

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life Balance Perspective

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1

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities with relevant implications for gender equality. The explosion of care needs and work demands became particularly evident during the first wave of the pandemic when, in almost all European countries, restrictions implying “staying at home” were implemented. Several studies examined the impact of the pandemic and the containment measures adopted, which often increased demand, especially for women. From a gender equality perspective, the study builds on existing literature to review work-life balance policies and strategies implemented during the pandemic in some Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) and their implications for gender equality. Enriched by an analysis of Covid-19 response policies in Southern European countries and their interaction with pre-existing gender inequalities, the paper also offers policy insights for future challenges (flexible work arrangements, parental leave, home/smart working options), urging a gender-responsive recovery plan.

Keywords: Covid-19, gender equality, work-life balance, South European countries, gender and care.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been described as unprecedented, not only for its health impact and socio-economic concerns but also for the containment measures and policies never used before, including the closure of schools, childcare, and non-essential activities and the increase in remote working (Dayal

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& Tiko, 2020). The event significantly exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities across Europe, amplifying gender disparities, particularly during the first wave when "stay-at-home" restrictions were enforced in many countries. The surge in care responsibilities and intensified work demands during this period drew renewed scholarly attention to the longstanding challenge of work-life balance (WLB), a matter that has traditionally affected women (Mínguez-Moreno & Crespi, 2017). The governmental strategies implemented during the pandemic, whose measures indirectly impacted gender equality, have provided new challenges to WLB. As pointed out by recent research (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Casquilho-Martins & Belchior-Rocha 2022; Sánchez-Mira, 2021), the impact was particularly pronounced in Southern European countries due to the combination of persisting traditional gender roles, the spread of the pandemic, and the consequential response policies, rooted in these countries' historical legacies shaped by strong patriarchal norms, conservative family structures, and delayed economic reforms, which have all contributed to the persistence of gendered disparities in both public and private spheres.

The intersection of work and care responsibilities and employment became especially evident during the pandemic, as women were more likely to bear the brunt of increased childcare, homeschooling, and eldercare demands, all while managing professional obligations (Daly, 2021; Daly et al., 2022). Five years on, revisiting pandemic-related data remains essential to understand how short-term crisis responses have translated into lasting gendered outcomes, particularly in contexts characterised by fragile labour markets and familistic welfare regimes. In Southern European countries, these dynamics are especially relevant, as emergency measures interacted with pre-existing institutional weaknesses and deeply rooted gender norms; a comparative, data-driven perspective allows assessment of these processes beyond the immediate emergency and in relation to longer-term trends in gender equality and work-life balance. While Northern and Western European countries, with their more substantial emphasis on job security and formalised labour practices, were better positioned to absorb the shocks of the pandemic, this further underscores regional disparities. In Southern European countries, the situation was further complicated by the region's labour market fragility, where precarious employment and informal work are more prevalent than in other parts of Europe, especially among women. The literature often describes Southern European countries as characterised by familistic welfare arrangements, in which families—and particularly women—play a central role in compensating for the limited provision of public care services (Ferrera, 1996; León, 2005; Saraceno & Keck, 2010). Although important differences exist among Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain in terms of labour market structures, social policies and gender equality trajectories, these countries continue to share

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life
Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

several structural features, including strong intergenerational solidarity, persistent gendered divisions of unpaid labour, and comparatively weaker work–family reconciliation measures than those found in many Northern European welfare regimes. These characteristics make Southern Europe particularly relevant for analysing the gendered implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on work–life balance.

Using information from the COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database, this article examines how Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain responded to the gendered implications of the pandemic through policy initiatives. These countries offer a relevant comparative setting because they share key features of Southern European welfare regimes, including strong reliance on family solidarity, relatively weak public care infrastructures, and persistent gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work. At the same time, they differ in labour market structures, gender equality trajectories and emergency policy responses, making comparison useful for identifying both common regional patterns and national specificities.

The article addresses the following research question: How did COVID-19 response policies interact with pre-existing gender regimes in Southern European countries, and to what extent did they reinforce or mitigate existing inequalities in work–life balance?

To answer this question, the paper combines structural indicators, cultural attitudes, policy responses and empirical literature. First, it analyses gender equality trends through the EIGE Gender Equality Index, with particular attention to the work and time domains. Second, it uses EVS/WVS data to contextualise cross-national differences in gender role attitudes. Third, it examines COVID-19 policy responses through the Eurofound COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database. Finally, it reviews recent empirical studies on the gendered implications of the pandemic in the four countries.

The contribution of the study lies in its integrated comparative perspective. Rather than treating the pandemic as an isolated disruption, the article interprets it as a critical event that interacted with pre-existing welfare arrangements, labour market inequalities and gender norms. In doing so, it shows how emergency policies both responded to and were constrained by the structural and cultural conditions shaping work–life balance in Southern Europe.

2. The current study: main goals and methodological approaches

Most literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality has focused on single-country analyses, while comparative studies from a Southern European perspective remain relatively limited (Casquilho-

Martins & Belchior-Rocha, 2022). This article adopts an integrated comparative perspective to investigate how COVID-19 response policies interacted with pre-existing gender regimes in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, and to what extent they reinforced or mitigated existing inequalities in work–life balance. In this study, work–life balance (WLB) is understood not simply as an individual ability to reconcile paid work and private life, but as a socially and institutionally shaped condition influenced by labour market structures, welfare policies, and gender norms (Lewis et al., 2007; Mínguez-Moreno & Crespi, 2017; Ciziceno, 2024). From this perspective, WLB is closely connected to the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work within households and to the availability of social and policy support enabling individuals to combine employment and caregiving responsibilities.

