Work inequalities for Romanian women during COVID-19 pandemic

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Трудови неравенства при жените в Румъния по време на COVID-19

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Abstract

Inequalities between women and men in the labor market intensified during the pandemic, wiping out at least two years of progress over the past decade, accordingly to recent reports (European Commission, World Bank, etc.). The existing analyses estimate a "COVID-19 gap" that compares job losses with the increase in employment expected before the pandemic, finding that there are 5.1 million more women unemployed and 5.2 million fewer women working now, compared to what would have happened if the pandemic did not occur. According to Global Gender Gap Report 202," Romania was placed in the 88th position in The Global Gender Gap Index 2021 rankings, with the most significant decrease in Eastern Europe, as compared with the previous year. Our article is focused on the situation of Romanian gender inequalities. As methods of research, we used secondary analysis of data and focus groups. Our study's results discuss the situation of women's inequalities in the Romanian workforce market, particularly in the educational system. Our conclusions point out the necessity of solutions for Romanian women to ease their work's existing double and triple burdens.

Keywords: work inequalities, Romanian women, COVID-19 pandemics, gender differences, Romanian educational system

Резюме

Неравенствата между жените и мъжете на пазара на труда се засилиха по време на пандемията, заличавайки поне две години напредък, постигнат в това отношение през последното десетилетие (според последните доклади на Европейската комисия, Световната банка и други институции). Съществуващите анализи оценяват пропастта, създадена от COVID-19, като сравняват загубата на работни места с очакваното увеличение на заетостта преди пандемията и установяват, че има 5,1 милиона повече жени без работа и 5,2 милиона по-малко работещи жени сега, в сравнение с това, което би се случило, ако пандемията не беше настъпила. Според доклада за глобалните различията между половете (Global Gender Gap report 2021) Румъния е поставена на 88-ма позиция в класацията на индекса за глобалните различия между половете (The Global Gender Gap Index 2021) с най-голям спад в Източна Европа в сравнение с предходната година. Настоящата статия се фокусира върху състоянието на неравенството между половете в Румъния. Използвните методи за изследване са вторичен анализ на данни и резултати от проведени фокус групи. Предложеното изследване представя в детайли ситуацията с неравенството на жените на пазара на

труда в Румъния и в образователната система. Резултатите акцентират върху необходимостта от набор от решения за румънските жени, които да намалят съществуващата двойна и тройна тежест върху техния труд.

Ключови думи: трудови неравенства, румънски жени, пандемия от COVID-19, различия между половете, румънска образователна система

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In March 2020, COVID-19 took the world by surprise, and citizens were forced into a global lockdown with almost no time to prepare and with no precedent in recent years (Carminke et al., 2022). The changes produced by the global quarantine were also reflected in the labor market. Thus, in Germany, the data from the Mannheim Corona survey (Blom et al., 2020) showed that at the end of March 2020, 26.5% of German workers were working from home, and the percentage had been reduced to 22.5% by the beginning of April the same year. One can compare those data with the figure of 12% (employees and self-employed combined) who regularly work from home, according to the German Federal statistical office data (Blom et al., 2020).

As regards the gender differences, at the level of the European Union, one can notice that there was no significant gender difference in the incidence of working from home at the end of March 2020: 26% women, 27% men in the initial two-week period but there was a modest differential in the later April wave (20.5% of women homeworking v 24.3% of men) (Blom et al., 2020).

Despite that public image, at a closer look, it can be noticed that women have been disproportionately affected by the work stoppage caused by the pandemic, especially in the sectors facing the worst effects of the crisis (Blom et al., 2020).

The issues faced by women in the work-place were highlighted in the World Bank's "2020 Regular Economic Report for the EU" (World Bank, 2021). The report found that at least one in five women will have difficulty returning to work compared to one in ten men. An exciting result of the same analysis was the fact that it has been more difficult for women to resume their job due to the sectors in which they work and the positions they hold, as well as the responsibility for domestic activities that have fallen disproportionately into their responsibility - a manifestation of growing inequalities in the household (World Bank, 2021).

