

Executive summary

- Young women and men have been particularly vulnerable to the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. As young people often work in temporary and part-time positions or contact-intensive sectors, they have been more likely to experience lay-offs or a decrease in working hours. While young men are steadily re-entering the labour market, young women are experiencing long-term unemployment.
- Among younger people, the overall unemployment rate of certain groups, notably young women and men with a migrant background, has increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although young women continue to achieve higher levels of education, the employment rate of women who have recently graduated from tertiary education remains lower than that of men.
- Young women face gendered barriers when entering and participating in the labour market, resulting in limited opportunities in later stages of their lives. As such, young women are more likely than young men to be in precarious employment and at risk of poverty. The pandemic has also increased the threat of social, material and housing deprivation for young women.
- Young women continue to bear the brunt of childcare, with significantly more women than men performing care work at a high intensity. The COVID-19 pandemic has not equalised the distribution of childcare duties, as both young women and men in couples report sharing fewer of these tasks.

What is the 2019–2027 EU youth strategy?

The EU youth strategy is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019–2027. The strategy aims to create more effective and coherent youth policy across the EU.

The strategy is based on three main pillars.

- **Engage.** Foster youth participation in democratic life.
- **Connect.** Bring young people together across the EU and beyond to foster voluntary engagement, learning mobility, solidarity and intercultural understanding.
- **Empower.** Support youth empowerment through quality, innovation and recognition of youth work.

Source: European Youth Portal, EU youth strategy (https://europa.eu/youth/strategy_en).



The COVID-19 pandemic hit young women and men the hardest, with emerging losses in gender equality

The social and economic situation of young women and men ⁽¹⁾ in the EU was already marked by major uncertainties, including challenges to gender equality in many areas of their lives, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the pandemic hitting young people particularly hard in terms of their employment, income ⁽²⁾ and mental health ⁽³⁾, further losses in gender equality are emerging.

Evidence from EU Member States has shown an increase in suicide among young people, particularly boys, during the pandemic ⁽⁴⁾. Young men are among the least likely to ask for help from friends or medical professionals for mental health problems. Harmful gender norms, such as toxic masculinity and unachievable beauty standards, have similarly far-reaching negative impacts on mental health. This is exemplified by high suicide rates among young men, poor mental health among LGBTQI* ⁽⁵⁾ people and the high prevalence of anxiety and eating disorders among young women ⁽⁶⁾.

Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine will likely amplify the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic for young people in Europe, specifically affecting their access to jobs, financial situation and mental health. These challenges put additional strain on the resilience of young women and men and further reinforce the risk that they will be less well off than older generations ⁽⁷⁾.

The EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, which aims at mitigating the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, includes young people among its main policy areas

of concern. Specifically, the Recovery and Resilience Facility regulation highlights youth policies related to education and skills among its six pillars ⁽⁸⁾. The promotion of policies for young people is listed as one of the assessment criteria that the national recovery and resilience plans must successfully comply with to receive funds.

The EU policy framework on youth presented in the 2019–2027 EU youth strategy ⁽⁹⁾ highlights that the EU cannot afford wasted talent, social exclusion and disengagement among young people. Enabling young women and men to be the architects of their futures and to become a positive change in society are the strategy's main aims. As part of the European youth goals, the strategy advocates for the promotion of a sustainable and green Europe in which all young people are environmentally active and educated. Concerns over climate and the environment are particularly important to young people living in the EU as is highlighted in a recent Eurobarometer survey ⁽¹⁰⁾. Every third young person aged 15–30 (34 %) indicated that protecting the environment and fighting climate change should be one of the main priorities in 2022. The EU youth strategy also aims to ensure equality for all genders ⁽¹¹⁾, emphasising the urgency of adopting a gender perspective in youth policies. In this context, placing gender equality at the heart of recovery policies for young people should be an EU priority so that neither young women nor young men, in all their diversity, are left behind.

⁽¹⁾ The general focus in this policy brief is on young women and men aged 15–29. The lower age bound is 15 for the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) data, 16 for the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) data, 20 for the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) COVID-19 survey and 16 for EIGE's Online Panel Survey of Platform Workers.

