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Keywords: Gender equality; structural change; universities; European Union; pandemic

ARTICLES

Navigating the pandemic: Gendered perspectives on vulnerability, resilience and institutional change in times of crisis

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a multifaceted crisis, impacting health, the economy, policy and society at large, and also resulting in a humanitarian crisis. These crises have impacted everyone, although the effects have been unevenly distributed, leading to further disadvantage and marginalisation for those who were already vulnerable and marginalised. The pandemic laid bare and intensified pre-existing gender inequalities in many aspects of life, from the labor market and educational opportunities to health and social protection systems. The unequal impacts on women and men have been observed in the economy and employment, in domestic work and care, in physical and mental health, and in violence.

The collection of articles in this special issue critically interrogates these key issues relating to the impact of the pandemic on gender equality in Europe, highlighting exacerbated gender inequalities, policy responses and the potential for a gender-responsive recovery. This special issue brings together a collection of eight articles that investigate various aspects of gender inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that explore potential pathways towards achieving greater gender equality in the post-pandemic world. They summarise the findings and contributions of several social scientists and also of two EU funded projects: RESISTIRÉ (GA 101015990) and GEARING Roles (GA 824536). The

articles are structured around five main themes: labor market disparities, education and skill development, social and political responses, post-pandemic opportunities, and care. Each article contributes unique insights, empirical findings and policy recommendations from a feminist perspective to enrich the ongoing discourse on gender equality. Together, the articles show the necessity of feminist analysis of crisis, and reveal the structural roots of inequalities while simultaneously emphasising the necessity for transformative action to address inequalities.

Keywords: care; COVID-19; crisis; decision-making; economy; education; gender; gender equality; policy responses; violence

Resumen. *Explorando la pandemia: perspectivas de género sobre vulnerabilidad, resiliencia y cambio institucional en tiempos de crisis*

La pandemia de COVID-19 ha sido una crisis multifacética que ha impactado en la salud, la economía, las políticas públicas y la sociedad en general, y que también ha provocado una crisis humanitaria. Estas crisis han afectado a todas las personas, aunque los efectos se han distribuido de manera desigual, lo que ha provocado más desventajas y marginación para las que ya eran vulnerables y estaban marginadas. La pandemia ha dejado al descubierto y ha intensificado las desigualdades de género preexistentes en muchos aspectos de la vida, desde el mercado laboral y las oportunidades educativas hasta los sistemas de salud y de protección social. Se han observado impactos desiguales en mujeres y hombres en la economía y el empleo, en el trabajo doméstico y los cuidados, en la salud física y mental, y en la violencia contra las mujeres.

La colección de artículos recogidos en este monográfico examina de manera crítica estos temas clave relacionados con el impacto de la pandemia en la igualdad de género en Europa. Destacan las desigualdades de género exacerbadas, las respuestas políticas y el potencial de una recuperación sensible al género. Este número especial reúne una colección de ocho artículos que profundizan en diversos aspectos de la desigualdad de género exacerbada por la pandemia de COVID-19 y que exploran posibles vías hacia una mayor igualdad de género en el mundo postpandemia. En ellos se resumen los hallazgos y las contribuciones de varias científicas sociales y también de dos proyectos financiados por la UE: RESISTIRÉ (GA 101015990) y GEARING Roles (GA 824536). Los artículos se estructuran en torno a cinco temas principales: disparidades en el mercado laboral, educación y desarrollo de habilidades, respuestas sociales y políticas, oportunidades postpandemia y cuidados. Cada artículo aporta perspectivas únicas, hallazgos empíricos y recomendaciones políticas desde una perspectiva feminista para enriquecer el discurso actual sobre la igualdad de género. En conjunto, los artículos muestran la necesidad de un análisis feminista de la crisis y revelan las raíces estructurales de las desigualdades, al mismo tiempo que enfatizan la necesidad de una acción transformadora para abordar las desigualdades.

Palabras clave: cuidado; COVID-19; crisis; economía; educación; género; igualdad de género; respuestas políticas; toma de decisiones; violencia

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a health crisis as well as a humanitarian, economic and social one, affecting us all, albeit unequally. The pandemic laid bare and intensified pre-existing gender inequalities in various aspects of life, from the labor market and educational opportunities to health and social protection systems (Axelsson et al., 2021). The differential impacts of the crisis on women and men have been observed in areas such as employment, domestic work, caregiving and mental health (Sandström et al., 2022, 2021; Stovell et al., 2021, 2022). Feminist analyses reveal the structural roots of these inequalities and emphasise the necessity for transformative action to address them.

According to Strid et al. (2022), the pandemic shifted social structures and organisation, and the impacts of this were gendered. As a group, women have been hit harder by the political responses than men; an inequality that increases depending on their class, age, migration status and other inequality grounds (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022, 2023). While for some the shift towards a stronger online existence (through, e.g., telework or online shopping) improved access to work, others became unemployed, experienced increased levels of violence or financial difficulties, or suffered physical and mental illness – all consequences of “normal” societal supports being disrupted or halted during the pandemic.

As governments and organisations grapple with the far-reaching implications of the pandemic, it is crucial to examine the specific ways in which the crisis has impacted different social groups, particularly in terms of gender and gendered inequalities. This is crucial not least to equip policymakers with evidence-based recommendations for inclusive crisis management in the future, including crisis responses which mitigate rather than exacerbate existing inequalities.¹ Crouze et al. affirm that social inequalities during pandemics create an unevenly distributed risk of disease due to three main factors: 1) exposure to the virus (including, e.g., the capacity to self-isolate and work remotely); 2) biological conditioning to the virus (including, e.g., gender, age, and host immunity); and 3) access to treatment and health coverage (Crouzet, 2022). Further, the impact of the pandemic can also be exacerbated by socioeconomic or ethnic disparities (Blumenshine et al., 2008). The focus on gender equality in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly pertinent, given the region’s commitment to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment through various policies and initiatives (EC, 2020c), and also considering that women were the majority among first-line respondents (EIGE, 2020; Bahri, 2020). Therefore, they were exposed to infection and psychological stress; more women than men lost their jobs; and women took over most of the care responsibilities, in turn disrupting their professional paths (Carli, 2020).

This Special Issue critically interrogates these key issues relating to the impact of the pandemic on gender equality in Europe, highlighting the exacer-

1. See RESISTIRÉ Factsheets, RESISTIRÉ Community on Zenodo: <https://zenodo.org/communities/resistire/?page=1&size=20>

bated gender inequalities, the policy responses, and the potential for a gender-responsive recovery. It brings together contributions from different European projects funded by the European Commission and from renowned feminist scholars and external experts on the gendered impact of public policies in different domains, including policy (multi-governance), care, violence, and education and research. First, the RESISTIRÉ (2021-2023) project, funded by the European Commission H2020. RESISTIRÉ (REspondIng to outbreakS through co-creaTive sustainable inclusive equality stRatEgies) aims to understand and create operational recommendations to mitigate the social, economic, political and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy and societal responses on existing inequalities in 31 countries (EU-27, Iceland, Serbia, Turkey and the UK) and to work towards individual and societal resilience. This is achieved by mapping and collecting data, and by analysing and translating these insights into solutions to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders and actors in the field in different policy domains. Second, the Gearing ROLES (2019-2022) project (Gender Equality Actions in Research Institutions to traNsform Gender ROLES), also funded under EC H2020, which is aimed at promoting institutional change in universities and research organisations, and which has addressed the impact of the pandemic on equality policies.

2. Gender inequalities exacerbated during the pandemic

The *economy* has been a key policy domain for policy responses. Existing gender inequalities were exacerbated by the pandemic, challenging the provision of equal rights for men and women. Women traditionally take on a large share of care and household work, and therefore they were more affected by increased care duties during the crisis. These duties increased especially due to schools and childcare institutions closing, and older people's need for additional care support (Blaskó et al., 2020). Despite being a crisis across multiple policy domains, the pandemic was especially a care crisis, in which substantial evidence shows a gendered and intersectional impact, especially from an economic point of view (Strid et al., 2022). According to OECD (2020), the public health crisis of COVID-19 rapidly turned into a job crisis, with crucial economic consequences. The economic impact of the pandemic was so evident that many of the areas of public policy intervention during the pandemic, especially during the first phase of social isolation, focused on ensuring the maintenance of employment and income (Cibin et al., 2021). The economic downturn and job losses have also affected women disproportionately, with sectors that predominantly employ women, such as hospitality and tourism, being severely hit. The private sector has a significant role to play in promoting gender equality, both within their organisations and through their impact on society. Adopting and implementing gender-sensitive policies, such as flexible work arrangements, equal pay and gender diversity in leadership, can contribute to a more equitable workplace and can foster an environment that values and supports women's contributions.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of women's leadership and participation in decision-making processes, as countries with women leaders have often demonstrated effective and empathetic responses to the crisis. Strengthening women's political representation and empowering them to participate in shaping policies and programs that affect women's lives are critical for achieving gender equality in the post-pandemic era. The relationship between gender equality and public policy is complex: partly as gender equality is a political priority, and partly as women's leadership itself can be central in promoting successful policy measures, which in turn will also result in the promotion of gender equality (Paula, 2020). However, findings from RESISTIRÉ show that most of the pandemic-related measures identified in the national reports were created at the level of the national government (with some exceptions observed in countries with a more federal system), sometimes with the support of expert committees created ad hoc to deal with the emergency, and in many countries the relevant decision-making positions were mainly held by men (Cibin et al., 2021).

Gender-based violence is a cause and consequence of gendered inequalities. Globally, one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner; or sexual violence in their lifetime (Devries, 2013; World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, the pandemic has led to a surge in gender-based violence, with women experiencing heightened vulnerability due to lockdown measures, combined with limited access to support services, which in many countries were shut down due to not being considered essential. Studies on help-seeking show increases in calls to hotlines and contacts with shelters (EIGE, 2021). They also show that victims/survivors seek psychological care from their general practitioners rather than from the criminal justice system and the police, meaning they may receive less support and access to resources. While help-seeking through contact with shelters has increased, there are cases of the opposite happening: some feminist organisations have pointed to the difficulty women faced contacting support services during lockdown without the knowledge of a violent partner.

Overburdened, unpaid care work and its effect on women's mental health and well-being has been a significant pandemic policy and research area. Domestic responsibilities increased during lockdown periods for most households, and particularly for those with children or other dependents, who were unable to receive care support from external institutions. Women globally tended to shoulder more of this increased care burden than men (Fodor et al., 2023). This increased burden on women is considered to be a proven personal stressor (Bulog et al., 2022).

The gendered nature of unpaid work became more apparent during the pandemic (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). Data provided by UN Women in April 2020 found that among women surveyed in different Asian countries, between 49% and 68% reported spending more time on domestic chores compared to men (UN WOMEN, 2020). These data, coupled with the perceived gendered moral obligation to care, results in a worsening of the well-being of women with dependents (European Value Survey, 2018).

3. Policy and social responses to the pandemic

Government measures to address gender inequalities during the pandemic have been a focus of much pandemic research. A wealth of evidence has shown how governmental responses to the pandemic did not sufficiently address gendered inequalities; existing inequalities increased and new inequalities emerged, including the deepening and widening economic gaps, a re-traditionalisation of gender roles, and increasing levels and new forms of gender-based violence (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022; Stovell et al., 2021). With a focus on European economic recovery (EC, 2022), later recovery policy – coordinated through the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility of the Next-GenerationEU fund – set up to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, was also criticised for not taking gendered inequalities sufficiently into account (Cibin et al., 2022). An in-depth comparative analysis of the European national recovery responses, including the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) of 26 European countries and equivalent policies in an additional five European countries (Cibin et al., 2022) shows that while most NRRPs included some policy measures aimed at mitigating gender inequalities (often in the policy areas of employment, education and care), in most cases gender was predominantly reduced to descriptive diagnosis and general reflections of contexts. The NRRPs show a significant lack of gendered analysis of the prognosis and of concrete solutions. Furthermore, while the NRRPs address women as a workforce, there is a striking lack of measures on gender dimensions of decision-making and violence. The NRRPs embedded stereotypes positioning gendered patterns in access to the labour market and income as “women’s problems” relating to the lack of the correct skills or education; women need to develop and learn (men’s) management skills. Finally, there is a complete lack of intersectional understandings of inequality in the NRRPs; when responses and measures do address multiple inequality grounds (e.g. age, disability and social class), these are presented as single strands operating in silos, without a consideration of how they interact. The rich analysis of the national recovery responses has led some commentators to refer to pandemic policy as a missed opportunity to restructure society and build back better (Sandström et al., 2022).

Initiatives by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups have been crucial to support and protect vulnerable groups. Where governmental responses fell short, inspirational civil societal initiatives emerged to mitigate gendered and other inequalities and to support the most vulnerable (Strid et al., 2022).² Such civil societal initiatives and practices contributed to reducing, and – in some cases – reversing, the increase in inequalities caused by the pandemic and the policy responses to it. These initiatives and practices were made possible because of specific features and actions that enabled NGOs and other civil societal organisations to

2. Better stories of the pandemic. Available at: <https://resistire-project.eu/better-stories-europe/>

navigate the challenges of the pandemic and offer effective support where governments and public authorities often fell short (Cibin et al., 2023). First, civil society organisations managed to respond quickly to the crisis, using improvisational skills that drew on previous knowledge of tensions between experience and creativity; on internal organisational reflexivity; and on attention to the skills and autonomy of volunteers and staff. Second, and often in contrast to governmental responses, a strong sense of community and mutual trust operated as the backbone of civil society organisations, on which activities were built. The building blocks of this backbone consisted of empathy, solidarity and mutual trust, both between users and beneficiaries, with the beneficiaries themselves considered to be “agents of their own change, and supported through tailored responses that reflect the differences between people” (Cibin et al., 2023); and within civil society organisations, where attention was paid to inclusive and participatory decision-making and the well-being of staff and volunteers. Further, we have witnessed empathy, solidarity and trust in civil society organisations’ communication and outreach activities, which has challenged and changed our understanding of vulnerabilities. Finally, in civil societal responses to the pandemic, we have witnessed new alliances and collaborations across inequality grounds and beyond group interests and identities, including collaborations that allowed for the sharing of knowledge and resources to find solutions and to fill the gaps left by public authority responses. This last point underlines the ability of civil society to mobilise intersectionally, paying attention to diversity as a strength, both in relation to users and in relation to the very organisation of civil society.

Higher education and research institutions have a multifaceted role in promoting gender equality. They can contribute through access and enrollment initiatives, inclusive curricula, diverse leadership, gender-focused research, equitable policies, and partnerships for advocacy. By actively addressing gender disparities within their own institutions and influencing broader society, they can create a positive impact toward achieving gender equality.

Aware of this transformative potential, the European Union has been committed to promoting public policies that foster institutional change and progress in the European Higher Education Area (EC, 2020a; EC, 2021). However, the pandemic has meant a step backwards in the gender agenda in higher education institutions. Aware of this negative impact, the EU itself has implemented different measures to address sex and gender aspects of the crisis, including a case study on the sex and gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic carried out by the European Commission’s Expert Group on Gendered Innovation (EC, 2020b) and their report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report highlights the pandemic’s gendered impact on academic productivity, early-career researchers, and work-life balance (EC, 2023). However, most analyses have focused on the impact of the pandemic on women as individuals, and little attention has been paid to the impact of the pandemic on institutions and processes of structural change.

4. Challenges and opportunities for gender equality post-pandemic

As shown above, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on many aspects of gender equality, exacerbating pre-existing gender disparities and creating new barriers for women and marginalised groups. To ensure a just and sustainable recovery, it is crucial to *adopt inclusive and equitable economic and social recovery policies that promote inclusivity, equity and gender equality*.

Addressing economic disparities: The pandemic has significantly affected women's economic participation, leading to job losses, increased unpaid care responsibilities, and limited access to economic opportunities. (ILO, 2021; Mascherini & Nivakoski, 2021). Inclusive policies should focus on creating and supporting good quality work, promoting fair wages, and ensuring equal access to economic resources and opportunities for women (EC, 2023). Moreover, as stated by the RESISTIRE project, a “holistic and human rights approach to address poverty and social exclusion” is necessary to address economic inequalities and fight poverty and meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda.³

Recognising and reducing unpaid care work: The pandemic has highlighted the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by women. Inclusive policies should recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities by investing in social infrastructure, such as affordable and quality childcare facilities, eldercare support, and paid family leave policies. However, RESISTIRE findings showed that the initial policy responses to the pandemic rarely mainstreamed gender (Cibin et al., 2022), and the analysis of European recovery plans also indicated a lack of a gender-sensitive approach, and excessive focus on male-dominated sectors, resulting in limited situational policy responses to the care gap.

Strengthening social protection systems: Inclusive policies should prioritise strengthening social protection systems to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, including women and marginalised groups. This can involve expanding access to healthcare, income support and social assistance programs. Additionally, targeted measures should be implemented to address the specific needs of marginalised groups such as women from racial and ethnic minorities, indigenous women and women with disabilities.

Investing in education and skills development: To achieve gender equality, it is crucial to invest in education and skills development programs that are accessible to all regardless of gender. Policies should aim to eliminate gender-based stereotypes in education, promote girls' enrollment and retention in schools, and provide training and re-skilling opportunities for women in emerging sectors. Additionally, efforts should be made to bridge the digital gender divide by promoting women's access to technology and digital literacy (Cibin et al., 2022).

3. See RESISTIRE Factsheets, RESISTIRE Community on Zenodo: <https://zenodo.org/communities/resistire/?page=1&size=20>

Promoting gender-responsive governance and decision-making: Inclusive policies should strive to increase women's representation and participation in decision-making processes at all levels. This can be achieved by implementing affirmative action measures, promoting women's leadership, and ensuring diverse representation in political, economic and social institutions. Gender-responsive governance ensures that policies and programs take into account the specific needs and experiences of women, leading to more equitable outcomes.

By adopting inclusive and equitable policies for economic and social recovery, societies can rebuild in a way that addresses the systemic barriers faced by women and marginalised groups, promotes gender equality, and paves the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

The importance of gender mainstreaming in decision-making and policymaking cannot be underestimated. In light of these exacerbated gender inequalities, feminist perspectives call for gender-responsive policy responses and effective strategies to address the gendered impacts of the pandemic, as well as to identify opportunities for fostering gender equality in the recovery process. The unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have necessitated urgent and coordinated political and social responses at various levels, ranging from public health measures to economic recovery strategies. A feminist approach to policymaking emphasises the importance of centering gender equality, social justice and inclusiveness in these responses, with a focus on addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of diverse groups in society.

The implementation of gender-sensitive policies, such as emergency childcare provisions, support for informal workers, and measures to address gender-based violence, have been essential in mitigating the gendered consequences of the pandemic. Economic stimulus packages and social protection measures should be gender-responsive and inclusive, reflecting a thorough understanding of gender-specific vulnerabilities and needs. Initiatives targeting women's economic empowerment, such as financial support for women-owned businesses and skills development programs, can contribute to a more equitable recovery process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the persistent gender inequalities in society, presenting both challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality in the post-pandemic world. Feminist perspectives emphasise the need for concerted efforts from governments, international organisations, the private sector and civil society to address these challenges while seizing opportunities for transformative change.

5. Structure and focus of this special issue

This special issue brings together a collection of seven articles that examine various aspects of gender inequality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and explore potential pathways towards achieving greater gender equality in the post-pandemic world.

The articles are structured around four main themes: labor market disparities; education and skills development; social and political responses; and

post-pandemic opportunities. A fifth theme centering on care is also explored. Each article contributes unique insights, empirical findings and policy recommendations from a feminist perspective to enrich the ongoing discourse on gender equality.

Several articles in this issue focus on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women's employment and economic opportunities. The article "Essential and forgotten. Domestic work and the impact of policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and Italy" by Tarragona and Ghidoni compares pandemic policy in the care domain in Italy and Spain, and how the impacts of policy restrictions on domestic workers – a highly feminised and racialised sector – have not been paid significant attention by policymakers, contrary to public debates. Thematically, the article examines the gendered nature of job losses and reduced work hours, the implications of remote work on gender dynamics within the household, and the need for policies that support women's participation in the labor force and their economic empowerment. The latter theme of the economy is also explored in "Gender mainstreaming in times of crisis: Missed opportunities in pandemic policymaking" by Callerstig and Strid, which looks at gendered inequalities in pandemic economic policymaking in Sweden, a country considered to be an ideal case for gender mainstreaming but which nonetheless failed to integrate gender in its economic recovery policy. The theme of gender dynamics in the household is explored from the angle of a (gendered) care crisis. In "The moral assumption of care for parents: A gender issue?" by Aristegui, Beloki and Silvestre. Their article analyses the European Values Study as applied to five countries that represent different cultural models, and asks whether the moral responsibility of caring for older people in Europe corresponds to gender issues or to cultural and institutional issues, related to social welfare models. The article demonstrates that while the job of caring for older people continues to carry a strong component of moral responsibility, it simultaneously varies with different social welfare models.

The gendered consequences of the pandemic on education and skill development are addressed in two of the articles. "Vulnerabilities in the face of the health crisis: Impact of COVID-19 on the educational processes of children and adolescent ion situations of neglect" by González, Izaguirre and Arrieta assesses the ways in which school closures and remote learning have affected girls and young women, the potential long-term consequences of these disruptions on gender equality in education, and the importance of targeted interventions to ensure equal access to quality education for all. Education is also the focus of "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on institutional change processes and the collective capacities of higher education and research institutions" by Campanini, López Belloso and Mergaert, which draws on the capabilities approach to explore the institutional impact of the pandemic and its context on collective capabilities and gender structural change processes in the implementation of Gender Equality Plans in higher education institutions.

Social and political responses to the pandemic from a gender perspective are explored in three articles: “Essential and forgotten: Domestic work and the impact of policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and Italy” by Tarragona & Ghidoni; “Gender mainstreaming in times of crisis: Missed opportunities in pandemic policymaking” by Callerstig and Strid; and “The impact of intergovernmental relations in the management of COVID on women’s leadership” by Novo-Arbona. These evaluate the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies in mitigating the negative effects of the crisis on women, the role of women’s leadership in shaping pandemic responses, and the importance of gender-sensitive social protection systems in supporting vulnerable populations.

Lastly, the article “Facing yet another crisis? Gender-based violence policies at the Spanish local level during COVID-19” by Paleo, Alonso and Diz, and the two articles mentioned above, by Callerstig and Strid, and Novo-Arbona, discuss the challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality in the aftermath of the pandemic, and look to the future of gender equality in policymaking. While Paleo, Alonso and Diz focus on the future challenges in gender-based violence policy and research, Callerstig and Strid examine the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Sweden, and make recommendations for gender equal economic policymaking in future crisis. Novo-Arbona examines the form rather than the content of policymaking, and explores the very presence of women in policymaking. The three articles highlight the potential for transformative change through the adoption of gender-responsive recovery strategies, the promotion of women’s leadership and political participation, and the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders to address the underlying structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities.

Throughout this Special Issue, common themes emerge, such as the need for gender-responsive policies, the importance of women’s leadership and representation in decision-making, and the potential for transformative change in the post-pandemic era. These themes underscore the urgency of addressing gender inequality, and the opportunities presented by the crisis to reimagine and reshape a more just and equitable future. Together, the articles in this volume provide new directions for future research and inclusive policymaking.

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El impacto de las relaciones intergubernamentales en la gestión de la COVID sobre el liderazgo de las mujeres

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Resumen

La mayoría de las investigaciones sobre gobernanza multinivel desde una perspectiva de género han tenido como variable dependiente las políticas de igualdad (Haussman et al., 2010). Por el contrario, son menos frecuentes las investigaciones que analizan la presencia de las mujeres como protagonistas de la gobernanza multinivel, sus formas de actuación o el efecto de sus acciones en el resultado final (Gushchina y Kaiser, 2021). Esta investigación aborda esta perspectiva en una situación de pandemia, donde la urgencia y la interdependencia estimulan la regla de participación ejecutiva.

La limitada presencia de mujeres en la gestión intergubernamental de la pandemia está estrechamente relacionada con su escasa presencia en los gobiernos. El poder ejecutivo y, en especial, la jefatura de gobierno sigue siendo un terreno cerrado para las mujeres. Actualmente, casi la mitad de los países de la Unión Europea no han tenido en su historia a ninguna mujer como primera ministra (Novo-Arbona, 2020). Sin embargo, los sistemas federales y descentralizados han representado una vía de acceso de las mujeres a las jefaturas de los poderes ejecutivos, y su presencia ha sido más común en las jefaturas de las unidades constituyentes. El porcentaje de mujeres ministras también ha aumentado considerablemente, y ellas han ocupado carteras más prestigiosas, como las de Asuntos Exteriores, Defensa o Economía, aunque tradicionalmente —y todavía hoy— es más habitual su presencia en las relacionadas con los cuidados, como los servicios sociales o el ámbito sanitario (Kroeber y Hüffelmann, 2021). Este artículo identifica los órganos de decisión multinivel más relevantes desde la declaración de la pandemia, la presencia de mujeres en ellos y su rol dentro de las organizaciones.

Palabras clave: género; federalismo; relaciones intergubernamentales; COVID-19

Abstract. *The impact of intergovernmental relations in COVID management on women's leadership*

Most research on multilevel governance from a gender perspective has taken gender equality policies as the dependent variable (Haussman et al., 2010). In contrast, research that analyses the presence of women as protagonists in multilevel governance, their forms of action or the impact of their actions on the outcome is less frequent (Gushchina and Kaiser, 2021). This research addresses this perspective in a pandemic situation, where urgency and interdependence stimulate the rule of executive participation.

The limited presence of women in intergovernmental management of the pandemic is closely related to their limited presence in governments. The executive, and in particular the head of government, remains a closed terrain for women. Currently, almost half of the countries in the European Union have never had a female prime minister (Novo-Arbona, 2020). However, federal and decentralised systems have been a way for women to gain access to the heads of executive power, as their presence is more common in the heads of constituent units. The percentage of women ministers has also increased considerably, and they have occupied more 'prestigious' ministries such as foreign affairs, defence or the economy. Traditionally, and still today, their presence is more common in care-related ministries such as social services or health (Kroeber and Hüffelmann, 2021). This article identifies the main multi-level decision-making bodies since the declaration of the pandemic, the presence of women in them and their role within the organisations.

Keywords: gender; federalism; intergovernmental relation; COVID-19

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1. Introducción

La Organización Mundial de la Salud¹ declaró la COVID-19 como una emergencia de salud pública de preocupación internacional el 30 de enero de 2020 y como pandemia el 11 de marzo de 2020. A pesar de que esta organización

1. El comité de emergencias de la OMS está dirigido por Didier Houssin, y está formado por dieciocho miembros, siete mujeres y once hombres (<<https://www.who.int/groups/covid-19-ihc-emergency-committee>>). El consejo de este organismo derivó en la declaración del director general de la OMS (<[https://www.who.int/es/news/item/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/es/news/item/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov))>).

no había dado por finalizada oficialmente la pandemia,² en abril de 2022 la mayoría de los países europeos consideraron superada la crisis. De este modo, el periodo de análisis de la presente investigación abarca dos años, desde marzo de 2020 hasta abril de 2022.

La gestión de la pandemia —una crisis de carácter internacional que ha puesto en cuestión los sistemas de salud, los sistemas de cuidados y la asistencia social— parece un ámbito en el que las mujeres podían adquirir una relevante presencia, dado que incluye espacios tradicionalmente atribuidos a ellas. Por ello, el confinamiento permitió que algunas líderes salieran reforzadas sacando ventaja de su perfil estereotipado (Johnson y Williams, 2020). Además, este protagonismo pudo ser mayor porque esta crisis generó una importante interdependencia, debido a que la salud y la asistencia social son ámbitos descentralizados. En estas áreas, los gobiernos de las unidades constituyentes han tenido una gran implicación, y con ellos la presencia de las mujeres podría aumentar.

Pese a esto, algunas investigaciones dejan entrever una menor presencia de mujeres en los ámbitos de decisión de la gestión de la COVID-19 (Smith, 2020). Tal y como señala Vickers (2013), la mayoría de las contribuciones de los estudios de género sobre el federalismo se centran en la obstaculización o impulso en este sistema de las reformas y políticas que favorezcan los derechos de las mujeres y la igualdad. Sin embargo, estas aportaciones también recogen el debate sobre los efectos de la centralización-descentralización como ventana de oportunidades para la representación de las mujeres en política (Vickers, 2013).

La presente investigación recoge en qué medida las mujeres han estado presentes en las jefaturas de gobierno de las unidades constituyentes y en qué medida estas unidades han sido capaces de dar respuestas autónomas a la crisis sanitaria. Todo ello en contextos federales o descentralizados con fuerte interdependencia entre el gobierno federal y las unidades constituyentes. ¿En qué medida esto ha limitado su liderazgo? ¿Cuál ha sido su presencia dentro de los mecanismos de cogobierno?

2. Las mujeres en los gobiernos

La relevancia de la representación descriptiva ha sido puesta de manifiesto en numerosas investigaciones, ya sea desde la teoría democrática y la legitimidad, desde la representación simbólica y la politización, o desde la representación sustantiva y la permeabilidad del sistema, aspectos todos ellos que adquieren mayor peso en un contexto de crisis sanitaria como es el de la COVID-19 (Smith, 2020).

En favor de un incremento de las mujeres en los órganos de representación (Stockemer y Sundström, 2018), han jugado las cuotas voluntarias de los partidos

2. En la duodécima reunión del comité de emergencias se señaló que la COVID-19 sigue constituyendo una emergencia de salud pública de importancia internacional (<[https://www.who.int/es/news/item/12-07-2022-statement-on-the-twelfth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/es/news/item/12-07-2022-statement-on-the-twelfth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic)>).

en el norte de Europa y las cuotas legislativas más propias de los países del sur de Europa (Krook, 2009; Franceschet et al., 2012; Praud, 2012; Dahlerup et al., 2013), así como el poder movilizador del movimiento feminista en los partidos políticos y fuera de ellos como tema de competición interpartidista (Childs y Kittilson, 2016). Pese a esto, siguen siendo excepcionales los países en los que la presencia de mujeres es superior a la de los hombres en los parlamentos (Ruanda, Cuba y Bolivia), y únicamente en tres países de la Unión Europea (España, Finlandia y Suecia) la composición de la Cámara Baja es paritaria, con una presencia de mujeres igual o superior al 40 % (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2021).

Sin embargo, el poder ejecutivo —y especialmente las jefaturas de gobierno— sigue siendo un ámbito indirectamente vedado para las mujeres. En la actualidad, casi la mitad de los países de la Unión Europea no han tenido en su historia a ninguna mujer como primera ministra (Italia, España, Portugal, Luxemburgo, Austria, Hungría, Lituania, Chipre, República Checa, Estonia, Irlanda, Malta y Holanda). En el resto, en al menos una ocasión ha habido una mujer en el cargo, aunque cabe destacar la excepcionalidad de su presencia en algunos de los países (Bulgaria, Grecia, Letonia, Eslovenia, Francia y Bélgica) en los que la electa ha estado en el cargo menos de la mitad de una legislatura. Por ejemplo, en Bulgaria, Reneta Ivanova Inshova solo ocupó el cargo en funciones y, en Grecia, Vasiliki Thanou estuvo menos de un mes, desde la dimisión de Tsipras en 2015 hasta la convocatoria de nuevas elecciones. Algo más duraderos, pero igualmente excepcionales, fueron los casos de Laimdota Straujuma, en Letonia, que entró en el gobierno tras la renuncia de su antecesor y cesó con la convocatoria de elecciones dos años después, y de Alenka Bratusek, en Eslovenia, que conformó gobierno tras la moción de censura a su antecesor pero dimitió y convocó elecciones un año y medio después (Novo-Arbona, 2020). También excepcional fue el paso por el cargo de primera ministra de Sophie Wilmès en Bélgica, con un mandato de algo menos de un año. Por su parte, la primera ministra sueca, Magdalena Andersson, fue elegida en noviembre de 2021, renunció pocas horas después, pero se mantuvo en el cargo hasta octubre de 2022.

En el periodo de análisis de la presente investigación, únicamente doce países han tenido una jefa de gobierno electa en algún momento (Piscopo, 2020), y de ellos la mitad se sitúa en Europa (Serbia, Dinamarca, Finlandia, Alemania, Noruega y Bélgica).

En este contexto, y con relación a la gestión de la crisis provocada por la pandemia COVID-19, la prensa internacional puso inicialmente el foco en líderes caracterizados por una gestión hipermasculinizada (Piscopo y Och, 2021; Waylen, 2021), que contradecían las recomendaciones de las personas expertas. Sin embargo, frente a estos modelos de gestión que encarnaban Trump, Bolsonaro o Johnson, un artículo de Avivah Wittenberg-Cox en *Forbes*³ consiguió cambiar temporalmente el foco y enfatizó la eficacia de las jefas de gobierno en la gestión de la crisis sanitaria (Piscopo y Och, 2021).

3. <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/?sh=6b6dcd8d3dec>>.

El interés por el tema no fue solo mediático. Estudios posteriores pusieron el énfasis en comparar la gestión de la pandemia en países liderados por mujeres y por hombres, con resultados diversos. Se consideró una gran diversidad de variables de control, como la insularidad, el tamaño del país y el desarrollo económico (Windsor et al., 2020; Piscopo, 2020; Waylen, 2021; Garikipati y Kambhampati, 2021), y se analizó la efectividad también en términos democráticos (Park, 2022).

Sin embargo, estos estudios sobre las mujeres en el poder ejecutivo durante la gestión de la pandemia se centraron en el análisis de los liderazgos en el ámbito estatal. Por el contrario, salvo algunas excepciones, no se realizaron análisis sobre la gobernanza de la COVID-19 en ámbitos subestatales. Entre los pocos existentes, puede mencionarse el de Piscopo y Och (2021), que analizaron gobernadoras o alcaldesas que lideraron la gestión sanitaria en situaciones adversas de liderazgos hipermasculinizados en el gobierno central y en contextos económicos adversos.

La presente investigación se sitúa en este marco y pretende analizar cuál fue el rol de las jefas de gobierno estatal y de las unidades constituyentes basándonos en su papel en la cogobernanza de la pandemia en contextos federales o fuertemente descentralizados en Europa. ¿Estaban las mujeres en estos puestos? ¿Tenían capacidad de decisión en un marco de interdependencia?

3. Las relaciones intergubernamentales y el cogobierno durante la COVID-19

No todos los mecanismos intergubernamentales tuvieron la misma relevancia durante la pandemia, debido a elementos estructurales como el reparto de competencias o la estructuración institucional del cogobierno en cada país.

En función del modo de reparto de competencias, los sistemas federales o fuertemente descentralizados pueden ser duales o cooperativos. En los sistemas duales, la materia se reconoce con todas sus funciones (legislativa y ejecutiva) al estado o a las unidades constituyentes, tal y como ocurre en Bélgica (Popelier y Bursens, 2022). En el sistema cooperativo, además de repartirse las materias, también pueden diferenciarse las funciones sobre cada una de ellas, como en el caso de Alemania, Austria y España. Asimismo, en la mayoría de los estados federales o fuertemente descentralizados, el reparto constitucional reconoce al estado central la competencia en la gestión de situaciones de emergencia o alarma, y a las unidades constituyentes, la competencia en materia sanitaria (Chattopadhyay et al., 2022).

Por el contrario, encontramos algunas matizaciones en los estados con modelo cooperativo. En Alemania y España, el ámbito sanitario es concurrente y las unidades constituyentes pueden legislar sobre la materia⁴ y ejecutar

4. En Alemania, el estado federal podrá legislar sobre la materia si es necesario un marco único en algunos aspectos de forma motivada (Färber, 2022). En España, el estado podrá regular las bases comunes para todo el territorio y recae sobre las unidades constituyentes de desarrollo de la ley.

las medidas. En Austria, el ámbito sanitario es exclusivo del estado federal, pero introduce algunas excepciones materiales, y así, por ejemplo, el poder del estado se limita a aprobar la legislación básica de las instituciones sanitarias (hospitales y centros de salud) (Kössler, 2022). Bélgica, por su parte, a pesar de su dualidad, no sigue el modelo generalista estadounidense de lista única, y divide la materia sanitaria en diferentes submaterias. Así, las responsabilidades para hacer frente a la COVID-19 afectan a materias tanto estatales como de las unidades constituyentes (Popelier y Bursens, 2022).

Esta realidad en los modelos federales o cuasifederales de la Unión Europea ha llevado más allá lo que ha sido una tónica en la gestión de la pandemia, es decir, la necesidad sin precedentes de los mecanismos de cogobierno. Además, los sistemas federales europeos son más propicios al cogobierno en comparación con Canadá, donde los gobiernos de las unidades constituyentes han tenido una mayor capacidad de actuación autónoma, en general, y también en la gestión de la pandemia con estrategias de actuación diferenciadas (Broschek, 2022). La relevancia del cogobierno en los modelos federales europeos es especialmente llamativa en el caso de Alemania, con un fuerte peso de la toma de decisiones conjuntas (Broschek, 2015).

El bicameralismo fuerte (Lijphart, 2012) es la mejor vía para integrar a las unidades constituyentes en la definición del interés general y para vehicular las relaciones intergubernamentales. Pero no todos los sistemas federales cuentan con un sistema bicameral simétrico e incongruente. Elazar (1990) sostiene que el Bundesrat alemán es el único que cumple eficazmente con esta función, mientras que el bicameralismo belga y el español se sitúan entre los semifuertes, y el austriaco entre los débiles (Lijphart, 2012).

En esta línea, Ceccherini destaca la proliferación de mecanismos de cogobierno como vía alternativa a las cámaras de representación territorial, que gozan de menor legitimidad tanto en España y en Austria como en Bélgica (Ceccherini, 2001; 2008). Además, en el contexto de la pandemia, los parlamentos quedaron relegados a un segundo plano, incluso con dificultades para reunirse en momentos de confinamiento, y fueron los poderes ejecutivos los que adquirieron una mayor presencia (Kössler, 2022).

Los diferentes estudios sobre las relaciones intergubernamentales durante la pandemia COVID-19 pusieron de manifiesto la relevancia del órgano mixto de jefaturas de gobierno estatal y de las unidades constituyentes (conferencias, en adelante) como el mecanismo más eficaz y más recurrido para cogobernar tanto en Alemania (Färber, 2022; Kropp y Schnabel, 2021) como en España (Erkoreka et al., 2022) y, en menor medida, en Austria (Kössler, 2022) y Bélgica (Popelier y Bursens, 2022), aunque en estos últimos dos casos debido a la debilidad de la acción de cogobierno más que a la sustitución de este mecanismo por uno alternativo.

Rupak Chattopadhyay et al. compararon el modelo de gobernanza de 23 países durante la COVID-19 y diferenciaron tres niveles: dominio del gobierno estatal, colaboración fuerte y colaboración débil. España se situó en el primer grupo, con un fuerte predominio de la acción estatal, mientras que Bélgica mostró una débil colaboración intergubernamental. Por el contrario, en Austria y Alema-

Tabla 1. El cogobierno para la gestión de la COVID-19 según país

País	Decisiones	Bicameralismo	Conferencia
Alemania	Mayormente cogobierno	Bundesrat	Relevante
España	Estado y luego cogobierno	Semidébil	Relevante
Austria	Cogobierno y luego estado	Semidébil	Medio
Bélgica	Estado	Débil	Poco relevante

Fuente: elaboración propia.

nia el cogobierno y la coordinación jugaron un papel mayor (Chattopadhyay et al., 2022). Estos resultados son coincidentes con los obtenidos por otras investigaciones sobre los casos de España —aunque solo en la primera etapa (Erkoreka et al., 2022)—, Bélgica (Popelier y Bursens, 2022) y Alemania (Färber, 2022).

Por el contrario, hay disparidad de criterios al analizar el caso austriaco. Para Kössler (2022), es un ejemplo de centralización, mientras que Hegele y Schnabel (2021) describen un escenario de decisiones federales unilaterales sin coordinación con las unidades constituyentes o con coordinación previa, es decir, consultando únicamente la decisión. Así, las unidades constituyentes se pliegan a la acción del estado dando pie a una participación moderada en la codecisión, con menos incidencia de acciones individualizadas por parte de los ejecutivos de los estados federados. El contexto político puede explicarlo en parte: seis de los nueve *länder* están encabezados por el Partido Popular, y en uno este forma parte de la coalición. Así, solamente dos unidades constituyentes no son congruentes con el gobierno estatal: Burgenland y Viena.

En España, el presidente del gobierno y el ministro de Sanidad tuvieron un papel relevante en la toma de decisiones sobre la COVID-19 en la primera fase de la pandemia, abriéndose a la descentralización y a la acción individual de las unidades constituyentes conforme transcurrieron los meses y cambiaron las respuestas a la crisis sanitaria (Navarro y Velasco, 2022). Por el contrario, en Alemania en todas las fases se situaron en el ámbito de la toma de decisiones descentralizadas (Hegele y Schnabel, 2021) y en Bélgica se caracterizaron por una mayor centralización.

Observados estos elementos estructurales y coyunturales, la capacidad de acción de las líderes de los gobiernos estatales o subestatales no fue la misma en cada uno de los casos estudiados. En Alemania y España tuvieron una mayor capacidad de incidencia, mientras que en Austria fue menor, y en Bélgica, prácticamente inexistente. En este contexto, ¿cuál fue la situación de las mujeres en estas relaciones intergubernamentales?

4. La presencia de mujeres en el poder ejecutivo y en los órganos intergubernamentales durante la pandemia

4.1. Poder ejecutivo central

Cuando el 11 de marzo se declaró la pandemia de la COVID-19, dos de los países seleccionados contaban con gobiernos liderados por mujeres: Alemania

y Bélgica. Sin embargo, la situación de ambas jefaturas distaba de ser la misma. Así, Angela Merkel había sido la primera mujer en llegar a la cancillería y su experiencia en el puesto en ese momento era dilatada, ya que contaba con una trayectoria de quince años en el cargo y con un relevante reconocimiento en Europa y en el ámbito internacional. Además, Merkel era la líder de su partido político y encabezaba un gobierno de coalición de ganador mínimo, es decir, contaba con apoyo mayoritario en el Bundestag, con un gobierno de coalición formado por los dos principales partidos de la derecha (CDU/CSU) y el SPD. A pesar de tratarse de un gobierno de coalición, y por tanto más fragmentado que un gobierno monocolor, la segunda persona más relevante en la gestión de la crisis sanitaria, el ministro de Sanidad, pertenecía a su mismo partido político.

Sin embargo, había elementos que condicionaron su fortaleza. Por un lado, Angela Merkel ya había anunciado que ese sería su último mandato, y por tanto, el partido que lideraba se situaba en una posición de búsqueda de sucesión, con las consiguientes pugnas entre diferentes sectores del partido. Por otro lado, el calendario electoral estaba muy activo, con elecciones para la renovación del Bundestag previstas en el plazo de un año y con algunos *länder* celebrando sus propias elecciones.

No obstante, uno de los elementos que debilitó el liderazgo de Merkel durante la pandemia fue precisamente la rápida acción de las unidades constituyentes. En los primeros momentos, el gobierno federal alemán no quiso adoptar medidas muy restrictivas para contener la pandemia, lo que dejó campo para la actuación de las unidades constituyentes. Los *länder* más rápidamente afectados por la COVID-19 actuaron como principales responsables en dar respuesta a la incipiente crisis sanitaria (Pelowski, 2021) y establecieron un precedente de lo que serían las respuestas a esta crisis en los meses sucesivos. Si bien la tradición cooperativa del federalismo alemán pesó y los órganos de cogobierno adquirieron un gran protagonismo en el proceso de toma de decisiones, el marco de acción de las jefaturas de gobierno de las unidades constituyentes tuvo un claro margen de acción y difuminó el liderazgo de la canciller. Uno de los momentos críticos se produjo en la semana de Pascua de 2021, cuando Merkel tiene que retrotraerse de las medidas adoptadas y pedir disculpas públicamente.

Así, hitos como el primer confinamiento (Baviera), el primer uso obligatorio de las mascarillas (Sajonia, Mecklemburgo-Pomerania Occidental y Baviera) o el test con carácter universal (Baviera) se adoptaron en el ámbito de *land*, lo que puso en un brete la autoridad de la canciller y del ministro de Sanidad, y los obligó a actuar (Huhlmann, 2020). De esta forma, la tradición de decisiones conjuntas del sistema alemán se vio superada, mostrando que en contextos críticos el sistema relaja los marcos que limitan la acción política y el liderazgo de los *länder* adquiere una mayor fuerza que en situaciones de normalidad (Broschek, 2022).

La estrategia por recuperar la iniciativa en la gestión de la COVID-19 por parte del gobierno liderado por Angela Merkel se llevó a cabo a través de tres vías: las comunicaciones públicas de la canciller y del ministro de Sanidad;

la convocatoria de la Conferencia de Presidentes, y la ampliación del gasto público, la transferencia de recursos a los *länder* (Färber, 2022) y la reforma de la Ley de Protección contra Infecciones en abril de 2021. Algunas de las comunicaciones públicas de Merkel tuvieron una gran proyección en los medios internacionales, ya que mostró un fuerte liderazgo europeo que contrastaba con la situación de gestión de la COVID-19 dentro de Alemania.

La situación de la primera ministra belga fue muy diferente. Sophie Wilmès, miembro del partido francófono Movimiento Reformador, fue nombrada primera ministra en funciones en octubre de 2019. Wilmès sustituyó al hasta entonces primer ministro, Charles Michel, que, estando en funciones, dimitió para asumir la presidencia del Consejo Europeo. Cuando se declaró la pandemia, la primera jefa de gobierno en la historia de Bélgica llevaba menos de seis meses en el cargo. Su liderazgo del gobierno de coalición no buscaba la continuidad, sino que estaba marcado por la provisionalidad, pues estaba a la espera de los resultados de las negociaciones políticas que alumbrarían un nuevo gabinete. Sin embargo, las tareas de gobierno y el equipo no eran ajenos a Wilmès, dado que ocupaba un ministerio desde 2015.

Este fenómeno según el cual la primera mujer en liderar un gabinete en algunos países lo haga en situación de crisis es conocido como «acantilado de cristal» (*glass cliff*) (Ryan et al., 2016), y está protagonizado por las mujeres que alcanzan los puestos de dirección en las compañías cuando estas están inmersas en situaciones de crisis. Este fenómeno, que surge del ámbito privado, es perfectamente aplicable al público y, especialmente, a las jefaturas de gobierno en sistemas parlamentarios.

Además de la provisionalidad del nombramiento, Sophie Wilmès lideraba un gobierno de coalición infrarrepresentado en funciones. Tras la salida de los nacionalistas flamencos en 2018 y la convocatoria de elecciones en 2019, los partidos estaban a la espera de la conformación de un nuevo ejecutivo. Este proceso se había vuelto a dilatar y batía un nuevo record de días necesarios para constituir el gobierno. En ese contexto, en plena pandemia, la primera ministra en funciones pasó a recibir plenos poderes legislativos avalada por los partidos más importantes. El 16 de marzo fue designada primera ministra por el rey y se mantuvo en el cargo hasta el 1 de octubre de 2020, cuando se conformó la nueva coalición liderada por Alexander de Croo.

La debilidad de la situación política de la primera ministra se compensó con la reacción del sistema federal ante la crisis sanitaria. En Bélgica, la gestión de la pandemia rompió con la estructura competencial dual y se reconoció como una competencia federal, quedando las unidades constituyentes como órganos de implementación de las decisiones federales, lo que constituye un modelo más propio de sistemas federales o descentralizados de tipo cooperativos. Este proceso se desarrolló con el beneplácito de todas las partes (Popilier y Bursens, 2022), y la primera ministra y la ministra de Sanidad tuvieron un importante liderazgo durante la pandemia.

En la crisis generada por la COVID-19, otra figura relevante dentro de los gabinetes estatales han sido las jefaturas del Ministerio de Sanidad. Sin embar-

Tabla 2. Las características de los gobiernos estatales en el inicio de la COVID-19

País	Gobierno	Partido	Situación	Líder	Departamento de Sanidad	
Alemania	Coalición	CDU-CSU/SPD	Mayoría	Mujer	Congruente	Hombre
Austria	Coalición	ÖVP-Grüne	Mayoría	Hombre	Incongruente	Hombre (2)
Bélgica	Coalición	MR, CDyV, Open Vld	Minoría	Mujer (1)	Incongruente	Mujer
España	Coalición	PSOE-UP	Minoría	Hombre	Congruente	Hombre (3)

Nota: (1) Sophie Wilmès, hasta 1 de octubre de 2020, y Alexander de Croo, hasta la actualidad; (2) desde enero de 2020, Rudolf Anschober (Grüne), y desde el 19 de abril de 2021, Wolfgang Mückstein (Grüne); (3) Salvador Illa, del 13 de enero de 2020 al 27 de enero de 2021; le sustituye Carolina Darias.

Fuente: elaboración propia.

go, de acuerdo con los estudios de género, el ámbito sanitario no se considera prestigioso o cercano a la jefatura de gobierno, por lo que en gobiernos de coalición suele ser un área atribuida al partido más pequeño. Asimismo, la Sanidad es una materia vinculada al cuidado, que suele estar acompañada de otras áreas como servicios sociales o familia, y su gestión suele estar asignada a mujeres.

En la gestión de la pandemia, los cuatro casos estudiados son gobiernos de coalición, y en dos de ellos —Austria y Bélgica— el ámbito sanitario recayó sobre un partido distinto al de la jefatura de gobierno, lo que dividió el liderazgo. En Bélgica, esta situación debilitó más si cabe la posición de la primera ministra, pues la ministra de Sanidad, Maggie de Block, lideró las medidas restrictivas y acaparó una considerable atención mediática con sus propuestas.

En la etapa final del análisis, en marzo de 2022, todos los cargos más destacados de los gobiernos estatales para el liderazgo de la respuesta a la crisis sanitaria estaban ocupados por hombres, salvo el Ministerio de Sanidad en España. Tras el cambio de gobierno en Alemania, a finales de 2021, y en Bélgica, un año antes, las jefaturas de gobierno pasaron a manos de Olaf Scholz y Alexander de Croo. Los ministerios de Sanidad de ambos gobiernos también cambiaron. En Alemania, Jerns Spahan cedió la cartera a Karl Lauterbach y, en Bélgica, Maggie de Block lo hizo en favor de Frank Vandenbroucke. El único cambio que se produjo en estos puestos que favoreció la presencia de mujeres fue el nombramiento de Carolina Darias en España. La mayor inestabilidad en gobiernos estatales se vivió en el ejecutivo de Austria, que tuvo tres primeros ministros en menos de cuatro meses: Kurz, Schallenberg y Nehamer. Todos pertenecían al Partido Popular de Austria. Los cambios de liderazgo no afectaron a la coalición ni a la dinámica del cogobierno.

4.2. Las unidades constituyentes

La distribución de poder territorial ha sido considerada una de las ventanas de oportunidad para la incorporación de las mujeres a los poderes ejecutivos y, por tanto, a la labor de liderazgo de equipos de gobierno, lo que ha contribuido a la ruptura del imaginario de imposibilidad de acceso al poder y ha facilitado su incorporación a otros niveles de gobierno.

Sin embargo, no siempre ocurre así. En Alemania, solamente una mujer ha precedido a la canciller Merkel en la jefatura de un *land*, la ministra presidenta de Schleswig-Holstein Heide Simonis, una política del Partido Socialista que ocupó el cargo desde 1993 hasta 2005. En el caso de Austria, al igual que en España, hasta el momento no ha habido ninguna mujer en la jefatura de gobierno, pero sí en las jefaturas de gobierno de los *länder* y las comunidades autónomas, respectivamente. En Austria, Waltraud Klasnic fue la primera mujer en presidir un *land*, Estiria, entre 1996 y 2005. En España, la primera presidenta de una comunidad autónoma fue María Antonia Martínez, presidenta de la Comunidad Autónoma de Murcia entre 1993 y 1995, aunque ya había ocupado este cargo de forma interina durante un mes en 1984. En Bélgica, la primera mujer que encabezó una región fue Laurette Onkelinx en 1993, tras la dimisión de Bernard Anselme. Fue reelegida en 1995 y se mantuvo hasta 1999. Durante la crisis sanitaria de la COVID-19, ninguna mujer lideraba una región o comunidad en Bélgica.

Por su parte, en Alemania, durante todo el periodo de la pandemia solamente dos de los dieciséis *länder* estaban liderados por mujeres: Mecklemburgo-Pomerania Occidental (2017-actualidad) y Renania-Palatinado (2013-actualidad). Durante la crisis, otras dos mujeres se incorporaron a las jefaturas de gobierno en Berlín (2021) y Sarre (2022). El análisis de su participación en los mecanismos de cogobierno se ha centrado en los dos primeros casos.

Los dos gobiernos liderados por mujeres en Alemania durante toda la pandemia tuvieron características similares. En ambos casos eran gobiernos de coalición, con lo que la líder se vio obligada a negociar con otros partidos políticos en el seno de su gabinete. Mientras que Mecklemburgo-Pomerania tenía la misma coalición que gobernaba en el estado (CDU/SPD) durante la primera etapa, en Renania-Palatinado gobernaban los mismos partidos que integran el segundo gobierno estatal que ha gestionado la pandemia (SPD, FDP y Grüne). Si bien la capacidad de liderazgo de la jefatura de gobierno disminuye cuando se trata de gobiernos de coalición (Lijphart, 2012), este hecho se vio paliado en ambos casos por la congruencia política entre las ministras presidentas y la persona que encabezaba el Departamento de Sanidad en sus gabinetes. Además, en el gobierno de Mecklemburgo-Pomerania, el equipo que lideró la respuesta a la COVID estuvo compuesto por dos mujeres, una situación excepcional dado que la mayoría de los departamentos de Sanidad de los *länder* durante la pandemia estuvieron dirigidos por hombres, como en Renania-Palatinado.

En Austria, durante la pandemia únicamente una mujer lideraba un estado, Johanna Mikl Leitner, del Partido Popular de Baja Austria. Al igual que sus homólogas alemanas, capitaneaba un gobierno en coalición, en este caso entre el SPÖ y el ÖVP, cuyo Departamento de Sanidad recaía sobre el partido que estaba al frente del gobierno regional. A pesar de que en Austria la mayoría de las carteras de Salud de los estados federados estaban encabezadas por mujeres, en Baja Austria el tándem fue mixto.

De los casos seleccionados, España es el país con mayor presencia de liderazgo femenino en las unidades constituyentes. De esta forma, al igual que en

Tabla 3. Las jefaturas de gobierno de las regiones según afinidad política con jefatura de gobierno estatal y jefatura de la cartera de Sanidad.

	Unidades	Total	Parcial	Jefatura gobierno		Cartera de Sanidad	
				Con.	No con.	Con.	No con.
Alemania	16	2	2	0	4 (*)	3	1
Austria	9	1	0	1	-	1	-
Bélgica	5	0	0	-	-	-	-
España	17	4	0	3	1	4	0

Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de las páginas web de los gobiernos.

Alemania, solo cuatro de las diecisiete comunidades autónomas están lideradas por mujeres, aunque todas ellas de forma continuada desde la declaración de la pandemia, en marzo de 2020: Madrid, las Islas Baleares, Navarra y La Rioja. Respecto al liderazgo interno de su gobierno, todas las unidades constituyentes lideradas por mujeres eran gobiernos de coalición. La fragmentación y la extensión de sistemas multipartidistas generaban gobiernos de coalición de más de dos partidos en las Islas Baleares (PSOE, Podemos y Més per Mallorca) y en Navarra (PSOE, Podemos y Geroa Bai), y de dos partidos en La Rioja (PSOE, Podemos-Equo) y en Madrid (PP y Ciudadanos) hasta marzo de 2021. El liderazgo de la respuesta a la COVID-19 en estas comunidades es de gran afinidad política en las Islas Baleares, Madrid y La Rioja, y de gran confianza política en Navarra, dado que para la cartera de Sanidad se nombró a una persona no adscrita a ninguna fuerza política. A pesar de que la composición más habitual en el liderazgo conjunto (jefatura de gobierno y jefatura de Sanidad) es de dos hombres en ocho de las diecisiete comunidades autónomas, en las lideradas por mujeres prevalece el liderazgo de equipo femenino. La excepción es Madrid, donde la Consejería de Sanidad está encabezada por un hombre.

