

Gender equality effects of COVID-19

Knowledge and initiatives in the Nordic countries



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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting new challenges for gender equality. The virus itself is not gender-neutral. More men become seriously ill and die from COVID-19 than women. The efforts to combat the virus are not gender-neutral either. How are the Nordic countries handling the effects of COVID-19 on gender equality? This question has loomed large in Nordic gender equality co-operation since the outbreak of the pandemic.

The most obvious example of an effect is the risk of increased domestic violence when the community partially shuts down to reduce the spread of infection. A number of the Nordic countries have earmarked funding for increased protection and support for victims of domestic violence in connection with the pandemic.

Also when it comes to working life and the economy, there have been warnings of a backlash for gender equality, in particular due to the gender-segregated labour market, which remains one of the major challenges for gender equality in the Nordic countries. The female-dominated services sector was initially hit hard. Women are also more economically vulnerable, having lower wages and more precarious employment. Those with an immigrant background and those with a lower level of education are especially vulnerable. There is also a risk that women are forced to take the lion's share of responsibilities for the home and family when schools and preschools are closed. Several of the Nordic countries have commissioned studies and surveys to gather more information about paid and unpaid work and the

economic consequences of the pandemic from a gender perspective.

Health and personal care staff are at the frontline of the pandemic, where the proportion of stress-related sick leave has been high for some time. That stress level has now skyrocketed because of a large group of seriously ill patients, and staff being required to cancel leave and work long shifts under difficult circumstances. Mental ill-health in the wake of the pandemic has been discussed and there are reports that women are experiencing more anxiety, stress and other signs of mental ill-health. A number of the Nordic countries have initiated studies to survey how mental health has been impacted by the pandemic.

All in all, there are clear indications that the consequences of the pandemic are far from gender-neutral, and from this we can conclude that it is important to take the gender equality perspective into account – also in times of crisis.

This publication summarises the knowledge produced in the Nordic countries and brings together the Nordic countries' gender equality initiatives and measures in relation to the pandemic. The publication has been produced by Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), which is a co-operation body under the Nordic Council of Ministers. It is based on data from the Nordic countries as well as interviews with researchers and experts.

The first reports of a novel coronavirus causing serious illness in some came in January 2020 in the Nordic countries. Soon, all the Nordic countries had cases of COVID-19. In attempts to reduce the spread of this infection, various forms of restrictions were imposed. Periodically, schools, preschools, universities, libraries, restaurants, swimming pools, shops and other places where people gather have been completely or partially closed since then. Gatherings of people have been restricted in numbers. Borders have been closed. Quarantine rules have been introduced. Where possible, workplaces have been moved into homes. Digital platforms have replaced physical meetings in working life, teaching and the private sphere. These changes have been rapid and huge, and have had consequences in a number of areas.

The Nordic countries have many similarities when it comes to how their labour markets and welfare systems are organised. But these countries also differ, in particular regarding how they have dealt with the pandemic. The Nordic Ministers for Gender Equality have jointly stressed the importance of measures to prevent the coronavirus crisis from becoming a gender equality crisis.¹ This publication brings together what we know, and how the Nordic countries are working to deal with the crisis from a gender equality perspective.

Globally as well as in the Nordic countries specifically, attention has been drawn to the risk of increased domestic violence during the pandemic. There is a clear consensus in the Nordic countries on the need to prevent violence and offer new possibilities for getting help.

1. Aftonbladet, 2020.

In other areas, work is now under way to identify the long-term consequences of the pandemic from a gender equality perspective, including in relation to working life and the economy, which also includes unpaid work. Having this knowledge base in place as soon as possible is of great importance if we are to avoid the pandemic leading to greater gender *inequality*.

But the huge changes that have occurred also mean opportunities to challenge gender patterns such as unpaid work in the home and substandard working conditions in the female-dominated health and personal care sector. Investments in infrastructure as part of the recovery could be extended to include social infrastructure, the importance of which has now become clearer than ever.