As regards the implications of the pandemics for women's employment and working life, the existing literature (Weber, Hurley & Adăscăliței, 2021) showed that for those women who continued to work, weekly working hours decreased more for men than for women over the lockdown period, while employed women were more likely to have temporarily stopped working altogether (Weber, Hurley & Adăscăliței, 2021).

This latter pattern was also identified in a set of real-time survey data collected in the UK during the first wave of the pandemic, when a higher share of women was on furlough (28% compared with 24% of men) (Office of Data Statistics, 2021).

According to Sevilla and Smith (2020) a plausible explanation is that working women and mothers have borne the main brunt of increased domestic care responsibilities during the pandemic – because of work, school, and childcare center closures – as care responsibilities usually fall on them. In dual-worker households with a choice, women were more likely to avail of furlough opportunities than their male partners (Sevilla & Smith, 2020). In their analysis, Sevilla and Smith showed that the best telework predictors were education and location. Thus, two-thirds or more of those with third-level degrees teleworked during the crisis compared with one-third or less of those with lower levels of attainment. In addition, as the analysis pointed out, those women who were residents in cities or city suburbs were also more likely to work from home (Sevilla & Smith, 2020).

After the lockdown, women were somewhat more likely than men to report having started working from home (European Commission, 2021). According to the official data of the European Commission (2021), the most significant rise in the prevalence of working from home was among younger employees, supporting the narrative that the COVID-19 crisis has equalized access and removed, at least provisionally, the status-related dimension of access to telework.

The data of the "2021 Report on gender equality in the EU" published by the European Commission in 2021 (European Commission, 2021) concluded, as such, that the pandemic has hit women particularly hard in several respects, and women's participation in the labor market is no exception. Women's overrepresentation in lower-paid sectors and occupations, such as hospitality, retail, or personal services, make them particularly vulnerable in the labor markets struck by the COVID-19 crisis (European Commission, 2021). In addition, women, especially in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, are experiencing a greater risk of employment loss. Also, they face more significant barriers to benefitting from extraordinary income support schemes to mitigate the impact of such employment loss (European Commission, 2021).

At the level of the European Union, in contrast to previous financial crises, the sector which was worst affected has been the service industry, especially in-person services, also the domains of activities primarily employing women (European Commission, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, accommodation, food, hospitality, retail, and travel are categorized as high-risk in terms of exposure to disease, physical proximity to co-workers, and limited possibility of working remotely (European Commission, 2021). In contrast, service sectors that were not as disrupted due to the nature of their activity, such as information and

communication, finance, and insurance, primarily employing men, saw increased employment rates, benefitting from the greater demand for digital services (European Commission, 2021). Overall, 25% of employed women in the EU work in high-risk sectors, exceeding the share of employed men (20%) (European Commission, 2021).

It can be concluded, as such, that women, especially those in low-paid occupations in high-risk sectors, are at a greater risk of losing their job and being unemployed than men in all Member States as a consequence of the pandemic (European Commission, 2021).

Table 1

The proportion of parents declaring they are too tired after work to do household jobs, EU27

			Summer 2020	Summer 2021
Men	No children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	25%	26%
	With children under 12	Worked only from home	23%	23%
		Worked from employer's premises	27%	20%
		Worked only from home	24%	24%
Women	No children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	30%	36%
		Worked only from home	30%	30%
	With children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	38%	44%
		Worked only from home	31%	39%

Note. See, Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski & Sándor https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2021/living-working-and-covid-19-update-april-2021-mental-health-and-trust-decline-across-eu-as-pandemic)

In spring 2021, men were more likely to be still unemployed after losing their job during the pandemic than was the case in the summer of 2020 (10% compared with 8%), while no such increase was measured for women (Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski, & Sándor, 2021). In the same year, young people aged 18–29 were most likely to have lost their job, with 17% now unemployed compared with 9% of those 30 or over (Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski, & Sándor, 2021).

