



Doc. 15322
19 June 2021

Overcoming the socio-economic crisis sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Rapporteur: Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Serbia, Group of the European People's Party

A. Conclusions of the Committee

1. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination congratulates the rapporteur of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, Mr Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL), on his report, which sets out clearly the socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and of the measures taken to stem its spread.
2. The committee commends the rapporteur's concern for ensuring that those who were already vulnerable before the pandemic and/or who were made more vulnerable as a result of it receive the support that they need in health, social and economic terms. It welcomes the emphasis placed on ensuring that funds made available to stabilise and strengthen the socio-economic situation are used to promote more inclusive and more sustainable development.
3. The committee fully supports the draft resolution as adopted by the reporting committee. Nevertheless, it wishes the text to reflect more strongly the principles of equality and non-discrimination which lie at the core of its terms of reference, and which are crucial to our societies' sustainable recovery from the pandemic. The amendments proposed below are put forward to that end.

B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 8, replace the words "and in" with the following words:

"in order to achieve dignity for all, political, economic and social policies must protect the rights of everyone. In".

Explanatory note

We cannot talk about socio-economic recovery without paying attention to the needs of the disadvantaged and marginalised and without Covid-19 responses grounded in data, evidence and human rights.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15145](#), Reference 4537 of 12 October 2020 and [Doc. 15246](#), Reference 4578 of 28 May 2021. Reporting committee: Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development. See [Doc. 15310](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 17 June 2021.



Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 8.1. insert the following paragraph:

“8.2 Mainstream equality into all measures taken to respond to the socio-economic crisis, and to this end:

8.2.1 incorporate equality impact assessments as an integral element of on-going public health, economic and social policy responses to the crisis, aimed at identifying and eliminating the actual or potential discriminatory effects of these responses;

8.2.2 ensure equal opportunities by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices as part of the sustainable development goals and the pledge to leave no one behind;”

Explanatory note

Equality impact assessments enable States to anticipate and eliminate the discriminatory effects of their policy responses, including unintended or unforeseen effects. Ensuring that discriminatory laws, policies, practices and inequalities do not hinder lifesaving tools from reaching all who need them requires strong health systems and inclusive governance built on trust.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 8.2.1, add the following words:

“and promote equal access to these services and infrastructures”.

Explanatory note

The pandemic has cast a strong spotlight on the need to invest in actively promoting equality; deep-seated inequalities will not disappear on their own.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 8.2.3, add the following words:

“, in order actively to promote their access to the labour market”.

Explanatory note

Recovery measures must foresee special measures to promote young people's access to the labour market, otherwise the harm caused to their employment prospects by the pandemic will become even further entrenched.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 8.2.5, insert the following paragraph:

“ensure adequate housing and decent living conditions for all;”

Explanatory note

The pandemic must prompt us to give new priority to ensuring access to adequate housing for all, in line with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This includes making adequate public investment in this field and guaranteeing access to social housing for those who need it.

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 8.2.7, insert the following paragraph:

“combat all forms of gender-based violence and domestic violence”.

Explanatory note

Violence against women is a clear violation of human rights, which also has a high economic cost to our societies. Preventing it is thus not only a basic question of human rights, but also clearly preferable from an economic perspective.

Amendment G (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 8.5, replace the words, “put in place a system of checks and balances with measures aimed at effectively eliminating gender pay gaps” with the following words:

“adopt positive measures to eliminate the gender pay gap and gender pension gap”.

Explanatory note

Introducing a system of checks and balances is not sufficient to eliminate gender pay gaps or other types of discrimination in employment. Far more ambitious positive measures are needed to achieve real and lasting improvement in this field, especially in the face of the lasting impact of the pandemic.

Amendment H (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 8.5, insert the following paragraph:

“ensure that crisis response bodies and those working on recovery measures are gender-balanced, diverse and inclusive; their work must also be evidence-based (notably through the use of data disaggregated by gender and other discrimination grounds) and gender-sensitive, ensuring that equality is mainstreamed throughout;”

Explanatory note

Gender and diversity mainstreaming in the composition of decision-making bodies is vital to ensure that the different impacts that measures may have on different groups are identified and measures adapted as necessary to different circumstances. This is especially crucial in the pandemic context, given the enormous impact of measures taken.

