups in terms of poverty in Lithuania are the unemployed, single people, single parents raising children, old age pensioners, people with disabilities, large families and children. Compared to 2019, in 2020 at-risk-of-poverty rates have increased or remained similar for many groups. The largest increases are observed among the unemployed (up 2 percentage points) and old-age pensioners (up 4.4 percentage points). On the other hand, in 2020 the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children decreased (by 2.7 percentage points) (Nacionalinis skurdo mažinimo organizacijų tinklas, 2021). As, usually, it is women who become single parents (Euroblogas, 2020) and there are almost twice as many female old age pensioners as male (SODRA, 2022), women are at a higher risk of poverty and have been more negatively affected by the pandemic than men.

According to survey data, in 2020, after the first lockdown, around 5 % of respondents claimed to have lost work due to COVID-19, 35 % experienced a significant decline in revenue, 38 % indicated that their family members had lost their jobs or their incomes have dropped significantly, as many as 11 % said they didn't have enough money for food, and 14 % were unable to pay for housing or utilities (Nacionalinis skurdo mažinimo organizacijų tinklas, 2021).

A survey conducted in March 2021, measuring the effect of the second lockdown, revealed similar results – the propor-

tion of the population short of money for food has remained unchanged. In addition, a higher percentage of respondents indicated that they lost their jobs due to COVID-19. When comparing their financial situation during the two lockdowns, a third of respondents (33 %) said their situation had deteriorated and only less than a tenth indicated that the situation had improved (8 %) (Nacionalinis skurdo mažinimo organizacijų tinklas, 2021).

Researchers from Vilnius University have analysed the extent to which COVID-19 mitigation public measures have contributed to maintaining the well-being of citizens. Because of the directionality of public support measures, 73 % of households that benefited from it previously received a lower income than an average household. Thus the Gini coefficient showing income inequality among households fell by 2.3 percentage points and the at-risk-of-poverty rate – by almost 3 percentage points. This indicates that public support has reached lower-income households. Inequality and the poverty rate have been reduced the most by the 'EUR 200 lump sum for seniors, orphans, widows and the disabled', 'EUR 257 benefit for the self-employed', 'Temporary EUR 42 or 200 job search allowance' and 'One-off allowance of EUR 120 or EUR 200 for children'. Other measures did not have a significant impact on income inequality and poverty rate (Černiauskas, Lazutka, 2020).

In the representative survey of the 18–74-year-old Lithuanian population, the population's assessment of the Lithuanian government's response to the pandemic was 6.3 points on average in the ten-point system. Women rated the reaction of the government slightly more favourably than men (Černiauskas, Lazutka, 2020).

3. COVID AND HEALTH ISSUES

As mentioned above, in Lithuania the segregation of labour market along gender and profession is highly visible. This reveals certain tendencies of negative consequences for women. According to the European Gender Equality index the risk of being infected by COVID-19 is higher for women than men because they are overrepresented in healthcare and social work. Additionally, women frequently work in grocery shops, chemists and other frontline positions (EIGE, 2020). Lithuanian data show that almost 100 % of nurses are women, 79 % of family doctors are women, and for medical doctors specialising in a specific health field, 69 % are women (SODRA, 2020, p. 17). Thus, the majority of all workers in the field of healthcare are women and that the specialists of this profession should always be physically present at work including during lockdown and thus on the frontline with the resulting risk of infection. For example, on October 14, 2020, the National Public Health Centre stated that, since the beginning of the pandemic, 729 infection cases have been confirmed among healthcare workers, and 310 cases were diagnosed over September and October 2020 (Andriukaitytė, 2020). Research on medical doctors' psychological well-being completed in March-April 2020 has shown that the major-

ity of medical staff in intensive care units experienced moderate to severe stress, anxiety and depression. More than a quarter of interviewed medical staff in Lithuania's healthcare institutions experienced a constant fear of being infected or passing the infection on to their relatives. As many as 4 % of respondents thought about changing their profession since the beginning of COVID-19 (Baškienė, 2020). Researchers noted that the high stress of medical doctors in Lithuania remained during the period when lockdown was relaxed during the summer of 2020. Lack of psychological services and other support for the medical personnel in the hospitals impacted on such health conditions (Baškienė, 2020).

Some issues on the violation of women's human rights during the pandemic were discussed in the national media (Karlionė, 2020). This is connected to the restrictions to participation in childbirth for partners or other relatives together with the women in labour. Only expectant mothers could enter the clinic during the lockdown. A group of NGOs raised concerns about these restrictions and published an open statement to the public authorities, requesting they respect and ensure the protection of women's reproductive rights in maternity hospitals (Motinystę globojančių iniciatyvų sąjunga, 2020). The Ministry of Health did not change the rule and suggested the use of a mobile device or computer to communicate with relatives while giving birth (LR Sveikatos apsaugos ministerija, 2020a)

A more problematic issue widely discussed in the national media was the restriction of access to safe and legal abortions during lockdown (Balkūnaitė, 2020). The Minister of Health explained that this practice is temporary due to COVID-19 conditions and limited access to regular health services. Nevertheless, he commented that this temporal regulation might encourage women to reconsider the decision to terminate their pregnancy. As a reaction to this minister's statement, human rights organisations organised a petition which was signed by more than 10,000 people to express disapproval with the minister's statement (ŽTSI, LGPC, 2020). However, the regulation was left unchanged.

