

The Evaluation of the Effects of the Pandemic Period on Women through a Focus Group Study⁺

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Bu makale hakem incelemesinden geçmiştir ve TÜBİTAK – ULAKBİM Veri Tabanında indekslenmektedir.

+ PandeVITA project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 101006316.

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Makale geliş tarihi: 22 Haziran 2023 **Makale kabul tarihi:** 20 Ekim 2023

Atıf önerisi: Güneş Peschke, Seldağ, Irmak DüNDAR, Anıl Güven Yüksel, Nildağ Başak Ceylan, Ayhan Kapusuzoğlu, Lutz Peschke. "The Evaluation of The Effects of The Pandemic Period on Women Through a Focus Group Study." Ankara Barosu Dergisi 81, no. 4 (Cumhuriyet 100. Yıl Özel Sayısı, Ekim 2023): 465-496. **DOI:** 10.30915/abd.1318334

THE EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC PERIOD ON WOMEN THROUGH A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

ABSTRACT

Women have faced more difficulties than men in all the past centuries. In the last decade, although many steps have been taken to ensure equality between men and women, this gap has still not been fully closed. After the announcement of the World Health Organisation (WHO) about the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, many countries around the world have introduced restrictive rules and measures to reduce the spread of the infection. The sudden supply and demand contractions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic process directly affected the economies and the health systems of the world deeply. One of the biggest effects of the pandemic was on women, especially in the lockdown periods domestic violence and sexual abuse towards women increased. This article has been prepared under the PandeVITA project with the aim of minimizing the effects of the pandemic on women for similar situations in the future by showing the negativities experienced by women, from 5 systems of the quintuple helix collaboration model, through examples discussed in the focus group event. The paper identifies and brings solutions and suggestions, for women in the finance and labour market, decision-making processes, and domestic work, who were very adversely affected after the first wave of the pandemic.

Keywords:

women

pandemic

focus group event

Covid 19

PANDEMİ DÖNEMİNİN KADINLAR ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİLERİNİN ODAK GRUP ÇALIŞMASI ÜZERİNDEN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

ÖZ

Kadınlar geçtiğimiz yüzyıllar boyunca erkeklerden daha fazla zorlukla karşılaşmıştır. Son on yılda kadın-erkek eşitliğini sağlamaya yönelik birçok adım atılmış olsa da, bu açık hala tam olarak kapatılabilmiş değildir. Dünya Sağlık Örgütü'nün (WHO) 11 Mart 2020 tarihinde COVID-19 salgınına pandemi olarak ilan etmesinin ardından, dünya genelinde birçok ülke virüsün yayılmasını azaltmak için kısıtlayıcı kurallar ve önlemler getirmiştir. COVID-19 pandemi sürecinde meydana gelen ani arz ve talep daralmaları, dünya ekonomilerini ve sağlık sistemlerini doğrudan ve derinden etkilemiştir. Pandeminin en büyük etkilerinden biri de kadınlar üzerinde olmuş, özellikle karantina dönemlerinde aile içi şiddet ve kadına yönelik cinsel istismar sayılarında artışlar meydana gelmiştir. Bu makale AB Horizon 2020 kapsamında hibelenen, PandeVITA projesi,^[1] çerçevesinde odak grup etkinliğinde tartışılan örnekler üzerinden, beşli sarmal işbirliği modelinin 5 sisteminde gelen kadınların yaşadığı olumsuzlukları göstererek, gelecekte benzer durumlar için pandeminin kadınlar üzerindeki etkilerini en aza indirmek amacıyla hazırlanmıştır. Çalışma, pandeminin ilk dalgasından sonra çok olumsuz etkilenen finans ve işgücü piyasasında, karar alma süreçlerinde, ev işlerinde yer alan kadınların yaşadıkları olumsuzlukları belirleyerek, çözüm ve öneriler getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

kadın

pandemi

odak grup etkinliği

Covid 19

[1] PandeVITA Projesi, Avrupa Birliği'nin Horizon 2020 araştırma ve yenilik programından 101006316 numaralı hibe anlaşması kapsamında fonlanmıştır.

INTRODUCTION

Women have faced more difficulties than men in all the past centuries. In the last decade, although many steps have been taken to ensure equality between men and women, this gap has still not been fully closed.

The activities of women in the labour sector, representation in politics or making decision-making positions are still not at the expected level. The States must ensure access to women to work in better opportunities and working conditions with effective gender policies. There can be no sustainable development without empowering women, as they are representing half of the world's population.

In extraordinary situations such as war, pandemics or natural disasters, the most affected part of society is women and children. For that reason, the empowerment of women is an important phenomenon to be considered by the nations. For a sustainable future, it is vital to support women and increase their participation both in social life and the labour force.^[2]

This paper focuses on how the COVID-19 affected crisis-affected women in the health sector, decision-making processes, care work, finance and labour market after the first wave of the pandemic, and by the discussion in the focus group event which was organized in Ankara on 20th October 2022 to find out possible solutions for women from different perspectives, which could be a guide for the public and private institutions, based on the experiences of the participants from quintuple helix collaboration.

I. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN

After the announcement of the World Health Organisation (WHO) about the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, many countries around the world have introduced restrictive rules and measures to reduce the spread of the infection.

The sudden supply and demand contractions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic process directly affected the economies and the health systems of the world deeply. One of the biggest effects of the pandemic

[2] Seldağ Güneş Peschke and Lutz Peschke, "Women Issues in An Interdisciplinary Context," in *A Comparative Study of Women Issues*, ed. Güneş Peschke, Seldağ and Peschke, Lutz (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2018), 2.

was on the employment levels of countries, in particular, women's employment, which was affected negatively during this period. Many women have become unemployed or have been crushed by the workload at home with the transition system into home office.

A) THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ECONOMIC GROWTH UNDER THE WOMEN'S LABOUR FORCE PERSPECTIVE

The financial and economic systems of the countries interact with each other and act in a multi-directional manner. The main purpose put forward to increase the welfare of the country is to ensure economic growth, in other words, to increase the level of GDP. In order to achieve this goal, all the basic parts of the economic system should move toward for the same goal, and the conditions and potential that will provide this need to be revealed. When the economic system is considered as a whole, it is seen that especially the quality and efficiency in the production process come to the fore. The economic growth that will occur as a result of the realization of the production process, in other words, an output-based economic growth level will provide real benefits to the countries. Otherwise, a situation will arise where the level of economic growth that will occur is not sufficient and unrealistic, especially if the income increase expected to be created by the level of economic growth is not balanced and diffused.

1- The Relationships Between Economic Growth and Gender Equality

Countries that set out with the goal of economic growth based on production need qualified human capital, regardless of the sector. The qualifications of human capital as a whole in terms of quantity and quality increase efficiency in the production process and make a meaningful contribution to the level of economic growth in real terms.

In this sense, in order to prepare sufficient human capital in terms of quality and quantity, countries need to create employment and at the same time reveal the workforce potential that responds to this employment. Particularly, in countries with an increased labour force participation rate and a young population, the targeted goal of achieving qualified human capital can be achieved in a shorter time.

While it is obvious that human capital is very important for the economic growth process in terms of quality and quantity, the workforce structure that creates this structure should also be addressed in terms of women and men. In particular, situations such as gender inequality that may occur in the process of labour and employment creation can harm the formation of human capital and therefore the economy of the country. For this reason, it is necessary to prevent gender inequality as much as possible and to take measures, especially for the female workforce, which has a higher potential for discrimination. In other words, no discrimination should be allowed in terms of the opportunities and conditions offered. Within the framework of the macro goal leading to economic growth, these micro-building blocks are considered to be of extremely great and critical importance.

The projections made on the importance of gender equality on economic growth also support the points expressed and emphasized above. In the projection made by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2022), an estimation was made in terms of the level of economic growth within the scope of the European Union regarding the process until 2050. In line with the projection, the per capita growth rate is expected to increase from 6.1% to 9.6% in 2050, within the scope of countries throughout the European Union. As stated earlier, it was stated that the process of creating qualified human capital and increasing the rate of getting education for this also contributed to economic growth. In support of this situation, the study, which was carried out, showed that the increase in the level of participation in education, including within the scope of the European Union member countries, through the coordination of labour and education policies, caused a 2.2% increase in the per capita growth rate throughout the European Union. (DG EAC, 2016). It has even greater importance in this process in terms of women's labour force participation level and creating a qualified human capital, because women have very different roles in life. It can be stated that they have an even greater role than men in the process of creating qualified human capital both today and in the future, both for themselves and for their role as mothers who raise individuals.

The projection made by EIGE (2022) regarding the establishment of a balance between the female and male workforce and the employment that will be created for women is of greater importance and should be given more importance. The findings revealed in the projection process, which

started in 2015 and continued until 2050, support the findings, which show the effect on the GDP levels of the European Union countries. In the study, it is stated that as a result of ensuring the equality of women and men, it provides an additional 10.5 million jobs (80% employment rate) potential until 2050. However, it has been revealed that women can be more adversely affected by poverty due to low employment opportunities and generally low wages compared to men in this existing process, and therefore the additional employment opportunities that arise are of even greater importance for women.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started to show its effects as of December 2019 and started to show itself fully within the first quarter of 2020, had great negative effects on the workforce and employment processes, as well as affecting all elements of the country's economy. The economies and production processes of the countries, which are based on the healthy functioning of the demand and supply balance, have been adversely affected both in terms of demand and supply after the pandemic. With the negative impact of the pandemic on employment opportunities, layoffs started and as a result, dramatic decreases began to occur in the income levels of individuals. The low level of income also decreased the demand level, and the existing production supply could not find a response. In this case, it caused a decrease in the revenues of the companies as a chain. As a result, companies started to make additional layoffs due to the decrease in sales revenues, and the negative chain process summarized above started.