5. El liderazgo de las mujeres en la Conferencia de Presidentes

El primer resultado respecto al papel de las líderes estatales y subestatales en las conferencias es que en ninguno de los casos su presencia supera el primer cuartil, no llega al 30 % necesario para constituir masa crítica y poder establecer líneas alternativas en la toma de decisiones. La posición de las líderes varía significativamente, afectada por el rol en la conferencia, la dimensión del territorio que gobiernan, la afinidad con el gobierno estatal, pero también influenciada por la experiencia en el cargo y la posición respecto a su partido en el ámbito estatal.

Tal y como observábamos, dos mujeres lideraron la representación del estado en estas conferencias en Alemania y Bélgica, aunque en posiciones diferentes. En Bélgica, la centralización del proceso de toma de decisiones vació de poder la conferencia. La primera ministra, con un gobierno de coalición en minoría y en funciones, lideró la crisis sanitaria, y su principal sombra estuvo

en su propio gabinete, y no tanto en sus relaciones con los líderes de las regiones o comunidades.

En Austria, las primeras decisiones que concentran el poder en el ministro de Salud no encontraron contestación por parte de las jefaturas de gobierno de los estados federados. Kössler (2022) afirma que los estados federados se sentían cómodos con el liderazgo del gobierno federal, aunque apunta varios desencuentros que se produjeron en algunas de las decisiones, especialmente con el Tirol —con afinidad política— y más adelante con Viena —dentro de la lógica de la competición interpartidista. En opinión de Kössler, no se puede hablar de grandes diversidades en la aplicación de las medidas para hacer frente al virus entre los diferentes estados federados. Bußjäger (2020) va más allá al señalar que la COVID-19 convirtió Austria en un estado unitario descentralizado. En esta línea, Hegele y Schnabel (2021) sostienen que las primeras decisiones fueron centralizadas y unilaterales, y que esta fue la tónica general de la gestión de la crisis sanitaria en este país.

En Austria, una única mujer formó parte de la Conferencia de Presidentes, Johana Mikl-Leitner, de Baja Austria, uno de los *länder* más poblados del país y políticamente afín al gobierno estatal. A pesar de la congruencia política, Mikl-Leitner era considerada una persona influyente en el partido en el ámbito estatal, con un papel relevante en el proceso de transformación de la cúpula durante el periodo de la crisis sanitaria. Fue una voz que los medios buscaron para valorar la evolución del Partido Popular en Austria. Además, de 2011 a 2016 había ocupado el Ministerio de Interior, antes de ser nombrada primera ministra del *land*. Su presencia en los medios estatales (*Krone* y *Kurier*) respecto a la crisis sanitaria es limitada. En las noticias relacionadas con la Conferencia de Presidentes, su valoración fue positiva, y reforzó la idea de la necesidad de unirse para dar una respuesta más eficaz. En concreto, puso en valor los acuerdos adoptados con Viena, en manos de la oposición. Era una mujer del aparato y defendió la idoneidad de las medidas restrictivas aplicadas por el estado desde el primer momento. Al igual que sucedió con las mujeres de los ejecutivos estatales, su propuesta de medidas o peticiones dirigidas al gabinete federal siempre iba encaminada a una mayor protección, con una gran promoción de la vacunación y la regulación de su obligatoriedad en parte del sector público.

En Alemania, Angela Merkel encabezó la lucha para liderar la respuesta a la COVID-19. Debe precisarse que la jefatura del gobierno del estado en la Conferencia de Ministros Presidentes en Alemania no es jerárquica. La preside el ministro presidente del *land* que ostenta la presidencia en cada momento, y la canciller acude en dos de las cuatro reuniones anuales. Ciertamente, la dimensión de la crisis sanitaria llevó a que se multiplicaran las reuniones de este órgano, y la canciller estuvo presente en la práctica totalidad de las reuniones del mismo durante el periodo analizado. Los acuerdos adoptados en las conferencias fueron presentados en rueda de prensa por la canciller en compañía del ministro presidente que dirigía el órgano en ese momento.

En Alemania, además de Merkel, otras dos mujeres formaron parte de la Conferencia de Ministros Presidentes durante todo el periodo analizado,

aunque la posición de ambas en el órgano no fue de poder. En primer lugar, ninguna de ellas presidió la conferencia. La crisis estalló bajo la presidencia de Baviera, en 2021 recayó sobre Berlín y en 2022 fue asumida por Renania del Norte-Westfalia. De esta forma, no pudieron aprovechar la proyección mediática estatal que les dio a sus homólogos presentar los tan esperados acuerdos de la conferencia junto con la canciller. En segundo lugar, lideraban *länder* pequeños (Mecklemburgo-Pomerania) y mediano-pequeños (Renania-Palatinado). En tercer lugar, si bien no eran políticamente afines a la jefatura del gobierno estatal, su partido formaba parte del gobierno de coalición. Además, en el caso de Mecklemburgo-Pomerania, se reeditaba el modelo de coalición del estado, aunque en este caso liderado por el SPD. La congruencia política pudo así jugar un papel favorable a la hora de mantener posiciones colaborativas en el órgano.

Finalmente, en lo que respecta a su trayectoria en la posición de liderazgo, las dos ministras presidentas presentan diferencias. Manuela Schwesig llevaba tres años en el cargo y había llegado en situación especial tras la renuncia de su antecesor por enfermedad. No obstante, no era nueva en política. Había formado parte de la élite estatal ocupando cargos en la dirección de su partido y había pertenecido al gabinete de Angela Merkel desde 2013 hasta 2017. Cabe destacar otros dos elementos excepcionales que pueden incidir sobre su posición durante la COVID-19: estaba en el final del ciclo electoral, con las elecciones previstas para septiembre de 2021, y unos años antes había sido diagnosticada de cáncer de mama.

Si bien su posición en el debate interno de la conferencia no recibió especial atención en los principales medios estatales (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* y *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), sus declaraciones en los mismos se encaminaron a destacar la relevancia del cogobierno y la codecisión para hacer frente a la crisis sanitaria. El rol de esta líder dentro de la conferencia fue de búsqueda de consenso y de actuación conjunta como medio para salir de la crisis. Sus críticas al gobierno estatal siempre se encaminaron a demandar una mayor protección.

Por su parte, Malu Dreyer, ministra presidenta de Renania-Palatinado, estaba en su segundo mandato. En 2013, había entrado a liderar el *land* tras la dimisión de su antecesor, y en sus primeras elecciones, en 2016, obtuvo los mejores resultados de su partido en Renania. Aunque no había ocupado cargos en el gobierno estatal, sus instituciones no le resultaban ajenas, pues en 2016 presidió el Bundesrat y había sido vicepresidenta del SPD en el Bundestag. Durante 2019, circunstancias especiales le llevaron a liderar el SPD en el ámbito estatal, pero tras la reconstitución de la cúpula volvió a situarse a la cabeza del partido en su *land*. En las elecciones de 2021, algunos medios dejaron entrever su posible sustitución, pero no solo lideró la candidatura, sino que ganó las elecciones.

Al igual que Schwesig, su participación en la conferencia no recibe gran atención por parte de los principales medios estatales. Su posición está centrada en su rol de jefa de gobierno del *land* y no tanto en una percepción estatal del problema. La visibilización de Dreyer durante la COVID no se centra en su posición en la Conferencia de Ministros Presidentes, sino en acontecimientos

externos a la crisis sanitaria como las elecciones en el *land* (marzo de 2021), las graves inundaciones (julio de 2021) y las elecciones al Bundestag (septiembre de 2021). Respecto a la COVID y la Conferencia de Ministros Presidentes, la mayoría de sus declaraciones se dirigieron a valorar positivamente las medidas de protección como la mascarilla o la distancia. Fue una de las pocas líderes de los *länder* que apoyó a Merkel en la decisión de tomar medidas restrictivas en la semana de Pascua de 2021. En la segunda fase de la pandemia, iniciada la vacunación, abogó por una mayor transparencia sobre las vacunas disponibles. En esta etapa el foco positivo de la respuesta a la COVID se pone en Renania-Palatinado, porque en este *land* se encuentran empresas como Biotech, productora de las primeras vacunas contra la COVID, y Schott, exportadora de viales para su inoculación. Algunos medios señalan que este hecho favoreció su reelección en 2021.

En España, tal y como se ha señalado, la Conferencia de Presidentes es un órgano más vertical, con una clara dependencia de las decisiones del gobierno del estado. De hecho, durante más de una década este órgano no había sido convocado. Sin embargo, durante la pandemia se convirtió en una ventana de oportunidades para la proyección estatal de las personas que lideraban los gobiernos autonómicos. Por un lado, el fluctuante sistema político español en lo que a la distribución territorial del poder se refiere (Novo-Arbona et al., 2019) se encontraba en etapa descentralizadora. Por otro lado, la capacidad del gobierno estatal de centralizar la toma de decisiones es limitada (Erkoreka et al., 2022). Así, aunque la primera etapa de la gestión de la COVID-19 se caracterizó por la centralización, la segunda fue una fase de codecisión que fue derivando en una cada vez mayor autonomía de acción por parte de las unidades constituyente a finales de 2020 (Navarro y Velasco, 2022).

También debe considerarse que el gobierno estatal es un ejecutivo de coalición infradimensionado, lo que favorece a los liderazgos subestatales. Además, en España se da también la mayor presencia de mujeres en la Conferencia de Presidentes en comparación con el resto de países analizados. Así, el 23,5 % de las jefaturas autonómicas presentes están encabezadas por mujeres.

En el caso español, se pudieron diferenciar claramente dos situaciones de poder entre las líderes autonómicas. La primera estaba conformada por las presidentas de las comunidades autónomas de menor población (Navarra y La Rioja) o tamaño medio (Balears) y afines al gobierno. La segunda estaba compuesta por la presidenta de una de las comunidades autónomas más pobladas, en la que se sitúa la capital del estado (Madrid), y gobernada por el Partido Popular.

Durante la pandemia, la Conferencia de Presidentes en España estuvo presidida por el presidente del gobierno, por lo que no hubo un cambio de roles en este caso, y fue él quien presidió las ruedas de prensa posteriores. Sin embargo, como gesto simbólico, las reuniones presenciales se celebraron en diferentes comunidades autónomas (La Rioja, Castilla-León y Las Palmas), aunque esto no supuso en ningún caso una mayor visibilización de las jefaturas de gobierno de estas comunidades autónomas.

Las presidentas de Navarra, La Rioja y las Islas Baleares dirigían gobiernos de coalición progresista con más de dos partidos políticos, lo que debilitaba su poder en el gabinete. Sin embargo, para la gestión de la crisis sanitaria contaron con el apoyo de la persona responsable del área de Sanidad, que o era de su partido (La Rioja y Baleares) o había sido elegida por esta (Navarra). La gestión de la crisis estuvo liderada por equipos de mujeres en estas tres comunidades, es decir, además de la presidenta también las consejeras de Sanidad eran mujeres.

Si bien ninguna de ellas había ostentado cargo alguno en el ámbito estatal, la presidenta de las Islas Baleares era miembro de la ejecutiva estatal de su partido ininterrumpidamente desde 2004 y en el debate sobre el liderazgo PSOE apoyó desde el principio al actual líder y presidente del gobierno. El papel de María Chivite (Navarra) y Concha Andreu (La Rioja) en el ámbito estatal fue algo más limitado. Si bien ambas lideran el partido en su comunidad autónoma, solo Andreu formó parte de la ejecutiva estatal por un tiempo limitado. Ambas estaban posicionadas a favor del actual líder de su partido.

El rol de estas presidentas en la Conferencia de Presidentes ha pasado desapercibido en los principales medios estatales (*El País* y *El Mundo*). Las presidentas no se desmarcaron de las líneas principales del gobierno del estado durante la gestión de la COVID-19 en las declaraciones tras las conferencias. Mientras que Concha Andreu (La Rioja) fue más partidaria de los acuerdos autonómicos, Francina Armengol (Baleares) destacaba las bondades de la descentralización y abogó por dar pasos hacia una mayor autonomía dentro de un pacto federal. Así, destacó el liderazgo de las Baleares en la vacunación de menores de 12 años. En la última etapa, las peticiones de María Chivite (Navarra) fueron encaminadas a solicitar una mayor protección social, la ampliación de medidas económicas excepcionales y la apertura controlada de centros escolares para favorecer la vida social de la infancia.

Un rol muy distinto jugó en la Conferencia de Presidentes Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), presidenta de la Comunidad de Madrid. Ayuso llegó a la presidencia tras las elecciones de 2019, siendo la segunda fuerza más votada y con un gobierno de coalición infradimensionado. Sin embargo, presidía la tercera comunidad autónoma con mayor número de habitantes y era la única líder subestatal de los casos estudiados que se encontraba en total oposición política a los partidos que componían el gobierno del estado. No había vínculo político alguno entre el gobierno estatal y autonómico. El único límite a una voz propia dentro de la Conferencia de Presidentes podía venir de la ejecutiva estatal de su propio partido, cuyo liderazgo, sin embargo, estaba cuestionado, lo que propició que los dirigentes autonómicos adquirieran mayor voz propia.

Como en ningún caso anterior, Ayuso consiguió mucha atención mediática de los principales medios estatales. La presidenta abogó por una mayor autonomía en la decisión en detrimento de la codecisión o la centralización. Mantuvo una posición contraria a los acuerdos adoptados en el seno de la Conferencia de Presidentes y lideró en los medios la oposición a las respuestas del estado durante la crisis sanitaria. Además, consiguió tener su propia voz al

margen del posicionamiento de su partido en la conferencia. De hecho, ganó un pulso al líder de su partido que le costó el puesto a este, mientras que ella se mantuvo a la cabeza de la formación en su comunidad autónoma. A diferencia del resto de las líderes subestatales, mantuvo una postura contraria a las medidas de protección como la mascarilla, el confinamiento o la distancia. Aplicó políticas alternativas a las coordinadas, todas ellas encaminadas a un menor intervencionismo, y lideró las medidas de desescalada.

Al igual que sus homologas alemanas, afrontó elecciones en 2021, aunque a diferencia de las anteriores no por finalización del mandato, sino por adelanto electoral, tras adoptar la decisión de disolver la cámara autonómica y dar por roto el gobierno de coalición con Ciudadanos. El lema principal de su campaña fue *Libertad* y, también como las líderes alemanas, salió reforzada de los comicios. En su caso, dobló el número de escaños de su partido en la cámara autonómica, lo que le permitió gobernar en solitario a pesar de no tener la mayoría absoluta.

6. Conclusiones

Los resultados muestran la escasa presencia de mujeres no solo en los ejecutivos estatales, de los que desaparecieron en la segunda etapa de la pandemia, sino también en los de los gobiernos subnacionales. En Bélgica, ninguna mujer se encontraba a la cabeza de ninguna unidad constituyente en el momento del inicio de la crisis sanitaria y tampoco en el momento de la redacción del presente trabajo. De este modo, aunque en todos los países las mujeres llegaron antes a las jefaturas de las unidades constituyentes que a la del gobierno estatal, no se puede decir que su presencia sea amplia, pues solo en nueve de las 47 unidades constituyentes lideraron desde el ejecutivo de algún *land* o comunidad autónoma la respuesta a la pandemia.

En general, las líderes de los gobiernos subnacionales adoptaron posiciones congruentes con las líneas establecidas desde la jefatura del estado. Sus *länder* o comunidades autónomas no destacaron por liderar iniciativas alternativas o innovadoras. La excepción se sitúa en la Comunidad de Madrid, cuya líder desafió las decisiones conjuntas adoptadas en la Conferencia de Presidentes y contradijo abiertamente las iniciativas propuestas por la jefatura del gobierno estatal. La afinidad política entre las líderes de las unidades constituyentes y quien encabezaba o componía el gabinete en el estado puede explicar algunas de estas diferencias, si bien no hay que olvidar las iniciativas y actuaciones autónomas de los líderes de algunos *länder* alemanes, incluso de aquellos políticamente afines a Angela Merkel u Olaf Scholz.

Asimismo, salvo en el caso de Madrid, el resto de las líderes subestatales tuvieron una proyección limitada en los medios de ámbito estatal en comparación con la visibilización de los jefes de gobierno de otras unidades constituyentes. Tuvieron mayor presencia en Alemania quienes presidieron la Conferencia de Ministros Presidentes durante la pandemia y, en todos los casos, aquellos que tuvieron roles más *outsider* o contrarios a la corriente principal. En este

papel se situó la presidenta de la Comunidad de Madrid, quien desde el principio acaparó una especial atención de los medios.

Finalmente, por lo que respecta a la Conferencia de Presidentes, la posición de las líderes subestatales se situó entre los roles proteccionistas en la gestión de la pandemia, en sintonía con investigaciones anteriores durante la crisis sanitaria por parte de las mujeres en el ámbito estatal. Una vez más, la excepción la constituyó la presidenta de Madrid, que abogó por medidas menos restrictivas que las acordadas en la Conferencia de Presidentes, convirtiendo este posicionamiento en el lema de su campaña durante las elecciones autonómicas celebradas en medio de la situación de pandemia.

A pesar de no ser uno de los objetivos de la investigación, también cabe destacar que, aunque pudiera pensarse que una crisis producida en el ámbito sanitario pudiera implicar un mayor liderazgo femenino y una mayor visibilización de las mujeres líderes, el estudio muestra que este fenómeno ha sido limitado en el ámbito estatal y más ajustado en el subestatal. En el primer nivel, solamente uno de los cuatro ministerios de Sanidad analizados estaba en manos de una mujer cuando se inició la crisis sanitaria. En el subestatal, en Austria, el modelo más repetido fue un hombre en la jefatura del gobierno y una mujer en la de Sanidad, algo menos habitual pero también extendido en Alemania y Bélgica. Sin embargo, en España, de las seis mujeres que lideraron la Sanidad en el ámbito autonómico, tres lo hicieron en gobiernos encabezados por mujeres.

Por ello, el análisis de la gobernanza durante la pandemia muestra que los ejecutivos siguen siendo ámbitos masculinizados, incluso en el nivel subnacional. La incorporación de mujeres se ha producido en momentos de crisis en los gobiernos, de forma análoga al fenómeno del acantilado de cristal, no solo en el ámbito estatal sino también en el subestatal. Sin embargo, su presencia en los gobiernos de las unidades constituyentes ayuda a subrayar su capacidad para gobernar y debería facilitar su incorporación a los ejecutivos del estado con mayor naturalidad.

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Gender mainstreaming in times of crisis: Missed opportunities in pandemic policymaking

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Abstract

This article problematises gender-mainstreaming in Swedish policy responses to COVID-19 in relation to economic politics. The aim is to understand how gender mainstreaming was implemented, and with what effects. Little is still known about gender mainstreaming in crisis management and policymaking, and even less is known in relation to pandemic policy responses. To contribute to this field of knowledge, the article therefore analyses the Swedish National Recovery and Resilience Plan, supplemented by interviews with public servants, to understand the factors that impact the implementation of gender mainstreaming in policymaking in times of societal crises. At a theoretical level, the article draws on feminist institutionalism and implementation studies, the notion of resilience, and insights from critical frame analysis. The data is based on a larger dataset collected as part of the EU-funded *RESISTIRÉ: Responding to Outbreaks through Co-creative Inclusive Equality Strategies* project. The results indicate that gender mainstreaming is limited in its rationale and scope in times of crisis and that the integration of a gender equality perspective in crisis management needs to be developed in several important ways.

Keywords: crisis; economy; gender equality; gender mainstreaming; National Recovery and Resilience Plan; pandemic policymaking; RESISTIRÉ; Sweden

Resumen. *Integración de la perspectiva de género en tiempos de crisis: oportunidades perdidas en la formulación de políticas para pandemias*

El artículo problematiza la integración de la perspectiva de género en las respuestas políticas suecas al COVID-19 en relación con la política económica. El objetivo es comprender cómo se implementó la integración de la perspectiva de género y cuáles fueron sus efectos. Aún se sabe poco sobre la integración de la perspectiva de género en la gestión de crisis y la formulación de políticas, y se sabe aún menos en relación con las respuestas políticas a la pandemia. Con el fin de contribuir a este campo de conocimiento, el artículo analiza el Plan Nacional de Recuperación y Resiliencia de Suecia, complementado con entrevistas a funcionarios públicos, para comprender los factores que inciden en la integración de la perspectiva de género en la formulación de políticas en tiempos de crisis social. Teóricamente, el artículo se basa en el institucionalismo feminista y los estudios de implementación, la noción de resiliencia y los conocimientos del análisis crítico del marco. Los datos se basan en un conjunto de datos más amplio recopilado en RESISTIRÉ: *Responding to Outbreaks through Co-creative Inclusive Equality Strategies*, proyecto financiado por la UE. Los resultados indican que la integración de la perspectiva de género está limitada en su racionalidad y alcance en tiempos de crisis y que en la gestión de crisis debe desarrollarse de varias maneras importantes.

Palabras clave: crisis; economía; igualdad de género; integración de la perspectiva de género; Plan Nacional de Recuperación y Resiliencia; formulación de políticas para pandemias; RESISTIRÉ; Suecia

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1. Introduction

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality across Europe have been severe. They go further than health-related effects and are visible in, for example, increased economic gaps, increased care gaps, a return to traditional gender roles, and increased levels of gender-based violence (Axelsson et al., 2021; Sandström et al., 2022; Stovell et al., 2021). Many of these impacts result from the policy responses introduced to address the pandemic, rather than from the virus itself (Cibin et al., 2021, 2022). Due to the drastic measures taken to close down parts of society, the pandemic was problematized early on as a social and economic crisis as well as a health crisis. In recent European pandemic policy responses, European economic recovery has been in focus

(EC, 2022). The economic situation for individuals prior, during and post the pandemic are unequal and intertwined with multiple intersecting inequalities. For decades, gendered differences in income and pensions due to low and discriminatory wages have had a gender-unequal impact on living standards. As a result, the capacity to cope with the economic effects of the pandemic is low for large groups of women; and a vicious circle of being low-paid, over-worked and highly exposed to the virus itself, and with fewer economic means to cope with sick leave, extra family care burdens and redundancies, appear to have created a downward spiral of inequalities, in turn making it increasingly difficult for groups of women to catch up. In the long term, the pandemic risks further widening the gender pension gap and other economic gender inequalities for decades to come (EC, 2021; Axelsson et al., 2021).

As the pandemic spread fast in 2020, governments introduced social isolation, remote working and, in many cases, severe lockdown policies. In Sweden, however, the policy responses introduced did not enforce nationwide lockdowns. Instead, restaurants and bars kept serving, schools and nurseries remained open, and public transport kept running. The majority of changes were in the form of recommendations. Sweden saw strong public agreement and adherence to the general recommendations set out to minimise the spread of the virus, including high levels of trust in pandemic research and policy (Public & Science, 2021/2022).¹ Yet, as in other countries, society in many ways came to a halt, with increased remote working and restrictions on restaurants, shops and travelling. Thus, also in Sweden the effects on society, and especially for women, were severe, and have resulted in vast social and economic consequences, in addition to the health-oriented ones.

Despite Sweden's long history of gender mainstreaming and repeated top positions in various gender equality rankings, the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (GEA)'s evaluation of the impact of the pandemic and its policy responses on gender equality concluded that all areas of the six national gender equality objectives were negatively affected (GEA, 2021a, 2021b). Further, the GEA concluded that policy responses introduced to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 had paid little or no attention to gender equality (see also Cibin et al., 2021, 2022). The only exception related to the objective of eliminating men's violence against women and children, where the GEA found that measures were gendered and gender-mainstreamed (GEA, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

These conclusions might seem surprising given Sweden's long history of gender mainstreaming policies and as a top-ranking country in gender equality in the EU (EIGE, 2020), and with a self-proclaimed feminist government at the time. As such, and with the declared aim of including a gender equality

1. The argument for this approach, informed by the Swedish Public Health Agency, was that policy responses must take into account medical aspects and be based on a broad and long-term notion of public wellbeing, including gender equality, and be sustainable in the long run. Recent studies have concluded that the effects of other pandemic responses on death rates have been similar to countries that had lockdowns.

perspective in public health policy, it could be argued that Sweden is a “most likely case of gender mainstreaming” (Sainsbury & Bergqvist, 2009). The country would thus seem better positioned than many others to mitigate the negative effects on gender equality in relation to pandemic policy responses. The initial analysis of the GEA therefore seems puzzling, and warrants further interrogation of pandemic policymaking. In this article we do this by investigating how gender aspects were considered in relation to pandemic policymaking, and with a focus on economic policymaking. This focus is motivated by the GEA’s evaluation showing the relative lack of gender concerns in the area of economic policymaking. Furthermore, economic policy was identified early on as central to gender mainstreaming, both by representatives of the Swedish Government (Linde & Regnér, 2020) and by the EU (European Parliament & the European Council, 2021).

Overall, little is still known about gender mainstreaming in crisis policymaking and even less in relation to pandemic policy responses in Sweden or internationally. Previous research has suggested that one of the most important yet little studied factors that impact gender mainstreaming is how gender equality is understood in the area where it is to be implemented (Verloo 2007; Callerstig, 2014; Lowndes, 2020; Bustelo & Mazur, 2023). We aim to further understanding of the interplay between actors, institutions and ideas in the post-adoption stages of gender equality policy (Mazur & Engeli, 2018; Bustelo & Mazur, 2023) and in particular by focusing on the ideational aspects of implementation. In doing so we aim to contribute to what has been called the “elusive recipe for successful gender equality policy” (Mazur & Engeli, 2018: 112).

This article problematizes how gender mainstreaming has been implemented in Swedish policy responses to COVID-19 by analysing the Swedish National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), a policy which had clear directives to conduct and present gender analysis (Swedish Government, 2021). It contributes to the understanding of what affects the implementation of gender mainstreaming in policy in times of crisis, with a focus on the discursive elements of implementation. The Recovery and Resilience Facility of the NextGenerationEU fund was set up to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic. The NRRP presents a good opportunity to examine how gender equality is understood and operationalised in relation to economic concerns, as the EU demands the inclusion of a gender equality perspective and gender impact assessments of all proposed measures. The EU asks its member states to explain explicitly both the principles of how gender mainstreaming is going to be implemented in the operational stages, and how gender equality is assessed in relation to each policy measure. Being a broad policy programme to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic and boost economic recovery in its late and post phases, it also offers an opportunity to investigate how many of the insights from the pandemic gender assessments made by other gender equality bodies, in this case the GEA, are integrated; and thus also to see how gender mainstreaming operates across policy institutions; and to assess its ability to “stick” over time.

At a theoretical level, this article utilises a feminist institutionalist perspective to understand gendered institutional factors that may impact the implementation of gender mainstreaming during crises at various levels of implementation (Levitt & Merry 2009; Ahrens & Callerstig, 2017; Gains & Lowndes, 2014). We take as our starting point the understanding of gendered implementation as consisting of both material and discursive elements as determinants for the way gender equality will be enacted in the implementation (Callerstig, 2014). The article also draws on critical frame theory (Verloo, 2005, 2007) to understand the discursive aspects of how the overarching objectives (“rules in form”) of gender mainstreaming are translated into action (“rules in use”). This involves an analysis of *how* gender equality is included in the pandemic policy responses. Specifically, critical frame theory distinguishes between the diagnosis of a policy problem – that is, the description of a policy problem – and the prognosis – that is, the solutions to a policy problem. For a policy to enable change, the prognosis is essential; without prognosis, policy remains merely descriptive rather than prescriptive (Verloo, 2005, 2007).

The aim of the article is to contribute to the understanding of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in times of crisis, not only to understand the consequences of the pandemic itself and for the possibilities to mitigate its negative effects, but – to use a popular term – to “build back better” (Sandsström et al., 2022).² Increasing the knowledge of how gender mainstreaming operates in times of crises provides insights to strengthen the future resilience of society. It thereby provides an opportunity to learn how to better cope not only with future pandemics but with societal challenges and crises to come. The overarching question guiding the article is: How has gender mainstreaming been implemented in the Swedish pandemic policy responses? More specifically we ask: In what way was gender equality seen as relevant and operationalised to the addressed policy problems? In the final discussion, the results of the analysis of the NRRP are discussed, drawing on insights from interviews with economic policy experts with a central position in public administration and in close interaction with the government. This approach deepens our understanding and offers indications for future research.

Below, the article briefly introduces the general objectives and organisation of gender mainstreaming in the economic policy area in Sweden and how the pandemic has impacted economic gender equality according to the assessments by the GEA. Then it turns to the literature to look at factors that have been found to impact the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the economic policy area, and in times of crises. Then the methodology, including the specific case – Swedish pandemic policy – are laid out. This is followed by the findings and analysis, and a discussion of these, including how and why

2. “Build back better” was coined by a UN task force with the objective of creating improved disaster-recovery plans. Initially, according to Kaplan (2020: PP) building back better meant: “using recovery after calamities (such as earthquakes and hurricane) to restore equitable social systems, revitalise livelihoods and protect the environment”.

gender mainstreaming was implemented. Finally, the conclusions and their implications for further research are discussed.

2. The case of gender mainstreaming in the economic area in Sweden

Gender mainstreaming has been the main Swedish political strategy for implementing national gender equality policy goals since the mid-1990s. To assist in the implementation, the Gender Equality Agency (GEA) was established in 2018. The GEA works on policy analysis and follow-up of progress against the gender equality goals; coordination and support to government agencies and universities on gender mainstreaming; as well as international exchange and cooperation. Besides the GEA, a designated Gender Equality Unit, located in the government offices alongside the different ministries, supports the implementation of gender mainstreaming, but all ministries have an independent duty to implement gender mainstreaming in their policy areas.

Economic gender equality is one the Swedish government's six gender equality objectives. Its relevance and content is defined as follows: "The overall objective of gender equality policy is that women and men shall have the same power to shape society and their own lives. The distribution of economic resources is a central part of this goal. The objective of economic gender equality is that women and men must have the same opportunities and conditions regarding paid work that provides economic independence throughout life [...] Another part of this objective is that women and men must have the same opportunities and conditions regarding access to work and the same opportunities and conditions both regarding working conditions, including terms of employment and pay, and regarding opportunities for development at work. The aim is to have a life-cycle perspective implying that paid work should provide economic security and independence during retirement too." (Government Offices, 2021: 2). In 2022, the GEA reported on how the economic objective had progressed since 2015. Besides the above-mentioned areas, it also included a specific focus on the effects of COVID-19 on economic equality, as well as economic equality and public business financing; economic violence; and the undervaluation of female-dominated work (GEA, 2022). Even if the situation in Sweden has differed from other European countries, the pre-pandemic economic inequalities – such as a pay-gap on an average EU-level, comparatively low pension rates and a highly gender-segregated labour market – follow the same pattern as in other European countries, in turn making the gendered economic consequences also follow the same gendered pattern as elsewhere in Europe. Besides the findings in its report of 2022, the GEA also concludes, in a series of reports, that the pandemic has had an overall negative impact on economic equality in Sweden (GEA, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022). The Swedish NRRP was approved on 4 May 2022. It represents the Swedish response to "the need of fostering a strong recovery and making Sweden future ready" (EC, no date). The reforms and investments introduced in the NRRP set out to "help Sweden become more sustainable, resilient and better prepared

for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions”. (EC, no date), It consists of 26 reforms and investments, supported by €3.3 billion in grants. It has a clear focus on green and digital transition, with 44% of the measures supporting climate objectives and 21% supporting the digital transition. The plan’s four chapters and 203 pages identify: 1) the current state of affairs (a diagnosis); 2) six focus areas/pillars of recovery, each pillar including subsections on challenges and objectives, reforms and investments, the pillar’s green components, and the pillar’s digital components; 3) Cohesiveness and implementation; and 4) Impact assessment. A special three-page section in the first chapter addresses gender equality and equal opportunities. In addition, each of the six pillars includes specific measures.

The GEA’s analysis of economic policy responses during the pandemic shows that employment has remained fairly high overall thanks to policy support, while at the same time contributing to an increased gender employment gap and with subsequent effects on economic equality, one example being differences in the distribution of support regarding short time work. The GEA (2022: 5) also stresses the overall necessity of integrating gender equality in the public authorities, particularly taking into account that their activities may wrongly be reviewed as gender neutral when the systems are shaped from the beginning based on a male norm. Finally, the GEA (2021b) also concludes that while economic recovery has been faster than expected, recovery raises several inequalities concerns that need to be addressed.

In the following we will discuss some theoretical insights that may help shed light on this puzzle, and will also present our analytical framework.

3. Implementing gender mainstreaming in economic and crises policymaking: lessons from previous studies

Even though it has been suggested that crises – such as the pandemic – offer an opportunity to re-shape and create an acceptance for new norms (Chappel, 2006), earlier studies of gender mainstreaming in European economic crises have demonstrated an “extreme side-lining of gender equality concerns and gendered analysis” (O’Dwyer, 2022: 158). Previous research has suggested that one of the most important factors impacting the implementation of gender mainstreaming is how gender equality is understood by the actors involved (Verloo, 2005, 2007; Callerstig, 2014; Lowndes, 2020; Bustelo & Mazur, 2023). For gender mainstreaming in the area of economic policy, a lack of experience and knowledge of gender analysis by experts involved in policy analysis, as well as the general absence of gender perspectives in the field to begin with, have been found to be key obstacles to implementation. In particular, integrating a gender perspective while at the same time sticking to traditional economic methodologies in which individuals are often absent from the analysis and the focus is on “measurability”, have been found to complicate gender analysis. Another difficulty highlighted is that gender objectives are often regarded as political by economic analysts, and therefore lacking in scien-

tific legitimacy and as compromising the integrity of economic experts (Sjöo & Callerstig, 2021). One study on policymaking in the field of economic growth and labour market politics (Ahrens & Callerstig, 2017) found that the importance of gender equality and gender mainstreaming was indeed recognised as such and did not meet with any major resistance. It was not clear, however, what the aims of the gender mainstreaming strategy should be for the policy area. At best, it was understood instrumentally to reach other policy goals; that is, gender equality as a strategy rather than as a vision. Without a clear focus in the first steps of policy prioritisation, this led to gender mainstreaming being left “open”, and applied in the very last step as a demand for local projects, leading to unfocused and weak implementation (Ahrens & Callerstig, 2017).

In crisis policymaking, it has been suggested that the lack of gender perspectives in economic policymaking may be even greater, since policymakers are pushed to make quick decisions. Also, the uncertainty of new and untested situations may lead policymakers to fall back on implicit gender stereotypes, or to completely side-step gender mainstreaming altogether (O’Dwyer, 2022). For the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of gender concerns was different to previous European economic crises. Some explanations for this are that the COVID-19 crisis was not framed only in economic terms; there was greater visibility of the gendered impacts of the crisis; the pandemic affected (and re-valued) female-dominated labour differently to other crises; and policy learning occurred because gendered aspects had not been addressed in responses to earlier economic crises (Rubery & Tavora, 2021; O’Dwyer, 2021). Even though progress seems to have been made in terms of the initial pandemic policy responses, concerns about the need to integrate gender into recovery policies have been raised. It has been suggested that the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the recovery phase has been hampered by a misrepresentation of women and a lack of gender concerns in relation to the policy measures proposed (O’Dwyer, 2022). Furthermore, it has been argued that gender mainstreaming can be implemented as long as it does not jeopardise or challenge the fundamentals of the policy itself, which, it has been suggested, is the case with the EU recovery fund (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022). In sum, gender mainstreaming in the area of economic crisis policymaking has been found to be impacted by several factors relating both to actors and to organisational features, the crisis as context as well as the overall contextual understanding of gender equality within economics, which provides a useful starting point to our theoretical framework for this analysis.

Our analysis of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in Swedish economic crisis policymaking draws on feminist institutional theory, which allows for a problematization of how gendered institutions and actors mutually affect the outcome of policy implementation, and how and if “rules in form” become “rules in use” (Ostrom, 1999: 38). Feminist institutionalist theory takes as its point of departure the idea from new institutionalism (March & Olsen, 1984), that “the organisation of political life makes a difference” and sets out to understand more specifically how *gendered* aspects, both formal and

informal, make a difference on how they affect the organisation of politics and policy processes (Gains & Lowndes, 2014). The institutional environment that both “policy makers” and “policy takers” operate within can be understood as being “comprised of regulative, normative and culture-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2008: 48). The gendered effects on policy implementation processes are visible in the choices made by actors operating within those institutions (Levitt & Merry, 2009; Ahrens & Callerstig, 2017; Gains & Lowndes, 2014). Societal gender institutions, or what have been called the “deep structures of organisations”, affect policy implementation in a multitude of ways, and constitute policy actors’ shared frameworks, which underlie their decision-making and actions (Rao & Kelleher, 2005: 64). More specifically it means that political organisations in their daily operations create and reproduce gendered divisions of labour, cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, and ways of articulating men’s and women’s interests that reach beyond their borders (Acker, 1992; Connell, 2006). Yet, the impact of societal gender institutions in policy implementation often remains unnoticed by the institutional actors that reproduce them (Freidenwall, 2020).

One explanation for the popularity of gender mainstreaming as a strategy is exactly that it questions the liberal idea of public policies as neutral (Stratigaki, 2005). Thus, a fundamental aspect of the gender mainstreaming change logics and methodology consists in assessing and reformulating policies to bring gender into focus (The Council of Europe, 1998: 15). According to Jahan (1995), the strategic underpinning and transformative potential of gender mainstreaming aims to give priority to gender objectives over competing issues, and to re-think and re-articulate policy ends from a gender perspective. In doing so, “women not only become part of the mainstream, they also re-orient the nature of the mainstream” (Jahan 1995: 13). Studies of gender mainstreaming have, however, shown disappointing results: gender equality is rarely a priority in organisations, including those with direct instruction to implement it, and consequently there are gaps in both the knowledge and resources needed to implement it. In Sweden, this is reinforced by a general belief that Sweden as a nation has already succeeded in reaching gender equality (Callerstig, 2014; Sainsbury & Bergqvist, 2009).

In our analysis we take as our point of departure a theoretical framework in which gendered implementation is understood to be affected both by the material aspects of implementation (e.g. providing necessary resources, sufficient support, monitoring and steering mechanisms, et cetera), combined and intertwined with the non-material aspects of implementation (e.g. understanding how and why gender equality is relevant and thereafter operationalisation into concrete measures) (Callerstig, 2014; see also Bustelo & Mazur, 2023; Verloo, 2005, 2007). The two aspects – the material and non-material – are seen as interrelated: if gender equality is seen/not seen as relevant for the area of implementation, the material aspects of implementation will be affected (Callerstig, 2014). From critical frame theory (Verloo, 2005, 2007), we deploy

the suggestion to analyse how gender equality is included in implementation and to distinguish between the *diagnosis*, i.e. the description of a policy problem, and the *prognosis*, i.e. solutions to a policy problem.

The process of turning gender equality objectives into concrete actions is understood to be a challenge in itself. Gender equality objectives are often not operationalised when implementers are tasked with implementing them, in the sense that the objectives rarely include the exact means and measures for *diagnosis* and *prognosis*, i.e. how to determine if something poses a gender equality problem and how it should be addressed in the area of implementation. In most cases, therefore, implementation entails a learning process in which implementers “invent” solutions to policy problems presented to them (Schoefield, 2004). To add to the complexity, the policy problems of gender equality seldom have a simple solution and are often dilemmatic to its character (Callerstig & Lindholm, 2011). How implementers understand gender equality has been found to be intertwined with personal attitudes and beliefs concerning gender relations, and the appropriate role of the state and public servants in addressing them (Paterson & Scala, 2017; Callerstig, 2012). To integrate gender equality objectives as part of the gender mainstreaming process, implementers need to reflect and make decisions in relation to different aspect of gender equality. This includes to consider the broader concepts of “gender”, “equality” and also “change”, i.e. how to go from gender inequality to gender equality. In this process, each concept raises additional questions. For example, for “gender”: What is the relevance of gender to the area in focus? Are the observed gender differences a problem or not? Are differences always the same or do they differ in accordance with various intersectional interferences? For “equality”: What does equality in relation to gender aspects mean? Should the goal be equality of opportunities or equality in outcomes? In relation to “change”: How can and should gender equality be achieved? Should it be through changing the mind-set of people, or by coercive mechanisms such as quotas, or both? (Callerstig, 2014).

Previous research shows different gendered institutional norms within specific policy areas, affecting both the diagnosis and prognosis. Thus the implementation of gender equality in different policy areas will also look different, even when the objectives are similar. These gendered “rules of the game” set the conditions for policymaking within the particular area in which it is applied (see Kenny, 2007, 2013, 2014; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay & Waylen, 2014). Chappel (2006) describes how the “gendered logic of appropriateness” looks different in different sectors, and prescribes different knowledge claims and methodological choices to be more salient than others (Chappel, 2006). We understand this complexity as expressions of institutional *gendered knowledge regimes* that will determine what is the appropriate and legitimate way to understand and implement gender equality objectives in a specific policy area (Dy & Vershinina, 2019). Gendered knowledge regimes are prescriptive for understandings and behaviours. They rest on the shared beliefs within a particular field that explain why different actors can come to

the same decisions. Specific gendered knowledge regimes in various policy areas are likely to be affected by historically rooted, epistemological world views, and by the state of the art of gender knowledge in the field. Knowledge regimes become visible when opposing views are presented, one example being gender training in which a particular form of resistance is common in not just questioning the need for such training or that gender equality poses a problem, but in questioning the legitimacy and validity of gender knowledge itself (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). The impact of knowledge regimes is likely to be higher the vaguer the strategic aims and objectives are (Riley & McGinn, 2002). Gender mainstreaming, being an open-ended process and to a large degree open for interpretation, is thus one area of gender equality policy where the impact of different gendered knowledge regimes could be higher.

Overall, feminist economists have for many decades pointed to strong, implicit norms that are taken for granted within the field of study and also underpin the fundamentals of economy itself (Elson, 1994; Costanza et al., 2023). Mainstream economy theories and its models and methods have been argued to have a strong androcentric and market-oriented bias, favouring men and masculine topics and the economic case for gender equality, while the general assumption is that studies are objective and neutral (Nelson, 1995; Pearse & Connell, 2016; Elomäki, 2015). As discussed at the start, failures to integrate gender into economic policymaking through gender mainstreaming efforts is not always due to applying it incorrectly, but leaving implementation to others or not applying it at all (also Elson, 1991; O'Dwyer, 2022). "Bias through omission" often through assuming policy to be neutral, may in fact be the key mechanism in which economic policy generates gendered, biased policy that increases inequalities (O'Dwyer, 2022: 60). As pointed out by Bakker (1994), omission can even be strategic, as it efficiently hides gendered consequences, which could jeopardise the legitimacy of the economic policy.

4. Data and methodology

This paper is based on an analysis of the Swedish National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which contains 26 policy measures to promote recovery from the pandemic. To illustrate the problems identified in the analysis of the NRRP and to bring additional insights to the results, we compare the findings with interview accounts from three public officials. The data were collected from a larger data collection initiative within the EU H2020 RESISTIRÉ: Responding to Outbreaks Through Co-Creative Inclusive Equality Strategies project and collaboration in researching the impact of COVID-19 and its policy and societal responses on inequalities in 31 European countries, including Sweden.

In the analysis of the NRRP, we seek to understand how gender mainstreaming was implemented, and in particular to analyse the way the NRRP describes the problem of gender (in)equality. This offers a way to understand

both the formal and informal gendered institutions that may affect its implementation (Bustelo & Mazur, 2023; Chappel, 2006). We start with the overall question of *how* gender equality is included in the NRRP, and distinguish between the diagnosis, i.e. the description of the problem of gender (in)equality, and the prognosis, i.e. the solution of gender (in)equality (Verloo, 2007). The analysis particularly focusses on the underlying understandings of the concepts of “gender”, “equality” and “change” inherent in the broader understanding of how and why gender equality is a problem (or not), and how it can be resolved (Callerstig, 2014).

Following these overall questions, the NRRP is analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ahrne & Svensson, 2011). It was coded in multiple steps, which encompassed thorough reading of the entire material and recording of word choices and expressions. By reading the notes and the material alternately several times, the NRRP was categorised and thematised. Themes consisted of common or recurring gender equality approaches in the overall descriptions and in the gender equality assessments of the different measures proposed. The analysis work included noting, as an example, differences in the assessments made and whether the assessments were coherent with the overall descriptions made of gender inequalities in the document. Five specific questions guide the analysis:

1. Is gender mainstreaming applied in a coherent and specific way?
2. In what way does the initial analysis reflect the economic consequences pointed out by the Swedish GEA?
3. Are there specific initiatives suggested to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on gender equality in the measures?
4. In what ways are the national gender equality objectives reflected in the measures?
5. How is the NRRP’s initial analysis of gender equality integrated in the measures?

To shed light on the findings of the analysis of the NRRP, and to understand what factors hinder or contribute to the implementation of gender mainstreaming, three interviews with public authority officials were analysed. Two of the interviewees worked on mainstream macroeconomic analysis for state authorities, one worked on gender equality and economics for state authorities. The interviews were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ahrne & Svensson, 2011) was used in the analysis of the responses. The interviewees were asked what effects they had observed in pandemic policy responses from a gender equality perspective. They were also asked about economic pandemic policymaking and how a gender equality perspective had been integrated into policy responses, and why. This article now turns to the findings.

5. Gender mainstreaming in Swedish economic policymaking during COVID-19

In the following section we will first present the analysis of the Swedish NRRP and the findings from the governmental economic policy experts interviewed. The analysis is divided into three sections: 1) Gender mainstreaming in Sweden's NRRP (including diagnosis of the problem of inequality and the prognosis/solution to inequality); 2) Gender mainstreaming in the NRRP measures; and 3) Illustrations and insights from governmental economic experts.

5.1. Gender mainstreaming in Sweden's National Recovery and Resilience Plan

The findings are presented according to what is described as the problem of gendered inequality (the diagnosis), and what is prescribed as the solution to the problem of inequality (the prognosis) in the general sections of the NRRP.

5.1.1. The problem of inequality (diagnosis)

The section on the social effects of the pandemic occasionally comments on the effects on women and men, and young people. The analysis and discussion concern the economic recession, effects on companies and unemployment, and the risk of long-term negative effects on “already vulnerable groups” later described as “people who are born outside Europe, who have a reduced ability to work or who do not have a high school education.” (p. 7). It is stated that the pre-pandemic segregated labour market risks further segregation. The situation in the healthcare sector is discussed, such as the need to recruit employees in the future. Nurses are said to need better working conditions and opportunities at work, but there is no mention of a gender equality perspective in the analysis. Some gender statistics are brought up, for example relating to the retirement age for women and men. The analysis is overall predominantly focused on economic effects, and foremost discusses gaps and differences concerning groups based on gender, foreign-born people and younger persons, in relation to the functionality of different economic systems.

The NRRP contains a section in the introduction entitled “1.3 Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities”. Here, income, economic differences between women and men, and again the situation for foreign-born persons compared to those born in Sweden are discussed. Part-time work and increasing differences in income from capital, and how these have erased improvements in closing the pay gap since 1995 are discussed (p. 26). Unpaid work and the situation of foreign-born women regarding employment are particularly addressed.

The analysis in the plan in the initial section (p.p. 26-29) is focused on *employment levels* and income differences between women and men. The analysis highlights that the employment level for women is high compared to other countries, but still lower than for men, and that this is an important explanation for the difference in income, according to the analysis (p. 26). It also

mentions that the gap is even higher between foreign-born women and men. Additional explanations put forward are that women are absent from work more than men due to *parental leave* and *health-related* issues, and have less *income from capital* than men. *Gender segregation* in the labour market is also put forward as an explanation to the overrepresentation of men in higher paid labour market sectors and occupations.

The discussion then turns to how the ongoing recession is affecting economic gender equality, and highlights how certain groups have been more affected, such as young women and foreign-born women (who had a weak position on the labour market even before the crisis). Income loss due to job loss and parental leave is mentioned, and an increase in *unpaid work* for women. It concludes, however, that it is difficult to determine the negative effects on the labour market for women compared to men.

5.1.2. *The solution to inequality (prognosis)*

What solution is suggested then? The NRRP claims that it includes two measures that are assessed as having an effect on economic gender equality: an increase in available education and the elderly care initiative. The reasons given are that since women are overrepresented in many educational contexts this will strengthen women's opportunities for education, work and economic independence (p.27). The NRRP also claims it is expected to contribute to several of the gender equality objectives, including education, but without explaining which other objectives, or how. The "Elderly care initiative is said to benefit especially foreign-born women who need education and that could make their position on the labour market stronger" (p.27).

In sum, the problems mentioned include: lower employment levels for women (especially for foreign born women); women's higher absence from work due to parental leave and health problems; that women have less income from capital, and work in lower paid parts of the labour market. The solutions presented in the NRRP are an increase in availability of education that will strengthen women's opportunities for education, work and economic independence, and the elderly care initiative that will strengthen their position on the labour market, especially for foreign women, by offering job opportunities. The ambition in terms of gender equality is not to address inequalities per se, and the plan contains no concrete measures to address gender inequalities as an independent objective. The measures proposed aim most of the time to "equip" the vulnerable groups mentioned, i.e. to help them overcome barriers, rather than to address institutional inequalities

5.1.3. *Gender mainstreaming in the individual reforms*

The plan consists of 26 measures (12 investments and 14 reforms). They will be supported by €3.3 billion in grants from the recovery fund. For each reform and investment in the plan there is a short section called "Gender equality perspective". The analysis of the content is shown in the table below. Of the 26 assessments of the impact on gender equality made, only eight refer to a

Table 1. Gender equality assessment of individual measures in Sweden's NRRP

AREA/MEASURE	GE objectives	Effects on GE	Intersectional aspects
Green recovery			
Climate investments in the industrial sector	None	Indecisive	-
Local and regional climate investments	None	Indecisive	-
Energy efficiency of apartment buildings	None	Indecisive	Foreign-born women and men
Railway investments	None	Indecisive	
Protection of a valuable nature	Economy	Negative	-
Abolished reduction of energy tax on heating fuels in industry, agriculture, forestry, and aquaculture	None	No effect	-
Adjusted calculation of car benefit	Economy	No effect	-
Changes in the reduction obligation	Economy	No effect	-
Education and readjustment			
More places in regional vocational training	None	Positive	Foreign-born women
The compensation is raised for vocational education combined with courses in Swedish for immigrants	None	Positive	Foreign-born women
More places in the polytechnic education	None	Positive	-
Resources to meet the demand for education at universities and college	Education	Positive	-
Changed labour law and increased opportunities for adjustment	No analysis	No analysis	-
Demographic challenge and integrity of the financial system			
The elderly care initiative	Economy	Positive	-
Protected professional title for the profession of assistant nurse	Economy	Positive	-
Extended working life – adjusted age limits in the social insurance and tax systems	None	Positive	-
Strengthened measures against money laundering and terrorist financing	No analysis	No analysis	-
A new account and safe deposit box system	None	No effect	-
Expansion of broadband, digitisation of public administration and research			
Administrative digital infrastructure	None	Indecisive	-
Broadband expansion	None	Indecisive	-
Investments for growth and housing construction			
Investment support for rental housing and housing for students	None	Indecisive	Young women and men
Private initiative right – the stakeholder's participation in detailed planning	None	No effect	-
A simplified and effective regulatory framework for, among other things, building permits	None	No effect	-
Better prerequisites for housing construction	None	No effect	-
Abolished standard income on deferral amounts	Economy	Positive	-
Raised minimum level for deferral amounts	Economy	No effect	-

Source: authors results from the analysis of the Swedish National Recovery and Resilience Plan

specific national gender equality objective in the analysis. For the rest, it is unclear what criteria the analysis is based on, e.g., why certain gender statistics are brought up and not others. When a specific gender equality objective is mentioned, all but one (that mentions education) relate the analysis to the objective of economic equality. The analysis made concludes that the effect is

positive in eight cases, negative in one case, and will have no effect on gender equality in eight cases. In two cases no analysis has been made, and the report says it will be made later. In seven cases, the assessment is indecisive, i.e., it is not possible to determine what the outcome of the assessment is, based on the description, and no clear result is presented. In four cases, variables other than gender are explicitly mentioned, in three cases foreign-born persons are mentioned, and in one case age is mentioned.

In sum, the assessment shows that 18 out of the 26 measures in the plan will have *no effect* (gender neutral), have a *negative effect*, are *inconclusive*, or *no analysis* has been made. Most of the assessments (approximately 70%) have been made without an explicit reference to a gender equality objective, in turn making it difficult to understand the results in relation to gender mainstreaming's aim to be a steering mechanism for the national gender equality objectives. The gender impact assessment (GIA) varies between different areas. Assessments are generally more thorough concerning softer policy areas such as Education and readjustment, and less thorough in the areas of Green recovery and Expansion of broadband, digitalisation of public administration and research. Overall, several tendencies can be noted in the assessments. One is that there is often an *over-simplified and blunt calculation of resources spent* on women and men, as in the measure "Administrative digital infrastructure", where the GIA concludes that, "It is possible that more women than men will benefit from the measure, as a majority of public sector employees are women." (p.114). This type of tendency to *miss the bigger problem* – or, as a popular Swedish saying goes, "to not see the forest because of all the trees" – is visible in many of the GIAs. Another example is the measure "Protected professional title for the profession of assistant nurse" (p.100), where the assessment is that this benefits women, who constitute 90% of the nursing workforce, who get a better chance of permanent employment. The immense gender segregation in the profession itself is not addressed, however. In another measure "Äldrelyftet" ("The Older People Boost"), where the aim is to ensure enough staff for care for older people, improving working conditions is said to be beneficial for the recruitment of more men to the profession, but the measures in the plan contain no concrete measures or suggestions for how this can be done. Furthermore, the impact of and lessons learned about the relationship between bad working conditions (including health hazards), pay levels and professional skills in elderly care from the pandemic are not discussed.

Another observation is that an analysis of the prevailing and systematic *gender inequalities that may be counterproductive* to the positive assessment made is often missing. One example is the reform "Extended working life – adjusted age limits in the social insurance and tax systems". Here the GIA concludes first that the pension rules are gender neutral, and second that because women live longer than men, they tend to receive on average more pension during their lifetime than they have paid into the pension system, which means that the pension system redistributes resources from men to women. The GIA continues to describe how an important motive for raising the age limits is

that it is expected to lead to more people working longer and thus receiving higher incomes both during working life and during their time as a pensioner, and that this applies to both women and men. And because women on average have lower pensions than men, the increased opportunities for a better financial standard are particularly important for women. (p.105). The assessment is therefore that the rules themselves are neutral, the effects are even favouring women (redistributing money to women), and the reform will be especially good for women. There is however no mention of how work in sectors dominated by women and work in sectors dominated by men are valued differently, or gender differences in other economic aspects, such as in capital income, and how working conditions differ (which can make a higher pension age become particularly problematic in certain professions dominated by women). The value of unpaid care-work is not included in the reflections on re-distribution between women and men. A third observation is that *gender mainstreaming is often left to the implementers in the following steps*. One example is the investment “Local and regional climate investments (*Klimatklivet*)”, where it is said that The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and the Swedish Energy Agency all have the duty to implement gender mainstreaming, which will create “good opportunities” to integrate gender into the investment (p.35).