This publication summarises knowledge produced thus far in the Nordic countries and brings together the gender equality initiatives and measures that the Nordic countries have initiated in relation to the pandemic. In focus are areas such as domestic violence, the economy and working life, and mental health. This publication aims to contribute to the sharing of knowledge and experience between the Nordic countries arising from the effects of the pandemic on gender equality. Increased knowledge can help us to prepare better. By learning from each other, the Nordic countries can equip themselves better now and when faced with future crises.



Domestic violence

The risk of an increase in domestic violence was highlighted early in the pandemic – in the Nordic countries as well as globally. The UN has issued sharp warnings about what it has called the Shadow Pandemic, where those living under the threat of or in actual domestic violence situations have become isolated with the perpetrators as a result of various forms of restrictions on movement. This applies mainly to women and children. The pandemic has also made it more difficult to seek help, due to both isolation and coercive control, and because of fear of spreading the infection.

Past experiences of situations such as economic crises and natural disasters have also demonstrated the need for preparedness for a rise in domestic violence when people are put under pressure in connection with major crises – whether or not the situation involves a lockdown in the community or not.

In a report by Kilden (Gender Research of Norway), commissioned by Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir), minority group women were highlighted as a vulnerable group.² They are already over-represented at Norwegian crisis centres for women who are victims of domestic violence. According to the Norwegian MiRA Center, a resource centre for women with a minority group background, there was a widespread misconception among their target group in spring 2020 that crisis centres were closed as a result of the pandemic. Apprehensive young women who had moved away from home to study, but were now forced to go back and live with their families, where they had previously

been subjected to coercive social control, have also turned to the MiRA Center asking for help.

In spring 2020, the Finnish Government appointed a working group to produce a report on well-being and equality during the pandemic. The report, published in May 2020, highlighted the risk of increased domestic violence and the need for action by the community.³ The authors of the report also highlighted the importance of a particular focus on women with disabilities and women with immigrant backgrounds.

The Danish organisation Lev Uden Vold (live without violence) saw a doubling of calls to their national helpline when the first lockdown was announced.⁴ Immediately afterwards, the number of calls fell for several weeks, and then rose again. The police in Finland have reported an increase in the number of calls from victims of violence, while requests for help at crisis centres has decreased. In the Greater Reykjavík area of Iceland, which includes six additional municipalities, reports of domestic violence have increased by 14 per cent during the pandemic, while reports of sexual violence have fallen.⁵ In Sweden, daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter published a survey in December 2020 which showed that one in three municipalities had seen an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic.⁶

The Norwegian organisation Gender Research Norway's report entitled Likestillingskonsekvenser av koronapandemien – vold mot kvinner [Equality

2. Kilden, 2020a.

3. Finnish Government, 2020.

4. Lev Uden Vold, 2020.

5. Government of Iceland, 2020.

6. Dagens Nyheter, 2020a.

consequences of the coronavirus pandemic – violence against women] notes that both the police and crisis centres experienced a drop in calls for help in spring 2020.⁷ At the same time, the crisis centre in Oslo reported that they had seen more serious cases, as a result of women waiting before they sought help. One in three crisis centres in the country have described a specific ‘coronavirus violence’ – where restrictions and the spread of infection have been used as a tool for coercive control.

It is too early to say to what extent domestic violence in the Nordic countries has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, partly because opportunities for seeking help have been more limited. It is likely that we will only get a comprehensive picture once society returns to normal.

Increased resources, targeted actions and new tasks

In the spring of 2020, increased funding for the protection and support of victims of violence and for preventing domestic violence were announced in several Nordic countries.

In Denmark increased pressure on the country’s crisis centres for women who are victims of violence was reported after schools and workplaces were largely forced to close in mid-March 2020.

The Danish Government allocated DKK 11 million between five crisis centres to finance a total of 55 new beds. The allocation was determined in consultation between the crisis centres and the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Interior on the basis of where the greatest need was and the possibility to manage emergency accommodation beds.

In the first Icelandic package of measures in connection with COVID-19, ISK 100 million was allocated to safe house accommodation. Support activities for people who have been victims of sexual violence received an increased contribution of ISK 20 million to reduce the longer waiting periods that have arisen during the pandemic.

