



Women's rights and well-being in a post-Covid world: Internet of things (IoT) and related abuses, new ways of working, teleworking, tele-learning, unpaid care and housework, women in leadership and decision-making process

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On the International Women's Day, let us recall the context in which the current event is taking place. Just about a year ago, the World Health Organisation proclaimed the COVID 19 as the global pandemics. In the scope of several weeks, it has affected all the countries in the world and persists until this day, in spite of the existence of vaccines. Hence, further societal developments are uncertain and more changes within it are to be expected. In the sections below, the Policy Department tries to address the selected sectors of society affecting women and girls by changes resulting from the effects of the COVID 19 pandemics.

Internet of Things (IoT) and domestic violence

An increasing number of household devices are now "smart" in that they contain sensors, record activity, and share and store data – from different household appliances, door locks to smart TVs. However, little [research](#) exists on the gender-based implications such devices have in the context of the domestic household and, specifically, intimate controlling behaviour like gender-based violence and abuse.

Domestic violence is not limited to physical abuse, but can be committed through various means, including [information and communication technology](#) (ICT), such as social media abuse or cyber stalking – the so called "tech abuse". As mentioned above, the rise of new "smart" devices, also known as the Internet of Things, provide further opportunities for technology-facilitated abuse. This situation is particularly important to look into now, during the various national or regional lockdowns related to the COVID 19 pandemics.

The [Internet of Things](#) can be described as a network of physical objects – "things" – that are connected through the internet, Bluetooth or other means, allowing them to share data with each other. Examples IoT



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devices are smart homes, health trackers or AR glasses. In 2017, there were 27 billion IoT appliances, and this number will likely increase to over [125 billion devices by 2030](#). Even though currently large number of these tools need human action, they will most likely soon be acting [without any form of direct human intervention](#), basing their actions on data gathered from their users.

While these technologies are generally designed to make life easier, they can also create new opportunities for perpetrators of domestic violence to manipulate, abuse and control. The victims are mostly women and girls, not only due to the fact that females are generally disproportionately affected by the abuse, but also because men are usually in charge of purchasing and setting up the new technology.

Currently, IoT devices lack well-functioning security and privacy settings, which makes it easy to misuse them. They are designed in a way that assumes their [users trust each other](#) and want to share information. Domestic abuse victims report their violent partners [changing codes on the digital locks at the door or switching off the air-conditioner](#). Perpetrators can also obtain data through the search history of voice-controlled virtual assistants, such as Amazon's Alexa or Google Assistant.

As smart homes usually need an administrator who manages the whole system through the use of passwords, it allows one person to almost entirely [control the life of another](#). They can do it all without the victim's [consent or even knowledge](#). Due to constant tracking nature, it may be almost impossible for a victim to find the space where she would not feel observed. However, uninstalling smart-home devices by victim can [trigger violence](#) from their partner and further increase their isolation.

Organisations working with victims of domestic violence report that they [do not feel well-equipped](#) to deal with conventional tech-abuse, and responding to IoT-facilitated violence arguably requires even stronger technological knowledge. Because the technology is relatively new, there is currently scarcity of data available on its impact, which makes it difficult to design prevention strategies. Increasing awareness and understanding of IoT could make a huge difference, as it would not only help victims [escape their abusers](#), but also collect evidence of crime. The appliances, as they gather a lot of data, can constitute an important piece of evidence during trial. For example, FitBit played a [key role](#) in the domestic violence homicide case. In another case, a man was found guilty of [stalking his ex-partner](#) after he hacked into the smart home device to spy on her.

IoT devices can also be used to prevent the occurrence of abuse or help victims find necessary support. Number of apps were developed to allow victims to find out where to receive help, quickly report incident or signal for help. For example, pressing an [IoT bracelet](#), will share the person's location and provide live-stream audio. Apps [Incognito](#) and [Certo](#) can detect and remove [stalkerware](#) from a phone. GPS trackers can be used to monitor offenders and other new technologies can help [identify perpetrators at risk of re-offending](#).

Although scarce, some meaningful initiatives have been introduced in recent years to tackle IoT-related violence. Australian government, on the recommendation from the eSafety Commissioner, established a [tech-abuse unit](#), which can be reached victims and survivors to receive advice and support. In 2017 [Refuge](#), UK-based organisation helping victims of violence and abuse, [launched a programme](#) funded by Google to train 300 frontline professionals and establish expert unit focused on tech abuse cases. Last year, IBM security experts formulated "[five technology design principles to combat domestic abuse](#)" to minimise the risk of technology being used for abuse of another person.

