

The COVID-19 crisis and gender equality in Finland

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Abstract

This article assesses the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality in Finland, based on the findings of a research project funded by the government's analysis, assessment and research activities. Finland provides an interesting case, as in some respects it could be argued to represent the best-case scenario. The article shows that the employment and social impacts of the crisis were gendered, and that the crisis made visible long-term gender equality problems in the Finnish society. The article suggests that the impacts on gender equality were nevertheless relatively small and short term. The lightness of the restriction measures, high levels of gender equality, and the Finnish welfare state contributed to this outcome, even if the protection provided by these factors was not complete. Despite the Finnish government's commitment to advancing gender equality, the adopted recovery and support measures were not particularly gender sensitive.

Keywords: gender equality, crisis management, policy, welfare, COVID-19, Finland

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has been seen as a crisis of gender equality, and new empirical knowledge about the manifold gendered impacts of the crisis is constantly emerging from different national contexts (e.g. Alon et al., 2020; Bluedorn et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021; Möhring et al., 2021). This article contributes to these debates through assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality in Finland. The severity of the gender equality impacts can be expected to depend on the one hand, on structural and institutional factors, such as the welfare and gender regime of the country, and, on the other hand, on pandemic- and policy related factors, such as the extent of the restriction measures and the policies adopted to mitigate economic and social impacts.

Finland provides an interesting context to analyse gender equality impacts of the crisis, as in some respect it could be argued to represent a best-case scenario. First, regarding structural factors, Finland is a Nordic welfare state with a relatively strong social protection system, established gender equality policies and institutions and a comparatively gender equal society. Finland tends to do well in different gender equality indices (e.g., EIGE, 2022), and Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government in charge of addressing the COVID-19 crisis has been internationally renowned for its young female leadership and equality-focused policies. Yet Finland has long-standing gender equality problems that include a persistent gender

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pay gap, highly gender-segregated labour market, uneven distribution of care responsibilities between parents and high levels of violence against women. Second, the case of Finland illustrates how the gendered impacts unfold in a national context with relatively low infection rates and relatively modest confinement measures. Unlike many other European countries, Finland did not go under total lockdown at any point of the pandemic, and the primary schools and day-care remained mostly open. However, in Finland the policies to respond to the hardships experienced by the individuals were rather modest, as it was assumed that the Finnish social security system provides a sufficient safety net for those hit by the crisis.

The article is based on the findings of the research project *The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality in Finland* funded by the government's analysis, assessment, and research activities (see Mesiäislehto et al., 2022). The aim of the project was to find out what kind of impacts the crisis has had on different groups of women and men in Finland and how these impacts have affected overall gender equality. The project examined the impacts of the crisis on the different dimensions of gender equality, including the labour market, working conditions, entrepreneurship, sharing of care responsibilities, domestic violence and gendered violence, health, well-being and the use of services. It also analysed decision-making and economic policy related to the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of gender equality. Various data sources were used to evaluate the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Finland and the effectiveness of the policy responses, including national register data on income and social benefits, survey data on employment, working conditions and domestic violence, and government documents and reports (for full description of data and methods, see Mesiäislehto et al., 2022). The purpose of this article is not to summarize the findings of the project and its final report but, rather, to draw broader conclusions based on its results.

The first section discusses the role of gender in the employment and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Finland. The second section presents interpretations of the short- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality in Finland. The third section discusses the reasons for the relatively low and short duration of gender equality impacts and assesses the success of the government's COVID-19 policy from the equality perspective, and the fourth section looks at the government's COVID-19 policies from a gender perspective. The conclusions contain some policy recommendations related to post-crisis management, gender equality policy and preparedness for future crises.

Gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis

In Finland, confinement measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus started in mid-March 2020. This led to the closure of most public places and private businesses. Schools operated from distance for two months (from 14 March to 18 May). Thereafter, primary schools mainly remained open. Parents of small children (0–6 years old) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) were recommended to care for their children at home during the first weeks of the pandemic. After May 2020, the ECEC facilities stayed normally open during the whole time of the pandemic. In terms of duration, the confinement measures affected hotels, restaurants and cultural events for a relatively long period: Restaurants and bars were forced to shut down twice (3.4.2020–31.5.2020 and 9.3.2021–18.4.2021) and their opening times and number of guests were limited for long periods of time. Limitations regarding public gatherings were eased at the end of the year 2021 and in June 2022, general confinement measures under the Communicable Diseases Act were lifted.