⁽²⁾ EIGE (2021), *Gender Equality Index 2021 – Health*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2021-health>).

⁽³⁾ Eurofound (2021), *Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20036en.pdf).

⁽⁴⁾ Taylor, A., 'Suicide increasing amongst Europe's youth, governments underprepared', EURACTIV, 18 January 2022 (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/suicide-increasing-amongst-europes-youth-governments-underprepared/>).

⁽⁵⁾ The initialism LGBTQI* is the most inclusive umbrella term for people whose sexual orientation differs from heteronormativity and whose gender identity falls outside binary categories. The language used to represent this very heterogeneous group continuously evolves towards greater inclusion, and different actors and institutions have adopted different versions of the initialism (LGBT, LGBTIQ and LGBTI).

⁽⁶⁾ See footnote 2.

⁽⁷⁾ European Commission (2017), *White Paper on the Future of Europe – Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025*, Brussels.

⁽⁸⁾ European Parliament and Council (2021), Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 57, Publications Office of the European Union.

⁽⁹⁾ European Commission (2018), Commission communication – Engaging, connecting and empowering young people: A new EU youth strategy (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0269>).

⁽¹⁰⁾ European Commission (2022), 'Youth and democracy in the European Year of Youth', Eurobarometer (<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2282>).

⁽¹¹⁾ EU youth strategy (https://europa.eu/youth/strategy/european-youth-goals_en).

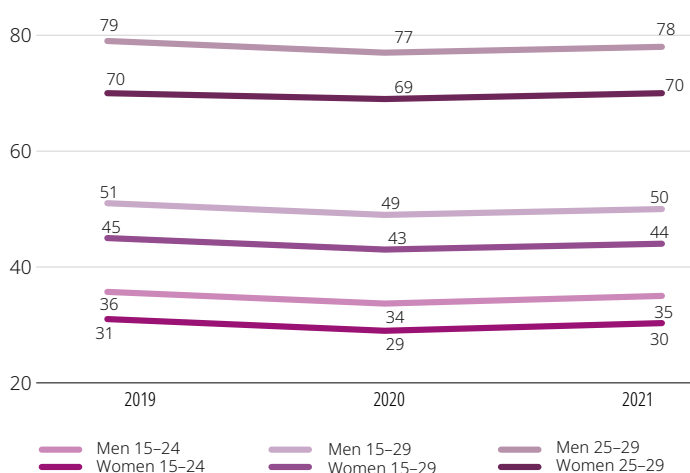
The negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the labour market is longer lasting for young women than men

While young women were over-represented in sectors less affected by job losses during the pandemic (such as education and health), they experienced sharper decreases in the number of total actual hours worked. This trend may partially be explained through an increase in unpaid care duties and gendered expectations of women to be the primary caregivers.

Young men were more likely to lose their jobs at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but their situation improved shortly after. The negative effect on women's economic well-being and employment remains more pronounced to this day, with the gender gap in employment continuously widening.

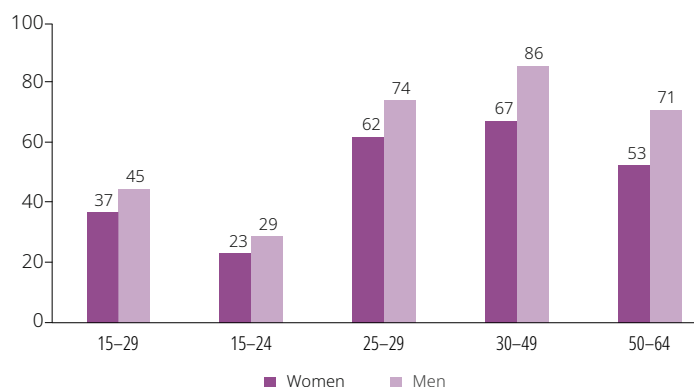
The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the employment of young people (Figure 1). The gender gap in employment has remained the same among women and men aged 25–29 (8 percentage points (pp) in 2021, compared to 9 pp in 2019), and for women and men aged 15–24 (5 pp in 2021 and 2019), but neither group has yet reached the same levels as in 2019. Additionally, for women and men aged 15–24, the overall employment rates are much lower compared to women and men aged 25–29.