5.2. Interviews with governmental economic experts

The interviews conducted with the economic policy experts provide additional insights into how gender equality is understood in relation to economic policy responses in the pandemic. The first conclusion from the interviews is that even when economic policy experts recognise that gender equality matters to the area in focus, it is not considered their job to address them. For example, when gender differences – such as in labour market segregation or in working conditions – are brought up, the informants do not see how, or indeed why, these factors should be integrated into the macro-level analysis. The reason is that they conceptualise gender differences as individual rather than structural, and therefore addressing them falls outside the remit of their jobs. First, in this line of reasoning, gender inequalities both get individualised and detached from the analysis of the developments in different sectors, industries and companies. Second, gender inequalities are understood as the effect of how the market is operating, e.g. if jobs are lost within a sector dominated by women, it will have a greater effect on women than men, rather than being the conditions of how the market operates. The third conclusion of the analysis is that when gender equality is seen as important, it is in an instrumental way, such as when gender inequality could pose an obstacle to long-term productivity levels. One example mentioned is the lack of employees in the health sector. The final and fourth conclusion is that the interviews demonstrate how gender equality can increase through efforts to help individuals to get a better position in the labour market. Examples from the interviews include offering education to women and other

vulnerable groups. One of the experts interviewed even suggests that this could be made a condition for companies to receive state support.

The interviews also provide insights into how the policymaking process has affected the implementation of gender mainstreaming. All the experts interviewed raise the criticism that the economic policy responses focussed too much on the so-called “insiders”, i.e. those who already have a strong foothold in the labour market, and relied too much on already-existing systems, at least in the beginning, rather than designing new ones.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The article has analysed national policy responses to COVID-19 and interviews conducted in Sweden to understand the factors that impacted on the implementation of gender mainstreaming during the pandemic, with a specific focus on how gender equality is understood in relation to pandemic economic policymaking. In the final section, we now return to the initial questions posed: How has gender mainstreaming been implemented in the Swedish pandemic policy responses? And more specifically, in what way was gender equality seen as relevant to, and operationalised in, the policy problems addressed? We will highlight some of the conclusions from the analysis and reflect on the puzzling question of why the Swedish governmental aim to integrate gender concerns in all policies related to the pandemic seem to have failed to deliver on its promises. We will discuss how particular understandings of the concepts of “gender”, “equality” and “change”, inherent in the broader understanding of how and why gender equality is a problem (or not) and how it can be solved, have affected the implementation and can shed some light on its difficulties. A general conclusion is that gender mainstreaming in economic policy is limited in its rationale and scope in times of crisis. It is affected by several factors, some more general, concerning gender mainstreaming in the economic area that has been pinpointed in earlier studies, and some that we argue are more specific to crises.

The diagnosis and prognosis of gender equality in the NRRP are made mainly in terms of economic consequences of unemployment. With few exceptions, the favoured solution is increased employment levels. This tendency has also been witnessed in earlier economic crisis responses where gender equality is understood as “as equivalent to (and limited to) labour force activation leading to the co-option of gender equality language in the pursuit of labour market deregulation” (O’Dwyer, 2022: 161). There is no mention of other types of effects (with impact on the economy), such as the increase in gender-based violence linked to the increase in unpaid housework or unemployment, which could have been a significant economic analysis. Young persons and (im)migrants are highlighted as having a particularly difficult situation linked to unemployment or establishment in the labour market. The NRRP contains measures that are claimed to mitigate these effects and increase the possibilities to readjustments, including e.g., opportunities for education and vocational

training. There is, however, with few exceptions, no mention of the need to address and counteract stereotypes or discrimination facing different groups in society.

Both the diagnosis and prognosis detected in the analysis mainly discuss gender inequalities from a woman's perspective, i.e., that women have lower employment levels, are absent more from work, have less income from capital, work in lower paid parts of the labour market, etc. The solutions suggested are to help women to strengthen their position (including foreign-born women and young women). There is a general lack of problematisation of the role of men or problematisation of gender inequalities as relational, not individual. In general, there is a lack of a perspective that seeks to alter not only symptoms, but the underlying causes of gender differences. This includes, e.g., the historical undervaluation of female-dominated work areas or the need for a more family-friendly work life. Many assessments focus on whether rules are neutral and apply to all (*de jure* equality). Fewer focus on problematising aspects that may lead to different gendered outcomes (*de facto* equality) such as in the case of increasing the pension age. Many assessments also lack a clear reasoning or are inconclusive. The majority (18 out of 26 measures) are assessed to have no effect on gender equality, i.e. they are considered to be gender neutral.

The link to the economic consequences of the pandemic and the national sub-target on economic gender equality is vague. No measure takes as its starting point gender inequalities caused or deepened by the pandemic. The analysis made in the introduction, which highlights gender segregation in the labour market, and which is also mentioned in several of the gender equality assessments, is an example that could have been the starting point for a measure on its own. This analysis, and the way it limits gender equality concerns to only address parts of a problem in its operationalisation, are examples of how the non-material or discursive aspects of implementation will impact on its outcomes (Callerstig, 2014).

Similar findings have been found comparing implementation in EU member states, showing no or very little overall gender equality concerns in their NRRPs. In their practical implementation, most NRRPs include a chapter or a separate section dedicated to gender equality, and the issue is among the challenges to be addressed; however, the number of targeted gender equality measures is limited (Sapala, 2012). The androcentric focus in economic policy (Nelson, 1995; Pearse & Connell, 2016) is also visible in the NRRPs' focus on the green economy and the digital economy, which are traditionally dominated by men; the comparatively more limited focus on sectors profoundly affected by the COVID-19 crisis which are traditionally dominated by women is likely to increase the gender divide in the labour market (Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020). When actions to mitigate gender inequalities are indeed included, it is mainly in the area of work, education and care. There is a striking lack of measures in other areas, such as decision-making and gender-based violence; gender is often considered in isolation, and the NRRPs lack an intersectional perspective (Cibin et al., 2022).

Our conclusion is that the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the Swedish NRRP remains symbolic, rather than substantive. It is decoupled from the proposed measures, which are seemingly assessed ad hoc, rather than systematically. There is a weak coherence between the initial analysis and the assessments of the individual measures, and GIA assessments are also varying and inconsistent, e.g., gender segregation in the labour market is brought up in some cases and not in others. The results from the Swedish GEA show that many aspects of the negative impact of the pandemic on economic gender equality have been lacking in Swedish pandemic policymaking, such as the impact of remote working on digital transition, or the long-term effects caused by the high impact on many female-dominated, so-called first-line or essential professions (that are likely to linger for decades). Our analysis shows also how the NRRP fails to address many aspects of these consequences, as well as parts of the economic gender equality objective itself, such as the impact on entrepreneurship.

In terms of why gender mainstreaming was implemented in this way, additional understanding is provided through the interviews. One of the overall conclusions from the interviews is that integrating gender perspectives into the economic analysis or policy considerations is not seen as a stated task of the economic policy experts, either because the data does not allow for it or because gender equality is neither the starting point nor the end-goal of the analysis. They also show how a gender equality analysis is seen as difficult to make, since it would concern individuals, which is the “wrong” unit of analysis. The task of working with gender equality is seen as the duty of other parts of the state machinery. The policy experts interviewed also discuss how few *new* responses were made in the pandemic policy responses but rather alterations of already existing ones were prioritised. This was discussed as problematic since these systems are built on a norm that prioritises “insiders”, i.e., those who had a regular job prior to the pandemic and to compensate for their loss. This approach ignores the way that the economy itself is gendered, as pointed out in feminist research for decades (Elson, 1991; O’Dwyer, 2022). This means that gender not only needs to be integrated into economic policy, but there also needs to be an understanding that economic policy is already gendered to start with.

a. The implementation puzzle

In public organisations, experts are confronted with contradicting aims to both contribute to normative political ambitions and to deliver scientifically robust analysis; they resolve this through different practices in order to be perceived as credible in terms of objectivity, reliability and efficiency (Bandola-Gill, 2021). In the analysis of the NRRP, and supplemented by the interviews, the commonly shared understandings, the gendered knowledge regime, that guides actors in their assessment of gender equality becomes visible. These relate to particular accepted understandings of “gender”, “equality” and “change”,

and can explain the reasoning and assessments made. The analysis shows how gender is predominantly understood as a discrete element and most of the time is understood in isolation from other intersectional aspects. Gender is also understood as a commodity inherent in a person rather than as a relational and contextual construct. Equality is most often understood in a *de jure* manner, focusing on equality in opportunities, not outcomes. And change is understood as being incremental and rational, i.e. if the right incentives and pre-conditions are right and equally distributed, gender equality will follow. Gender inequality is thus understood foremost as the problem of individuals, and the solution becomes to help women who are working in low paid sectors, lacking education and so on. The system, rules and regulations are understood as gender neutral, and gendered aspects of individual choices made or how gender relations are determinate for the economy, such as unpaid care work, is not discussed.

The policy experts interviewed also describe how the initial policymaking during the crisis was conducted under time pressure and in the context of a previously unprecedented situation, with little earlier experience to fall back on. Gender equality was not considered and not seen as a main task; the focus was on supporting the “insiders”, which later was understood as a mistake to some degree. These conditions had however changed considerably for the drafting of the NRRP; gender mainstreaming and mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic on gender equality was a clearly articulated demand, and there was not the same time-pressure. Even so, gender mainstreaming has been integrated in a way that is not likely to generate any substantial effect on gender equality. Our conclusion is that the overall gendered knowledge regime in the economic field, including the understanding that gender equality is not relevant for the analysis, can explain both how and why (not) gender mainstreaming was implemented, and why Sweden, a European champion in gender equality, shows disappointing results.

*b. Policy implications for gender mainstreaming in crises policymaking:
A lost momentum*

In most cases, the overall lack of direction and intention in relation to gender mainstreaming and analysis is decoupled from the reforms outlined, which increases the risk for non-implementation in the further implementation of the NRRP in the years to come. This also means that at the same time an important step in gender mainstreaming is missed out. As described earlier, this particular absence of policy direction, with the gender analysis (diagnosis and prognosis) in gender mainstreaming failing to bring gender in, has been observed in other cases in economic policy (Ahrens & Callerstig, 2017; Sjöo & Callerstig, 2021). And as pointed out by several authors, gender bias in economic policy is not always explicit (Elson, 1991; O'Dwyer, 2022), and “bias through omission” may risk increasing inequalities (O'Dwyer, 2022: 60).

The main conclusion from the analysis is that the NRRPs, which could have been a window of opportunity for gender mainstreaming and for which Sweden would have been the ideal case for this, instead rather lost momentum. In relation to the crisis, a popular concept has been resilience, i.e. to understand how society is able to cope with crises or the “capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks” (Forbes et al., 2009: 22041). We can conclude, in terms of gender mainstreaming, that its resilience in how it operates in times of crisis is no better than at the outset. If gender mainstreaming is working poorly in an area prior to a crisis, this is also likely to be the case during the crisis. In fact, one may turn the question around and conclude that resilience is strong in terms of the particular gendered knowledge regime in the economic policy area and how it retained its *modus operandi* during the crisis.

What to do then to increase the resilience of gender mainstreaming in future crises? The interview responses suggest that there indeed is a difficulty in understanding both the relevance of, and how to integrate, a gender perspective in relation to macroeconomic initiatives to the pandemic. Furthermore, in times of crisis the urgency of policy responses might make the implementation of gender mainstreaming more difficult, due to time pressure and a general lack of framing of gender relevance in relation to the crisis, i.e., it was seen foremost as a health crisis, with secondary consequences (from health prevention measures undertaken) being mainly economic. From earlier crises we know that gender equality concerns are often downplayed in times of crisis, not only during but also after them – in the recovery phases (O’Dwyer, 2022). The impact of the particular and gendered knowledge regime on the implementation partly relates to the openness of gender mainstreaming as a strategy where actors normally involved in policy-making, not gender experts, are responsible for integrating gender equality. This openness also brings the risk of policy vagueness being transferred to other levels and actors in the implementation (Candel, 2017), or even to the last instance. To strengthen the implementation one suggestion is to take both these aspects into consideration, i.e. both the understanding of gender equality in relation to the area but also the understanding of gender mainstreaming as a strategy.

c. Limitations and future research

In this study we have focused on analysing gender mainstreaming in the Swedish NRRP and complementary interviews with experts to deepen our understanding of the problems at hand. The results indicate that the strong gendered knowledge regime in the area determines both if and in what way gender equality will be translated into action, and who is seen as responsible for its implementation. Additional interviews with policy actors within the area can provide a deeper understanding of how and why gender equality is perceived differently

in different policy areas and how material aspects of implementation are affected by these different understandings. Comparative studies of the discursive aspects of implementation of gender mainstreaming in economic policy both in Sweden and with other countries could lead to additional insights. Comparative studies of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in other policy areas could also increase this knowledge. Also, studying the implementation of the NRRP in its further steps can increase the knowledge of how gender equality will be picked up by actors operating within other knowledge regimes.

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Vulnerabilities in the face of the health crisis: the impact of COVID-19 on the educational experiences of children and adolescents in situations of neglect

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Abstract

This article is the result of a research process within the RESISTIRÉ project, which evaluates the responses to the COVID crisis in social policy processes in several European countries. This study has taken into account the experience of girls and adolescents in situations of neglect in the circumstances that have surrounded their educational processes and their academic reality in the COVID period.

Situations of neglect in childhood are those that affect the normal personal, social and material development of minors, generating situations of high vulnerability that imply the need to activate alternative protection measures that guarantee the subjective right of every child and/or adolescent.

Thought should be given to the special relevance that the health crisis has had on the reality of these girls and adolescents whose legal guardians -affected by particular life situations- have been able to suffer in an aggravated manner in the face of a reality that previously constituted a highly vulnerable situation.

The article focuses on the reality of girls and adolescents in the Basque Country (Spain). For this purpose, and through the access to their narratives, the particularity of their vital conditions is identified, showing their high resilient capacity, as well as the difficulties, alternatives and capacities developed to face adversity.

Keywords: girls; adolescents; protection; neglect; health crisis; education

Resumen. *Vulnerabilidades ante la crisis sanitaria: incidencia del COVID 19 en los procesos educativos de niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo*

Este artículo es el resultado de un proceso de investigación dentro del proyecto RESISTIRÉ. Concretamente, este estudio ha tenido en cuenta la vivencia de niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo ante las circunstancias que han rodeado sus procesos formativos y su realidad académica en la época COVID.

Las situaciones de desprotección grave y/o desamparo en la infancia son aquellas que inciden en el normal desarrollo personal, social y material de las personas menores de edad, generando situaciones de alta vulnerabilidad que implican la necesidad de activar medidas alternativas de protección que garanticen el derecho subjetivo de todo niño, niña y/o adolescente.

Atendiendo a estas consideraciones, la crisis sanitaria ha tenido una especial relevancia ante la realidad de estas niñas y adolescentes cuyos responsables legales -afectados por particulares situaciones vitales- han podido padecer de manera agravada ante una realidad que previamente constituía una situación altamente vulnerable.

El artículo centra su mirada en la realidad de las niñas y adolescentes del País Vasco (España). Mediante el acceso a sus narrativas y el conocimiento de sus experiencias obtenido de primera mano, se identifica la particularidad de sus condicionamientos vitales mostrando su alta capacidad resiliente, sus dificultades, alternativas y capacidades desarrolladas para hacer frente a la adversidad.

Palabras clave: niñas; adolescentes; protección; desamparo; crisis sanitaria; educación

Summary

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1. Introduction

The study of children as a collective has historically been characterized by a lack of attention to their specific needs as developing *beings* (González, 2017). The continuing differences between societies and cultures on the issue of child protection were notably highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis, forcing states, countries and regions to act quickly to alleviate situations of vulnerability among children.

These measures, however, were mostly of an improvised and emergency nature, against a backdrop of unpredictability and uncertainty. With the passing of time, we can now assess the effectiveness of these responses.

The aim of this research is therefore to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational process of adolescent girls living in residential children's homes in Gipuzkoa. Girls and adolescents in a situation of neglect

face a two- or three-fold vulnerability: as minors who are victims of violence or severe neglect within their birth families; as women in social contexts that are still characterized by inequality; and as the subjects of highly complex social phenomena such as migration, mental illness or early trauma experienced in origin.

Throughout this article our aim is to understand the educational experiences of a group of young people in order to examine the impact of institutionalization on their individual educational experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Characteristics of residential life: child protection, gender and vulnerability

González (2017) offers some interesting data on the characteristics associated with children in residential care today: they are generally from highly dysfunctional families which have been the object of interventions over many years aimed at family preservation, although this aim has ultimately failed; they come from environments where there is the constant presence of male violence; likewise, in recent years the emergence of phenomena involving new forms of violence has been observed, such as parent-child violence associated with the absence of parental control; among the adolescent population, the incidence of behavioural problems and the consumption of toxic substances (addictions) is of concern, as well as the prevalence of infant-juvenile mental illness. These situations coincide with phenomena such as adoption failures and the influx of unaccompanied migrant minors, as Gipuzkoa has gone from being a cross-border territory and therefore a transit territory to being considered a final destination where a planned migratory process can take place (Segú & González, 2020).

The situations that are dealt with by these services show an over-representation of social phenomena such as migration, mental illness, suicidal behaviour, alcohol and other drug use, and violence against women in the family environments of these young people. Children and adolescents who are victims of a serious lack of protection in childhood are more susceptible to developing behavioural or mental health problems, which affects a significant proportion of them (80%, according to figures obtained from the 2016 report of the children's service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa); similarly, there is a high incidence of learning difficulties among children in residential care, affecting 18% of their population, compared to 3% of the general population, with 8% displaying suicidal behaviour (Childhood Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, 2016).

With regard to education and academic development, the figures on school performance are particularly worrying, in terms of their importance for children's transition to the adult world. Various studies of residential foster care programmes in Spain note the low level of educational achievement among adolescents living in this type of setting (Montserrat, Casas & Bertrán, 2013;

López, del Valle, Montserrat & Bravo, 2010; Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2015; Miguelena, 2019).

Given the characteristics of this research and particularly the group of young women interviewed, we believe it is relevant to highlight at this point the theoretical perspective on the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality, understood as an analytical tool, argues that the different systemic inequalities are forged and strengthened from the superimposition of different social factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, social class, etc. In this sense, this theory contributes to and helps us understand the different ways in which gender intersects with other identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It can be said, therefore, that the main aim of the above-mentioned theory is to reveal the varied identities and expose the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a result of the combination of identities. It also seeks to address the ways in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women in historical, social and political contexts (Association for Women's Rights & Development, 2004; Berkhout & Richardson, 2020; Eaves & Al-Hindi, 2020; Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020).

Thus, the young women taking part in this study are characterised by the complexity of their multiple identities, which must be addressed as part of their future progress towards insertion and transition to adult life.

2.2. Data on academic development in residential care: Child protection under scrutiny

As many authors point out, children and adolescents in care are among the most educationally vulnerable populations (Hedin et al., 2011). The study by Sebba et al. (2015) indicates that there is a significant gap in education between children and adolescents in care and their peers. Adolescents in care are therefore a vulnerable group facing great educational challenges (Tilbury, 2010). They tend to achieve poorer results across different contexts in terms of grades, literacy and numeracy test scores, attendance and exclusions (O'Higgins, Sebba & Luke, 2015); a lower academic suitability rate; and a lack of expectations regarding the educational environment, among others (Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020). Generally, a very small percentage continue with further education (López et al., 2010), and an even lower proportion enrol in university studies (Jackson, Cameron & Graham, 2015). Thus, we find that the educational path followed by the majority of children and adolescents in residential care is more related to short-term work-related studies, as this has been identified as an easier pathway that allows them a rapid route to employment (Miguelena, 2019). Consequently, it can be said that there is a clear link between the low level of educational attainment and the risk of social exclusion (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). This situation contributes to the construction of a disadvantaged social image of this group of children and adolescents (Morentín-Encina & Ballesteros Velázquez, 2022),

thus making the education process essential not only in the present but also for these adolescents' futures.

This aspect is highly relevant given that educational level emerges as a protective factor against the risk of exclusion, especially in the processes of transition to adulthood (Rodríguez & Pérez, 2008; González, 2017; Migue-lena, 2019). In this sense, it is worth considering the impact of the lack of economic and emotional support for these young women after they reach the age of eighteen, which greatly hinders their move towards independence (Rodríguez et al., 2022).

If we look at the data and conclusions obtained from previous research, we find a population characterized by habitual school absenteeism and grade repetition, and generally low expectations (Bravo & Del Valle, 2001; Del Valle et al., 2000; Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020), so that a very small percentage of the group reaches further education, and an even smaller percentage goes on to university (López et al., 2010; Domínguez, 2010; Migu-elena, 2019).

On the one hand, we know that the emotional state of a person has a direct impact on their work capacity and performance, so that the life situations that these young people have had to face from a very early age have an impact on their development and adaptation at school and in society (García & De la Herran, 2007; Casas & Monserrat, 2009; Melendro, 2010).

However, access to education and the academic pathway are predictors of adaptation and autonomy in the transition to adult life, a transition that they will also have to make much earlier than the average young person (Goyette, 2010). In our view, this aspect is undoubtedly one of the challenges of the current child protection system, as it has an impact on the personal and emotional situation of the subjects as a prior step to later academic achievement.

Being able to understand the specific experiences of the school and educational environments of adolescent female victims of neglect broadens our view of the individual aspects of their unique experiences. In this way, an exceptional situation such as the COVID-19 health emergency allows us to understand the implications of a common and generalized scenario in a particular context, defined by the complexity of its circumstances.

2.3. Vulnerable adolescents: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their educational experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant consequences worldwide. In March 2020, in order to better manage the health crisis resulting from the pandemic, the Spanish Government decreed a state of emergency (Real Decreto 463/2020). This marked the beginning of a severe lockdown, targeting every citizen regardless of age, and placing children and adolescents under strict restrictions (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2020). Although the number of children affected by the pandemic is relatively small compared to other age groups, the indirect effects caused by this disease, such as the closure of schools, after-

school programmes and recreational activities, disconnected nearly 60 million children and youth from essential resources and support (OECD, 2019). The prohibition to go outside to play or socialize with peers may have had a negative impact on children's and adolescent's well-being (Erades & Morales, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the COVID-19 crisis transformed children's and adolescents' day-to-day lives.

However not all of these children and adolescents were affected in the same way (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2022). In this sense, the pandemic and its subsequent restrictions created an added difficulty for children and adolescents in residential care, given their home situation and their particular and specific needs, and thus placed them in a doubly vulnerable scenario (OECD, 2020). For children and youth in residential care, physical and social distancing and other COVID-19 restrictions led to feelings of isolation and loneliness, disrupted their routines, and limited their access to extended family, friends and other community support networks. In this sense, and according to the study carried out by UNICEF Spain (2020), the conditions for socializing of children and adolescents in residential care worsened during lockdown.

As noted above, in order to reverse the advance of the pandemic, the social policy responses taken by the government led to the closure of schools. According to the UN (2020), the closure of schools and other learning spaces impacted 94% of the world's student population. In other words, by mid-May 2020, more than 1.2 billion students at all levels of education around the world were no longer attending face-to-face classes at school (UNESCO, 2020).

As school and work activities moved, to a large extent, to virtual formats, school systems transitioned to a non-traditional digital and distance education methodology, developing new materials and platforms and converting to online teaching. In other words, the pandemic became a catalyst for educational institutions around the world to seek innovative solutions in a relatively short period of time (World Economic Forum, 2020). While this may initially have been seen as exciting for children and adolescents, it also had its drawbacks and risks, as on the one hand, the quality of education at home may have worsened their educational experiences, and on the other hand, they may have had less social interaction than through school or face-to-face contact (OECD, 2020). In addition, given that many children and adolescents in residential care may be academically disadvantaged, this new type of virtual learning posed new challenges for them, as they lost access to necessary educational support, such as individualized academic support or tutoring (Font, 2020).

In addition to the personal consequences that school closure had on children and adolescents in residential care, they faced further obstacles linked to the lack of resources that their children's homes could offer them. In some cases, they faced a lack of technology, a lack of internet connectivity, and last but not least, a lack of a supportive learning environment, making it difficult for them to fully engage in distance learning. Overall, one can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption to the academic experiences of adolescents, and negative experiences with online teaching.

2.4. *The approach to residential foster care for minors as a child protection measure in the Basque Autonomous Community: The case of Gipuzkoa*

The subsidiary nature that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) grants to the relevant public administrations of signatory states with regard to child protection has meant a legislative, organisational and technical readjustment. This has been taking place in Spain since the 1990s.

As we know, public authorities provide a secondary level of protection that is subsidiary to that of the birth family, and is activated only in emergency situations of risk for the child or adolescent when the birth family – either by action, omission or negligence – cannot on its own guarantee the provision of basic needs.

The concepts of risk and neglect are defined in the Spanish Civil Code and replicated in the Basque Law 18/2005 on Care and Protection of Children and Adolescents. These set out the socio-familial situation of the child from a legal perspective and activate child protection services in the event of such risk or neglect.

It is important to point out the importance of the concept of *significant harm* currently employed by social services for child protection as a scale for determining the seriousness of these situations. It includes descriptors of the harm to their development potentially suffered by children and adolescents deriving from situations of neglect within their birth family. This involves recognition of the physical and psychological suffering of minors, and understanding emotional, social and cognitive areas as fundamental aspects of their development (Balora, 2017).

The existence of significant harm to the child will therefore require subsidiary – and, we would add, effective – action by the relevant public authorities. On the other hand, the different situations of risk and/or social need that the children and adolescents in care may experience correspond to the diversity of types of lack of protection that are dealt with by the Child Protection Services. Table 1 shows the types of lack of protection and the associated percentages, taken from the total notifications of abandonment published by the Provin-

Table 1. Types of lack of protection reported to the Children's Service of Gipuzkoa, 2021

Physical Abuse	2%	9
Psychological Abuse	30%	130
Negligence	42%	182
Sexual Abuse	7%	30
Parental inability to control behaviour	20%	87
Serious parental difficulties	16%	69
Prenatal Abuse	1%	4
Abandonment	2%	9
History of serious lack of protection	10%	44
Temporary or permanent impossibility	5%	22
Other (begging, corruption, inappropriate treatment...)	3%	13

Source: 2021 Report of the Children's Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa.

cial Council of Gipuzkoa in 2021. It shows that cases of severe neglect and psychological abuse constitute the highest percentages among the causes for family separation measures.

Following a declaration of abandonment and the assumption of guardianship by the relevant public administration, guardianship can take two forms: foster care (placement of the child with a different family), or residential care (placement of the child in a children's home).

In Spain, according to data from the Boletín de Estadística Básica de Medidas de Protección a la Infancia (2021) issued by the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, in 2020 a total of 16,991 minors in a situation of neglect were in residential children's homes.

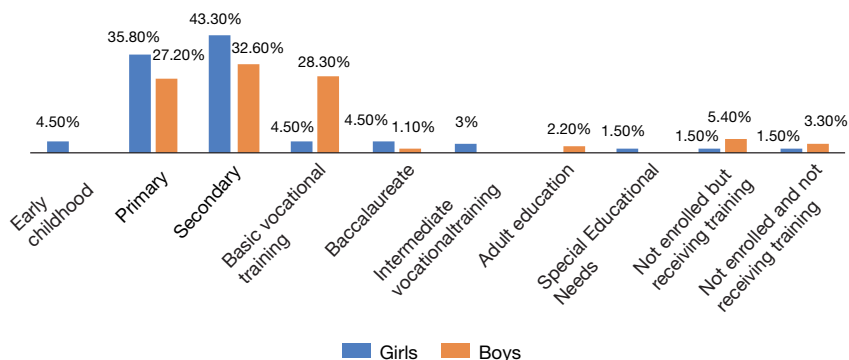
In the case of Gipuzkoa, according to the most recent data (Report of the Children's Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, 2021), 45.8% of cases receive specialized intervention in the home, 25.2% are in residential children's homes after being taken into care, and 29% are in a situation of alternative family care (foster care). If we look at the gender breakdown, data for the year 2021 show that 57.1% of those cared for were male and 42.9% female (Report of the Children's Service of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, 2021).

In terms of the province of Gipuzkoa specifically, and in view of the interest of this study, we transcribe data from the longitudinal research by Miguelena (2019). Graph 1 shows general school enrolment of the population in residential care 2015-2018, including both sexes, in a sample not differentiated by age.

These data show that school enrolment is higher for girls than for boys, and that it is girls who are choosing pathways towards higher education, within the framework of compulsory studies, prior to the baccalaureate. However, there has been a considerable drop in enrolments in the field of further education leading to university studies.

Likewise, a global reading of this study (Miguelena, 2019) allows us to obtain a broader view of the academic development of these boys and girls,

Graph 1. Distribution of students in residential care according to educational stage



Source: Miguelena J. (2019)

depending on their countries of origin. Thus, those born in Spain (85.8%), South America (85.8%) and Other European countries (71.5%) were enrolled in primary education and ESO, while those born in African countries had the highest rate of schooling in Basic Vocational Training centres (50%).

Thus, despite the vulnerability associated with the group, there seems to be a clear gender bias in terms of women's chances of reaching higher academic levels; this is more common in indigenous girls and less common in girls from foreign countries, although the number of women in situations of homelessness who reach university is still only a small percentage.

3. Methodology

The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experience of adolescents in the residential care system of Gipuzkoa. The importance of this objective lies in observing what role institutionalization played in the period of lockdown, specifically in the case of adolescent girls.

This research is part of the H2020 Resistiré project (101015990), whose objective is to analyse the responses generated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from an intersectional and gender perspective. These responses can be institutional or individual, from civil society or from the users themselves. In this context, the views of adolescent girls in the residential system regarding their educational experiences are the focus of this article. This research has been carried out with the permission of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and has been subject to a subsequent ethical review process.

The main aim of this research has been achieved through the use of a qualitative methodology in which semi-structured in-depth interviews have been used. Voice has been given to girls and adolescents residing in a children's home in the province of Gipuzkoa.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocolized script of open questions structured around four blocks of questions: 1) their course attendance and the follow-up they received from their teachers; 2) academic results; 3) extra-academic support; 4) study materials used; and 5) interpersonal relationships.

3.1. Sample

The fieldwork was carried out in July 2022. The subject of research was a residential children's home for adolescents in the province of Gipuzkoa, providing a standard care programme. The objective of the programme is to create a normalized context that enables the children in its care to maintain a daily structure that allows them to integrate into society. Respondents were selected through communication with the children's home where they live. All of them participated in the research on a voluntary basis and with the promise of confidentiality. The research underwent all the necessary ethical procedures.

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample

Code	Current age	Age during lockdown	Academic level during lockdown	Origin	Typology of lack of protection during lockdown	Place of residence
E1	17	15	3RD ESO	Native	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family
E2	17	15	3RD ESO	Native	Homelessness	Residential Home
E3	16	14	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family
E4	16	14	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family
E5	15	13	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Homelessness	Residential Home
E6	15	13	2ND ESO	Native	Homelessness	Residential Home
E7	14	12	1ST ESO	Native	Homelessness	Residential Home
E8	16	14	2ND ESO	Non-EU	Extremely vulnerable	With birth family

Source: own elaboration

The authors are independent of the children's home selected, their relationship being circumstantial to this research.

All participants are girls. This is because the aim of the research is to look specifically at how the lockdown measures of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected women specifically.

The participants are between 14 and 17 years of age, and all of them are currently under a protection measure or care order that obliges them to live separated from their birth families. It should be considered that, although all of them currently have a family separation measure in place and are therefore under the guardianship of the relevant public administration, during the period of lockdown some of them were still living at home, in situations of risk of serious lack of protection, before the separation measure had been put in place.

The group is culturally diverse, which is of interest since, although all of them currently live in the Basque Country, they come from different places of origin – either because they were born in non-EU countries and have immigrated to Gipuzkoa either alone or with their families; or because they were born in the region (what is considered “native” in terms of this research), and are second generation children of migrant families. This selection corresponds to the situation of unprotected minors in the province, where, in addition to native people, there is a representation of adolescents from different migratory backgrounds, as well as from other EU countries.

This aspect is shown in Table 2, which includes the coding table of the sample. It is relevant in reference to the difficulties that some of the respondents report regarding their language skills.

3.2. Analysis

The analysis of the information obtained during the interviews followed the approach proposed by Taylor and Bodgan (1990), with the ultimate aim of seeking to develop an in-depth understanding of the scenarios or persons being

studied (Salgado, 2007). Thus, the analysis carried out was divided into three distinct stages: 1) Discovery phase: in which the emerging themes were sought by examining the data provided; 2) Coding phase: in which the data were coded and the different coding categories were developed; and 3) Data relativization phase, interpreting the information obtained. To ensure immersion in each of the interviews, each interview was reread, and significant aspects were noted. After analysing the interviews, saturation was reached in terms of themes and categories (Suárez-Relinque, del Moral-Arroyo & González-Fernández, 2013). Content analysis was performed with the support of Atlas-ti 7.0 software.

4. Results

The situation of enforced and highly restrictive lockdown experienced in Spain from March to May 2020 meant the immediate suspension of daily activities, which affected the normal day-to-day life of all citizens. The young women interviewed for this study were inevitably caught up in this situation and had to remain in their homes for a period of three months, with very few options for leaving their homes, as was the case for the general population.

Inevitably, their attendance at their respective schools and training centres was affected, which had far-reaching implications for them, given their complex personal and family situations. We will see below how the degree of impact on their academic and training experiences affected different areas of their lives, although it seems clear that their academic environments were obliged to formulate an improvised response to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation.

In order to analyse their situation, we specified different aspects that would allow us to extract specific details of their experiences in terms of 1) their class attendance and the follow-up they received from their teachers; 2) academic results; 3) extra-academic support; 4) the study materials used and; 5) interpersonal relationships, allowing us to determine the existence of significant changes at some of these levels, as well as the particularity of their own experiences during the pandemic.

4.1. Attendance and follow-up of classes

First, we were interested to know whether they maintained regular attendance at school during lockdown, via the online connections established for following classes. We see that the responses are varied, although there is a clear distinction between those who report that they lacked motivation and chose not to attend classes, and those who report that they maintained regular attendance.

I didn't do anything, I didn't feel like doing anything. We had online classes, horrible really, but I didn't go online. I didn't feel like doing anything when I finished the online classes. (E3)

When the pandemic started, I became demotivated and stopped joining classes and in the end I stopped attending classes. (E2)

We can see that both interviewees refer to their feelings of demotivation with regard to the online nature of the classes, to the point that they abandoned classes definitively. Other female interviewees, however, reported that they had kept up their rate of attendance, while still acknowledging the problems that this type of attendance involves, specifically mentioning problems relating to internet connections, the lack of organization of the teaching staff, or even difficulties in understanding the contents of the course.

I didn't miss any of them. There was a lot of confusion about the video calls, because there was a link that I don't know, that there were teachers who gave you more than one subject. So, I didn't know whether to use that link or the other one. (E6)

I used to go to classes. But [...] because of the language, well [...] it was very difficult for me. And then there were some things that were very difficult for me, for example some Maths and so on that I wasn't very good at. (E8)

As we can see, the experiences reported by the adolescents show some variation. Some interviewees mention a feeling of being monitored and checked up on by the teachers, although the majority of the adolescents experienced greater flexibility in this aspect than in normal situations.

I don't think so, maybe they called us a couple of times but very few. Compared to what they call you right now in case you miss class, [...] in the quarantine, no [...] I don't think they could control everything that went around. (E1)

If you didn't connect, the teacher sent you an email or said in the call that we should write to each other in the Whatsapp group [...] the teacher said that we should contact the group and tell them to join. (E6)

We understand that the circumstances of the situation and the improvised nature of the educational context enforced by the health crisis had a negative impact on the ability of the teachers of these teenage girls to monitor their attendance. In general, a certain failure to check up on the situation of each student is perceived, and it is therefore worth asking whether these responses, which are somewhat varied in terms of the students' attendance in class, may have had an impact on the greater vulnerability of the students. They also offer lessons for avoiding future risks of school failure.

4.2. Academic results

The lack of attendance and the lack of motivation that the girls reported may have had a detrimental effect on their academic development. Indeed, the gen-

eral perception expressed by the girls was that the teachers were less demanding; they reported that academic progress was easier, assessment exercises had been adapted to the situation; and, in general, exams were at a lower level. In the words of the girls themselves, “it was all easier.”

I had failed “everything” in inverted commas, because I hadn’t done anything, but as I couldn’t repeat [the course] again they gave me fives. So I had already passed the third year [course] without doing anything. I wasn’t any good, but I had passed third year (E1).

In the end I kind of passed, as we finished lockdown before the end of the course, well, the last push and I passed, I passed the course [...] but how, I don’t know... (E3)

In addition to a shared feeling that the courses were less demanding, some of the girls interviewed felt that the situation itself could have helped them to pass an academic course which, under normal conditions, would have been more challenging. Particularly striking is the awareness shown by E3 with respect to her own academic ability, showing in her account that she does not consider the result to be in any way due to her own merit.

However, these accounts are complemented by the experience of other adolescent girls, who maintained very low levels of attendance and involvement, resulting in academic results that did not allow them to move on to the next grade:

When we had to go home, my marks went down a lot because there was work and so on that they sent me in Basque. I didn’t understand and when I was in class the teachers and so on helped me a bit and so on, but when I was at home without that help, well ... my marks did go down a lot [...] I repeated a year. (E8)

In this respect, we would like to highlight the account given by E8 of the difficulties she encountered in following the classes during lockdown, linked to her difficulties with her knowledge of Basque. She is a teenager born in a foreign country who learned the language after her arrival in the Basque Country, in a migratory process that was not without difficulties. In this sense, the added vulnerability that these girls may have experienced during lockdown is evident, as they lack direct support to enable them to understand academic content in a language other than their language of origin.

4.3. Academic support

The vulnerability of adolescents in situations of child neglect with respect to their academic development has been demonstrated and contrasted through various research and scientific studies, referenced in this article.

In this regard, it is common for adolescent girls living in children’s homes to require after-school classes or extracurricular support aimed at reinforcing

the subjects that are more difficult for them, or in which they have greater comprehension and/or learning difficulties.

This type of support reinforces language skills or the learning of more complex subjects such as those involving logical-mathematical thinking. Among the reports obtained, we only found two adolescents who claimed to have received the extracurricular support they had already started prior to the period of lockdown

Yes, I did go and when I was in lockdown, we did make calls or if you had an after-school class at 17:00 in the afternoon you had to join a call and they would send you some worksheets by email and these worksheets were checked by the teacher and you could see if you did them or not. (E6)

As we can see, the extra tuition these interviewees received for school catch-up continued to operate, offering support through remote tutoring, similar to the teaching they received from their schools.

However, the majority of the responses offer a very different perspective, reporting that they did not receive additional academic support during the pandemic, so that they had to overcome the challenges of the school year themselves, as well as the difficulties associated with the circumstances at the time.

I used to go to an after-school class just to do English, Maths and Basque, but when we were put into lockdown... of course, I stopped going [...] I needed a lot of support, especially for the classes that are in Basque. That was the most difficult thing. The language. Because imagine, for example, in Maths everything was in Basque. Problems and things in Basque. And I couldn't do that because I didn't understand. (E8)

Once again, interviewees report difficulties in understanding and a lack of adult support who could provide the learning support expressed by this adolescent (E8). In view of the feedback from these young women, it is worth asking whether they received the help they needed in the absence of in-person classroom attendance, help that in their case, and due to their particular circumstances, they did not always receive from the adults with whom they lived.

At this point, in the case of adolescent girls living in children's homes during the pandemic, it is interesting to highlight some of the responses from girls who, unlike other participants, say that they did receive support at home from the professionals working in their children's homes when they needed specific explanations or support on specific subjects.

At [the residential] home we all do homework in the living room or in the bedroom And if I have a question, they are still here with me to help me. If I have an exam they usually come too, they help me study [...] During the pandemic too, even more I think. If you had any questions, they would come and explain it to you. In other words, you were in an on-line lesson, you didn't understand the teacher and you called them. I used to mute the call, tell the

social worker [referring to the professional working at the residential home] to come and explain it to me and that's it. (E6)

The presence of adults who can resolve the difficulties or shortcomings in the care provided by the birth parents, fulfilling the functions that their birth parents cannot provide, is clear in these responses. It is precisely this complementary function, provided through their presence in the upbringing of these adolescents, that is the subsidiary public function assigned to residential foster care as a care measure.

4.4. Academic resources during lockdown

The delivery of classes in online mode, initiated suddenly and immediately following the declaration of the health emergency, requires access to new study materials, different to more traditional ones such as books or notebooks.

To a certain extent, adapting to the new era, which educational centres have been moving towards for years, is democratizing student access to portable technology, as this is seen as the basic resource required for study and work. This offers each student the possibility to have a personal laptop for academic use, something which has inevitably facilitated the transition to online classes enormously.

Some of the adolescent girls reported similar experiences when they were asked about the academic resources used during the pandemic, answering that they continued to use the computer they already had, or even used their mobile phones for academic purposes.

We don't have books at all. It's all on the computer. At my school we use the computer for everything [...]. What happens is that in mathematics, physics and chemistry and everything that you had to do the exercises on paper, you took your mobile phone, you took a photo and you had to upload it to the computer [...] or if you had to do a project you recorded yourself doing the project and uploaded it, so you use both the mobile phone and the computer. (E6)

However, the use of technology in the classroom is still in the process of being rolled out, so not all schools have abandoned the use of books as reference materials in favour of exclusively using technology. For this reason, during lockdown some adolescent girls encountered difficulties accessing online classes, as well doing school assignments digitally.

When we are at home we use the computer more, because we have to send work and so on, or by post, so we use it more. I didn't have one, they lent it to me at school. (E8)

As we can see from their accounts, the girls who did not have their own computer prior to lockdown had the possibility of using devices provided by their respective schools, which effectively alleviated the situations of greatest

need among the families with the greatest difficulties. In this sense, it seems that equality of opportunity in terms of access to technology as a study resource was maintained, as was access to the internet, since only one of the adolescents interviewed reported that she did not have access to the internet at first, a situation that was remedied shortly afterwards.

At first I didn't have internet, but then I did. We called to contract the company (E3).

The use of laptops was common and generalized by all of them for continuing their academic work during those months. The exercises of each class and the tasks associated with each subject were performed on the computer and sent through platforms or via e-mail to the teachers, but the computer was also used as a meeting resource in the classroom. Group video calls became the way to maintain the structure of a physical classroom in the virtual space, and the cameras attached to each device made face-to-face meetings in the classroom possible, offering more relationship-based uses.

4.5. Relationships during lockdown

Undoubtedly, the loss of direct, physical contact with our respective social groups was one of the most far-reaching repercussions of the COVID-19 health crisis, caused by the restrictions that governments and countries around the world imposed as preventive measures. This sense of lack of interaction with others emerges in the girls' accounts, as they repeatedly mention a sense of loss of their personal relationships with their peer groups, especially with classmates:

I lost a lot of contact. My relationships with friends were good, normal, [...] but during lockdown I lost a lot of contact [...] suddenly it was all over. I spoke very little with them. (E3)

Well, with some people I did change a bit because we didn't talk much and so on... But I always normally kept in contact with my best friend and so on, through video calls and mobile phones, but with other friends or friends we used to be with I changed the relationship a bit, we didn't talk anymore... I was more distant, you know? (E8)

We can see, therefore, that the absence of a physical space for meeting, together with the particular nature of the moment, and possibly individual factors beyond the scope of this research, may explain the feeling of loss of contact with their social environment experienced by these teenagers. Nevertheless, some of the girls report the existence of certain relationships, apart from their classmates, with whom they always maintained more contact through video calls or social networks.

However, we would like to highlight two accounts from teenage girls who reflect positively on their relationships with classmates, reporting that

in their case the opposite effect occurred; that is, the virtual space became a relational space.

I got closer to my high school friends because we made phone calls and we were on video calls during the classes and we stayed on the same call when the class was over. So I think so. We got closer. [...] It was good because I would stay for hours talking to them about my life. (E6)

We kept in touch with the class [...] well, by mobile phone, by computer. Well, there were some who were cut out and some that weren't. (E5)

In view of the specific details of these responses, we consider it important to consider a second period, linked to their relationships and the impact of lockdown. So, to conclude the interview with the participants in the study, we were interested in finding out what their experiences were after returning to the classroom, when they were reunited with their classmates. The responses to this question coincide in pointing out an initial feeling of strangeness, of a certain difficulty due to the passage of time and the loss of the dynamic of the relationships typical of daily encounters.

The adolescents are very clear in their accounts, showing that they felt a major change between them, even physical changes that surprised them enormously and generated feelings of strangeness and embarrassment. In general, their comments spoke of a certain initial distancing after months of lack of contact.

People changed quite a lot. A year without seeing each other... There were people who had one physique, ended up having another. Then also the groups of friends and they split up. Then they got together... (E6)

Other teenagers refer to more personal aspects, carrying out an interesting exercise of introspection in which they are able to identify the internal difficulties that they themselves remember having experienced during their reunions with classmates after months of lockdown at home.

It was more difficult for me to relate. It was like everything was new, so as I hadn't left the house for so long... I don't know, I was embarrassed. [...] After lockdown, it was hard for me to talk. Well, before as well, but after, a lot more. (E3)

It was a bit weird because it was again with your mates and so on. And it's like you've been taken out of a cave, like, you've forgotten what physical contact and things like that were like [...] I really didn't even remember what my relationships were like, how to talk to people, what it was like to feel good, to feel bad [...]. I swear I'd forgotten about the hugs that came up (E2).

It is particularly interesting to understand the feelings expressed by these young women, insofar as they identify affective losses in their narratives that translate into an absence of physical contact, or even of the practice of communication (speech) as a basis for human interaction. As we have said, this is

undoubtedly an issue of great interest due to the emotional impact that this type of situation generates in human beings, who are eminently social beings.

5. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experiences of adolescents in the residential care system, based on the adolescents' perspectives.

The closure of schools and other learning spaces as a result of the health crisis affected 94% of the world's student population (UN, 2020), so that 1.2 billion students at all levels of education around the world were out of school (UNESCO, 2020). The consequences that this situation has had on the child and youth population are particularly significant in the field of education, which required creative and effective alternatives to respond to the educational needs of children and adolescents around the world.

The views of these adolescents show different aspects of this lockdown in their respective educational experiences. Taking into account the different impacts that the lockdown had on the group offers the possibility of adapting preventative interventions, in order to prevent the emergence of situations that further aggravate the vulnerability of these adolescents.

Several research studies address the vulnerability of children in care in terms of their academic situation (Tilbury, 2010; Hedin et al., 2011;) and highlight the need to address the gap in educational experience between children and adolescents in care and their peers (Sebba et al., 2015). Access to education and the academic pathway are predictors of adaptation and autonomy in the transition to adulthood, a transition that they will also have to make much earlier than the average young person of their age (Goyette, 2010).

In terms of attendance and follow-up of online classes, there are differences between the interviewees. Some report that they regularly followed the classes scheduled by the schools, while in other cases, the responses show that they felt demotivated, mainly due to the online format and the new methodologies. This demotivation, together with the lack of strictness or scrutiny by some of the teaching staff at their schools, meant that what should have been an academic year with greater rigor and academic demands turned into one that could be passed easily.

The role of teachers was a central element, both in assessing results and in offering follow-up alternatives to those with greater difficulties. In this respect, academic results are mixed.

While some adolescents managed to pass the course, others were unable to reverse an already complex academic situation that was aggravated by lockdown itself. This disparity in results does not diminish the subjective perception of the adolescents regarding the help they have received from their teachers, or even of having benefited from a lower level of expectation from their teachers. This aspect confirms elements already identified by previous research, which reveals a population characterized by habitual school absences and grade

repetition, and generally low expectations (Bravo & Del Valle, 2001; Del Valle et al., 2000; Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the absence of extracurricular support for learning emerges as a constant theme among these adolescents, with limited availability of extra tutoring as a resource to support school learning.

Given the circumstances arising from the enforced lockdown, the possibility of receiving support from the adults responsible for these young girls diminished, since it was only the domestic context that could respond to the situation caused by the health crisis. On this point, the effectiveness of the complementary nature of the residential care home system can be observed (compared to the cases of adolescent girls who, despite being at serious risk, remained in their respective homes during the pandemic).

Likewise, difficulties relating to the language level of some of the girls, whose condition as foreign migrant females, together with the lack of specific support for learning the Basque language, compromised their chances of reaching the minimum academic level required. The present research shows that these academic support needs were met by the professionals at their care homes, as a subsidiary function of their roles.

On the other hand, the results of the study show that the rapid adaptation of educational centres to the new guidelines imposed by the pandemic made it possible for adolescent girls to adapt to their own educational needs in order to continue their education. In line with the advice from expert forums, school systems moved from traditional education to distance education based on digital education methodologies, with new materials and platforms (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Thus, the use of new technologies has since become very important insofar as they have come to replace traditional materials, such as textbooks, with individual laptops and even personal mobiles, converting these into new tools for pedagogical use. Although this situation may have made it difficult for adolescent girls who did not have their own devices to follow their classes regularly, the efficiency of the schools in responding to these shortcomings – as well as the provision of pre-existing resources (laptops, tablets or mobile phones) – meant that the interviewees had access to the material resources they needed to continue their education.

What was an advantage in the academic sphere, however, was a two-edged sword in terms of relationships. The pandemic clearly led to the loss of in-person contact with social groups. Difficulties in maintaining the usual habits and dynamics of socialization may have affected the general well-being of children and adolescents (Erades & Morales, 2020), with unprotected children being particularly vulnerable as their options for having access to extended family, friends and other community support networks were compromised (OECD, 2020).

In some of the responses of the young women interviewed, the experience of this social isolation takes on certain particularities. Based on their responses, we can infer a generalized feeling of discomfort due to the absence of direct contact with friends and classmates, which was especially felt when they met up again and re-entered their usual school dynamics (in September 2020).

In some cases, however, internet connection devices were redefined for them as spaces for interaction and contact with peers.

In this way, the use of new technologies favoured the continuation of peer relationships, as the usefulness of new technologies was able to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in terms of access to different informal support networks (OECD, 2020). Undoubtedly, the absence of peer relationships and interaction had an impact on these eight adolescents, in common with aspects already pointed out by UNICEF (2020), that children and adolescents in care homes suffered greatly from physical and social distancing, as well as other restrictions that caused feelings of isolation and loneliness, disrupted their routines and limited their access to extended family, friends and other community support networks.

6. Conclusion

The above literature review shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences, such as school closure, has again affected one of the most vulnerable populations: children and adolescents, especially if they come from low socio-economic backgrounds, as these groups might experience persisting scarring effects that might compromise their educational attainment in the future (Maestripieri, 2021).

Although the institutional response was effective, especially in terms of the effectiveness demonstrated in providing the online resources that the girls and adolescents needed to follow their lessons, there were significant differences between the different responses of the teaching staff and the adults (legal guardians) of these girls. Significant differences can be observed in the different responses of teachers and adults – those legally responsible for these young girls; – and in the support provided to overcome academic difficulties. This was very varied and depended on the willingness and availability of the girls' teachers and/or legal guardians (parents or educators).

The lockdown in Spain was particularly restrictive and long-lasting, and entailed an almost total limitation of personal interactions. The impact of this relational loss will be the focus of future research, which will have to undertake the difficult task of determining the emotional and even psychosomatic damage derived from this situation. Undoubtedly, this will be a subject of interest for research beyond this study.

At the same time, the pandemic exacerbated the already existing challenges these adolescents faced before COVID-19 appeared. Addressing these challenges quickly is key to avoiding a rise in inequality – among the current generation of children and the next – and to ensuring inclusive growth.

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Finally, we would like to acknowledge the enormous contribution of each of the adolescent girls who participated in this study. Their generosity and collaboration have allowed us to learn first-hand about their experiences, which are usually characterized by complex and painful situations. Once again, all of them are examples of self-improvement, and of struggle and courage in the face of life's difficulties. They represent a small number of all those girls who have previously been in the same position and are an example for those who will inevitably be in their position in the future. Living with them, talking with them, interacting with them is all about learning. Thank you for your spontaneity, your kindness and your affection. I hope that in these lines we can convey the admiration and respect we feel for you. For the heroines of this story.

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Vulnerabilidades ante la crisis sanitaria: incidencia del COVID-19 en los procesos educativos de niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo

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Resumen

Este artículo es el resultado de un proceso de investigación dentro del proyecto Resistiré. Concretamente, este estudio ha tenido en cuenta la vivencia de niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo ante las circunstancias que han rodeado sus procesos formativos y su realidad académica en la época del COVID.

Las situaciones de desprotección grave o desamparo en la infancia son aquellas que inciden en el normal desarrollo personal, social y material de las personas menores de edad, y que generan casos de alta vulnerabilidad que implican la necesidad de activar medidas alternativas de protección para garantizar el derecho subjetivo de todo niño, niña o adolescente.

Atendiendo a estas consideraciones, la crisis sanitaria ha tenido una especial relevancia ante la realidad de estas niñas y adolescentes cuyos responsables legales —afectados por particulares situaciones vitales— han podido padecer de manera agravada ante una realidad que previamente constituía una situación altamente vulnerable.

El artículo centra su mirada en estas niñas y adolescentes del País Vasco (España). Mediante el acceso a sus narrativas y el conocimiento de sus experiencias obtenido de primera mano, se identifica la particularidad de sus condicionamientos vitales mostrando su alta capacidad resiliente, sus dificultades, alternativas y capacidades desarrolladas para hacer frente a la adversidad.

Palabras clave: niñas; adolescentes; protección; desamparo; crisis sanitaria; educación

Abstract. *Vulnerabilities in the face of the health crisis: the impact of COVID-19 on the educational experiences of girls and adolescents in situations of neglect*

This article is the result of a research process within the Resistiré project, which evaluates the responses to the COVID crisis in social policy processes in several European countries. This study has taken into account the experience of girls and adolescents in situations of neglect in the circumstances that have surrounded their educational processes and their academic reality in the COVID period.

Situations of neglect in childhood are those that affect the normal personal, social and material development of minors, generating situations of high vulnerability that imply the need to activate alternative protection measures that guarantee the subjective right of every child and adolescent.

Thought should be given to the special relevance that the health crisis has had on the reality of these girls and adolescents whose legal guardians —affected by particular life situations— have been able to suffer in an aggravated manner in the face of a reality that previously constituted a highly vulnerable situation.

The article focuses on the reality of girls and adolescents in the Basque Country (Spain). For this purpose, and through the access to their narratives, the particularity of their vital conditions is identified, showing their high resilient capacity, as well as the difficulties, alternatives and capacities developed to face adversity.

Keywords: girls; adolescents; protection; neglect; health crisis; education

Sumario

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1. Introducción

La consideración histórica de la infancia como colectivo ha estado mediatizada por una falta de atención a la especificidad de sus necesidades en tanto y cuanto *seres* en desarrollo (González, 2017). Las diferencias aún existentes entre sociedades y culturas en materia de protección infantil han sido evidenciadas de manera notable durante la crisis del COVID-19, lo que ha obligado a estados, países y territorios a actuar de manera súbita para paliar las situaciones de vulnerabilidad en la infancia.

Estas medidas, no obstante, han sido mayoritariamente desarrolladas desde la improvisación y la urgencia, en un contexto lógico de impredecibilidad e incertidumbre que nos permite, pasado el tiempo, valorar la efectividad de estas respuestas.

El objetivo de la investigación es, por lo tanto, examinar el impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en el proceso educativo de las adolescentes residentes

de un recurso del sistema de protección infantil de Guipúzcoa. Las niñas y adolescentes en situación de desamparo parten de una vulnerabilidad implícita en una doble o incluso triple condición: como menores de edad víctimas de situaciones de violencia o negligencia severa en el seno de sus familias de origen; como mujeres en contextos sociales aún desiguales, y como protagonistas de fenómenos sociales altamente complejos como la migración, la enfermedad mental o el trauma temprano vivido en origen.