The four countries were selected because they share several characteristics commonly associated with Southern European welfare regimes, including strong reliance on family solidarity, limited public care infrastructures, and persistent gendered divisions of unpaid work. At the same time, they differ in labour market structures, gender equality trajectories, and policy responses to the pandemic, making them particularly suitable for comparative analysis. To address the research question, the study combines multiple secondary data sources and literature, each contributing to a distinct analytical dimension of the phenomenon.

To contextualise the pandemic's impact on gender equality, we describe national trends in gender equality for 2015–2021 using the index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The EIGE index allows observation of the development over time of gender equality across the domains of Health, Money, Power, Knowledge, Time, and Work. We paid particular attention to potential tensions between gender equality in paid work and in the use of time, as these dimensions are more directly connected with the focus of this study. This observation will provide information on the national context of gender equality before and during the outbreak of the pandemic. Additionally, we use descriptive statistics based on data collected between 2017 and 2020 by the European Values Study/World Values Survey (EVS/WVS) to complement the contextualisation by providing information on cultural elements, such as the gender norms legitimating traditional gender roles existing in the four countries at the moment of the pandemic outbreak. This will help explain the social legitimacy of policies and potential clashes of gender norms in a specific condition that made the tension between care needs and paid job duties more socially visible. We then describe national pandemic response policies that may have had a gendered impact, based on the Eurofound COVID-19 EU Policy Watch database, which provides the most complete and comparable information on COVID-19 response policies in

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life
Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

Europe. The information retrieved in this database allows for observing how governments intervened, how the health emergency have been faced with responses that might have prioritized certain groups (e.g., depending on the type of job or parents with children of a certain age) with indirect gender impacts, due to the pre-existing gender inequalities, documented by the overview provided using the EIGE index.

This combined approach aims to provide a longitudinal analysis when consistent data from a single source are unavailable but needed to investigate the potential gendered impact of the response policies implemented. To this purpose, we addressed the longitudinal aspects by using the EIGE index on gender equality to cover the period before and during the pandemic; the EVS/WVS to show gender norms existing at the moment of the outbreak of the pandemic, contributing to the social legitimacy of policies as well of social expectations unpaid care/paid work increased demands, especially for mothers. The period immediately after the outbreak, and the implications of how response policies interacted with pre-existing inequalities, is covered by a review of empirical studies conducted in national contexts during 2020-21.

In fact, the article reviews recent empirical studies and institutional reports, primarily produced during and after the pandemic period, focusing on gender equality, work-life balance, telework, care responsibilities, and labour market inequalities in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The literature was identified through academic databases and institutional sources using combinations of keywords such as “COVID-19”, “gender equality”, “work-life balance”, “telework”, “care work”, and “Southern Europe”. Particular attention was given to peer-reviewed comparative studies and nationally focused empirical research directly relevant to the article’s analytical framework and research question.

Taken together, these different sources make it possible to connect structural inequalities, cultural norms, policy responses, and empirical evidence within an integrated comparative perspective.

3. Gender equality in Southern European countries

This section provides an overview of the structural and cultural aspects of gender equality in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, focusing on the period before and during the pandemic (2015–2021). We use two types of measurement. First, the EIGE Gender Equality Index, based on statistical office data, monitors structural dimensions such as education, health, labour market integration, and political power across EU Member States. Second, cultural aspects are observed through attitudes towards gender roles from the

EVS/WVS surveys. These beliefs shape daily practices and concur explaining the gendered division of paid and unpaid work (Carlson & Lynch, 2013).

The EIGE Index adopts a multidimensional approach, considering six domains of gender equality. With scores ranging from 0 (absence of equality) and 100 (full equality), gender gaps are measured in the domains of Health, Money, Power, Knowledge, Time, and Work. They are then computed in a single index useful to monitor changes in gender inequality.

From 2015 to 2021, gender equality in Europe improved from 64.1 to 68 (Table 1). Trends in Southern Europe, however, are uneven: Greece remains at the lowest level with little change since 2017. Similarly, Italy shows minimal progress. By contrast, Portugal and Spain report steady improvements, with Spain consistently surpassing the European average since 2015 and widening its lead (+0.9 in 2017, +6.3 in 2021), indicating a faster reduction of inequalities.

Table 1. EIGE Gender Equality Index - trend 2015–2021 by country.

	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021
EU27	64.4	65.7	66.9	67.4	68
Greece	50.1	50	51.2	52.2	52.5
Italy	56.6	62.1	63	63.5	63.8
Portugal	54.4	56	59.9	61.3	62.2
Spain	67.4	68.3	70.1	72.0	73.7

When considering the EIGE Gender Equality Index domains separately, differences among these four countries become clearer. The dimensions of Work and Time capture participation in paid employment and unpaid care responsibilities. Over time (Fig. 1 (a) through (d)), gender equality is higher in the domain of Work than in that of Time in all the four countries. Nevertheless, the domain of Work also refers to dynamics in the labour market like horizontal and vertical segregation, both still relevant in the Southern European countries, especially in Italy (ranked with worse score in Europe in this domain). Furthermore, the gender gap in the time spent in care and in social activities increased, except in Portugal, where it slightly decreased². In other words, while women have increased their economic participation, they are still doing most of the unpaid care work: WLB became even more challenging over time. Moreover, the gap between these two equality domains reflects the different national patterns of gender division (Cunha & Atalaia, 2019; Pfau-Effinger, 1998). In Greece and Portugal (Fig. 1 (a) and (c)), the discrepancy is quite large (about 20 and 25 points, respectively). This addresses situations wherein,

