



Stoyanka Eneva

COVID Impact on Gender Inequalities in Bulgaria

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About this publication

The present report analyses different aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria in relation to gender inequalities and discrimination. It focuses on six key dimensions: labour market, poverty, health, education and childcare, gender-based violence and crisis response measures. Data from various sources were analyzed, the main ones being the National Statistical Institute, Eurostat, Eurofound and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The analysis shows a deepening of gender-based inequalities in the above-mentioned dimensions. The report suggests the need for policies for workplace protection against discrimination, for better public child care services and such that enable a more equal redistribution of childcare between parents. It urges for a fair redistribution of pandemic recovery funds, paying particular attention to the increased vulnerability of women, and to the intersection of inequalities such as gender, age and ethnicity.

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INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria is one of the countries, which has been very negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic within the European Union. Although the first wave of the virus resulted in relatively low transmission and mortality rates, several very sharp peaks of COVID followed in the autumn of 2020 and 2021, hitting the country particularly hard, both in health and economic as well as in social terms.

The management of the COVID crisis in Bulgaria cannot be understood without taking into consideration its close interconnection with the political turmoil in the country. In 2021 a total of three rounds of parliamentary and one presidential election were held. To a great extent the COVID crisis overlapped with the electoral campaigns, and the strategy chosen by most of the parties was to avoid unpopular measures such as heavy lockdowns. But at the same time there were not any convincing enough awareness-raising and vaccination campaigns, which in turn completed the vicious circle between the unpopular measures and their non-implementation. In combination with the traditionally low level of trust in the institutions the state of emergency produced polarisation of public opinion, difficulties in accessing reliable scientific information and a low level of public involvement. Traditional and social media also played an important role in this scenario, spreading false information about COVID-19 under the pretext of giving a platform to different points of view. This combination of factors resulted in discontent, noncompliance and distrust in the infection prevention measures, low vaccination rates and difficult access to treatment whenever the healthcare system collapsed.

An emergency epidemic situation was introduced in March 2020 and it was gradually extended until April 2021. During this period the level of restrictive measures varied and after the initial lockdown, which lasted from March to May 2020, no full closure was applied again. Temporary partial closures in early 2021 affected restaurants and nightclubs as well as schools, which switched back to distance learning in autumn 2021. In October 2021 a "green certificate," i.e. a vaccination or negative test requirement for access to public facilities, was introduced. This measure led to some increase in vaccination numbers but it also failed to be widely observed after the initial period of stricter compliance. Eventually, the requirement for a certificate for both access

to public sites and entering the country was lifted from 1 April 2022.

COVID AND THE LABOUR MARKET

The pandemic had a particularly severe impact on the labour market, reinforcing already existing inequalities. One of the most important ones is the gender pay gap. Although according to the National Statistical Institute (NSI) its total value went down in 2020 from 13.7% to 12.3%, the gap is still very big and particularly marked in feminized occupations. For example, the 2019:2020 ratio in the culture, sports and entertainment sector was 24.7% versus 23.1%, while in the health-care and social work sector the gap decreased from 29.5% to 27.1%. The latter is a gender segregated occupation with significant low-paid female labour. On the other hand, in the highest paying sector in the country, i.e. information and creative product development, the gap was one of the largest: 22.4% in 2019 and 22.5% in 2020.

One of the sectors with a wage gap in favour of women is construction, which traditionally makes use of male labour, but pays higher wages to the few women employed. A similar trend is observed in the real estate sector, where the wage gap grew in favour of women from -7.5% in 2019 to -10.2% in 2020. The administration sector is the one with the largest pay gap in favour of women, which, however, declined during the last years from -29.8% in 2019 to -26.3% in 2020.

In the latter the number of employed women is remaining relatively stable, having dropped from 104,800 employees in 2019 to 103,200 in 2020. Comparatively few sectors have created jobs for women in the last two years: an exception is the healthcare field, where the number of employees rose from 130,000 in 2019 to 134,900 in 2020. There is a small increase of women in the IT sector, from 35,000 to 35,700, as well as in the extractive industries where their number grew from 8,000 in 2019 to 9,200 in 2020. On the other hand, their decline is significant in the majority of sectors: education, manufacturing, electricity, transport and communications, hospitality, culture.