A lo largo de este artículo, nos preocupamos por conocer —y nos ocupamos de ello— cuál ha sido la vivencia de un grupo de jóvenes con respecto a su realidad educativo-formativa para examinar el peso de la institucionalización en su propio proceso.

2. Revisión bibliográfica

2.1. *Características de la vida en residencias. Protección infantil, género y vulnerabilidad*

González (2017) refiere algunos datos de interés a tener en cuenta sobre las características de los perfiles asociados a los menores en acogimiento residencial en la actualidad. Por lo general, son familias altamente desestructuradas, con muchos años de intervención familiar en domicilio con las que se ha desarrollado un trabajo de preservación familiar, preservación que finalmente no ha podido sostenerse; son entornos con presencia constante de violencia machista. Asimismo, en los últimos años, se observa la emergencia de fenómenos que implican nuevas formas de violencia, como la filioparental, asociada a la ausencia de control parental. Entre la población adolescente, preocupa la incidencia de problemas de comportamiento y de consumo de sustancias tóxicas (adicciones), así como la prevalencia de enfermedad mental infantojuvenil. Estas situaciones convergen con fenómenos como los fracasos adoptivos y la afluencia de menores migrantes no acompañados/as. A este respecto, la incidencia de la migración de personas menores de edad viene siendo un fenómeno creciente en el País Vasco, y más concretamente en Guipúzcoa, donde pasa de ser inicialmente un territorio transfronterizo —y, por tanto, de paso— a considerarse un destino final donde desarrollar el proceso migratorio planificado (Segú y González, 2020).

Las situaciones que se atienden desde estos dispositivos evidencian una sobrerrepresentación de fenómenos sociales como las migraciones, la enfermedad mental, la conducta suicida, el consumo de alcohol y otras drogas, o la violencia contra las mujeres, presentes en los sistemas familiares de estas jóvenes. Además, la situación personal de niños, niñas y adolescentes (a partir de ahora NNA) víctimas de situaciones de desprotección grave en la infancia les hace más vulnerables al desarrollo de problemas de conducta o salud mental, alcanzando cifras significativas (80 %, según datos obtenidos de la *Memoria del Servicio de Infancia de la Diputación Foral de Guipúzcoa* del año 2016). Por otra parte, se observa una gran incidencia de la discapacidad intelectual entre

los niños de acogimiento residencial, que representa un 18 % frente al 3 % de la población general, y un 8 % de conductas suicidas (Servicio de Infancia de la Diputación Foral de Guipúzcoa, 2016).

En lo concerniente al ámbito educativo y las características de su desarrollo académico, las cifras sobre el rendimiento escolar resultan especialmente preocupantes en cuanto a la importancia para su tránsito al mundo adulto. A este respecto, distintas investigaciones desarrolladas desde la perspectiva de la evaluación de programas en acogimiento residencial en el estado español (López et al., 2010; Montserrat, Casas y Baena, 2015; Miguelena, 2019) preocupan al evidenciar el bajo nivel formativo de los adolescentes residentes en este tipo de recursos.

Por otro lado, y atendiendo a las características de esta investigación y esencialmente al colectivo de jóvenes entrevistadas, creemos relevante rescatar la perspectiva teórica en torno al concepto de interseccionalidad. La interseccionalidad, entendida como una herramienta analítica, defiende que las diferentes desigualdades sistémicas se forjan y se crean a partir de la superposición de diversos factores sociales, como el género, la etnia, la edad, la clase social, etcétera. En este sentido, esta teoría ayuda a entender las diferentes maneras en las que el género se cruza con otras identidades, y cómo estos cruces contribuyen a experiencias únicas de opresión y privilegio. Por tanto, puede decirse que el objetivo principal de la teoría que viene mencionándose reside en revelar las variadas identidades y exponer los diferentes tipos de discriminación y desventaja que se dan como consecuencia de la combinación de identidades. De igual manera, busca abordar las formas en las que el racismo, el patriarcado, la opresión de clase y otros sistemas de discriminación crean desigualdades que estructuran las posiciones relativas de las mujeres, siempre tomando en consideración los contextos históricos, sociales y políticos (Eaves y Al-Hindi, 2020; Ryan y El Ayadi, 2020).

De esta forma, desde su condición de mujer, las jóvenes participantes en este estudio están *atravesadas* por la complejidad de las múltiples identidades que sustentan, y que deberán atenderse en sus futuros procesos de inserción y tránsito a la vida adulta.

2.2. Algunos datos sobre el desarrollo académico en acogimiento residencial.

La protección infantil a examen

Los niños, niñas y adolescentes en acogimiento representan una población altamente vulnerable desde el punto de vista educativo (Hedin et al., 2011). Los resultados obtenidos en el estudio realizado por Sebba et al. (2015) indican que existe una brecha significativa al comparar a NNA en acogimiento y a sus pares cuando se habla de educación. Este escenario hace de estos adolescentes en acogimiento un grupo vulnerable con grandes retos educativos (Tilbury, 2010): tienden a obtener peores resultados en sus calificaciones, en pruebas de lectoescritura y aritmética, necesitan asistencia y son víctimas de exclusiones en diferentes contextos (O'Higgins et al., 2015); además de experimentar una

menor tasa de idoneidad y falta de expectativas respecto al entorno educativo, entre otros (Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020). Generalmente, un porcentaje muy pequeño continúa con estudios superiores (López et al., 2010), y una proporción aún menor se matricula en la universidad (Jackson et al., 2015). Así, encontramos que la trayectoria educativa seguida por la mayoría de NNA en acogimiento residencial está más relacionada con estudios profesionales de corta duración, ya que se han identificado como una vía más fácil que les permite una rápida inserción sociolaboral (Miguelena, 2019). En consecuencia, se puede afirmar que existe una clara relación entre el bajo nivel de estudios y el riesgo de exclusión social (Jackson y Cameron, 2012). Los hechos anteriores contribuyen, por tanto, a la construcción de una imagen social desfavorecida de este grupo (Morentín-Encina y Ballesteros Velázquez, 2022), por lo que el proceso educativo se hace imprescindible no solo en el presente, sino también para el futuro de estos adolescentes.

Este aspecto adquiere alta relevancia en tanto y cuanto el nivel educativo emerge como un factor protector ante el riesgo de exclusión, especialmente en los procesos de tránsito a la vida adulta (Valle y Fuertes, 2000; González, 2017; Miguelena, 2019). En este sentido, cabe considerar la incidencia que tiene la ausencia de cobertura económica y emocional de estas jóvenes tras su llegada a la mayoría de edad, lo que dificulta en gran medida sus procesos de emancipación (Rodríguez, Miguelena et al., 2022).

Si atendemos a los datos y a las conclusiones obtenidas de investigaciones previas, nos encontramos ante una población caracterizada por ausencias escolares y repeticiones de curso habituales, y en general unas bajas expectativas (Fernández Del Valle y Bravo, 2001; Bravo y Fernández Del Valle, 2003; Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020), por lo que un porcentaje muy pequeño del colectivo llega a alcanzar estudios superiores, y un porcentaje aún menor cursa estudios universitarios (López et al., 2010; Domínguez, 2010; Miguelena, 2019).

Por un lado, sabemos que el estado emocional del ser humano influye directamente sobre la capacidad de trabajo y el rendimiento de la persona, por lo que las situaciones vitales que estas jóvenes han tenido que afrontar desde edades muy tempranas tienen incidencia en su desarrollo y adaptación escolar y social (García Barriocanal et al., 2007; Casas y Monserrat, 2009; Melendro, 2010).

Sin embargo, el acceso a la educación y el itinerario académico son predictores de adaptación y autonomía en el tránsito a la vida adulta, trayecto que además ellos tendrán que realizar con mucha antelación con respecto a la media de las jóvenes de su edad (Goyette, 2010). Bajo nuestro punto de vista, este aspecto es sin duda uno de los retos del actual sistema de protección a la infancia, que deberá incidir sobre la situación personal y emocional de los sujetos como paso previo para la consecución de logros académicos posteriores.

Poder aproximarnos de manera específica a la vivencia de las adolescentes en sus entornos escolares y formativos, como mujeres menores de edad víctimas de desprotección infantil, amplía nuestra mirada hacia los matices de su propia

y singular experiencia. Así, una situación excepcional como la derivada de la emergencia sanitaria del COVID-19 nos permite conocer las implicaciones que un escenario común y generalizado tiene en un contexto particular, definido por la complejidad de sus circunstancias.

2.3. Adolescencias vulnerables: Sobre el impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en sus procesos educativos.

La pandemia del COVID-19 ha tenido importantes consecuencias en todo el mundo. En marzo de 2020, el gobierno español, para gestionar mejor la crisis sanitaria derivada de la pandemia, decretó el estado de alarma (Real Decreto 463/2020). Esto supuso el inicio de un severo bloqueo, dirigido a todos los ciudadanos independientemente de su edad, que puso a los niños y adolescentes bajo estrictas restricciones (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2020). Aunque el número de NNA afectados por la pandemia es relativamente pequeño en comparación con otros grupos de edad, los efectos indirectos causados por esta enfermedad, como el cierre de escuelas, programas extraescolares y actividades recreativas, desconectaron a casi 60 millones de niños y jóvenes de recursos y apoyos esenciales (OCDE, 2019). La prohibición de salir a jugar o socializar con los compañeros puede haber tenido un impacto negativo en el bienestar de NNA (Erades y Morales, 2020). Por lo tanto, es factible afirmar que la crisis del COVID-19 ha transformado la vida cotidiana de la infancia.

Sin embargo, no todos estos niños, niñas y adolescentes se han visto afectados de la misma manera (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2022). En este sentido, la pandemia y sus restricciones han supuesto una dificultad añadida para NNA en acogimiento residencial, dada su situación en el hogar y sus necesidades particulares y específicas, al colocarlos en un doble escenario de vulnerabilidad (OCDE, 2020). El distanciamiento físico y social y otras restricciones del COVID-19 fomentaron sentimientos de aislamiento y soledad, rutinas interrumpidas y acceso limitado a la familia extensa, amigos y amigas y otras redes de apoyo comunitario. En este sentido, y según el estudio realizado por Unicef España (2020), las condiciones de socialización de las personas menores de edad en acogimiento residencial han empeorado durante la medida de encierro.

Como se mencionó anteriormente, para revertir el avance de la pandemia, las respuestas de política social adoptadas llevaron al cierre de escuelas. Según la ONU (2020), el cierre de escuelas y otros espacios de aprendizaje ha afectado al 94 % de la población estudiantil mundial. En otras palabras, a mediados de mayo de 2020, más de 1.200 millones de estudiantes de todos los niveles educativos del mundo ya no asistían a clases presenciales en la escuela (Unesco, 2020).

Las actividades escolares y laborales se trasladaron en gran medida a formatos virtuales. En este sentido, los sistemas escolares hicieron la transición hacia una metodología de educación digital y a distancia poco tradicional, desarrollando nuevos materiales y plataformas y también convirtiéndose en cursos a distancia en línea. En otras palabras, la pandemia se ha convertido

en un catalizador para que las instituciones educativas de todo el mundo busquen soluciones innovadoras en un periodo de tiempo relativamente corto (Foro Económico Mundial, 2020). Aunque en un principio los niños, niñas y adolescentes puedan ver esta medida como algo emocionante, lo cierto es que también puede tener sus inconvenientes y riesgos, ya que, por un lado, la calidad de la educación en casa puede haber empeorado su proceso educativo y, por otro, los contactos sociales pueden ser menores que a través de la escuela o en persona (OCDE, 2020). Además, teniendo en cuenta que muchos NNA en acogimiento residencial pueden tener retrasos académicos, este nuevo tipo de aprendizaje virtual puede suponer nuevos retos para ellos y ellas, ya que pueden perder el acceso a los apoyos educativos necesarios, como el soporte de instrucción individualizada o las tutorías (Font, 2020).

Además de las consecuencias personales que el cierre de la escuela podría haber tenido en estos y estas NNA, hay que tener en cuenta que podrían haberse enfrentado a obstáculos adicionales relacionados con las posibilidades que les ofrecen sus hogares de acogida, como la falta de tecnología, conectividad y, por último pero no menos importante, un entorno de aprendizaje de apoyo, lo que dificultaría su plena participación en el aprendizaje a distancia. Así pues, se puede decir que la pandemia de COVID-19 creó una alteración en las experiencias académicas de los adolescentes provocando experiencias negativas con la enseñanza en línea.

2.4. Aproximación al acogimiento residencial de personas menores de edad como medida de protección infantil en la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco: el caso de Guipúzcoa

El carácter subsidiario que la Convención de los Derechos del Niño (1989) otorga a las administraciones públicas competentes de los estados firmantes en cuanto a la protección infantil ha supuesto una readecuación legislativa, organizativa y técnica que en el estado español viene desarrollándose desde la década de los noventa hasta nuestros días —y que optó, en su momento, por un reparto competencial descentralizado en cada comunidad autónoma.¹

Como sabemos, la subsidiariedad de los poderes públicos se sitúa en el segundo nivel de protección, activándose únicamente ante la emergencia de situaciones de riesgo para el niño, la niña o el adolescente cuando la familia

1. En España las competencias en torno a la protección infantil están repartidas entre los ayuntamientos y las comunidades autónomas, con la excepción del País Vasco —región que analiza este artículo—, en que los territorios también tienen competencias de ejecución de las mismas.

La ley 3/2005, de 18 de febrero, de Atención y Protección a la Infancia y la Adolescencia de la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco, recoge el reparto competencial actual en esta comunidad autónoma y establece que la responsabilidad en el desarrollo de las actuaciones en situaciones de desprotección leve o moderada recae sobre los servicios sociales municipales (dependientes de los ayuntamientos de cada municipio), mientras que las actuaciones en casos de riesgo de desprotección grave o desamparo son competencia de los servicios sociales especializados, responsabilidad de las diputaciones forales de cada territorio histórico: Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya y Álava.

de origen —bien por acción, bien por omisión o por negligencia— no puede garantizar la cobertura de las necesidades básicas por sí misma.

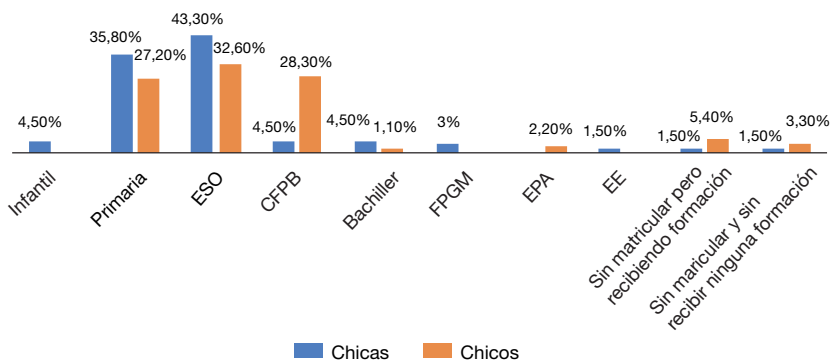
A este respecto, los conceptos de riesgo y desamparo quedan definidos en el Código Civil español y replicados en la Ley 18/2005 de Atención y Protección a la Infancia y Adolescencia de la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco, delimitando desde una perspectiva jurídica la situación sociofamiliar del niño y activando ante su concurrencia los servicios de protección infantil.

Resulta del todo relevante señalar la importancia que adquiere el concepto de *daño significativo* que establecen actualmente los servicios sociales de protección infantil como baremo para la determinación de la gravedad de estas situaciones. El término recoge los descriptores del daño potencialmente sufrido por NNA sobre su desarrollo madurativo, derivados de situaciones de negligencia en el seno de su familia de origen. Supone el reconocimiento del sufrimiento físico y psicológico de las personas menores de edad, entendiendo las áreas emocional, social y cognitiva como aspectos fundamentales de su evolutiva (Balora, 2017).

La existencia de daño significativo en *el niño* precisará, por tanto, de una actuación subsidiaria —y nosotros añadimos eficaz— de los poderes públicos competentes. Por otro lado, las diferentes situaciones de riesgo o necesidad social que pueden experimentar NNA atendidos responden a la diversidad de tipologías de desprotección de las que se ocupan los servicios de protección infantil. En la siguiente tabla, podemos consultar las tipologías de desprotección y los porcentajes que se extraen de las notificaciones totales de desamparo decretadas por la Diputación Foral de Guipúzcoa en el año 2021, donde se observa que los casos de negligencia severa y maltrato psíquico constituyen los porcentajes más elevados entre las causas motivantes de medidas de separación familiar.

Tras la declaración de desamparo y la asunción de la tutela por parte de la administración pública, el ejercicio de la guarda puede desarrollarse bajo

Gráfico 1. Distribución del alumnado en AR en función de las etapas educativas



Fuente: Miguelena J. (2019)

Tabla 1. Tipologías de desprotección notificadas al Servicio de Infancia. Guipúzcoa 2021

Maltrato físico	2 %	9
Maltrato psíquico	30 %	130
Negligencia	42 %	182
Abuso sexual	7 %	30
Incapacidad parental de control de la conducta	20 %	87
Graves dificultades progenitores	16 %	69
Maltrato prenatal	1 %	4
Abandono	2 %	9
Antecedentes de desprotección grave	10 %	44
Imposibilidad temporal o definitiva	5 %	22
Otras (mendicidad, corrupción, trato inadecuado...)	3 %	13

Fuente: *Memoria del Servicio de Infancia de la Diputación Foral de Guipúzcoa* de 2021.

dos modalidades de protección: el acogimiento familiar (integración en una familia alternativa) o el acogimiento residencial (integración del niño en un hogar de protección).

En España, según los datos del *Boletín de estadística básica de medidas de protección a la infancia* (2021), desarrollado por el Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030, en 2020 un total 16.991 menores de edad en situación de desamparo se encontraban bajo una medida de guarda en residencia.

En el caso de Guipúzcoa, recurriendo a los datos más recientes (*Memoria del Servicio de Infancia de la Diputación Foral de Guipúzcoa* de 2021), podemos confirmar que un 45,8 % de casos mantienen una intervención especializada en el domicilio, mientras que un 25,2 % de los menores de edad tienen una medida de guarda tomada bajo la modalidad de acogimiento residencial tras ser decretada su situación de desamparo, y un 29 % de los expedientes abiertos se mantienen en una situación de guarda en familia alternativa (modalidad de guarda en acogimiento familiar). Si atendemos a la variable género, los datos de atención correspondientes al año 2021 indican que el 57,1 % de los atendidos eran varones frente al 42,9 % de mujeres (*Memoria del Servicio de Infancia de la Diputación Foral de Guipúzcoa* de 2021).

En lo que concierne a la especificidad del territorio histórico de Guipúzcoa, rescatamos la información obtenida en el trabajo de investigación de corte longitudinal desarrollado por Miguelena Torrado (2019). Los datos generales de escolarización de la población en acogimiento residencial 2015-2018, incluyendo ambos sexos, en una muestra no diferenciada por edades, quedan recogidos en el siguiente gráfico:

Estos datos nos aproximan a un colectivo en el que la escolarización de las mujeres se sitúa por encima de la de los hombres, además, son ellas las que eligen itinerarios orientados hacia estudios superiores, en el marco de los estudios obligatorios anteriores al Bachillerato. No obstante, se observa un descenso bastante considerable en las matriculaciones en el ámbito de los estudios superiores que dan acceso a itinerarios universitarios.

Asimismo, una lectura global del estudio mencionado (Miguelena, 2019) nos permite obtener una visión ampliada del desarrollo académico de estos chicos y chicas, en función de sus países de origen. De esta manera, los nacidos en España (85,8 %), América del Sur (85,8 %) y otros países europeos (71,5 %), en mayor porcentaje, estaban matriculados en Educación Primaria y en ESO, mientras que son los nacidos en países africanos los que mayor tasa de escolarización mantienen en centros de Formación Profesional Básica (50 %).

A pesar de la vulnerabilidad asociada al colectivo, parece que existe un claro sesgo de género en cuanto a las posibilidades de las mujeres por alcanzar niveles académicos más altos, siendo más habitual en mujeres autóctonas y no tanto en mujeres proveniente de países extranjeros, si bien el número de mujeres en situación de desamparo que llega a la universidad sigue siendo aún un porcentaje residual.

3. Metodología

El objetivo del presente estudio es examinar el impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en el proceso educativo de los adolescentes del sistema de acogimiento residencial de Guipúzcoa. La importancia de este objetivo radica en observar qué papel ha jugado la institucionalización en el periodo de confinamiento, concretamente en el caso de las mujeres adolescentes.

Esta investigación se contextualiza dentro del proyecto H2020 Resistiré (101015990), cuyo objetivo es analizar las respuestas generadas en el marco de la pandemia del COVID-19, desde una perspectiva interseccional y de género. Estas respuestas pueden ser institucionales, de la sociedad civil o de las propias personas usuarias. Así, este artículo pone el foco en la vivencia que las mujeres adolescentes del sistema residencial tuvieron respecto a su propia realidad y en relación con el entorno educativo. Esta investigación ha contado con el permiso y la colaboración de la Diputación de Guipúzcoa y ha sido objeto del consiguiente proceso de contraste ético.

El objetivo de esta investigación se ha alcanzado mediante el uso de una metodología cualitativa en la que se han utilizado entrevistas en profundidad semiestructuradas. Se han escuchado y analizado, por tanto, los relatos de niñas y adolescentes residentes en un hogar de protección del territorio histórico de Guipúzcoa.

Las entrevistas semiestructuradas se han realizado utilizando un guion protocolizado de preguntas abiertas planteado en torno a cinco bloques de preguntas: 1) su asistencia a clase y el seguimiento que recibían de sus profesores; 2) los resultados académicos; 3) el apoyo extraacadémico; 4) los materiales de estudio utilizados, y 5) las relaciones interpersonales.

3.1. Muestra

El trabajo de campo se realizó en julio de 2022, mientras que el contexto de la investigación se localiza en un hogar de protección para población adoles-

Tabla 2. Características de la muestra

Código	Edad actual	Edad en el confinamiento	Nivel académico durante el confinamiento	Origen	Tipología de desprotección durante el confinamiento	Lugar de residencia
E1	17	15	3.º ESO	Nativa	Riesgo grave	Con familia de origen
E2	17	15	3.º ESO	Nativa	Desamparo	Acogimiento residencial
E3	16	14	2.º ESO	No EU	Riesgo grave	Con familia de origen
E4	16	14	2.º ESO	No EU	Desamparo	Con familia de origen
E5	15	13	2.º ESO	No EU	Desamparo	Acogimiento residencial
E6	15	13	2.º ESO	Nativa	Desamparo	Acogimiento residencial
E7	14	12	1.º ESO	Nativa	Desamparo	Acogimiento residencial
E8	16	14	2.º ESO	No EU	Riesgo grave	Con familia de origen

Fuente: elaboración propia.

cente del territorio histórico de Guipúzcoa, correspondiente al programa de atención básica. El objetivo de intervención del programa se basa en generar un entorno normalizado que permita a las menores de edad residentes mantener una estructura diaria que posibilite su integración en su contexto más cercano.

Las personas fueron seleccionadas a través de la relación establecida con la entidad en la que residen. Todas ellas participaron de forma voluntaria y bajo la premisa de la confidencialidad. La investigación pasó todos los procedimientos éticos necesarios para ello. Todas las participantes son mujeres, ya que el objetivo de la investigación es observar de forma concreta cómo han afectado las medidas de confinamiento de la pandemia COVID-19 específicamente a las mujeres.

Las participantes tienen entre 14 y 17 años, y todas se encuentran actualmente bajo una medida de protección que las obliga a vivir separadas de sus familias de origen. Hay que tener en cuenta que, aunque todas tienen actualmente una medida de separación familiar en vigor y, por tanto, se encuentran bajo la tutela de la administración pública competente, durante la fase de internamiento algunas seguían viviendo en su domicilio, en situación de riesgo de desprotección grave, sin que se hubiera ejecutado la medida de separación.

El grupo mantiene una diversidad cultural que resulta de interés, ya que, aunque todas las chicas residen actualmente en el País Vasco, tienen orígenes diferentes; bien porque han nacido en países extracomunitarios y han iniciado un proceso migratorio solas o acompañadas de sus familias; bien porque han nacido en el propio territorio (lo que se considera persona autóctona a efectos de esta investigación) pero pertenecen a segundas generaciones de familias migrantes. Esta selección responde a la realidad de las menores de edad en situación de desprotección del territorio, donde, además de las personas autóctonas, existe una representación de adolescentes protagonistas de diferentes itinerarios migratorios, cuya casuística no recoge la existencia de personas de otros países de la UE.

Este aspecto se muestra en la siguiente tabla de codificación de la muestra y resulta relevante atendiendo a las dificultades que algunas de ellas expresan con respecto al uso de la lengua.

3.2. *Análisis*

El análisis de la información obtenida durante las entrevistas siguió el enfoque propuesto por Taylor y Bodgan (1990), con el fin último de tratar de desarrollar una comprensión en profundidad de los escenarios o personas objeto de estudio (Salgado, 2007). Así, el análisis realizado se dividió en tres momentos diferenciados: 1) fase de descubrimiento, donde se buscaron los temas emergentes mediante el examen de los datos aportados; 2) fase de codificación, donde se codificaron los datos y se desarrollaron las diferentes categorías de codificación, y 3) fase de relativización de los datos, donde se interpretó la información obtenida. Para asegurar la inmersión en cada una de las narraciones, se releó cada entrevista y se anotaron los aspectos significativos. Tras analizar las entrevistas, se alcanzó la saturación en cuanto a temas y categorías (Suárez Relinque et al., 2013). El análisis de contenido se realizó con el apoyo del *software* Atlas-ti 7.0.

4. Resultados

La situación de confinamiento forzoso y altamente restrictivo vivido en España desde el mes de marzo hasta el mes de mayo del año 2020 supuso la suspensión con carácter inmediato de actividades de la vida cotidiana que afectaron al normal desarrollo del día a día del conjunto de la ciudadanía. Las jóvenes entrevistadas no escaparon de esta situación y tuvieron que permanecer en sus casas por un periodo de tres meses, sin apenas opciones para salir de su hogar, tal como ocurrió con la población general.

Lógicamente, su asistencia a sus respectivos colegios y centros formativos se vio afectada, lo que generó implicaciones de alcance para ellas en un entorno personal y familiar complejo.² A continuación, veremos como el nivel de afectación sobre su experiencia académico-formativa alcanza diferentes ámbitos, si bien parece evidente que el contexto académico respondió con lógica improvisación ante una situación de incertidumbre difícilmente previsible.

Para ello, concretamos diferentes aspectos que permitirán extraer matices de sus vivencias en torno a: 1) su asistencia a clase y el seguimiento que tuvieron por parte de sus profesores y profesoras; 2) los resultados académicos; 3) los apoyos extraacadémicos; 4) los materiales de estudio utilizados, y 5) las relaciones interpersonales, permitiendo concretar la existencia de cambios sig-

2. Recordemos que en aquel momento todas ellas tenían; o bien una medida de desamparo tomada por la administración pública; o bien se encontraban en situaciones de desprotección muy elevada en sus hogares que desembocaron finalmente en una medida de separación familiar

nificativos en alguno de estos niveles, así como la particularidad de sus propios procesos en época de pandemia.

4.1. Asistencia y seguimiento de las clases

En primer lugar, nos interesamos por saber si, durante el confinamiento, mantuvieron una asistencia regular al colegio, siempre a través de las conexiones *online* propuestas para el seguimiento de las clases. Vemos que las respuestas son diversas, si bien se establece una clara diferenciación entre quienes confirman haber sido víctimas de la desmotivación y optan por no acudir a las clases, y quienes afirman haber mantenido su asistencia regular a las mismas.

No hacía nada, no tenía ganas de hacer nada. Teníamos clases *online*, horrible la verdad, pero no me conectaba. No tenía ánimos cuando terminaba las clases *online*. (E3)

Cuando empezó la pandemia pues me empecé a desmotivar y dejé de unirme a las clases y al final dejé de hacer clase. (E2)

Se observa que la alusión de ambas entrevistadas se centra en señalar su sentimiento de desmotivación con respecto a la modalidad de seguimiento propuesta, en formato *online*, hasta llegar a abandonar definitivamente las clases. Sin embargo, otras compañeras afirman haber mantenido el ritmo de asistencia sin desestimar los problemas que este tipo de seguimiento implican para su mantenimiento, como los relacionados con las conexiones telemáticas, la falta de organización del profesorado o incluso la dificultad para la comprensión de los contenidos.

No faltaba a ninguna. Hubo muchos rollos, eso de las videollamadas, porque había un *link* que no sé, que había profesores que te daban más de una materia. Entonces, no sabía si meterte en ese *link* o en el otro. (E6)

Me conectaba a clases. Pero [...] por lo del idioma, pues [...] me costaba un montón. Y ya luego algunas cosas que a mí se me hacían muy difíciles, por ejemplo, algunas cosas de matemática, y así que no se me daban muy bien. (E8)

Como vemos, las experiencias narradas por las adolescentes tienen algunos matices diferenciales. Algunas aportaciones hablan de una percepción de seguimiento y control por parte del profesorado, si bien mayoritariamente las adolescentes experimentaron una mayor permisibilidad en este aspecto que la propia de las situaciones de normalidad.

Yo creo que no, igual nos llamaron un par de veces, pero muy pocas. Comparado con lo que te llaman ahora mismo por si faltase a clase, [...] en la cuarentena, no. [...] Yo creo que tampoco podían controlar todo lo que iba por ahí. (E1)

Si no te conectabas, te mandaba un correo el profesor o decía en la llamada que nos escribiéramos en el grupo de WhatsApp, [...] el profesor decía que avisáramos por el grupo y decir que se una. (E6)

Entendemos que las circunstancias propias de la situación vivida y la improvisación que desde el contexto educativo implicó la crisis sanitaria incidieron negativamente en la capacidad de ejercer seguimiento por parte de los profesores y profesoras de estas adolescentes. En general, se percibe cierta falta de control sobre la situación de cada estudiante y, por tanto, cabe preguntarse si estas respuestas, un tanto lábiles en cuanto a la necesaria asistencia de las estudiantes a clase, han podido incidir en que las realidades de mayor vulnerabilidad se complejicen. Asimismo, resulta un aspecto a valorar con el objetivo de evitar futuras situaciones de fracaso escolar.

4.2. Resultados académicos

La falta de asistencia y la desmotivación que las jóvenes referían con respecto a su presencia en las clases pudieron tener un efecto perjudicial en su desarrollo académico. Efectivamente, la percepción general que las adolescentes expresan es de una exigencia menor por parte del profesorado, identificando un proceso académico más fácil, ejercicios de evaluación adaptados a la situación y, en general, exámenes de menor nivel. En palabras de las propias adolescentes: «Era todo más fácil».

Yo había suspendido todo entre comillas, porque no había hecho nada, pero, como no podía repetir otra vez, me lo pusieron en cincos. Entonces ya había pasado tercero sin hacer nada. No tenía ningún mérito, pero había pasado tercero. (E1)

Al final, como que aprobé, como acabamos el confinamiento antes de acabar el curso, pues el último empujón y aprobé, pasé el curso [...] pero cómo, no sé... (E3)

Además de una sensación compartida de menor exigencia, algunas de las jóvenes entrevistadas interpretan que la propia situación pudo ayudar a que superasen un curso académico que, en condiciones normales, hubiera resultado más complejo. Llama especialmente la atención la conciencia que muestra E3 con respecto a su propia capacidad académica, evidenciando en su relato que no considera que el resultado sea en absoluto mérito suyo.

No obstante, estos relatos se complementan con la experiencia de otras adolescentes que mantuvieron niveles muy bajos de asistencia e implicación que derivaron en situaciones académicas que no permitieron pasar al curso siguiente.

Cuando tuvimos que ir a casa, pues como que mis notas bajaron mucho porque había trabajos y así que me mandaban en euskera. Yo no entendía, y

cuando yo estaba en clase pues ahí los profesores y así pues me ayudaban un poco y tal, pero estando en casa, al no tener esa ayuda, pues... sí que bajan mucho las notas. [...] Repetí curso. (E8)

A este respecto, quisiéramos destacar el relato que nos ofrece E8 sobre las dificultades que durante el confinamiento encontró para el seguimiento de las clases, relacionadas con sus problemas con el conocimiento del euskera. Se trata de una adolescente nacida en un país extranjero que aprendió el idioma tras su llegada al País Vasco, en un proceso migratorio no exento de dificultades. En este sentido, se evidencia la vulnerabilidad añadida que estas jóvenes han podido experimentar durante el confinamiento, al carecer de apoyos directos que posibiliten la comprensión de los contenidos académicos en un idioma diferente a su lengua de origen.

4.3. *Apoyos académicos*

La vulnerabilidad que el colectivo de adolescentes en situación de desprotección infantil mantiene con respecto a su desarrollo académico ha quedado demostrada y contrastada mediante diversas investigaciones y trabajos científicos, referenciados en este mismo artículo. Así, es habitual que las adolescentes residentes en centros de protección infantil precisen de la activación de academias o apoyos extraescolares orientados a reforzar las materias que les resultan más complejas, o sobre las que mantienen mayores dificultades de comprensión o aprendizaje.

Este tipo de soporte refuerza las competencias lingüísticas o el aprendizaje de asignaturas más complejas, como las que implican el pensamiento lógico-matemático. Entre los relatos obtenidos, únicamente encontramos dos adolescentes que afirmaron contar con los apoyos extraescolares que ya tenían activados con anterioridad al periodo de confinamiento.

Sí que iba y, cuando estaba en el confinamiento, sí hacíamos llamada, o si tenías academia a las 17:00 de la tarde te tenías que unir a una llamada y te enviaban por correo unas fichas, y esas fichas las controlaba la profesora, y veías si las hacías o no. (E6)

Como podemos comprobar, las academias a las que acudían como refuerzo escolar mantuvieron su actividad ofreciendo apoyo a través de un seguimiento telemático, similar al que se desarrolló desde los centros educativos. No obstante, la generalidad de las respuestas obtenidas mantiene una línea bien diferente, al afirmar las participantes que no contaron con apoyos académicos durante la pandemia y que tuvieron que asumir ellas mismas las vicisitudes del curso escolar, así como dificultades asociadas a las circunstancias el momento.

Solía ir a alguna academia solo para hacer inglés, matemática y euskera, pero cuando nos confinaron..., pues claro, dejé de ir. [...] Yo necesitaba mucho apoyo, sobre todo por las clases que son en euskera. Eso fue lo más difícil. El

idioma. Porque, imagínate, por ejemplo, en matemáticas todo era en euskera. Problemas y cosas en euskera. Y yo para poder hacer eso no podía porque no entendía. (E8)

Nuevamente, emergen relatos relacionados con las dificultades de comprensión y la falta de referentes adultos que puedan acompañar las necesidades de apoyo en el aprendizaje expresadas por esta adolescente (E8). Atendiendo a las narrativas de estas jóvenes, cabe preguntarse si en el proceso contaron con la ayuda que hubieran podido precisar en ausencia de presencialidad en las aulas, ayuda que, en su caso y por sus particulares circunstancias, no siempre pudieron encontrar en los adultos con los que convivían.

En este punto, consideramos interesante resaltar algunas aportaciones de las adolescentes residentes en hogares de protección durante la pandemia, quienes, al contrario de las que permanecieron con sus familias de origen, afirman haber contado con apoyo en casa por parte de los profesionales que trabajan en el hogar cuando han precisado de explicaciones o ayudas específicas en materias concretas.

En casa (se refiere al hogar de protección), estamos todos haciendo los deberes en la sala o en el cuarto. Y si tengo una duda, siguen estando aquí conmigo para ayudarme. Si tengo un examen, también suelen venir, me ayudan a estudiar. [...] Durante la pandemia, también, incluso creo que más. Si tenías alguna duda, venían, te lo explicaban. O sea, estabas en la llamada del cole, no entendías a la profesora y les llamaba. Yo he solido silenciar la llamada, decirle a la educadora que viniera y que me explique, y ya está. (E6)

La existencia de adultos que puedan paliar las dificultades o déficits identificados en la crianza por parte de los progenitores, complementando las funciones que estos no pueden garantizar, adquiere ante estos discursos un aspecto clarificador. Es precisamente esa complementariedad ejercida a través del acompañamiento en la crianza de estas adolescentes la función pública subsidiaria asignada al acogimiento residencial como medida de guarda.

4.4. Materiales académicos durante el confinamiento

El seguimiento de las clases en modo *online*, activado de manera súbita e inmediata tras la declaración de la emergencia sanitaria, implica el acceso a nuevos materiales de estudio, distintos a los materiales de uso más clásico como pueden ser los libros o cuadernos.

Ciertamente, la adecuación a los nuevos tiempos que los centros educativos llevan desarrollando desde hace años está democratizando en cierta manera el acceso a la tecnología portátil, al ser entendida como el material básico de estudio y trabajo. Esta circunstancia ofrece la posibilidad a cada estudiante de contar con un ordenador portátil de uso académico propio, algo que lógicamente facilitó enormemente la adaptación a las clases telemáticas.

Esta casuística es la que comparten algunas de las adolescentes cuando son interrogadas sobre los materiales de uso académico utilizados durante la pandemia, sobre los que responden que han seguido utilizando el ordenador que ya tenían, o incluso han llegado a utilizar el teléfono móvil con fines académicos.

No tenemos libros para nada. Está todo en el ordenador. En mi cole se utiliza el ordenador para todo. [...] Lo que pasa es que matemáticas, física y química y todo eso, sí que tenías que hacer los ejercicios en papel, cogías tu móvil, sacabas una foto y lo tenías que subir al ordenador... o si tenías que hacer un proyecto, te grababas haciendo el proyecto y lo subías, entonces usas tanto el móvil como el ordenador. (E6)

No obstante, el uso de la tecnología en el aula está en proceso de implantación, por lo que no todos los centros escolares han desestimado la utilización de libros como material de consulta, en favor del uso exclusivo de la tecnología. Por este motivo, durante el confinamiento, algunas adolescentes se encontraron con dificultades para acceder al seguimiento telemático de las clases, así como para la ejecución de las tareas escolares en formato digital: «Estando en casa, usamos más el ordenador, ya que tenemos que mandar los trabajos y así pues, o por correo entonces pues usamos más. Yo no tenía, a mí me lo prestaron en el colegio» (E8).

Como podemos comprobar a través de sus relatos, las adolescentes que no contaban con ordenador propio con anterioridad a la etapa del confinamiento tuvieron la posibilidad de acceder a dispositivos ofrecidos por sus respectivos centros escolares que paliaron de manera eficaz las situaciones de mayor necesidad entre las familias con mayores dificultades. En este sentido, parece que la igualdad de oportunidades en cuanto al acceso a la tecnología como material de estudio se mantuvo, al igual que el acceso a internet, ya que únicamente una de las adolescentes entrevistadas afirma no haber podido acceder a la red en un primer momento, situación que se resolvió poco después: «Al principio no tenía internet, pero después sí. Llamamos para contratar la compañía» (E3).

Los ordenadores portátiles fueron de uso común y generalizado por todas ellas para el seguimiento académico durante aquellos meses. Los ejercicios de cada clase y las tareas asociadas a cada asignatura se ejecutaban en el ordenador y se enviaban a través de plataformas, o bien a través de correo electrónico a los profesores y profesoras, pero igualmente el ordenador fue utilizado como material de encuentro en el aula. Las videollamadas en grupo se convirtieron en la vía para mantener la estructura de una clase física en el espacio virtual, y las cámaras acopladas a cada dispositivo posibilitaron los encuentros cara a cara en el aula, redimensionando sus posibilidades tecnológicas iniciales hacia contenidos más relacionales.

4.5. Relaciones durante el confinamiento

Sin duda, la pérdida del contacto humano y directo con nuestros respectivos grupos de referencia ha supuesto uno de los hándicaps de mayor alcance deri-

vados de la crisis sanitaria del COVID-19 en virtud de las restricciones que gobiernos y países de todo el mundo activaron como medidas preventivas. Esta ausencia de interacción con *otros* emerge en sus relatos en tanto y cuanto, recurrentemente, mencionan una sensación de pérdida de sus relaciones personales con el grupo de iguales, especialmente con los compañeros y las compañeras de clase.

Perdí mucho contacto. Mis relaciones con amigos eran buenas, normal, [...] pero durante el confinamiento pues que perdí mucho contacto, [...] de repente se acabó todo. Hablaba muy poco con ellos. (E3)

Pues con algunas personas sí que cambié un poco, porque como que no solíamos hablar mucho y así... Pero siempre normalmente mantenía más el contacto con mi mejor amiga y mejor amigo y tal, a través de videollamadas y móvil, pero con otras amigas o amigos con los que solíamos estar cambié un poco la relación, ya no hablábamos... como que era más distante, ¿sabes? (E8)

Por tanto, podemos interpretar que la ausencia de un espacio físico para el encuentro, unida a la particularidad del momento y posiblemente a factores individuales fuera del alcance de esta investigación, puede explicar la sensación de pérdida de contacto con el entorno que experimentan estas adolescentes. En todo caso, algunas de ellas refieren la existencia de ciertas relaciones al margen de sus compañeros de clase, con los que mantuvieron más contacto siempre a través de videollamadas o redes sociales.

En este punto, quisiéramos rescatar dos relatos vertidos por sendas adolescentes que reflexionan positivamente sobre sus relaciones con los compañeros de clase afirmando que, en su caso, se produjo el efecto contrario, esto es, el espacio virtual se convirtió en un espacio relacional.

Me uní más a los de mi instituto porque hacíamos llamadas y estábamos en videollamadas durante las clases y nos quedábamos cuando se terminaba la clase en la misma llamada. Entonces creo que sí. Nos hemos acercado más. [...] Estuvo bien porque me quedaba horas hablando con ellos de mi vida. (E6)

Mantuvimos el contacto con la clase, [...] pues por los móviles, por los ordenadores. Pues había algunos que se cortaron y otras no [...]. (E5)

Teniendo en cuenta los matices de estas respuestas, consideramos importante atender a un segundo momento, vinculado al contenido relacional y su afectación durante el confinamiento, por lo que para finalizar la entrevista con las participantes del estudio nos interesamos por saber cuál fue su experiencia tras el regreso a las aulas, cuando se produjo el reencuentro con sus compañeros y compañeras de clase. Las aportaciones ofrecidas en lo relativo a esta cuestión coinciden en señalar una sensación inicial de extrañeza, de cierta dificultad por el paso del tiempo y la pérdida en la dinámica de la relación propia de los encuentros cotidianos.

Las adolescentes son muy explícitas en sus relatos expresando que sentían cambios importantes entre ellos y ellas, incluso físicos, que les sorprendían enormemente y que les generaban sentimientos de extrañeza y vergüenza. En general, la percepción hablaba de cierto distanciamiento inicial tras meses de falta de contacto: «La gente cambió bastante. Un año sin vernos... Había gente que tenía un físico, acabó teniendo otro. Luego también los grupos de amigos y se separaron. Luego se unieron» (E6).

Otras adolescentes hacen alusión a aspectos más personales, en un interesante ejercicio de introspección donde son capaces de identificar las dificultades internas que ellas mismas recuerdan haber experimentado durante su reencontro con compañeros y compañeras de clase, tras meses de encierro en casa.

Me costaba más relacionarme. Era como todo nuevo, entonces, como había estado tanto tiempo sin salir de casa, pues... no sé, me daba vergüenza. [...] Después del confinamiento, me costaba hablar. Bueno, antes también, pero después, bastante más. (E3)

Era un poco raro porque era otra vez con tus compañeras y así. Y es como que te hayan sacado de una cueva, en plan, se te había olvidado lo que era el contacto físico y esas cosas. [...] De verdad que no me acordaba ni cómo eran, de mis relaciones, de cómo hablar a la gente, cómo era sentirse bien, sentirse mal... de los abrazos, como surgían, te juro que se me había olvidado. (E2)

Resulta especialmente interesante conocer las sensaciones expresadas por estas jóvenes, en tanto y cuanto identifican en sus narrativas pérdidas afectivas que se traducen en la ausencia de contacto físico, o incluso de la práctica de la comunicación (el habla) como base para la interacción humana. Como decíamos, se trata sin duda de una cuestión de alto interés por el impacto emocional que este tipo de situaciones genera en los seres humanos, seres eminentemente sociales.

5. Discusión

El objetivo del presente estudio fue examinar el impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19 en el proceso educativo de las personas menores de edad del sistema de acogimiento residencial a partir de las perspectivas de las adolescentes.

El cierre de escuelas y otros espacios de aprendizaje como consecuencia de la crisis sanitaria afectó al 94 % de la población estudiantil mundial (ONU, 2020), de tal manera que 1.200 millones de estudiantes de todos los niveles educativos del mundo estuvieron sin escolarizar (Unesco, 2020). Las consecuencias que sobre la población infantojuvenil ha tenido esta situación adquieren especial significación en el ámbito educativo, que precisó de alternativas creativas y efectivas para dar respuesta a las necesidades formativas de niños, niñas y adolescentes de todo el mundo.

Las narrativas de estas adolescentes dan cuenta de aspectos cualitativos de este confinamiento en sus respectivos procesos formativos. Tener en cuenta

las diferencias o matices que este hecho tuvo sobre el colectivo supone la posibilidad de adecuar prácticas interventivas de manera preventiva, con el fin de evitar la emergencia de situaciones que agraven aún más la vulnerabilidad propia de estas adolescentes.

Diversas investigaciones abordan la vulnerabilidad de la población infantil en situación de desprotección en lo que respecta a su situación académica (Tilbury, 2010; Hedin et al., 2011), y destacan la necesidad de atender la brecha existente al comparar a NNA en acogimiento y a sus pares cuando se habla de educación (Sebba et al., 2015). Por otro lado, el acceso a la educación y el itinerario académico son predictores de adaptación y autonomía en el tránsito a la vida adulta, camino que además tendrán que realizar con mucha antelación con respecto a la media de las jóvenes de su edad (Goyette, 2010).

En cuanto a la asistencia y el seguimiento de las clases en remoto, existen diferencias. Así, hay quienes afirman haber continuado con regularidad las clases programadas por los centros escolares, mientras que, en otros casos, las respuestas recogidas guardan estrecha relación con sentimientos de desmotivación ocasionados principalmente por el formato *online* y las nuevas metodologías. Esta desmotivación, unida a la permisividad y la falta de control de cierta parte del profesorado en los centros educativos, ha tenido su peso, de manera que lo que debía haber sido un año académico con mayor rigor y exigencia se convirtió en un curso relativamente fácil de aprobar.

El papel del profesorado ha sido un elemento central, tanto al valorar los resultados como al ofrecer alternativas de seguimiento a las personas con mayores dificultades. En este sentido, los resultados académicos son dispares.

Mientras que algunas adolescentes consiguieron superar el curso, otras no pudieron revertir la situación académica ya compleja y agravada por el propio confinamiento. Esta disparidad de resultados no exime de una consideración subjetiva de algunas participantes ante el hecho de haber tenido ciertas ayudas o incluso de haberse beneficiado de un menor nivel de exigencia por parte del profesorado. Este aspecto concluye que hay elementos —ya identificados por investigaciones previas— que hablan de una población caracterizada por ausencias escolares y repeticiones de curso habituales, y en general de unas bajas expectativas (Bravo y Valle, 2001; Valle et al., 2019; Montserrat et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2020).

Por otro lado, la ausencia de apoyos extraescolares para el aprendizaje emerge como una constante entre estas adolescentes, pues es residual la existencia de academias como un recurso para el refuerzo escolar.

A tenor de las circunstancias derivadas del encierro forzoso, la posibilidad de contar con apoyos por parte de los adultos responsables de estas jóvenes se redimensiona, puesto que es únicamente el contexto doméstico el que puede responder ante la contingencia provocada por la situación de crisis sanitaria. En este punto, se observa la eficacia en la complementariedad del sistema de protección (frente a los casos de las adolescentes que, aun teniendo una situación de riesgo grave, permanecían en sus respectivos hogares durante la pandemia).

Asimismo, se concluyen dificultades relacionadas con el nivel idiomático de algunas adolescentes, cuya condición de mujer extranjera migrante, unida a la falta de apoyos específicos para el aprendizaje de la lengua vasca, comprometió sus posibilidades de alcanzar el mínimo nivel académico exigido. La presente investigación permite identificar que estas necesidades de apoyo académico han podido suplirse por parte de los y las profesionales de los hogares de protección, en el ejercicio de su función subsidiaria.

Por otro lado, los resultados del estudio evidencian que la rápida adecuación de los centros educativos a las nuevas directrices impuestas por la pandemia posibilitó una adaptación de las adolescentes a sus propios itinerarios educativos para continuar con su formación. En congruencia con las aportaciones vertidas en foros expertos, los sistemas escolares transitaron de una educación tradicional a una educación a distancia basada en metodologías de educación digital, con nuevos materiales y plataformas (Foro Económico Mundial, 2020).

Así, el uso de las nuevas tecnologías ha cobrado desde entonces una gran relevancia, en tanto y cuanto llegaron a sustituir los materiales de uso clásico, como los libros de texto, por portátiles individuales e incluso móviles personales, que se reconvirtieron en nuevas herramientas de uso pedagógico. Si bien esta situación pudo haber dificultado que las adolescentes que no tuvieran sus propios dispositivos pudieran seguir con regularidad las clases correspondientes, la eficacia de los centros escolares a la hora de dar una respuesta a estas carencias —así como la dotación de recursos previos (hablamos de dispositivos portátiles, tabletas o telefonía móvil)— favoreció que las entrevistadas tuvieran acceso a los recursos materiales que precisaban para seguir con su formación.

Lo que ha sido una ventaja en el ámbito académico se ha convertido, sin embargo, en una moneda de doble cara en el aspecto relacional. La pandemia ha supuesto de forma clara la pérdida del contacto humano con los grupos de referencia. Las dificultades para mantener los hábitos y dinámicas habituales de socialización han podido influir en el bienestar general de los niños y adolescentes (Erades y Morales, 2020), de modo que la realidad de la infancia en situación de desprotección ha sido especialmente vulnerable, al verse comprometidas las posibilidades de acceso a la familia extensa, amigos y otras redes de apoyo comunitario (OCDE, 2020).

Siguiendo las aportaciones de las jóvenes entrevistadas, la vivencia de este aislamiento social adquiere en unas y otras ciertas particularidades. Atendiendo a sus respuestas, se infiere un sentimiento generalizado de extrañeza ante la ausencia de contacto directo con amigos y compañeros, especialmente presente en el momento del reencuentro y la reincorporación a la dinámica escolar habitual (en septiembre de 2020). No obstante, en algunos casos, los dispositivos de conexión telemática se redefinen para ellas como espacios para la interacción y el contacto con iguales.

De esta manera, el uso de las nuevas tecnologías ha favorecido que las relaciones entre iguales se siguieran manteniendo, ya que su utilidad ha podido mitigar el impacto de la pandemia en cuanto al acceso a diferentes redes de apoyo informales (OCDE, 2020). Sin duda, la ausencia de relación e interac-

ción con iguales tuvo incidencia en estas ocho adolescentes, en congruencia con aspectos ya señalados por Unicef (2020) al afirmar que los y las NNA de los hogares de protección han sufrido sobremanera el distanciamiento físico y social, así como otras restricciones que fomentaron sentimientos de aislamiento y soledad, rutinas interrumpidas y acceso limitado a la familia extensa, a amigos y amigas, y también otras redes de apoyo comunitario.

6. Conclusión

La revisión bibliográfica anterior muestra que la pandemia de COVID-19 y sus consecuencias sociales, como el cierre de escuelas, han vuelto a afectar a una de las poblaciones más vulnerables: los niños, niñas y adolescentes, especialmente si pertenecen a entornos socioeconómicos bajos, ya que podrían experimentar efectos cicatrizantes persistentes que podrían comprometer su rendimiento educativo en el futuro (Maestripieri, 2021).

De todas formas, la respuesta institucional fue eficaz, sobre todo atendiendo a la efectividad demostrada para la dotación de recursos telemáticos que las niñas y adolescentes precisaron para el seguimiento de las clases. No obstante, se observan diferencias significativas entre las distintas respuestas del profesorado y de los adultos —responsables legales— de estas jóvenes, ya que las necesidades de apoyo ante las dificultades académicas resultan muy aleatorias. Por otro lado, quedan vinculadas a la voluntariedad y disponibilidad mostradas por parte de sus profesores o responsables legales (progenitores o profesionales de los recursos de protección).

El confinamiento en España fue especialmente restrictivo y duradero en el tiempo y conllevó una limitación casi total en las interacciones personales. El impacto de esta pérdida relacional será foco de investigaciones futuras que deberán acometer la difícil tarea de determinar el daño emocional e incluso psicosomático derivado de esta situación. Sin duda, este será tema de interés para otras investigaciones distintas a la que nos ocupa.

Al mismo tiempo, la pandemia ha exacerbado los retos ya existentes a los que se enfrentaban estos adolescentes con anterioridad a la pandemia. Abordar estos retos con rapidez es clave para evitar un aumento de la desigualdad —entre la actual generación de NNA y la siguiente— y para garantizar un crecimiento integrador.

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Igualmente, quisiéramos expresar nuestro agradecimiento al Centro de Protección Infantil Larratxo Fundazioa por su implicación en el cuidado, el acompañamiento y la protección que ofrece a niños, niñas y adolescentes vulnerables de dentro y fuera de Guipúzcoa. Sirva este escrito como un reconocimiento a su labor y a su implicación en favor del colectivo de la infancia durante más de cuarenta años.

Por último, nos gustaría reconocer en estas líneas el enorme valor que tienen cada una de las adolescentes participantes de este estudio. Su generosidad y colaboración nos han permitido conocer de primera mano sus experiencias, habitualmente mediatizadas por situaciones complejas y dolorosas. Una vez más, todas ellas son ejemplo de superación personal, de lucha y audacia ante las dificultades de la vida. Representan una pequeña parte de todas las que ocuparon con anterioridad su lugar y son ejemplo para quienes inevitablemente lo ocuparan en el futuro. Vivir con ellas, hablar con ellas, interactuar con ellas es sinónimo de aprendizaje. Gracias por vuestra espontaneidad, por vuestra bondad y vuestro cariño. Ojalá en estas líneas podamos transmitir la admiración y el respeto que por vosotras sentimos. Para las heroínas de esta historia.

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Essential and forgotten. Domestic work and the impact of policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain and Italy

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Abstract

Results from the European project RESISTIRÉ show that the pandemic outbreak and policies adopted to contain the virus have reinforced pre-existing gender inequalities, resulting in a “spiral of increasing inequalities” (Axelsson et al., 2021: 110). The care domain is a key part of this spiral and has been at the centre of debates and of some of the COVID-19 policy responses. However, for the most part, policy interventions in the care domain have focused primarily on work-life balance, neglecting the impact of health-related policy restrictions on domestic workers – a highly feminised and racialised sector. Yet these workers have been dramatically affected by the pandemic and related policies, not only in terms of exposure to infection, but also in terms of exacerbation of pre-existing and intersecting inequalities. Moreover, when policies did address the domestic sector, they often reproduced gender stereotyped understandings of the nature of care work, and reinforced racist assumptions on migration. This paper compares the policies on domestic workers enacted during the pandemic in Italy and Spain, which illustrate how public policy engages in gendering and racializing domestic workers. Drawing on Bacchi’s methodology, it seeks to unfold and problematise the representations and implicit assumptions related to care work, and the gender and racial hierarchies underpinning them.

