

# “PUTTING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE TO COVID-19 & HIGHER EDUCATION”

EWORA WEBINAR, 6 NOVEMBER 2020  
SUMMARY REPORT



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## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) emerged at the end of December 2019 in Wuhan city of China and spread rapidly. Within a very short period of time, cases of COVID-19 were detected in several other countries and soon it became a global threat (Sahu, 2020). Since then, the pandemic has been a tremendous challenge for the whole world. It has also triggered a rapid change process in Higher Education and Research area in Europe and worldwide. All the actions and activities of the universities have been re-planned due to the pandemic. University leaders have had to take rapid decisions to re-shape the educational and research activities in their universities and “to coordinate such a massive effort as closing entire education systems” (World Bank Policy Paper, 2020). Within this period the importance of strategic planning and management at universities are once again highlighted.

### Higher Education in the time of “Pandemic”

It has been reported that by the end of March 2020 nearly 150 countries have closed all educational institutions. The report by UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) described this sudden and massive change as follows: “The efforts made to continue teaching courses in virtual mode have been notable everywhere and, given the lack of experience with similar situations in the past, the transfer has not been easy” (UNESCO IESALC, 2020, p.13).

Several articles and news items have been published during the beginning of the pandemic revealing how this sudden shock is being experienced both by university managers and students. Prof. Bert van der Zwaan, former Rector of Utrecht University in the Netherlands clearly highlights that “the pandemic is speeding up changes in a tremendous way” (Witze, 2020). Prof. Sanjay Sarma, Vice-President for open learning at MIT, noted his institution’s response:

*“The Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge has been putting courses online for free since 2002, but most academics who were teaching in the current semester still had to scramble to work out how to move their materials online when the pandemic hit” (Witze, 2020).*

Nicholas Young, a Ph.D. candidate at Michigan State University describes the first shock: “I had just parked and started walking to class when the text came: All classes would be taught online starting at noon. At first, I couldn’t believe the news. Was the text message legitimate?” (Young, 2020).

This sudden shift from site education to online education also hits the students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds disproportionately when compared to others:

*“Every day, more colleges and universities are canceling in-person classes due to the threat. Most are keeping dorms and dining halls open for now, but a growing number have asked students to pack up and leave campus indefinitely. That presents a problem for the significant fraction of students who depend on their school for basic needs — food, housing, financial aid, health insurance and on-campus jobs. And, as colleges shift to online learning for the remainder of the semester, not everyone can afford the necessary laptops and broadband” (Kamenetz, 2020).*

## The “Vulnerability” of “Women” in Pandemic

Women are also considered as one of the most vulnerable to the effects of global crises such as financial deprivation, climate change, natural disasters or pandemic. “The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health issue. It is a profound shock to our societies and economies, and women are at the heart of care and response efforts underway” (UN Women, 2020). One of the reasons behind this “vulnerability” is that COVID-19 made us all stay at home and “home” is already a “gendered space” where inequalities are embedded. Accordingly, female academics have started to be confronted with additional constraints to their career progression, due to the COVID-19:

*“...Instead of writing papers, they are likely to devote time to homeschooling children and doing household chores. For those who have not yet leaked from the pipeline and are struggling to keep their careers on track, these months of heavier duties may increase the distance between them and their male and childless peers” (Staniscuaski et al., 2020).*

Several female academics shared their experiences of struggling to work within their “gendered homes”. One academic specifically highlights that her research work has stopped: “I worry that I will not be able to keep up with my research because I have to manage childcare” (Isselbacher, 2020). Another female academic shares the difficulties of online education while managing childcare:

*“I record lessons for my students to watch online, minimizing background noise is a must. But my son is two years old. In the first lesson I tried to record, you can clearly hear his toy trumpet playing during the last two slides of the presentation” (Minello, 2020).*

Such remarks from women in academia are pointing out that female academics’ research productivity is decreasing and the results of this widening of the gender gap in academia may have much more visible consequences in later years. In fact, journal editors have already reported in April 2020 that: “Women — who inevitably shoulder a greater share of family responsibilities — seem to be submitting fewer papers” (Kitchener, 2020).

