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## **REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON POLICIES TO ENSURE GENDER EQUALITY**

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***Abstract.** The purpose of this research is to reflect the issue of gender equality in general aspects and in particular an approach is made to equality between women and men through the lens of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.*

*I am going to discuss the efforts of the authorities, civil society, development partners that have been channeled in the fight against the challenges and consequences of the new pandemic.*

*This research incorporates a synthesis, a study containing analytical notes and measures in the context of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the various spheres of life through the lens of gender equality.*

**Key words:** Covid-19, gender equality, Republic of Moldova

**JEL Classification:** H11, H12, H75, I14, I18, I38, J16, J88

### **1. Introduction**

Gender involves socially constructed roles, responsibilities, constraints, and privileges that are assigned or imposed on women and men in a particular culture. Attitudes and characteristics regarding gender, the role played by men and women and the expectations regarding them vary from one society to another and change from one era to another.

The fact that attitudes towards gender are constructed by society also means that they can change in such a way as to lead to the creation of a more equitable and just society and a gender-balanced democracy.

Gender equality must be a central objective of any democratic society that wants to create full and equal human rights for all and is intrinsically linked to its sustainable development, being vital for the implementation of human rights.

We can say that there is equality between women and men when both sexes are able to:

- equally share power and influence;
- to have equal opportunities in terms of financial independence through work and by establishing one's own business;
- to enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop their skills and talents;
- share responsibility for the home and children and be free from any kind of coercion, intimidation and acts of gender-related violence both at home and at work.

Since the year 2020 was characterized by an unprecedented health context marked by the Covid-19 pandemic that determined a series of changes and effects on the population, these being internalized differently by women and men, it was observed that the effects of the

situation influenced directly gender equality both economically and socially both at the country level and at the global level.

In the mission of dealing with the problem of Covid-19 and its impact on policies to ensure gender equality in the case of the Republic of Moldova, I intend to analyze the activities that have been reoriented towards reducing the consequences, strengthening resilience and above all, identifying solutions and strategies to make against the health crisis that affected different spheres, including the issue of gender equality.

## **2. General aspects regarding ensuring gender equality in the Republic of Moldova**

Gender equality is based on the premise that men and women should be treated the same. Gender equality is a right whereby every person is free to develop their own skills and express their choices, without being influenced by the particularities of their sex. The different behaviors, aspirations and needs of women and men must be equally appreciated and promoted.

All people are born free and equal in rights, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Even if international and national documents recognize this fact, in reality, every second, a person is discriminated against on the basis of one or more criteria. One of the most common forms is discrimination based on gender or discrimination against women for being women.[5]

Gender equality is ensured by a set of national laws and international conventions, which the Republic of Moldova has signed and ratified. This set of documents forms the legal and normative framework through which the rights of women and men are protected and promoted.

With the signing and ratification of international conventions and treaties, the Republic of Moldova has made firm commitments to ensure equal rights, opportunities, opportunities and freedoms for men and women, to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence.

The most important law, the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, says that: "in the Republic of Moldova, women and men benefit from equal rights and freedoms, and they are guaranteed equal opportunities to exercise them". Although the Constitution specifies that women enjoy the same rights as men, in reality, due to existing stereotypes in society, there are inequalities between women and men, starting from access to the labor market, salary earnings, representation of women in decision-making forums, etc.[6]

In the Republic of Moldova, equal opportunities between women and men are regulated by Law No. 5 of 09.02.2006 regarding ensuring equal opportunities between women and men. The law presents the general notions and areas in which measures are applied to promote equal opportunities and treatment between women and men and to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on gender. These areas are workplace, education, health, politics and participation in decision-making.

"Gender-based discrimination is the unfair and different treatment of women in relation to men, which manifests itself by limiting rights and opportunities, differentiating, rejecting or excluding them and consequently limiting or canceling fundamental rights and freedoms".[7]

The analysis of the situation in the Republic of Moldova regarding the issue of equality between women and men highlights the fact that the most problematic aspects are: the

empowerment of women in the political, economic, social fields and family violence. In order to improve the situation, the Government, civil society and development partners have carried out and supported multiple initiatives and projects to promote equality between women and men.