Keywords: care; domestic work; gender inequalities; COVID-19; intersectionality

Resumen. *Esenciales y olvidadas. El trabajo doméstico y el impacto de las respuestas políticas durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en España e Italia*

Los resultados del proyecto europeo RESISTIRÉ muestran que la pandemia y las políticas adoptadas para contener el virus han reforzado las desigualdades de género preexistentes y se ha entrado en una «espiral de desigualdades crecientes» (Axelsson et al., 2021: 110). El ámbito de los cuidados es una parte clave de dicha espiral y ha sido el centro de los debates y de algunas de las respuestas políticas al COVID-19. Sin embargo, en su mayor parte, las intervenciones políticas en el ámbito de los cuidados se han centrado principalmente en el equilibrio entre la vida laboral y familiar y se han olvidado del impacto de las políticas relacionadas con la salud en las trabajadoras domésticas, un sector muy feminizado y racializado. No obstante, estas trabajadoras se han visto dramáticamente afectadas por la pandemia y por las respuestas políticas no solo en términos de exposición al contagio, sino también en términos de exacerbación de desigualdades preexistentes y entrecruzadas. Además, aquellas políticas que abordaron el sector doméstico a menudo reprodujeron estereotipos de género sobre la naturaleza del trabajo de cuidados y reforzaron supuestos racistas sobre la migración. En este artículo se comparan las políticas sobre trabajadoras domésticas promulgadas durante la pandemia en Italia y España, ilustrativas de la forma en que las políticas públicas contribuyen a la discriminación de género y racial de este grupo de trabajadoras. Basándose en la metodología de Bacchi, el artículo trata de desplegar y problematizar las representaciones y suposiciones implícitas relacionadas con el trabajo de cuidados, y las jerarquías de género y raciales que las sustentan.

Palabras clave: cuidado; trabajo doméstico; desigualdad de género; COVID-19; interseccionalidad

Summary

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1. Introduction

Results from the European project RESISTIRÉ show that the policies adopted to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and their subsequent effects on the economy and the labour market have reinforced pre-existing gender inequalities, resulting in what the project has termed a “spiral of increasing inequalities” (Axelsson et al., 2021: 110).

The policy mapping conducted as part of the RESISTIRÉ project showed that gender is a long way from being mainstreamed, and that intersectional dimensions of inequality were not considered in the design of pandemic-related policies (Cibin et al., 2021: 12). Most of the policies adopted across

the fields of care and the labour market did not address gender inequalities sufficiently, and to some extent ended up reproducing mechanisms of exclusion from social and economic protections for the most vulnerable groups, while reinforcing assumptions regarding the distribution of care work. On the one hand, policies aimed at supporting workers generally excluded those in informal or precarious working relationships. This was particularly the case with domestic workers, who are at the intersection of gender and racialization. The report showed that in some countries income and employment support measures explicitly excluded this group of workers (Cibin et al., 2021: 47). On the other hand, the need for care services during the pandemic was addressed mostly (if not exclusively) from the perspective of unpaid care work through work-life balance policies. As a result, paid and unpaid care work were usually not treated as dimensions of the same problem, but rather were compartmentalised (Camilletti & Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2022: 221). Few initiatives went beyond the contingent needs of the crisis, and, in fact, it could be argued that the priority objective of most policies was to maintain economic activity, not to tackle the underlying cause of the gender care gap. While these policies protected the income of female workers and prevented many job losses, they also reinforced the gender division of labour.

Within the care domain a stratification can be observed, insofar as most policy interventions focused primarily on work-life balance measures (Cibin et al., 2021: 53) and, in some cases, on the working conditions of healthcare professionals in hospitals and facilities for the elderly. The impact of the crisis upon these essential workers was made visible in the public debate, raising awareness of their precarious conditions. However, a third group of workers involved in the care sector received less attention from policy responses: workers in the cleaning industry and paid domestic and care workers. This last group is the focus of this paper.

We would argue that, despite increasing awareness of the importance of care in public debate, the negative impact of policy restrictions on paid domestic work – a highly feminised and racialised sector (OIT, 2018) – has not been a core concern among policymakers. Yet these workers have been essential in attending to such a basic need as the social reproduction and care of the most vulnerable populations, and they were dramatically affected by the pandemic and its related policies, not only in terms of exposure to infection, but also in the exacerbation of pre-existing and intersecting inequalities of gender, nationality and socio-economic disadvantage.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that in the early stages of the pandemic (March 2020) roughly 49.3% of domestic workers were significantly impacted in terms of reductions in numbers of hours of work, reductions in earnings and job losses. This figure peaked at 73.7% in May 2020 (ILO, 2020a). Yet this figure merely represents the regular segment of this labour market, which has the highest percentage of informality: 75% of all domestic workers worldwide are informal. In addition to the elevated risk of exposure to COVID-19, domestic workers risked losing their jobs and were

not always covered by social security in the event of illness. Increased checks to ensure that lockdown restrictions were adhered to also exposed migrant workers to increased risks of deportation, and prevented those without regular contracts from legally and safely travelling to their workplaces (ILO, 2020b). These constraints opened the way for increased forms of abuse by employers, such as those that are mentioned in the narrative interviews conducted as part of the RESISTIRÉ project (Axelsson et al., 2021: 17; Sandström et al., 2022: 20). The situation of some live-in workers was particularly acute. Many scholars have shed light on the momentum created by the pandemic in terms of the importance of care (Fine & Tronto, 2020) and the opportunity for a paradigm shift, with social movements at the forefront of claims-making and forms of resistance (Boris, 2022; Vega & Marega, 2021; Jiménez Castillón & Ruberte, 2021). Moreover, research on the impacts of the pandemic on domestic workers has revealed the limited provision (if not exclusion) for domestic workers in social protection policies worldwide (Camilletti & Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2022), and the socio-economic effects of lockdown, mobility restrictions and (lack of) social policies, coupled with pre-existing structural issues (Allen et al., 2020; Díaz Gorfinkiel & Elizalde-San Miguel, 2021; Duijs et al., 2021; Giordano, 2021; Leiblfinger et al., 2021; Martínez-Buján & Moré Corral, 2021).

While most of the analyses focus either on legal aspects (De Martino, 2021; Gómez García, 2021) or on social sciences approaches,¹ this paper proposes an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together insights from both social science and legal analysis. Moreover, it offers a comparative approach to the policies enacted in Spain and Italy to address the difficulties of the domestic sector in the early phase of the pandemic outbreak. During the pandemic, paid domestic work remained highly invisible, and even when policies addressed the issues arising from the crisis, the way of representing the problem and the solutions to it reveal persistent assumptions based on gender inequality and anti-migrant attitudes.

Before looking more closely at the two concrete policy regimes under analysis, we offer a brief overview of the legal and institutional background against which these policies were developed and implemented. Next, the paper looks at the policies themselves, first describing them and then providing a more in-depth analysis, shedding light on the representations and implicit assumptions around care work, and the gender and racial hierarchies underpinning them. To do so, it draws on Carol Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* approach (Bacchi, 2009).

The paper aims, first, to draw attention to the role of legal regulation (or lack thereof) in creating and sustaining systemic and intersecting inequalities in the domestic work sector. To do so, the paper again highlights the uncontested assumptions regarding the special nature of domestic work, its exceptional regime under labour law, and how the irregularity fostered by legal arrangements and migration policies contribute to segregating racialised women in an

1. Exceptions include Stevano et al. (2021) and Martínez-Buján and Moré Corral (2021).

extremely precarious sector. Through their differences, the Italian and Spanish policies on domestic work illustrate how law engages in gendering and racializing domestic workers. Next, the paper aims to explore how the policy domains of care, labour and migration interact; how the precarious conditions faced by domestic workers represent an intolerable instance of gender inequality intersecting with racist policies, and should be tackled by law and policies consistently across those three domains; and how the way that domestic workers' issues affect gender equality is not straightforward, so it is not an item on the gender equality agenda of EU institutions.

2. The intersecting inequalities of domestic work: Theoretical notes

The issues relating to migrant domestic work stem from and are shaped by the interaction between three different policy domains: care, the labour market and migration,² which are inherently shaped by intersecting inequalities of gender, race and class (Andall, 2000; Anderson, 2000). This approach to domestic work has been widely explored in social sciences, with a particular focus on the gender (and sometimes race) dimension of some policy domains such as welfare regimes (Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993; Williams, 1995) and migration regimes (Lutz, 2008; Kofman et al., 2000; Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000). Similarly, legal scholarship has revealed the gendered dimension of law as a whole, and of particular legal domains such as migration (Mullally, 2014; Spijkerboer, 2000) and labour law (Conaghan, 2018; Fudge, 2014). The theoretical contributions underpinning these approaches both in legal and sociological studies are particularly relevant for our analysis.

This paper seeks to shed light on the inequality issues connected to the domestic work sector, by drawing on the concept of systemic inequality developed within critical (feminist) antidiscrimination law, in particular by Barrère (2014). Barrère contends that inequality is rooted in power systems;³ these systems rest on certain grounds or categories (sex-gender, race, class, etc.), and are reproduced by a series of interconnected elements (ideologies, myths, stereotypes, representations, etc.). These elements are embedded in the functioning of society and permeate all institutional domains (e.g. family, state, labour market, school, religious institutions and media), and derive from intergroup relations (Barrère, 2014: 20). This understanding resonates with and can be seen as complemented by Walby's theorization of intersectionality based on the concept of social system revisited through complexity theory (2007). According to Walby, each social inequality (e.g. gender, race, class) has its base in all domains (e.g. economy, family, state, polity).

2. The regimes are not always identified in the same way. Lutz (2008: 2), for instance, focuses on the intersection of gender regimes, care regimes (welfare) and migration regimes. Scrinzi, on the other hand, focuses on social policies, migration and labour.
3. The concept of system within this specific legal theory is close to and can be assimilated with that of social relations, regimes or power structures.

Besides differences between disciplines and the further complexity added by the debates within intersectionality studies (Bello, 2020; Cho et al., 2013; Walby et al., 2012), Barrère and Walby's approaches share an interest in the importance of revisiting and retaining the notion of system/regime to make sense of intersectional inequality. A crucial aspect of this theoretical approach is the idea of the mutual constitutiveness and mutual reinforcement of these systems, which compels scholars – but not only scholars – to engage in more complex analysis beyond single-axis and single-domain approaches.

Against this background, legal arrangements (policies and regulations) play a twofold role as being both an institutional domain and (one of) the set of norms governing all other institutional domains. In feminist legal theory, the concept of law as a *gendering* practice (Smart, 1992) and Holtmaat's description of how law reproduces gender (2001) are key to the analysis in question here.⁴

State policies “contribute to the shaping of a gendered and racialised division of domestic labour that links countries of origin and countries of destination” (Scrinzi, 2008: 29), with class being another important social inequality reinforced through these policies. Yet state policies rarely address domestic work and its underlying interplay between migration, labour and social policies: each policy domain is regulated separately and often in contradiction with the others (Ibid., 32).

3. Domestic work before the pandemic: The background in Italy and Spain

Italian households employ a large number of domestic workers. A significant change took place in the Seventies, due to the combination of a number of factors, such as the rapidly ageing population; the familistic welfare system characterised by monetary transfers rather than public care services; the increased participation of Italian women in the labour market; and the absence of any significant change in the gendered division of care work within the family (Andall, 2000; Colombo, 2003; Marchetti et al., 2021: 44). These factors explain why, from that moment on, the high demand for care workers has been increasingly satisfied by foreign women (from 5.6% in 1972 to 70% in 2021).

The care sector in Italy is profoundly marked by geographical (north/south) and racial divisions. On the one hand, most domestic workers are concentrated in the northern regions, where demand for these services is greater, due to a higher rate of women's employment and less pronounced family networks (Marchetti et al., 2021: 45), and working conditions and wages are better (Maioni & Zucca, 2016). On the other hand, the segmentation of the sector is reflected in the racial division between Italian women (employed as part-time

4. Holtmaat argued that Scott's elements involved in the social construction of the relationships between the sexes (cultural symbols; normative concepts that interpret them; social institutions and organisations; and subjective gender identities) (Scott, 1986) can also be applied to understand the law as a gendered practice (Holtmaat, 2001).

housekeepers) and foreign women (segregated in the live-in segment, and commonly known as *badanti*) (Andall, 2000; Di Bartolomeo & Marchetti, 2016).

The first law on domestic labour in Italy, which is still in force, dates back to 1958. It was the result of years of intense mobilization by workers' organisations,⁵ and was the political initiative of the two main parties of that time (Marchetti et al., 2021: 46). An important role was played by Catholic institutions, whereas traditional labour unions did not express interest in this field (Scrinzi, 2008). Since then, domestic workers have been granted basic labour rights, such as working and rest times, paid holidays, dismissal regulations, severance pay and matrimonial leave (Sarti, 2013: 73). By judicial intervention, domestic workers were given the right to collective bargaining (1969), which led to the first collective agreement (1974).

Despite these advances, there is a high level of informality and non-compliance with established labour legislation in Italy. Informality is considered to be a structural characteristic of this sector, mainly due to the specific nature of the workplace (a private house) and the job *per se* (devalued as mere "chores"). According to the Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS) [National Institute of Social Welfare], in 2020 the number of domestic workers with regular contracts was 921,000. Of these, 68.8% were foreign workers, 48.5 % were non-EU citizens, and the majority (87.6%) were women. Data from the National Institute of Statistics shows that in 2019 57% of labour relationships in the sector were irregular, by which it is estimated that the total number of domestic workers was 2.1 million (DOMINA Observatory on Domestic Work, 2021: 15).

Italy ratified ILO Domestic Workers Convention N. 189 (henceforth C189) in 2013. However, domestic workers' rights organisations, together with other social actors involved in the struggle, argued for the need to improve the current national collective agreement (CCNL) and bridge the gap between domestic work and other work sectors, in particular in relation to maternity leave, health and social security coverage, and working hours for live-in workers. All these issues should be regulated under EU labour law, which applies to domestic workers too. The need for these improvements has been further emphasised since the outbreak of the pandemic. In January 2021, the social partners who were signatories of the CCNL presented the government with a programmatic platform of actions (DOMINA Observatory on Domestic Work, 2021: 71), including proposals such as the adoption of a sickness allowance paid by the INPS, the deductibility of workers' wages from employers' incomes, and also the restoration of the yearly immigration quotas through the *decreto flussi* [flow decree], with a specific quota for the domestic sector. The maximum weekly working time set for live-in domestic workers remains problematic, as it exceeds the maximum 48 working hours established in the EU directive on working time.⁶

5. *Legge 2 aprile 1958, n. 339 Per la tutela del rapporto di lavoro domestico*, (GU n.93 del 17-04-1958) (Law for the protection of domestic work).

6. Directive 2003/88/EC, see also Scheiwe (2021).

The dynamics of this sector should also be read in conjunction with the migration policies enacted in recent decades, particularly those concerning the recruitment of foreign labour, and the amnesties issued between 1982 and 2012 to regularise the great number of irregular migrant workers created by restrictive immigration policies (Oliveri, 2020: 20). Following the 2002 immigration law (known as *Bossi-Fini*),⁷ a planned yearly quota for on-call recruitment was introduced, becoming the only means of legal entry for non-EU working migrants. However, this has been discontinued and, in any case, proved ineffective.⁸ A legislative proposal brought forward by the platform *Ero Straniero* [I Was a Foreigner] in 2017 sought to move towards a system that prevents workers falling into irregularity by introducing temporary residency permits “while searching for employment”, restoring the sponsorship system, and recognising a residency permit under proof of integration.⁹

After Italy, Spain is the EU country with the highest number of domestic workers. With an increase in the ageing population and a corresponding rise in care needs, plus the generalised incorporation of women into the labour market, domestic work has increased hugely since the nineties. Generally, the Spanish welfare system fails to provide sufficient state support for care, which is relegated to the private sphere (León, 2010: 413; Parella Rubio, 2021: 105) and rests therefore with families, often through domestic workers. While the *Ley de Dependencia* [Law on Dependent Care] of 2006 aimed to tackle care needs, its impact was limited.

Thus, the number of domestic workers doubled from 1990 to 2016 (Marchetti et al., 2021: 48). According to official surveys,¹⁰ 580,500 households in Spain employed domestic workers in the last quarter of 2019, while there were 396,626 domestic workers registered on the social security system in December 2019.¹¹ These represent only part of the workforce, as it is estimated that 30% work without a contract (Marchetti et al., 2021: 48; Parella Rubio, 2021: 106). Moreover, it is a highly feminised sector, with over 90%¹² of the workforce being female (Díez Gorfinkiel & Elizalde, 2021: 89).

7. *Legge 30 luglio 2002, n. 189 Modifica alla normativa in materia di immigrazione e di asilo* [Modification of the norms about immigration and asylum].

8. Foreign workers (non-EU) included in the yearly quota are entitled to a residence and work permit, on condition of being hired on a permanent contract for at least 26 hours per week. The most recent decree established a quota of 69,700 non-EU workers (*Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri 21 dicembre 2021, Programmazione transitoria dei flussi d'ingresso dei lavoratori non comunitari nel territorio dello Stato per l'anno 2021. (22A00166) (GU Serie Generale n.12 del 17-01-2022)*).

9. <https://erostraniero.radicali.it/la-proposta/>

10. *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* [National Institute of Statistics], 2019 and 2020, activity code 9700 (activities of households as employers of domestic workers), available at: <https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=4128>

11. Data from the Spanish Social Security (*Serie de afiliación Media por regímenes, 2001-2022*), available at: <https://www.seg-social.es/wps/portal/wss/internet/EstadisticasPresupuestosEstudios/Estadisticas/EST8/EST10/EST290/EST291>

12. According to the labour force survey of the National Institute of Statistics in 2019 and 2020, 98% of domestic workers are women (data of the labour force survey, per occupation, available at <https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=4143>). Similarly, 95% of domestic

As in Italy, domestic work cannot be detached from migration dynamics. The increase during the nineties coincided with Spain becoming a country of destination (Arango, 2013: 3; Düvell, 2011: 280). Migrant women occupied – and continue to occupy – niches in the labour market, one of them being domestic work (Mestre i Mestre, 2002: 1; León, 2010: 414; Martínez-Buján, 2014: 285). Currently, around 40% of domestic workers are of migrant origin (Díez Gorfinkel & Elizalde, 2021: 89; Parella Rubio, 2021: 106). In September 2022 there were 163,678 foreign domestic workers registered with social security, of whom 129,392 are from outside the European Union (mostly from Latin America, Morocco, the Philippines and Ukraine).¹³ However, the figure is higher, as many are not registered, some have an irregular migration status (an estimated 70,000 workers¹⁴), and others have obtained Spanish nationality.

The regulation of domestic work in Spain is fairly recent. In 1985, *Real Decreto-Ley 1424/1985, de 1 de agosto, por el que se regula la relación laboral de carácter especial del Servicio del Hogar Familiar* [Royal Decree-Law 1424/1985 of 1 August, that regulates the labour relationship of a special character of Service into the Family Household] was approved. It excluded domestic work from the social security system, and protections remained low. No written contract was required, and working time and salary did not have the same guarantees as under general labour regulations (Mestre i Mestre, 2002: 7).

A major shift occurred in 2011. In the context of the adoption of C189 on Domestic Workers by the ILO that year, *Real Decreto-Ley 1620/2011* [Royal Decree-law 1620/2011], of 14 November, was approved. Written employment contracts became a mandatory requirement (reducing informality enormously), the minimum wage was applicable, and working hours and rest hours were regulated, among other achievements. It failed, however, to place domestic work totally in line with other sectors. In fact, the preamble of the law justifies their different treatment by the fact that the activity is carried out in the family home, and within the personal relationship of “trust” that is required. In parallel, a special regime for domestic workers was included in the general social security system. This was a considerable step, as registration with the social security system became mandatory, and pension rights and sick leave were recognised. As a result, registrations increased enormously, making a great number of contracts regular. From January to December 2012 the number of workers registered increased from 283,131 to 414,453.¹⁵

workers registered on the social security system are women (data from the Social Security, available at <https://www.seg-social.es/wps/portal/wss/internet/EstadisticasPresupuestosEstudios/Estadisticas/EST8/EST10/EST290/EST291>)

13. Data from the Spanish Social Security of September 2022 (data series *Afiliados medios extranjeros por nacionalidad y regímenes*), available at <https://www.seg-social.es/wps/portal/wss/internet/EstadisticasPresupuestosEstudios/Estadisticas/EST8/EST10/EST290/EST292>
14. Domestic work is the sector that employs the highest number of migrant workers in a situation of irregularity, according to Gálvez-Iniesta (2020).
15. Data from the Spanish Social Security (Serie de afiliación Media por regímenes, 2001-2022), available at: <https://www.seg-social.es/wps/portal/wss/internet/EstadisticasPresupuestosEstudios/Estadisticas/EST8/EST10/EST290/EST291>

While these legislative changes were a great step forward, aimed at putting domestic work on an equal footing with other sectors in line with ILO recommendations, it still left the sector under a special regulatory scheme that perpetuated the structural precariousness, vulnerability and ultimately discrimination of domestic workers. For example, it still failed to grant unemployment protection.¹⁶ This law was meant to be followed by a set of regulations, but a change of government in 2011 stopped this from taking place, and ILO Convention 189 was not ratified (Marchetti et al., 2021: 50). Despite the demands of domestic workers' organisations and other civil society organisations, domestic work remained a "special" type of labour relationship, with fewer rights than most other jobs, characterised by the exclusion from unemployment allowance, the right of the employer to withdraw (and end the contract) at any time with no reason, and the non-applicability of health and safety at work regulations. No further changes were brought forward except for the special and provisional measure approved in 2020, which lasted only four months.

Important changes, however, occurred in 2022: the EU Court of Justice ruled that the exclusion of unemployment benefit amounted to a case of indirect discrimination due to sex,¹⁷ Spain ratified Convention 189, and *Real Decreto-Ley 16/2022, de 6 de septiembre, para la mejora de las condiciones de trabajo y de Seguridad Social de las personas trabajadoras al servicio del hogar* [Royal-Decree Law 16/2022, of 6 September, to improve the working conditions and those of the Social Security of domestic workers] was approved, recognising the right to unemployment allowance for domestic workers, establishing the need for justification in case of dismissal, and setting the basis for improvement in aspects relating to safety at work.

4. Domestic work during the pandemic: Policy responses in Italy and Spain

Policies affecting domestic work during the pandemic were analysed through the mapping of policy responses carried out as part of the RESISTIRÉ project. Spain and Italy were among the few countries that adopted policies in this sector, and a comparison between them offers the opportunity to understand similarities and differences in the way they address domestic work. In the case of Italy, two policies were examined: the *Cura Italia* decree and the *Rilancio* decree, which included a special allowance and a regularisation procedure for migrant workers. In the case of Spain, the analysis was limited to the special allowance for lack of activity, as no other measures mentioned domestic work.

16. Other specific aspects include the fact that in the case of part-time work and less than 60 hours of work per month, employees can enrol themselves directly. In a sector where working a few hours per week in different households is common, this has had a big impact.

17. Judgement CJ and TGSS, C-389/2020, EU:C:2022:120.

4.1. Regulation by exclusion in Italy, with two exceptions

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Italian government issued several measures aimed at mitigating the socio-economic impact of the crisis, but left domestic workers unprotected. First, the *Cura Italia* [Care for Italy] decree¹⁸ addressed this sector indirectly, through its omissions and exclusions. This specific choice resonates with the peculiar status attached to domestic work. While *Cura Italia* introduced a new furlough scheme in the case of private employers, it expressly excluded employers in the domestic sector. This is surprising, considering the sector employs at least one million (declared) workers and carries out important tasks for society as a whole, and because no other sector was explicitly excluded.

Likewise, in relation to the prohibition of dismissal provided for in *Cura Italia* (art. 46), it was expressly stated that this provision did not apply to domestic workers, given that at-will dismissal is possible in the sector.¹⁹ Moreover, domestic workers with children were also excluded from entitlement to the so-called “baby-sitter vouchers”.²⁰ It was not clear whether they were entitled to the parental leave introduced by article 23, but they were able to access the special parental leave for parents with children in quarantine due to COVID-19 infection.²¹

The *Cura Italia* decree received a negative reception from experts and organisations, who pointed out that such exclusion was the legacy of a long-standing political choice of treating care work as something less than work.²² Consistent with this perspective, while health and safety measures and protocols were updated to minimise the risk of infection in most workplaces, no guidance was given to family employers on how to ensure that employment relationships and care obligations could be carried out with adequate protections for the safety of both workers and care-receivers. Employers were recommended to encourage family workers to take vacations, in order to facilitate social distancing and prevent contact with people outside the family. If workers

18. *Decreto-legge 17 marzo 2020, n. 18, Misure di potenziamento del Servizio sanitario nazionale e di sostegno economico per famiglie, lavoratori e imprese connesse all'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19.* (20G00034) (GU Serie Generale n.70 del 17-03-2020) [Measures to improve the national health system and to support families, workers and businesses in relation to the COVID-19 epidemic emergency].

19. See Message no. 2261 of 1-06-2020 published by INPS and available here: <https://www.inps.it/bussola/VisualizzaDoc.aspx?sVirtualURL=/Messaggi/Messaggio%20numero%202261%20del%2001-06-2020.htm>

20. Art. 23 and 25 of *Cura Italia* decree.

21. *Art. 5 Decreto-legge 8 settembre 2020, no. 111, Disposizioni urgenti per far fronte a indifferibili esigenze finanziarie e di sostegno per l'avvio dell'anno scolastico, connesse all'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19.* (20G00134) (GU Serie Generale n.223 del 08-09-2020) [Urgent measures to address financial needs that cannot be delayed and to support the start of the school year in relation to the COVID-19 epidemic emergency]. It was clarified that INPS will provide for these special leaves (*circolare n. 116 del 2 ottobre 2020*).

22. See the appeal by a group of researchers, accessible on the website of the journal inGenere at this link: <https://www.ingenere.it/en/articles/towards-caring-democracy>

contracted the virus at work, this was considered an occupational injury covered by INAIL insurance [National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work], but the duty to keep paying wages in case of quarantine or isolation was left to the employers, who could later request reimbursement from the state. This of course translated into a considerable cost for families, who were also economically affected by the pandemic. The postponement of social security contributions until June 2020 (art. 29) was considered insufficient as a measure to support families who employ domestic workers. Less clear was the situation of live-in workers who tested positive but were not hospitalised. In most cases, they were trapped in their workplace. In cases of job loss and dismissal, domestic workers were only entitled to unemployment benefit or “last resort income” (*reddito di ultima istanza*), introduced by article 44.

The subsequent *Rilancio* decree²³ introduced two provisions which are relevant to domestic workers. The first is an income support measure for domestic workers in the form of a lump sum of 500 euros for the months of April and May 2020 (art. 85). Eligibility conditions included being registered on the INPS platform, not living in the employer’s home (live-out workers, accounting for 60% of the total), and having one or more contracts for more than 10 hours per week on 23 February 2020. The provision had two restrictions: it could not be combined with any other COVID-19 allowances to support the income of some categories of workers; and, in the case of beneficiaries of basic income (*reddito di cittadinanza*), the amount could not exceed the total amount of basic income. In practice, this measure applied to a very slight proportion of (regularly employed) domestic workers. Half of the sector, amounting to more than one million workers, consists of people working under informal agreements, who were left unprotected. Data made available by INPS revealed that 275,000 requests were submitted, of which 212,000 were approved (INPS, 2020), which is still fewer than the number of workers who were entitled to it.

Along with this measure, the *Rilancio* decree introduced an exceptional regularisation procedure for migrant workers (art. 103), which was open between June and July 2020. Allegedly, this was adopted to “guarantee sufficient protection of individual and communal health, as a response to the contingent and exceptional health emergency” caused by the pandemic, and “to encourage the emergence of irregular working relations”. Yet the policy was tailored to a selection of strategic market sectors in which the shortage of workers was declared an issue,²⁴ namely agriculture, livestock and fisheries and homecare (including

23. *Decreto-legge 19 maggio 2020, n. 34 Misure urgenti in materia di salute, sostegno al lavoro e all'economia, nonché di politiche sociali connesse all'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19.* (20G00052) (GU Serie Generale n.128 del 19-05-2020 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 21) (Urgent Measures on health, support to work and the economy, as well as social policies connected to the COVID-19 epidemic emergency).

24. Coldiretti is the major organization of agricultural entrepreneurs in Italy, which sounded the alarm over the impact of the closure of borders on the availability of foreign agricultural workers. <https://www.coldiretti.it/lavoro/coronavirus-1-4-dei-raccolti-a-rischio-senza-stagionali>

care for people, and housekeeping). The provision provided for two channels of regularisation. One relied on the initiative of employers, with the possibility of either signing a fixed-term employment contract with foreign nationals present on national territory, or of declaring the existence of an irregular employment relationship with Italian citizens or foreign nationals. To be eligible, the worker had to have been present on national territory continuously since before the declaration of the state of emergency. In the case of undocumented migrants, they would receive a residency permit for work reasons. The other channel allowed foreign citizens holding an expired residency permit to apply for a temporary residency permit lasting six months, to look for a job in the selected sectors. If they did find a job within six months, the temporary permit could be converted into a residency permit for work reasons. Conditions to apply were, again, presence in Italy and proof of having worked in one of the listed sectors prior to 31 October 2019. Proof of presence appeared to be particularly problematic, and depended on the practice of each local administrative office. With both channels, the decree allowed foreign nationals to apply for a one-year residency permit while “awaiting employment”, in the event that their previous employment relationship had been terminated (Palumbo, 2020).

Data published by the Ministry of Interior showed that 207,542 applications were submitted, of which 85% were from domestic workers and 15% from agricultural workers.²⁵ After two years, in March 2022, 105,000 residency permits had already been issued or were about to be issued (50% of the total of employers’ requests), and thousands of applications were still to be finalised. Considering that 11% of requests had been rejected as of March 2022, it appears that prefectures processed only 62% of the total requests they received.²⁶ This considerable delay left migrant workers in a vulnerable position. It should be noted that while waiting for the resolution, migrant workers could not leave Italian territory, or their request would have been revoked. This condition was recently lifted in the case of Ukrainian nationals working in Italy and who are waiting for the release of their residency permit.²⁷

4.2. *The Spanish special allowance for domestic workers*

A variety of urgent measures were approved in Spain in the weeks that followed the declaration of the state of emergency in March 2020, aimed at

25. Complete data are available here: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/emersione-dei-rapporti-lavoro-presentate-piu-207mila-domande>

26. The process takes a long time. Once the prefecture has processed the request, it convenes the worker and the employer to sign the contract. At this point, the worker has to wait for the residency permit to be issued by the police station.

27. They are allowed to leave national territory “only to provide support to their family members” and then return to Italy, without becoming ineligible for regularisation. *Art. 6.1 Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri, 28 marzo 2022, Misure di protezione temporanea per le persone provenienti dall’Ucraina in conseguenza degli eventi bellici in corso. (22A02488) (GU Serie Generale n.89 del 15-04-2022)* [Temporary protection measures for persons coming from Ukraine as a consequence of the war].

preventing the spread of the virus, alleviating economic losses and supporting those in need. In this sense, *Real Decreto-ley 8/2020, de 17 de marzo, de medidas urgentes extraordinarias para hacer frente al impacto económico y social del COVID-19* [Royal Decree-law 8/2020 of 17 March, on urgent extraordinary measures to deal with the economic and social impact of COVID-19] was complemented days later by the approval of *Real Decreto-ley 11/2020, de 31 de marzo* [Royal Decree-law 11/2020, of 31 March], which adopted additional measures. Both regulations provided measures aimed at workers, families and vulnerable groups, as well as at companies, the self-employed, and the public administration.

Domestic workers were neglected in most of the measures relating to employment. They were not mentioned, for example, in the first urgent package of measures that were adopted through Royal Decree-law 8/2020. Due to their special regime, domestic workers were not included in the furlough scheme ERTE (*Expediente Temporal de Regulación de Empleo*), which allowed for the temporary suspension of employment contracts or a reduction in working hours, accompanied by the right to unemployment benefit for workers affected, and the obligation for companies to retain the jobs affected for at least six months.

As an exception to that generalised omission, a special allowance for domestic workers was established in articles 30, 31 and 32 of Royal Decree-law 11/2020, among other measures directed at families and vulnerable groups. The measure granted the right to an “extraordinary” and “temporary” allowance for domestic workers in the case of suspension or reduction of activity due to COVID-19. It was approved after a strong campaign in the early weeks of the lockdown, led by an array of associations of domestic workers in Spain demanding solutions (Jáuregui, 2020; Parella Rubio, 2021: 107).

The measure established that the allowance would be triggered by a temporary suspension (either partial or total) of activity due to COVID-19, in which case a declaration from the employer was needed, or the cancellation of the contract by the employer, either by dismissal or withdrawal. This measure applied only to domestic workers with a regular contract and who were registered on the social security system, and not to the considerable number of domestic workers (around 30%) who did not meet these conditions. The special allowance amounted to 70% of the basic salary, as per article 32, and could never be higher than the minimum wage. The calculation of the allowance appears prejudicial to this category of workers compared to other beneficiaries of state allowances, for whom the top-up maximum is higher than the minimum wage.

Subsequently, the Resolution of 30 April 2020 of the State’s Public Employment Service established the procedure for applying for the special allowance. In addition, the Resolution referred to the legislative framework for domestic work (Royal Decree-law 11/2020 and Law 27/2011), giving more details as to the justification of the need for this allowance and the consideration of work.

This measure came into effect on 1 April 2020, and lasted only until 21 June 2020. In contrast to many other measures implemented during the pandemic, this allowance applied to the months of lockdown and was not extended in time. The impact of this measure appears to have been limited. It was requested by only 55,994 domestic workers and was finally approved for only 44,062 of them (CES, 2022: 65).

5. Analysis: Care as essential vs the continuity in policy discourse

The following analysis of the COVID-19 policies described above addresses three main aspects: 1) the traces of exceptionality; 2) the role of immigration policies; and 3) the gender of domestic work. This allows us to shed light on similarities and differences in the policies' underlying assumptions, common omissions and misrepresentations.

The policies put in place during the COVID-19 crisis are of particular interest, as they illustrate the extent to which the “emergency framework” has altered (or not) the social and cultural values underpinning the treatment of domestic work as a gendered, racialised and class-based policy domain.

To undertake this analysis, Carol Bacchi's “What's the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR) approach has been used. WPR is a useful tool to reveal and analyse the implicit representations contained in public policies. This approach moves away from the view that problems are solved through policies. Instead, it proposes that what a policy proposes as a solution “produces” the problem in a certain way. The proposed solution has, in a way, a performative/constitutive effect, thus limiting the responses to it to those deemed as “possible”, considering the particular understanding of the problem (Bacchi, 2012a: 21–22). According to Bacchi, examining the solutions provides us with an entry point to uncover how the issue is framed and problematised, by giving us insights into the implicit representations and assumptions that underlie such problematisation (Bacchi, 2012b: 4).

5.1. *Traces of exceptionality: Strongholds to tear down*

As discussed above, the regulatory regimes in both Spain and Italy consider domestic work to be a special type of work, separate from most other sectors. The atypical regulation of the domestic work sector is one of the final areas of public/private and productive/reproductive divisions that feminism has historically challenged. These discursive elements usually justified both the non-interference of the state in regulating specific relationships, traditionally family-based, that occur within the household as well as the rejection of market logics within the domestic sphere. Assumptions about solidarity and attachment embedded in the private/family domain underlie this reluctance, along with the difficulty of accepting market logics into households. The reluctance to interfere has worked to prevent an inquiry into equality and justice within this domain, and thus to challenge inequalities affecting relationships

in the private/family sphere.²⁸ The exceptionality of domestic work translates into the de-regulation or special regulation of labour relationships, leading to lower protection for workers and no mechanisms to balance the asymmetry of power between employer and employee. This is usually achieved by introducing exceptions into minimum standards legislation that emphasize the special relationship based on trust between the relevant parties. At-will dismissal, longer working hours, lack of maternity protections and (until recently in Spain) lack of unemployment benefits are among the issues which, coupled with the tendency to leave the individual employer alone to cope with the expenses, make domestic workers more vulnerable while also impoverishing families.²⁹ Measures adopted during the pandemic once again led to lower protections compared to other workers.

Following Bacchi's approach, COVID-19 policy responses in the domestic sector offer us an opportunity to explore how domestic work and domestic workers are represented, and the meanings that underpin such representation. The measures enacted during the pandemic exemplify the underlying assumptions already found in the general regulation of domestic work in Italy and Spain. The measures – and lack thereof – followed that same logic of the exceptionality of domestic work, building on and reinforcing the arguments usually used to justify the special regime applied to work relationships in this sector.

On the one hand, both countries excluded domestic workers from most of the support mechanisms that were put in place for workers in other sectors, reinforcing once again a hierarchy of value in which domestic work does not have the same value as other sectors, as it belongs to the private and unproductive sphere.

In Italy, the *Cura Italia* decree explicitly excluded domestic workers from the support mechanisms introduced for workers in other sectors, mainly a furlough scheme, a prohibition on dismissal, and entitlement to childcare vouchers. Given that this was the only sector specifically excluded, the decree marked a clear line between domestic work and other sectors. Such exclusions reaffirm the assumption that domestic work satisfies a private, individual need and cannot be considered as actual work exchanged on the labour market. The assumption is so deeply embedded that even when exclusion from protections is not explicit, it is presumed (Pavlou, 2016).³⁰

28. Family law scholars refer to this discursive practice as family law exceptionalism, which is based on the contract/status dichotomy (Marella, 2011; Halley & Rittich, 2010). Using this concept, they have exposed the ambiguities embedded in legal discourse concerning family relationships, which presents the family as a domain *sui generis*, while it is in fact highly regulated by the state. While the relationship is, to some extent atypical, the problem remains that families are employers in a labour relationship with an employee. As Mullally and Murphy (2014) put it, the greater the personal work relationship resembles a family relationship, the less likely the worker is to enjoy the protection of human rights law.

29. As is noted in the literature, domestic work is not a luxury of middle-class families but rather a need created by the lack of a state response to effectively address care needs.

30. Especially in Italy and Spain, where EU nationals in the domestic sector outnumber non-EU nationals, it would be enough to invoke EU free movement law to ensure protection (Pavlou, 2018: 94).

In the case of Spain, domestic workers were not even mentioned in the policies enacted to protect employment. They were simply understood as being excluded, given the “special” regime accorded to domestic work. To understand this framing of the problem, reference needs to be made to how domestic workers and their rights are represented in the Spanish regulatory framework, which represents domestic work as being divorced from “the principles of market economy”. This, together with the special trust required in these relationships, are the reasons used to justify a different regulatory treatment that results in lower protections.

On the other hand, those same underlying assumptions are found in the measures specific to domestic workers that were enacted in both countries during the pandemic. In the case of Italy, no explicit reference is contained in the text(s) regarding the rationale underlying the income support measure for domestic workers. Yet the numerous conditions set for eligibility to receive this support offer a sense of “what’s the problem represented to be”, and what assumptions underpin it, in line with the above.

In Spain, the government sought to address the increased vulnerability of domestic workers by introducing yet another exceptional measure, limited just to the period of the strict lockdown. And, in contrast to many other measures enacted then, the allowance for domestic workers was not once extended in time, again reinforcing the separation of domestic work from other work sectors. While Royal Decree-law 11/2020 acknowledged that the allowance was granted as a *response to* the lack of the right to unemployment benefits for domestic workers and the resulting vulnerability, the Spanish measure failed to problematise the separation of domestic work from most “other work”, thus perpetuating the discriminatory treatment.

In both countries, the exceptionality framework of domestic work as such and the exceptionality discourse sparked by the COVID-19 crisis together provide a specific description of the problem. The COVID-19 crisis is touted as the specific circumstance that justified the measures, implying that the issues addressed are strictly connected to the pandemic, and that beyond that period, the situation would go back to normal. Exceptionality falsely represents the problem as contingent rather than structural, and prevents the consideration of different solutions and interventions that go beyond the crisis. Gender and race are implicitly involved, as both policies constitute disparate treatment against a highly feminised and racialised sector, and contribute to making these inconsistencies less visible. At the same time, the unexpected outcome is that the pandemic crisis brought this issue to the surface.

Inequality is also significant, as the situation of domestic workers was addressed almost as an afterthought, once most of the other categories of workers had already been addressed by income support instruments. This is striking if we consider the pandemic was a care crisis that raised awareness of the importance of care work. Although domestic workers were formally recognised as essential workers, the treatment of this sector stands in contrast to that of other categories of workers employed in care facilities.

5.2. *Where are immigration policies in the debate?*

The migration regime lies at the centre of domestic work inequalities. An in-depth analysis of the exclusionary dynamics and policies of the migration regimes of Italy and Spain exceeds the remit of this article. However, a general overview suggests that irregularity feeds the labour market's need for cheap labour (De Haas, 2008: 1315), and that this is particularly true in the case of domestic work. Among the elements that are deployed to increase the vulnerability of migrant workers is the choice to regulate migration through administrative acts rather than legislative procedures. Increased vulnerabilities depend greatly on the citizenship status of the employee. Lack of regular residency status paves the way for abusive conditions, and some employers use it as a tool to control domestic workers, both in terms of retaining domestic workers and enforcing working conditions that would be otherwise unacceptable or not tolerated (Anderson, 2007: 261). This, coupled with the rising costs of providing paid care, lead to care workers' wages "being forced down by strategies such as employing those with the least bargaining power" (Williams, 2011: 30). Precarious residency status may also inhibit workers from reporting incidents of gender-based violence, a dramatic form of discrimination that is neglected in research and policy. Indeed the dynamic of gender-based violence during the pandemic is another topic that demands further exploration.

Further, research suggests that domestic work intersects with racial issues. In this sense, migratory origin is central to understanding the existing hierarchies in the power relationships between domestic worker and employer. Anderson precisely refers to "foreignness" and being "racially different" as something used by employers as a way of seeing themselves as *saviours* rather than as the party with the upper hand in an unequal relationship (Anderson, 2016: 166-167). Research also reveals preferences for certain women to carry out care work because they are seen as having characteristics that make them good carers (Anderson, 2016: 165). For example, Latin American women are perceived in Spain as "affectionate", "patient", and even "obedient" (Díaz-Gorfinkel & Martínez-Buján, 2018: 109).

The nexus between domestic work and migration remains one of the great silences in the policies analysed and the related overall framework. Far from being neutral, those silences fail to problematise irregularity, and thus help perpetuate the hierarchies and inequalities ingrained in domestic work. Such silences are present in the overall framework of domestic work, and were once again evident in COVID-19 policies.

The silence was prevalent in the measures concerning domestic workers in both countries, particularly in Spain. Here, the path towards regularisation was blocked despite being debated in the early months of the pandemic and pushed for by several political parties and civil society organisations.³¹ Regardless of

31. The civil society *#RegularizaciónYa* [RegularisationNow] channelled the demand, which was finally discussed in the Spanish Parliament in September 2020 without success.

the discourse on essential care workers, the proposal for regularisation was represented by the government as contrary to European agreements on migration, and therefore not a possibility (López-Sala, 2021: 93). In contrast, Italian regularisation demonstrated the possibility of a different path. Here, the comparative approach proves to be particularly useful as it helps open up alternative proposals to problematisation (Bacchi, 2012b: 6). Nevertheless, the Italian regularisation was a utilitarian, slow and ineffective measure. While formally pursuing the objective of health protection, the regulation clearly rests on the idea of migrants being a temporary (and cheap) solution for labour shortages. The restrictive criteria set for applying for regularisation illustrate this quite evident purpose. Subordinating the procedure to the goodwill of employers without offering any incentive might also run the risk of exacerbating abusive practices and heightening the unequal relationship between the parties.

Another silence was prevalent in both countries. Both the income support measure in Italy and the special unemployment allowance in Spain neglect the reality of the high degree of informality in the sector, by making allowances available only to the small proportion of regularly employed domestic workers. In both cases, this led to the systematic exclusion of a large proportion of domestic workers who work without contracts, in most cases due to their legal status of irregularity. In Italy, around one million domestic workers were prevented from applying for the proposed allowance because they were not registered with the INPS; in Spain, the same applied to around 250,000 domestic workers. Undeniably, the silences in both Spanish and Italian policies open the door to exploitation and abuse, and to increased vulnerability. Furthermore, such silences reproduce the representation of migrant workers as less valuable than non-migrant workers.

5.3. The gender of domestic work as the most deafening silence

As RESISTIRÉ's findings revealed, gender equality is still far from being mainstreamed, and is instead compartmentalised in specific domains, such as work-life balance and gender-based violence. The fact this approach is problematic is particularly evident in the case of domestic work, which rests on the interaction between several policy domains, and in which conditions are profoundly gendered.

Perhaps the most striking silence of COVID-19 policies on domestic work is the absence of the gender dimension. Gender hierarchy is so deeply embedded in the regulation of domestic work that its elements are quite hidden and difficult to expose. The undervalued status of domestic work, its connection to the private sphere of emotion, solidarity and attachment, the nature of innate, female activity and low-skill sometimes emerge more explicitly in policy discourse.³²

32. As the Spanish Government put it, domestic workers are “low skilled” employees, remunerated at minimum wage, who would find it more convenient to access unemployment protection rather than continue working (CJ v Tesorería General de la Seguridad Social (TGSS), C-389/2020, ECLI:EU:C:2022:120, par. 53).

The silence around gender might not be as striking when looking at equality policies. Up until recently, domestic work had been quite neglected in equality policies, both national and European,³³ and has rather been addressed for its levels of undeclared work.³⁴ Furthermore, domestic work has been framed as an issue of work-life balance, and is represented as a response to the needs of families (Peterson, 2016: 94). Global developments in migration led also to the shift from the unpaid domestic work traditionally carried out by women in the family to paid domestic work carried out by other women, many of them from a migrant background, and in precarious conditions. The perpetuation of the roles and the gendered division of labour is thus left unchallenged and is shifted onto racialised women, making the intersections of gender, care and migration a compelling issue. The specific policies approved during COVID-19 reinforced these frameworks, providing contingent solutions and leaving the underlying assumptions untouched.

As noted above, the exceptionality discourse that characterises domestic work has worked to overshadow inequality that occurs in this sector and that disproportionately affects women. Legal scholarship too, to some extent, has not been able to problematise the day-to-day instances of inequalities that affect domestic workers, but has rather focused on a higher threshold of severe human rights violations (Pavlou, 2018: 85). There are, nonetheless, legal instruments, particularly EU directives on equality law, that should be mobilised to challenge gender discrimination in the domestic work sector.

6. Conclusions

Various authors have noted a divergence in the care policies of Spain and Italy during the 1990s and 2000s, with Spain “catching up” on family and care policies, while Italy hardly moved forward in this area (León & Pavolini, 2014: 366). While acknowledging their different trajectories (León et al., 2021: 453), this analysis of COVID-19 policies, however, points to a convergence in the particular case of policies around domestic work, with the two countries having more similarities than differences, as well as similar impacts; and both cases showing continuity with respect to previous policy, similar representations of domestic work, and similar underlying assumptions reflected in the policies.

In this sense, Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” framework has facilitated the unpacking of such representations and implicit assumptions contained in the legislative measures approved in the early months of the pan-

33. For instance, the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 adopted by the European Commission (COM(2020) 152 final) does not mention actions explicitly aimed at improving the domestic work sector. Yet, very recently, on 5 July 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on common European action on care (2021/2253(INI)), which could establish a discursive change in EU policies on domestic work.

34. As shown for example in the resolution of the European Parliament of 28 April 2016 on women domestic workers and carers in the EU (2015/2094(INI)), which focuses on improving working conditions.

demic. Two main approaches have been identified in how domestic work is represented. On the one hand, the separation of domestic work from other types of work, both implicitly (through exclusion from the general regulation) and explicitly (through the exceptionality of the measures enacted) reinforces the lower value assigned to this sector and justifies lower protections and the resulting precarity. In addition, such policies contribute to legitimising the assumption that care is a private matter, absolving the state from engaging in more consistent reforms of social policies. On the other hand, the silences revealed in the analysis are equally telling, as the measures adopted (or their absence) fail to problematise both the nexus between migration and domestic work, and the gender dimension, leaving the prevalent hierarchies, inequalities and roles unchallenged.

Policies that touch upon domestic work maintain a fictitious separation between welfare, migration and labour (Scrinzi, 2008: 32), although the reality of domestic work is built upon the regulations in each of those areas. The vulnerability fostered through policies in different domains illustrates how intersecting inequalities of gender and race mutually reinforce each other, placing the most vulnerable subjects in situations that prevent them from claiming their rights and finding a way out. In fact, the provision of care services in the labour market under the terms we are familiar with (high irregularity, low salaries and limited rights) is only made possible by those same vulnerabilities. Addressing these would involve changes in each of the regimes. From one side, if we are to build a caring democracy (Tronto, 2013) in which care is recognised and valued, as are those who provide it, investments need to be made in public care services available to all, along with the guarantee of decent working conditions. Migrant domestic workers, who make up the majority of the sector, should be included in this project and their situation regularised accordingly, and independent migration routes should be established to allow legal entry of migrant workers. Simultaneously, a more egalitarian distribution of care responsibilities within the household should be promoted through regulations and policies. This needs to be achieved not only by debunking gender stereotypes on the role of men and women in the family and the market, but also by establishing mechanisms (e.g. parental leaves of equal length and compensation, mandatory) that foster this change.

ILO Convention 189 has brought domestic work right into the domain of labour law, engaging with some of the most persistent assumptions underlying it; and EU policy is also moving away from the exceptionality discourse. Nevertheless, only nine EU Member States have ratified the ILO Convention so far, and EU law (but also other international human rights instruments) is rarely mobilised to challenge discriminatory legislations (and collective agreements) at national level (Pavlou, 2016, 2018). Reversing this trend might be one of the best long-term strategies for achieving equality in this sector.

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The moral assumption of care for parents: a gender issue?

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Abstract

This article asks whether attitudes towards the moral obligation to care for parents is a gender issue that is generalisable to all European countries, or whether different models of the welfare state and provision of assistance to older people are factors that modify the views of informal carers. To this end, the article analyses the European Values Study as applied to five countries which, according to previous correspondence, represent different cultural models: Norway, Germany, Russia, Italy and Spain. The article provides an analysis of each of these countries in order to identify the impact of sociodemographic variables (sex and living together with parents), as well as a comparative analysis aimed at identifying differences and similarities among different models of welfare (Scandinavian, former communist, Central European and familialist). The aim is to determine whether the associated factors have an individual character, with a strong gender impact, or rather a cultural character, with the welfare model providing a strong associated impact. The analysis reveals that in the case of opinions gathered in different European countries, the model of welfare appears as the most influential associated factor. Similarly, it can be said that despite the existence of strongly familialist welfare models in southern Europe, Spain moves towards a greater resemblance to central European countries on this issue.

Keywords: long-term care; family care; parents; gender; cohabitation

Resumen. *La asunción moral del cuidado de los progenitores: ¿una cuestión de género?*

Este artículo se pregunta si las actitudes hacia la obligación moral de cuidar a los progenitores es una cuestión de género generalizable a todos los países europeos, o si los distintos modelos de estado de bienestar y de prestación de asistencia a las personas mayores son factores que modifican las opiniones de las personas cuidadores informales. Para ello, el artículo analiza la Encuesta Europea de Valores aplicada a cinco países que, según previas correspondencias, representan modelos culturales diferentes: Noruega, Alemania, Rusia, Italia y España. El artículo ofrece un análisis de cada uno de estos países con el fin de identificar el impacto de las variables sociodemográficas (sexo y convivencia con los progenitores) y de realizar un análisis comparativo dirigido a identificar las diferencias y similitudes entre los distintos modelos de bienestar (escandinavo, excomunista, centroeuropeo y familista). El objetivo es determinar si los factores asociados tienen un carácter individual, con un fuerte impacto de género; o más bien un carácter cultural, asociado al modelo de bienestar. El análisis revela que, en el caso de las opiniones recogidas en diferentes países europeos, el modelo de bienestar aparece como el factor asociado más influyente. Del mismo modo, se puede afirmar que, a pesar de la existencia de modelos de bienestar fuertemente familistas en el sur de Europa, España avanza en esta cuestión hacia una mayor semejanza con los países centroeuropeos.

Palabras clave: cuidados de larga duración; cuidado familiar; progenitores; género; convivencia

Summary

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1. Introduction

Family care, and more specifically long-term care, has taken on a social and political dimension in recent decades, becoming a major issue throughout Europe. As sociologist Teresa Bazo (2008) points out, the assumption of family care and intergenerational solidarity is a debate of great social interest.

Long-term care has a great family and personal impact. Caring at home implies an intimate relationship with the person being cared for, making the carer feel less free and more committed and responsible (Öhman & Söderberg, 2004). In this situation, family members express concern, not only for the dependent or sick person, but also regarding the consequences for the caregiver (Ruiz de Alegría, 2006).

Although men are gradually becoming more involved in caregiving (Aguilar, 2017), several studies show that the distribution is not equal and that women assume most responsibility (La Parra, 2001; Bodoque, 2016). Furthermore, when those being cared for have a high degree of dependency, it is women, in their dual roles as wives and daughters, who take on the greatest

responsibility for caring for them (Ruiz de Alegría, 2006). In sum, caregiving interferes with women's daily lives much more than with men's, and puts them at greater risk of negative consequences. In this sense, while some studies highlight the benefits of caregiving, other research points to negative perceptions of caregivers (Neufeld & Harrison, 2003).

The fact of taking on the responsibility for caring for our relatives or not therefore places us in a situation of ambivalence between, on the one hand, the moral duty of care, the logic of reciprocity and increasing solidarity and, on the other, our own aspirations and the resources available to us (Rodríguez, 2013). Studies such as Aguilar (2017) conclude that the logic of reciprocity and the perception of care as a gift that obliges us to return care for care is very present in the narratives of caregivers.

However, it could also be that this moral assumption of care on the part of women is a construction of the collective imaginary rather than a reflection of their free will to carry out care work. This could be seen, for example, following the COVID-19 pandemic, when elements such as women's greater resilience in caregiving and their lesser awareness of the caregiver burden (Raiber & Verbakel, 2021) were highlighted (Cohen et al., 2021), even though the consequences of the "refamiliarisation" of care (Martínez Buján et al., 2021) have had very harmful effects for women carers (Budnick et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2021; Lorenz-Dant & Comas-Herrera, 2022; Truskinovsky et al., 2022; Zwar et al., 2022; Gräler et al., 2022).

In this regard, we consider which factors have the greatest impact on the duty of care for older people. Is it a gender issue or is it, rather, variables such as culture and a country's welfare model that have the greatest impact on care? In order to address this question, we have used the results of the European Values Study carried out in 34 European countries, basing our research on the following question or item: "*Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents*".

Previous studies (Aristegui et al., 2022) have confirmed that sociodemographic variables such as age, sex and, above all, living with the people being cared for are the associated factors when considering care for parents as a moral obligation. This has been verified through analysis of the European Values Study in its application to Spain, in the survey's latest edition in 2017-2018. Similarly, analysis of the European Values Study has confirmed that attitudes towards the moral duty to care for one's parents varied according to the model of welfare. Those countries with developed welfare models, such as the Scandinavian countries, headed by Norway, demonstrate the greatest disagreement with the idea that daughters and sons have a moral obligation to care for parents. In this sense, the Scandinavian countries, which have more developed welfare states, are united around a less familialist position on the allocation of care responsibilities. Similarly, the communist past shared by various European countries appears to be an associated factor for the opposite view. The communist past of former Soviet republics appears as an associated factor in the positioning of those countries in relation to care for fathers and

mothers, given that it coincides with the high level of agreement with the moral responsibility of sons and daughters.

This research takes as its starting point the following hypotheses: that women who live with the people they care for take on an excessive burden of caring tasks, leading them to question the moral duty of care more than men who provide care who also live with the people they care for; and that a country's welfare model has an impact on the perception of care. Thus, the more developed welfare models coincide with lower levels of agreement with the obligation to care for older family members.