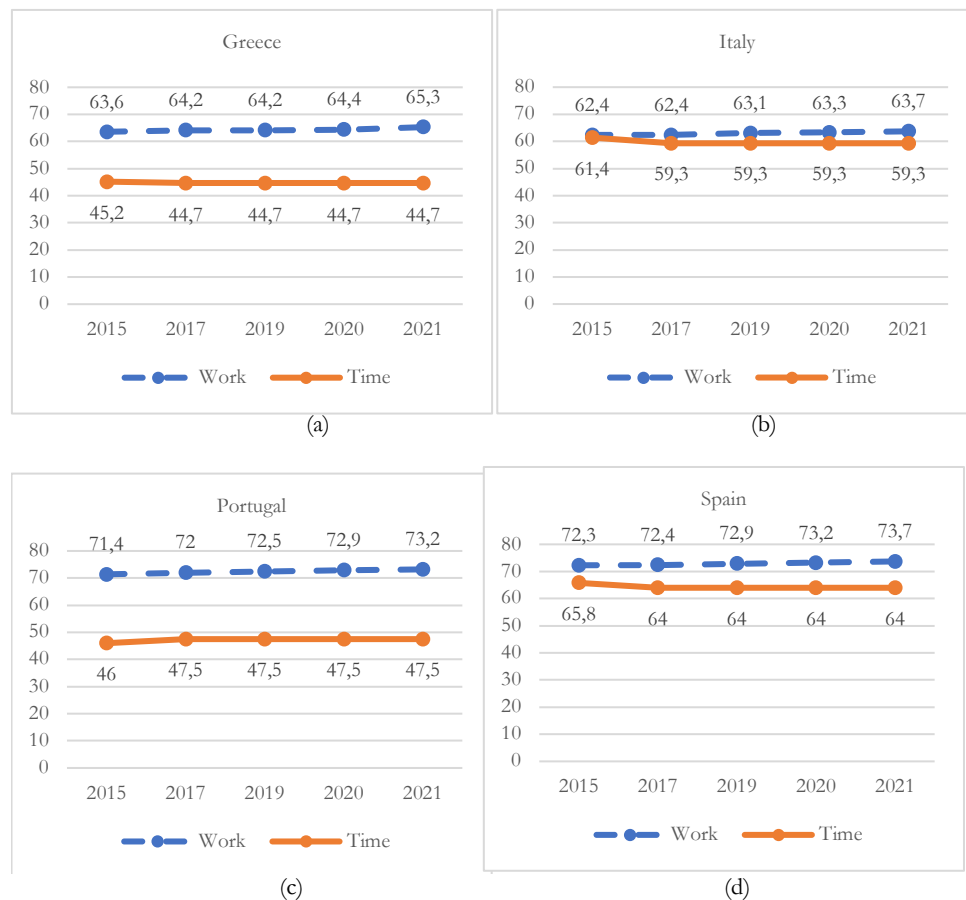
² Detailed statistics by sex, country and year are available at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/domain/time>.

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life Balance Perspective

Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

alongside the expectation of women to participate more in the public domain of social life, they are expected to spend more time than men in care activities and less in social activities. In Italy and Spain (Fig. 1 (b) and (d)), the gap is smaller (4 and 9 points, respectively). Spain displays higher scores than the other countries in both domains, reflecting greater progress towards gender equality.

Figure 1. EIGE Gender Equality Index - trend 2015–2021 of domains Work and Time: (a) Greece; (b) Italy; (c) Portugal; (d) Spain.



Data on gender role attitudes (GRA) from the EVS/WVS provide insights on the cultural aspects of gender equality. The joint EVS/WVS survey (2021) includes four items measuring attitudes towards gender roles, providing

information on the legitimization of gender roles before the outbreak of the pandemic³. Respondents are asked to express their agreement (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree) with four statements: a) “Overall, men make better political leaders than women do”; b) “A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl”; c) “Overall, men make better business executives than women do”; and d) “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.” Attitudes towards gender roles in the public and domestic spheres might not converge. The lack of family and work policies that enable egalitarian processes reaching the domestic domain by making possible for women and men to contribute both to caregiving and family income can lead to attitudinal ambivalence: support gender egalitarian roles in the public domain while expressing traditionalist views regarding family roles (Grunow et. al., 2018; Lomazzi, 2022a). Items a), b), and c) concern the public domain of GRA. For simplicity, we computed a synthetic index of GRA in the public domain as the mean of the scores for items a), b), and c). Only the fourth item, d), concerns GRA in the domestic sphere. In contrast to measurements based on multiple items, a single item risks a weak coverage of the concept. However, this specific item is known for its reliability and cross-national comparability (Lomazzi, 2022a). The GRA scores range from 1 to 4, where higher scores refer to stronger support for egalitarian gender roles.

Table 2 summarises the scores by domain for each country and the European Member State averages.

Attitudes toward gender roles are generally more egalitarian in the public than in the domestic sphere. However, the Southern European region is not homogeneous. In Spain, people express more gender egalitarian views than the European average in both domains; Portugal aligns egalitarian attitudes in the public domain to the European average but remains more traditional in the domestic sphere. Greece and Italy display traditional views in both domains, reflecting familistic welfare systems that insufficiently support dual-earner/dual-caregiver models and thus reinforce traditional gender norms.

³ Data collection took place between 09/2017 and 03/2020. For details, please consult <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>. Data on gender role attitudes are not available for previous waves for all the countries included in the study.

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life
Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

Table 2. Gender role attitude (GRA) scores by domain and country.

	GRA score for domestic sphere	GRA score for public sphere
EU Average*	2.81	3.19
Greece	2.64	3.09
Italy	2.40	3.17
Portugal	2.56	3.20
Spain	3.04	3.51

Source: EVS/WVS (2021)

Note: Weighted data. The dataset includes the EU MS except Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Malta.

This overview, based on structural and cultural elements, shows that prior the pandemic the four countries investigated by this study had different levels of gender equality. For example, while Greece and Italy show a slight increase in the gender gap in time use despite little progress in gender equality and more traditional views on gender roles than the EU average, Portugal and, particularly, Spain show a steady improvement in gender equality and more progressive views on gender roles.

