

ETUC document

COVID-19 IS NOT GENDER NEUTRAL: a gender strategy is needed

1. Throughout Europe trade unions are increasingly concerned about the gender impact of Covid19. It is exposing inequalities, especially gender related inequalities, between men and women and between women of different classes and regions.
2. A series of factors show that women are more exposed to the socio-economic consequences of the virus. The lessons of the financial crisis of the past decade are that women are more vulnerable than men in a number of circumstances. We cannot repeat the experience. The Covid crisis is, instead, showing very vividly the devastating impact of the under-funding of crucial public sectors, including health, social care, and education, on society and on women workers - as the majority of these sectors are women-dominated professions.
3. Women workers and their trade unions continue to grapple with the long-standing inequality associated with undervaluing of their work. COVID-19 has laid bare the enormous gap between the value that frontline and service workers bring to society and the low wages—and lack of respect—many earn in return.
4. Long-time policy demands address the roots of gender inequalities in Europe, and we know that those magnified by the current pandemic are not new. Unless we tackle these recognised weaknesses during the crisis and in the recovery from the crisis, women are going to pay a double price for the consequences of Covid19

EU Gender Equality Strategy must be part of the road map to recovery

5. The Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025¹ already addresses many crucial concerns for women workers across Europe. Now, the concerns call for policy interventions that cannot be delayed. The ETUC calls the European Commission to act fast to implement it in all its part, especially those that pertain to tackle the impact of Covid19.
6. The ETUC has identified a series of challenges related to Covid19 in a gender perspective that need to be addressed with tailor-made and effective policy responses. Commissioner Dalli, informed about the ETUC concerns, has promised to take over the responsibility to make an in-depth examination of the situation in a gender perspective and monitor that political action is undertaken promptly².
7. **In response to these challenges, therefore, the ETUC firmly demands**
 - a. an effective coordination of policies at EU level to promote and protect public and human health as for the TFEU. Such effectiveness can only be realised through an enhanced fiscal capacity of the EU to run investments that are considered as strategic – as the EU cannot rely on the extraordinary solidarity efforts of few individual countries but must rather engage in a new structural response to the increasing social needs. The ETUC believes a COVID-Bond Programme would be the only available financial option to urgently support the infrastructure and supplies for National Health Systems, the emergency measures related to employment and income support, the scheme for unemployment reinsurance at European level. However, efforts must also be long-term ones, implying to go beyond

¹ Brussels, 5.3.2020, COM(2020) 152 final, https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

² <https://www.etuc.org/en/circular/please-send-your-comments-draft-resolution-gender-balance-company-boardrooms-letter-dalli>

the limits of the Stability and Growth Pact, allowing MS to invest in sectors and infrastructures that an ageing Europe permanently can rely on, and preventing that the consequences of the crisis become new structural negative trends whose repercussions would mostly fall on women workers.

- b. Urgent measure to protect occupation health and safety of women workers in sectors in the frontline of the crisis, starting with provision of PPE, reasonable working shift and care in case of infection
- c. The proper representation of women into decision making at all levels
- d. Effective actions to tackle the gender pay gap, revalue pay and benefits for key workers
- e. Recognition and qualification for unpaid care work and solid investments in public, quality and accessible care services
- f. Recognition, income protection and social support for all domestic workers, especially migrant and undocumented workers
- g. The ratification of the ILO Convention 189 by all EU member states
- h. The fast and ambitious implementation of the Work Life Balance directive, with parental leaves paid at least at the level of sick leaves
- i. Financial resources to ensure adequate income support to women in need
- j. Effective and prompt action against gender domestic violence, starting with the ratification of the Istanbul Convention

Covid19 gender-related challenges and ETUC policy calls.