The results of the research project demonstrate how the unequal and gendered structures of society emerged in a time of crisis and shape its impacts. The clearest example of the impact of structural inequality relates to the gender-based segregation in the Finnish labour market. Women's employment rate declined faster and more severely than men's at the onset of the crisis (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022). This was due to the predominance of women in the sectors affected by the confinement measures, such as the hospitality sector. Segregation also explains in part why the crisis has had more negative impacts on the

working conditions and perceived well-being of women than men. The crisis placed a particular strain on workers in the healthcare, care and education sectors and other roles that involve considering the needs of other people and responding to them—all of which are female-majority sectors. (Sutela et al., 2022.) Similarly, the COVID-19 crisis had a greater impact on female entrepreneurs, as they more often work in the sectors most affected by the crisis. Female entrepreneurs more often experienced financial instability and difficulties in coping and needed to adapt their activities accordingly. (Pärnänen & Pietiläinen, 2022.)

Correspondingly, the unequal distribution of care responsibilities between parents, which in Finland is more pronounced than in other Nordic countries, was visible in spring 2020, as responsibility for care of young children and primary school pupils was transferred to homes. Women in particular found it difficult to reconcile gainful employment and childcare (Närvi et al., 2022). Women working remotely, and especially those in families with children, had to work in shared spaces such as dining rooms more often than men, who more often had their own office or permanent workstation (Sutela et al. 2022). Gender differences in health, well-being, morbidity and lifestyle have also emerged during the COVID-19 crisis. Although recorded COVID-19 infections and deaths in Finland are approximately equal for men and women, men have been hospitalised more often (Kivipelto et al., 2022).

Gender makes a difference overall, but different groups of men and women have experienced the crisis in different ways. International research on the COVID-19 crisis has stressed the intersectional dimension of its impact (e.g., Maestripieri, 2021). The results of the project confirm that it is important to examine gender impacts in relation to other forms of inequality and background variables. Gender had a clear impact on people's experiences in the areas of employment, working conditions, entrepreneurship, experiences of violence, reconciliation of work and family life, and health and well-being. In addition to gender, changes caused by the crisis have been significantly structured by a number of other factors, including age, origin or mother tongue and type of household. In the areas of employment, experiences of violence, and well-being and mental health, there are groups of men and women whose situation has been weakened by the crisis. In 2020, the employment impacts of the COVID-19 crisis were most acute among those aged under 25, especially among women, and the number of male NEETs (young people not in employment, education or training) increased in 2020. (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022.) The negative well-being impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been particularly strong among girls and young women (Kivipelto et al., 2022; Suvisaari & Rissanen 2022).

Men and women who either have a foreign background or have immigrated to Finland also stand out as a group particularly affected by the crisis. The negative impacts of the crisis on different areas of health and well-being and on people's financial situation were higher among immigrants than among the rest of the population. Women who had immigrated to Finland seem to have been particularly affected, as they were more alone and their ability to work was weaker than that of men. (Kivipelto et al., 2022.) On the other hand, women with a foreign background were the only group whose employment rate increased in 2020 (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022).

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis have been not only differentiated but also polarised: People's experiences of the crisis have often been mirror opposites. This can be seen, for example, in relation to domestic violence. Although the COVID-19 crisis has not significantly increased violence against women or intimate partner violence at the population level, for some people the COVID-19 crisis led to a deepening spiral of violence (Pietiläinen et al., 2022). Experiences of sharing care responsibilities and of parents' well-being have also been polarised. During the first COVID-19 spring, some enjoyed the increase in shared family time and a calming down of their everyday lives, while others felt worried and stressed, had difficulties reconciling work and childcare, and were concerned about managing financially. (Närvi et al. 2022.) The same can be seen in the realm of working conditions and well-being. Whereas workers engaged in contact work in the social welfare and health care and education sectors found the crisis stressful, men and women who work remotely often experienced the positive impacts brought by COVID-19 (Sutela et al., 2022). In terms of well-being, some felt that the impacts of the restrictive measures on their everyday life were positive, but for others they significantly reduced social interaction. The negative mental health

impacts of the restrictive measures were particularly pronounced among those who live alone.

Short and long-term impacts on gender equality

Due to the differentiation and polarisation of impacts, it is difficult to provide a concise overall picture of how the crisis affected gender equality in Finland. However, the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality seem to have remained relatively small compared to many other countries. According to our analysis, in Finland the COVID-19 crisis did not constitute a turning point in any key realm of gender equality—neither for the worse nor for the better. However, it needs to be stressed that although the research project did not find any sizable impacts on gender equality at the societal level, the COVID-19 crisis has had significant gendered impacts on people's everyday lives.