As noted in the report *Bulgaria in a Europe of Labour*, prepared by the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of

Bulgaria (KNSB), the pandemic has widened the gap between the sectors where remote working is possible and those where it is not. The latter are associated with additional health and labour risks during the pandemic, as well as with labour devaluation. The wage gap is also driven by the percentage of men and women employed in managerial positions, in skilled or unskilled categories. In the executive category, 2020 marked some growth for women employed in these positions, as well as a decline for men (102,700 men in 2019 and 95,500 in 2020 compared to 65,600 and 67,300 women). In 2021, however, the number of men grew slightly and that of women dropped more sharply (96,400 and 59,800, respectively). Within the skilled workers category where the number of employed women is higher than men, the numbers for both sexes rose (190,100 in 2019 to 205,800 in 2020 for men and 349,200 to 357 000 for women). It is essential here that in 2021 the number of female skilled workers grew even more – up to 370,100, while that of men experienced a slight decline to 203,300, that is, during the post-pandemic recovery the number of male managers stabilized and grew, while that of women started to decline.

Therefore, the NSI data show the loss of a high percentage of workplaces in some already feminized sectors such as services, commerce, administrative assistants and accommodation and food service activities, which are slower and harder to recover while increasing the number of contracts in 2021. Unemployment is also more clearly seen among low-skilled women as compared to low-skilled men or executives and specialists, who have those skills, conditions and means to work from home, which are more than ever in demand now. These processes run in parallel with an increase in staff in sectors that are not only feminized but also of key importance in the frontline work, i.e. implying greater health risks. Such are healthcare and parts of the administration, whose resources have been directed towards combating the pandemic.

In the long run labour force recovery is more solid for men than for women. For the former, unemployment increased from 83,300 to 96,300 in 2020, but declined to 93,900 in 2021. While for women in 2019 the number of unemployed was less – 60,500, but rose dramatically to 72,300 in 2020, and in 2021 continued to grow reaching 74,700. The long-term unemployed were 2.4% in 2019, of which 2.6% were men and 2.2% – women. In 2020 the number of men remained 2.6% and that of women dropped to 2%.

COVID AND POVERTY

According to NSI data the relative share of the population living in poverty in Bulgaria increased during the first year of the pandemic from 22.6% in 2019 to 23.8% in 2020, and dropped to 22.1% in 2021. But this seemingly optimistic picture of declining percentages of the poor turns out to be more complicated if a number of important factors are taken into account: the relative share of the poor before receiving social transfers is almost double: 42.2% in 2019, 41.7% in 2020, and rising to as much as 44.3% in 2021. This is an indication of the crucial role of social transfers in reducing poverty: pensions, unemployment benefits and other types of

compensation contributed to a change from 17.9% in 2019 to 29.9% in 2020 and 31.5% in 2021.

The relative share of the poor by gender shows that the percentage of women is higher. For both genders the figures increased during the pandemic from 20.9% in 2019 to 21.7% in 2020 for men and from 24.3% to 25.8% for women. The values fell to 20.3% for men and 23.9% for women in 2021, but here it is important to note the significantly higher percentage of women below poverty line prior to social transfers. It was 44.4% in 2020 and 47.1% in 2021 vs 38.8% and 41.3% for men, respectively. Should the age dimension be added, the difference in the percentages of the elderly poor will become quite dramatic. Women in poverty aged 65 and more (including social transfers) are 40% as compared to 26.6% of men. These values have increased tremendously since 2019, when they were 28.3% for women. The percentage of elderly men in poverty has fallen during the same period from 29.7 to 26.6%.