Amendment I (to the draft recommendation)

At the end of paragraph 3.3, add the following words:

“and to accept in particular the system of collective complaints provided for under the Additional Protocol to the European Social Charter (ETS No. 158)”.

Explanatory note

The collective complaints system creates a unique and powerful mechanism for enforcing social rights under the Social Charter, as well as equality and non-discrimination in the enjoyment of these rights. Yet only 16 Council of Europe member States have so far accepted it.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Elvira Kovács, rapporteur for opinion**1. Introduction**

1. I wish to congratulate Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL) for his report on behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development. It draws attention to the socio-economic dimension of the crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic and points out that its effects have been aggravated due to structural weaknesses that already existed within our societies. I welcome the recognition that inclusive and sustainable development must be at the heart of all recovery efforts.

2. Amongst the most crippling weaknesses running through European societies today are many persisting forms of inequality and discrimination. As the Assembly noted in [Resolution 2339 \(2020\) “Upholding human rights in times of crisis and pandemics: gender, equality and non-discrimination”](#), the Covid-19 pandemic not only exposed the existing structural inequalities in European societies – it also exacerbated them.

3. Governments often responded to the crisis with a one-size-fits-all approach, especially in the measures initially adopted. As a result, many measures taken aggravated structural inequalities. Lockdown measures confined women to their homes with their abuser, while making support services less accessible. Discrimination on grounds of sex, gender, “race”, national or ethnic origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics and health status was amplified in all fields of daily life and progress towards equality was set back. Manifestations of racism and prejudice against some groups also increased. All of these phenomena will unfortunately have long-lasting effects.

4. Mounting evidence has shown that ethnic, racial and religious minorities are not only at greater risk of contracting the virus for a wide range of reasons – from their disproportionate employment in high-risk sectors such as nursing, cleaning and public transport to their concentration in overcrowded housing where social distancing is more difficult – but can also face higher mortality rates once infected, often due to limited access to medical care. Linguistic minorities may face problems in accessing accurate public health advice.

5. In March 2021, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination adopted a motion for a resolution “For a fairer future: building on the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic to promote equality in Europe” (Doc. 15456). The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development was invited to take this motion into account in the report which forms the object of the present opinion.

6. My opinion highlights some of the key equality issues that must be addressed throughout the recovery period and beyond. Some of these issues, concerning specifically socio-economic inequalities, can be taken on board in the draft resolution proposed in Mr Hunko’s report. Others would warrant a full report by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

2. Gender inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic

7. Women do on average 2.6 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men.² This burden remains the single biggest barrier to women’s economic participation everywhere in the world.³ As noted in the draft resolution, lockdowns throughout the world have left many women bearing a further increased burden of unpaid care work and home-schooling.⁴ In parallel, women remain over-represented in low-paid jobs and continue to face greater income insecurity and a higher risk of unemployment.⁵ With schools and day-care facilities closed, single parents – most of whom are women – have been placed at increased risk of poverty.

8. Those who gave up their jobs to take on unpaid care or childcare work have also predominantly been women – often because they were already the lowest-paid member of their household. In addition, far more women than men have lost their jobs as a direct result of the pandemic.⁶ In the United States, by the end of April 2020, women’s job losses had erased a decade of employment gains.⁷ Those now seeking to return to the workforce will moreover be in competition with people who never had to stop working.

9. These realities have disadvantaged women in the short term and will have lasting effects on the already existing gender pay gap and gender pension gap. Governments must address these realities in the recovery measures they adopt.

10. Women who switched to teleworking have faced a significant increase in online harassment, made easier by the lack of witnesses to one-to-one online communications. Over 25% of respondents to a recent survey of tech industry workers reported an increase in gender-based harassment during the pandemic – 98% of whom were women, genderqueer or non-binary and only 2% of whom were men. Women of colour were also far more likely to have experienced race-based hostility than men.⁸

11. Many people’s health has been affected by the reprioritisation of healthcare services to cope with the crisis. This has had especially serious repercussions on women’s and girls’ sexual and reproductive health rights, hindering access to necessary care, including contraception, abortion care and pregnancy and obstetrical care. These difficulties were compounded by lockdowns and border closures for women who needed to travel to a different region or country to seek appropriate care.⁹

2. UN Women (2018), “Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development”, UN Women, New York, p. 93.

3. Scott L. (2020), “How coronavirus is widening the UK gender pay gap”, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2020.