In May, the Swedish Government commissioned the National Board of Health and Welfare to distribute a grant of SEK 100 million to non-profit organisations working with children in vulnerable situations and children, women and LGBTQ people who are at risk of violence.⁸ The aim was to give these organisations the opportunity both to strengthen their efforts and adapt to a new set of circumstances, for example in the form of a greater online presence.

The need to find new ways to contact and reach out to people with information is central. When people are asked to work and study at home, when public transport is limited and places where

VOICES FROM THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: “THE NEED IS NOT TEMPORARY”

In August 2020, a crisis centre for women victims of violence was opened in Akureyi in northern Iceland. It is the first crisis centre to be opened outside the capital Reykjavik in 30 years. Sigþrúður Guðmundsdóttir, who is managing the centre, says to Iceland Review that she hopes that it will remain after the pandemic.⁹ “The need is not temporary,” she says, and points out that one in five women seeking safe house accommodation in Reykjavik comes from a town or village outside the capital.

7. Kilden, 2020a.

8. Swedish Government, 2020.

9. Iceland Review, 2020.

people used to meet close or otherwise become inaccessible, it also becomes more difficult for victims of violence or threats of violence to seek help. In some cases, it becomes impossible to call the police, social services, 24-hour helplines, crisis centres, friends and family. Recommendations to do the right thing by staying home and not burdening the healthcare system or other social services can also act as an obstacle to seeking help.

In several countries, including Norway and Denmark, the police have been commanded to prioritise domestic violence, work more with outreach activities, and actively encourage people to report domestic violence. Organisations and other actors working with prevention have begun to work more with online solutions.

In Iceland, the government has set up a working group for coordinating the prevention of violence during the pandemic. It has a particular focus on preventing violence against people with disabilities. A strengthening of knowledge and skills regarding violence against children and

domestic violence has also been implemented among those responding to calls to the emergency number 112 (SOS Alarm). In October 2020, the 112 service in Iceland launched the option of seeking emergency assistance in cases of domestic violence through a chat service.

In April 2020, the Swedish Gender Equality Agency was tasked with identifying and developing effective methods for municipalities to disseminate information about domestic violence and honour-based violence and oppression and how contact can be established with the victims of these kinds of violence. The task is to be based on the prevailing circumstances in connection with the pandemic and will be reported on at the end of February 2021.

VOICES FROM THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: “WE MUST NOT FORGET ONLINE VIOLENCE”

Indications of increased domestic violence came already before the pandemic reached the Nordic countries – first in connection with the outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan, but later also from several countries in Europe.

“Unemployment, economic uncertainty and other psycho-social stressors increase the risk of violence against women and domestic violence, as we saw in connection with the financial crisis in 2008,” says Solveig Bergman, who is head of research at the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) in Norway.

The link between major societal crises and the risk of violence is well known, she points out, even though we still do not know the final outcome from the current crisis.

“We must pay particular attention to the most vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, the elderly, children and young people. And we know that domestic violence affects women more often than men and has more serious consequences for women.”

Solveig Bergman talks about NKVTS’s study among teenagers after the schools closure in Norway in the spring of 2020. This study showed that one in six experienced domestic violence during that period, either themselves directly or witnessed it between adults.

“We must also not forget online violence when many people, especially young people, have nowhere else to meet than online.”

None of the Nordic countries has introduced a total lockdown with curfew. Crisis centres for victims of violence have remained open, even though in some cases there have been staffing problems as a result of the spread of the infection.

“In March, a decision was made to categorise crisis centres in Norway as activities with a critical social function. It was an important step,” says Solveig Bergman.

This category means that staff also have the right to child care and a place in school even during lockdown. In addition, staff at crisis centres cannot be reassigned to other tasks within the municipalities during the pandemic.

This is also an example of the preparedness that ought to be in place for future crises.

“That is a conclusion we can draw right now: that there is a need for a gender equality perspective in emergency preparedness. Other consequences of the pandemic are also gendered, not just violence.”