Nevertheless, a lot remains to be done. As many support services report the rise in number of tech abuse cases, there is a pressing need to comprehensively address this issue by all relevant stakeholders. In particular, more data must be collected to realise the real scale of the problem and enable effective responses.

New ways of working including teleworking and tele-learning

The ongoing pandemic of COVID 19 has accelerated the move toward a digital world of work. Working remotely in new and digital ways will change how we work and will require new skills. The critical skills required for work have shifted in the past few years and will continue to do so in the new world of “distance-economy”.

Women in particular have been hit harder by the crisis and face growing challenges from automation. [Research shows](#) that women’s jobs globally are more vulnerable to the crisis than men’s jobs. They make up 39% of global employment but accounted for 54% of overall job losses as of May 2020, mainly because women are for a large part working in declining industries, in part-time jobs or less secure independent work.

Furthermore, during the pandemic women had to work a “double-shift” at home with nurseries and schools closed. Even more women may leave the labour market if we face a slower recovery and reduced public spending on childcare and education services.

Automation will put further pressure on women’s jobs. Whilst the share of women whose jobs are replaced by machines is the same as for men (up to one in four may need to change occupation over the next ten years), they may have less time to refresh or learn new skills. They spend much more time on unpaid care work, they tend to have less access to digital technology and have a lower participation in STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) studies.

Operating in a digital environment with the help of AI

Remote working is here to stay beyond pandemics. Most organizations will embrace a [hybrid working environment](#) with employees working both online and on-site. This requires digital infrastructures and processes to enable remote (tele)working. Therefore, basic digital skills will be essential for employees including a basic understanding of critical technology which is urgent particularly for women and girls.

As AI and automation can take over repetitive tasks and give us better insights, [it is estimated](#) that it will free up 20 to 30% of our working hours, giving us more time to focus on what humans do best: complex problem solving, creative thinking and communications.

Furthermore, in the “distance economy” where most interactions take place digitally, social and emotional skills are essential to build a strong professional network.

Tele-learning

It is the tele-learning technology that allows the communication of ideas and information through an electronic medium has transformed when, where and how we learn.

More than ever before, schools practice distance education, develop online skills-developing situations, employers increase professional development via online training and application sharing and video-conferencing.

It is recognised, that the sudden shift to remote learning globally has propelled school system leaders and educators to reflect on what works best for students and what innovations should be taken up. This in turn can cause upward pressure for important policy changes. It will take creativity and a lot of work to advance these changes while driving student learning. Schools adopting tele-learning technologies during the COVID19 outbreak reveal two key components necessary to the future of learning: flexibility and creativity.

Online platforms and groups are being created to bring together like-minded people to facilitate sharing their ideas and skills. Whether it is [language apps](#), [virtual tutoring](#), [video conferencing](#) tools, or [online learning software](#), there has been a significant surge in usage since COVID-19.

There are, however, challenges to overcome. Some students - including and in some cases especially women and girls - without reliable internet access and/or technology struggle to participate in digital learning; this gap is seen across countries and between income brackets within countries.

The question is, whether the move to online learning can be the catalyst to create a new, more effective method of educating students. While some worry that the hasty [nature of the transition online](#) may have hindered this goal, others plan to make e-learning part of their 'new normal' after experiencing the benefits first-hand.

Whatever the solution, it must be adapted to the country context in order to avoid posing an additional burden on learners, particularly the most vulnerable. Measures may also be required to address issues of connectivity and access to educational materials both for teachers and students, which could include the provision of charge-free devices and internet.

New environment for work and socialising

COVID-19 has changed the learning landscape by accelerating the adoption of fully online training through live video and social sharing. Continuous learning is rapidly becoming the norm and there has never been a better moment to start adapting skills and roles to the post-pandemic ways of working.

The "distance economy" will require greater agility and resilience to embrace constant change and disruption in our society.

New research suggests the effects of pandemics result in creation of new ways of socialising, with traditional ones having been disrupted by confinements and lockdowns. Striving for social connection, contacts have moved online and connect those that find themselves either based locally or in the other side of the world.