4. COVID AND COMBATING THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

The Lithuanian government passed a package of legislative changes in order to improve the economic situation of the most vulnerable social groups and most negatively affected business companies on March 17, 2020 (LR Socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2020b). Legislative provisions introduced measures to secure an income for employees of at least a monthly minimum salary for the lockdown period and provided subsidies to businesses to preserve the jobs, compensated for prolonged sickness leave and introduced measures to ease some financial burdens, for example deferred loan repayments. Parents, in particular mothers who usually take care of their children and other dependant family members, benefitted from these measures. For example, the period of child sickness benefit for parents who

have to stay at home to look after their children following the closure of schools was extended until the end of lockdown. Sickness benefit was also introduced for persons caring for people with disabilities and grandparents in need of care following the suspension of the activities of day centres.

In practice, Lithuanian State Social Security Fund (SODRA) has deferred social security contribution in a simplified manner for many companies affected by COVID-19. The majority of these deferred companies are in the restaurant and catering business (388) – as mentioned above this sector is commonly staffed by female employees. Almost 6 million EUR has been deferred for them. Meanwhile, 366 transport companies (where the majority of employees are men) were allowed to defer 6.6 ml EUR. SODRA statistics show that 157 enterprises providing car services were allowed to postpone contributions of 1.4 million EUR, 153 enterprises in the food and drinks industry – 1.6 million EUR, 93 enterprises in the hotel and accommodation industry – 2.6 million EUR, 68 clothing stores – over 2 million EUR (SODRA, 2020) In total, SODRA took 7400 decisions to defer up to 130 mln EUR contributions which enterprises and the self-employed should pay every month. During the height of the pandemic in 2020 it was noted that unemployment increased and the number of socially secured individuals was lower than in 2019. The most severe reduction of employees has been observed in enterprises of hotel services (85 % women), travel agents (72 % women) and food services (88 % women) (SODRA, 2020a).

Similar tendencies remained in 2021. Enterprises in the hotel and accommodation services, travel arrangement services, stores and other trade fields and education (sectors mainly occupied by women) reduced their number of employees. Meanwhile, employee numbers increased in information and communication services and transport (fields dominated by men). Nevertheless, the income of employees in certain professions increased – medium salaries of medical personnel increased up to 27 %, 17 % – in education, trade business – 13 %, science and professional field – 14 % (SODRA, 2021). Some experts noted that tendencies demonstrate uneven development in income and insured employees, and uneven development of recovery across different sectors and occupations. This contributes to increased risks of widening the gap between employees with the highest and lowest earnings, between women and men, because women are overrepresented in sectors which are highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown conditions (SODRA, 2021).

5. COVID AND SCHOOLS

Inequality in the family remains a huge problem in Lithuania. For example, 66 % fathers aged 25–49 take care and/or educate their children on a daily basis, while 92 % mothers do the same on a daily basis. In Lithuania, on a daily basis, 79 % women cook and 41 % women take care and/or educate their children, while only 29 % of men cook and only 24 % take care of their children (EIGE, 2021). In

the Baltic states, the share of women aged 15–74 in the public sector and working part time is almost twice as high as that of men (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2020). As noted by employers, work from home due to COVID-19 has more negative impact on women due to their higher burden of household activities and childcare as children also stayed at home due to closed schools, kindergartens and informal education activities. Employed women had to complete both job tasks and at the same time care for their children. Twice as many women than men said that they experienced difficulties in balancing these two tasks (SWEDBANK, 2020).

Since September 2020, the government of Lithuania approved the proposal to pay sickness benefits for the care of young children or children with disabilities when they must self-isolate (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministerija, 2020c). Sickness benefit for the care of a child amounts to 65.94 % of the gross salary. It is paid during the period of compulsory self-isolation, but no longer than 14 calendar days. The parents used the proposed support measure to take the sickness benefits for care of their children who could not attend education institutions due to lockdown. More than two-thirds of parents caring for children are women. As the data show, up to 67 % of women took sickness leave during the lockdown period in 2020 (SODRA, 2020). Periods of incapacity for work of up to three months and sickness benefits for some women have become a lifeline, especially for those working in the sectors most affected by lockdown (SODRA, 2020).

Lockdown measures such as restricted access to kindergartens and schools due to their closure have had some negative consequences for people in precarious work and employees who have to be physically present at their work, for example healthcare institutions (Nacionalinis skurdo mažinimo organizacijų tinklas, 2020). The government of Lithuania introduced certain measures to facilitate these employees' conditions and obliged schools and nurseries continue providing the services for such parents who have to provide proof from their jobs. Any form of proof must indicate that the person must work in his or her workplace and cannot perform its functions remotely. Such evidence should be submitted by both parents (Sveikatos apsaugos ministerija, 2020b).