Figure 1. Employment rates by sex and age (% , EU, 2019–2021)



Source: Eurostat, 'Youth employment by sex, age and educational attainment level', (yth_empl_010).

Figure 2. Full-time equivalent employment rates by sex and age (% , EU, 2020)



Source: EIGE's elaboration based on EU-LFS microdata, 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to several gender-specific labour market trends⁽¹²⁾. For example, full-time equivalent employment rates are lower for young women than men (Figure 2). This gender gap increases for the adult age groups and reflects the fact that women are more likely to engage in non-standard, precarious and part-time jobs. While the share of part-time employees among younger women and men (15–24) has not changed since 2019, young women remain significantly more likely to be employed in part-time positions. In 2021, 30 % of young women worked part-time, compared to 17 % of young men (15–29)⁽¹³⁾. Intensified demands for unpaid care, which have fallen mainly on women during the COVID-19 pandemic, are expected to widen the gender gaps in full-time equivalent employment rates across all age groups.

The share of young people (15–29) who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has increased slightly since 2019. The gender gap in the NEET rate, which rapidly widens with age, hints at the existence of barriers young women may face when entering the labour market. In 2021, the NEET rate for young women was 15 % compared to 12 % for young men⁽¹⁴⁾. This indicates a persistent challenge.

⁽¹²⁾ See footnote 11.

⁽¹³⁾ Eurostat, 'Part-time employment as percentage of the total employment, by sex and age (%)', (lfsa_eppga).

⁽¹⁴⁾ Eurostat, 'Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and labour status (NEET rates)', (edat_lfse_20).

The economic independence of disadvantaged groups of young women and men is especially at risk

Some groups, such as young women with a migrant background, are particularly at risk of unemployment, especially in times of crisis. In the EU, the unemployment rate for women aged 15–29 with a migrant background increased from 17 % in 2019 to 20 % in 2021 (compared to 11 % of unemployed native-born women in 2019 and 12 % in 2021). The unemployment rate is also high for young men (15–29) with a migrant background – 15 % in 2019 and 17 % in 2021 (compared to 12 % of unemployment among native-born young men in 2019 and 13 % in 2021) ⁽¹⁵⁾.

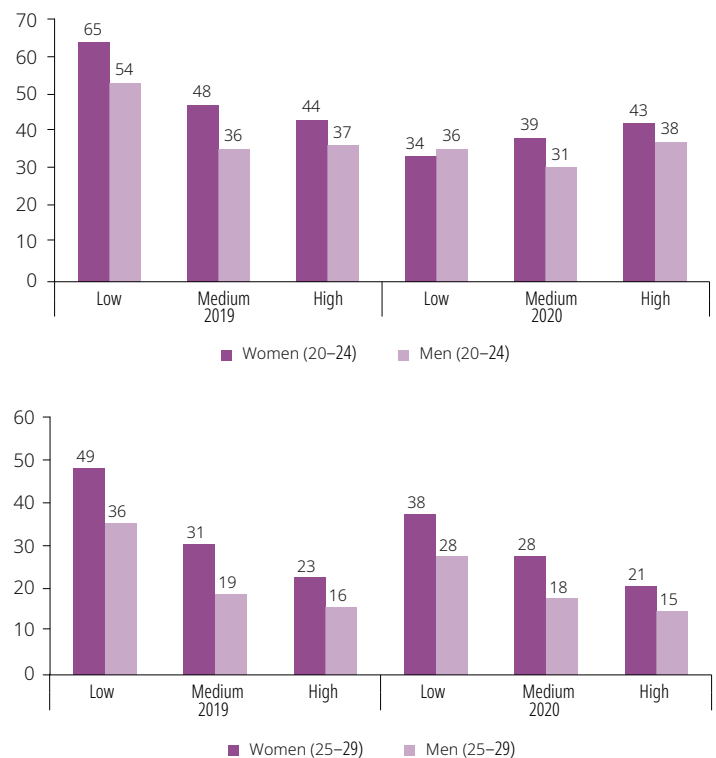
The level of education achieved by the younger generations was particularly high in 2021, especially for women. In 2021, 24 % of women aged 15–29 (compared to 17 % of men). In particular, in the most decisive years for the attainment of a university degree, that is between 25 and 29 years old, 47% of women (compared to 35% of men) attained tertiary education. ⁽¹⁶⁾ These figures are the highest recorded since 2012. And yet, the employment rate for recent female tertiary graduates remains lower than that of men – 84 % and 86 % respectively in 2021 ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Low educational attainment increases the risk of precarious employment for both women and men. Young women face a higher risk of engaging in precarious work than young men, with young women (20–24) with a low level of qualifications being the most vulnerable (**Figure 3**).