Women on the frontline of this pandemic – urgency for structural macroeconomic policy response

8. Women, that make up the majority of workers in the health and social care sector – 70% in 104 countries analysed by the World Health Organization (WHO)- cope with the emergency in despicable working conditions putting their own health at risk.
9. The Eurostat data show how the public expenditure for public health services has been steadily reduced in the last ten years (in EU28 it remained stable or declining (-0.1% of GDP in 2015 and 2017) since 2011; same applies to the Euro Area). Also public investments in infrastructures declined. The past Semester cycle promoted again “rationalisation” and “cost-efficiency”, usually implying aggregation of structures, shift of already allocated resources, de-hospitalisation of care, and almost never public investment in personnel and services that would be needed. Increasing line cuts to qualified professions and staff, health supplies, investments in research and development show now the incapacity of the austerity approach in providing structural responses to people’s demands of fundamental health and care services. The pandemic highlights how this is an issue for patients as well as for the workforce. As denounced by the press and witnessed by workers in the sectors, women workers in the health and social care services, on the frontline of the fight against the virus spreading, face very difficult conditions, are forced to longer hours, perform physically challenging jobs related to the healthcare necessities, experience frustration for not being able to cope with the emergency, and are called at doing so often without the necessary means and adequate protection for their own health.
10. Women are at the frontline also in other sectors than health and care, such as in the service sector. According to the ILO, the majority (58.6 per cent) of employed women worldwide work in the service sector. Women in commerce, shops, pharmacy provision, cleaning and other services that ensure crucial provisions to the communities during this crisis, are highly exposed. They are experiencing not only difficult working conditions but also serious and actual risks for their own health, due to the lack of adequate personal protection equipment

and sanitary supplies. Women in essential public sectors are also called at answering people's demands on-line, in a situation of lack of personnel and unpreparedness of the systems. This often implies long shifts at the pc, thus risks of hyper-connection, difficult work-life balance, higher exposure to harassment from dissatisfied users, and consequent burnouts.

11. **Therefore the ETUC is calling for the absolutely crucial protection of the health and safety of women in the sectors at the frontline of the crisis**, especially as far as healthcare sector workers are concerned, including the provision of all personal protection equipment, but also proper rest in case of extra time and shifts under pressure, direct patient care when they are at risk and, when necessary, priority of evaluation and treatment.
12. **Moreover, the ETUC calls for the EU must engagement in both emergency and long-term structural responses to the increasing public health needs.** Both EU and MS must inject financial resources in the sectors under pressure in order to first protect women's health and safety, and then ease their working conditions, via ensuring that staff capacities are adequate to confront the emergency needs and that the workplaces are properly equipped. Investments in public quality and accessible care services was crucial before the Covid19 and must remain a top priority to cope with the needs of the population in time of pandemic as well as in normal conditions. Care and service sectors must become opportunities for more and high-quality quality employment.

Current sex-disaggregated data are incomplete – a gender issue in decision making.

13. Although women are working non-stop behind the scenes, it is mostly men making decisions in this crisis. The gender imbalance in decision making is mirrored also in the collection of data related to the impact of Covid19. The international community communicates an almost equal number of cases between men and women and generic data. The Lancet (March 2020) denounces how this lack of information is linked to the lack of women in decision making institutions at all levels and in all sectors involved in monitoring and responding to the pandemic.
14. However, incorporating a gender analysis would be crucial to improve the effectiveness of health interventions and promote gender and health equity goals. If the response to disease outbreaks such as COVID-19 is to be effective (and not reproduce or perpetuate gender and health inequities, as it was the case for the Zika and the Ebola crisis), it is important that gender norms, roles, and relations that influence women's and men's differential vulnerability to infection, exposure to pathogens, and treatment received, as well as how these may differ among different groups of women and men, are considered and addressed.
15. **The ETUC therefore calls for a proper representation of women into decision making at all levels.** Incorporating the voices of women into preparedness and response efforts to Covid-19 is absolutely urgent.