## The “Power” of “Women” in Pandemic: Female Leadership

The pandemic is hitting disadvantaged groups more severely, thereby exacerbating inequalities for women. Despite this, women’s leadership has been brought to the attention of the broader public in various news articles relating to how women political leaders are managing the COVID-19 pandemic more effectively than their male counterparts. It has been recognized, for example, that leaders in Germany, New Zealand, Iceland and Taiwan have acted quickly and decisively in response to the coronavirus as stated below:

*“From New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, to Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, female leaders have excelled in displaying a governance and communication during the pandemic that has inspired and set an example for supporters and critics alike (Hoffman & Kim, 2020).*

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the number of countries led by women is very limited and the effects of the pandemic in each country is still in a flux. Thus, it is not possible to access concrete data comparing the performance of female and male political leaders during this crisis. However, it can be noted that pandemic has made “women’s leadership” much more visible. Studies suggest two

key reasons for understanding women's better performance while leading their countries during pandemic;

- 1) More willing to take risks: "By locking down early, women took greater risks with their economies than their male equivalents when compared to their male counterparts" (Barry, 2020);
- 2) Better communication skills: "...decisive and clear communication styles adopted by several female leaders, whether it be Norway's prime minister Erna Solberg speaking directly to children or Ardern checking in with her citizens through Facebook lives" (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020).

## Women's Absence in Scientific Leadership

Unlike female political leaders, women are noticeably less visible in the flurry of scientific publishing on the pandemic and their voices are being heard less in the scientific response to the pandemic. Therefore, bringing a gender lens to scientific leadership is gaining importance as part of the gender dimensions of the pandemic.

## EWORA Survey

Discussions around 'gender' in the early months of the pandemic provided the context for EWORA to carry out a survey to learn more about the experiences of women leaders in academia, during this change process in HE created by COVID-19. The survey was conducted between May and July 2020. A questionnaire was disseminated among active female Rectors/Vice Chancellors mainly in European countries. There were 5 open-ended questions, listed below:

1. *How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected HE in your country? What have been the main challenges?*
2. *What strategies have you designed and implemented to reorganize your educational and research activities under the pandemic conditions? Have you made adjustments to your strategies throughout this process? And why?*
3. *In what way or in which areas do you think that you and your team have been successful in making a smooth and successful transformation in current actions and future plans?*
4. *Do you think this crisis has had an impact on gender equality in universities? Have you designed and implemented any gender-responsive policies during this period?*
5. *What would be your approach to the exceptional work that female political leaders are doing as a response to the COVID-19 crisis? How do you interpret the reasons that make female leaders better at managing this crisis?*

## Methodology:

The EWORA survey was distributed via an email campaign and received 11 responses. However, the calculation of a correct response rate is not possible since the EWORA database of active women Rectors does not reflect the exact number of Rectors who received the invitation to participate. This is mainly because it is very difficult to track who is still in a leading position or who had a chance to receive the invitation personally.

Furthermore, the number of received responses was limited as the survey was open-ended. As one respondent commented: it was a time-intensive questionnaire arriving in a period when Rectors are very busy. Also, as some of the respondents remarked, there may not be enough data to provide answers to the questions relating to the gendered impact of the pandemic.

## Survey Results

### The Main Challenges, New Strategies and Adjustments:

All respondents to the survey saw the main challenge caused by the pandemic as: a sudden shift towards 'Distance Education'. One of the respondents summarizes this very quick transformation as follows:

*"We had to change to distance learning and to home office from one day to the next. This sudden change was at first a shock for both the staff and the students".*

Two respondents also mentioned the challenges of planning future education systems. Only one respondent commented that online teaching is not "as effective as on-site education". When asked about the new strategies and adjustments they had conducted, respondents mainly focused on the difficulties related to online education, requiring new arrangements for online examinations and course evaluations. One respondent pointed out how the impact of the pandemic varies in different geographical locations:

*"It was necessary to solve the issue of establishing feedback. It is confirmed that only 30% of students have problems with regular Internet connections".*

Hence the recognition that the pandemic is having different effects on different groups of people with/without a strong infrastructure, in terms of the digital toolkit needed during the process towards distance learning.

Several respondents also raised the topic of 'blended learning' that is being discussed and planned for in re-organizing educational systems. Other responses referred to the transformation process towards a digital future in Higher Education.

*....we have learnt a lot about the possibilities for the future with digitalization....useful features in the video conferencing software, that they plan to continue using even after Corona times.*

Overall, university leaders have faced a unique and challenging experience requiring them to be "responding rapidly and with real focus to the immediate crisis".

Respondents shared some good practices as follows;

- Organizing online training for faculty members and students, for a smooth transition to the distance learning;
- Developing mobile applications for Digital Learning;
- Getting funding for COVID-19 related research.

## The impact of the Pandemic on gender equality in universities:

Three respondents claimed that the pandemic has **“not” affected gender equality** in universities and, consequently, there is no need for designing gender inclusive policies in response to it. This suggests that despite the plethora of reports, articles or news items published on the gendered results of the pandemic, their content is not always visible to decision-makers.