The share of young women with a low level of qualifications aged 20–24 in precarious employment decreased significantly from 2019 to 2020 (– 31 pp), whereas the decrease for young men of the same age was less severe (– 18 pp). Similar trends, albeit to a lesser extent, are observed among precarious workers aged 25–29, with the share of women with a low level of qualifications decreasing by 11 pp since 2019. This suggests that the COVID-19 crisis caused more job losses for young women with a lower level of qualifications, who were most likely to drop from precarious employment to unemployment.

The growth of artificial intelligence technology and platform work is rapidly changing the world of work. These phenomena have the potential to create new opportunities for gender equality, but at the same time could reinforce inequalities and discrimination in the labour market. According to EIGE's survey of platform workers, a high share of women aged 16–24

Figure 3. Precarious employment by sex, age and level of qualification (% EU, 2019 and 2020)



Source: EIGE's elaboration based on EU-LFS microdata, 2019 and 2020.

NB: Precarious employment is defined as when a person is in at least one of the following three working conditions. 1. Very low pay: take-home pay from the main job is below the first quintile. 2. Very short working hours: fewer than 10 hours of employment per week (also referred to as mini jobs). 3. Low job security, which might mean employees have: (a) a temporary contract that covers 12 months or less; or (b) a permanent contract but are looking for another job due to the risk or certainty of loss or termination of present job.

are engaged in platform work, with the take-up of platform work being particularly high among women with a migrant background. Platform work can increase women's and men's participation in the labour market, providing them with some flexibility around care and other activities, and a way out of discrimination in the traditional workplace. However, with limited regulations and social protections, platform work may lead to greater vulnerability and risk of poverty over the life course ⁽¹⁸⁾.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Eurostat, 'Youth unemployment rates by sex, age and country of birth', (yth_empl_100).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Eurostat, 'Population by sex, age and educational attainment level (1 000)', (lfsa_pgaed).

⁽¹⁷⁾ Eurostat, 'Employment rates of young people not in education and training by sex, educational attainment level and years since completion of highest level of education', (edat_lfse_24).

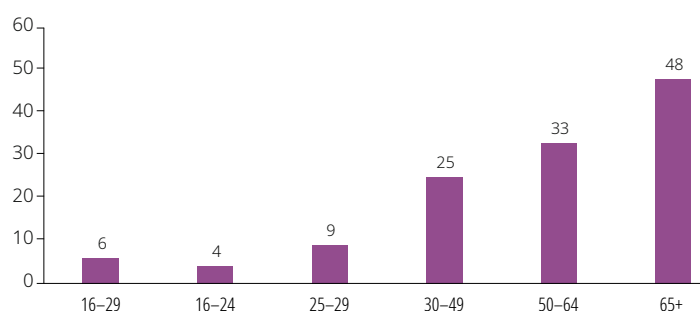
⁽¹⁸⁾ EIGE (2022), *Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Gender Equality*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/artificial-intelligence-platform-work-and-gender-equality-report>).

