

Gender Reflections on the (Post)Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe

Iva Šmídová^a, Radka Dudová^b ¹, Éva Fodor^c

^a) Masaryk University

^b) Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences

^c) Central European University

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The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on gendered structures and practices. This thematic issue aims to reflect on recent experiences of life under the pandemic and the period following it by concentrating on the gender dimensions of those experiences. The gender perspectives, theories, and empirical analyses collected in the papers of this issue help to provide a much-needed comprehensive understanding of the pandemic's impact on individuals and its complex consequences for gender relations, social reproduction, labour markets, new private and public dynamics, health, and the quality of life in general. The papers collected in this issue target specific topics and offer a rethinking and re-examination of them in the light of recent developments connected with the 'Corona crisis'. The reflections in these papers address the aforementioned public/private divide and confusion; the de/institutionalisation of care and education; health; the politics of gender and sexuality under the lockdown; inequalities, etc.

There has recently been a flood of thematic journal issues covering this phenomenon, but here we seek to fill an intellectual gap by addressing the international, cross-

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border dimensions of the pandemic by focusing on the region of Central and Eastern Europe. We believe that this perspective provides an array of themes for comparison, for an analysis of relevant problems in their local cultural contexts, and for underlining similarities and differences. The social and other impacts of the pandemic are examined using interdisciplinary, intersectional, and transdisciplinary approaches, which provide critical reflections on a region where specific transborder emphases remain underexplored and have yet to be addressed. This issue presents our contribution to the debates, and the analytical category of gender forms one of the core axes of the reflections presented here.

The papers collected in this volume primarily address the (lack of) transformation of the division of care and work both in the labour market and in the private sphere. Alexandra Scheele, Helene Schiffbänker, David Walker, and Greta Wienkamp present a picture of 'Double Fragility: The Care Crisis in the Time of the Pandemic' based on interviews with professional health-care providers in Austria and Germany. The dilemmas of paid and unpaid care and precarious working conditions, further amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, are critically addressed as indicators of a structural crisis in paid care work that is threatening the functionality of the health-care sector.

Marie Pospíšilová adopts a similar angle in her paper (in Czech) titled 'Nurses and the COVID-19 Pandemic – Practices and Identity Construction in Formal and Informal Care', focusing on Czech nurses who were also mothers during the pandemic. The paper explores the interconnections between formal and informal care and argues against their analytical separation by documenting what were only temporary changes in the gender order under the imperative of intensive mothering that is ever-present in the Czech context. Both Scheele et al.'s and Pospíšilová's articles dealing with nurses and their situation during the health crisis that was caused by COVID-19 show the almost impossible situation they faced in trying to manage the 'double burden' of care, with German and Austrian nurses prioritising their public role as health-care providers, while Czech nurses focused more on their role as a mother in their identity management. Both of these articles provide evidence that the resilience of health-care systems during the COVID-19 crisis in Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic was a result of the enormous burden placed on and extremely strong professional ethics of the systems' (mostly female) health-care workers.


The private sphere is addressed in 'It Takes Two to Be Equal? Middle-Class Men Managing Care and Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland' by Ewelina Ciaputa, Marta Warat, and Ewa Krzaklewska. The authors analyse new strategies and solutions for the care/work dilemma through the involvement of fathers during the lockdown. They describe task-oriented fathers, supportive fathers, and engaged fathers, whose gender roles are theoretically framed by the concept of caring


masculinities. The analysis points to the continuity of the fathers' involvement in care and their caring identities both before and during the COVID-19 crisis.

Ana Bilinović Rajačić addresses the topic of human reproduction at the crossroads of individual and institutional conditions in her analysis of pregnancies during the pandemic. Her paper, 'What to Expect When Expecting? Experiences of Pregnant Women in Serbia during the COVID-19 Pandemic and State of Emergency', describes the dilemmas pregnant women faced during the pandemic and the adjustments they had to make in several aspects of their pregnancy experience (such as health, childbirth, and work and family practices).

State policies that reproduce the heteronormative gender order is the topic addressed in the final paper featured in this volume: 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and Gender+ Inequalities in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia: The Heteronormativity of Anti-Pandemic Measures and Their Impact on Vulnerable Groups'. The authors, Vanda Černožorská, Zuzana Očenášová, and Agnes Kende adopt an international comparative perspective and shed light on the effects that the seemingly 'gender-neutral' policies adopted during the pandemic had on vulnerable groups of people in these three countries. Socio-economic status, precarious working conditions, ethnicity, and visa/asylum status are the primary focus of the paper's exploration of how existing gender regimes have shaped anti-pandemic policies. The policy patterns identified provide evidence of the further exclusion and even attacks on vulnerable groups.

Although COVID-19 was a global disaster and, in many ways, its social and economic consequences were similar in all countries (especially in terms of the negative impacts on gender equality), the local and regional context played a role. The contributions in this issue show how the settings of the welfare state, given gender cultures, and the ways of 'doing fatherhood' and 'motherhood' influenced the specific impacts and the experience and management of the pandemic in the CEE region. We hope this issue can thus make a meaningful contribution to the debate on the pandemic.

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Iva Šmídová is a sociologist and an associate professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. She has worked in the field of gender studies in both research and teaching since the early 1990s. She is a founding member of the department's gender studies community. Her long-term research interests include critical studies on men and masculinities, gender relations in the family, the sociology of health, illness and medicine, and bereavement studies. Her current research project is on 'Institutions of Ageing Men'. More details and a list of projects and

publications are available here: <https://www.muni.cz/en/people/7385-iva-smidova/projects>.
Contact email: krizala@fss.muni.cz.

Radka Dudová is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague. She is an expert in the analysis of public policies and institutions. Her research interests include policy-making and practices of childcare and elderly care, women's bodily citizenship, policy-making on abortion, and changes in the labour market. Her articles have been published in various journals, such as *Politics and Gender*, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Sociological Research Online*, and *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, and she is the author of several books in the Czech language. Her current research focus is on the gendered socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contact email: radka.dudova@soc.cas.cz.

Éva Fodor is a professor of gender studies and is currently a member of the CEU's Senior Leadership Team as Pro-Rector for Foresight and Analysis. She has a PhD in sociology from the University of California in Los Angeles and works in the field of comparative social inequalities. Specifically, she is interested in how and why gender differences in the labour market and elsewhere are shaped, reshaped, renegotiated, and reproduced in different types of societies and in different social contexts. Her recent book, *The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary*, describes the introduction of what she calls a 'carefare' regime in Hungary after 2010 (open access with Palgrave Pivot, 2022). Her ongoing research projects address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the division of care work and the transformation of the labour market during and following the pandemic. Contact email: fodore@ceu.edu.