As the pandemic progressed, other elements were added to the general image. Thus, while in summer 2020, the wish to telework over the long term (at least several times a week) was similar among men (44%) and women (45%), by spring 2021, women were more likely to have this preference (49% compared with 43% of men) (Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski, & Sándor, 2021). Also, in the period from summer 2020 to spring 2021, the increase in preference for working from home was strongest among those currently working only from home (from 62% to 73%), but it was also significant among those who were currently combining working from home and the employers' premises (43% to 53%) (Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski, & Sándor, 2021). Women were also affected by the pandemics as regards childcare; the data from 2021 pointing out that the biggest increase among parents reporting they were too tired after work to do household tasks was found among women with young children, particularly women with young children who worked only from home (Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski, & Sándor, 2021).

Starting from these realities of existing inequalities for women in the labor market in Europe, the present study focused on this issue in the case of Romania and had two distinct research objectives:

RO1: To analyze the situation of Romanian gender inequalities in Romania;

RO2: To present the situation of Romanian gender inequalities in the Romanian educational system.

Method and materials

The methodology used in this study is mixed, based on a triangulation of samples and data sets (Heale, & Forbes, 2013; Turner, & Turner, 2009).

For the first research objective, we used the statistical set of data at the national level in Romania, available at the National Institute of Statistics and Eurostat, and the existing surveys made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the analysis's exploratory character, the results presentations were mainly descriptive.

To meet the second research objective, we analyzed a set of data resulting from an ERASMUS+ project (“DigiTeaL” - “Digital Teaching Literacy”) running in 2021-2022 over 18 months. The University of Bucharest is a partner in the project along with the University of Wolverhampton (Great Britain) and the non-governmental organizations Demokritos (Cyprus), Emphasis (Greece), and Beno (Germany). More precisely, in the project's second stage, between September 9-11, 2021, we conducted four on-line focus groups with 18 teachers from pre-university education in Romania. The results were presented in a

descriptive manner, pointing out the Romanian teachers' opinions about the situation of gender inequalities in the Romanian educational system.

Results

Romanian gender inequalities during the pandemic

According to the official data from the 2020-2022 period (Guvernul României, 2021), the evolution of the unemployment rate in Romania was unbalanced as regards the gender ratio. Thus, if the rate of men's unemployment decreased from 6.3% in November 2020 to 5.5% one year later, in the same time interval, the decrease in women's unemployment was higher, from 6,3% in November 2020 to 4.9% in November 2021 (See Table 2).

Table 2

Romanian gender inequalities during the pandemic

Unemployment Rate in Romania					
	November 2020	August 2021	September 2021	October 2021	November 2021
Male	6.3%	5.8%	5.6%	5.5%	5.5%
Female	6.3%	4.8%	4.5%	4.7%	4.9%

Note. Source: Guvernul României, 2021)

The study made between October 30 and November 4, 2020, by Wisemetry Research on a sample of 1000 respondents showed that in Romania, people assessed that they work harder from home (Economica.net, 2020). Thus, 37% of respondents who have experienced both office work and work-from-home/teleworking regime say that they work more, as allotted time, when working from home, 35% say they have not noticed a pattern or work as much in both situations and the fewest, 28%, think they work more from the office. According to this study, the main reasons for an extended work schedule from home were (Economica.net, 2020): spontaneously solving several activities - 47%; the fact that people intended to show that they could work efficiently, or even more efficiently, from home - 42%; the respondents declared that they preferred not to be interrupted from the pace of work/concentration - 38% and the respondents have complained of interruptions due to family members or household activities - 30% (Wisemetry Research, 2020).

From a gender-based perspective, women are more likely to work longer when working telework (Wisemetry Research, 2020). In addition, among the respondent who was interrupted from work to do household chores, a larger ratio was constituted by women: 78% women and only 22% men (Wisemetry Research, 2020).