Young women earn less than men and the pay gap widens with age

Young people, especially young women, are at higher risk from the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. With young women continuing to face more long-term unemployment consequences, concerns are rising over the pandemic's impact on poverty. While some challenges, such as severe housing deprivation, affect young women and men equally, young women face material deprivation more often. The COVID-19 pandemic has reversed the decrease in poverty among young people observed in recent years.

The gender pay gap in monthly earnings is much narrower among younger people and tends to widen with age (Figure 4). The gender pay gap in monthly earnings is narrowest among women and men aged 16–24. However, it widens significantly as women and men advance in their careers, reflecting the accumulation of gender inequalities across the life course (namely, the disadvantages women face in their careers after having children, part-time work prevalence among women, and occupational and hierarchical segregation within the labour market)⁽¹⁹⁾. The gender pay gap in monthly earnings increases almost fourfold for women and men aged 30–49 compared to women and men aged 16–29.

Figure 4. Gender pay gap in monthly earnings (% , EU, 2020)



Source: EIGE's calculation based on EU-SILC microdata, 2020.

NB: The gender pay gap in monthly earnings is defined as the difference between the average gross monthly earnings of men and women expressed as a percentage of the average gross monthly earnings of men.

Young women are more likely to be at risk of poverty and material deprivation



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In 2020, 14 % of young women aged 15–29 experienced social and material deprivation, compared to 12 % of young men in the same age group⁽²⁰⁾. Among young people aged 15–29 at risk of poverty, young women aged 15–19 are the most affected by housing deprivation, with 17 % facing severe housing deprivation in 2020 compared to 13 % in 2019⁽²¹⁾. Overall, 7 % of the EU's young people (15–29) experienced severe housing deprivation in 2020, which is 3 pp higher than the average for the whole population. Young women with lower educational attainment are particularly at risk of material and social deprivation, with the risk decreasing almost two-fold if they have completed upper secondary education (Figure 5). However, the gender gap in material and social deprivation is similar regardless of the educational level attained. This also indicates that while education should help correct existing social inequalities, it does not necessarily help correct existing gender gaps.

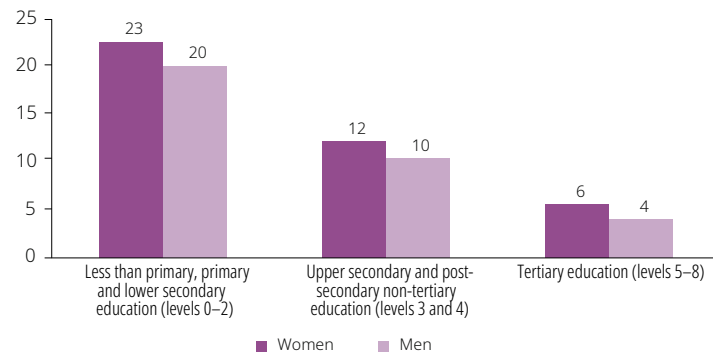
⁽¹⁹⁾ EIGE (2019), *Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work-life balance*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/tackling-gender-pay-gap-not-without-better-work-life-balance>).

⁽²⁰⁾ Eurostat, 'Material and social deprivation rate by age and sex', (ilc_mdspd07).

⁽²¹⁾ Eurostat, 'Severe housing deprivation rate by age, sex and poverty status – EU-SILC', (ilc_mdho06a).

The material and social deprivation of young women and men increased in 2020, putting a stop to a steady decrease in these shares between 2015 and 2019. In a similar vein, the shares of young women and men (15–29) living in overcrowded households increased by 1 pp from 2019 (27 %), which is 9 pp higher than the overcrowding rate for the overall population (18 %). Young women aged 15–19 are the most disadvantaged, with 30 % living in overcrowded dwellings in 2020 ⁽²²⁾.

Figure 5. Material and social deprivation by sex and education level (% , 16–29, EU, 2020)



Source: Eurostat, 'Material and social deprivation rate by age, sex and educational attainment level', (ilc_md3d03).