Unpaid care and house work

The gender gap in unpaid care work is one of the most glaring manifestations of inequality between men and women around the world. Care responsibilities limit women's participation in the labour market and the quality of their employment, which is not the case for most men. [Measuring and recognising](#) this unpaid work is important for several reasons. First, the gender gap in unpaid care work is itself a significant indicator of gender inequality. Second, poor estimation of unpaid care work has led to underinvestment in public policies and services to address the issue and associated social and economic losses.

Women continue to take disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work, for children, spouses, partners, older relatives and persons with disabilities. Unpaid care work encompasses [three categories of activities](#): 1. unpaid domestic services for own use within households, 2. unpaid caregiving services to household members, 3. community services and help to other households.

[Women perform](#) 76,2 per cent of such work globally, dedicating, on average, four hours and 25 minutes daily to it – 3,2 times more than men's average of one hour and 23 minutes. The principal reason given by women of working age for being outside the labour force is unpaid care work, whereas for men it is "being in education, sick or disabled". 606 million women of working age have declared themselves to be unavailable for employment or not seeking a job due to unpaid care work, while only 41 million men are inactive for the same reason.

[According to Eurostat](#) women perform more food management, cleaning, ironing and laundry, while men are more involved in construction and gardening. While men and women participate both in childcare, it seems that women are relatively more involved in physical care, supervision and accompanying their children, while men seem to participate relatively more in teaching, playing and talking with their children. The cost of employment loss associated with women's care responsibilities has been estimated at about EUR 370 billion per year for the EU.

Even without a crisis, caring responsibilities usually fall heavily on women. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, women in the EU spent [13 hours more than men](#) every week on unpaid care and housework. [In the EU](#), women report spending an average of 39 hours per week caring for their children, compared with men's 21 hours. With the closure of schools and workplaces, and older relatives possibly getting sick, women's unpaid workload further increases.

COVID-19 will have [far-reaching impacts](#) on labour market outcomes and on vulnerable groups of population. The pandemic dramatically increased [unpaid care work at home](#) as a result of an unprecedented shift to teleworking.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has [highlighted](#) the critical role of both paid and unpaid care work for the wellfunctioning of society and the economy. [Coronavirus containment measures](#) have resulted in the closure of many services—including schools, basic health care, and day care centres—shifting responsibility for their provision on to households. While this could offer an opportunity for gender roles to shift within the home, [women](#) continue to play leading roles in care works during the pandemic.

Almost one in four people in the EU lives at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The situation for single parents is even more difficult, especially when having to juggle working from home and caring for children alone. Single parents are more likely to be at risk of poverty, compared to single people, or people in couples with and without children. Women make up almost [85% of all single parents in the EU](#) and almost half (48 %) are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared to a third (32 %) of single fathers. Covid-19 is [increasing that risk](#). As schools (partially or fully) closed and transitioned to online modes of teaching for single parents it may be an insurmountable juggle to combine home schooling (and other forms of care) with working.

[Access to affordable](#), reliable and high-quality childcare and elderly care is essential for allowing women to concentrate on their work without constant interruptions due to family care or domestic chores.

[Dismantling gender stereotypes](#) and ideas about traditional gender roles could encourage more men to pick up their fair share of unpaid work at home.

[Financial support](#) for lone parents to assist with childcare, rent payments and other household expenses could help to alleviate some of the financial hardship, especially in light of job losses in relation to Covid-19.

During the pandemic, many countries have broadened, on a temporary basis, the circumstances under which paid parental leave is granted. However, available evidence shows that women mainly took up these leaves. This underlines [the importance](#) of designing maternity, paternity and parental leaves in ways that do not reproduce or reinforce the unequal gender division of unpaid care work.

Women in leadership and decision making

The first text the reader sees when accessing EIGE's Gender Equality Index 2020: Key findings for the EU¹ reads as follows: *"With 67.9 out of 100 points, the EU has a long way to go before reaching gender equality. The Gender Equality Index score has increased by only 4.1 points since 2010 and 0.5 points since 2017. At this pace of progress – 1 point every 2 years – it will take more than 60 years to achieve gender equality in the EU".*

¹ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-key-findings-eu>

According to the Gender Equality Index, gender inequalities are most pronounced in the domain of power (53.5 points), especially in economic decision making. Nevertheless, despite having the lowest score, the EU's performance in the domain of power has improved the most since 2010 (+ 11.6 points) and this improvement is driving the overall increase in the Index score. Without gains in power, gender equality would be barely progressing.