During the last years, certain progress has been registered: increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, opening up citizens to support women in politics and decision-making positions, including the gender dimension in some sectoral policies, increasing the level of information and awareness, as well as improving the skills of specialists from the field etc.

### **3. Main consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Republic of Moldova from gender equality perspective**

Any crisis affects women and men differently, and COVID-19 is no exception. The pandemic has revealed and, at the same time, exacerbated existing gender inequalities, both in terms of the severity of the consequences and their impact in the short, medium and long term.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated once more the need to collect extensive statistical data disaggregated by sex, in order to be able to treat each category appropriately. For example, while the mortality rate among men is higher, women and girls are more affected by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. According to an analysis by UN Women and UNDP, the cost of living for approximately 435 million women and girls in 2021 was less than \$1.90 a day, with 47 million women falling below the poverty line [1].

Global and regional reports highlighted a number of issues that affected women more than men.

*First of all*, there were more women than men in the front line of the fight against the pandemic. For example, women represent 76% of the approximately 49 million healthcare workers in the EU. This means that predominantly women fought on the front lines against the COVID-19 pandemic, providing care to those infected. About 10-11% of COVID-19 infections are in healthcare workers. [2] Women not only make up the majority of the care sector (including aged care, social care, disability care, childcare, domestic help and housekeeping). These jobs present an increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 infection due to close physical contact.

Other essential workers, also predominantly women, are more affected by the virus. For example, women are over-represented in food production/processing, school and pre-school education, sales and retail. Women are disproportionately employed in work sectors with increased risk of exposure to COVID-19, such as housekeeping and personal care. These categories of employees often have unsafe working conditions, low wages and require direct physical contact.

*Secondly*, women not only delivered care formally as health workers, but also absorbed most of the informal and unpaid care. As quarantine and self-isolation rules came into force, and schools and kindergartens were closed, women increased the time they spent on domestic duties. In two-parent families, women's domestic work increased more than men's (this despite the fact that women were already devoting significantly more hours of invisible/unpaid work in the pre-pandemic period). For some women, this meant they had to take unpaid leave or dramatically reduce their working hours. These trends were perceived more acutely among single-parent households. Changing work practices have a significant impact on incomes and raise concerns

about job security in the post-pandemic period. Women, who need to take care of their children thus reducing their workload, may be treated by employers as 'non-essential' workers [2].

As job cuts and recession are expected on a global scale, this could put women at greater risk of layoffs and unemployment compared to men. Employers need to recognize the distribution of domestic work within households and how this affects paid work. Women must be mandatorily protected against forced redundancies due to the need to care for children. As remote work and quarantine can continue for months on end, governments need to ensure social and financial protection through different tools: child benefits, allowances or paid parental leave. Data on layoffs and job losses must be disaggregated by sex.

**Thirdly, a significant issue during the COVID-19 lockdown was domestic violence. Most cases of physical abuse occur inside homes, so the need for people to stay at home to avoid the spread of COVID-19** has, surprisingly, led to an increase in the rate of violence. The incidence of domestic abuse is difficult to measure because victims often do not report it. However, during the pandemic, calls to assistance centers increased by around 20-60% across the EU, posing a challenge to society and government [2]. EU governments have made efforts to reduce risks to women, including by increasing funding for helplines, subsidizing hotel rooms for women at risk and introducing mechanisms for women to report violence confidentially.

**Fourthly, women's economic empowerment will be significantly affected due to the impact of COVID-19 on the economy. HoReCa, tourism and education/child care are the sectors that suffer the most from the pandemic. These sectors are highly feminized** so as organizations become insolvent, this presents a significant risk of unemployment among women. Unlike regular recessions, which tend to affect traditionally male sectors (construction and manufacturing), this COVID-19 recession has been called the "shecession" (female recession). [2].

We propose to analyze the impact of the pandemic from a gender perspective in the Republic of Moldova based on the studies carried out by the UNDP in partnership with PwC Moldova, UN-Women Moldova and the statistical data provided by the NBS.