Therefore, the outbreak of the pandemic, and of the implementation of national policy responses, might have had a different impact in these contexts due to the interaction between pre-existing situations of inequality and the gendered impact of specific policies.

For example, the tension between the increased women's economic participation and persistent gender gap in the time spent in care activities was already present before the pandemic, supported by traditional gender norms. However, such a pre-existing gender inequality, characterised by the double gendered expectation for women of being the main caregiver and a worker, was fuelled with the outbreak of the pandemic, resulting in double workloads, especially for working mothers with "teleworkable" jobs (EIGE, 2022), a condition that given the "stay-at-home" order issued in about all the European countries became widespread, with potential gendered impact as other policy responses. The next paragraph will provide an overview of those with potential challenges to gender equality.

4. COVID-19 response policies and structural challenges to gender equality

To deal with the pandemic, European governments implemented policies aimed at limiting the spread of the virus and, at the same time, trying to contain the negative risks for the economy. Measures referred to eight categories (Eurofound 2020a): employment protection and retention; ensuring business continuity and support for essential services; income protection beyond short-

time work⁴; prevention of social hardship; promoting the economy, labour market, and social recovery; protection of workers at the workplace; reorientation of business activities; and supporting businesses to stay afloat. As summarized in Table 3, Portugal implemented fewer policies than the others three countries, and greater emphasis was placed on policies aimed at promoting economic, labour market, and social recovery (e), similarly to Spain. Greece and Italy's policies were mainly concentrated on supporting businesses to stay afloat (h). These differences may depend on national governments' prioritisation as well as on the pre-existing labour market and welfare policy orientations.

Table 3. Summary of national COVID-19 response policies by country.

	Greece	Italy	Portugal	Spain
a) Employment protection and retention	9	5	2	12
b) Ensuring business continuity and support for essential services	5	4	5	4
c) Income protection beyond short-time work	6	11	7	9
d) Measures to prevent social hardship	15	6	7	17
e) Promoting economic, labour market, and social recovery	15	14	27	27
f) Protection of workers, adaptation of workplace	11	19	10	10
g) Reorientation of business activities	4	6	5	6
h) Supporting businesses to stay afloat	33	36	11	23
Total	98	101	74	108

Source: Eurofound COVID-19 EU Policy Watch, 15 December 2025; authors' elaboration.

Some response policies, such as those aimed at ensuring business continuity and support for essential services (b), which implied changes to work arrangements, and those protecting workers in the workplace (f), which included regulations for teleworking, were particularly relevant to gendered WLB. We will therefore focus on these two categories to describe the challenges for gender equality defined by the structural contingencies of the policies. In this perspective, response policies particularly affected two groups: women employed in so-called “essential jobs” and those employed in “teleworkable jobs”.

⁴ Short time work schemes are public programmes that allow firms experiencing economic difficulties to temporarily reduce the hours worked while providing their employees with income support from the State for the hours not worked.

4.1 Essential jobs

Due to pre-existing gender segregation dynamics in the labour market, women in jobs deemed “critical” or “essential” by national governments (Eurofound, 2020b) faced significant challenges during the pandemic, particularly due to job precarity and increased care demands. These challenges were most pronounced in tourism, hospitality, healthcare, and retail sectors.

Most workers (including the self-employed) in these sectors continued to work during lockdown periods, increasing their risk of exposure to the virus. EIGE analysis⁵ shows that women are overrepresented in these essential jobs. Female-dominated essential jobs are often poorly paid and socially not well recognised and with a high share of undeclared work (Blasko et al., 2020). According to the EU Labour Force Survey⁶, women represent 75.9% of European workers in the human health sector, but with a regional variation in the gendered composition of essential jobs. Women’s highest presence is in Portugal (80.4%), followed by Spain (73%) and Italy (67.6). The lowest one is in Greece (63.1%). The workloads and emotional efforts of health workers during the pandemic had huge societal implications for gender equality, traceable in the larger exposure to changes in the work arrangements of women, as they represent the majority of this sector. In the context of policies ensuring business continuity and support for essential services, governments introduced temporary and exceptional measures that potentially increased such risks. In some cases, national governments granted a special bonus for healthcare and civil protection workers in recognition of their work or provided frontline workers in essential services with access to kindergartens and primary schools despite the closure order (e.g. Portugal). Elsewhere, temporary derogations to overtime work, minimum daily rest periods, work on Sundays and public holidays were implemented to face urgent needs in the emergency. For example, Greece removed the obligations of employers to obtain the Ministry’s permission to ask employees to work overtime, and Portugal suspended overwork limitations for certain essential services (Eurofound 2020a). While these policies addressed urgent labour demands, they disproportionately burdened women in essential roles, exacerbating WLB challenges and health risks.

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/frontline-workers/>.

⁶ EU Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) data [dataset: lfsa_egan22d, 15 December 2025].