4. Azcona G. et al. (2020), “Ipsos survey confirms that Covid-19 is intensifying women’s workload at home”, Research Highlight: Gender and Covid-19, UN Women, 9 July 2020.

5. OECD (2020), “Women at the core of the fight against Covid-19 crisis”, in OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (Covid-19), 1 April 2020

6. OECD (2020), “Covid-19: From a health to a jobs crisis” in OECD Employment Outlook 2020: Worker Security and the Covid-19 Crisis.

7. Holpuch A. (2020), “The ‘shecession’: why economic crisis is affecting women more than men”, *The Guardian*, 4 August 2020.

8. Project Include (2021), “Remote work since Covid-19 is exacerbating harm”, March 2021.

9. See the report of Ms Petra Stienen (Netherlands, ALDE), “Upholding human rights in times of crisis and pandemics: gender, equality and non-discrimination” (Doc. 15129), chapter 2.7.

12. Women's increased exposure to gender-based violence during the pandemic is well documented. Women (and frequently children) were immured with their abuser during lockdown periods, with severely reduced access to support mechanisms.¹⁰ These grave human rights issues were examined in depth in Ms Stienen's report on "[Upholding human rights in times of crisis and pandemics: gender, equality and non-discrimination](#)" (Doc. 15129). They would warrant revisiting now that more time has passed, as additional lessons can certainly be learned. Given the socio-economic focus of the present report, I will limit myself to underlining here the high economic cost to our societies of violence against women.¹¹ Preventing it is a very basic question of human rights, but it is also clearly preferable from an economic perspective.

13. I also wish to highlight here women's under-representation in political decision-making processes, including in pandemic response structures.¹² There is little evidence to suggest that this problem has been remedied when it comes to designing and implementing recovery measures. Such measures thus risk ignoring the gender dimension once again and entrenching still further the setbacks to gender equality sustained during the pandemic. It remains essential that crisis response bodies and those working on recovery measures be gender-balanced; their work must also be evidence-based (notably through the use of data disaggregated by gender) and gender-sensitive, ensuring that the gender dimension is mainstreamed throughout.

3. Other inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic

14. The "one-size-fits-all" approach highlighted in [Resolution 2339 \(2020\)](#) led to widely unequal experiences and impacts of the crisis depending on people's circumstances. These differences have occurred across fields as varied as access to crucial information about the pandemic; physical and social distancing measures; lockdowns and related enforcement measures; restrictions on economic activity; school closures; reprioritisation of healthcare and support services; and restrictions on public services and facilities.

15. One year later, all of the above would warrant new and careful examination by the Assembly. I will however limit myself here to a few comments on the socio-economic dimension of these inequalities.

16. The pandemic has exposed how deeply enmeshed racism and housing are in our societies. It has left the many Roma and Travellers in Europe who still have no access to decent housing or living conditions, due to the indifference, inaction or outright racism of public authorities, at a higher risk of contracting and becoming seriously ill from Covid-19.¹³ Many migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees have faced similar problems. Yet many political leaders have chosen to scapegoat and stigmatise these groups rather than to support them and seek to mitigate these problems.¹⁴

17. Poorer and/or larger families living in crowded circumstances have also faced increased risks from the virus as well as a greater impact on children's capacity to keep up with schooling during school closures. Inadequate living conditions have also become, during the pandemic, an inadequate home-schooling environment, especially for those who do not have electricity, IT equipment or access to the internet in their homes.¹⁵ Without wishing to ignore the psychological impact of the crisis on all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, overall, the long-term impact of school closures on children's educational outcomes is likely to be far greater on children growing up in inadequate living conditions.

18. The pandemic must prompt us to give new priority to ensuring that everyone in our societies has access to adequate housing, as required under Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This includes making adequate public investment in this field and guaranteeing access to social housing for those who need it.