During the pandemic, isolation measures were imposed and people had to change their living habits to protect themselves and their families from infection with the new coronavirus. These changes were more demanding for women than men in terms of time, because the view in the country is that women should be responsible for housekeeping and childcare. Women allocated more time to housework than men, as well as to supervising and assisting children in distance learning. This has had a direct impact on women's work and careers, as the National Bureau of Statistics found 24.4% of the total employed population was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, of which 60.5% were women [3]. Another vulnerability among the female population stems from the fact that a large proportion of them depend on social benefits and remittances as sources of income. While social benefits may not be enough to provide a comfort level for women to protect them during a crisis, 30% of respondents said they lost remittances due to the pandemic (according to a survey conducted by the NBS, remittances are forecast to drop significantly due to the COVID-19 crisis, an estimated 24-40% in 2020 compared to 2019. The exact data will be revealed in the 2021 statistical yearbook).

The pressure was more acute for women, as they typically devote more time to childcare than men, while also taking on the burden of the most difficult housework: cleaning, cooking.

According to a survey conducted by UNDP in partnership with PwC to assess the impact of COVID-19 on gender inequality, 97.27% of the employed female population worked remotely, compared to only 14% of male employees. At the same time, the share of housework performed by women was higher compared to men: 40% of women reported an increase in time spent on care work, and 79% of women reported an increase in time spent on unpaid housework vs. by 68% of men. According to the survey carried out by PwC. [4]

#### **4. Improving gender equality policies under the conditions of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of social, political and economic systems throughout the world, the Republic of Moldova not being an exception. Resilience measures have required a shift in priorities and funding in the public and private sectors, with far-reaching effects on the well-being of women and girls. Thus, women must be both the architects and beneficiaries of recovery efforts.

COVID-19 has infected and affected men and women differently. Women have been disproportionately affected by both the implications of the pandemic and governments' response to the outbreak. This is an important distinction to make: it is not the virus itself that causes socio-economic impacts on women, but rather the mechanisms put in place by administrations to mitigate disease transmission, which cause downstream effects, disproportionately affecting women. Most acutely, women faced risks to their physical safety, with domestic violence on the rise across the EU and globally.

Women's economic security and participation in economic life have also been affected by COVID-19, both at the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the sectors of the economy that predominantly employ women have been the most disrupted by national gridlock. These sectors included education, healthcare, childcare, hospitality (HoReCa). Many women either lost their jobs or took government-funded support packages. Within the workforce, women are also disproportionately represented as healthcare workers, working on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis, putting themselves or their families at risk of infection, additional workloads for caseload management and increased violence and health tensions. This must be recognized and accounted for. Women also had changes to their paid work due to the additional demands placed on them by school closures and unpaid care, which increased significantly in households. Women absorbed more of this care than men, resulting in the need to identify their own resources for combining paid and unpaid work with the impact of greater psychological and mental health issues.[8]

Women's limited access to infrastructure, land, financial capital and other assets prevents them from facing a crisis, recovering and rebuilding their small businesses. Emerging evidence from UN Women's Operational Assessment Surveys in Europe and Central Asia highlights the differential impact on self-employed women and men. While men are more likely to see their working time reduced (54% of men vs. 50% of women), more women have lost their jobs or businesses as a result of COVID-19 (25% of women vs. 17% of men).[9] Women-owned businesses need grants and other incentive funds specifically targeted at them. Furthermore, governments must protect the health, safety and incomes of vulnerable workers, including those in the informal sector. These efforts should be supported, expanded and anchored in the legal and financial framework.



Smart investments and sound policies will be crucial to eradicating extreme poverty. The cumulative cost of these activities by 2030 was about \$2 trillion in purchasing power parity, or just 0.14% of global GDP. As more women than men live in poverty, reducing the gender poverty gap must be a vital part of a broader poverty eradication strategy. A policy simulation analysis resulting from the Futures International Model estimates that more than 100 million women and girls could be lifted out of poverty if governments implement a comprehensive strategy to improve access to education and family planning, fair and equal wages and the expansion of social transfers.[10] Applying a gender lens to the design of fiscal stimulus packages of social assistance programs is crucial to building a more prosperous, equal, inclusive and resilient society.

Care work – typically devalued by markets inadequately supported by governments – has taken center stage during the pandemic. While governments have taken unprecedented steps to address the economic consequences, relatively few measures have been directed at supporting families to reconcile paid and unpaid work, including care needs. Based on a quick assessment of the initial social protection measures adopted by governments around the world to combat the COVID-19 crisis, less than 1 in 5 were gender sensitive.[10] Governments must ensure open and functional shelters as essential services or convert unused spaces to provide shelter for women and girls who are forced to flee their homes to escape abuse. Additionally, shelters need more resources so they can expand to meet quarantine needs and increased demand. Greater support is also needed for helplines and women's rights organizations working on the front lines. Government responses to the rise in violence against women, however, have been uneven.