The gender difference in telework ability in Romania relates in part to patterns of sectoral segregation with men in particular over-represented in sectors with limited telework ability potential such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing, utilities, and construction (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2020). This is under the existing trend at the level of the European Union, where even in these male-dominated sectors, the female telework able share of employment tends to be high. In construction, only 6% of male work is telework compared to 69% of female jobs, with similar differentials observed in utilities, mining, transportation, and storage (Ahrend et al., 2020).

This reflects the fact that also in Romania, female workers tend to work in different jobs than men in these sectors and that these jobs tend to be telework able ones – office-based, secretarial, or administrative, with a lower share of physical handling tasks (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2020).

The pandemic years also put an additional burden on women's health and well-being in the workplace. Thus, in 2021, the level of stress increased for 58% of women and 45% of men out of 2,000 Romanian workers (Alecsandru, 2021). On the one hand, the psychological issues resulted from the pandemic years. Thus, according to a Mercer Marsh Benefits study (Mercer, 2020), about 6% of employees have given up the medical services they needed for fear of the pandemic, the level of stress is increasing, but more and more employees intend to change their lifestyle to a healthy one. As regards the gender differences in stress levels, the same study (Mercer, 2020) pointed out that during the pandemic, the stress level increased for 58% of women and 45% of men.

On the other hand, the physical and health-related effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were significant for Romanian women. The studies made in 2020 and 2021 (Mercer, 2021) showed that during the pandemic, women who do not exercise represent over 33% of the total, compared to 23% of men. Much more, for both genders, the percentage of those who do not move decreased by an average of 2 percentage points during the pandemic, compared to the beginning of the pandemic (Mercer, 2020).

Gender inequalities in the Romanian educational system during the pandemic

In Romania, recent OECD data indicate the existence of an imbalance between male and female teachers in the primary and secondary education system. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2018, the vast majority of Romanian schools' teachers were mainly women (60.7%) while almost a quarter of the schools had their teaching staff composed exclusively of women (24.1%) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018).

In 2021 the percentage of women working in the education sector in Romania was 73.2%, according to the National Statistical Institute (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2020). In this case, the highest percentage was recorded in all economic sectors, except health and social work (where the rate of women employed reached 79.5% of the total work-force) (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2020).

Of extreme importance for our analysis were the data related to economic aspects of gender inequalities in Romania. For example, the highest average net monthly earnings in 2020, higher than the average for the Romanian economy, were recorded in the following economic activities: information and communications (+ 92.4%), financial intermediation and insurance (+ 65.2%), public administration (+ 62.0%), production and supply of electricity and heat, gas, hot water, and air conditioning (+ 50.2%), extractive industry (+ 41.5%), professional, scientific and technical activities (+ 28.8%), health and social assistance (+ 24.4%), respectively education (+ 11.1%) (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2021). As regards the earning of Romanian women, the official data showed that in Romania, in 2021, female employees earned, on average, in gross terms, 1.2% less than male employees (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2021). Thus a female teacher in the primary and secondary education system has an average gross salary of 5179 lei (compared to 5244 lei for male employees). In net terms, Romanian female employees earned 4.2%, respectively 139 lei per month less than Romanian male employees (3144 lei average salary net for female employees compared to 3283 lei for male employees (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2021).

The Romanian teachers interviewed within the “DigiTeaL” project invoked the sudden shift from face-to-face teaching to on-line education (as in 2020) or to a mixed, hybrid system (as in 2021). As a result of this “fluid” situation which had covered two academic years, the Romanian women teachers assessed that they felt the need to improve their skills and abilities related to the on-line environment. In this context, a unique " loop " was revealed, which went from students to teachers in adapting the educational process to the requirements of the new technologies.

> “I learned a lot from students in 2020 and less from my classmates.” (FG1)
>
> “Some children have done better with new technologies and have even become teachers.” (FG2)
>
> "On-line learning is just one of the many ways to learn. For on-line learning to be effective, it is necessary for both teachers and students to have skills related to this

type of learning and, in addition, to be used together with classical learning methods, which are based on the natural interactions between teacher and students." (T1-2021)

A special issue discussed within the focus groups from 2021 was the additional expenses women teachers had to incur during the COVID-19 pandemic to purchase new devices or high-performance software.