The economy and working life

The economic downturn that has accompanied the pandemic is, in many respects, different from previous crises. One aspect of this is the speed with which it happened. The pandemic and its impacts came suddenly. However, it is also different in terms of which industries have been most affected. The Nordic labour market is gender-segregated and in our case the pandemic initially hit the female-dominated services sector hardest.¹⁰

When restaurants, hotels and shops are forced close or reduce their hours, it is women's job opportunities that are most at stake. In the public services sector, the problem in the short term is quite a different one, with increased stress levels and higher risk of infection in healthcare, personal care and schools. In the longer term, a reduction in tax revenues may also impact the labour market in the public sector.

At the same time, there is a risk that women are forced to take the lion's share of responsibilities for the home and their families when schools and preschools remain closed – resulting in reduced income and weakening their position in the labour market. There are also more single women than men who have sole responsibility for their children.

A number of reports from the Nordic countries have warned of a backlash for gender equality as a result of the pandemic. Decision-makers are being called upon to act urgently. However, in the area of the economy and working life, there

has been a general lack of the kind of rapid and clear measures from the gender equality perspective that have been applied to the domestic violence situation.

The Finnish Government report on the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing and equality from May 2020 entitled “Strengthening wellbeing and equality during and after the coronavirus crisis” highlights groups that are generally vulnerable in times of economic crisis: Young people, the elderly, immigrants, the disabled and people who have partial disabilities that prevent them from working full-time.¹¹ These groups are always vulnerable, but in this case it is also evident that women's labour markets are under severe pressure, say the authors of the report. In Finland, this is particularly evident among women aged between 20 and 24 with a low level of education, where the level of redundancies and unemployment is high.

The Finnish authors of this report conclude that a gender perspective on stimulus measures is essential and that improvements in social infrastructure should therefore be given priority over other efforts. An equitable distribution of support initiatives is of the utmost importance. Keeping childcare and primary schools open as far as possible is also an important measure for gender equality.

Commissioned by the Norwegian Government Gender Research Norway has published a report

10. Vox EU, 2020.

11. Finnish Government, 2020.

in the area of working life and the economy during the pandemic.¹² It too warns of potentially major negative consequences for gender equality. It addresses that women are already more economically vulnerable with fewer resources than men. Low levels of education and immigrant background lead to an increased vulnerability.

Gender Research Norway emphasise the importance of a rapid transition based on knowledge about the gender-segregated labour market and believe that the unique situation can present opportunities for positive changes, for example through increased recruitment of men to the health and personal care sector. They are also calling for measures related to pay, status and the sector's part-time culture now that the sector is under huge strain. A government initiative has been ongoing in Norway for several years now to attract more men to health and personal care occupations. In connection with the pandemic, the *Menn i helse* (Men in healthcare) project has been allocated more resources.¹³

The Icelandic Government notes in a gender analysis of the pandemic that historically a disproportionately large share of unemployment benefits

has gone to men and draws attention to the need to follow up this situation.¹⁴ Women who run their own businesses are less likely to apply for financial support and when they do, it is for smaller amounts. This is why the new funds established to support business owners have a clear gender equality objective, including the fact that working part-time will not affect the eligibility assessment. According to the Icelandic Government, two-thirds of the grants after the first wave of the pandemic went to female-dominated businesses such as hairdressers, beauty salons, dental care and psychotherapy.

Iceland has also increased the child allowance for those on the lowest incomes, which is expected to benefit women to a greater extent than men. In June 2020, a one-off sum was paid in addition to the child allowance.

Sweden's Gender Equality Agency notes that more men than women have so far been given notice of termination of their employment, mainly as a result of women's dominance in the public sector.¹⁵ But the pandemic has also hit women with disabilities hard along with women born abroad – two groups already in weak

VOICES FROM THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: "SHIFT FROM PRAISE TO ACTION"

The pandemic has highlighted the conditions in the health and personal care sector, with low wages, insecure jobs and a culture of part-time employment. Nurses around the world have pointed out that it's not enough to applaud them from balconies – they also need better conditions.

In an op-ed in the Danish broadsheet newspaper Politiken Katrin Arnfred, project manager at the Danish Women's Society's crisis centre, writes: "We have a unique opportunity to translate recognition and heroism into concrete political restructuring and redistribution in the economy.¹⁶ There is now an opportunity to promote low-valued and low-paid occupational groups. To shift from praise to action and to strengthen these occupations. Not only through applause, hashtags and singing their praises".