Another absolutely necessary measure is the disaggregation of statistics by gender. Timely and appropriate gender data and statistics must be fully prioritized as part of the COVID-19 policy response. Through the Women Count programme, UN Women is working with partners in 62 countries to launch rapid gender assessment surveys to gain much-needed information on the impact of the pandemic. The results of these surveys help countries prioritize the rights of women and girls. But more is needed to fully understand the scale and impact of the crisis on women and girls, namely by collecting real-time COVID-19 data on incidence, hospitalization, testing and mortality.

At the European level, a set of recommendations was also formulated to avoid the repercussions of the pandemic crisis, including the gender perspective [8]:

- 1) The gendered nature of the health workforce must be recognized, and additional risks for frontline women must be mitigated through access to personal protective equipment and improved personal financial security so that they can perform work in safe conditions;
- 2) In order to stimulate employment and ensure continuity, it is necessary to ensure a social package for women employed in the care sector;
- 3) Employers must recognize the distribution of domestic work within the family and how it affects paid work;
- 4) Women must be insured against dismissal due to childcare responsibilities;
- 5) Since working at home and the quarantine imposed by COVID-19 can extend for an indefinite period of time, it is necessary to ensure the social and financial protection of families (child allowances or parental leave for a longer duration);
- 6) Data on layoffs and job losses must be disaggregated by sex;

7) Governments must reduce risks for women through increased domestic violence reporting mechanisms, the creation of subsidized safe spaces for women in need of shelter and the strengthening of telephone helplines;

8) Governments must focus on stimulus and/or recovery packages in those sectors of the economy that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

9) The childcare sector must become a priority in the pandemic and post-pandemic period, as a facilitating factor for the inclusion of women in the labor market.

## **5. Conclusions**

The issue of gender equality affects all spheres of economic and social life and continues to develop in the sense of a multidimensional perspective of implementing the principle put into practice in the Republic of Moldova. The necessary actions to reduce inequalities are directed, emerging from the Strategy for ensuring gender equality between women and men for the years 2017-2021, towards ensuring representation from a gender perspective in the political sphere, in decision-making processes in all spheres and at all levels, career advancement and occupying leadership positions, combating violence, education and combating perceptions and stereotypes present in society regarding the role of women in society, financial independence and economic empowerment, ensuring fair working conditions for men and women.

In the research, gaps were identified regarding the practical application of the principles of gender-responsive budgeting, or the integration of the gender dimension in the budget policies of the Republic of Moldova does not register progress. The actions of the Republic of Moldova in the field of the integration of the gender dimension in the budget policy up to the present time have focused more on the strengthening of capacities and the training of officials in the field of gender-responsive budgeting.

The integration of the gender aspect in the process of developing public policies in the Republic of Moldova is at an early stage. As we were able to convince ourselves, most public policies, especially in the economic field, remain gender-neutral or gender-blind.

Until the spread of the pandemic virus Covid-19, the integration of the gender dimension in the process of developing public policies is not always an imperative condition. However, the pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of social, political and economic systems throughout the world, the Republic of Moldova not being an exception. Resilience measures have forced a shift in priorities and funding in the public-private sectors, with far-reaching effects on the well-being of women and girls.

Covid-19 has infected and affected men and women differently. Women have been disproportionately affected, both by the implications of the pandemic and by the Government's response measures to reduce the risks of infection of the population. This is an important distinction to make: It was not the virus itself that caused the negative socio-economic impact on women, but rather the mechanisms put in place by the administration to mitigate the transmission of the infection disproportionately affected women. Thus, women must be both the architects and beneficiaries of recovery efforts.

In our opinion, the subject of ensuring the promotion of gender equality should have enjoyed more attention and recognition in the Republic of Moldova. Regrettably, however, the biggest

challenge lies not in the development of legislation or measures to formally ensure gender equality, but in the eradication of harmful stereotypes and negative preconceptions deeply rooted in the collective consciousness.

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