Young women bear the brunt of childcare

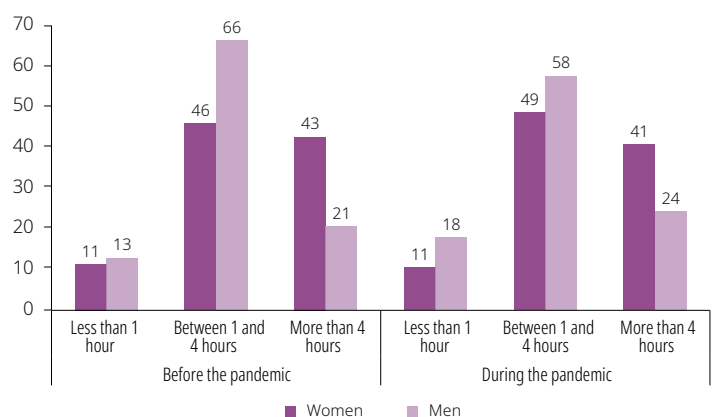
During the COVID-19 pandemic, both young women and men have been more intensively engaged in childcare. However, women continue to face higher time demands, with young women being almost twice as likely as young men to spend over 4 hours per day on childcare duties and tasks. The majority of women report they are for the most part or almost completely responsible for childcare, whereas young men are more likely to report an equal distribution of childcare duties.

Already before the pandemic, women aged 20–29 were more intensively engaged in care responsibilities than men of the same age (Figure 6). Around 43 % of young women spent 4 hours or more per day caring for young children (0–11), compared to twice as few young men (21 %). Most men (66 %) were engaged in childcare between 1 and 4 hours per day. The distribution of time spent on childcare remained similar during the pandemic, which points to both



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Figure 6. Time spent on care for children aged 0–11 per day, before and during the pandemic by sex (% , 20–29, EU, 2021)



Source: EIGE's survey on gender equality and socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19.

NB: The comparison is between the situation before February–March of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started, and June–July of 2021, when the survey was collected.

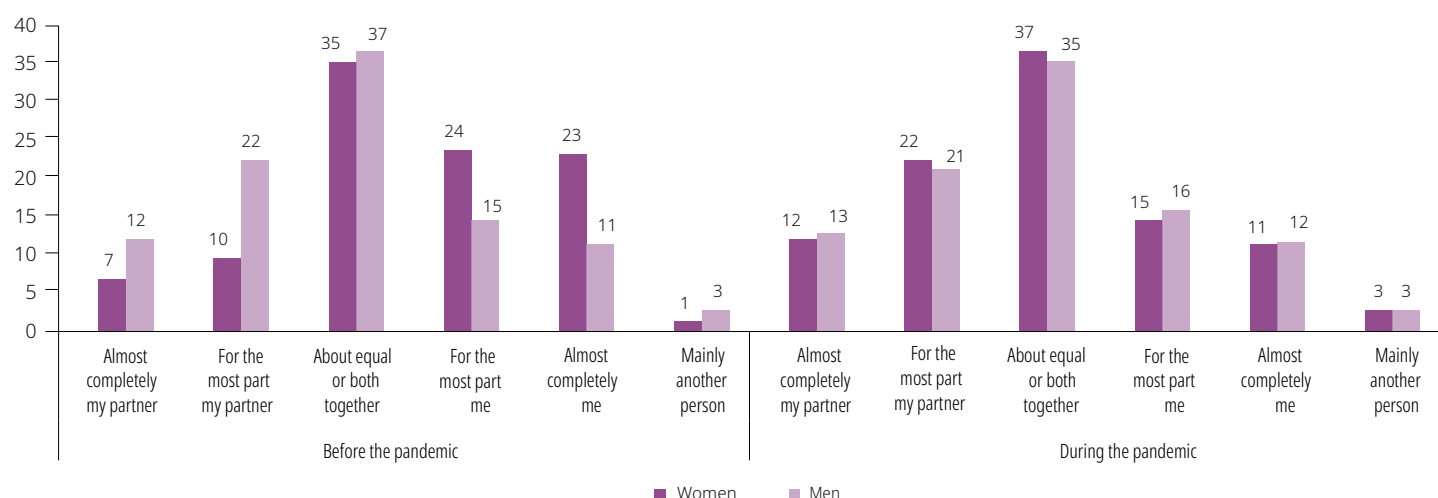
⁽²²⁾ Eurostat, 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population – EU-SILC', (ilc_lvho05a).

the rigidity of pre-existing gender inequalities and the limited influence of the pandemic in offsetting them.