The type of household is another determinant of the risk of poverty: the most disadvantaged households are those consisting of one person over 65 (with 61.8% people living in poverty in 2020 and 55.4% in 2021), two adults with three or more dependent children (52.2% and 49.3% in 2020 and 2021), and women living alone (where the percentage of the poor was 53.5% in 2020 and 48.6% in 2021). The lower pensions of women as a result of the pay gap or maternity and parental leave extended for various reasons, determine the lower income of older women, which in turn logically affects the poverty ratio in those households where they rely only on their own income.

Poverty rates are lower for working people, but the pandemic years have caused significant losses and increased risks for the households. In the supplementary survey to Household Budget Monitoring, conducted by the NSI for the fourth quarter of 2021, 8.4% of the respondents indicated a significant reduction in their income. For 29.7% of them it was due to a reduction in the working hours or salary, and 20.2% had lost their jobs or their own businesses had gone bankrupt. Two-thirds of the respondents had difficulty meeting their daily expenses (37.1% of the individuals had certain problems, 26.6% had difficulties, and 11.9% had major difficulties). It is also important to mention another combination of intersecting factors that increase the risk of poverty, namely the level of education and ethnicity. These were especially important indicators during the pandemic since the sectors requiring low-skilled and on-site labour offered lower pay under riskier working conditions; and on the other hand, ethnic discrimination was increased by means of state and police control in the areas with Roma population, as was public and media stigmatisation.

COVID AND CHILDCARE

The percentage of children in Bulgaria, who are only looked after by their parents, is the second highest in the EU, i.e. 71.8% (Eurostat, 2022), whereas this responsibility within the family falls mostly on women. The numbers of mothers and

fathers on parental leave are very polarised: 86,003 women versus 22,317 men or 79.4% versus 20.6% in 2019. In 2020 the numbers amounted to 81,894 and 21,994, i.e. 78.8% vs 21.2%, showing a slight increase in accord with the trend of progressive growth over the recent years. While these figures imply an attempt, albeit a slight one, at redistributing child caregiving, in the following periods the percentages in terms of parental leave become extremely polarised, because caregiving was taken on exclusively by women: the ratio between working women and men who received childcare benefits for up to a 2-year period was 99.1% to 0.1% in 2019, and 99.2% and 0.8% in 2020.

The amplification of this trend during the pandemic is evident from the *Quality of Life and Quality of Society under COVID-19* survey (Eurofound, 2020–2021): household work and adult care show some inequalities, but childcare is the most unequally distributed. Thus, male respondents in 2021 said they had spent 9 hours on cooking and housework, while women had spent 14.4. Men had spent 5.7 hours taking care of relatives (elderly or disabled ones) and women – 6.4. Regarding childcare, as mentioned above, the difference is the largest: 10.3 hours for women versus 3.9 for men.

As for school-age childcare, an additional problem in Bulgaria was the intermittent transition to distance education for different age groups of children as COVID infection levels increased, since it didn't coincide with the parents' non-productive time. While the first lockdown from March to May 2020 targeted the whole population, between October 2021 and March 2022 special measures were imposed on school-age children only, thus creating some additional difficulties for their parents. A series of reports prepared by Global Metrics for UNICEF Bulgaria (2020) have shown different levels of gender inequality regarding families in this context. As regards children in grades 1st to 4th, mothers have expressed greater anxiety and interest in the ways to resolve conflicts, especially in families with more than one school aged child. As regards children after grade 5th, there is a clear difference in the time provided for help with the homework, the average time being 1-2 hours. However, it doubles to 3-4 hours for women, especially for housewives and unemployed ones. That is to say, keeping children at home goes with more stress, conflicts, and the need for emotions management skills. Plus, there is a need for extra help with homework, which commitment, as the survey shows, is twice as often taken on by women who are already unemployed (this increase is not found in the case of male unemployed respondents).