Key workers under paid and undervalued

16. Jobs on frontline, predominantly done by women have along legacy of being undervalued and underpaid. Covid-19 has spotlighted how the unfair market-determined salaries of workers such as cleaners, retail, transport, care and healthcare workers have diverged from the real value that they provide to society and the economy. It is long past time that low-wage workers secure a permanent income boost and earn a wage with adequate benefits. **The announced Gender Pay Transparency Directive must tackle the root causes and include provisions that assist workers and their unions to re-evaluate their pay and to secure increases that reflect the real value of the work to the organisations and society. Unions must be empowered to**

bargain to build a new normal where work that is done by women is properly valued and paid.

Concern for severe job losses in women-dominated professions and sectors

17. Women are already underemployed and underpaid with respect to men, segregated into low paid sectors and trapped in involuntary part-time and poor-quality jobs.
18. Social partners and governments are working to preserve employment in the short and mid-term for all workers, and extraordinary measures are being negotiated to ensure acceptable income maintenance. However, precarious and atypical workers are more at risk of enjoying low or no protection at all, and in this scenario, women are more at risk than men. Many women have precarious jobs both in the private and the public sector and work in small and medium enterprises, are more exposed to employers' pressure or avoidance of negotiated rules. The poor social benefits they accrue in consequences of their poor salaries and precarious employment expose them to more serious lack of access to social protection and adequate income in case of need. Workers in **externalized and privatized care services (mostly self-employed or part of often "false" cooperatives), not to mention domestic workers, are encountering problems and obstacles in accessing the compensation and salary integration schemes they would have the right to, if the services were still public.** Member states that are contributing to employment preservation with public money should ensure that extraordinary measures benefit the whole workforce.
19. **Therefore the ETUC urges to address the gender pay gap and the women segregation** in low paid sectors and precarious jobs, to tackle low wage levels and gender-related low job quality. It is fundamental that member states engaged in financial efforts to maintain employment levels in the mid-term also demand and monitor that employers respect the agreements in the long run *in a gender perspective*.

Unpaid (care) work for women will increase

20. Women already do three-times as much unpaid care work than men. Caring for relatives especially children and elderly ones is already great part of unpaid care work performed by women. Unpaid care duties prevent women participation into the labour market and the accrual of effective and adequate social protection benefits. The virus adds to the burden, especially with the closure of schools, childcare facilities and workplaces. The situation will be even more difficult for single parents, especially when options for informal childcare are unavailable.
21. Women all over Europe already bear much of the responsibility for childcare, elderly care and long-term care – hot topics for trade unions that have always denounced how badly Europe is struggling with care services and infrastructure, especially public, accessible and of high quality. At home and institutionally, and in both settings women carry out the lion's share of the work. With the mass school and nurses' closures in more and more countries, the gender impact of the care crisis has particularly affected women. In many cases, where telework has been adopted, coping with both work and family duties is a real challenge – as witnessed by the education sector, again female-dominated, which is currently struggling a lot with moving to remote learning. In some countries, like Belgium and Italy, workers with childcare duties, especially in the health and public security sectors, receive support from the state, via special nurse services or pre-paid vouchers for baby-sitting. However, these solutions are temporary, targeted and the lack of care structures remains. Those who do not fall into the specific

categories, who are poor, working in service jobs that cannot be done from home, and those without paid leave are especially vulnerable.

22. **Therefore the ETUC is calling for the necessary recognition and qualification for unpaid care work**, to allow women to be fully part of the labour market, the social protection system and the society equally. Investments in public quality and accessible care services was crucial before the Covid19 and must remain a top priority to fight unpaid care work and create new quality employment.