2. Care, older people and women carers

2.1. *The moral obligation to care*

The aging of our populations and the need for care are shot through with inequalities between men and women. The burden of this care, whether inside the family or through market alternatives, falls particularly heavily on the shoulders of those women who have the least resources. (Lidia Brun, 2022)

The specialist literature demonstrates that:

Care in the home continues to be provided, to a large extent, through informal, paid or unpaid work, and it is increasingly common to find semiformal care arrangements. The establishment of these inexpensive cash-for-care systems may increase inequalities of class and gender. (Rodríguez Modroño & Matus López, 2016: 123-124)

More recent studies show how, in Spain:

The implementation of policies that make cuts to public services, and specifically what are referred to as social services, is provoking a reinforcement of the 'familialist' model, in which the responsibility for covering the assistance and care needs of family members is dependent on familial cooperation and/or solidarity. (Esteban Ramiro & Fernández Montaña, 2017: 42-43)

As María Jesús Rodríguez García argues, we must reconsider "the central role played by households in the production of welfare and, on the other hand, pay attention to the changes in the forms of female participation in the labour market, as a new social risk on which the state can intervene" (Rodríguez García & Navarro Yáñez, 2008: 62). The consideration of state-market-family relationships forces us to consider the sexual division of labour at the heart of the home and the distribution of care work, as well as the generation of unpaid welfare work. All these things condition access to equality of opportunity and the enjoyment of political, economic and social rights.

Feminist economics has for some years denounced the fact that inequality and care form part of a vicious cycle that leads to exclusion from citizenship

(Pérez Orozko, 2009). According to Pérez Orozko, in order to break with the vicious cycle of care-inequality-exclusion we must recognise a “right to care that is constituted from the hard core of citizenship” (Pérez Orozco, 2009: 5). To this end, we need to open the “democratic debate about who must provide care, for whom, how, where and in exchange for what” (Pérez Orozco, 2009: 4). If we understand care as the work that is necessary for subsistence, well-being and social reproduction (Carrasco Bengoa, 2017), we cannot avoid the fact that care work is essential for the maintenance of any human community. This is an issue that has become more obvious in the context of collapse, such as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As people we are interdependent (Tronto, 2013), and for this reason it does not make sense to consider and design social policy based on the premise that some people are independent and others are dependent; perhaps it would be better to assume the existence of different degrees of dependence. All people will require care. However, the social and economic value attributed to care work is very limited; as an example, we can cite the care duties carried out by those who work in the area of home help, “a feminised occupational sector that is little valued in terms of social status and salary, precisely because of the work’s association with domesticity and femininity” (Roca Escoda, 2018: 76).

A number of surveys (Clece, 2021; Obra Social La Caixa, 2016; Imsero, 2005) indicate that the majority of the population want to be cared for at home when they are older; however, a rigid sexual division of labour persists in the familial sphere, meaning that the majority of those who perform the care are women, precisely because of their condition as women (wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, etc). Similarly, previous studies (Aristegui et al., 2018; Aristegui et al., 2022;) have revealed that, in the case of care for the elderly, there is general agreement both in Spain and in the Basque Autonomous Community that sons and daughters have an obligation to care for their parents in the long term. Two factors are associated with this viewpoint: age and whether one lives with one’s parents. However, it has also been concluded that being a woman is not associated with a greater level of agreement with the obligation to care for one’s parents. Rather, the data analysed indicates that women in the middle age group, the group in which care is largely concentrated, are those who question this agreement to the greatest extent.

This leads us to believe that the collective imaginary regarding familial care for parents has not taken on board the questioning of this care by the very women who provide the care work. Moreover, the younger and older populations, as well as the men who live with their parents, maintain a particular distance from this care work.

2.2. Care for older people

According to data from 2016, 17% of the population in the European Union are carers, and women make up 62% of this total (Zigante, 2018). Care for older people and/or people with disabilities is concentrated among women in

the pre-retirement age range (50-64 years). In terms of the intensity of care work, 21% of women and 11% of men in this age range provide care every day or several days a week; these percentages fall to 13% and 9% respectively in the 15-49 age range (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019).

Although the need for care that derives from our interdependence is a constant throughout the whole life cycle (Martín Palomo, 2021), there is no doubt that with age our challenges increase, due to the loss of physical, cognitive, emotional and social resources, and it becomes more and more difficult to compensate for this loss with the gains of this stage of life. It should be noted that the care required by older people is longer, and the nature of that care more complex, than that required by younger people. Thus, it is calculated that the need for care is three times greater in the case of people over the age of 80 than in those between the ages of 15 and 64 (Durán de las Heras, 2021). This generates a greater burden on the carer than care for younger people (Schrank et al., 2016).

Age is associated with a greater level of dependence, understood as a lack of or decrease in the functional capacity to carry out everyday life activities and, frequently, with greater social fragility – a situation determined by the loss of autonomy in performing instrumental activities, but also the shortage of significant people who can provide instrumental, social and economic support for life in the community (Beloki et al., 2021). If dependence, above all in its most extreme cases, is characterised by the need for care with a significant physical and psychological component involving intensive, long-term and often professional dedication, situations of social fragility (even if less perceptible) are associated with the loneliness, emotional suffering and abandonment that come with the loss of those connections that were forged earlier in life (Beloki et al., 2021; Fundación HelpAge Internacional España, 2021).

The greater longevity and increased age expectancy of the population bring us face to face with the insufficiency of existing public policy, forcing families to adopt private strategies for the management of care. In the best of cases, these families seek a combination of public and private services alongside, as we said above, the care provided directly by the women in the family (Comas d'Argemir & Bofill Poch, 2021).

In short, both the direct provision of care and the organisation of this care generate high costs in terms of women's health, employment and personal development.

3. Methodological framework

3.1. *The sample*

The data analysed is based on the latest edition of the European Values Study (EVS). The Deusto Social Values team represents Spain in the EVS and has formed part of this consortium since 1990, participating in all waves of the EVS. The most recent wave was conducted between December 2017 and January 2018, with the participation of 34 European countries.

The definition of the paths, the procedure for selecting the building, building number, floor, apartment number and person to interview was also entirely established and agreed, in the first instance, between the researchers and principal researchers (PIs) of each country and the methodological team of the European Values Study. The EVS methodology has been greatly strengthened for the current wave to bring the quality of the data to a high level. Each national survey conforms to guidelines designed to ensure quality and consistency.

We should therefore point out that all the countries are considered in the same way, regardless of their size, since the complete sample is already weighted by the EVS methodological team, making it a representative sample for each country, as well as for Europe.

The total sample has been obtained from the sum of the samples of each country, all of them being representative with samples of more than 1,000 persons. The final total sample is weighted, according to the size of each country, by the EVS methodological team.¹

3.2. *The results*

This is a descriptive study, so we have used percentages and descriptive statistics to compare means (Anova). We have also carried out an analysis of correspondence to see how the countries appear in relation to care for the elderly, specifically in the case of long-term parental care. Thus, the diagram shows how each country is positioned in terms of greater or lesser support for family care. Finally, we analysed the incidence of socio-demographic variables such as cohabitation with parents and sex of respondents to measure whether the association is significant when it comes to positioning oneself in favour or against the moral duty of care. The results are presented in percentages as we used the chi-square statistic.

In order to analyse the results, we considered the positioning of the population on a scale of agree/disagree with the statement, “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents”. The scale goes from 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly agree” and 5 “strongly disagree”.

For the extraction of data in Europe, we selected a series of countries according to the following three criteria: on the one hand, the traditional classification of welfare states (Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and central European states) of Esping-Andersen (1990) has been considered, since the results of the European Values Survey establish a clear differentiation between countries with strong welfare states based on the principle of universalisation and the rest of the countries. Another geographical boundary, in terms of values, is provided by the ex-communist countries, as they demonstrate their own culture and set of values, which are strongly conditioned by their past as communist regimes (Ochkina, 2014). Finally, we have also considered the impact of the process

1. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/survey-2017/methodology/>

of secularisation in Europe in recent decades, which is an explanatory factor for cultural changes, especially in southern Europe (Halman & Van Ingen, 2015). This led us to select Norway as an exponent of the Nordic welfare state; Germany as an example of the Central European welfare state; Russia as an ex-communist country; and Italy and Spain as countries that have undergone rapid and progressive secularisation. The programme used was the SPSS.

4. Analysis of results

In this section, initially and as a general overview of the context, the attitudes of European citizens in relation to the moral duty of care are described. After explaining this context, an analysis is made of those countries which will be taken into account in the subsequent analysis and which have been selected according to the criteria indicated in the previous section.

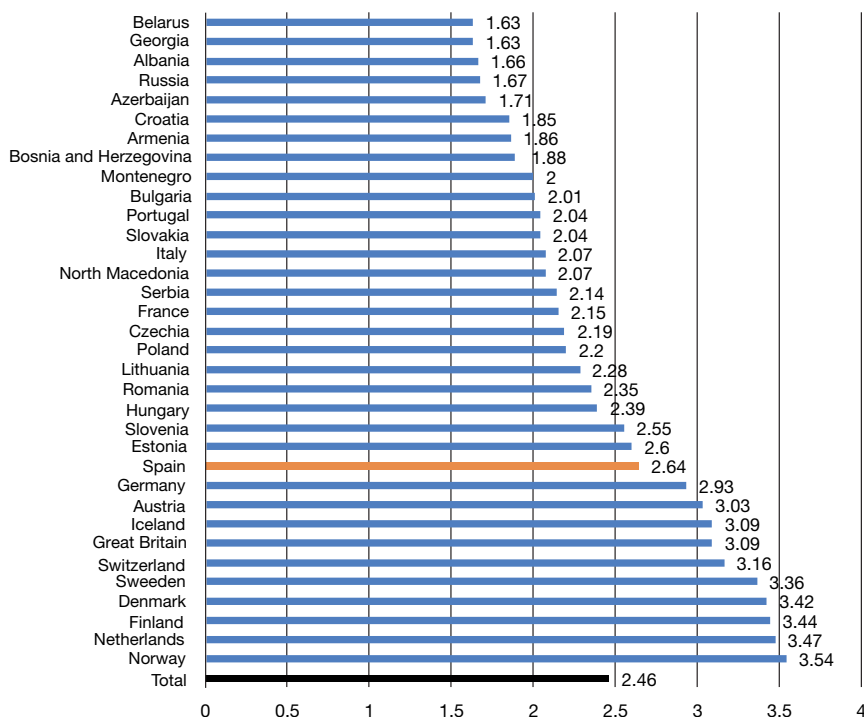
4.1. European attitudes to the model of care for older people

In this section, we analyse the level of agreement demonstrated by the European population with the statement “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents”. To this end, we have compared the means and related the countries according to their greater level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. Graph 1 orders the countries according to the mean attained.

The countries with the highest means are those that demonstrate the strongest disagreement with the statement. In this group we find all the Nordic countries (Norway, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark and Sweden), followed by some Central European countries (Switzerland, Austria and Germany). Spain and Great Britain are also situated with values above the total mean, as are Estonia and Slovenia. At the other extreme of the continuum we find those countries with a mean below 2, which implies strong agreement with the statement that sons and daughters have an obligation to provide care for their mothers and fathers. The countries that demonstrate high levels of agreement are Belarus, Georgia, Albania, Russia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Armenia and Bosnia Herzegovina. This ordered list of mean values leads us to ask whether it is possible to establish a relationship between options of care for older people and social welfare models. Certainly, it is indisputable that, at least at the two extremes, the political model of social welfare in the lower part of the graph and the communist past of the countries in the middle and upper part explain, to some degree, the disparate viewpoints we observe in Europe.

The analysis of correspondences demonstrates that the country with the highest level of disagreement with the statement is Norway, which is situated in the upper-right quadrant, alongside the option “totally disagree”. In the area around “disagree” we find countries such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Finland. All these countries have highly developed welfare states, characterised by systems of high taxes that allow for the application of

Graph 1. Level of agreement with the statement “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents.” (means) (1 “strongly agree” and 5 “strongly disagree”)

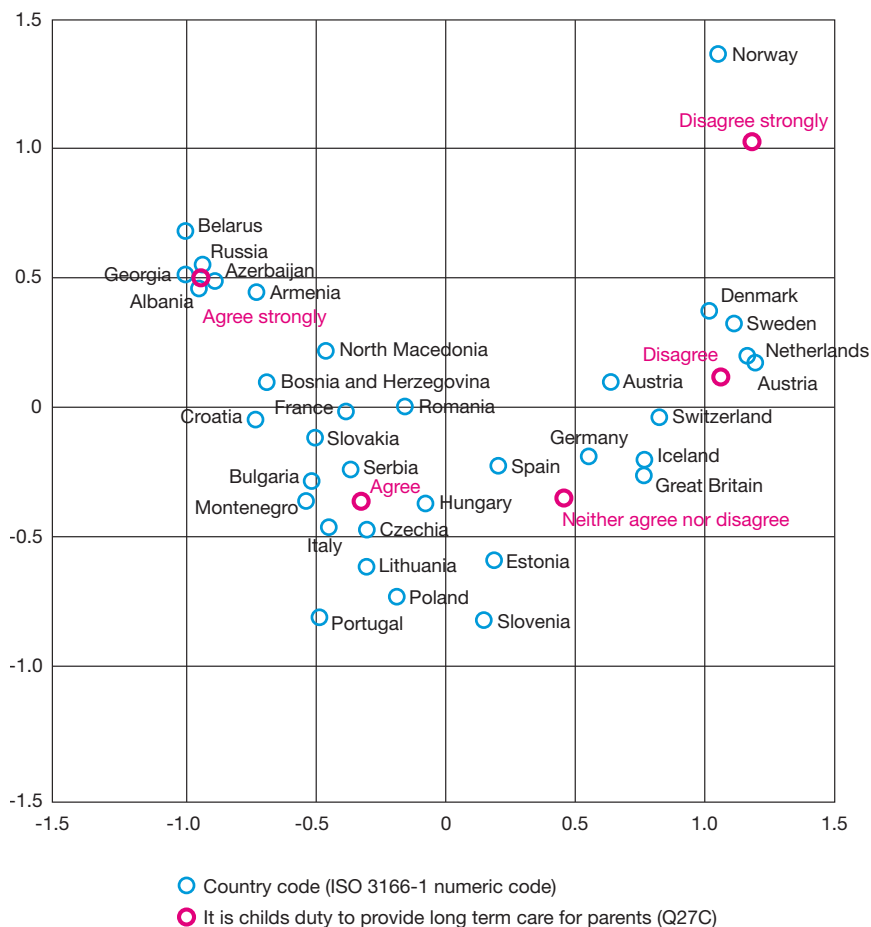


Source: authors' construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

the principle of universality in the majority of public services and benefits. These are societies with a high level of social equality and low levels of poverty and social exclusion. Another piece of information to keep in mind is that the majority of the countries that demonstrate higher levels of disagreement than agreement with the statement are countries with a life expectancy above 80 years, with robust pension systems and healthcare coverage, and which dedicate the highest percentage of GDP to long-term care (Zigante, 2018).

These are countries that occupy the highest positions in the Global Age Watch ranking, published by the British organisation HelpAge, which measures the wellbeing of older people in four areas: financial security, health, personal capacities and a favourable social environment (Taipale, 2014). The role played by the welfare state in the provision of services and assistance and care programmes may be one reason for the level of disagreement found in the Scandinavian countries, given that a higher level of joint responsibility for care duties will have been reached, thanks both to demercantilisation and, above all, to defamilialisation resulting from social and family policies that are universal and have a gender perspective.

Graph 2. Distribution of European countries in relation to the degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement: “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents”



Source: authors' construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

On the opposite side of the graph, in the upper-left quadrant, are those countries that are most in agreement with the statement. These are countries such as Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Albania, all of which share the fact that they used to be Soviet republics within the USSR and, as a result, have a recent communist past. The ideological base, development and evolution of the Soviet social state was very different to those of the welfare states in Europe that arose after World War II, and resulted, in part, from the interventionist socialisation of the USSR. Anna Óchkina (2014) argues that the Soviet social

state evolved from being an “institutional structure in all sectors of the social sphere: public health, education, housing, social security, culture” to one that “understood any social programme or project as an expense whose aim was to achieve stability, a kind of payment to eliminate or prevent social tension”. When the communist regime lost legitimacy and suffered a strong moral crisis, the social state continued to be a tool of protection in the face of economic downturn and commercialisation. It is difficult to know whether support for familial care for parents corresponds to a cultural rejection of a historical model that was highly interventionist, or the assumption of responsibility in the face of a social system that is considered incompetent, incapable or precarious.

No common pattern can be observed in the countries of southern Europe, given that the levels of agreement in countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy are not close. Spain has values similar to those recorded in Germany, Estonia and Slovenia, and for that reason the country is positioned closer to Central Europe. However, the highly familialist character of the Spanish welfare model also no doubt plays an important role in explaining the position of Spanish society in relation to this issue.

4.2. Living with parents and the obligation to care for them

One question to ask is whether living with one’s parents is a factor associated with the sense of duty to care for them. According to the data, the answer is that, to a large degree, there is a coherence between this idea and the variable of living together. Thus, 73% of Europeans who live with their parents agree or agree strongly with the obligation to provide long-term care for them. This percentage exceeds by more than 15% the percentage of those in agreement who do NOT live with their father and/or mother (56.2%).

Similarly, among people who demonstrate disagreement with this statement, the percentage of people who do NOT live with their parents is much greater.

If we analyse the degree of agreement/disagreement according to the sex of the respondent, we observe that there are almost no differences between the

Table 1. Agree/disagree with the statement “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents” according to whether they live together (Europe) (%)

	Europe	
	Live with father and/or mother	Do not live with parents
Strongly agree + agree	72.9	56.2
Neither agree nor disagree	16.4	19.0
Disagree + strongly disagree	10.6	24.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: authors’ construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

Table 2. Agree/disagree with the statement: “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents” according to whether they live together and by sex (Europe) (%)

	Europe			
	Live with father and/or mother		Do not live with parents	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agree + strongly agree	74.6	70.9	56.5	55.9
Neither agree nor disagree	15.8	17.1	19.7	18.5
Disagree + strongly disagree	9.6	12.0	23.9	24.8

Source: authors' construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

sexes in the case of people who do not live with their parents. However, in the case of people who live with their parents, we observe some quite significant particularities. In this sense, both men and women who live with their fathers and/or mothers demonstrate a greater degree of devotion to the moral duty to care for elders than people who don't live with either parent.

Women in Europe who live with their parents were found to be in agreement or strongly in agreement with the statement in 71% of cases, below the general pattern of agreement of the total, and well below men who live in the same situation (75%). This leads us to conclude that, contrary to what one might expect, men who live with their parents seem to do so on the basis of a moral duty of care that is greater than that of women with respect to their parents.

It is also notable that the ambivalence in the case of women who live with their parents is greater than that for men. Let's consider the possible causes of this ambivalence. If we start from the assumption that women are the ones who take on the majority of long-term care for older people, this information could reflect the fact that the consequences resulting from the familial model of care lead some women to question the traditional assumption of care as a moral duty. This questioning, however, does not apply to the men who live with their parents, probably because the care for family members falls most heavily on women (partners, sisters, etc.). It appears, therefore, that the question of care depends to a large extent on living together, as is reflected in the datum “the greater the situation of living together with parents, the greater the moral duty to care for them”; and at the same time, it is a question of differentiation according to sex. Both in Europe and in Spain, women who live with their parents tend to be somewhat less in agreement with the obligation to care than men.

If we now analyse the degree of agreement/disagreement by country, following the classification of the corresponding analysis above, we find that the cultural variable (values, welfare models) of each country has a strong influence on citizens' way of thinking.

Thus, we can confirm that, in all the cases analysed, people who live with their parents demonstrate a greater acceptance of the obligation to care for

Table 3. Agree/disagree with the statement: “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents” according to whether they live together and by sex in different European countries (%)

	Norway			
	Live with father and/or mother		Do not live with parents	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agree + strongly agree	65.2	43.4	32.8	24.6
Neither agree nor disagree	8.8	21.7	14.3	13.4
Disagree + strongly disagree	23.7	34.8	53.0	62.0
	Germany			
	Live with father and/or mother		Do not live with parents	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agree + strongly agree	63.5	64.3	35.2	38.7
Neither agree nor disagree	24.3	14.3	18.2	19.0
Disagree + strongly disagree	12.2	21.3	36.6	42.4
	Spain			
	Live with father and/or mother		Do not live with parents	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agree + strongly agree	72.9	62.9	51.2	51.6
Neither agree nor disagree	10.8	21.0	22.9	22.9
Disagree + strongly disagree	16.2	16.2	26.0	25.5
	Italy			
	Live with father and/or mother		Do not live with parents	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agree + strongly agree	77.2	75.9	74.2	74.4
Neither agree nor disagree	15.8	14.1	19.4	18.8
Disagree + strongly disagree	7.1	10.0	6.4	6.8
	Russia			
	Live with father and/or mother		Do not live with parents	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Agree + strongly agree	88.7	79.4	86.2	88.0
Neither agree nor disagree	9.4	11.5	9.8	9.1
Disagree + strongly disagree	1.8	9.1	4.0	3.0

Source: authors' construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

them than those who do not live with their parents. But the greatest differences are found according to country. In this regard, we can see that the percentages regarding agreement with the duty of care are much greater in countries such as Italy, and especially Russia, compared to Spain, Germany or Norway. If we consider the means of each country, we can confirm the results above.

Table 4. Comparison of means on agreement/disagreement with the statement “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents” according to sex and country in the group of people who live with their parents (1 “Strongly agree” and 5 “strongly disagree”)

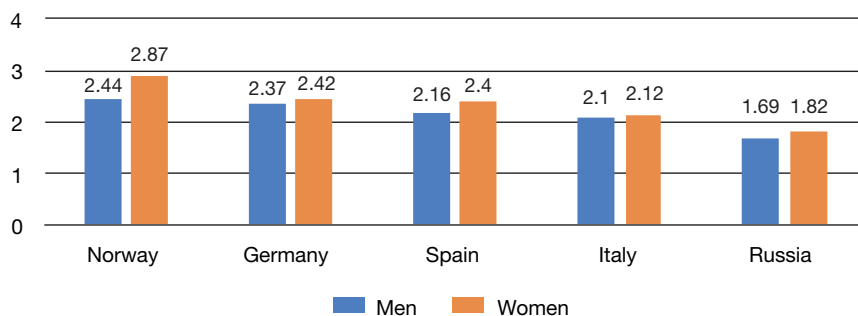
	Man	Woman
Norway	2.44	2.87
Germany	2.37	2.42
Spain	2.16	2.40
Italy	2.10	2.12
Russia	1.69	1.82
Europe	2.06	2.16

Source: authors' construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

The differences in means by sex are not statistically significant, although it is interesting that in all the cases analysed the means for women who live with their parents are somewhat higher than those for men, confirming our hypothesis that women who live with their parents are somewhat less in agreement than men with the moral duty of care, since they are the ones who carry the burden.

Furthermore, as can be seen in the graph, the variable that carries the greatest weight with reference to care is the country or the welfare model. Where there are developed welfare states, the appreciation of the moral duty of care on the part of sons and daughters drops. In the interpretation of the variable analysed, we appear to get more information from the division between western and eastern European countries than between countries in northern and southern Europe. The welfare models and the communist past of those states seem to be explanatory elements in the different perceptions of the European citizenry regarding the moral obligation to care for one's parents.

Graph 3. Distribution of European countries in relation to the degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement: “Adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents”



Source: authors' construction based on European Values Study 2017–2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

Conclusions

We return to the research question and the hypotheses that guided the study. Our work aimed to contribute to the theoretical debate on the care crisis by trying to discern whether the moral responsibility of caring for the elderly in Europe corresponds to a gender issue or rather to a cultural and institutional issue relating to social welfare models.

This research demonstrates that the job of caring for older people continues to carry a strong component of moral responsibility for the majority of the European citizens surveyed. This responsibility is recognised to the greatest extent by people who provide care and live with the people they care for, although women who live with their parents express a degree of disagreement greater than men who live with their parents, no doubt because women take on a higher level of, and greater responsibility for, this care work.

It is evident that those who perform this care are in the main women in the middle age range, whose resilience and capacity for adaptation to some degree allows public authorities to ignore this issue. Nevertheless, it is essential to remove care work from the private and domestic sphere and take it into the public and political sphere. It is urgent to define true models of joint-responsible care, in which the family (women and men), the market, public authorities, organised civil society and the community take part. And these new models cannot ignore social inequalities, given that it is the poorest women who take on the most work in relation to care. The stakes for a strong and universal model of welfare appear to influence the change of values and, therefore, the change in behaviours when it comes to exercising care. As we have already argued, we believe that social policies must aim to reduce the naturalised assumption of care, or at least question the willingness to adopt the decision to care, independently of the burden that it generates, in order to promote welfare models that are more egalitarian and just.

Thus, we have demonstrated the strong impact of gender on the assumption of care tasks and, above all, the moral perception of the responsibility to care among those who live with their parents. However, the impact of country is also clear, especially in view of the social welfare model behind it and the influence of its values. We have stated that the greatest differences are found according to country. In this regard, we can see that the percentages for agreement with the duty of care are much greater in countries such as Italy and especially Russia, than in Spain, Germany or Norway. This paper reinforces the incidence of a series of explanatory factors of the main cultural differences: on the one hand, the explanatory value of gender in the family sphere, and on the other hand, the significance of issues such as the social welfare model or the impact of the process of secularisation. Today, cultural differences in Europe, as reflected in value surveys, must place more emphasis on the differences between the West and the East than on the (now largely) outdated differences between southern and northern Europe. The communist past, the levels of social welfare and the different role played by secularisation are three issues to be considered in comparative studies.

An important challenge that we must face as societies lies in the political, economic and social-communitarian response to our aging societies. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the serious limitations of our model of care: residences must be made more humane and care work done by family members (especially women) or employees – what is inaccurately called “informal care” – requires greater regulation and recognition, not only social, but also economic.

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La asunción moral del cuidado de los progenitores: ¿una cuestión de género?

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Resumen

Este artículo se pregunta si las actitudes hacia la obligación moral de cuidar a los progenitores es una cuestión de género generalizable a todos los países europeos, o si los distintos modelos de estado de bienestar y de prestación de asistencia a las personas mayores son factores que modifican las opiniones de las personas cuidadoras informales. Para ello, el artículo analiza la Encuesta Europea de Valores aplicada a cinco países que, según previas correspondencias, representan modelos culturales diferentes: Noruega, Alemania, Rusia, Italia y España. El artículo ofrece un análisis de cada uno de estos países con el fin de identificar el impacto de las variables sociodemográficas (sexo y convivencia con los progenitores) y de realizar un análisis comparativo dirigido a identificar las diferencias y similitudes entre los distintos modelos de bienestar (escandinavo, excomunista, centroeuropeo y familista). El objetivo es determinar si los factores asociados tienen un carácter individual, con un fuerte impacto de género; o más bien un carácter cultural, asociado al modelo de bienestar. El análisis revela que, en el caso de las opiniones recogidas en diferentes países europeos, el modelo de bienestar aparece como el factor asociado más influyente. Del mismo modo, se puede afirmar que, a pesar de la existencia de modelos de bienestar fuertemente familistas en el sur de Europa, España avanza en esta cuestión hacia una mayor semejanza con los países centroeuropeos.

Palabras clave: cuidados de larga duración; cuidado familiar; progenitores; género; convivencia

Abstract. *The moral assumption of care for parents: a gender issue?*

This article asks whether attitudes towards the moral obligation to care for parents is a gender issue that is generalisable to all European countries, or whether different models of the welfare state and provision of assistance to older people are factors that modify the views of informal carers. To this end, the article analyses the European Values Study as applied to five countries which, according to previous correspondence, represent different cultural models: Norway, Germany, Russia, Italy and Spain. The article provides an analysis of each of these countries in order to identify the impact of sociodemographic variables (sex and living together with parents), as well as a comparative analysis aimed at identifying differences and similarities among different models of welfare (Scandinavian, former communist, Central European and familialist). The aim is to determine whether the associated factors have an individual character, with a strong gender impact, or rather a cultural character, with the welfare model providing a strong associated impact. The analysis reveals that in the case of opinions gathered in different European countries, the model of welfare appears as the most influential associated factor. Similarly, it can be said that despite the existence of strongly familialist welfare models in southern Europe, Spain moves towards a greater resemblance to central European countries on this issue.

Keywords: long-term care; family care; parents; gender; cohabitation

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1. Introducción

Los cuidados familiares y, sobre todo, los cuidados de larga duración han adquirido una dimensión social y política importante en las últimas décadas y se han convertido en un tema de mucha relevancia en toda Europa. Como señala la socióloga Teresa Bazo (2008), la asunción de los cuidados familiares y la solidaridad intergeneracional constituyen un debate de gran interés social.

Los cuidados de larga duración tienen un fuerte impacto familiar y personal. Cuidar en casa implica una relación íntima con la otra persona por la que estamos preocupados/as, nos hace sentirnos menos libres, comprometidos/as y responsables (Öhman y Söderberg, 2004). En esta situación, los familiares manifiestan preocupación, no solo por la persona dependiente y enferma, sino también por las consecuencias para el/la cuidador/a (Ruiz de Alegría, 2006).

Aunque los hombres se van incorporando paulatinamente a la actividad cuidadora (Aguilar, 2017), diversos estudios muestran que el reparto no es equitativo y que son las mujeres las que asumen la mayor responsabilidad (La Parra, 2001; Bodoque, 2016). Además, cuando las personas cuidadas tienen un alto grado de dependencia, son las mujeres, en su doble condición de esposas e hijas, las que asumen la mayor responsabilidad en su cuidado (Ruiz

de Alegría, 2006). El cuidado, en suma, interfiere en la vida cotidiana de las mujeres mucho más que en la de los hombres y las expone a un riesgo mayor de consecuencias negativas. En este sentido, mientras algunos estudios destacan los beneficios del cuidado, otras investigaciones apuntan a las percepciones negativas de las personas cuidadoras (Neufeld y Harrinson, 2003).

El hecho de asumir o no la responsabilidad del cuidado de nuestros ascendientes nos coloca, por tanto, en una situación de ambivalencia entre, por un lado, el deber moral del cuidado y la lógica de la reciprocidad y de la solidaridad ascendente, y por otro, nuestras propias aspiraciones y los recursos con los que contamos (Rodríguez, 2013). Estudios como el de Aguilar (2017) concluyen que la lógica de la reciprocidad y de la percepción del cuidado como un don que nos obliga a devolver cuidado por cuidado está muy presente en las narrativas de los/as cuidadores/as.

Sin embargo, también podría ser que esta asunción moral del cuidado por parte de las mujeres fuese una concepción dentro del imaginario colectivo, más que un reflejo de su libre voluntad para realizar las labores de cuidado. Es lo que pudo darse, por ejemplo, tras la pandemia del COVID-19, cuando se destacaron elementos como la mayor resiliencia de las mujeres en el cuidado y la menor conciencia de carga (Raiber y Verbakel, 2021; Cohen et al., 2021), a pesar de que las consecuencias de la «refamiliarización» de los cuidados (Martínez Buján et al., 2021) hubiesen tenido efectos muy perjudiciales para las mujeres cuidadoras (Budnick et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2021; Lorenz-Dant y Comas-Herrera, 2022; Truskinovsky et al., 2022; Zwar et al., 2022; Gräler et al., 2022).

En este sentido, nos planteamos qué factores tienen un mayor impacto en el deber de cuidar a las personas mayores. ¿Se trata de una cuestión de género o son las variables cultura y modelo de bienestar de un país las que más influyen en los cuidados? Para abordar esta cuestión, hemos utilizado los resultados del Estudio Europeo de Valores en su aplicación a 34 países europeos y hemos basado nuestra investigación en la siguiente pregunta o ítem: «¿Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres?».

En estudios previos (Aristegui et al., 2022) se ha podido constatar que variables sociodemográficas como la edad, el sexo y, sobre todo, la convivencia con personas cuidadas se revelaban como los factores asociados a la hora de considerar el cuidado de los progenitores como una obligación moral. Esta constatación se ha obtenido a partir del análisis de la Encuesta Europea de Valores en su aplicación en España en su última edición de 2017-2018. Asimismo, el análisis de la Encuesta Europea de Valores ha permitido constatar que el posicionamiento sobre el deber moral de cuidado de los progenitores varía en función del modelo de bienestar. Los países que tienen estados de bienestar desarrollados, como los países escandinavos, con Noruega a la cabeza, son los que mayor desacuerdo muestran ante la obligatoriedad moral del cuidado de los progenitores por parte de los hijos e hijas. En este sentido, es posible aunar a los países escandinavos, con estados de bienestar más desarrollados, en torno a un posicionamiento menos familista en la atribución de

responsabilidades de cuidado. Asimismo, el pasado comunista compartido por algunos países europeos parece ser un factor asociado a la opinión contraria. El pasado comunista de las antiguas repúblicas soviéticas se revela como un factor asociado al posicionamiento de estos países ante el cuidado de los padres y madres, en la medida en que se da en ellos un alto grado de acuerdo con la responsabilidad moral de hijos e hijas.

Esta investigación parte de las siguientes hipótesis previas: *a)* existe una carga excesiva en las tareas de cuidado que desempeñan las mujeres que conviven con las personas cuidadas, lo que las lleva a cuestionarse el deber moral de cuidado en mayor medida que los hombres que cuidan y que también conviven con las personas cuidadas; *b)* El modelo de bienestar de un país incide en la percepción que se tiene del cuidado. Así, a modelos de bienestar más desarrollados, menor acuerdo con la obligación del cuidado de los ascendientes.

2. Cuidado, personas mayores y mujeres cuidadoras

2.1. *La obligación moral de cuidar*

El envejecimiento de nuestras poblaciones y las necesidades de cuidado están atravesados por la desigualdad entre hombres y mujeres. La carga de estos cuidados, ya sean dentro de la familia o a través de las alternativas del mercado, recae particularmente sobre los hombros de las mujeres con menos ingresos. (Lidia Brun, 2022)

La literatura especializada muestra que:

Los cuidados siguen siendo proporcionados, todavía en gran medida, en los hogares a través de trabajo informal, remunerado y no remunerado, y cada vez más se encuentran estrategias de cuidados semiformales. El establecimiento de estos esquemas baratos de *cash-for-care* puede elevar las desigualdades de clase y de género. (Rodríguez Modroño y Matus López, 2016: 123-124)

Estudios más recientes muestran que, en España:

La puesta en práctica de políticas de recortes en servicios públicos y de forma concreta en lo que se refiere a los servicios sociales está provocando un reformamiento del modelo “familista” en el que se deposita sobre la cooperación y/o solidaridad familiar la cobertura de necesidades de atención y cuidados de los integrantes del núcleo de convivencia. (Esteban Ramiro y Fernández Montaña, 2017: 42-43)

Como afirma María Jesús Rodríguez García, debemos, «por un lado, reconsiderar el papel central que desempeñan los hogares en la producción de bienestar y, por otro lado, atender a los cambios en las formas de participación femenina en el mercado de trabajo, como nuevo riesgo social sobre el que el

estado puede intervenir» (Rodríguez García y Navarro Yáñez, 2008: 62). La consideración de las relaciones estado-mercado-familia nos obliga a tener en cuenta la división sexual del trabajo en el seno del hogar y el reparto del trabajo de cuidados, así como la generación de trabajo asistencial no remunerado. Todo ello condiciona el acceso a la igualdad de oportunidades y el disfrute de los derechos políticos, económicos y sociales.

La economía feminista hace años que viene denunciando que la desigualdad y el cuidado forman parte de un círculo vicioso que conduce a la exclusión de la ciudadanía (Pérez Orozco, 2009). Según esta autora, para romper el círculo vicioso cuidado-desigualdad-exclusión es necesario el reconocimiento de un «derecho de cuidado que sea constituido del núcleo duro de la ciudadanía» (Pérez Orozco, 2009: 4), para lo cual es imperativo abrir el «debate democrático sobre quién debe cuidar, a quién, cómo, dónde y a cambio de qué» (Pérez Orozco, 2009: 4). Si entendemos el cuidado como todos los trabajos necesarios para la subsistencia, el bienestar y la reproducción social (Carrasco Bengoa, 2017), no podemos obviar el hecho de que las tareas de cuidado son esenciales para el mantenimiento de cualquier comunidad humana. Esta cuestión ha sido más evidente en un contexto de colapso como el producido por la pandemia del COVID-19. Somos seres interdependientes (Tronto, 2013), por lo que no tiene sentido pensar y diseñar las políticas sociales bajo la premisa de que existen personas autónomas y personas dependientes; quizá sea mejor asumir que existen personas con diferentes grados de dependencia y que todas ellas van a necesitar cuidados. Sin embargo, es escaso el valor social y económico atribuido a las labores de cuidado; podemos poner el ejemplo del trabajo de cuidados en los servicios de ayuda a domicilio, que es «un sector ocupacional feminizado y poco valorado en términos sociales y salariales, precisamente por la vinculación del trabajo a la domesticidad y a la feminidad» (Roca Escoda, 2018: 76).

Numerosas encuestas (Clece, 2023; Obra Social La Caixa, 2016; Imsero, 2005) indican que la mayoría de la población desea ser cuidada en casa cuando sea mayor; sin embargo, en el ámbito familiar persiste una férrea división sexual del trabajo que implica que quienes cuidan son, mayoritariamente, las mujeres por su condición de mujeres (esposa, madre, hermana, hija, etc.). Del mismo modo, investigaciones anteriores (Aristegui et al., 2018 y 2022) han revelado que, en el caso del cuidado ascendente, existe un acuerdo general, tanto en España como en la Comunidad Autónoma de Euskadi (CAE), con la obligación de los hijos/as de prestar cuidados a largo plazo a los progenitores. La menor y mayor edad y la convivencia con los propios progenitores se revelan como factores asociados a dicho acuerdo. Sin embargo, también se concluye que ser mujer no se asocia a un mayor acuerdo con la obligación de cuidar a los progenitores; antes bien, los datos analizados apuntan a que las mujeres de edades intermedias, grupo en el que se concentra mayoritariamente el cuidado, son quienes cuestionan en mayor medida tal afirmación.

Ello nos lleva a pensar que el imaginario colectivo sobre el cuidado familiar de los progenitores no está incorporando el cuestionamiento que del

mismo puedan estar haciéndose las mujeres que desempeñan estos cuidados, y que la población más joven, la población mayor, así como el grupo de hombres convivientes con los progenitores se mantienen especialmente ajenos al mismo.

2.2. El cuidado de las personas mayores

Según datos de 2016, en la Unión Europea, un 17% de la población es población cuidadora y las mujeres suponen el 62% (Zigante, 2018) de ese total. El cuidado de personas mayores o con discapacidades se concentra en las mujeres en edades previas a la jubilación (50-64 años). Por lo que respecta a la intensidad de los cuidados, el 21% de las mujeres y el 11% de los hombres de ese tramo de edad presta cuidados todos los días o varios días a la semana, porcentajes que se reducen al 13% y 9% en el tramo de edad de 15 a 49 años (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019).

Aunque la necesidad de cuidados derivada de nuestra interdependencia es una constante a lo largo de todo el ciclo vital (Martín Palomo, 2021), no cabe duda de que con el envejecimiento se acrecientan nuestras dificultades debido a la pérdida de recursos físicos, cognitivos, emocionales y sociales, y se hace cada vez más difícil compensarlas con las ganancias que acontecen en esos tramos de la vida. Cabe afirmar que el cuidado que necesitan las personas mayores es de mayor duración y de naturaleza más compleja que el de las personas jóvenes. Así, se calcula que la necesidad de cuidados es tres veces mayor en el caso de las personas mayores de 80 años que en el de las personas de entre 15 y 64 años (Durán de las Heras, 2021) y genera una carga mayor en la persona cuidadora que el cuidado descendente (Schränk et al., 2016).

El envejecimiento va asociado a una mayor dependencia, entendida como falta o disminución de la capacidad funcional para hacer frente a las actividades de la vida diaria, y, a menudo, a una mayor fragilidad social —situación determinada por la pérdida de autonomía para las actividades instrumentales, pero también de personas significativas que puedan proveer de apoyo instrumental, social y emocional para la vida en comunidad (Beloki Marañón et al., 2021). Si la dependencia, sobre todo en sus estadios más severos, se caracteriza por la necesidad de unos cuidados con un gran componente físico y psicológico, que requieren una dedicación intensiva, de larga duración y a menudo cualificada, las situaciones de fragilidad social (aun pasando más desapercibidas) están asociadas a la soledad, al sufrimiento emocional y al abandono resultante de la pérdida de vínculos forjados en otras etapas de la vida (Beloki Marañón et al., 2021; Fundación HelpAge Internacional España, 2021).

La mayor longevidad y el creciente envejecimiento de la población se enfrentan a una insuficiencia de políticas públicas que obliga a las familias a adoptar estrategias privadas para su gestión, buscando en el mejor de los casos una combinación de servicios públicos, de servicios prestados por el mercado y el desempeño directo del cuidado por parte, como se ha dicho, de las mujeres del ámbito familiar (Comas d'Argemir y Bofill Poch, 2021).

En definitiva, tanto la prestación directa del cuidado como la organización de este generan unos altos costes en la salud, en el empleo y en el desarrollo personal de las mujeres.

3. Apartado metodológico

3.1. *La muestra*

Los datos que se han analizado están basados en la última Encuesta Europea de Valores – European Values Study (EVS). El Equipo Deusto Valores Sociales representa a España en la EVS y ha formado parte de este consorcio desde 1990 participando en todas las oleadas de la EVS. La última oleada fue realizada entre diciembre de 2017 y enero de 2018 y participaron en ella 34 países europeos.

La definición de los recorridos, el procedimiento de selección del edificio, el número de edificio, la planta, el número de apartamento y la persona que se iba a entrevistar se establecieron íntegramente y se acordaron, en primera instancia, entre los investigadores e investigadores principales (IP) de cada país y el equipo metodológico de la Encuesta Europea de Valores. La metodología de la EVS se ha reforzado enormemente en la oleada actual con el fin de elevar la calidad de los datos a un alto nivel. Cada encuesta nacional se ajusta a unas directrices diseñadas para garantizar la calidad y la consistencia.

Debemos señalar, por tanto, que todos los países tienen la misma consideración, independientemente de su tamaño, puesto que la muestra completa es ponderada por el equipo metodológico de la EVS, lo que la convierte en una muestra representativa tanto de cada país como de Europa.

La muestra total se obtiene a partir de la suma de las muestras de cada país, todas ellas representativas con muestras de más de mil personas. La muestra total final ha sido ponderada, según el tamaño de cada país, por el equipo metodológico de la EVS¹.

3.2. *Los resultados*

Siendo este un estudio descriptivo, hemos utilizado porcentajes y estadísticos descriptivos para la comparación de medias (Anova). También hemos realizado un análisis de correspondencias para ver cómo se sitúan los países en relación con el cuidado de ancianos; concretamente, en el caso del cuidado parental de larga duración.

Para analizar los resultados hemos tenido en cuenta el posicionamiento de la población en una escala de acuerdo/desacuerdo con la afirmación: «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres». La escala va del 1 al 5; 1 es muy de acuerdo y 5 muy en desacuerdo.

1. <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/survey-2017/methodology/>

Para la extracción de los datos de Europa se ha seleccionado una serie de países de acuerdo con tres criterios: por una parte, la clasificación tradicional de estados de bienestar (nórdicos, anglosajones y centroeuropeos) de Esping-Andersen (1990), en la medida en que los resultados de la Encuesta Europea de Valores establecen una clara diferencia entre países con fuertes estados de bienestar basados en el principio de universalidad y el resto de países. Otro límite geográfico, en términos de valores, lo proporcionan los países excomunistas, ya que muestran su propia cultura y conjunto de valores, fuertemente condicionados por su pasado como regímenes comunistas (Óchkina, 2014). Por último, también hemos considerado el impacto que ha tenido el proceso de secularización en Europa en las últimas décadas, que es un factor explicativo de los cambios culturales, especialmente en el sur de Europa (Halman y Van Ingen, 2015). Ello nos ha llevado a seleccionar Noruega como exponente del estado de bienestar; Alemania como ejemplo de estado de bienestar centroeuropeo; Rusia como país excomunista; e Italia y España como países que han experimentado una secularización rápida y progresiva.

El programa utilizado ha sido SPSS.

4. Análisis de resultados

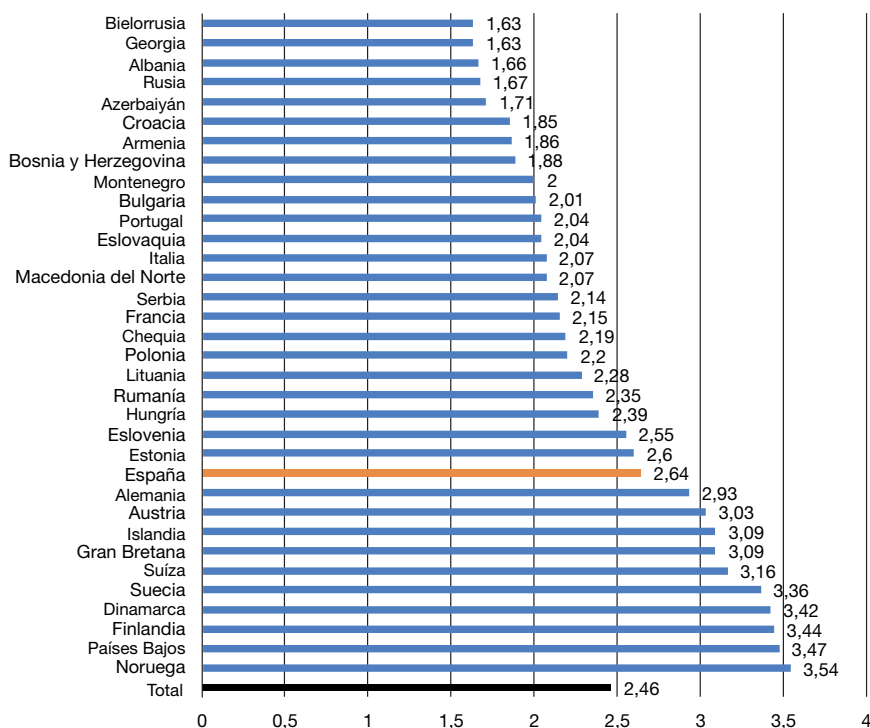
En este apartado, a modo de visión general del contexto, se describen las actitudes de la ciudadanía europea en relación con el deber moral de cuidados. Tras la explicación de este contexto, se analizan los países que serán tenidos en cuenta en el análisis posterior. Los países se han escogido siguiendo los criterios indicados en la sección anterior.

4.1. Actitudes europeas ante el modelo de cuidado de las personas mayores

En esta sección analizamos el grado de acuerdo mostrado por la población europea con la afirmación «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres».

Los países con medias más altas son aquellos que muestran mayor desacuerdo con la afirmación. En este grupo encontramos a todos los países nórdicos (Noruega, Países Bajos, Finlandia, Dinamarca y Suecia), seguidos por algunos países centroeuropeos (Suiza, Austria y Alemania). Con valores superiores a la media total también se sitúan España y Gran Bretaña, así como Estonia y Eslovenia. En el otro extremo del continuo encontramos aquellos países con medias inferiores a 2, lo que implica un gran acuerdo con la afirmación de que es obligación de las hijas e hijos proporcionar cuidado a sus madres y padres. Los países que manifiestan altos grados de acuerdo son Bielorrusia, Georgia, Albania, Rusia, Azerbaiyán, Croacia, Armenia y Bosnia Herzegovina. Esta primera presentación ordenada de las medias nos lleva a preguntarnos si es posible establecer una relación entre las opciones de cuidado de las personas mayores y los modelos de bienestar social, ya que es indiscutible que, al menos en los dos extremos, el modelo político de bienestar social, en la parte superior del gráfico,

Gráfico 1. Grado de acuerdo con la afirmación: «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres». Medias (de 1 «muy de acuerdo» a 5 «muy en desacuerdo»)



Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

y el pasado comunista de los países con medias más bajas podrían explicar, en parte, el posicionamiento dispar que observamos en Europa.

Los países con las medias más altas son los que muestran un mayor desacuerdo con la afirmación. En este grupo se encuentran todos los países nórdicos (Noruega, Países Bajos, Finlandia, Dinamarca y Suecia), seguidos de algunos países centroeuropeos (Suiza, Austria y Alemania). España y Gran Bretaña también se sitúan con valores superiores a la media total, al igual que Estonia y Eslovenia. En el otro extremo del continuo se encuentran los países con medias inferiores a 2, lo que implica un fuerte acuerdo con la afirmación de que los hijos e hijas tienen la obligación de cuidar a sus madres y padres. Los países que muestran altos niveles de acuerdo son Bielorrusia, Georgia, Albania, Rusia, Azerbaiyán, Croacia, Armenia y Bosnia Herzegovina. Esta primera presentación ordenada de las medias nos lleva a preguntarnos si es posible establecer una relación entre las opciones de cuidado de las personas mayores y los modelos de bienestar social, ya que es indiscutible que, al menos en los dos extremos, el modelo político de bienestar social de la parte superior del gráfico y el pasado comunista de los países de la parte media e

Gráfico 2. Distribución de los países europeos en relación con el grado de acuerdo o desacuerdo con la afirmación: «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres»



Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

inferior explican, en cierta medida, el dispar posicionamiento que observamos en Europa.

El análisis de correspondencias muestra que el país con mayor nivel de desacuerdo con la afirmación es Noruega, que se sitúa en el cuadrante superior derecho, junto a la opción «totalmente en desacuerdo». En torno al «desacuerdo» encontramos a países como Dinamarca, Suecia, Países Bajos o Finlandia. Todos estos países poseen estados de bienestar altamente desarrollados, caracterizados por elevados sistemas impositivos que permiten aplicar

el principio de universalidad en la mayoría de los servicios y prestaciones públicas. Son sociedades con una estratificación social igualitaria con bajos niveles de pobreza y de exclusión social. Otro dato que debe tenerse en cuenta es que la mayoría de los países que muestran mayores niveles de desacuerdo que de acuerdo con la afirmación son países con una esperanza de vida superior a los ochenta años, con solventes sistemas de pensiones y cobertura sanitaria, y los que mayor porcentaje del PIB dedican a los cuidados de larga duración (Zigante, 2018).

Se trata de países que se sitúan en los primeros puestos de la clasificación Global Age Watch, que publica la organización británica HelpAge y que mide el bienestar de los ancianos en cuatro áreas: seguridad salarial, salud, capacidades personales y ambiente social favorable (Taipale, 2014). El papel que juega el estado de bienestar en la provisión de servicios y programas de atención y cuidado puede ser una de las razones que expliquen el nivel de desacuerdo que se recoge en los países escandinavos, puesto que se habría alcanzado un mayor nivel de corresponsabilidad en las tareas de cuidado gracias tanto a la desmercantilización como, sobre todo, a la desfamilización proporcionada por políticas sociales y familiares de carácter universal y con perspectiva de género.

En el lado opuesto del mapa, en el cuadrante superior izquierdo, se sitúan los países que están más de acuerdo con la afirmación. Se trata de países como Bielorrusia, Rusia, Georgia, Azerbaiyán o Albania; todos ellos países que comparten haber sido repúblicas soviéticas de la URSS y, por tanto, un pasado reciente comunista. El estado social soviético ha tenido una base ideológica, un desarrollo y una evolución muy distintos a los estados de bienestar europeos surgidos en Europa después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y que respondían, en parte, a la socialización intervencionista de la URSS. Anna Óchkina (2014) afirma que el estado social soviético evolucionó de ser una «estructura institucional en todos los sectores de la esfera social: sanidad pública, educación, vivienda, seguridad social, cultura» a «entender cualquier programa y proyecto social como un gasto en pos de la estabilidad, como un pago para eliminar o prevenir la tensión social». Cuando el régimen comunista perdió legitimidad y sufrió una fuerte crisis moral, el estado social siguió siendo una herramienta de protección ante el decrecimiento y la mercantilización. Es difícil aventurar si el apoyo al cuidado familiar de los progenitores responde a un rechazo cultural de un modelo históricamente muy intervencionista o a la asunción de una responsabilidad por considerar incompetente, incapaz o precario el sistema social.

No se observa un patrón común en los países del sur de Europa, puesto que los niveles de acuerdo de países como España, Portugal o Italia no son próximos. España posee valores similares a los recogidos en Alemania, Estonia o Eslovenia, por lo que su posicionamiento está más cercano al centro europeo. Sin embargo, el carácter altamente familista del modelo de bienestar español, sin duda, también juega un papel importante a la hora de explicar la postura de la sociedad española en esta cuestión.

4.2. La convivencia con los progenitores y la obligación de cuidarlos

Nos preguntamos si la convivencia con los padres y madres es un factor asociado a la percepción del deber de cuidarlos. La respuesta a la que apuntan los datos es que, en gran medida, parece haber cierta coherencia entre lo que se piensa y la variable convivencia. Así, en Europa, el 73% de quienes viven con sus ascendientes afirma estar de acuerdo o muy de acuerdo con la obligación de prestarles cuidados de larga duración. Este porcentaje supera en más de 15 puntos el porcentaje de acuerdo que muestran las personas que no conviven con sus padres o madres (56,2%).

Del mismo modo, entre las personas que se muestran en desacuerdo con dicha afirmación, el porcentaje de las personas que no conviven con sus padres/madres es mucho mayor.

Si analizamos el grado de acuerdo/desacuerdo en función del sexo de las personas que viven o no con sus progenitores, observamos que apenas hay diferencias en el caso de las personas no convivientes con ascendientes. Sin embargo, en el caso de las personas convivientes apreciamos algunas particularidades que son bastante significativas. En este sentido, tanto los hombres como las mujeres que conviven con sus padres/madres muestran un mayor grado de adhesión al deber moral de cuidar a los mayores que quienes no viven con ninguno de sus progenitores.

Tabla 1. Acuerdo/desacuerdo con la frase «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres» según convivencia (España y Europa) (%)

	Europa	
	Vive con padre/madre	No vive con progenitores
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	72,9	56,2
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	16,4	19,0
En desacuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	10,6	24,8

Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

Tabla 2. Acuerdo/desacuerdo con la frase «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres» según convivencia y sexo (Europa) (%)

	Europa			
	Vive con padre/madre		No vive con progenitores	
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	74,6	70,9	56,5	55,9
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	15,8	17,1	19,7	18,5
En desacuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	9,6	12,0	23,9	24,8

Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

Tabla 3. Acuerdo/desacuerdo con la frase «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres» según convivencia y sexo en distintos países europeos (%)

	Noruega			
	Vive con padre/madre		No vive con progenitores	
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	65,2	43,4	32,8	24,6
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	8,8	21,7	14,3	13,4
Muy de acuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	23,7	34,8	53,0	62,0
	Alemania			
	Vive con padre/madre		No vive con progenitores	
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	63,5	64,3	35,2	38,7
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	24,3	14,3	18,2	19,0
Muy de acuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	12,2	21,3	36,6	42,4
	España			
	Vive con padre/madre		No vive con progenitores	
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	72,9	62,9	51,2	51,6
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	10,8	21,0	22,9	22,9
Muy de acuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	16,2	16,2	26,0	25,5
	Italia			
	Vive con padre/madre		No vive con progenitores	
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	77,2	75,9	74,2	74,4
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	15,8	14,1	19,4	18,8
Muy de acuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	7,1	10,0	6,4	6,8
	Rusia			
	Vive con padre/madre		No vive con progenitores	
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres
De acuerdo + muy de acuerdo	88,7	79,4	86,2	88,0
Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo	9,4	11,5	9,8	9,1
Muy de acuerdo + muy en desacuerdo	1,8	9,1	4,0	3,0

Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

Las mujeres que conviven con sus progenitores se muestran de acuerdo o muy de acuerdo con la afirmación en un 71% en Europa, por debajo del patrón general de acuerdo del total y muy por debajo de los hombres que se encuentran en la misma situación (75%). Esta realidad nos lleva a afirmar que, contrariamente a lo que cabría pensar, los hombres que viven con sus padres parecen hacerlo basándose en un deber moral de cuidado mayor que el que existe entre las propias mujeres con respecto a sus propios progenitores.