During the pandemic, fewer young women reported equal sharing of care responsibilities with their partners and more of them reported performing most of the care duties (Figure 7). Fewer young men also indicated equal sharing

of childcare responsibilities, with a marginal increase in men engaged in childcare for the most part or almost completely by themselves. Spending more time on childcare duties at the expense of leisure time and work opportunities has had profound effects on women’s work-life balance, mental well-being and overall satisfaction (23).

Figure 7. Distribution of care and supervision for children aged 0–11 before and during the pandemic, by sex (% , 20–29, EU, 2021)



Source: EIGE’s survey on gender equality and socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

NB: The comparison is between the situation before February–March of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started, and June–July of 2021, when the survey was collected.

What can be done to ensure young women and men feel empowered in their social and economic situation after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed gender differences among young people in their social and economic situation, but its adverse effects are likely to be more prolonged for women than men. Unless urgent action is taken, the existing gender inequalities and challenges young women and men face from an early age will limit equitable transition to adulthood and worsen later on. In light of the EU policy efforts to engage and empower young people, the following policy recommendations are put forward.

- The European Commission and Member States should ensure that policy measures to empower young people also consider existing gender differences so that youth policies benefit both young women and men in all their diversity. In the context of the EU youth dialogue, both

young women and men should be engaged and consulted when designing youth policies to ensure their needs and perspectives are considered.

- The Commission and Member States should ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic recovery policies are age and gender responsive and guarantee that young women – one of the groups most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – are not left behind. The recovery policies should consider intersecting inequalities and pay additional attention to ensuring that specific needs of the most disadvantaged groups, such as young migrant women, are considered.
- Member States should counteract the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young women’s employment

(23) EIGE (2021), *Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-and-socioeconomic-impact-covid-19-pandemic>).

- with active labour market policies and reinforced social and legal protection systems. Member States should make the most out of the reinforced youth guarantee to specifically address young women who are not in education, employment or training. In times of crisis, Member States should also strengthen safety-net measures for those most at risk of lay-offs, such as young women in precarious employment, in order to reduce the risk of poverty and prevent social, material and housing deprivation.
- Member States should tackle precarious employment among young women and men and ensure greater quality of work and social protection, including by addressing the gendered character of involuntary part-time work, platform work and the gender pay gap. Member States should also support young women graduates in gaining better access to the labour market.
 - Member States should take steps to close the gender care gap, including among young couples with children, by promoting the equal sharing of care responsibilities at home, tackling gender stereotypes and increasing access to affordable and good-quality early childhood education and care services. Taking into consideration the widening gender pay gap along the career and life paths of women and men, Member States should devise policies that foster equal work-life balance arrangements.
 - Reducing mental health stigma should be a health priority, as it would encourage more people to seek help, reduce mental health treatment gaps and improve mental health globally. Member States should address the deterioration in young people's well-being resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic by challenging stigmas related to mental health and taking action to improve support for young people experiencing mental health problems.

Read more about EIGE's Gender Equality Index

EIGE, 'Gender Equality Index' (<https://www.eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index>).

Where to find more from EIGE?

EIGE (2022), *Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Gender Equality*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/artificial-intelligence-platform-work-and-gender-equality-report>).

EIGE (2021), *Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-and-socio-economic-impact-covid-19-pandemic>).

EIGE (2019), *Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work-life balance*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/tackling-gender-pay-gap-not-without-better-work-life-balance>).

Gender Statistics Database

EIGE, 'Gender Statistics Database' (<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs>).

European Institute for Gender Equality

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.

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