12. Kilden, 2020b.

13. Menn i Helse, 2020.

14. Government of Iceland, 2020.

15. Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2020a.

16. Politiken, 2020.

positions in the labour market. Women have also lost income as a result of having been at home with children to a greater extent than men during the pandemic. The proportions are at the same level as before. Men still take out 40 per cent and women 60 per cent of leave to care for a child (VAB). But since the numbers of people taking out the VAB benefit has soared during the pandemic, this inequality is now having an even bigger effect.

Women have lower wages, work fewer hours and more often have temporary employment. They are also more dependent on their pay because they have less capital. In an article on the Agency's website, Eberhard Stüber, senior investigator at the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, concludes that: "In particular women who already are in a vulnerable situation socio-economically".¹⁷

Unpaid work

It is a well-known fact that the distribution of chores in the home is unequal. Regular surveys show that women do more work in the home and provide personal care without payment. But the pandemic has radically changed this situation in many homes. Those who can do their job from home are encouraged to do so. At various times, schools and preschools have been closed. Teaching has been online. Parents have been forced to take greater responsibility for their children's schooling.

The Finnish Government report entitled "Strengthening wellbeing and equality during and after the coronavirus crisis" noted that those who care for the sick and elderly are mostly women, in many cases older women.¹⁸ When access to respite from the community is restricted due to the risk of spreading an infection and restrictions, the burden on these informal carers risks increasing.

But thus far how unpaid work is being impacted by the pandemic is difficult to say. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) fears that women will take greater responsibility for children, cooking, cleaning and other unpaid work.¹⁹ But they also see an opportunity for greater gender equality with many men now spending their working days in the home.

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency describes similar scenarios on its website – a risk that the current pattern will be strengthened but also an opportunity for change.²⁰ However, the inequality in taking leave to care for a child (VAB) in Sweden has remained during the pandemic.

The Gender Research Norway report on working life and the economy outlines studies which show that women in Norway have devoted more time than men to their children's school work during the pandemic and that women themselves report that they have taken greater responsibility for their homes and their families since the lockdown in March 2020.²¹ But one study also shows that both women and men are of the opinion that the distribution of work in the home has become more equal – which is also reflected in taking leave for care of a child.

More knowledge is anticipated, including from Iceland, where the distribution of unpaid work will be studied in a multidisciplinary research project in the spring of 2021 with a view to finding out how the pandemic has impacted gender equality in the home.²² The Finnish Government has initiated a broad research project on the effects of COVID-19 on gender equality in Finland under the leadership of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL).²²

17. Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2020b.

18. Finnish Government, 2020.

19. European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020.

20. Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2020c.

21. Kilden, 2020b.

22. University of Iceland, 2021.

22 Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 2021.

VOICES FROM THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: “WE NEED TO INVEST IN SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE”

From an economic point of view, the coronavirus crisis is very special according to Anna Elomäki, researcher in gender, politics and economics at the University of Tampere in Finland and responsible for the economic policy sub-area in the Finnish research project on COVID-19 and gender equality.

“Generally, female-dominated sectors are affected in the latter stages of a crisis. Now the situation is reversed,” says Anna Elomäki.

But the more time that passes, the more the crisis is also hitting male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing and the building and civil engineering industry.

“Toward the end of 2020, we could see a change happening, when instead unemployment among men began to rise more in Finland.”

The dynamics are quite different, but the long-term consequences are difficult to predict.

But what also makes this crisis stand out from many others is its effect on unpaid work. Studies from other European countries show that closed schools and childcare centres have meant less gainful employment for women.

“In France, Italy and the United Kingdom, it is apparent that both men and women have done more unpaid work, but that women’s share of this work is greater. We do not yet know very much about the situation in the Nordic countries.”

Anna Elomäki says that there is now a possibility for change in the sharp distinction between paid and unpaid work, between the public and private spheres – a distinction strongly influenced by how gender is perceived.

“One hope is that we can start valuing unpaid work in a different way. When the home becomes our workplace, when our children are there in the background during online work meetings, it becomes so very clear that we are not just productive beings, but also reproductive beings.”