The majority of respondents (7) shared the view that, although there are **“no quantitative data”** they observed that: **“women have been more affected by the demands of childcare and caring”**. Only one respondent stated that she was unable to answer this question without basing it on **“research”**.

One respondent highlighted that not only female but male academics (and students) may have been disproportionately impacted due to their caring responsibilities. Another Rector described how COVID-19 is deepening the gender inequalities in academia:

*“the simultaneous home office and home schooling/caring for their children has led to a fallback in old role models - women take a double load. As a result, we see much less publications and grant writing from our female scientists and scholars”.*

## Gender Inclusive Policies during this crisis

Although a majority of respondents claim that women are more likely to be negatively affected by pandemic, there were only three who stated that they are applying gender inclusive policies.

*“We are being very flexible on our approaches to work and have supported staff with equipment etc to help”.*

One other respondent also highlighted that they are especially designing strategies for **“single-parent families”**.

## Going Digital: Helping to achieve “Gender Equality” instead of diminishing it?

When asked about the gendered impact of the pandemic an alternative response referred to the question: **would working remotely be better for women or not?** For example, could joining in digital meetings be a time saver and help to promote work-life balance, instead of damaging it?

*“In some ways I think that online meetings seem to be more “democratic” (less hierarchical) than physical meetings”.*

Alon et al. (2020) assert that the consequences of the current crisis are falling disproportionately on women but, on the other hand, they underline that **“there are also counteracting forces that may promote gender equality during the recovery from the current crisis”** (p. 17). It is expected that

flexible working arrangements will continue to be adapted in the future as triggered by the pandemic. Besides, “many fathers will now also shoulder additional child care and home-schooling responsibilities. In a sizeable number of families, fathers will temporarily turn into primary child care providers. These changes are likely to push social norms towards more equality in the provision of child care and house work” (Alon et al., pp. 17-18). Although, neither “home” nor “pandemic” is gender neutral, the current crisis may help to initiate a change of culture in the distribution of household duties thereby benefiting from the ‘workplace flexibility’.

## The reasons that make female political leaders better at managing this crisis?

All respondents agreed that female political leaders have been more successful in the management of COVID-19. Here are some of the comments concerning women leaders:

- *“Empathy, clarity of communication, listening to others”*
- *“They have exceptional empathy and do not seem to be driven by self-aggrandising, power-hungry ego”*
- *“The leadership of women leaders seems to be more clearly based in value-based leadership and perhaps more skilled in understanding complexity and different experience based perspectives”*
- *“Women are practical and fearless, without minding so much about reputation. They also listen well before acting and that helps in a crisis”*
- *“Female political leaders might have to make quick decisions and apply the regulations very quickly”.*

## Recommendations by EWORA

EWORA encourages all higher education institutions to take action for designing gender sensitive policies and strategies for reducing gender inequalities being deepened by the pandemic.

Extending the tenure clock or extending deadlines for funding applications are strategies already being employed. For instance, “...many universities in Canada now allow researchers to stop their tenure clocks if the pandemic has impacted their research...” (Peters, 2020).

Other recommendations listed by EWORA are outlined below;

- Institutions/countries should carry out specific research on their own social/cultural/institutional contexts to fully recognize the diversity among disadvantaged groups who are disproportionately effected by the pandemic;
- The voices/experiences of female academics should be much more visible in portraying both the new challenges and opportunities they have identified;



- Financial opportunities should be created to support gendered research on the effects of COVID-19 and female leadership during global crises;
- Research by female scientists in the field of pandemic should be made much more visible;
- The strategies that decision makers are applying for a gender-sensitive management of the crisis should be exchanged among leaders and 'best practices' made more visible;
- Gender parity should be achieved in all decision-making positions and women should be included in the crisis management;
- Family-friendly policies should be designed and implemented;
- "No leadership behavior is inherently gendered, it is developed over time" (Luzio, 2020). Hence, more research should be carried out on how gender affects leadership styles. For instance, why and how women are better at empathetic leadership or better and open communication? How are we going to realize women's potential power and talent translated into 'action'?

## An optimistic Perspective, Future Possibilities

This pandemic is making gender inequalities and injustices visible and also helping to recognize the significance of 'women's empowerment' in societies, academia and leadership.