It is important to draw attention to the intersection of factors that put families in a vulnerable position and affect children's educational opportunities, namely the impact of parents' education and qualifications in combination with gender and ethnicity. The NSI report *Poverty and Social Inclusion Indicators 2021* shows an increase in the risk of poverty for children of parents with secondary education during the pandemic. The number of non-poor children of parents with secondary education has decreased from 90.3% to 87.2%, while the number of poor children has increased from 9.7% to 12.8%. Even more serious is the increase in the group of parents

with primary and no education, whereas the non-poor were reduced by half from 31.7% in 2019 to 15.9% in 2020, and the poor increased from 68.3% to 84.1% during the same year. The particular vulnerability and discrimination towards ethnic minorities must also be taken into consideration here, as well as the wages for non-skilled occupations.

COVID AND COMBATING THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

The economic measures adopted during the pandemic were marked by the strong predominance of businesses as the main beneficiaries of funds to tackle the crisis. This was an EU-wide trend, which Bulgaria was also following. The number of measures systematised in the Eurofound's database of national-level responses (2022) is 45. 14 of them directly targeted different types of businesses, helping them to keep operating. In the second place, 7 specific measures were intended for prevention of social hardship, and in the third – 6 measures were envisaged for protection of workers and adaptation of workplaces.

The first category included measures that offered direct funding of part of the employees' salary (at a 60:40 state/business ratio) in order to keep them employed at times where various types of manufacturing companies were either closed or had their turnover reduced by 20% at first and by 30% later on. Initially, the measure covered the sectors, which were closed during the first stage of the pandemic (hotels and restaurants, transport and tourism), but as a result of the strong effects of the crisis it was expanded to new occupations. Various programmes fell within the same category, such programmes offering compensation to businesses for hiring unemployed people, such as the "Employment for You" operation and the "Short-term Employment" programme, which supported both businesses and the self-employed. Emergency funds were also offered to the sector of culture, both for employees and self-employed people.

Measures, aimed specifically at parents, included childcare compensations when the schools were closed because of the pandemic. This measure was related to the inability to work from home, i.e. the benefit was paid to enable parents to look after their children, but not in cases where they were already working from home. In other words, if paid work was carried out at home, it was not considered necessary to compensate for the reproductive work carried out at the same place. Another contribution, aimed at families, provided a one-off grant for incidental expenses for families with financial difficulties. It was intended for parents who had used up their paid leave and had taken at least 20 days of unpaid annual leave, as well as for cases where one or both parents were unemployed but were not receiving any benefits. Under these conditions they could receive a one-off grant of BGN 375.

Pensioners receive a BGN 60 bonus to their pension for the period January to June 2022, preceded by a BGN 120 bonus on a monthly basis October to December 2021. An innovative measure is the BGN 75 one-off vaccination bonus for

pensioners as well. Also, it is mostly the elderly who benefit from the services of “warm lunch provision” and “individual food packages provision”. As the previous section has shown, these social transfers, although insufficient, are vital for people at risk of poverty.

Finally, no gender specific anti-discriminatory measures have been envisaged. According to the *Report on Equality between Women and Men in Bulgaria*, produced by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the state has already guaranteed this equality through measures such as the Law on Protection against Discrimination, the Labour Code, etc.

At the same time the report acknowledges the existence of a pay gap and occupational segregation, and recognises as positive the measures taken in a number of sectors that employ women, such as hotels and restaurants, commerce, administration and culture. Two important points are highlighted: firstly, the report welcomes the increase in staff costs for administrations operating in the field of COVID control and where, as stated above, women constitute the greater part of the workers. And, on the other hand, it reports positive figures regarding women, who have benefited from the Human Resources Development programme. The percentage of women enrolled in vocational training in 2020 was 68.3% and the percentage of those enrolled in key competencies training was 69.6%. In 2020 women accounted for 58.1% of all people having started a new job as compared to 57.2% in 2019.

COVID AND HEALTH ISSUES

If the first wave of the pandemic in March – May 2020 did not affect Bulgaria so strongly in terms of increasing excess mortality, the autumn of 2020 was extremely severe with respect to this indicator with extreme mortality peaks. Eurostat data showed excess mortality rates of 94.0% in November 2020 and 74.2% in December. During the next waves in 2021 excess mortality levels of 53.7%, 77.3% and 26.7% were reported for March, April and May 2021. In autumn 2021 a new wave raised the values up to 51.7%, 74.3% and 88.8% in September, October and November. Despite the drop in cases and the lifting of the measures and the state of emergency, the situation is far from normal, with values of 44% and 16.5% for February and March 2022.