A significant proportion of the negative impacts of the crisis on different aspects of gender equality have been of relatively short duration. At first, the crisis weakened gender equality in working life in terms of employment, working conditions and the position of women entrepreneurs. Although the employment rate of women fell earlier and more dramatically than that of men, it also started to recover faster than that of men (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022). The observed negative impacts on reconciling work and family life and sharing care responsibilities were also of short duration. By the end of 2020, the temporary, pandemic-induced difficulties in combining gainful employment and family life had eased again, and the gender differences had evened out (Närvi et al., 2022). Similar patterns can be seen in terms of violence. In spring 2020, following the state of emergency and the recommendation to stay home, there were more reports on intimate partner violence, but the rise in reports also levelled out towards the end of 2020 (Pietiläinen et al., 2022, p. 112).

The crisis can nevertheless be expected to have long-term negative consequences for gender equality. Some of these consequences relate to well-being and mental health. For example, there has been a significant decrease in perceived health and increase in loneliness among women in many working-age groups, with these effects being much less pronounced among male groups (Kivipelto et al., 2022). The long-smouldering care gaps that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, such as in services for the elderly and mental health services, may also have long-term effects on gender equality.

The crisis may also have longer-term effects on gender equality in working life. The increase in part-time and fixed-term employment that has been seen in the labour market may weaken gender equality if the proportions of such employment relationships remain at a permanently higher level. Although fixed-term and part-time employment relationships have become more common among both genders, they are still more common among female wage earners than among men. (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022.) It is concerning that the gender gap in fixed-term and part-time work, and in part-time work in general, has increased since 2019. The increased strain experienced during the crisis in the female-dominated social welfare and health care and education sectors may also undermine gender equality in working life if the working conditions in these critical sectors do not see improvements.

The COVID-19 crisis has also brought some positive developments, but not everyone has benefited from them. First, the gender gap in the employment rate has narrowed as a result of the increase in employment following the steep drop in 2020, and the employment rate of women passed that of men at the beginning of 2022 (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022). However, it is important to note that this is not a purely positive development, because the narrowing is partly explained by the drop in employment among men in middle age groups. The employment rate of men in Finland is already low compared to other countries, and the COVID-19 crisis may have accelerated the structural change in Finnish working life and the related change in competence needs. One clearly positive development, nevertheless, is that the employment rate of women with a foreign background increased slightly during the COVID-19 crisis (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022).

Second, some people's satisfaction with their ability to reconcile work and family life has increased over the longer term as remote work has become more common (Närvi et al., 2022). Improving the recon-

ciliation of work and family life is a long-term goal of Finnish gender equality policy, and the digital leap spurred on by the pandemic, combined with the normalisation of remote work, may continue to support this goal. In addition, the situation of women and men has become more equal in respect to opportunities for working remotely (Sutela et al., 2022). However, these positive impacts are likely to be experienced mostly by senior clerical workers. In contrast, parents working in manual professions or in the female-dominated service, social welfare and health care and education sectors have few opportunities for remote work. It should also be noted that the effects of increased remote work are not only positive and that more research is needed on its long-term impacts.

Third, it seems that the pandemic had some positive impact on the division of care responsibilities between parents although in Finland, the potential trajectory of change is rather ambiguous. Despite the persistent inequalities in division of care responsibilities between parents, Finnish fathers' involvement in childcare is more equal compared to many countries, even it lacks behind other Nordic countries. The COVID-19 crisis did not reduce fathers' use of family leave, but it did not increase it either. However, as recent findings of the time use survey from 2020 (Statistics Finland, 2022) show, fathers' time spent on childcare has increased since 2010. Some of the positive development may be due to the COVID-19 crisis when families had to manage childcare by themselves without help from outside. Since in Finland, a large proportion of the workforce is engaged in knowledge work, it could be assumed that this occupational and task structure of the labour market together with extensive and long-term conditions of remote work made it possible for some families to share care responsibilities more flexibly instead of having one of the parents (usually the mother) always staying at home with a sick or quarantined child. However, any long-term change in regard to these developments will only become visible later on.

Reasons for the trajectory of gender equality impacts

There are several key factors behind the fact that the impacts on gender equality were relatively small and short term. We suggest that these include the lightness of the restrictive measures, the high levels of equality in the Finnish society, and the Finnish welfare state. However, the protection provided by these factors was not complete.