**"We are all in the same storm, but not in the same boat"**

## Fundamental Barriers to Gender Equality in Academia

In highlighting the potential inequities in academia, evidence of a COVID-19 driven gender gaps have concentrated on quantifiable metrics e.g. number of papers submitted/published/cited (particularly in high status peer-reviewed journals), rather than the overall quality of the research and scholarship. This reflects the ever-expanding reliance on KPIs/Rankings/bibliometric indices. Perhaps it is time to review the appropriateness of these, particularly in relation to (often highly-gendered) decisions about appointments and tenure in academia?

Ongoing competition for staff, students and resources is reinforced by these metrics at the price of collaborative efforts and collegiality. The race for external funding sources, most notably for research, may come at the expense of providing the best teaching and supports for staff and students, particularly at a time of crisis.

A European Universities Association report (Estermann et al., 2020) pointed to the critical role of public funding in mitigating, or amplifying, the impact of the crisis on universities. Yet universities are facing growing pressure to lower costs through digitization, blended learning, online classrooms and online exams/video conferencing. These have provided lifelines to 'learning at a distance' but students, in particular, miss the human contact with academic staff and each other. There is a very real risk that these trends will not be reversed but become part of a future campaign for cost-cutting in academia. Changes in student numbers, triggered by rising unemployment or more stringent student aid policies, could produce a long-term impact on university budgets. Already, the imperative

to raise the numbers, especially of international students, has not always been matched by a similar increase in teaching staff, which adversely affects staff-student ratios.

All of these trends contribute to the 'leaky pipeline' affecting the career progression of women in academia. Sadly, the attributes of the pipeline have been exacerbated by COVID-19, through the gendered allocation of workloads, whereby "female academics are also given, or volunteer for, a disproportional amount of support or housekeeping work that is not accorded value for promotion" (Kinahan, Dunne & Cahill 2021, p. 48). Meanwhile, in the media, it is men who are still 'the experts' who retain positions of visibility in their responses to the crisis, as politicians and policy-makers, and as academic commentators. Existing pressures to complete tenure, promotion and grant applications have frequently posed greater problems for female faculty, due to their association as the primary care providers – for children and other family members.

**European university leaders need to realise that how they deal with academics/care providers now will directly impact how the professoriate will look in 5-10 years from now – how diverse it will be and how many women will be in positions of power within academia.**

## CALL FOR ACTION: Responding to COVID-19

### Are there any lessons that we can draw from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Whilst media coverage has emphasized the costs of COVID-19 to universities and their stakeholders it is worth considering whether academic leaders may have learned of any net benefits, and if women academics share any potential benefits equitably with men. As universities have increasingly closed across Europe, distance learning has meant that teaching to, and examining of, students is being conducted online. One major gain from this is the savings on commuting costs and time that accrue to working from home. Allied to this is the suspension of 'presenteeism' under which the only 'measure' of academic productivity (not captured by publications/citations) was the number of hours visibly spent on campus in a lecture room, office or laboratory. In prioritizing a duty of care to staff and students, university leaders have adopted a policy of 'working from home', based on trust.

Much media attention has centred around the conflicting demands of working and caring, usually implying that this applies to women only (regardless of their family status), rather than careers of all genders. Yet among this wider group there are some positive opportunities: the boundaries between paid employment and caring activities are now more fluid, gender roles less traditional and the appearances and background sounds of family members, during working hours, pose a challenge to any clear-cut delineation between work/family. Universities, like places of worship, were historically deemed the only 'place' in which learning (or religious worship) could be sustained. The pandemic has brought this into doubt as flexitime/flexiplace (long sought by academic parents/carers) have become the 'new normal'. Allied to this and the presenteeism imperative, meetings and conferences that used to require attendance, are now conducted 'virtually' through remote access video calls/conferencing. Events that once involved 1-2 days travel to remote locations are now facilitated through links in individuals' homes and countries, with savings on energy, time and travel costs.

## REMEDIES: Responding to COVID-19

“Covid-19 can be another such opportunity for greater gender equality in the workplace. For this to be achieved we need to stop apologising for personal lives, and let’s see more children on conference calls” (Wenham, Smith & Morgan, 2020).

***“a crisis requires that we draw from the intellect of the full population”***

**(Vincent-Lamarre et al., 2020)**

For this to become a better and shared post-COVID-19 future, it means that university leaders reflect the gender representation of their stakeholders (now at least 50% female), build upon the lessons learned and prioritise what would make academia more gender-sensitive. Among the proposals that have emerged are a rethinking about tenure and how the pandemic period might influence the outcomes, which requires careful monitoring to ensure that care-giving does not damage academic retention and advancement. It may also lead to a rethinking of the benchmarks for appointment/promotion; the (uneven) patterns of workload allocation between academics of all genders; and how the vital task of caring is assigned at household, family and societal levels.

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