"During this time, I can say that teachers spent a lot of money on equipment from their family's pockets. Everything was costly, we bought new devices if they broke down…we also had to buy some software for the classes." (FG5).

There was evident that the pandemic period has placed additional burdens on Romanian women teachers not only at the psychological level but also at the financial one, with some women being obliged to balance the monthly income of their families with the new requirements of on-line education.

Conclusions

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, women were somewhat more likely to report having started working from home post-outbreak than men (41% vs. 37%). In contrast, the opposite was true pre-outbreak, when 21%of men worked from home at least several times per month against 18% of women (Sostero, Santo, Hurley, Fernandez-Macia, & Bisello, 2020). This shift was evident as regards the share of employees in telework table where there was a much higher share of women than men (45% compared to 30%) in telework able occupations (Sostero, Santo, Hurley, Fernandez-Macias, & Bisello, 2020).

The incidence of teleworking has been similar by gender in pre-outbreak representative surveys, though the Eurofound COVID-19 survey data did show a small differential (41% of female employees and 37%of males report starting to telework since the onset of the current crisis) (Ahrend et al., 2020). In addition, as was the case within the main occupational groups, the female telework able share of employment tends to be higher; 86% of female managers and 89% of female clerical support workers are in telework able jobs compared to 75% and 73%, respectively of their male counterparts (Ahrend et al., 2020).

Those general trends recorded at the European level were also characteristic of the changes in Romanian women's activities. While in the Nordic countries, the percentage of those who can work from home or remotely reaches almost 50%, in Romania, this freedom is available only for 27% of the employed population (Nemțeanu, & Dabija, 2023). As Nemțeanu and Dabija showed (2023), after the first year of the pandemic, 29.9% of 1,000

Romanian employees stated that they start working early in telework, and almost 40% of them end their working day later than they would in the office.

The crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic increased the psychological stress in the education system, with the teachers having to deal with considerable changes in the teaching process and in the organization of the educational process. Our results showed that the Romanian women teachers declared the existence of stressful situations due, on the one hand, to the lack of necessary abilities and skills for on-line teaching and, on the other, to the financial constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic – e.g., the imperative of buying the necessary devices or software.

Romanian women teachers declared the existence of stressful situations due, on the one hand, to the lack of necessary abilities and skills for on-line teaching and, on the other, to the financial constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic – e.g., the imperative of buying the necessary devices or software. Our study confirms the existing literature (Larsen, Helland, & Holt, 2022), which showed the impact of lockdowns and on-line education at the level of teachers' stress, on the one hand, and of the families' general incomes world-wide, on the other.

The analysis of "DigiTeaL" results is under other studies (Smith, Tani, Yates, & Dickinson, 2022; Velicu, Barbovschi, & Rotaru, 2022), which showed that teachers who are also parents have to deal simultaneously with homework and the education and care of their children at home. The situation is even more challenging to manage in the case of single parents (most of whom are mothers). Paid care work is hard for low-paid women, and teachers are among them, and in a pandemic, even for those who can afford it, care workers may be unavailable due to restrictions on free movement (Giannini et al., 2022).

Teachers who work from home and care for their children have been in a similar situation to other people who have had to move to a home office and at the same time take care of and help their children with on-line schooling.

Our study has different limitations resulting mainly from relying on few sets of data available (e.g., the aggregate data from the National Institute of Statistics and Eurostat and the qualitative one from the "Digital" project). Still, it pointed out some interesting and important changes in women's work in the last years. Given the sudden shifts and dramatic changes which occurred in the 2020-2023 period, we stress the necessity of a set of solutions for Romanian women in order to ease the existing double and triple burdens of their work, and

we assess that this possible and desirable solution will take the shape of public policies to direct targeted at Romanian women who work in various domain of economy

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