The presence of women on the boards of the largest publicly quoted companies has greatly increased with the application of binding measures by some Member States. In 2010 women occupied only 12% of company boards, in 2020 this was 29%. Despite this important improvement, women are still not widely represented in senior management positions in private companies and public institutions. At the level of government ministers, members of parliaments and regional assemblies, research funding organisations and public broadcasting organisations the women/men ratio is similar, around one third women and two-thirds men.

The Sustainable Development Goals² set a clear target that by 2030 the world will strive to achieve women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life. To balance out existing inequalities, countries must make profound changes to ensure women have better access and opportunities to lead the institutions that govern our societies. Women's participation and leadership in the civil service is important for ensuring truly inclusive development and democratic governance, as well as enhancing the sustainability and responsiveness of public policies implemented by governments that mirror the diversity of the populations they serve. Still, many public institutions globally face steep challenges in fostering gender equality and inclusivity³.

In her Agenda for Europe⁴, Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen announced a new European Gender Strategy stating that "gender equality is a critical component of economic growth. The European Gender Strategy will systematically address the way laws impact the decisions women take throughout their lives: starting a job, running a business, getting paid, getting married, having children, managing assets and drawing a pension. We must give women and men equal legal rights across all of these life decisions". She also said that "to break the glass ceiling, we need to set quotas for gender balance on company boards" and that she would seek to build a majority to unblock the Directive on women on boards.

It is widely acknowledged that gender equality and diversity have beneficial effects on organisations, institutions and the economy as a whole. This is one of the reasons why the EU and national governments are developing policies to speed up the process towards gender equality and promoting women's empowerment. Women represent over half of the population and have the same amount of talent, commitment and productivity as men. Therefore, the global economy would benefit from boosting women's participation in the labour force. The fact that women are under-represented in positions of leadership is contrary to the drive to exploit talent in order to promote business. In developing countries gender equality and development are mutually reinforcing as more gender equality boosts economic development and more development leads to more gender equality. In developed countries, women represent an important positive factor in the economy, which contributes to economic growth. More women in work equals increased consumption, in particular of services, and more jobs.

Gender equality and diversity have an even greater impact when we look at decision-making. Studies show that diversity in decision-making positions is beneficial for the quality of the decision-making process. This benefits the company or organisation as a whole and ultimately leads to better results. The influence of women improves the decision-making process because, in general, women are better at handling difficult personal relationships, dealing with conflicts, communicating and sharing their views and reaching compromises and agreements. Moreover, women may take a different look at certain problems and policies,

² <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

³ <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf

for instance with regard to the social, human resources, and environmental and sustainability policies of a company or an organisation.

With the current COVID-19 crisis, the under-representation of women in decision making has a direct impact. It appears that in countries that have more women in leadership positions the effects of the crisis on women and girls has received more attention. This is particularly relevant in light of the increase of violence against women and girls during lockdown periods. Many who are in decision and policy making positions clearly lacked the gendered view to see the problem and tackle it. A lack of input by female decision makers may be to blame for this situation.

Twenty-five years after the Beijing women's conference⁵, politics remains overwhelmingly the domain of men and this needs to change. Introducing gender quotas and affirmative action policies have proven to be an important first step towards bringing more women into decision making positions in both the private and the public sectors. Women in public office are more likely to promote measures that address the challenges facing disadvantaged groups. They are more likely to put forward and promote legislation on gender-based violence, childcare and parenting, pensions and electoral reform. They are also more likely to introduce laws on education, health and the environment.

What measures need to be taken to ensure that more women move to leadership and decision making positions in politics? First of all a level playing field must be created. Electoral lists with gender parity could be drawn up, cross-party groups of women in politics could be created to influence the policy agenda, and more measures should be taken to improve the work-life balance. Redistributing care and domestic work more equally in family and society is essential for women to realise their economic and political opportunities and potential.

Gender stereotypes, traditional role patterns and conservative norms in education and the media must be fought and eliminated. Also, violence in politics is a phenomenon that is on the rise and women politicians are often targeted in gender-based (cyber) violence. This is a very effective deterrent for aspiring young women politicians and severely disrupts the process towards gender equality and gender parity in political decision making.

There are many reasons why gender equality must become an integral part in decision making in public and private sector organisations. The many complex problems that are facing us require well-balanced solutions from leaders and decision makers. Problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, the gender wage, pension, tax and labour gaps must be approached with a combination of insights based on education, gender, background, race and occupation. What is clear is that, despite positive trends in women's participation in leadership and decision making in politics and the economy, many structural reforms still need to be made.

⁵ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html>

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