Tabla 4. Comparación de medias sobre el acuerdo/desacuerdo con la frase «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres» según sexo y país en el grupo de personas que conviven con sus ascendientes (medias) (1: muy de acuerdo y 5: muy en desacuerdo)

	Hombre	Mujer
Noruega	2,44	2,87
Alemania	2,37	2,42
España	2,16	2,40
Italia	2,10	2,12
Rusia	1,69	1,82
Europa	2,06	2,16

Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

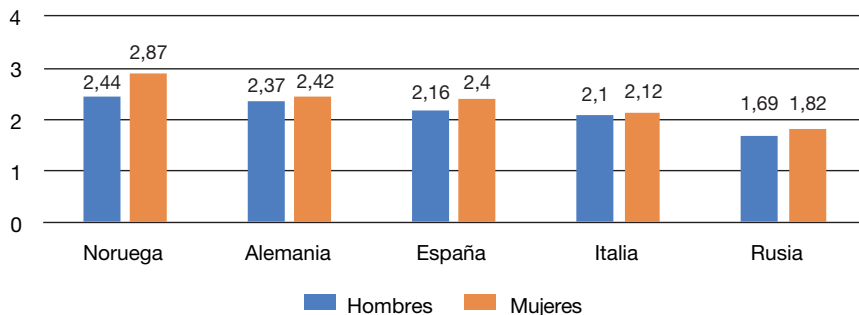
Llama la atención, así mismo, la indefinición en el caso de las mujeres convivientes, que está por encima de los hombres. Nos planteamos a qué se debe esa indefinición. Si partimos del supuesto de que las mujeres son quienes asumen mayoritariamente los cuidados de larga duración de las personas mayores, este dato pudiera estar reflejando que las consecuencias derivadas de un modelo familiar de cuidados estén llevando a algunas mujeres a cuestionarse la tradicional asunción de estos como deber moral. Este cuestionamiento, sin embargo, no alcanzaría a los hombres que conviven con sus progenitores, probablemente porque el cuidado de los familiares recae más en las mujeres (parejas, hermanas...). Parece, pues, que el tema del cuidado depende en gran medida de la convivencia, tal y como reflejan los datos «a más convivencia con los ascendientes, mayor deber moral del cuidado de estos», y al mismo tiempo es una cuestión diferenciada según el sexo. Tanto en Europa como en España las mujeres convivientes tienden a estar algo menos de acuerdo con esa obligación que los hombres.

Si analizamos ahora el grado de acuerdo/desacuerdo en función del país, siguiendo la clasificación anterior del análisis de correspondencias, vemos que la variable cultural (valores, modelos de bienestar) de cada país tiene un gran peso en la manera de pensar de su ciudadanía.

Así, podemos comprobar que en todos los casos analizados las personas convivientes muestran una mayor aceptación de la obligación del cuidado que aquellas no convivientes, pero que las mayores diferencias se dan en función del país. En este sentido, se puede observar que los porcentajes afines al acuerdo con el deber del cuidado son mucho mayores en países como Italia y, muy especialmente, Rusia, si los comparamos con Alemania o Noruega. Si tenemos en cuenta las medias de cada país podemos reafirmar los resultados anteriores.

Las diferencias de medias por sexo no son significativas estadísticamente, aunque resulta curioso que en todos los casos analizados las medias de las mujeres convivientes están algo por encima de las de los hombres, lo cual confirma

Gráfico 3. Comparación de medias sobre el acuerdo/desacuerdo con la frase «Es obligación del hijo proporcionar cuidado a largo plazo para los padres» según sexo y país en el grupo de personas que conviven con sus ascendientes (medias) (1: muy de acuerdo y 5: muy en desacuerdo)



Fuente: elaboración propia a partir de European Values Study 2017-2018 <<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>>

nuestra hipótesis de que las mujeres que conviven con sus ascendientes están algo menos de acuerdo que los hombres con el deber moral del cuidado, ya que es en ellas en quien recae el peso de este.

Además, tal y como se aprecia en el gráfico, se puede también señalar que la variable que más peso tiene en lo referente al cuidado es el país o el modelo de bienestar. Allí donde existen estados de bienestar desarrollados disminuye la apreciación del deber moral de cuidado de los hijos e hijas. En la interpretación de la variable analizada, parece que nos aporta más información la división entre países occidentales y orientales que entre países del norte y el sur de Europa. El modelo de bienestar y el pasado comunista de los estados parecen ser elementos explicativos de las diferentes percepciones de la ciudadanía europea con respecto al deber moral del cuidado de los progenitores.

Conclusiones

Volvemos a la pregunta de investigación y a las hipótesis que guiaron el estudio. Nuestro trabajo pretendía contribuir al debate teórico sobre la crisis de los cuidados intentando discernir si la responsabilidad moral del cuidado de los mayores en Europa responde a una cuestión de género o más bien a una cuestión cultural e institucional relacionada con los modelos de bienestar social.

La investigación muestra que la labor de cuidado de las personas mayores sigue teniendo un fuerte componente de responsabilidad moral para la mayoría de la ciudadanía europea encuestada. Esta responsabilidad es reconocida en mayor medida por las personas que cuidan y que conviven con las personas cuidadas, aunque las mujeres expresan un grado de desacuerdo mayor que los hombres convivientes, seguramente porque el grado y la responsabilidad de cuidado ejercido son mayores.

Es una evidencia que quienes están realizando estos cuidados de forma mayoritaria son las mujeres de mediana edad, cuya resiliencia y capacidad de adaptación está permitiendo, en cierta medida, que los poderes públicos desatiendan esta cuestión. Sin embargo, es fundamental desplazar del ámbito privado y doméstico la tarea de cuidado y llevarla al ámbito de lo público y lo político. Urge definir verdaderos modelos de cuidado corresponsables, donde intervengan la familia (mujeres y hombres), el mercado, el poder público, la sociedad civil organizada y la comunidad. Y estos nuevos modelos no pueden desatender las desigualdades sociales, puesto que quienes más carga de trabajo asumen en las tareas de cuidado son las mujeres más pobres. La apuesta por un modelo de bienestar fuerte y universal parece tener incidencia en el cambio de valores y, por ende, en el cambio de comportamientos a la hora de ejercer el cuidado. Como ya hemos afirmado, creemos que las políticas sociales debieran tener como finalidad reducir la asunción naturalizada de los cuidados o cuando menos cuestionarse la voluntariedad de la adopción de la decisión de cuidar, independientemente de la carga que genere, para poder promover modelos de bienestar más igualitarios y justos.

Un importante reto que debemos afrontar como sociedades está en la respuesta política, económica y sociocomunitaria que damos al envejecimiento de nuestras sociedades. La pandemia ha permitido visibilizar las serias limitaciones que tiene nuestro modelo de cuidado: las residencias deben humanizarse y el cuidado realizado por familiares (sobre todo mujeres) o personas contratadas (sobre todo mujeres migrantes de Latinoamérica en empleos precarios que nos abocan a la cadena global de cuidados), mal llamado cuidado informal, necesita una mayor regulación y reconocimiento —no solo social sino también económico.

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Facing yet another crisis? Gender-based violence policies at the Spanish local level during COVID-19

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Abstract

Analyses show that crises like the COVID-19 pandemic had gendered effects. This paper explores its impact on gender-based violence (GBV) policies in Spain. We carry out an empirical analysis addressing the case of *Information Centres for Women*, a local institution in the region of Galicia aimed at promoting equality and tackling GBV. We use a survey to gather information on three key dimensions of GBV policies (resources, actions and coordination) before, during, and after the pandemic. The study shows that there were no significant setbacks in terms of funding and personnel during lockdown. Yet, resources were not enlarged despite increasing levels of violence. Actions had to focus on priority issues and preventive measures were mostly paralyzed, while coordination with other institutions became more difficult. Data gathered for the post-pandemic period indicates that some of these changes remained in place. The article contributes to academic debates by delving into an understudied policy issue: the impact of the pandemic on equality policies at the local level.

Keywords: equality policies; local level; crisis; gender-based violence; Information Centre for Women; Spain; Galicia

Resumen. *¿Hacer frente a otra crisis? Las políticas de violencia de género en el ámbito local español durante la COVID-19.*

La literatura muestra que crisis semejantes a la generada por la pandemia de la COVID-19 tuvieron un impacto de género. En este trabajo exploramos los efectos de esta última crisis sobre las políticas de abordaje de la violencia de género (VG) en España. En concreto, llevamos a cabo un análisis empírico sobre los Centros de Información a la Mujer (CIM) de la comunidad autónoma de Galicia, instituciones locales destinadas a promover la igualdad y abordar la violencia de género. Utilizamos una encuesta para recopilar información sobre tres dimensiones clave de las políticas contra la violencia de género (recursos, acciones y coordinación) antes, durante y después de la pandemia. El estudio muestra que no hubo retrocesos significativos en términos de financiación y de personal durante el confinamiento. Sin embargo, los recursos de los CIM tampoco fueron ampliados, a pesar de que se produjo un aumento de los niveles de violencia contra las mujeres durante dicho periodo. Como resultado, las acciones realizadas desde estas instituciones locales se centraron fundamentalmente en cuestiones prioritarias vinculadas a la atención directa de las mujeres en situación de violencia de género. El resto de las medidas se redujeron drásticamente o incluso fueron paralizadas. Asimismo, la coordinación con otras instituciones fue más difícil. Los datos recogidos para el periodo pospandémico indican que algunos de estos cambios persistieron. El artículo contribuye a los debates académicos actuales profundizando en una cuestión política poco estudiada: el impacto de la pandemia en las políticas de igualdad en el ámbito local.

Palabras clave: políticas de igualdad; ámbito local; crisis; violencia de género; Centros de Información a la Mujer; España; Galicia

Summary

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1. Introduction

On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a “public health risk of international concern” (WHO, 2020a). Within a few weeks, its presence had already been detected in 114 countries, and more than 4,000 people had lost their lives. COVID-19 was officially considered a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). The lethal nature of the disease and its rapid transmission led governments around the world to implement a series of social distancing measures. Lockdowns lasted for months in some countries, mobility was limited to different degrees, and social gatherings of all kinds were banned (Sánchez et al., 2020). In Spain, the national government declared a state of emergency [*estado de alarma*] on 14th March,

in order to control the health crisis (Real Decreto [Royal Decree] 463/2020), and a lockdown was established from 15th March to 2nd June. Subsequently, measures were progressively loosened (freedom of movement, social gatherings etc.), although the increase in cases forced the extension of the state of emergency until May 2021. Those measures are considered effective in controlling the spread of the virus (García & Sánchez, 2021). However, the Covid-19 response also generated political, social and economic effects that need to be carefully analysed. Just like in former pandemics, COVID-19 had specific and disproportionate consequences for women (Zarra & Ceron, 2021; Rubery & Tabora, 2021). Available data shows the impact of the pandemic on access to sexual and reproductive health services, on levels of unemployment, and on housework and caregiving, which affected women's jobs as well as their mental health (United Nations, 2022; European Union, 2022).

In this article, we explore a key area of interest: gender-based violence (GBV). Unlike previous crises, international organizations such as the WHO and especially UN Women proclaimed the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 response from the beginning of the pandemic, urging governments to embrace a gender perspective (Wenham et al. 2020; Tomsick, et al. 2022). The prominence of more 'urgent' issues though – especially during the initial stages –, combined with a lack of political will, meant that gender equality was a rather secondary political goal in this period. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) analysis of the COVID-19 response in 206 countries revealed that only 12% of them took a significant number of gender-sensitive measures, while 42% of them had none (United Nations, 2022). Negative impacts have been particularly severe regarding GBV (Sánchez, et al. 2020; United Nations, 2021). Surveys carried out by the UN revealed alarming figures, while the executive director of UN Women herself referred to this type of violence as a 'shadow pandemic' (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020).

This article contributes to this crucial research agenda by exploring the case of Spain, a country that has undertaken a myriad of measures to address GBV since the beginning of the pandemic. Specifically, our study focuses on local GBV policies before, during and after the lockdown period. Gender equality policies in Spain are multilevel in nature (Verge & Alonso, 2020); in this article we explore empirically GBV policies at the local level in the region of Galicia, focusing on *Information Centres for Women* (ICWs) (84 municipalities). These local institutions have a primary role in delivering services to attend women experiencing GBV. We use a questionnaire to gather information on the impact of the pandemic on three dimensions of local GBV policies: resources, actions and coordination with other key institutional actors. Academic works have mostly focused on analysing the impact of the pandemic on gender inequalities (Wenham et al., 2020), the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the governments' responses, or the key role played by some critical actors such as UN Women (Mintrom & True, 2022; Tomsick et al., 2022). This study expands on former contributions by delving into a policy issue and a level of government that have been rather understudied.

Section one of this article reviews the literature on the changes affecting gender equality policies during crises; section two introduces a brief description of GBV policies in Spain and Galicia. Next, the methodology of the study is presented, followed by an empirical section which introduces its main findings. Finally, the conclusions section discusses the implications of the study for the literature on GBV policies, as well as for state intervention in this area.

2. Challenges for the development of gender equality policies:

The role of crises

2.1. Gender equality policies: Setbacks and developments

Gender equality policies have been progressively consolidated in different countries and at different levels of government (Htun & Weldon, 2018; Mazur, 2015). Specific institutions, strategies and instruments have been developed, giving shape to a differentiated policy sector (Alonso, 2015; Paleo & Alonso, 2014). Yet, gender mainstreaming has rapidly become a key approach to promote equality in every realm of public intervention, while equality bodies have progressively expanded their scope of action, strengthening their role as agenda-setters and influencing all areas of government (Alonso, 2015). Gender equality has not yet reached a central position in most national and international agendas and the goals of gender mainstreaming are still far from being achieved in post-industrial democracies (Waylen, 2017; Verloo, 2018). The adoption of policy programmes as well as their effective implementation remains challenging, as gender equality initiatives often have limited funding and resources (Engeli & Mazur, 2018). Their impact depends significantly on the personal commitment of so-called *femocrats* – political and technical staff of equality bodies – and their ability to influence personnel in other areas and levels of government. Likewise, equality structures tend to occupy a marginal position in the institutional architecture, which limits their capacity to shape other policies (Alfama & Paleo, 2022). *Resistances* emerge and developments are rather slow and uneven, even in institutions with a significant level of performance regarding equality goals (Mergaert et al., 2014). Recent research agendas go a step further and identify the key role of oppositional actors who push to dismantle equality policies altogether (Verloo, 2018).

Crises represent a key challenge for the effective implementation of gender policies. Academic works have repeatedly shown how economic crises have gendered impacts and how gender equality policies are likely to experience significant setbacks in those periods (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Paleo & Alonso, 2014; Gálvez & Rodríguez, 2013; Gálvez, 2012). They emphasize the need to include a gender perspective in policies aimed at dealing with economic and financial constraints. In this regard, the 2008 financial crisis brought up important lessons, as the EU's response based on austerity and the fiscal control of Member States lacked a gender perspective (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022). The crisis revealed the fragility of equality policies and how

developments could be easily reversed (Alfama et al., 2014; Beteta, 2013; European's Women's Lobby, 2009). Gender mainstreaming was simply not applied (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013), and austerity policies had a very negative impact both on the situation of women (Bettio et al., 2012; European Women's Lobby, 2012) and on gender equality policies. The marginalization of the feminist agenda (for example, by eliminating equality bodies or reducing their budgets) represented an indicator of a government's adequate response to the crisis, and contributed to framing equality as a rather marginal policy goal. All in all, the 2008 crisis represented a critical juncture for the promotion of equality in many countries (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013).

2.2. The COVID-19 crisis from a gender perspective

Academic works have explored the gendered nature of the COVID-19 pandemic since the very beginning and rapidly concluded that this crisis also contributed to increasing inequalities between men and women (Al-Ali, 2020; Nazneen & Araujo 2021; Wenham et al., 2020). Three areas are of special interest for exploring this impact: decision-making, work (paid and unpaid), and GBV. Concerning the former, scholars have emphasized the underrepresentation of women in key decision-making arenas related to the COVID-19 response. Women were more likely to comply with restrictions such as social distancing, and more likely to consider the pandemic as a critical issue. Yet their potential contribution as leaders wasn't equally considered during this period (Smith, 2020; Zarra & Ceron, 2021), and the glass ceiling kept female experts away from high-level decision-making bodies defining the response to the crisis. The underrepresentation of women raised concerns about the legitimacy of those decisions and anticipated their negative impact on gender inequalities (Smith, 2020).

Moreover, the effect of the pandemic on women's paid and unpaid work was different from former crises, as they were overrepresented in key economic sectors. Institutions at the frontline of the COVID-19 response, such as health-care or social services, were highly feminized. Although that gave them greater visibility and social recognition, it also meant that women were more exposed to the virus, while often lacking adequate protection measures. Other economic sectors highly affected by restrictions, such as tourism or hospitality, were also feminized (Cook & Grimshaw, 2021). According to ILO data, in 2018 84% of employed women worked in the private services sector across Europe, compared to 61% of men (Blaskó et al., 2020). Women were also over-represented in non-standard and precarious forms of employment, which faced a higher risk of dismissal during lockdown and when the economic crisis hit. Finally, social distancing and school closures increased the burden of housework and caregiving. Traditional gender roles whereby women are expected to be principal carers while men perform a breadwinner role were exacerbated during the pandemic in most EU countries (Blaskó et al., 2020). Researchers predicted a large increase in female unemployment and a wider wage gap (Alon et al., 2020), and data

from the US and Canada soon revealed that women with children were more likely than men with children to have reduced their working hours or to have left their jobs (Collins et al., 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020).

A third consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak was an increase in the prevalence of GBV. This type of violence was already a major global problem. According to WHO data, one in three women has suffered physical and/or sexual violence by her partner at some point in her life (World Health Organization, 2021). Social distancing measures and the economic and social consequences of the pandemic resulted in an even greater level of prevalence. The European Parliament estimated that GBV increased by a third during lockdowns in some EU countries. The significant rise in the number of calls received by GBV hotlines shows this shift (OEA, 2020; United Nations, 2020, 2021). In the case of Spain, calls to the 016 hotline increased by 51.43% in the second trimester of 2020, during a strict national lockdown (University of Granada, 2022), and the first month of this period of lockdown witnessed a rise in online consultations of 443.5% compared to March 2019 (Ministry of Equality, 2020). Eurobarometer data shows that 75% of women in Spain perceived an increase in GBV and up to 47% affirm that lockdowns and curfews had a negative impact on their mental health (six points more than the European average) (European Union, 2022). Paradoxically, existing data also indicates a decrease of GBV cases reported to the authorities, especially during lockdown. We can thus assume the negative impact of the pandemic on the capacity to report a case and to access GBV services (Ruiz-Pérez & Pastor-Moreno, 2021). In fact, the number of women attended increased when restrictions were lifted (Universidad de Granada, 2022).

UN Women provided several indicators to grasp the severity of the situation. In coordination with 58 countries, in April 2020 UN Women conducted surveys on the gendered impact of the pandemic. Up to 45% of the women interviewed declared having been directly or indirectly exposed to at least one form of GBV (that is, them or their acquaintances had experienced one or more forms of violence) during COVID-19 (United Nations, 2021). Verbal abuse and deprivation of basic resources were the most common forms of violence (23%), while 21% of those surveyed reported having experienced prohibition to communicate, which was probably aggravated by different restrictions (lockdowns, curfews and social distancing). UN Women urged governments and other key actors to understand that homes were not safe places for women, and became a global promoter of GBV policies (Mintrom & True, 2022). National institutions were expected to increase funding for online services and civil society organizations; ensure that judicial systems worked properly; establish emergency alert systems in pharmacies and grocery stores; consider women's shelters as essential services; and create safe ways for women to seek support (United Nations, 2020). Up to 149 countries introduced some of these policies; local, subnational, and national governments around the world responded to UN Women's political initiative by expanding their capacity to deliver services remotely (Mintrom & True, 2022).

The EU response to COVID-19 differed from that of other crises. EU institutions committed to provide sufficient funds for addressing the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. The so-called *recovery funds* entailed the end of austerity, characterized by a neoliberal and degendered approach (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022). The inclusion of a gender perspective in those policies was rather limited, and women were not equally represented in key decision-making arenas. Yet lessons learnt from previous crises helped feminist critical actors to seize their opportunities and navigate resistances. Despite a hostile context, equality issues were incorporated in the COVID-19 response, thanks, among others, to feminist actors in the European Parliament. Their coordinated efforts were successful in incorporating gender-sensitive actions in the recovery funds, even though measures were not transformative and remained at a rather technical level (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022).

Similarly, analyses exploring the national level showed that *national recovery and resilience plans* (NRRPs) unevenly incorporated a gender perspective (Zarra & Ceron, 2021). Spain appears to be one of the countries where this approach was more coherently adopted. Considerable resources were allocated to education and training policies, promoting women's digital skills while seeking to improve the presence of women in the STEM sectors. Public investment was also directed to developing the *care economy*, which in turn would boost female employment rates and decrease time devoted to housework (Zarra & Ceron, 2021).

3. Gender-based violence policies in multi-governed Spain

3.1. The institutionalization of GBV policies

GBV has long been considered a policy problem of public concern in Spain. The women's movement framed GBV as a key issue from the transition period and mobilized intensively in the following decades (Valiente, 2013). Policy development in Spain is often divided into different phases. The first phase corresponds to the 80s and 90s, when GBV was included on the policy agenda and actions were developed at different levels. The creation of the national *Women's Institute* in 1983 represented a key milestone for the promotion of equality in Spain (Bustelo, 2016), and soon after that, pioneer measures were undertaken. The penal code was reformed in 1989 to address "domestic abuse", in parallel with the creation of the first women's shelters across the country. GBV was subsequently included in the equality plans developed both at the national and regional level. Yet, this issue rose to the top of the political agenda at the end of the 90s, following the killing of Ana Orantes, which attracted significant media attention. A second reform of the penal code was undertaken to increase the protection of victims, and specific plans and measures (hotlines, special surveys, databases etc.) soon reflected the existence of broad social and political concern on the matter (Ferrer & Bosch 2014).

The second phase starts with the approval of the *Ley Orgánica 1/2004 de medidas de protección integral contra la violencia de género* [Organic Law 1/2004 of protection measures against gender-based violence]. Achieving vast political consensus, this law introduced a gendered approach to addressing violence against women. For the first time in Spain, this ‘policy problem’ was framed as rooted in structural gender inequalities (López, 2011; Bustelo & Lombardo, 2007), which required a wide variety of measures relating to prevention and awareness-raising (the education system, media etc.), comprehensive attention for victims in different areas (healthcare, social services, etc.), and protection (police, judiciary etc.). This law included the creation of brand-new institutional devices such as GBV courts and a *government delegation on gender-based violence*, and rapidly became internationally acclaimed good practice (Pastor-Gosálbez et al., 2021; Roggeband, 2012). Nevertheless, the economic crisis jeopardised its development, seriously affecting the resources available to implement existing policies (Paleo & Alonso, 2015; Lombardo & León, 2015), and deepening some key weaknesses, such as the lack of inter-institutional coordination or of sufficient awareness-raising and training activities directed at key roles (judges, police officers, etc.) (Verge & Alonso, 2020).

These concerns triggered intense mobilisations from the feminist movement and led to the main milestone that initiated the third phase of GBV policies in Spain. The *Pacto de Estado contra la Violencia de Género* [State Agreement Against Gender-Based Violence] was signed by all political parties in 2017, following growing demands to improve existing measures and to implement the *Istanbul Convention*, ratified by Spain in 2014. In line with this international treaty, the agreement included a broader concept of GBV, enlarging the existing legal framework, which limited its scope to intra-partnership violence. Improving implementation of Law 1/2004 represented another key achievement, thanks to 290 specific measures directed at fostering policies at all levels of government and inter-institutional coordination (Pastor et al. 2021; Villacampa, 2018). Resources represented another key component of the agreement, although these were only significantly increased recently (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018).

COVID-19 constituted the most recent challenge for GBV policies in Spain. The newly created *Ministry of Equality* of the PSOE-Podemos coalition government had to respond to this uncharted scenario. Fifteen days after starting a strict national lockdown, the government issued *Real Decreto 12/2020, de medidas urgentes en materia de protección y asistencia a las víctimas de violencia de género* [Royal Decree 12/2020, of urgent measures to protect and assist victims of GBV], under which all public services relating to GBV were classified as “essential”, allowing institutions to continue to attend to victims (shelters, psychological counselling etc.). Using economic resources from the *State Agreement*, this decree included a myriad of urgent measures to direct funding to regional and local authorities, in order to facilitate the adaptation of all services to the new scenario (Ruiz-Perez & Pastor-Moreno, 2021).

The national government also sponsored specific actions such as nation-wide information campaigns, guidelines for public authorities and new helplines.

3.2. GBV policies in Galicia and the role of local authorities

The development of GBV policies in Spain cannot be understood without considering the quasi-federal nature of the Spanish state. Since their inception, GBV has also been addressed by regional and local authorities. Sub-national governments pioneered the development of key policies in Spain, mirroring their leading role in other key areas such as gender mainstreaming. The first specific legislation on the issue was passed at the sub-national level, and the types of violence addressed have been traditionally broader (Verge & Alonso, 2020). Additionally, regional and, notably, local institutions are at the forefront of GBV policy implementation, as many essential services are provided, supervised or coordinated at those levels. Interestingly, academic research has paid limited attention to the role of local authorities in Spanish GBV policies. This article addresses the case of Galicia, which has a similar approach to other regions and has developed specific legislation and plans to address GBV. Most regional policy measures aim at providing resources to local authorities, as municipalities in Spain enjoy specific powers to develop actions to promote gender equality and other welfare services. Local equality policies and institutions are now widespread (Alfama & Paleo, 2022; Paleo & Diz, 2021; Paleo, 2018), and GBV represents a key area of intervention, thanks, among other things, to those state and regional-wide policies that emphasise the role of the local level. Galicia is no exception, and municipalities are at the core of GBV policy implementation. In this region, *Information Centres for Women* (ICW) [*Centros de Información á Muller*] have been set up in many counties (eight in total) and municipalities (76 in total). Most of them are part of a local institutional setting. Their functions and structure are regulated by the regional *Decree 130/2016*, which establishes that ICWs are “permanent institutional resources that articulate a comprehensive intervention targeted at supporting women and providing legal advice, psychological counselling, and social and career-related advice, as well as at developing any other action to promote effective equality between men and women.” Their mandate is thus rather broad, and ICWs frequently undertake awareness-raising campaigns, promote women’s associations or foster gender mainstreaming in local policies (Paleo & Diz, 2021; Paleo, 2018). Yet *Decree 130/2016* establishes that combating GBV constitutes a central and defining goal; accordingly, all ICWs must have at least a lawyer and a psychologist among their staff, both with training on gender equality issues. This legislation also contemplates their key role in the wider institutional network tackling GBV, as they must coordinate with institutions at various levels, including the regional government. They must also act as a key liaison in their own territory, leading local inter-institutional coordination bodies on GBV [*mesas de coordinación inter-institucional*]. These types of mechanisms have been set up in Galicia in the last ten years to estab-

lish cooperative practices at the local level, both across institutions and with civil society actors.

Thirty-six percent of Galician municipalities (114 municipalities) currently have ICWs, covering 73% of the population of this region in all four provinces (A Coruña, Lugo, Ourense, Pontevedra). Provinces are local entities with their own legal status that embrace several municipalities. Their governing bodies, the provincial councils, often perform a very active role in promoting local GBV policies, which has a positive impact on the activity of ICWs. In the case of Galicia, the provincial council of A Coruña stands out precisely for its long history of promoting such policies. Most ICWs are located in the provinces of A Coruña and Pontevedra, where municipalities are more populated and gender policies more developed (Paleo, 2018).

It is worth noting that ICWs receive funding from several institutional levels (Paleo, 2018). Existing data indicate that the regional government provided funding to 87% of them, whereas provincial councils and the central government gave resources respectively to 13.6% and 8% of them, and the EU only to 7%. Paleo shows that in A Coruña more than 30% of the municipalities have received funding from their provincial council, while other provinces had lower figures (Paleo, 2018). Interestingly, austerity policies and the approval of the *State Agreement on GBV* had an impact on funding. In Galicia, the national government and the UE increased their share in providing economic resources.

4. Methodology

The empirical analysis presented in this article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local GBV policies by focusing on the role of ICWs in Galicia. It looks at four key dimensions: 1) the general characteristics of each ICW (year of creation, institution it is affiliated to, sources of funding, territorial scope of action); 2) the economic and human resources available to carry out their duties; 3) their performance (actions, type of attention -face-to-face/online-, number of women using the services, difficulties of access, difficulties experienced by professionals, impact of the *State Agreement on GBV*, assessment of housing resources); and 4) the coordination with other key public institutions (Table 1).

An online questionnaire was sent to all 84 ICWs in Galicia in July 2022. Contact information was gathered from the regional government's database, and an email with a summary of the research goals and a link to the online questionnaire was sent to all of them. Each ICW was subsequently contacted by phone to check whether the email had been received and to explain in detail the importance of their participation in the study.

The questionnaire consisted of 36 questions and was delivered via the *SurveyMonkey* platform. The period for answering the questionnaire was three months, between 26th July and 26th September 2022. The response rate was 70.2% (N=59). 76.3% of the questionnaires were answered by the chief direc-

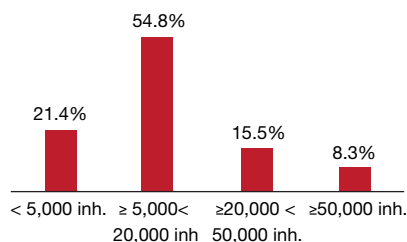
Table 1. Dimensions and indicators analysed in the online questionnaire for ICWs

Dimensions	Indicators
General characteristics	Year of creation. Institution it is affiliated to. Sources of funding. Territorial scope of action.
Resources	Evolution of economic resources. Evolution of human resources. Funding to address GBV during the pandemic. Impact of the <i>State Agreement on GBV</i> .
Performance	Evolution of the type of actions. Evolution of type of attention provided (face-to-face/ online). Difficulties experienced by professionals in providing the service.
Coordination with other key public institutions	Evolution of level of satisfaction with the coordination with other key public institutions. Participation in coordination bodies.

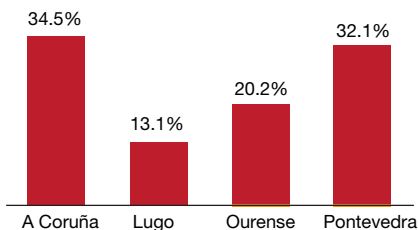
Source: authors' own.

tor of the ICW, 10.2% by the professional specialized in legal advice, 6.8% by the professional specialized in psychological counselling, and 6.8% by other staff (for example, equality experts). 97% of the respondents were women and 3% were men.

The composition of the sample shows similarities with respect to the universe in relation to two key factors: the size of the population (Graph 1) and the province where the ICW is located (Graph 2). However, municipalities that have between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants are slightly underrepresented, and those with more than 20,000 inhabitants are slightly overrepresented. Similarly, the province of Ourense has a greater presence compared to the uni-

Graph 1. Composition of the universe by population size

Source: authors' own.

Graph 2. Composition of the universe by province

Source: authors' own.

verse, while the province of Coruña is slightly under-represented. Differences are not substantial enough to influence the results of the analysis.

Data is analysed using descriptive statistics, presenting frequencies and percentages. As we are interested in assessing the impact of the pandemic, for most indicators we gathered information for three different periods: pre-lockdown (2019), lockdown (2020) and post-lockdown (2021). This provides a longitudinal perspective for analysing key dimensions of GBV policies at the local level. The empirical material is thus of great interest for exploring changes that might have remained after the pandemic.

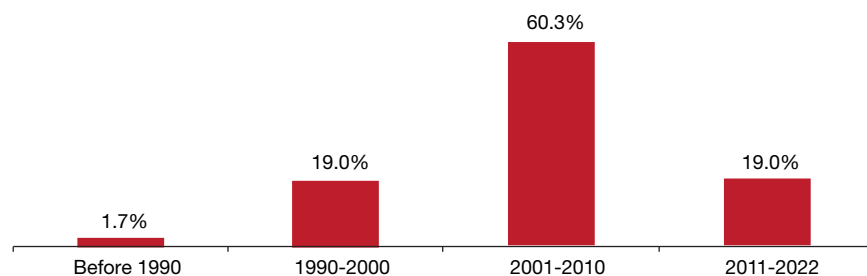
5. Results

5.1. ICWs' general characteristics

ICWs were set up in Galicia more than two decades ago. Graph 3 shows that 19% of these organizations were created during the 90s and 60% during the 2000s. They enjoy a considerable track record, which has surely provided notable capacity to respond to the pandemic, as most of the chief staff of these centres had to confront the former economic crisis. This experience was useful in knowing how to establish goals and strategies during the COVID-19 crisis.

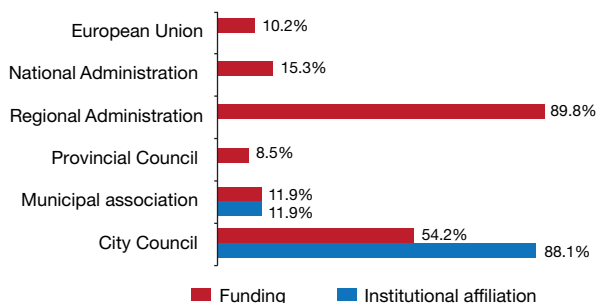
ICWs are part of a broader institutional setting at the local level. 88% of ICWs belong to a local council, and 11.9% to an association of municipalities (*mancomunidad*) (Graph 4). This second type is regulated by *Decree 130/2016* and is particularly common in small towns. Respondents indicate that over half of the ICWs (54%) receive funding from the local institution they are affiliated to. This figure differs from the situation in 2010, when 100% of these organizations claimed to receive municipal funding. Austerity policies and their impact on public expenditure at the local level may well explain this significant change (Alfama & Paleo, 2022). Moreover, the lack of centrality of gender equality issues should also be considered. That is, local governments seem to promote the creation of ICWs, but they do not represent a priority on their agendas. Other institutions are key for their funding capacities as well.

Graph 3. Period of creation of ICWs



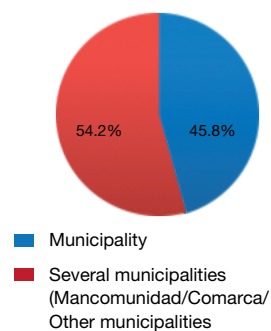
Source: authors' own.

Graph 4. Institutional affiliation and source of funding of ICWs



Source: authors' own

Graph 5. Territorial scope of action



Source: authors' own

90% of all ICWs receive regional funds (a percentage very similar to 2010), while 15% receive funds from the central government and 10% from the EU. Additionally, 12% of ICWs receive economic resources from the association of municipalities they are affiliated to.

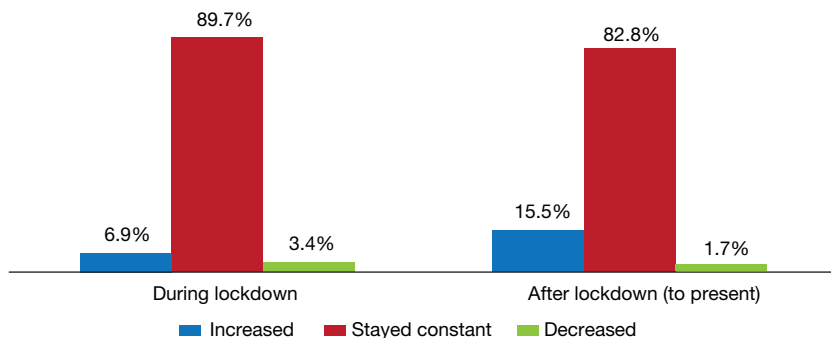
In Graph 5, we see that while 46% of the ICWs indicate that their territorial scope is the municipality in which they are located, 54% embrace more than one municipality. ICWs are present in only 36% of Galician municipalities (including municipalities sharing an ICW) but they provide services to 73% of the population. They make a crucial contribution, guaranteeing that women in situations of violence living in municipalities with no ICW (normally the smallest ones) can have access to these public services.

5.2. The impact of the pandemic on ICW policies

5.2.1. ICW resources

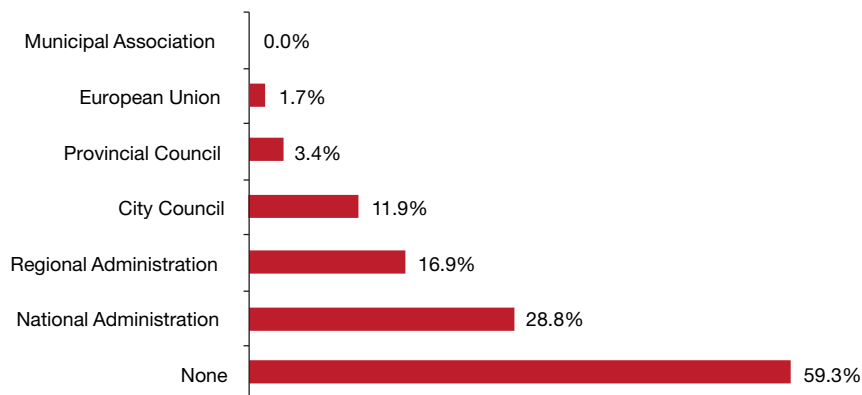
Resources are crucial for ICWs to discharge their responsibilities effectively, and the pandemic represented a significant challenge in that regard. When exploring economic resources, we see that more than 80% of the ICWs have not increased their budgets since the pandemic began. More specifically, our data show that during lockdown, 90% of ICWs continued to have the exact same level of economic resources, 3.4% experienced a reduction and only 7% saw an increase. It is worth noting that among the six large Galician cities that responded to the questionnaire (with more than 50,000 inhabitants), only two increased the budget allocated to their ICW (Vigo and Santiago de Compostela). After lockdown the situation was very similar. Only 15% of the ICWs said that their budgets – for 2021 and/or 2022 – increased. This data may indicate a positive trend and could be further reflected in 2023, but we must bear in mind that before the pandemic – during the 2015–2019 legislature – 71% of the Galician municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants

Graph 6. Evolution of ICW budgets



Source: authors' own.

Graph 7. Source of funding for GBV policies during the pandemic



Source: authors' own.

considered that the budget allocated to the promotion of equality was too limited (Paleo & Diz, 2021).

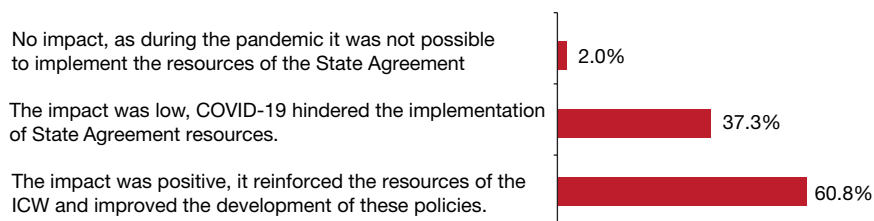
The lack of resources is also evident when we explore whether ICWs received any specific funding to address GBV during the COVID-19 crisis. 59% of them indicated that they did not receive any type of specific support to deal with GBV. Of those that did get funding, 29% stated that resources were transferred by the central government, 17% that they came from the regional government, 12% from the local council, and 3% and 1% respectively from provincial councils and the European Union.

Funding from the central government is related to the *State Agreement on GBV* that began to be implemented in 2018. Funding was allocated to local councils so that actions could be implemented at this level of government too.

This study contributed to gathering data on whether the *Agreement* had a positive impact during the pandemic. Graph 8 shows that 61% of the ICWs confirm that it did have a positive influence by expanding ICW resources. However, another 37% consider the impact to have been rather limited, and 2% did not see any effect at all. According to our data, almost 40% of ICWs indicate that the pandemic slowed down the implementation of the *Agreement* to some degree.

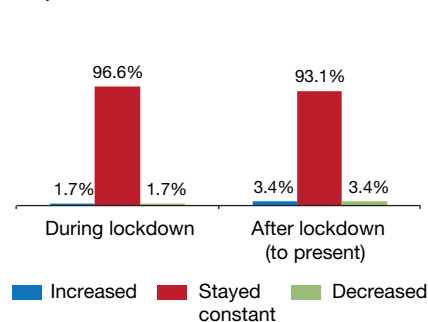
Human resources are equally important to effectively implement equality policies. The 59 ICWs that responded to our survey consist of a total of 171 members of staff, 91.2% of whom are women. Graph 9 shows that more than 98% of the ICWs did not increase their number of staff during the pandemic, while 3.4% reduced them after the lockdown. The regional government legislation mandates at least three roles: a director coordinating and leading the work of the ICW, a specialist in legal advice and a specialist in psychological counselling. These two specialists can also combine their responsibilities with performing the role of director. ICWs must provide at least ten hours a week of these services. Data produced for this study reveals that 43% of ICWs have two members of staff (Graph 10), only 37% have three, and 20% four or more. The most common option is therefore to combine the duties of chief with those of legal advice or psychological counselling.

Graph 8. Impact of the *State Agreement* during the pandemic



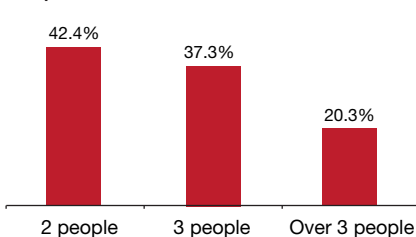
Source: authors' own.

Graph 9. Evolution of members of staff



Source: authors' own

Graph 10. Number of members of staff

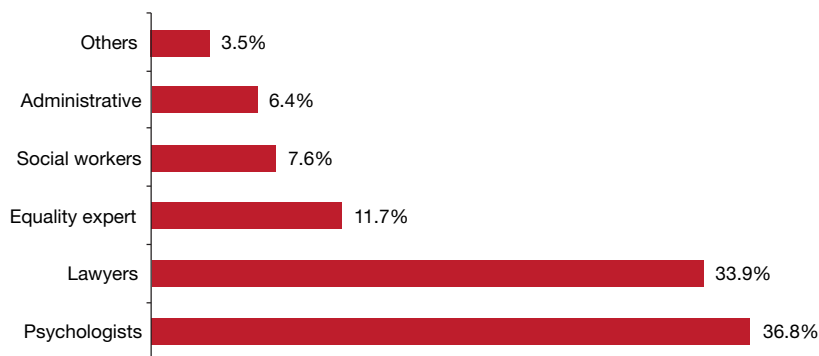


Source: authors' own

As expected, 71% of the staff have training either as a lawyer or as a psychologist (Graph 11), while other professional profiles such as equality expert, social worker or office worker have a rather limited presence. More than 40% of staff members are on part-time contracts. Likewise, 22% of them are not employed by the local institution directly (Graph 12), and work for companies providing external services.

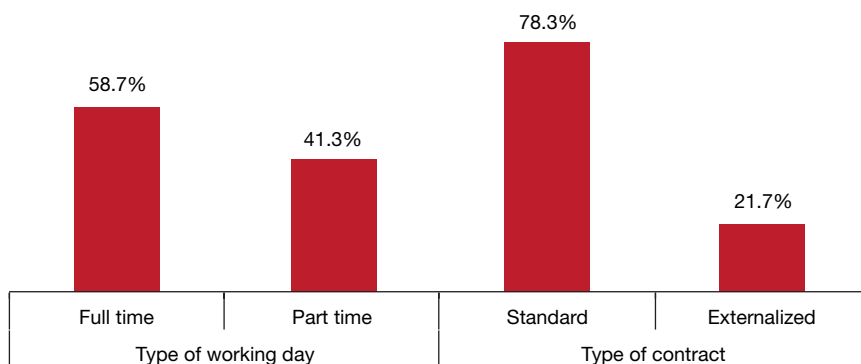
All these elements point to the persistence of poor working conditions and limited resources, something that did not change during the pandemic, putting professionals under great strain. ICWs and their staff were severely hit by the 2008 economic crisis, when human resources were cut and working conditions worsened (Paleo & Diz, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic did not involve an effort to reverse these tendencies. For years, the Association of Professionals of

Graph 11. Professional profile of members of staff

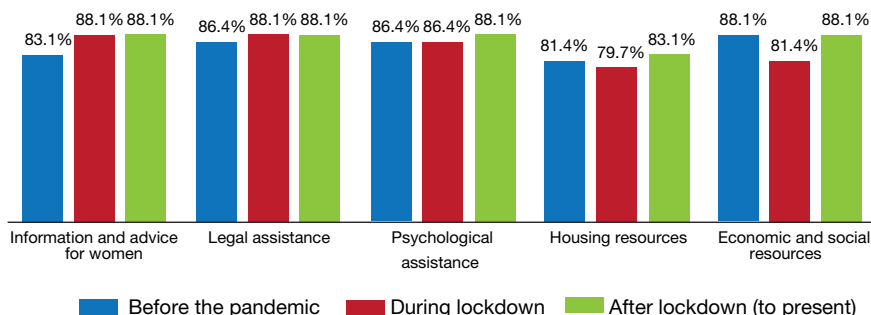


Source: authors' own.

Graph 12. Working conditions of members of staff



Source: authors' own.

Graph 13. Types of actions to attend women in situations of violence

Source: authors' own.

ICWs in Galicia has been drawing attention to the structural problems that affect these centres, particularly the effects of poor working conditions and limited staff. In a statement published on 8th March 2022, *Decree 130/2016*. Workers claim that staff are not replaced when they go on sick leave, and that ICWs do not provide the 10-hour service mandated in the regional legislation. This minimum number of hours is also considered insufficient to cover the needs of users, as demand is increasing. Additionally, the scope of professionals working in ICWs is considered too limited, as more gender experts and office workers are needed. Finally, they also stressed the need to have more stable contracts and to be incorporated in the institutional employees' framework (*RPT*) like any other member of staff; staff working in ICWs indicate that this is only the case in 27% of municipalities.

5.2.2. ICW actions

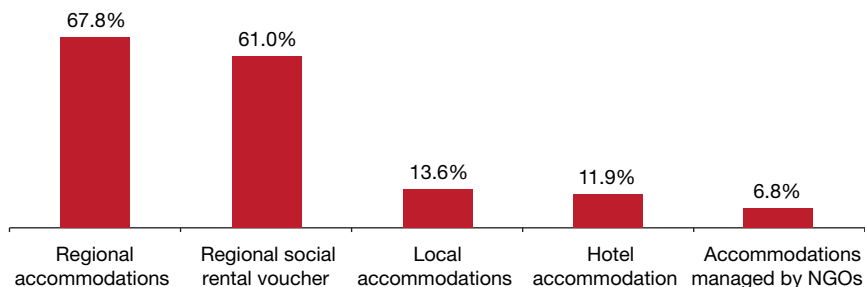
When exploring the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, assessing ICW performance is of relevance. First, Graph 12 shows the evolution of measures relating to the attention of women suffering GBV. Two types of actions increased during the pandemic: providing information and advice, and providing legal assistance. Measures relating to psychological counselling and to support to access housing resources also increased slightly, but only once lockdown was over. In contrast, support to access economic and social resources for women in situations of violence diminished by almost seven points during lockdown, before returning to pre-pandemic levels afterwards.

Housing resources (shelters, flats etc.) were especially important during the pandemic. More than 60% of the ICWs confirm that they helped women in situations of violence to get access to housing resources belonging to the regional administration (Graph 14). Up to 14% had housing resources at the local level, 12% occasionally had to find temporary accommodation such as hotels, and 7% worked with shelters managed by NGOs. More than 70% of ICWs consider that altogether these resources are not sufficient.

The pandemic resulted in a rise in demand for housing resources, as ICWs perceived that there were more women in need of accommodation. Yet around 80% affirm that the supply of public and private housing resources did not increase (Graph 15). Likewise, 41% of ICWs consider that the capacity of these services to offer a quick response worsened during COVID-19.

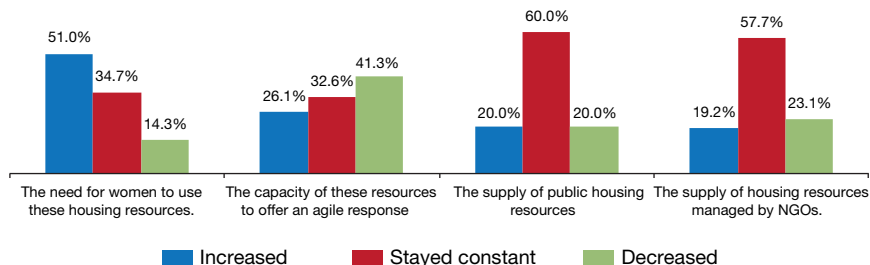
As for the performance of ICWs, the data indicate that actions relating to awareness-raising, gender training or gender mainstreaming were severely affected during the pandemic. Graph 16 shows that the percentage of ICWs that carried out GBV awareness-raising actions, promoted women's well-being and health, implemented training on equality and GBV or undertook activities for non-sexist education dropped by more than 30 points during lockdown. More than half of Galician municipalities did not carry out this type of action at all. Interestingly, the presence of these interventions did not go back to pre-pandemic levels, except for non-sexist education activities. The impact on training activities is of particular concern, as gender knowledge and awareness-raising activities are crucial for implementing gender mainstreaming and involving all civil servants. Before the pandemic, almost 70%

Graph 14. Housing resources managed by ICWs



Source: authors' own.

Graph 15. Impact of the pandemic on housing resources



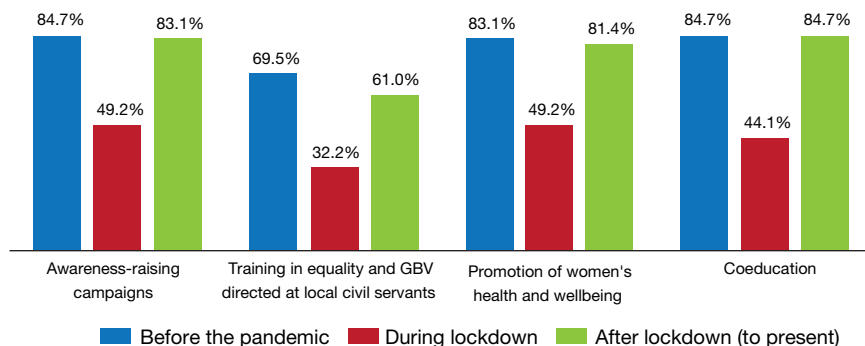
Source: authors' own.

of the municipalities claimed to carry out gender training activities; now this percentage is 61%.

Figures are even more negative when we explore actions relating to women's participation and empowerment. In Graph 17, we see that these types of activities took place in 30% of the ICWs during lockdown, dropping by half compared to the situation before the pandemic. The presence of support groups for women suffering GBV replicates pre-pandemic levels. Yet both the promotion of women's associations and political participation dropped significantly (8%), showing the lasting legacy of the COVID-19 crisis.

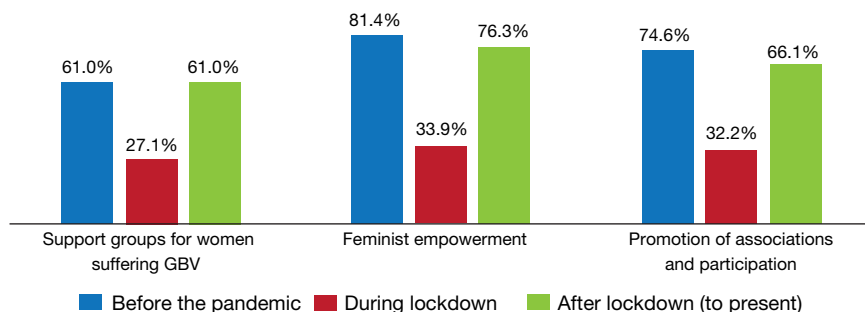
The pandemic forced public institutions to provide services remotely. ICWs were no exception and had to adapt abruptly to this new scenario. Graph 18 shows the extent to which ICWs provided face-to-face services before COVID-19. For instance, attention to women who suffer GBV (information, legal advice etc.) was offered using hybrid tools (remote and

Graph 16. Actions relating to awareness-raising and training

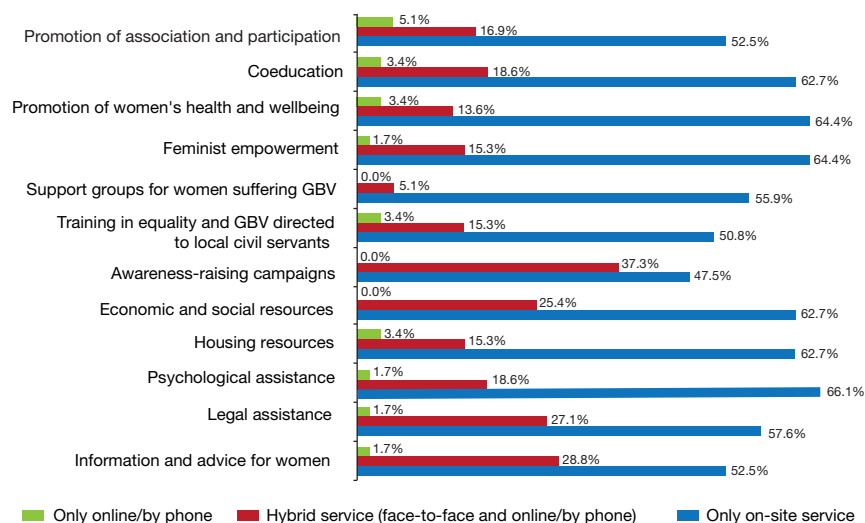


Source: authors' own.

Graph 17. Actions relating to the participation and empowerment of women



Source: authors' own.

Graph 18. E-administration before the pandemic

Source: authors' own.

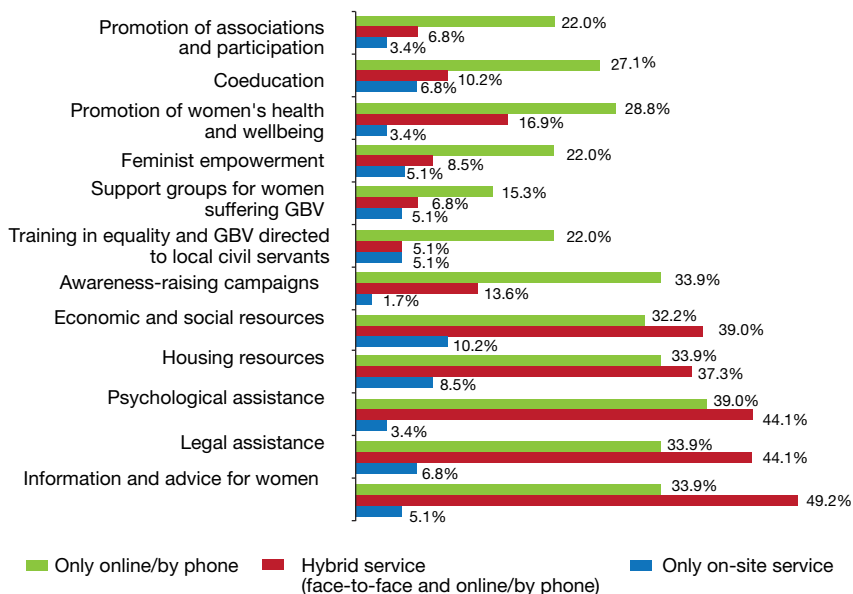
on-site) in only 30% of the municipalities; online provision was even more marginal.