First, the restrictive measures imposed in Finland to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were neither as extensive nor as long-term as those in many other countries, and a full 'lockdown' was never imposed at any point. Public services were closed or restricted, but primarily at the beginning of the pandemic in spring 2020. Since autumn 2020, services have mostly been operating as normal. However, efforts to cut down the queues for treatment has kept things busy, and the healthcare backlog in treatment and services has increased. In many European countries, gender equality was undermined by the closure of schools and of early childhood education and care. In Germany and Belgium, for example, day-care centres and schools were almost completely closed for a year, and responsibility for caring for children and managing distance learning was mainly left with the mothers. In Finland, the periods of remote schooling were relatively short and day-care centres were open throughout the pandemic, although there was a two-month period in spring 2020 when it was recommended that children be cared for at home. This avoided a situation where the care burden would have remained on women's shoulders for a longer period of time, and parents of small children who did not have the option of working remotely were able to work during the pandemic.

At the same time, prolonged restrictive measures in other areas of society led to gendered and long-term welfare impacts. Protracted remote learning in upper secondary and higher education can be seen as one of the main reasons for the increased mental health problems faced by young people and students, and particularly by girls and women. Restrictions on meetings and other isolation measures designed to protect elderly people in long-term care are still partly in force, and this affects the well-being of the female-majority users of these services.

Second, although the crisis has highlighted structural gender equality problems, the generally high

levels of equality in Finnish society mitigated the gendered impacts of the crisis. Structures and understanding that promote gender equality can be assumed to have influenced crisis management and crisis impacts. For example, the Finnish employment rate among women, which is high by European standards, and the predominance of full-time work among women, probably contributed towards the decision to keep day-care centres and schools open. At the same time, a comprehensive and high-quality early childhood education and care system enabled parents, and mothers in particular, to keep working during the COVID-19 epidemic.

The third key factor protecting against negative gender equality impacts was the Finnish welfare state, which stood the strain also in the midst of a crisis. The Finnish social security system, which is quite extensive by international standards, protected residents against the worst economic shocks. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the system included a comprehensive lay-off and unemployment security system, which mitigated the effects of the pandemic and its restrictive measures on the labour market and thus also on gender equality. The crisis showed that, when needed, the social security safety net can be adapted with even minor adjustments and can mostly do a good job of evening out losses in income (Elomäki et al., 2022; Kärkkäinen et al., 2022). However, one significant shortcoming in the current system is the social security of people working in atypical employment relationships, such as light entrepreneurs and freelancers. This problem was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in areas such as the cultural and event sector, which suffered greatly from the restrictive measures (Sutela & Sirniö, 2022).

However, the welfare state services did not support people during the crisis to the extent that they should have. The carrying capacity of primary health care was maintained fairly well, but mental health services were unable to meet the increased service need, partly because there was a service deficit already before the pandemic arrived. The rise in mental health problems is one of the key long-term gendered effects of the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, there were restrictions in services for older people that are important from the gender perspective. For instance, 24-hour care practices have shifted towards being more institutional, and many activities have been unavailable (Kestilä et al., 2022). During the pandemic, victims of domestic violence also had difficulties in contacting services and receiving assistance. Social welfare and health care services play an important role in identifying victims of domestic violence and their need for help. As the number of service visits decreased, this important function was also weakened. This could be seen in the fact that there were free places available in shelters during the pandemic. (Hitamäki et al., 2022; Pietiläinen et al., 2022.)

Evaluation of recovery policy measures

Despite the Finnish government's commitment to advancing gender equality in all decision-making, the recovery and support measures taken in Finland were not particularly gender sensitive and did little to alleviate the gendered impacts.

The changes made to social security in Finland during the crisis were modest when compared to other countries. Temporary changes to benefits, such as extending unemployment security to entrepreneurs and relaxing the conditions for unemployment security and social assistance made it possible to grant and pay support payments quickly. These temporary changes benefited women and men approximately to the same extent (Elomäki et al., 2022). However, unlike in some other countries, there was little support in Finland for parents who had to care for their children at home. A flat-rate temporary benefit for the purpose was in place for the first two months of the pandemic, but it was not extensively used. Despite the relatively light restrictive measures, the periods of remote schooling and the quarantine measures—which for a long time applied to the whole family of the sick person and anyone exposed to the virus—put a strain on families' daily lives and made working life a challenge for many. The burden could have been alleviated by providing financial support to parents caring for their children at home, rather than these parents often having to either fit in their work alongside childcare or take unpaid leave. Such measures were introduced in Austria

and Germany, for example, where a parent caring for a child at home received earnings-related compensation for lost earnings (ISSA, 2021).