As regards measures relating to work and the economy from a gender perspective, they are conspicuous by their absence, according to Anna Elomäki. Finnish politicians have expressed the will and ambition to do something in this area, but this has not been translated into action.

“In times of crisis, things happen fast. Laws are being passed and decisions made without the gender perspective that is otherwise a requirement. But it’s also about our lack of knowledge.”

She sees a risk that the resources earmarked for economic recovery will end up in male-dominated sectors with the usual investments in infrastructure projects such as railways, roads and digitisation – despite the fact that it has now become so clear how important our social infrastructure is.

“That we were forced into lockdowns was largely about not overburdening the healthcare system. The economic value is obvious. That is the kind of infrastructure we need to invest in.”



Mental health

COVID-19 is not gender neutral. More men than women die from it. Furthermore, more men than women have needed intensive care. From what we know today, the explanations for this are partly to be found in how the immune system differs between men and women, but also in risky behaviours and poorer physical health among men. These are gender equality aspects that require more knowledge and efforts in order to reduce men's vulnerability to the virus.

On the other hand, women's mental health seems to be more affected. Women's dominance in the public sector is of great significance here.

Increased pressure on the healthcare system

Since March 2020, healthcare professionals have been under unprecedented pressure. Alarm bells from healthcare staff and trade unions have been clear. The risk of infection in these occupations is greater, initially made worse by a lack of adequate personal protective equipment. That stress level has skyrocketed, with a large group of seriously ill patients, and people being required to cancel leave and to work long shifts under difficult circumstances. Many are heavily burdened in a sector where the overwhelming majority are women.

In a Danish study published in June 2020, researchers at the University of Copenhagen and Copenhagen's psychiatric hospital (Region Hovedstadens Psykiatri) have compiled results from international studies on mental ill-health

during the pandemic.²⁴ This study shows that anxiety, depression, stress and sleep problems have risen among healthcare workers, as was also the case in many countries during the SARS epidemic in 2002-2003. There are also signs, although these are less clear, that those who have been seriously ill with COVID-19 are at risk of mental illness in the form of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

In Norway, a study was carried out among public sector staff in April 2020. The researchers, who work at the University of Oslo, found signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in 30 per cent of the participants and symptoms of anxiety and depression in 20 per cent.²⁵ The mental health of those who worked directly with patients suffering from COVID-19 was impacted significantly more than others – a clear indication of the need for rapid action for those working at the frontline of the pandemic, according to the researchers.

On the other hand, rising mental ill-health among health professionals could not be demonstrated in the preliminary results of an ongoing study in Iceland which were presented in December 2020.²⁶ The study is being conducted in a collaboration between the University of Iceland, the teaching hospital Landspítali and Iceland's Directorate of Health, with the support of the Nordic research institution NordForsk. The researchers behind the study could also see no significant impact on mental health in Iceland

24. ScienceDirect, 2020.

25. Plos One, 2020.

26. University of Iceland, 2020.

at the general population level during the pandemic. One important explanation, according to the researchers, could be the relatively limited restrictions imposed in Iceland.

Again, it is too early to say anything about the long-term consequences for mental health in the Nordic countries. It is also impossible to say what the significance of the various levels of infection, mortality rates, level of restrictions and other factors has been.

Studies from both Denmark²⁷ and Norway²⁸ show a slight increase in mental health problems during the pandemic, but also that women have been hit harder than men – which could be partly explained by more women working in health and personal care occupations. Other risk factors identified include lower levels of education and migrant background.

In Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’s research unit has conducted a survey which showed that more women experienced pandemic-related stress in spring 2020, especially younger women and single parents.²⁹

The Public Health Agency of Sweden’s health report of May 2020 from the national public health survey showed that there is a great deal of concern about the pandemic and that women are more concerned than men about both their own health and that of their families.³⁰ However, the level of mental ill-health, according to the aggregated responses of the participants, is at a level similar to the level before the pandemic. This level gives women a worse base level however. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency stresses the importance of monitoring the health effects of the pandemic from a gender perspective (in addition to the direct effects of COVID-19),

partly due to the fact that women already have poorer mental health.³¹

Young people’s vulnerability

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency has also drawn attention to the consequences of distance education in schools and highlights a study of young people in upper secondary schools from the *Ungdomsbarometern* (youth survey).³² In the past, girls have indicated that they feel far more stressed in school and less well mentally than boys, but in the most recent survey, they also indicated to a greater extent that the amount of school work had increased in connection with distance education.