10. UN Women (2020), "[COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls](#)", UN Women, New York.

11. Estimated to be 2% of global GDP: see UN Women (2016), "[The economic costs of violence against women](#)", Remarks by UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri at the high-level discussion on the "Economic Cost of Violence against Women", 21 September 2016; Council of Europe Equality Division (2014), "[Overview of studies on the costs of violence against women and domestic violence](#)"; EIGE (2014), "[Estimating the costs of gender-based violence in the EU](#)".

12. UN Women (2018), "[Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development](#)", UN Women, New York, p. 95 ff.

13. See the statement of 27 March 2020 by Mr František Kopřiva (Czech Republic, ALDE), rapporteur on Discrimination against Roma and Travellers in the field of housing, "[Covid-19: Rapporteur denounces discrimination against Roma and Travellers](#)"; these issues will be explored further in his report.

14. [Doc. 15129, op. cit., chapter 2.2.](#)

15. [Ibid.](#), chapter 2.6.

19. I also wish to emphasise once again the impact of the pandemic on persons living in institutionalised settings – both the elderly and persons with disabilities. The crisis has exposed the health risks associated with living in such a setting, where physical distancing is impossible and many residents have a poor overall health status. The appalling death rates recorded in care homes for the elderly during the pandemic must not obscure the fact that the elderly and persons with disabilities are far too often underestimated, disempowered and denied a say in how they live their daily lives. Accelerating deinstitutionalisation must form an integral part of pandemic recovery measures. I hope that this will be taken up by our colleague from the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, Ms Reina de Bruijn-Wezeman (Netherlands, ALDE), in her report on deinstitutionalisation of persons with disabilities.

20. Finally, as the report notes, the pandemic has hindered young people's access to the labour market. Youth unemployment rates have risen sharply, wiping out the progress made since the financial crisis of 2008/09. 18-to-24-year-olds are far more likely to have lost their job due to the pandemic. This may be largely because many young people work in sectors that have been especially hard-hit by lockdown measures, such as retail, hospitality and leisure – but it is also noteworthy that employment contracts in these sectors are often highly precarious. Ethnic disparities amongst young people facing unemployment have also widened.¹⁶ Recovery measures must foresee special measures to promote young people's access to the labour market, or these inequalities will become even further entrenched.

4. Concluding remarks

21. Covid-19 has become a crisis of human rights as well as public health, exposing and deepening existing inequalities and disproportionately impacting marginalised and vulnerable communities that are, too often, left without access to critical tools and services. Therefore, solidarity and respect for human rights are fundamental to the success of both the public health response and economic recovery from the pandemic. Contexts of structural inequalities and discrimination are associated with higher levels of contagion and mortality due to Covid-19, in addition to the violation of social and economic rights.

22. As the Assembly noted in [Resolution 2339 \(2020\)](#), we must lose no time in bringing about the transformation to a more inclusive society that this crisis demands. To face possible new waves of the Covid-19 pandemic and other future crises, governments must examine critically who and what they missed in the first wave, and they take a differentiated approach in order to accommodate all needs. Bodies designing, implementing and evaluating crisis responses must not only be competent but also diverse, gender-balanced and inclusive. They must plan, budget for and provide additional support to all persons who need it, ensuring that special measures can be taken wherever necessary to guarantee equality and non-discrimination.

23. Moreover, as noted in our committee's motion mentioned above, the pandemic is still far from over and its discriminatory effects continue to deepen inequalities. Lockdowns increase the risk of domestic and gender-based violence; the gender pay and pension gaps are widening; unequal health status and living conditions continue to expose some groups to greater risks of illness; educational and professional opportunities for the young remain blocked; both young people and the elderly face persisting isolation; financial support has been diverted away from programmes designed to combat inequalities; and access to vaccination is also uneven.

24. States now face a dual challenge: they must not only continue to fight the pandemic and its effects, they also must look urgently to building a fairer, more inclusive future – throughout society and across all levels of people's lives, going well beyond socio-economic concerns. This fairer future requires transformative changes as well as global solidarity to support strong public health systems for everyone.

25. I remain convinced that the Assembly must examine these major equality concerns surrounding the pandemic and recovery measures – which go well beyond the scope of the present report – in a full report on these issues prepared by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

16. Sehmi R. and Slaughter H. (2021), "[Double trouble: Exploring the labour market and mental health impact of Covid-19 on young people](#)", Resolution Foundation, 13 May 2021.