The picture changed quickly when lockdowns and restrictions were enforced. Although ICWs continued to offer certain services to address GBV, the provision was mostly carried out online or in a hybrid mode (combining face-to-face with online/phone services) (Graph 19). The percentage of centres that kept offering on-site services was very small.

One key question is whether these changes remained in place once restrictions were lifted. Graph 20 indicates that hybrid forms of service provision seem to have been consolidated after the pandemic. Currently, more than half of ICWs use them to inform and advise women who suffer GBV or to provide legal assistance. Around 40% also use them to offer psychological counselling, to provide support to access social and economic resources or housing resources, and to carry out awareness-raising campaigns. For the remaining types of action, hybrid modes are used by approximately 30% of the municipalities.

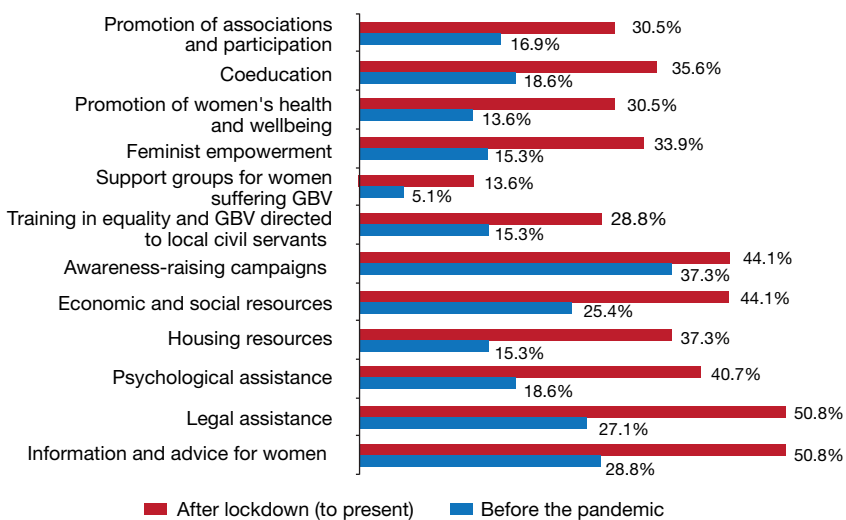
All these changes had a massive impact on staff. The survey included information on the challenges they encounter in performing their jobs. The level of difficulty was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was equivalent to non-existent or a very low level and 5 to a very high level of difficulty. As Graph 21 shows, ICW workers identify the worsening of working conditions as a key challenge: long working hours, increased health and safety risks, diversification of tasks, etc. The average score for this question is 3.4. The next problem,

Graph 19. E-administration during confinement



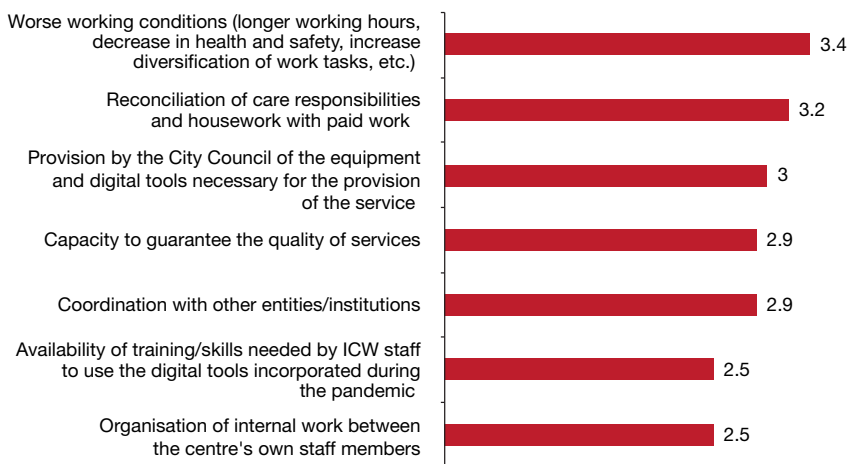
Source: authors' own.

Graph 20. Evolution of services provided through hybrid mechanisms (face-to-face and remote)



Source: authors' own.

Graph 21. Type of challenges in delivering services during the pandemic (1=not difficult, 5=very difficult)

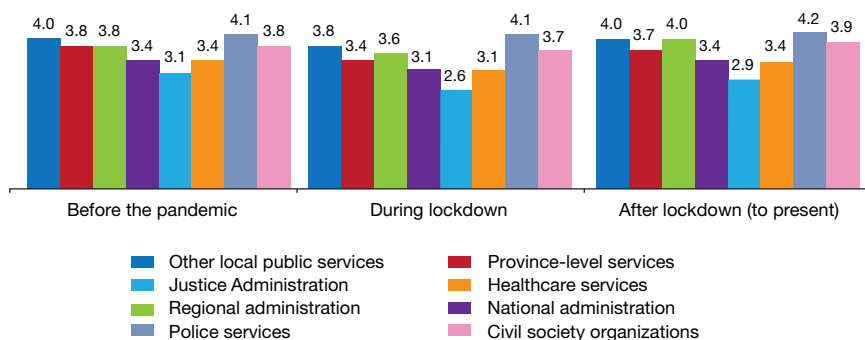


Source: authors' own.

with an average score of 3.2, has to do with reconciling personal life with work during the pandemic. It reflects how lockdowns had a massive impact on care and housework. Thirdly, respondents point to access to appropriate devices and equipment to provide services online. The capacity to guarantee the quality of services (a score of 2.9), the availability of training in using digital tools and/or the skills to do so (a score of 2.5), and the internal organization of work (a score of 2.5) emerge as less significant challenges.

5.2.3. *Coordination with other key institutions*

The final dimension of analysis refers to the coordination of ICWs with other key institutions for delivering GBV-related services. ICWs often represent the first service that women have access to. Indeed, regional regulations establish that ICWs should provide information and support to women when navigating the plurality of resources available in GBV policies. Data gathered for this study includes the average level of satisfaction of ICWs with inter-institutional coordination (Graph 22). This indicator is measured on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest level of satisfaction and 5 is the highest level of satisfaction. Likewise, professionals were requested to assess this item for three different points in time: before the pandemic, during lockdown, and after lockdown. The first period features an average score in the level of satisfaction of 3.7 out of 5. When exploring the assessment of the coordination with different bodies, we identify significant variations. The worst values correspond to working with the judiciary (3.1), followed by the regional healthcare service (3.4) and the national administration (3.4). In contrast, police services (4.1) and other local services (4.0) receive the highest levels of approval.

Graph 22. Level of satisfaction with coordination with other institutions (scale 1-5)

Source: authors' own.

The lockdown period shows an overall drop in the average value of this indicator (3.4). Again, differences arise when exploring coordination with several institutions. The assessment of working with the judiciary worsens even further (2.6), while police services are the only department that receives better figures. Finally, in the post-lockdown period, the average degree of satisfaction goes back to pre-pandemic levels (3.7). Figures improve especially for police services (4.2), regional administration (4), and civil society organizations specializing in GBV (3.9). However, the average does not reach the level of 2019. Although the assessment of staff is generally positive, it is worth noting the very negative evaluation of coordination with the judiciary, as this institution is crucial for protecting and attending to women.

Local Inter-institutional Coordination Bodies represent another key device for developing policies against GBV. They bring together local authorities (including local councils and/or associations of municipalities), representatives from regional and national governments, members of the police services (local police and the *guardia civil*), and civil servants from education and healthcare centres. This plural composition contributes to improving coordination and information-gathering at the local level. Data from this study indicates that 86.4% of ICWs take part in one of those mechanisms. Yet, most of them (66%) did not work during lockdown, a period when coordination was more necessary than ever, as cases were on the rise and most services struggled to cope.

6. Conclusions

The literature on gender policies has repeatedly shown that crises have a gendered impact, often leading to setbacks in terms of the promotion of equality. Austerity policies developed during the 2008 crisis, for instance, led to significant reversals in the equality framework. The global health emergency generated by COVID-19 had vast economic and social consequences, and from the very beginning, researchers sought to identify its differential

effects for men and women. They reported an increase in inequalities and the lack of a gender perspective in the political response to the pandemic. However, unlike previous crises, many governments did try to implement specific policies to mitigate some problems that were aggravated during this period, as was the case with violence against women. However, few analyses delve into this policy domain to map and assess the specific changes that were put in place.

This article addresses the need to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on this policy issue. We do so by exploring the case of Spain and focusing on GBV policies at the local level in Galicia. The study presents an original database that pioneers the analysis of key dimensions of GBV policies from a longitudinal perspective. It identifies changes that occurred during the pandemic and highlights those that remained after that period. In common with academic research on the 2008 economic crisis, the theoretical expectation was to find significant setbacks.

Data gathered for this study shows a rather mixed picture in the case of Galician ICWs. Their funding and human resources were not significantly affected, yet gender equality lacked centrality in the agenda. Despite the emergency situation and the increasing number of GBV cases, resources were not expanded, and services were provided thanks to the notable efforts of ICWs staff members. Indeed, the data reflect very clearly the extent to which working conditions worsened during this period (longer working hours, work overload, task diversification, stress, etc.). In terms of actions, attention to women suffering GBV was prioritized over other preventive measures (awareness-raising activities, gender training, participation, etc.). The provision of services had to be adapted to social distancing measures, just as in other public institutions. We see how digital and hybrid modes became the norm; and also, the extent to which they are currently widespread in the work of ICWs. Further research should explore the implications of such changes. Finally, the empirical evidence indicates that coordination with other institutions was less effective during lockdown. Key mechanisms did not work at all, and this had a negative impact on the quality and effectiveness of services to address GBV.

We can conclude that GBV policies have undergone another crisis that has deepened former constraints. Staff at ICWs have experienced a greater impact on their working conditions, and seen new setbacks in GBV policies that they have tried to mitigate. More research is needed to map the evolution of GBV policies at other local institutions during COVID-19, and to understand their implications for the quality of public services in the long run.

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on institutional change processes and the collective capabilities of higher education and research institutions

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the public policies adopted to cope with the ensuing crisis had a significant impact on higher education and research institutions, and this captured the attention of numerous scholars. However, most of the analyses, especially those adopting a gender perspective, have focused on the impact of the pandemic on women as individuals (individual capabilities), while little attention has been paid to the impact on institutions and processes of structural change (collective capabilities). The capabilities approach (CA) is useful for analysing gender inequalities in higher education, and has also been used to examine the impact of the crisis on certain groups and situations. Based on the adaptation of this approach by Robeyns (2003) and Baser and Morgan (2008) to emphasise the importance of collective capabilities for individuals, institutions and society at large, this paper examines the institutional impact of the pandemic by drawing from the experiences of the six institutions in the GEARING-Roles project implementing gender equality plans (GEPs). To this end, we combine desk research of secondary sources with qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with representatives of the GEP implementers and observations of project meetings carried out between April 2020 and June 2022. Our findings indicate a considerable impact on the collective capabilities of the change agents in the participating institutions, which stem mainly from a lack of institutional commitment to the gender equality agenda, mobility restrictions and limited social relations. However, some positive elements also emerge, such as the teams' exceptional capacity to adapt to adverse circumstances.

Keywords: gender equality; structural change; universities; European Union; pandemic

Resumen. *El impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19 en los procesos de cambio institucional y las capacidades colectivas de las instituciones de educación superior e investigación*

La pandemia de COVID-19 y las políticas públicas adoptadas para hacer frente a la crisis subsiguiente tuvieron un impacto significativo en las instituciones de enseñanza superior (ES) y de investigación, lo que captó la atención de numerosos estudiosos. Sin embargo, la mayoría de estos análisis, especialmente los que adoptan una perspectiva de género, se han centrado en el impacto sobre las mujeres como individuos (capacidades individuales) y han prestado poca atención al impacto sobre las instituciones y los procesos de cambio estructural (capacidades colectivas). El enfoque de las capacidades (CA) es útil para analizar las desigualdades de género en la ES y también para examinar el impacto de la crisis en determinados grupos y situaciones. Partiendo de la adaptación de este enfoque de Robeyns (2003) y de Baser y Morgan (2008) para subrayar la importancia de las capacidades colectivas para los individuos, las instituciones y la sociedad en general, este artículo examina el impacto institucional de la pandemia basándose en la experiencia de seis instituciones implementadoras de los planes de igualdad de género (GEP) en el proyecto GEARING-Roles. Para ello, combinamos la investigación de fuentes secundarias con el análisis cualitativo de entrevistas en profundidad realizadas a representantes de estas entidades y observaciones de reuniones del proyecto llevadas a cabo entre abril de 2020 y junio de 2022. Nuestros hallazgos indican un impacto considerable en las capacidades colectivas de los agentes de cambio de las instituciones participantes, que derivan principalmente de la falta de compromiso institucional con la agenda de igualdad de género, las restricciones de movilidad y las limitadas relaciones sociales. No obstante, también emergen algunos elementos positivos, como la excepcional capacidad de los equipos para adaptarse a circunstancias adversas.

Palabras clave: igualdad de género; cambio estructural; universidades; Unión Europea; pandemia

Summary

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an undeniable impact on higher education institutions. In a short space of time, universities and research centres had to adapt their activity to an online environment and adjust to new scenarios and educational models. The crisis did not affect women and men equally, and this must be addressed so that the efforts made by public institutions and universities in favour of equality over the last few decades do not become undone.

There is clear evidence of the impact that lockdown and remote working had on women in universities. For example, several studies show that the

scientific productivity of women during the crisis was seriously affected (Frederickson 2020; Vincent-Lamarre et al., 2020; Wiegand et al., 2020; Dolan & Lawless 2020; Alon et al., 2020), with a notable decrease in the number of articles with women as sole authors submitted for publication, and a general decrease in the participation of women in collective articles across all disciplines. This results in less visibility given to research by women compared with research by men (Diario Público, 2020). Several factors can explain this differential impact on female academics, including their load of caregiving and family-related responsibilities on top of most of the so-called domestic work in universities (Heijstra et al., 2017), which includes student care, tutoring and supervision. Moreover, male academics are more likely to have a partner who does not work outside the home, while their female colleagues, especially those in the natural sciences, are more likely to have an academic partner (Schiebinger et al., 2008). Even in dual-career households, evidence shows that women do more housework than men (Molly King, cited by Viglioni, 2020).

This situation may contribute to a further widening of the gender gap in science, making it more important than ever to reinforce and sustain actions to advance equality in these organisations. Given the urgency of managing the challenges faced by universities and research centres in dealing with the pandemic, the design, approval and implementation of gender equality plans (GEPs) in these institutions have been seriously affected. However, most research on the impact of the pandemic has ignored the collective and institutional impact that COVID-19, lockdown and the measures associated with management of the pandemic have had on implementation of GEPs and institutional equality policies.

The capabilities approach (CA), originally developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and later by Martha Nussbaum (2000) for the field of economics, is a useful tool for analysing gender inequalities in higher education institutions (Unterhalter 2007; Robeyns 2006; Boni & Walker, 2013) and has also been used to examine the impact of the crisis on certain groups and situations, such as humanitarian contexts (López Belloso & Mendiá Azkue, 2009). Baser and Morgan (2008) adapted it to emphasise the importance of collective capabilities for the development of individuals, institutions and society at large. Several studies have used CA to analyse the situation of gender equality in the context of higher education (Aristizábal et al., 2010; Córdoba 2006) and some researchers have deployed it to analyse the impact of COVID-19 (Simon et al., 2020; Meili et al., 2022), since it provides an adequate and coherent framework for measuring quality of life while accounting for the multiple effects of the pandemic. Other authors have analysed the implications of the pandemic itself for the CA and have considered the predominance of some capabilities over others (primacy of life and health over other capabilities) (Manley 2020). The contribution that the CA makes by giving education a central role is particularly relevant since it helps to clarify institutional impact and the collective capabilities of higher education institutions and thus helps to anticipate how the pandemic will impact the equality agenda in the European Research and Education Area in the medium and long term.

This paper aims to examine the institutional impact of the pandemic at the six institutions in the GEARING-Roles project¹ implementing GEPs. For this purpose, we combine documentary analysis of secondary sources with a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of the GEP implementers to determine how the pandemic has affected collective capabilities and institutional change.

This paper is structured into three main sections: the first presents the application of the CA to gender equality and higher education and research institutions; next, we explore the impact of the pandemic on implementation of GEPs at the institutions in the GEARING-Roles project, and the resultant effects on the capability of their working groups to continue promoting change in their organisations during the crisis; lastly, we explain how the project consortium and structural change community contributed towards sustaining progress on the GEPs during the pandemic, and suggest possible ways in which the CA could be used to harness institutional resilience in times of crisis, as well as to inform and implement public policies on research and innovation.

2. Theoretical framework: Application of the capabilities approach to gender equality and higher education and research institutions

The theoretical proposal of the CA developed by authors such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum represented a turning point in development approaches during the 20th century and acquired wide dissemination that has been reflected in a broad set of theoretical discussions and political proposals (Dubois, 2008), including educational policies. Its interest stems from the fact that, apart from being a theoretical proposal aimed at reversing poverty, it assigns education a central role (Córdoba, 2006). For Sen, education functions as a catalyst for the acquisition of other capabilities, understood as the real and current opportunity that people have to make informed decisions such that they guarantee themselves a life and activities that they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Once achieved, these capabilities take the form of what Sen calls “functionings” or “the various things that a person can value doing or being” (Sen, 1999, 75). As such, the CA aspires to well-being beyond economic well-being. It is not based solely on income or consumption, but argues that resources create opportunities rather than constitute an end in themselves, and therefore it attributes an instrumental dimension to education (Aristizábal et al., 2010; Córdoba, 2006).

Nussbaum’s contribution is linked to a social justice dimension. Her addition is directly linked to the usefulness of this approach as an evaluative fra-

1. GEARING-Roles is part of the European Commission’s commitment to promote structural change processes and the equality agenda in research. To this end, GEPs have become a key tool. For more information on gender policies in research and the implementation of equality plans, please visit the DG Research and Innovation website. For information on the project and on the institutions implementing the GEPs and the texts of the GEPs, see the project webpage.

mework for gender equality, since she criticises Sen for lacking definitions, thus weakening the evaluative potential of the CA (Dubois, 2008). Nussbaum revises the concepts of functionings and capabilities to make them more concrete, proposing a simpler interpretation of them and a defined list of capabilities that incorporate social virtues (Nussbaum, 2002: 120-123).

Nussbaum specified her proposal in ten key capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, relation with other species, play, and control over one's environment (political and material) (Nussbaum, 2007: 23).

Bozalek and Dison (2013) apply the CA to teaching and learning in higher education, and understand that the purpose of its application in this domain is to provide opportunities for both students and teachers to progress academically and to assess what is meaningful for this progress. They distinguish three categories of conversion factors, defined by Robeyns as "the ability of the individual to translate resources into desired functionings" (Robeyns, 2011, cited by Bozalek & Dison, 2013: 385): personal or internal factors such as prior teaching experience and academic literacy; social conversion factors such as educational policies and power relations (gender, race, class); and environmental conversion factors such as facilities, location or environment (Bozalek & Dison, 2013: 385). Loots and Walker (2016: 262) advocate methodological approaches based on the CA to address equality (or inequality) in higher education as a means of making it possible to go beyond numerical analyses, and to incorporate social structures, which maintain gender norms, as well as individual factors, interpersonal comparisons and complex conversion factors. They state that "gender equality would include the availability of opportunities for development for both genders, while also taking into account social and institutional structures as conversion factors which demand equity interventions" (Loots & Walker, 2016: 262). This view resonates with Robeyns, since it advocates analysis of existing policies and power inequalities at institutions, and posits that these may be structural (2011).

A significant contribution made by Robeyns (2011) is her definition of how the CA can be used as a normative framework in higher education, with normative frameworks being directly related to policy frameworks and goals (Walker, 2010: 488), namely to assess and evaluate (1) individual well-being; (2) social arrangements; and (3) social interventions, including social policies.

The role that the CA assigns to education contrasts with the current trend towards academic capitalism, in which the influence of the so-called "knowledge-based economy" paradigm calls on education and research "to meet the human capital needs of a changing labour market and economy, provide infrastructure and services to businesses, and transfer knowledge so that it contributes to capital accumulation" (Jessop, 2018). Furthermore, academic capitalism suggests that actors in the higher education environments, such as students, faculty and researchers, become enterprising bearers of intellectual capital.

This neoliberalisation of higher education is of concern to authors such as Walker who defend the application of the CA in the education sector,

with an emphasis on human development, agency, well-being and freedom, to ask a different set of questions about education, since it offers a “compelling and assertive counterweight to dominant neoliberal interpretations of human capital in education as something that only serves economic productivity and employment, and asks instead what education enables us to do and be” (Walker, 2006: 164).

Thus, in a context in which the crisis caused by COVID-19 highlighted the need to strengthen public policies and the capacity for collective action, the CA is an appropriate tool for analysing institutional responses. For the matter under consideration (equality policies in higher education), this approach can help to measure not only the impact that the crisis had on the individual capabilities of female academics, but also on the equality agenda of university institutions, which is the purpose of this article.

2.1. Suitability of the capabilities approach for analysing the impact of COVID-19 on the gender equality agenda in higher education institutions

The pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses in welfare systems, not only because of the challenges posed by the pandemic itself, but also through the public policies and measures adopted by countries to cope with the crisis (Biggeri, 2020). The CA can help us understand the impact of the pandemic on well-being, but also works as a critical frame to the dominant approaches, by questioning the impact of some of the measures adopted (Venkatapuram, 2020). Some authors, such as Venkatapuram, focus on analysis of specific capabilities such as health, while Anand et al. claim that the CA can help us understand some of the main policy responses by highlighting the importance of public deliberation and demonstrating the value of awareness of or sensitivity to a wide range of concerns within society (Anand et al., 2020). These authors list some of the capability deprivations that have been documented in the media or by researchers which address capabilities related to the home, places of work, community, the physical environment and access to services. This list shows that the impact of COVID-19 is profound but also broad, and affects all aspects of life. Thus Anand et al. argue that the CA is particularly useful as a structure that fits with empirical data and experiences as well as with theoretical criteria, and helps to identify what is needed for recovery.

Furthermore, the implications of the analysis of the pandemic on the approach itself have been highlighted (Manley, 2020). Manley argues that the pandemic reaffirms “the centrality of bodily health and life capabilities in Nussbaum’s list of capabilities, as well as the importance of publicly available health care” (2020: 288). On the other hand, in his view, the pandemic has shown that, when faced with a threat, individuals are willing to allow, or even demand, adoption of certain drastic measures (such as lockdowns) that diminish many individual and collective capabilities for the sake of protecting certain capabilities. He points out that cultural differences have substantially affected perception of these measures, which are

more readily accepted in some countries than others. Thus Manley suggests a new (collective) capability: resilience. He argues that the lack of resilience in public welfare systems has translated into an additional cost in the agency of individuals (2020).

This impact of the pandemic on the CA model emphasises one of its most quoted weaknesses, namely its predominant individualism as opposed to a broader approach that also considers collective capabilities. We argue that a collective CA can help to determine the impact of the pandemic on the European higher education equality agenda.

2.2. Main critiques of the capabilities approach: from individual to collective capabilities

An important point of critique of the CA is its individualistic approach (Ibrahim, 2006; Stewart, 2005; Comim & Kuklys, 2002; Evans, 2002, Comim & Carey, 2001). Robeyns structures the main criticisms around three main issues: (1) individualistic bias; (2) scant attention to groups; and (3) limited attention to social structures (Robeyns, 2005: 107). She acknowledges some of the criticisms made and incorporates them into her proposal.

A complement to this theoretical framework has been developed in response to criticism of the CA. It is based on collective capabilities, defined as “those capabilities exercised by a group – or more generally by a collective subject – that acts to secure a capability for the members of that group” (Robeyns, 2017: 116). Baser and Morgan (2008: 25) define collective capability as “the collective ability or capability of a system or organisation to carry out a particular function or process, within or outside the system.”

For the purpose of incorporating a review of the CA from the perspective of collective capacities, for this article we consider the proposals made by Robeyns and Dubois in their reviews of Baser and Morgan’s proposal on collective capabilities. Despite being *a priori* individual capabilities, given that she considers the limitations of the individualistic bias of the approach, Robeyns’ list for the evaluation of equality processes in the post-industrial societies of the West is nevertheless relevant to our analysis.

Our analysis of the capabilities proposed by Robeyns begins with the differentiation made by Alkire (2005) between evaluative and prospective applications of the CA: an evaluative analysis focuses on which capabilities are expanded, for whom and to what extent; a prospective analysis focuses on how and why capabilities are expanded. Our initial hypothesis is that even though both individual and collective capabilities have been impacted, the impact on the latter is directly linked to institutional commitment towards gender equality, and could harness policies on gender equality.

Baser and Morgan’s discussion of collective capabilities, as reviewed by Dubois, is relevant from an institutional point of view since they enable an organisation to do things and sustain itself (Dubois, 2019). Baser and Morgan identify five concrete collective capabilities: 1) commitment and attraction;

2) performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques; 3) relating and obtaining support and resources; 4) adapting and renewing itself; and 5) balancing coherence with diversity.

Thus, the theoretical framework chosen for analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on equality policies and structural change processes combines approaches based on human capability (Robeyns) and organisational capability (Baser and Morgan), since structural change processes are based both on institutional commitment and stakes, and on the agents of change (people) who promote, drive and sustain them.

With regard to analysis of the available institutional capabilities for mitigating the impact of the pandemic, we find the combination of both elements of the CA interesting: on the one hand, (a selection from) the defined list of capabilities in Robeyns' extended version, since it explicitly and consistently incorporates gender equality into this conceptual framework and because it incorporates an extended interpretation of the CA itself that includes social structures and attention to different groups; and on the other hand, the institutional approach provided by the five collective capabilities described by Baser and Morgan. The combination of both approaches to the CA allows us to analyse institutional impact from the perspective of the specific aspects contained in Robeyns' list (more closely linked to change agents), but also from Baser and Morgan's procedural perspective (institutional change).

2.3. Assessing the impact on the gender equality agenda and structural change: personal and institutional collective capabilities

Ingrid Robeyns has explored application of the CA in depth and proposes five criteria for selecting the capabilities employed for evaluative use (Robeyns, 2003: 70-71): (1) explicit formulation; (2) methodological justification; (3) context sensitivity; (4) different levels of generality; (5) exhaustion and non-reduction.

If we consider that context plays a key role in the CA and its implementation, Robeyns emphasises the importance of social structures and groups that affect individual capabilities and that these, in turn, are influenced by political frameworks. Thus, the political equality agenda, especially in the case of Europe, has played a fundamental role. However, while we acknowledge the importance of the policy and normative context, our focus is on the actions and initiatives that have been or could have been implemented at institutional level.

When Robeyns reviews the individualism of the CA, she argues that Sen's ethical individualism that permeates the CA places individuals/people at the centre of moral concern. Moreover, as Dubois points out, the CA introduces the social approach through two avenues: recognition of social and environmental factors; and prioritisation of capabilities over functionings in the assessment (Dubois, 2019). The 14 capabilities proposed by Robeyns are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Robeyns' list of capabilities

1. Life and physical health: being able to be physically healthy and enjoy a life of normal length.
2. Mental well-being: being able to be mentally healthy.
3. Bodily integrity and safety: being able to be protected from violence of any sort.
4. Social relations: being part of social networks and giving and receiving social support.
5. Political empowerment: being able to participate in and have a fair share of influence on political decision-making.
6. Education and knowledge: being able to be educated and to use and produce knowledge.
7. Domestic work and nonmarket care: being able to raise children and take care of others.
8. Paid work and other projects: being able to work in the labour market or to undertake projects, including artistic ones.
9. Shelter and environment: being able to be sheltered and to live in a safe and pleasant environment.
10. Mobility: being able to be mobile.
11. Leisure activities: being able to engage in leisure activities.
12. Time-autonomy: being able to exercise autonomy in allocating one's time.
13. Respect: being able to be respected and treated with dignity.
14. Religion: being able to choose to live or not to live according to a religion.

Source: Robeyns, 2003: 71-72

As noted above, we build on Alkire's (2005) understanding of evaluative and prospective applications of the CA, whereby an evaluative analysis focuses on which capabilities are expanded, for whom and to what extent; whereas a prospective analysis focuses on how and why capabilities are expanded. For our analysis, it is helpful to determine which of the 14 capabilities suggested by Robeyns have been affected by the pandemic (not all 14 apply to higher education institutions) and which have not.

At the same time, Baser and Morgan's collective capabilities, as reviewed by Dubois, are relevant from an institutional point of view, since they enable an organisation to do things and sustain itself (Dubois, 2019). Baser and Morgan propose five concrete collective capabilities, as summarised in Table 2.

In the section on methodology below, we describe how the human capabilities (Robeyns, 2003) were merged with the organisational approach (Baser & Morgan) and translated into interview questions.

Table 2. Baser and Morgan's proposal of collective capabilities

1. Commitment and attraction.
2. Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques.
3. Relating and obtaining support and resources.
4. Adapting and renewing itself.
5. Balancing coherence with diversity.

Source: Dubois, 2019:41

3. Methodology

We adopted a qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews and observation techniques. Specifically, interviews were conducted with eight representatives of the six GEARING-Roles institutions implementing GEPs and one representative of the evaluating partner. Also, participant and non-participant observations were carried out during project meetings and events held by the partner institutions between April 2020 and June 2022. With the exception of one event in mid-2022, observations were conducted online, since COVID-19 enforced limits on international travel and project meetings, so events were organised remotely during this period.

Within the scope of GEARING-Roles, the GEPs under analysis were designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated at six academic institutions across different countries: five research-performing organisations located in Portugal, Spain, Slovenia, Turkey and the United Kingdom; and one Estonian research-funding organisation. With the exception of the partners in Spain and the UK, who did have previous experience of implementing GEPs or consistent change initiatives, the GEPs represent the first ever experience of implementation of a GEP for the organisations that were observed. While the six plans have minimum common intervention areas, as self-tailored documents adapted to their specific contextual and institutional settings, there are differences between them in terms of structure and content, and in the different priorities at each institution they address. In this paper, the similarities and differences between the GEPs that were observed are not considered, because, according to the data that was collected, these did not affect how institutions managed the COVID-19 crisis in terms of gender.

For confidentiality purposes, throughout the discussions in this paper the institutions are named numerically, and direct references to names of institutions, departments, cities and countries have been removed from quotes.

During the research design phase, we drew up a list of questions combining seven of the 14 individual capabilities proposed by Robeyns and Baser and Morgan's lists of core collective capabilities (see Table 3). We selected seven of

Table 3. Combination of CA perspectives to measure the institutional impact of COVID-19 in GEARING-Roles partners implementing GEPs

Capabilities selected from Robeyns' list	
Analysis from the collective/institutional perspective	
Life and physical health	Commitment and attraction What measures taken by institutions demonstrate their commitment to protecting the health of higher education institutions' academic/institutional communities?
	Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques What services did institutions provide to protect staff?
	Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions create/implement health-support mechanisms?
	Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Did institutions take diversity into account when defining measures to promote health? Are those measures sustainable?

Table 3. Combination of CA perspectives to measure the institutional impact of COVID-19 in GEARING-Roles partners implementing GEPs

Capabilities selected from Robeyns' list	Analysis from the collective/institutional perspective
Mental well-being	Commitment and attraction Did institutions concern themselves with the mental health of staff? Did they commit to staff mental well-being? Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques What services did institutions promote to protect the mental well-being of staff? Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions create/implement mental health support mechanisms? Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Did institutions take diversity into account when defining measures to promote mental well-being? Are those measures sustainable?
Social relations	Commitment and attraction Did institutions commit to maintaining and sustaining staff social relations? Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques Did institutions offer any services/measures for promoting social relations? Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions formally or informally promote social interactions? Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Did institutions endure social inclusion and diversity?
Education and Knowledge	Commitment and attraction Did institutions commit to keeping teaching and research activities active? Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques What measures were taken by institutions to keep academic activities in place? Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions provide material conditions and other relevant resources for sustaining academic work? Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Did institutions consider diversity when taking measures?
Domestic work and non-market care	Commitment and attraction Did institutions establish measures to promote a fair work-life balance (WLB)? Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques What services did institutions offer (if any) to promote a WLB and fair distribution of care work? Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions they formally or informally promote a WLB? Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Did institutions consider diversity when defining WLB measures?
Mobility	Commitment and attraction What was the institutions' policy regarding mobility? Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques Did institutions provide researchers affected by mobility restrictions with alternatives? Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions offer mobility support? Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Was mobility available to everyone?
Time autonomy	Commitment and attraction Did institutions commit to employees' autonomy and to their right to disconnect? Performing logistical tasks or functions, offering services and techniques Did institutions offer mechanisms for managing time spent working? Relating and obtaining support and resources Did institutions provide employees with support for timing self-management? Adapting and renewing itself; and, balancing coherence with diversity Did institutions take diversity into account when considering time autonomy issues during the pandemic?

Source: self elaboration

the 14 capabilities listed by Robeyns using the five criteria she suggested and, in particular, those with a specific formulation that best fits the context that was examined and that are adapted to the methodology we used. This combination enables us to examine the adequacy of the CA for determining the gendered institutional impact of the pandemic, since the focus on collective capabilities facilitates assessment of its critical function and its capacity to create collective awareness from a solid theoretical base, and to identify the institutionalisation and consolidation of the processes of structural change (Dubois, 2008: 7).

4. Findings

The initial timeframe for the GEARING-Roles project (2019-2022) was seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the political measures that were adopted. When the pandemic was officially declared and the first lockdowns and restriction measures were implemented, most of the GEPs were in the approval phase just after completion of institutional diagnosis. Although the original plan was to develop in-person mutual learning activities and co-creative training with stakeholders from the GEP-implementing institutions during that period, these were seriously affected by restrictions to international mobility and closure of institutional premises. As the crisis evolved, implementation of the GEPs began in a context in which social interactions were restrained and all the institutions were working entirely remotely or on a hybrid basis. As the respondent from Institution 5 said: “Basically, the whole GEP is a pandemic GEP.”

If promoting structural change in traditional institutional settings is challenging due to resistances to institutional change, it is particularly tough in times of crisis. In a group of six institutions implementing gender equality plans, the capacity of the different GEP implementing task forces was limited by partners that were newcomers to the process of structural change, the lack of physical contact, the shift in institutional priorities, and the additional burden generated by the pandemic on all academic and administrative activities. This impact was highlighted by all institutions, and Institution 1’s statement describes the general context well:

In the context of a pandemic, in which the university had to face significant challenges, such as moving all activities online, guaranteeing access to education and ensuring that all sectors would remain active, everything related to the equality agenda gets pushed into the background [...] Suddenly, equality policies stop being a priority, stop being important, and there is a legitimisation of this backlash. (Institution 1)

4.1. Mobility

Mobility restrictions were identified by all participating institutions as one of the elements that affected performance of the GEP task forces and activities most.

In the first phase of the project, the consortium members met in person at the annual conference (November 2019) and at in-person mutual learning and pairing events. As Institution 2 stressed, these initial face-to-face meetings helped the partners to establish a cohesive manner of working and to build up a team identity, which contributed towards the consortium's later adaptation to an entirely online environment during lockdown. While the cancellation of face-to-face meetings seriously affected mutual learning meetings and co-creation events, the shift to an online environment provided the partners with the option of new settings for working and communicating, which resulted in positive results for the consortium as a whole, as noted by Institutions 2 and 5:

At this phase of the project, we have all these international workshops, pairing events and things like that. If pairing events are physical, only a couple of people can go, or for an annual conference, for instance, only a couple of people can attend. But when it was made available to more people, more people could join. (Institution 2).

Before the pandemic, we did not have regular meetings with each other. We had these trips where we met each other, but after the pandemic started, we started to have these bimonthly meetings in which we could see everybody face-to-face, even if it was just through Zoom or other ways. At first, it seemed that after the pandemic [outbreak] we saw the project partners more than before. (Institution 5).

While this new online reality resulted in positive effects at consortium level, the scenario at institutional level was far more complex. Overall, GEPIs reported that the lack of physical contact had negative implications for the entire GEP process. Closure of the institutions' facilities and national lockdowns impacted institutional agendas and the priority assigned to gender equality. The lack of physical interaction hindered definition of GEP actions, approval of plans and leverage of institutional commitment. Moreover, participation and engagement of diverse stakeholders in implementation of the plans, as well as more subjective aspects of GEP implementation such as dealing with resistance, were also stalled:

We have not returned to work in person, there is no one there [at the institution] [...]. There is a lack of ownership and identification with the organisation and colleagues. (Institution 3)

If we were working face-to-face, it would have been easier to include more people, to be more active in this process, but because of Zoom fatigue and so on, it was harder to get people involved and quite often people said: I would join this event if it was not online. (Institution 5)

The main impact, especially in the first period, was a lot of difficulties in getting access to the organisational stakeholders [...], how difficult it became to talk to people in corridors, to understand the atmosphere in a room and to see where the resistances were. (Institution 7)

These difficulties affected the institutions' capacity for engagement and attractiveness, limiting their collective capability for change. Therefore, these constituted conversion factors for GEPIs.

Despite the additional difficulties with regards to implementing gender equality initiatives at institutional level during the pandemic, some partners also reported some benefits, particularly those related to performing logistical tasks or functions. For example, some institutions reported advantages and benefits of remote working for the task forces:

For instance, the [Gender Equality Department] has not come back to physical work, although most units at the university have. More people have moved out of town now, they cannot afford to live in [city X] now because rent prices have gone up. So, distance remote work has worked beautifully and the [Gender Equality Department] has grown enormously and is incredibly effective with this kind of distance work. (Institution 2)

We have a lot of foreign students who, rather than having to stay here for the entire degree, can go back home when they need to, because it is not always easy to stay here in Europe alone. (Institution 6)

4.2. Social relations

The consequences of the pandemic on social relations, both at consortium and institutional level, are directly linked to mobility restrictions. Firstly, the aforementioned sense of community created during the first few months of the project contributed towards keeping informal spaces alive during running of the consortium when face-to-face meetings were no longer possible. While it cannot be denied that the decrease in in-person meetings limited the consortium's capacity for mutual support and exchange beyond formal lines, the experience of the GEARING-Roles project has also shown that informal connections and alternative means of building trust relationships are viable. In this regard, respondents from all institutions stressed the attention the consortium paid to sustaining a space for informal exchanges in online meetings to ensure that receptiveness to listening to the personal needs of the team and providing continuous mutual support was sustained.

We expected it would have been a very social process in the beginning, when there is a lot of information exchange also in casual environments, not just in official meetings, but the pandemic meant that there was much less connection to people and everything we did was mostly via videoconferences, adding a different mood to this whole thing. (Institution 5)

At institutional level, all respondents referred to the significant impact of the online environment and a limited ability to attract resources for the GEPs and to support the work of the task forces. Nevertheless, as Institution 7 recalls, despite these difficulties, all task forces succeeded in getting access to relevant

stakeholders. Most GEPs were approved by institutional leaders in due course, and implementation of many of the actions in the different GEPs began before formal approval of documents, thanks to the task forces' capability to renew and adapt to this unforeseen context. This collective capability to adapt to new circumstances continued during implementation of GEPs. For example, Institution 2 described an interesting initiative to foster engagement and participation among diverse stakeholders:

We tried to get more people on board, as much as possible, and at some point, we thought it was a better strategy to have individual meetings or smaller meetings. Thematic meetings with different people, for instance, to talk about research, to talk about curriculum, really helped. People are more involved and they become more active when it is their field of study or work.

Even though this initiative meant investing additional time and resources, it succeeded in engaging diverse actors. It is worth noting, however, that this investment was a task force initiative and not proof of institutional commitment to gender equality.

4.3. Education and knowledge

Universities and higher education institutions faced significant challenges, with little room for manoeuvre when confronted with the measures imposed by governments. This included guaranteeing the security of the university community, the quality of teaching and equal opportunities. Institutions were forced to train their teachers, maintain student care, increase their technological infrastructure to overcome obstacles and ensure that student training and other substantive processes did not come to a halt. (CRUE, 2020: 8).

At the same time, as noted above, within the GEARING-Roles project, restrictions on in-person consortium meetings directly impacted how knowledge exchange activities were delivered. All respondents referred to the differences between using co-creative and participatory techniques in face-to-face and online training.

The whole set of mutual learning was under pressure as well. Mutual learning is more complicated when you do it online than when you meet physically. The most sensitive issues are discussed during the breaks, at the coffee table. (Institution 7)

Given the complexity of change processes, the role of the consortium as a knowledge exchange community was crucial. Although partners commonly believe that certain exchanges can only take place in face-to-face meetings, overall, adapting to the online format also brought positive results. Respondents stated that the solution devised by the consortium of holding online meetings more frequently to compensate for the lack of physical contact meant that they were able to keep more up to date with the change processes in the

different GEP implementing institutions. This enabled them to learn from their peers' experiences and guide each other in similar situations. Moreover, respondents also drew attention to the fact that, since meetings and training workshops were held online, more people from the task forces were able to participate regularly:

If [the meetings and training workshops] had not been online, we would not have had such detailed knowledge of what our colleagues were experiencing in their GEPs. We were constantly learning from each other. (Institution 6)

A positive consequence was maybe getting more access to information because we tended to be online and share more. (Institution 7)

Use of digital tools was essential to keeping these activities going. In this regard, respondents also referred to the pandemic as an opportunity to adapt to alternative ways of working online without neglecting creativity and fluidity.

The digital tools indeed give us the chance to maintain training and meetings, which had an exponential impact that physical meetings do not have. (...) in a very short time, we became professional and learned a lot of techniques. (Institution 1)

At institutional level, meanwhile, the task forces faced issues convincing institutional actors to participate in training and get involved in the gender equality training initiatives provided for them in the GEPs. In this regard, Institutions 2, 3 and 6 expressed particular difficulties getting institutional actors involved in the training sessions on offer in the project, due to shifting priorities in the organisations; and Institution 6 reported that institutional members were particularly resistant to using the online format for gender equality training.

Despite this, respondents also reported aspects of the online format that ended up triggering positive results for women, especially students:

Acceptance by the institution of an online format for activities facilitates support in thesis orientations, helps people who need to work to fund their studies, people who live outside the city and abroad [...]. And I think it has had a positive effect on women. [...] They were working but kindergartens were still closed, so we could connect via Zoom and do classes in a hybrid format. (Institution 6)

Likewise, at Institution 2, the Gender Equality Unit noted the fact that a significant number of people from the staff and student communities were seriously affected by the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, and moved from metropolitan areas to live far away from the campus. In this context, adaptation of the main activities to a hybrid format was a means of ensuring that this new situation did not prevent certain groups from participating in

academic projects, training initiatives and regular teaching activities, and therefore allowed the institution to adapt and promote diversity in GEP implementation.

With regard to online teaching, one of the institutions implementing GEPs noted that, even though the institution did not adopt a gender perspective in its organisation of compulsory online teaching, teaching staff did notice a difference in behaviour of female and male students (Institution 1). Female students were perceived as more active and participative in online classes, while male students were more active in face-to-face classes. This was especially true in knowledge areas in which female students constituted the majority of students in the group but were less active in class. This reflection resulted in a shared task group discussion about class management that was then included in an institutional guideline.

4.4. Time autonomy

While digitalisation meant that activities could continue, the additional burden on academic and administrative tasks linked to the pandemic was mentioned by all respondents as a salient factor that hindered smooth execution of project and GEP actions, limiting their collective capability to perform logistical tasks and offer services.

Compared with in-person meetings, we all have a great deal more work to do when organising everything via Zoom. It is the case with all activities, not only within the project or in the GEP. [...] It is much more work than when we were on the faculty premises all the time. So people do not have, let's say, "free time" for other activities. (Institution 1)

In the second part of the pandemic, the problem became time [...]. Right now we are so stressed, we have to be available all the time, on the screen, through the phone, having these back-to-back meetings, so many more meetings that are taking place [...]. The kinds of, for instance, co-creative workshops that we organised before the pandemic, we cannot find time for such events, now everything has to be condensed [...] we are all overworked, everyone is, all the administrators, the faculty, the leadership; it is hard to have them prioritise the GEPs given this time constraint. (Institution 2)

All respondents referred to what is known as "Zoom fatigue", which affected the performance of activities in the consortium and at the institutions. Respondents expressed concerns about the dynamics of working from home and carrying out all activities online. They mentioned that being online can often be confused with always being available, and that dealing with the blurred boundaries between work and leisure hours was particularly challenging. The consortium sought to minimise such fatigue by striving to keep the agenda flexible, either by rescheduling training sessions to more favourable periods or adapting the length of sessions and break times.

In addition, respondents noted that gender equality issues were at risk of being dropped from the institutional agenda because priorities shifted to cope with the crisis and an additional burden was placed on all academic staff. Administration costs were often presented as a reason for putting GEP initiatives on hold. Moreover, all respondents reported that their institutions paid little attention to how COVID-19 disproportionately affected women and men.

Nonetheless, respondents also identified positive impacts on time autonomy. At Institution 5, for example, application processes were extended during the pandemic which – although unintentionally – ended up benefiting women with care responsibilities and underprivileged groups. At Institution 2, the respondent explained how the Gender Equality Unit was particularly mindful of how the pandemic affected different groups of people, with a view to ensuring flexibility and solidarity in operation of the unit.

4.5. Domestic work and non-market care

In close connection with the challenges generated by workload and time management, domestic and care responsibilities also impacted consortium activities and institutional scenarios. Institutions 3, 4, and 6 reported particular issues making progress with GEPs due to the decreased availability of task force members during lockdown. According to the respondents, the fact that the task forces are mainly composed of women who have young children and/or other caregiving duties limited the capacity of the task force:

All my young colleagues, the ones that have small children, were ill in my department, in the working group as well. (Institution 4)

Many of my colleagues in the task force were women with young children. I also have caregiving responsibilities for elderly people. You cannot expect them to perform as usual when they are closed at home. (Institution 6)

At institution level, respondents from Institutions 2, 3 and 5 stated that, even though their organisations adopted measures for staff and students to reconcile their personal and professional lives during the crisis, the measures did not consider how the pandemic impacted women and men differently in the academic context. Specifically, Institutions 2 and 5 explained that, although the organisations were quite flexible with people who have children, the measures taken in this regard were not gender-sensitive and their implementation lacked a gender perspective. While the respondents agreed that the work-life balance (WLB) measures that were adopted turned out to be particularly beneficial for women, they also pointed out that these initiatives were not deliberately designed for that purpose, and that a result such as this confirms, once again, that women are disproportionately disadvantaged in reconciling their professional and personal lives.

Institutions 1, 4 and 6, meanwhile, identified actions that adapted and renewed their traditional style of work with a more gender-sensitive and diverse perspective. At Institution 1, for instance, an analysis of work-life balance policies that were implemented *ad hoc* was carried out. Participants in this analysis stated that work-life balance measures that were implemented during the pandemic should be maintained in the long term. In other institutions, in addition to the special attention paid to people who have young children, the organisation changed internal rules that required academic staff to spend periods abroad in order to get promoted. Although the measure was taken as a means of coping with travel limitations during COVID-19, it will be maintained and replaced by a wider interpretation of international collaboration (Institution 4). As the respondent from Institution 4 noted, an approach of this kind affords caregivers and other people who do not have the option of being away for extended periods equal opportunities in career advancement.

Likewise, at Institution 6, a work group including members from the project task force was created specifically to debate issues relating to the long-term impact of the pandemic, with particular emphasis on reconciling professional and family life. Both examples demonstrate institutional commitment to keeping the spotlight on potentially distinct consequences suffered by different groups following the pandemic.

4.6. *Mental well-being*

The mental well-being of consortium partners and task force members became a major concern during the pandemic. In addition to the overall concern and uncertainty caused by the health crisis, the lack of in-person contact through which to share experiences and receive support, plus the additional workload and the need to adapt to new working modalities in a short period of time, affected people's mental health. Respondents mentioned that, despite the significant challenges, the fact that they perceived the attention and empathy of their peers during difficult times helped them to maintain enthusiasm, optimism and resilience among the consortium and task forces.

At institutional level, the concern shown by institutions implementing GEPs regarding a gender perspective in measures designed to address the mental health issues of staff and students during the pandemic was uneven. At Institution 5, for instance, risk assessments on working from home were organised but did not apply a gender lens. Nonetheless, these assessments remain in place following the end of the pandemic. At Institution 2 the Gender Equality Unit was invited to participate in the initial discussions to create a document on how to make life more comfortable during lockdown. The respondent noted, however, that the document that was released does not perceive differences in the consequences of working from home between women or men, especially those who have children.

4.7. Life and physical health

During the pandemic, life and physical health were a primary concern. The GEARING-Roles task forces suffered from periods when several of their members were on sick leave simultaneously. This was the case at Institutions 4 and 7. To deal with this, the teams redistributed tasks among their members and the consortium negotiated for deadlines to be extended.

Institutionally, all organisations adhered to national policies on lockdown and remote working, as well as to general restrictions such as mandatory use of facemasks and limitations on social interaction. Some of the institutions, such as Institution 1, adapted teaching schedules to avoid congregating large groups and to maintain social bubbles, and most of them adopted a hybrid format for meetings and lectures as a means of keeping activities going. However, none of the respondents declared that a gender perspective was taken into account when defining health policies. At Institution 1, for example, weekly newsletters were distributed through internal communication networks to inform employees and students about the health of the academic community (i.e. the number of infections and deaths) and alert them to the risks of face-to-face activities and ways to prevent infection. Nonetheless, the information was not disaggregated by sex or any other intersecting category:

The university has been issuing periodic data when contagion at student and faculty level has been at its highest, but there has been no sex-disaggregated data. (Institution 1)

In other institutions, such as Institution 6, policies to deal with the pandemic had a “diversity perspective”, albeit without a gender lens:

The institution recognised the impact of the pandemic on the academic work, but with no gender perspective [...]. Concern was shown for diversities such as class, mental health conditions and economic conditions, but never gender.

5. Discussion and conclusion

We can draw two types of conclusions from the above: theoretical conclusions related to the suitability of the approach and its possible limitations; and conclusions that are more oriented towards the practices of the higher education institutions themselves.

Based on our review of the CA as an analytical framework, we argue that, although it is true that it has been modified by various authors to adapt it to specific contexts (such as higher education or the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic), it is an appropriate framework for analysis of complex contexts in which the aim is to transcend merely quantitative approaches. Thus, the review of the CA shows that it is a useful tool for examining and identifying needs in terms of policy intervention. The critical dimension proposed by the CA aids analysis of complex processes by openly questioning the dominant

systems. For example, this critical contribution is particularly useful for addressing the dominant system of academic capitalism, characterised by prioritising economic results (such as staff productivity) over the promotion of specific capabilities. For this reason, it has already been used by authors such as Walker (2010) or Dyer et al. (2018) to question the neoliberal model.

It is precisely because of the prevailing neoliberal norm and perspective that during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus has been on the impact the health crisis has had on the individual capabilities of academics. Indeed, the limited number of analyses that have been conducted in terms of gender equality in higher education institutions during and after the pandemic have focused on the impact on female academics. However, to date, there is a gap in the literature regarding analysis of the impact that the COVID-19 crisis will have on institutional equality policies and agendas in the short and medium term. The contribution we make in this paper is an initial step towards filling this gap.

Our work is based on some of the main criticisms of the CA, namely its excessive individualism and scant attention to collective capabilities. These collective capabilities are essential to sustaining and promoting equality agendas in universities and higher education institutions, and should therefore be incorporated into analysis of the impact of this and future crises. Another question that emerges in terms of the implications for the CA of analysis of the pandemic is how to differentiate the concept of capability from that of capacity. If capabilities, as defined by Sen, are “the doings and beings that people can achieve” (whereby external factors are only implicitly considered), capacities would be those that one has or does not have depending on external constraints. These factors can make a difference in the process of acquiring capabilities and functionings, since it can mean that some groups or collectives are unable to acquire these doings and beings because they do not have, for example, an adequate environment. External factors, which are considered in the CA explicitly as conversion factors, but which in Sen’s interpretation also reside somehow in capabilities, deserve further disentanglement and analysis.

In this paper, we have seen how several authors (Venkatapuram, 2020; Walker, 2006; Robeyns, 2003) have focused their analyses on specific capabilities or have made lists prioritising some capabilities over others. Precisely one of the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 crisis is evident in the reinforcement of the centrality of certain capabilities over others (Manley 2020). In our opinion, adaptation of the approach itself and prioritisation of some capabilities over others is essential to its adaptation to analysis of specific contexts and fields. Specifically, we have opted to use Robeyns’ list as a starting point, because it is suitable for addressing gender equality in education, and the collective capabilities proposed by Baser and Morgan (2008).

Although we use the list and the prioritisation made by Robeyns as our starting point, we understand that the circumstances and characteristics of the crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic demand a reorganisation of this list to address the capacity thaties that have been impacted the most, according

to our qualitative analysis. Our results show the capabilities most affected by the pandemic within the context of a GEPI project are: 1) mobility; 2) social relations; 3) education and knowledge; 4) time autonomy; 5) domestic and non-market work; 6) mental well-being; and 7) life and physical health. As we have detailed in the section on methodology, we have not deployed Robeyns' complete list, but commenced with a prioritisation of the capabilities that appeared in the in-depth interviews and observations. Moreover, the results of the analysis show that the characteristics of the crisis caused by COVID-19 and by the measures adopted during the pandemic have meant that some capabilities have been more affected than others. It is precisely as a result of the measures adopted to deal with the pandemic, which involved lockdown and transfer of most higher education institutions' activities to the online environment, that life and physical health, for example, have received less attention than mobility or social relations, since, *a priori*, this digitalisation of activity translated into a greater perception of security of life and physical health.

In terms of practical outcomes, two main conclusions can be drawn. First of all, it is evident that universities have largely ignored the gendered impacts of the pandemic in general, while even less attention has been paid to the impact on the collective capabilities of the teams in charge of steering change. According to the interviews, the institutions focused on adapting to the circumstances arising from the crisis, and paid little or no attention to the commitments made in terms of equality. All the institutions that were analysed had "pandemic GEPs", and this had an impact on both the design and approval of plans, on the implementation of actions, but above all on the task forces and researchers in charge of implementing the GEPs. The success of the six GEPs is inseparable from the effort and dedication of these groups, and the pandemic and the situation arising from it significantly affected their collective capabilities.

In all the capabilities analysed according to Robeyns' list, there was an impact on the collective capabilities for engagement and attraction, for carrying out logistical tasks or functions and offering services, and for obtaining support and resources. The impact of COVID-19 on these collective capabilities shows a lack of focus on the gendered impact of the pandemic by the institutions analysed and the consequences that this has for task forces and change agents in these organisations. The main effects of this are gender fatigue and the fact that the additional effort made by these task forces may have significant consequences for sustainability of the equality agenda. However, some of the collective capabilities were also identified as having been strengthened; particularly, the capacity to adapt and renew. All interviewees highlighted the ability of the participating task forces and researchers to adapt to an unprecedented context in which the restrictive measures that were adopted made it more difficult to exchange experiences and learn from each other than initially planned. The interviews and observations highlighted the capacity of task forces to incorporate new tools and means of achieving not only the actions within the plans but also the activities of the project. This was due mainly to mutual support, the

search for alternative ways to maintain informal spaces, and exchanges between partners about experiences, even at a distance. The lack of institutional commitment was compensated by the undeniable commitment of the task forces and consortium members to weave a coherent and diverse support network that led to the success of the GEPs and project activities.

Finally, we believe that this paper is only an initial exploration into the impact of the pandemic on the collective capabilities and equality agenda in European higher education institutions. It would be useful to extend this research by incorporating additional experiences to identify common dynamics and specificities, and to compare the impact on institutions and consortia that were newcomers to the gender equality agenda when the pandemic was declared with those of institutions and actors with a more consistent track record.

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