

## WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITIES AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A PRELIMINARY COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AMONG ITALY, GERMANY AND POLAND



### PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND A PROJECT SUMMARY

(May 2021)

#### *About the Project*

##### *Research objectives and methodology*

Between October 2020 and February 2021, as part of the **4EU + Alliance**, preliminary studies were carried out at three European universities: Heidelberg University, the University of Milan and the University of Warsaw. The project was developed as the result of the coronavirus pandemic observation. The aim of the study is to analyse the situation of women at these universities (both students and employees) during the pandemic and the changes in their lives caused by it.

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#### **There were two main research questions:**

- 1) **How** does the coronavirus pandemic impact the professional / educational and general life situation of women working or studying at university?
  - 2) **What** problems and challenges do the pandemic cause in opinion of women?
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**The questions include** issues such as transition to home office and changes of work organization including daily life routine. New and missed career/education opportunities due to the pandemic are also of our research interest. Other issues concern support that women experience and expect during the pandemic.

**The research** consisted of online discussions (FGIs) conducted among three groups of women at university: researchers and teachers (academics), administration employees and students.

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N=11 FGIs (3-4 people per group)  
Time duration of FGI: approx. 120 minutes  
Location: online (zoom)  
FGIs conducted between 23.09 and

The FGIs were conducted on two levels: national and international, separately at each of three groups.

The discussions were attended by academics and students of various faculties and university units.

Overall 45 women participated in the study.

### → *Preliminary conclusions from the project*

#### *Challenges and problems caused by the coronavirus pandemic*

The data analysis shows that the COVID-19 pandemic caused **unexpected disruption** not only of traditional teaching and learning modalities but also university life per se. The pandemic has changed the mode of work organization. Communication and social relations took a different form; emails and instant messaging, including video communication, have become a common means of contact. The idea of the university as a community of scholars and learners has taken on a completely new face.

The lockdown of universities and a sudden switch to online education and online work were **unprecedented challenges** for all participants of education – students, teachers, researchers, administration staff including authorities as well as support staff. The consequences of the pandemic are experienced by the whole university community, as well as specific groups and people. Particularly women, who constitute the majority both in terms of faculty members, administration employees and students, are affected by the pandemic both in terms of professional and personal life.

#### *Online work and study during a pandemic*

Our research shows that working or studying during the pandemic is a challenge for women, regardless of university that they work or study at or their position at the university. However, depending on their profession and position in the university hierarchy, women experience various and different problems related to organization of online work/study, health and well-being.



Although female university employees have a stable employment situation, doctoral students' situation at the university is threatened by the pandemic. Suspended research projects and scholarships resulted in delays and difficulties in obtaining a doctoral degree and applying for a job.

While women researchers and faculty members did some of their work at home already before the pandemic (e.g. writing articles, preparing classes, conducting research projects), the administration employees did not have such experience. The pandemic meant that suddenly, overnight, they had to leave their office desks and literally turn the kitchen table into a home office. Administration staff often did not have their own desk or workplace at home, so due to the pandemic they had to build a home office from scratch. This change of work organization and work routine has various consequences on many aspects of their life including time perception and well-being. Changes caused by the pandemic affect a sense of identity and professional role as well (professional identity dependent on the scenography). Working from home, although it had its positives, was associated with various problems, e.g. multitasking. There is a pressure on employees to be effective in every area of life.



### *Digital competences*

The study data shows that the digital competence of students did not include online learning tools. Thus, online learning platforms and applications were unknown for students. The significant challenge was related to learn many online programs and tools in a short time, often without technical support and the appropriate computer equipment.

Acquiring the skills of using online programs and tools necessary to work and study is both time-consuming and stressful. The issue pointed out by women is a lack of support, not only technical, but also organizational and psychological. Communication problems arise due to information chaos, or the lack of efficient information network in a crisis situation. Therefore, women experience frustration and anxiety.



### *Time ... work time versus being home*

Being at home creates the illusion of having a lot of time that can be devoted to work/learning. This, in turn, creates a feeling of being at work all the time; women refer to it as “remote work as a trap”. However, spending many hours in front of the computer does not bring satisfaction. On the contrary, women complain about the feeling of being ineffective and tired. The lack of formal support is disappointing but at the same time it makes women

looking for an innovative approach to “crisis management”. In solving problems, they rely on the support networks they have developed individually, mainly informal contacts, as well as their social competences.

Online work/ learning disturbs the balance between work and home life. Women are burdened with many responsibilities including caring for family members. The media chaos over the COVID-19 sparked panic and fear of losing loved ones. Particularly in the group of administration employees, responsibilities that result from professional and family roles were priorities, while “caring for oneself” was of secondary importance. Having a family and being a mother, in particular, comes with multitasking which the pandemic exacerbated.



### *Social contacts, relationships, new opportunities*

The situation of students differed from that of university employees, among others in the context of household and social contacts. Full-time students were not burdened with housework to the same extent as part-time students and university employees. However, the lockdown has a negative effect on motivation to study.

The pandemic, especially social isolation, takes its toll on women’s mental health and well-being. In their opinion the lockdown and lack of social contacts can be seen both as “a chance to appreciate close relationships” and “the danger of loneliness”. During the pandemic mood swings occur, ranging from a state of “I don't need do anything” to a feeling of “emptiness” and even “losing control of time”.



### *Conclusions*

The COVID-19 pandemic has a deep impact on work organization, well-being and social activities of students, academics and administration staff in different ways. Differences among women depend more on a person’s social location (position or role at university), scope of duties and digital competences than on a group university affiliation.

Women of all three groups (students, academics, administration staff) are capable to work in a crisis situation and organize their work by themselves however the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a lack of crisis management strategy at the university and weaknesses in the organization of the university’s work. The support offered officially was insufficient and superficial in many ways. Women have managed in their professional life mainly due to their diligence, competence and informal social networks.



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Women see the advantages and benefits of online work and learning, e.g. flexible working time. Working and learning online strengthened their digital skills, both students and university employees. Some of the solutions worked out during the pandemic should be included in work and study at the university after the pandemic.

The project was part of  EUROPEAN  
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