4.2 Teleworkable jobs: gendered double workload?

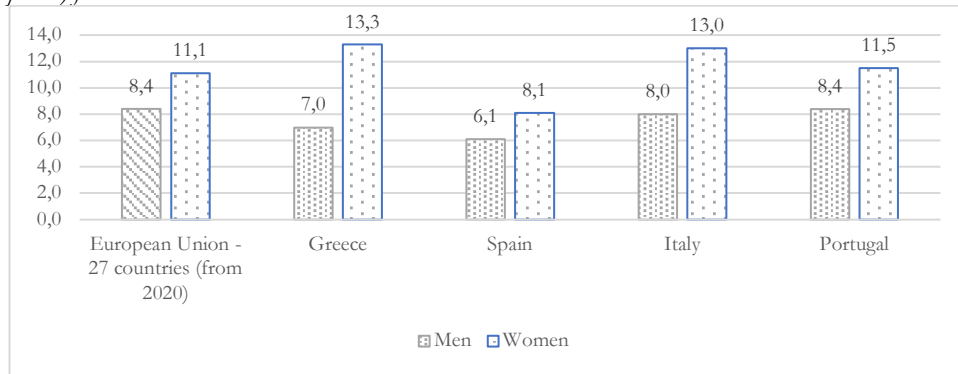
During the pandemic, for workers employed neither in “essential jobs” nor in jobs requiring physical presence at the workplace, working from home was often recommended to ensure continuity of service provision and foster job preservation. This was a big driver for changing work arrangements and for the implementation of new policies in organisations that challenged feminine stigma of flexibility and the belief that such work arrangements imply lower commitment to the company (Chung et al., 2021; Lomazzi, 2022b). Telework increased during the pandemic in all of Europe, both for women and men (EIGE, 2022). The rise was also driven by national regulations that generally recommended telework. In Greece, employers were allowed to unilaterally impose telework without the employee’s consent; Portugal made it mandatory whenever feasible for the post (Eurofound, 2020a).

Figure 2 the variation (expressed in percentage points) in the share of employed people who usually or sometimes teleworked from 2019 to 2021. The graph makes it evident that women started to work from home more than men everywhere. The gender gap was larger in Greece, where the share of women adopting Working From Home (WFH) solutions increased from 5.7% in 2019 to 19% in 2021 (in contrast to men, who passed from 4.9% to 14.9%), and in Italy, where 17.3% of female employees used WFH options in 2021, in contrast to 4.3% in 2019 (men using WFH in 2019: 5%, in 2021: 13%). The higher uptake of telework by women reflects both occupational segregation and societal expectations for women to manage caregiving alongside professional responsibilities. Because of these aspects, telework policies may have disproportionately benefited men in managerial roles compared to women in lower-paid teleworkable jobs. For example, even if both parents were working from home during the pandemic, mothers were interrupted by children three times more than fathers (EIGE, 2022), with potential implications for work performance, satisfaction, well-being and career progression.

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life Balance Perspective

Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

Figure 2. Increase in the share of employed persons working from home by sex and country (percentage points) from 2019 to 2021.



Source: Eurostat [dataset: *lfsa_ehomp*, 15 December2025]; authors' elaboration.

However, for many employed mothers, working from home resulted in a double workload in which external resources (e.g. childcare, support from relatives) were less available than before the pandemic due to restrictions in mobility and gathering.

Recent literature highlights the controversial effects of work flexibility on work–life balance (Wang & Cheng, 2024). While flexibility may grant workers greater freedom to manage their multiple responsibilities, remote work without corresponding time flexibility often leads to irregular hours, diminished performance, and health risks.

This “autonomy paradox” underscores the need for policies that align flexibility in work location with flexibility in work hours, particularly to support caregivers. The survey conducted during the pandemic by the EIGE (2022) confirmed the increased exposure to higher stress for employed mothers working from home. They faced much more interruption by children than men did and reported higher levels of concern for their work performance and feelings of guilt, depression, and anxiety than men due to the perception of not paying enough attention to their children because of work, despite being at home. The long-term implications of these psychological challenges, such as burnout or reduced career advancement, would require further investigation in the context of teleworking.

4.3 National measures addressing care demands

National governments' pandemic policies produced structural changes with significant implications for gender equality, particularly in relation to

work–life balance (WLB). Central challenges stemmed from “stay-at-home” orders and school closures, compounded by diverse work situations.

As reported in the Eurofound’s PolicyWatch database, some national measures specifically addressed working parents to support the additional WLB efforts. Table 4 reports the main aspects of such policies implemented in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain (detailed information is available in the Eurofound COVID-19 EU Policy Watch database⁷), most of which introduced special parental leave during school closures, generally for parents of children under 12. While Portugal and Italy also addressed care for dependents with disabilities, the needs of teenagers were largely overlooked. Despite the attempt to balance the increased double workload, these measures insufficiently covered all types of workers and vulnerable groups, with the consequence of harshening gender equality gaps in the labour market (crystallised gender segregation), work-places (e.g. related to career progression, when performance was gender impacted), and family (reinforcing traditional gender role expectations). In other words, policies reflected the gendered caregiving norms in Southern Europe. Nevertheless, EIGE survey (2022) reports an increase in younger fathers’ care duties, suggesting an ongoing potential generational change in gender norms and fatherhood expectations.

Table 4. Summary of national measures addressing care demands.

Country	Title (Reference)	Start	End	Category	Main aspects
Greece	Special purpose leave for working parents (GR-2020-11/691) ⁸	11.03.2020	31.07.2020	Income protection beyond short-time work	The government introduced the ‘special purpose leave for working parents’ in the private and public sector during the shutdown of school units or special schools for children with disabilities and the further extraordinary measure linked with the pandemic (see circulars of the Ministry of Interior No. 108/OIK.7874/2020 and 109/OIK.8000; Article 35 of Law No. 4690/30 May 2020). Originally planned for March to April 2020, the measure was extended with the school closures. The employer was obliged to grant the special purpose leave, two-thirds of which was paid by the state and one-third by the employer.

⁷ <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/eu-policywatch> .

⁸ https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/GR-2020-11_691.html.