Investments in services provided by the welfare state received little attention in the pandemic-related recovery policies. Investments in care have been seen as an important element of gender-sensitive or feminist recovery (e.g., De Henau and Himmelweit, 2021). In Finland, the care-related investments made in the context of recovery in 2020 and 2021 were mainly small, one-off investments in family, child, youth and elderly services and support for well-being, and they were aimed at mitigating the impacts of the pandemic. Domestic fiscal stimulus measures were not used to seek solutions to the longer-term problems of the service infrastructure, for instance, staff shortage, working conditions, and problems with the quality of elderly care. (Elomäki et al., 2022.) Care services play a larger role in stimulus implemented with EU funds, but the gender perspective is not visible in the care-related reforms and investments of the national Recovery and Resilience Plan (Elomäki, 2022).

Support for companies was the largest financial component of the support and recovery measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The various forms of support provided to companies helped to avert a wave of bankruptcy and mass unemployment, which could have affected female-dominated sectors in the early stages of the crisis and undermined financial and labour market equality. However, the targeting of business subsidies is concerning from a gender equality perspective. In 2020, the larger share of COVID-19 subsidies for companies were channelled through existing support instruments, and only a small proportion of these subsidies were targeted at female-majority sectors. For example, only 11% of the €1 billion coronavirus business support funds disbursed by Business Finland went to female-majority sectors. On the other hand, new instruments created to compensate for the losses caused by the COVID-19 crisis, such as support for business costs and for sole entrepreneurs, more clearly targeted at female-majority sectors which are also home to the majority of female entrepreneurs. However, these instruments were clearly smaller in size than Business Finland's support. (Elomäki et al., 2022.) Even the new forms of support did not necessarily succeed in taking the situations of low-income female entrepreneurs into account. For example, there are many female sole entrepreneurs who are in the lowest income decile, and thus earning so little that they may not be eligible for support.

Overall, gender equality perspectives and gender equality objectives were insufficiently integrated in the decisions made on restrictive and support measures related to the COVID-19 crisis (Elomäki et al., 2022). The assessment of the gender impacts of pandemic-related legislative proposals was either absent or inadequate, and the gender perspective was barely included in the preparation of other Government decisions and in parliamentary discussions of COVID-19 measures. In this respect the government, which is committed to gender equality and mainstreaming of the gender perspective, did not fully succeed in its task. The gender-related problems with the business support measures demonstrate why it is important to integrate the equality perspective and equality objectives into decision-making.

Conclusions: Post-crisis reconstruction and future crises

In this concluding section, we offer recommendations for taking into account the impacts and problems highlighted in this article in i) post-crisis management, ii) gender equality policy and iii) preparedness for future crises and their management.

First, the gender perspective should be taken into account in post-crisis management. This means measures to mitigate the gendered effects of the crisis and, in particular, support for groups affected by the crisis. In international discussions on equality, the COVID-19 crisis has been seen also as an opportunity to shape society and welfare states systems so that they would promote gender equality and treat different population groups more equally in future crises. This *Build back better* perspective has been highlighted by many international organisations, such as the OECD, the World Bank and the European Commission, in the planning of measures to promote the COVID-19 recovery. This could mean, for instance, addressing

the long-term care gaps intensified by the COVID-19 crisis, and addressing the well-being of groups particularly affected by the crisis. More attention should be paid to the working conditions and well-being at work in the women-dominated sectors of education and social welfare and health care.

Second, it is important that the next government takes into account the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and related factors in its gender equality policy. Gender equality policy can play a role in mitigating the gendered impacts of the crisis. In addition, gender equality policy can be used to ensure the visibility of gender perspectives in decision-making in future crises. For instance, policies and guidance related to gender mainstreaming should be updated so that they would better cover the intensive, quick-paced decision-making during times of crisis.

Third, the gender equality perspective must be considered when preparing for and managing future crises. On the one hand, there is a need to recognise the role of welfare services and gender equality in boosting societal resilience. The public care and service system must be functioning well if it is to help people and society get through future crises. Strong gender equality and non-discrimination policies help to ensure that the gender impacts of future crises are minimised. On the other hand, a variety of measures should be applied to ensure that the gender and non-discrimination perspective is included in crisis-related decision-making. This is important for all crises, whether they be pandemics, economic crises or military crises. For instance, it is important to assess the gender and equality impacts of crises and measures that respond to them. This will require additional resources for impact assessment, as well as for increasing gender equality competence throughout central government.

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