Domestic workers, the invisible workers

23. EFFAT sources (2018) report that worldwide there are some 400 million domestic workers. For Europe, official (Eurostat) figures estimate 26 million. However, much domestic employment is not officially registered, and research estimates a further one million undocumented - often migrant and refugees – domestic workers in Europe alone. Of course, the huge majority of them are women.
24. Isolated, often undeclared, poorly organised, domestic workers are severely exposed to the pandemic consequences. They are under protected in many member states also when they are not undeclared. In times of Covid19, they are often unprotected by risks for their own health (lack of personal protective equipment, work in different households, with consequent higher risks of exposure to sick people). The virus and the consequent restrictive measures imposed by member states to contain the spreading of the virus greatly expose them to unemployment. The restrictive measures expose them even to the loss of their accommodation, as they are no longer hosted in the households they usually assist. Eu migrant women cannot return to their countries of origin (mostly Eastern EU) due to travelling restrictions.
25. The situation is particularly concerning for non-EU migrant and refugee workers, especially women, often undeclared and even undocumented.
26. **The ETUC is calling for recognition, income protection and support of national social services for all domestic workers, especially migrant workers.** Member states must incentivise their official employment, fair pay and enhance quality working conditions and ensure that all, with specific regards to non- EU migrant and refugee workers, including undocumented ones, are able to claim employment and social rights. The EU must promote the ratification of the ILO Convention 189 well beyond the 7 countries that have done it so far.

Paid annual leaves and parental leaves as temporary measures to protect employment: yes but...

27. In times of global health crisis, governments and social partners are negotiating urgency measures across in Europe, to safeguard employment and prevent from company (especially SMEs) closures and shutdowns. In many cases extraordinary measures are equally applied to men and women. In case of workers with childcare and family duties, the recourse to paid leave as well as to parental leave has been agreed upon. In some countries, social partners negotiated the recourse to unused annual paid leave or additional ones that will not make women pay the consequence of the summer school closure, but this is not always the case. In Italy, for example, the level of pay for parental leaves taken in this extraordinary juncture has been slightly increased, but from 30% to 50% only and for a too limited period of time. However, we should not forget that the possibility for the two parents to share the parental leave is discouraged by the pay gap suffered by women, that parental leaves are very poorly

paid with respect to the usual salary and that in many countries across Europe they not paid at all.

28. **The ETUC is therefore calling for tackling the issues addressed by the Work Life Balance directive and magnified by the Covid crisis and stresses the urgency to implement it as soon as possible and far beyond the minimum requirements.** In particular, parental leaves should be paid at least at the level of sick leaves.

Women and risk of poverty, social exclusion, inadequate earning and household income, unmet medical needs.

29. In 2019 Eurofound assessed an overall lack of upward convergence and even downward convergence in the trends in these indicators across Europe, showing how member states should strengthen their economic and social resilience in order to support sustainable and inclusive convergence. These areas include employment participation and exclusion, as well as poverty and access to social services. The gender gap in poverty, social exclusion and risk of poverty in the EU (as witnessed by the high rate of homeless women, amongst other evidence) is evident and needs to be specifically addressed
30. **Therefore the ETUC is calling for Member states to be allowed to engage financial resources necessary to face women's needs in term of income support and ensure adequate minimum income schemes.**

Last but not least: staying at home for many women means to be trapped

31. Domestic violence is experienced by a high rate of women, for whom the recommendation not to leave the households not to spread the virus sounds like a condemnation. Domestic abuse increases in times of crisis, and women stuck at home with a violent partner are now exposed to them for longer periods of time, making it more difficult to call helplines.
32. The ETUC, in line with the EC engagements in the GES, **strongly calls for member states and all stakeholders to engage in spreading information concerning the helplines and other services assisting women in case of domestic violence, providing shelters but also protecting them with preventive and immediate measures against the perpetrators³.** Security and police interventions must be guaranteed in this juncture more than ever. Such effective measures can be enacted only if all member states adopt binding severe laws criminalising domestic violence, as prescribed by the Istanbul Convention. Its ratification by the EU and all EU member states must be at the top of the list for policy makers.

³ A recent decision of the Court of Trento, in Italy, condemned the perpetrator to leave the house in a case of domestic violence, to protect the woman and children.