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life
Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

Italy	Leave and allowance for workers with children and other dependents (IT-2020-12/429) ⁹	17.03.2020	30.06.2021	Income protection beyond short-time work	Decree-Law 18/2020 granted 15 days of parental leave at 50% pay to employees and self-employed workers with children under 12, to be alternated between parents and conditional on the absence of other income support. Alternatively, parents could apply for a babysitting voucher. The decree also provided 12 extra days of paid leave to assist persons with disabilities and allowed parents of children aged 12–16 to abstain from work without pay. In late 2020, these measures were extended, with leave entitlements and voucher amounts doubled.
Portugal	Exceptional support to workers' families (PT-2020-11/874) ¹⁰	13.03.2020	Open-ended	Income protection beyond short-time work	Decree-Law 10-A/2020 introduced temporary measures during pandemic-related school closures. Parents of children under 12—or of any age with disability or chronic illness—were entitled to justified absences. One parent received two-thirds of their salary. Self-employed workers faced contribution limits, while teleworking employees were excluded. In 2021, updates included: • Single parents of children under 12 can choose telework or family support, even if telework is possible. • Parents of children under 12 can opt for family support, even if one is teleworking. • Parents of dependents with disabilities or chronic illness can opt for family support, regardless of teleworking availability.
	Exceptional and temporary regime of justified absences to family care (PT-2020-48/1722)	28.11.2020	Open-ended	Measures to prevent social hardship	The Decree-Law 101-A/2020 established an exceptional regime for justified absences related to family care. Absences to care for children under 12 years (or any age if they have disabilities or chronic illnesses) are considered justified. Alternatively, workers can take holidays to care for a child without employer approval.

⁹ https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/IT-2020-12_429.html.

¹⁰ https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/PT-2020-11_874.html.

Spain	Right to flexible schedule and reduction of working hours for workers with care responsibilities (ES-2020-12/504) ¹¹	17.03.2020	30.06.2021	Income protection beyond short-time work	Royal Decree 8/2020 of 17 March permitted workers to adjust or reduce schedules to care for dependents, including full workday suspension. Eligibility required proof of family care duties for a spouse, partner, or blood relative up to the second degree. The measure applied when care was needed due to age, illness, or COVID-19-related disability, and when authorities closed educational centres during the pandemic.
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Source: Eurofound COVID-19 EU Policy Watch, 15 December 2025; authors' elaboration.

5. Covid-19 pandemic and its main effects on work and family in Southern Europe: a gendered overview

As reported in the previous sections, Southern European countries displayed a configuration of pre-existing gender inequalities, as evidenced by the EIGE index and data from the EVS/WVS. The outbreak of the pandemic and the response policies implemented could have slowed or even reversed the progress towards gender equality. To investigate the phenomenon, this section draws on empirical evidence from national studies conducted in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

As discussed, the Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to various facets of life, significantly impacting WLB and gender equality, particularly in Southern Europe (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Casquilho-Martins & Belchior-Rocha, 2022; Sánchez-Mira, 2021), among the hardest hit economically, faced higher job losses and reduced working hours than other EU states, with marked rises in unemployment and financial insecurity (Eurofound, 2023). Southern Europe's economic reliance on tourism, hospitality, and retail left it highly exposed to pandemic-related disruptions, resulting in widespread income losses and financial insecurity (Clark et al., 2021). This strain hindered families' ability to balance work and domestic duties. Unemployment surged in Spain, while precarious and informal workers in Italy and Greece were especially vulnerable. Government support programmes, such as Italy's "Cassa Integrazione" or Spain's "ERTE" system, have helped mitigate job losses, but recovery has been slow.

¹¹ https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/ES-2020-12_504.html/.

The presence of an unequal distribution of care tasks and work duties, depending on traditional gender culture, created a unique scenario where the pandemic's effects on WLB and gender equality became deeply intertwined (Eurofound, 2022; European Commission, 2022a). In this section, we focus on the implications of the response policies presented in section 4 for families, work and gender roles.

5.1 Families structure and generations coping with Covid-19

In Southern Europe, extended lockdowns and restrictions strained families, whose multigenerational structures proved both resilient and vulnerable. Extended families provided crucial emotional and financial support when state assistance was delayed or insufficient. However, close-knit family living also increased the risk of virus transmission, especially affecting elderly members (Andrade et al., 2022; Biroli et al., 2020).

The close-knit nature of family life provided critical support in a time of crisis. Extended families were a vital safety net in Spain, Italy, and Greece when state assistance was delayed or insufficient. Emotional support, financial aid, and childcare, mitigating hardships from job losses and business closures. Whilst these family networks fostered solidarity and buffered against social isolation, the multigenerational living also brought new risks, especially in the context of a highly contagious virus. Families in close quarters found it difficult to fully adhere to physical distancing measures, raising the risk of virus transmission, concerning for elderly members, who are more vulnerable to severe illness from COVID-19. In Italy, urban households showed higher spread due to intergenerational interaction, while in Greece families faced the dilemma of caregiving versus exposing vulnerable relatives, intensifying emotional strain. For instance, in Italy, one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic, multigenerational households in urban areas were shown to have higher rates of virus spread due to the intergenerational interaction and shared spaces. Similarly, in Greece, many families faced the heartbreaking dilemma of balancing the need for caregiving with the risk of exposing elderly relatives to the virus, exacerbating the emotional strain during an already stressful period. In Southern Europe, limited institutional childcare before the pandemic compounded household pressures. The increased burden was noticeable for parents, particularly women (Eurofound 2020c; ILO, 2020). Studies highlight that women were more likely to reduce their working hours or adjust their schedules to accommodate childcare and homeschooling needs (González Ramos & García-de-Diego, 2022; OECD, 2020). With school and childcare facilities closed for extended periods, the burden of childcare fell heavily on

families, especially on women. Many parents had to balance working from home with managing their children's education, which created immense stress (ILO, 2022; Vitoria et al., 2022).

This “double shift” effect, where women managed both full-time work and full-time caregiving, led to higher levels of stress and burnout among female workers. Women were also more likely to exit the labour market entirely or take extended leave, negatively affecting gender equality in the workforce.