The World Health Organization's data (2022) have shown that over the entire pandemic period the total number of infected people in Bulgaria was 1,161,351 and the total number of deaths was 37,043. The incidence and mortality rates are higher for men than for women. According to NSI data for 2020 the total number of deaths was 8,554, of which 5,284 were men and 3,270 women. The mortality rates are 8.0‰ and 5.6‰, respectively. The difference decreases with age and the deceased aged 85 and older are 451 males and 379 females, respectively. Another notorious record, apart from the high mortality rates, is the extremely low vaccination rate in the country, which was 36% in May 2022 (ECDC, 2022).

The 2021 *Quality of Life during COVID-19* survey focuses on European residents' attitudes towards vaccination. The varia-

tion in the responses between men and women in Bulgaria is very interesting. Men are more likely to think that the risk of COVID-19 has been exaggerated: 33% vs 21.2% of women, and 11.2% even state that “I think COVID-19 doesn't exist” vs 7.9% of women. 64.8% men vs 61.8% women agree with “I do not trust the safety of the vaccine”. But the explanation “I am worried that it will make my health problems worse” prevails among women, with 30.6% women vs 29.5% men. That is to say, women have a greater awareness of the disease, and of the risks it entails, but they are also concerned about the side effects or dangers of the vaccines (which were circulated in the media sometimes in a sensationalist way). On the other hand, we should not forget the tendency to downplay the effects of medication on the female body, while men's reluctance to vaccinate is clearly linked to the standpoint of an exaggerated risk and an aptitude for judging and taking risks at one's own discretion.

Some other interesting gender differences can be seen from the self-reported health conditions, which are part of the same study. When asked “In general, how is your health?” in February – March 2021, the percentage of men, who thought it was very bad (1.3%) and bad (8.4%), outnumbered that of women, whose values were 0.3% and 5.4%, respectively. Physical health complaints were prevalent among men, while in 2020 women were more severely affected by the pandemic also in respect of their mental health, thus showing higher rates of anxiety and depression. For example, 17.5% of the women checked “I have felt downhearted and depressed most of the time” vs 13.8% of the men.

In this section, it is important not only to mention some trends in the population health but also the working conditions of health specialists and care workers, who are also affected by gender-based inequalities. In 2000 a measure was approved for an additional remuneration of BGN 1,000 for frontline health specialists, as well as salary increases for doctors, nurses and attendants of BGN 600, 360 and 120, respectively. The different pay rises are also indicative of labour segregation and pay inequalities in the health sector. In relation to the specific risks to women's health, it is important to mention the working conditions of the Bulgarian migrant female care workers, as the demand for care work in the West European countries surged many times at the start of the pandemic, prompting repeated openings of special corridors across otherwise closed borders in order to channel female workers, mainly from Eastern Europe, towards countries seeking care work, Austria and Germany in particular.

The European Parliament's report *The Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis and Post-crisis Period* also highlights the particularly vulnerable situation of the Roma community due to a number of factors: disadvantaged living conditions, economic vulnerability and difficulty in accessing healthcare, which together can lead to a delay in seeking medical aid. Another crucial factor is the securitisation of the pandemic, from which migrant and racialised communities disproportionately suffer. In relation to the latter, the ombudsman's report from 2020 states that the conditions in the refugee accommodation centres do not meet safety measures and there is a particular risk to unaccompanied children.

COVID AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Bulgaria is one of the countries that have not ratified the Istanbul Convention, a decision taken after a long and problematic debate over its content. There is national legislation that addresses domestic violence: the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence (adopted 2005, with important amendments in 2019 and currently pending further discussions and amendments). Secondly, the National Programme for the Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence, adopted in 2020, foresees the establishment of a National Commission for the Eradication of Domestic Violence, which, however, has been delayed due to a discrepancy with the 2021 budget. In the pandemic context the Law on the Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency was also adopted, which ensures that cases under the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence are not suspended during the lockdown and COVID crisis.