Another gender pattern that risks being strengthened in connection with distance education is boys’ poorer academic results. Boys are generally more disadvantaged by poor quality in teaching. They also have a greater need for support initiatives.

27. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

28. Scandinavian Journal of Public Health, 2020.

29. Finnish Government, 2020.

30. Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020.

31. Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2020d.

32. Ungdomsbarometern, 2020.

VOICES FROM THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: “IT MAY TAKE SOME TIME BEFORE WE SEE HOW MENTAL HEALTH HAS BEEN AFFECTED”

Icelanders have suffered a deterioration in mental health during the coronavirus year of 2020, but it is not a dramatic change compared to the previous year. It is more of a small shift. Moreover, figures from population studies, in which participants themselves rate how they feel, do not show any clear differences between men and women in this small rise in mental ill-health.

“But we should remember that it may take time before we see how mental health has been affected,” says Sigrún Daníelsdóttir, Project Manager in the field of mental health in the Department of Public Health within the Directorate of Health, Iceland.

Such a delayed effect was evident during the financial crisis in 2008, which eventually hit Iceland hard. Sigrún Daníelsdóttir points out that there have also been no in-depth analyses among groups that have been more vulnerable during the pandemic, as a result, for example, of pre-existing conditions or illness, disability or unemployment.

“And we have probably not yet seen the full effects of what the stress within the healthcare system has meant for the people, mainly women, who work there.”

One group where there are already clear signs of an increase in mental health problems is among upper secondary school students, whose classes have largely been conducted online during the pandemic. Sigrún Daníelsdóttir describes the results of a new study as “alarming”.

The self-rated mental health of girls in upper secondary school is at a record low, with barely one third describing it as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ in 2020.

The corresponding figure among boys was 59 per cent, also at a record low. The boys reported more frequently that school work had been made more difficult during the pandemic.

“We must ensure that there are options for getting help with the longer-term consequences of the pandemic. And temporary measures are not enough.”

According to Sigrún Daníelsdóttir, this requires investment in an infrastructure that promotes mental health – in schools, healthcare, care and other social services.

“It is, of course, a challenge in this situation, with the social costs that the pandemic is having.”

There is still much uncertainty surrounding the effects of the pandemic on gender equality. The crisis is not over and more consequences can be expected. The Nordic Ministers for Gender Equality issued a call early on, demanding measures to prevent the coronavirus crisis from becoming a gender equality crisis. To achieve this, the Nordic countries need to ensure that the gender equality perspective is included in all crisis management. Sharing experiences within the framework of Nordic co-operation will be an important asset when it comes to dealing with the long-term consequences of the pandemic. More knowledge is needed, as quickly as possible, but also concrete measures based on what we already know – that the consequences of the pandemic are not gender-neutral.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting new challenges for gender equality, which has loomed large in Nordic gender equality co-operation since the outbreak of the pandemic. The risk of increased domestic violence when the community partially shuts down to reduce the spread of infection. Working life and the economy, unpaid care work and mental health issues are also areas that have been largely affected by the pandemic.

This publication summarises the knowledge produced thus far in the Nordic countries and brings together the gender equality initiatives and measures that the Nordic countries have initiated in relation to the pandemic. The publication aims to contribute to the sharing of knowledge and experience between the Nordic countries arising from the effects of the pandemic on gender equality. By learning from each other, the Nordic countries can decrease the risk for that the Corona crisis become a gender equality crisis. The publication has been produced by Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) and is based on data from the Nordic countries as well as interviews with researchers and experts.

Gender equality effects of COVID-19 – Knowledge and initiatives in the Nordic countries

The publication has been produced by Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) which is a co-operation body under the Nordic Council of Ministers.

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Göteborg, 2021
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