However, some pandemic effects on WLB were more nuanced. For many workers, especially fathers, the flexibility that remote work provided allowed them to spend more time with their families. This flexible arrangement provided a unique opportunity for fathers to play a more active role in caregiving, though these experiences varied greatly depending on individual circumstances, such as household income, job type, and access to flexible working arrangements. The positive effects of remote work were not evenly distributed. Workers in lower-paid or frontline jobs often did not have the opportunity of working from home. Those who continued working in essential services, such as healthcare, transportation, or retail, faced increased stress due to longer working hours, health risks, and reduced access to support services. Furthermore, families with limited access to digital tools or inadequate living space faced additional challenges in balancing work and family life during lockdowns (Ferreira & Gomes, 2023; Ninaus et al., 2021).

5.2 Work, occupation and gender roles

The impact of COVID-19 on WLB in Southern European countries was particularly pronounced, as this region already faced structural challenges in terms of social and labour policies and has historically exhibited strong traditional gender roles, with women often carrying a greater share of caregiving responsibilities (European Commission 2020, 2022a). According to many studies (Casquilho-Martins & Belchior-Rocha, 2022; Cook & Grimshaw, 2021; Moreira et al., 2021), the pandemic worsened pre-existing vulnerabilities related to economic instability, gender inequality, and limited access to childcare, amplifying difficulties for families trying to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. For example, in Italy, women disproportionately experienced job losses, particularly in lower-income, part-time, or informal employment; in Spain, women accounted for a significant percentage of frontline workers, exposing them to higher risks as they managed increased home responsibilities due to school closures and care needs (Mussida & Patimo, 2021; Scalise, 2022).

Even remote work did not lead to a more balanced distribution of household labour. Women continued to do most domestic tasks despite

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

working full-time. In Portugal, this “double shift” phenomenon, where women handle both professional work and household duties, was magnified during the pandemic; women spent significantly more time on childcare and housework compared to men, even when both partners worked remotely (Andrade & Petiz Lousã, 2021).

Moreover, the increased care responsibilities during lockdowns disproportionately fell on women, further reinforcing traditional gender roles. For many women, especially mothers, the pandemic forced them to reduce working hours or leave their jobs entirely to care for children or elderly family members (Espinoza & Reznikova, 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2021). This effect was particularly pronounced in Italy and Greece, where cultural expectations around gender roles are deeply ingrained. This regression in gender equality has sparked debates about the need for policies that support a better WLB and shared caregiving responsibilities (European Commission, 2022b).

Looking at the socio-cultural context of each country covered in this study, we can identify elements that summarise the main problems resulting from the pandemic.

The abrupt transition to remote work during the pandemic dramatically altered traditional work patterns in Italy. Italian culture, which strongly emphasises family and community, found the blending of work and home life both a blessing and a curse (Brini et al., 2021; Manzo & Minello, 2020). While remote work provided flexibility and eliminated commute times, women in Italy faced particular challenges, as they traditionally bear a larger share of household tasks and caregiving roles (Cannito & Scavarda, 2020; Newell, 2020). The burden of balancing work and family life became more pronounced, exacerbating stress and reducing overall well-being (Carnevale & Hatak, 2022). The Italian government responded with measures such as extended parental leave and financial support for families, but their long-term effectiveness remains uncertain (Crespi et al., 2023).

The pandemic’s impact on gender equality was starkly evident in the workforce composition in Spain. Women are overrepresented in sectors severely affected by the pandemic, such as retail, hospitality, and healthcare. As a result, they faced disproportionate job losses and reduced working hours (Farré et al., 2020; Roig et al., 2022). As mentioned, a significant percentage of frontline workers in Spain are women, exposing them to higher risks as they manage increased home responsibilities due to school closures and care needs. The shift to remote work did not lead to an equitable distribution of household labour. Studies (Caparrós Ruiz, 2022; Seiz, 2021) showed that Spanish women continued to do most domestic tasks despite working full-time.

In Portugal, the pandemic further highlighted the challenges of balancing childcare and work responsibilities. Surveys indicated that Portuguese women

devoted significantly more time to childcare and housework than men, even when both partners worked remotely (Gouveia et al., 2021). The Portuguese government introduced measures to support families, such as financial aid and flexible working hours. However, these interventions often failed to address the root causes of gender inequality in household labour distribution.

Traditional gender roles and cultural expectations significantly influenced the impact of the pandemic on WLB and gender equality in Greece. Greek society generally expects women to be primary caregivers, a norm that strongly persisted even during the pandemic (Grigoropoulos, 2021; Pouliakas, 2020). As a result, women in Greece faced heightened pressure to manage both their professional responsibilities and increased household duties. The government implemented various support measures, including financial aid for families and incentives for remote work. However, these policies had limited success in altering deeply ingrained cultural norms.

5.3 Social policies and Covid-19: WLB and gender equality need for a change

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened pre-existing social and economic challenges in Southern Europe, particularly concerning families, employment, and gender equality. While family networks provided support, they could not compensate for structural deficiencies in social services and employment security. Governments and organisations in Southern Europe responded with various measures to mitigate negative impacts on WLB and promote gender equality. Italy introduced extended parental leave and financial support for families, while Spain implemented policies to support teleworking and flexible working hours. Greece and Portugal implemented actions to address education, school closures, and WLB. These interventions provided immediate relief, but their effectiveness in fostering long-term change remains to be seen (Andrade & Petiz Lousã, 2021; Chalari & Charonitis, 2024; Farré et al., 2020; Newell, 2020).

The pandemic underscored the need for structural reforms to support gender equality and WLB (Vanhercke et al., 2021). There is a clear demand for more supportive work-family policies, such as enhanced access to flexible work arrangements, comprehensive childcare support, and mental health services. Additionally, ensuring men and women can equally balance work and family responsibilities is critical to achieving greater gender equality in the workplace. The pandemic highlighted the importance of flexible work arrangements and the need for structural changes that support all workers, regardless of caregiving responsibilities or job type (World Bank, 2021). Employers are now more aware of the importance of flexible work arrangements, but policies are still needed to

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life Balance Perspective

Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

encourage shared household responsibilities and provide comprehensive support for working parents. For example, promoting paternity leave and normalising its uptake among men can help redistribute caregiving duties more equitably.