As with the previous sections, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing problems and has exposed a lack of tools to address them. In this specific case it concerns the lack of official statistics on domestic violence. Thus, the sources of data on gender-based violence are, firstly, police and prosecutors (based on files and proceedings); NGOs that provide direct services to victims of violence and conduct research in this field; and, lastly, other NGOs and activist collectives that systematize data on femicides.

In this specific context of outsourcing of violence protection, the data provided by NGOs come in the form of annual reports. The Animus Foundation, which is the main provider of services related to the protection of victims of domestic violence, reports that, in addition to its usual activities, in 2020 it carried out others related to emergency support for victims of violence during the pandemic. These consisted of the establishment of an emergency fund, the provision of emergency assistance, including humanitarian assistance, and awareness-raising campaigns.

The Foundation provides valuable and representative data as it maintains the national helpline for victims of domestic violence. They note that the total number of calls made in 2020 shows a slight decline compared to 2019, but there is an increase in the number of calls related to experiencing domestic violence. For the entire period of 2020 these were 1,632, compared to 1,522 in 2019. In terms of quarterly trends, Animus notes that calls increased in the summer months of 2020 immediately following the end of the lockdown, which is attributed to the difficulty or impossibility of making phone calls when quarantined with the abuser. Thus, the average number of calls between May and September was between 200 and 250, compared to a 170-190 average. Due to the difficulties mentioned, 144 email consultations were also conducted.

According to the data of Sofia District Prosecutor's Office, published in the media, in 2019 there were 344 files and 40 pre-trial proceedings, and in the first half of 2020 there were 564 files and 116 pre-trial proceedings. In the first half of 2021, there were already 700 domestic violence files, of

which 127 pre-trial proceedings were initiated. The problem of absence of a unified system for information and data collection on domestic violence is also reported in an Ombudsman's Statement (2020). She points to the interconnected nature of different types of domestic violence, also drawing attention to the vulnerable position of children and people with disabilities, which is exacerbated in a pandemic context due to the limited access of social workers.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The report shows that inequalities in the labour market have become deeper with the pandemic, especially in feminized sectors and those with worse working conditions. Despite claiming the adequacy of the existing legislation, no specific measures have been taken to address and compensate for these labour problems. It would therefore be necessary to prioritise policies for workplace protection against discrimination, such policies targeting women, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups.

Throughout the report the recovery measures have been reviewed, concluding that they disproportionately benefit employers and, despite some social transfers, vulnerable groups such as the elderly, single households or the unemployed are left behind. This is why it is essential to move towards a fair redistribution of pandemic recovery funds, paying particular attention to the increased vulnerability of women, and to the intersection of inequalities such as gender, age and ethnicity. Social policies and transfers to help ensure a decent life for the elderly are particularly necessary. As the report has shown, they are in an especially vulnerable position, both in health and economic terms.

Data have shown that families, and mothers in particular, have borne much greater burdens of domestic and care work in the pandemic. This is caused, on the one hand, by the inadequacy of public childcare services and, on the other hand, by the unequal gender distribution of reproductive labour. This is why two types of policies are necessary: firstly, childcare public service provision and, secondly, redistributing the responsibility for the care of pre-school and school-age children. Specific actions like increasing the number of nursery places or awareness campaigns to involve men in domestic work could be implemented.

Year after year feminist organisations have been insisting on the need for statistics on domestic violence and concrete actions to prevent and stop it. The creation of uniform statistics on domestic violence is much needed, combined, however, with an analysis of the intertwining types of structural violence against women and development of government plans and programmes to address their different aspects.

In conclusion, regarding all of the above, an in-depth analysis of the intersectionality between different types of inequality, which places some social groups in a situation of extreme vulnerability, is necessary.

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