6. COVID AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In a press release from the Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson it was stated that women may become the main victims of the social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic (LGKT, 2020). Lockdown measures introduced across the country were considered likely to lead to an increase in domestic violence against women. In Lithuania the rates of domestic violence against women increased by 20 % from the beginning of the lockdown (LRT 2020).

The Department of Statistics of the Republic of Lithuania on April 8, 2021 provided evidence that COVID-19 pan-

demical had its negative effect on the dynamics of domestic violence in Lithuania. Although in 2020 there were fewer registered crimes of domestic violence than in 2019, the number of murders at home increased by almost a third (from 21 cases in 2019 to 28 cases in 2020) as well as the numbers of severe health impairments. Some experts noted that, due to lockdown, people were forced into isolation and this had an impact on increase of domestic violence but a decrease in the reporting of it (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2021) In 2020 there were 7100 incidents of domestic violence registered, which is 7.3 % less than 2019; sexual violence cases reduced by up to 38.7 %, but cases of severe health impairment increased up to 13 % and murders by up to 33.3 % (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2021)

It is difficult to hide physical violence cases – therefore they are registered, however, other possible forms of domestic violence could be overlooked in public. As some experts have noted, isolation at home heavily restricted victims' opportunities to report the situation and search for help and support, because the perpetrator could be in constant proximity. Thus, any call for help could cause more violence for the victim (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2021).

Similar tendencies could be noted in 2021. According to the official statistics, in 2021 (January – December), 5802 criminal offences related to domestic violence have been registered in the National Crime Register (Informatikos ir ryšių departamentas, 2021). During the same period for the previous year (2020), 7133 domestic-violence-related criminal offences were registered, thus the number dropped by 18.7 %. The number of registered offences during the lockdown (both the stricter version applied in winter and beginning of spring 2021, and more lenient version applied until the end of June) saw a similar decrease of registered offences by up to 20 %, compared to the period of 2021 (Informatikos ir ryšių departamentas, 2021).

Out of 6137 registered victims in 2021, 75.3 % (4624) were women, and 24.7 % (1513) were men. When it came to perpetrators, 87.1 % (3900) were male and 12.9 % (578) were female. The dynamics of perpetrators and victims is similar to previous years (Informatikos ir ryšių departamentas, 2021).

Lithuania has not yet ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). The conservative politicians, the Lithuanian Catholic Church and other religious communities resist its ratification due to the so-called ideology of genderism (LRT, 2021). The President of Lithuania also expressed his support for the postponement of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Penkunas, 2021).

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy agenda on improving gender equality should be integrated into the everyday work routine. Systematic collec-

tion of gender disaggregated data provides the possibility to identify gaps in the labour market and professions. Based on this, measures should be applied to reduce the existing gaps between women and men in the field of unemployment, pay gap, horizontal segregation of professions and the labour market.

Ratification of Istanbul Convention is necessary to improve the prevention, protection, prosecution and policies to eradicate gender-based violence.

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Front cover: picture alliance/Westend61

Design concept: www.bergsee-blau.de

Layout: www.stetzer.net

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Report on Covid and Gender: Case of Lithuania

This report provides evidence of the negative consequences of structural gender inequality more often experienced by women in Lithuanian society, which became more critical within the context of COVID-19. During the quarantine period (the first lockdown was from 16 March, 2020 until 17 June, 2020), the second from 4 November 2020 until July 1, 2021) women's unemployment grew significantly faster than men's, primarily because they work in sectors which were partially or completely closed during the lockdown period. On the other hand, the risk of being infected by COVID-19 is higher for women than men because of their prevalence in the professions of healthcare and social work. Additionally, women are overrepresented in grocery shops, pharmacies and other frontline occupations.

The most vulnerable groups in terms of poverty in Lithuania are the unemployed, single people, single parents raising children, old age pensioners, people with disabilities, large families and children. Usually, it is women who become single parents and there are almost twice as many female old age pensioners than male. Moreover, women are at a higher risk of poverty and have been more negatively affected by the pandemic than men.

Caring duties in the family are unevenly distributed within couples. Data on Lithuania show that on a daily basis 79 % women cook and 41 % women take care and/or educate their children, while only 29 % of men cook and only 24 % take care of their children. Working mothers experienced difficulties in balancing work and caring duties while working at home when their children are also at home due to closed schools, kindergartens and informal education activities twice as often as men.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on the dynamics of domestic violence in Lithuania. Although in 2020 there were fewer registered crimes of domestic violence than in 2019, the number of murders at home increased by almost a third (from 21 cases in 2019 to 28 cases in 2020) as well as the statistics on severe health impairment. Some experts noted that due to lockdown people were forced into isolation and this had an impact on the increase of domestic violence but a decrease in the reporting of it.