While structural reforms are essential to addressing long-term WLB challenges, implementing them requires careful planning, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and alignment with societal needs. Governments, employers, and community organisations can play distinct yet complementary roles in ensuring these reforms are practical and sustainable.

To implement structural reforms effectively, governments can adopt a phased approach that combines legislation, incentives, and public investments. For example:

- legislative measures: introducing mandatory, non-transferable paternity leave for fathers, accompanied by full wage compensation, would encourage equal participation in caregiving. This can be paired with enforceable quotas to ensure compliance.
- incentives for employers: tax breaks or subsidies can be offered to companies that adopt family-friendly policies, such as flexible working arrangements, on-site childcare, or extended parental leave for both parents. This would reduce employer resistance while promoting a cultural shift in workplaces.
- public investment in childcare: expanding state-funded childcare facilities and subsidising private providers would make childcare accessible to a larger segment of the population. A special focus on low-income families and rural communities could reduce disparities.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably reshaped WLB and gender equality in Southern Europe, bringing challenges and opportunities. The current study provided evidence that countries in this region face similar gender challenges, but at a different level due to pre-existing conditions given by the variety of welfare and care regimes, labour market segregation, and gender norms. Table 5 highlights similarities and differences regarding these aspects, including the main implication for gender equality of the interactions between the pre-existing situation and the gendered impact of the policy responses.

Table 5. Comparative dimensions of gender inequalities and work-life balance before, during, and soon after the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Europe

Dimension	Greece	Italy	Portugal	Spain
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Pre-pandemic	Welfare and care regime	Strong familistic model and limited public care services	Familistic welfare regime with strong intergenerational support networks	Familistic features combined with relatively higher female labour participation	More developed equality framework but persistent familistic dynamics
	Gender norms and unpaid care work	More traditional gender expectations and unequal domestic labour	Persistent “double burden” and strong maternal caregiving expectations	Gradual shift toward more egalitarian attitudes, but unequal care distribution remains	More egalitarian attitudes coexist with unequal care responsibilities
During the pandemic	Main labour market vulnerabilities during the pandemic	High employment insecurity and limited telework diffusion	Strong labour market segmentation and work–family overload	Work–care conflict intensified by teleworking arrangements	High precarity in female-dominated sectors and childcare pressures
	Effects of telework and school closures	Reinforcement of women’s caregiving role	Intensification of unpaid labour and emotional strain among women	Increased overlap between paid work and care responsibilities	Greater visibility of inequalities within households
Post-Pandemic	Overall implications for WLB and gender equality	Reinforcement of traditional gender inequalities	Intensification of the “double burden” for women	Partial mitigation through flexibility measures, but persistent inequalities	Broader policy support did not eliminate structural gender asymmetries

While the crisis exacerbated existing inequalities, it also highlighted the urgent need for structural and cultural changes to support a more equitable and balanced future.

From a gender equality perspective, the pandemic highlighted the critical need for policies ensuring that WLB is not only a women’s issue but a societal one. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the structural weaknesses in work-family policies across Southern Europe, where access to flexible working arrangements, comprehensive childcare services, and social safety nets was already limited (Vanhercke et. al., 2021).

Gender-sensitive policies that promote shared caregiving responsibilities, such as paternity leave and flexible working hours for both men and women, became even more urgent during the pandemic to prevent the regression of gender equality. However, despite efforts to implement emergency policies (such as remote working incentives and financial support for families), measures often failed to address the deeper cultural norms and structural barriers that perpetuate gender disparities. Investments in social infrastructure, such as

Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life
Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

affordable childcare services, paid family leave, and mental health support, are essential to guarantee a policy plan that enhances women's conditions (Cook & Grimshaw, 2021; OECD/UN Women, 2021). Governments should implement robust, non-transferable paid paternity leave policies that ensure equitable caregiving responsibilities. For example, even when men had the opportunity to work from home, studies indicated that women continued to bear the brunt of household tasks and caregiving, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. The normalisation of telework post-pandemic can perpetuate gender inequalities unless accompanied by structural changes that equitably distribute domestic responsibilities. Policies that address employees' needs, including company mental health programmes, complement employee well-being and retention strategies in the post-pandemic work world (Bellini & Lomazzi, 2024). Also, the pandemic spotlighted the critical importance of essential jobs, yet their poor pay and lack of recognition highlight systemic undervaluation of roles traditionally dominated by women.

Although this study primarily focuses on gender disparities, its findings also point to the importance of intersectional inequalities. The effects of the pandemic were not uniform across all women: those from lower-income households, migrant backgrounds or racialised groups often faced heightened economic insecurity and greater difficulties in balancing paid work and care responsibilities. While a full intersectional analysis is beyond the scope of this article, future research should further examine how gender intersects with socio-economic status, migration background and ethnicity in shaping labour market vulnerability, care responsibilities and social inequalities in Southern Europe.

Six years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, its gendered implications for work-life balance can be assessed more clearly through its medium- to long-term effects. What initially emerged as temporary emergency responses have, in many cases, consolidated into enduring practices and norms, revealing the extent to which existing institutional arrangements either mitigated or reinforced gender inequalities. An ex post, comparative analysis is therefore crucial not only to evaluate the effectiveness of pandemic-related measures, but also to inform future policy design, ensuring that crisis preparedness and recovery strategies are grounded in a gender-sensitive and structurally transformative approach.

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Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life
Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

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Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 Policies in Southern Europe: A Work-Life Balance Perspective
Isabella Crespi, Vera Lomazzi, Margherita Pellegrino

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