2- The Review of The Main Statistics for Labour Force Participation

The labour force (human capital) and employment levels, which are very important factors of production in terms of the development and development of countries, have been evaluated comparatively in terms of the existence of opportunities for women's employment, and the presence or absence of opportunities. In addition, the effects of the situation revealed in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic were also explained.

The importance of the labour force participation level in the country in terms of quality and quantity was emphasized in the previous section. While it is important to increase both the quality and quantity of the workforce, which we refer to as human capital, the balanced distribution of this workforce in terms of men and women is also extremely important.

Especially, as stated earlier, women have a high potential to be victimized due to lower wages and fewer employment opportunities. For this reason, even if it is very difficult to achieve a full rational distribution, realizing a nearly rational distribution of male and female workforce should be a basic goal for policymakers. This situation is also perceived as an indicator of the level of development based on the fact that countries do not discriminate between men or women on the basis of gender.

When the distribution of the female workforce aged 15 and over by years in the period between 2018 and 2022 is examined, it is seen that the country that prioritizes the employment of women aged 15 and over is the Netherlands, followed by Germany, Finland, and Portugal. The countries with the lowest labour force participation of women aged 15 and above at the employment level were Greece, Italy, and Turkey. It is seen that the employment rates on the basis of countries do not show great differences and they maintain a stable level. When the situation is evaluated in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic when 2019 and 2020 are compared, there is a decrease in countries other than Germany and the Netherlands, and there is an increase in the employment levels of some countries as of 2021 as a result of the measures taken by the country administrations, and there is no change in Germany. Also, it is observed that there is a slight decrease in Greece (ILO, 2022).

When the distribution of male workforce aged 15 and over by years is examined, it is seen that the countries that prioritize the employment of men aged 15 and over are the Netherlands and Turkey, followed by Germany, Finland, and Portugal. The countries with the lowest labour force participation of women aged 15 and above at the employment level were Greece, Italy, and Spain. When the current situation is examined, it is seen that the Netherlands and Germany provide high levels of employment rates for both men and women. In other words, it is seen that the employable level in terms of quantity has been successfully established in these countries. The point that draws attention here is that although Turkey is at the forefront of male employment, the rate of female employment has remained in the background. Therefore, it can be stated that the opportunities offered for the female workforce should be developed and women's employment should be trained at a level that can benefit from the opportunities to be presented. When the situation is evaluated in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, when

2019 and 2020 are compared, there is a decrease on the basis of countries other than Germany and the Netherlands, there is a tendency to increase again in the employment levels of the countries as of 2021 as a result of the measures taken by the country administrations, and for the case of Greece. there appears to be no change (ILO, 2022).

The Netherlands ranks first in the 15-24 age range, as it is in the 15-year-old and above age group. Therefore, it can be stated that a much wider opportunity is offered for young women to access employment. The Netherlands is followed by Finland and Germany within the scope of related statistics. The lowest employment level for the young female workforce is seen in Greece, followed by Italy. This may be due to the lack of adequate opportunities for young women's employment, as well as the fact that young people extend their education processes and/or want to join employment late. When the situation is evaluated in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, when 2019 and 2020 are compared, there is a decrease in countries other than Germany, as a result of the measures taken by the country administrations, there is an increasing trend in the employment levels of some countries, especially in the Netherlands, as of 2021, and in others (Greece and Portugal) seems to have experienced a decrease (ILO, 2022).

The Netherlands is the leading country, followed by Turkey. When the situation in Turkey is analyzed, it is seen that although the employment of young women between the ages of 15-24 is at relatively low levels, the employment of young men is at a high level, about twice of that. This situation may reveal the perception that there are some deficiencies/problems in terms of equality of opportunity for women's employment. When the situation is evaluated in terms of Italy and Greece, it is clearly seen that the employment of both young women and young men is at low levels. In line with the current situation, the perception that there is an inequality of opportunity between women and men in terms of employment, rather than the perception of young women and young men in terms of education, etc. It can be considered that they prefer to join employment later for reasons. When the situation is evaluated in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic when 2019 and 2020 are compared, there is a decrease on the basis of all countries, as a result of the measures taken by the country administrations, there is a tendency to increase again in the employment levels of some countries as of

2021, while in others (Greece and Finland) on the contrary, there appears to be a decrease (ILO, 2022).

The increase in the level of employment of women, who affect the formation of society with their roles as both mothers and individuals, will lead to faster development and development of the country's economies. In particular, the inequality that may occur between the employment of men and women may lead to the deterioration of the employment structure of the country.

When the findings evaluated within the scope of the study are considered in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic process, which had a significant negative impact on the growth and development processes of the national economies, naturally had a negative impact on employment levels and opportunities, especially on women's employment. However, it has been observed that countries that prioritize women's employment and prioritize their contribution to economic growth have started to correct the negative situation through the incentives and aid they have put forth during and after the pandemic quickly. As a result, as the importance given by the countries to women's employment increases, the country's economies will grow stronger and healthier. It will be possible to get out of negative processes more easily and with less damage.

B) WOMEN IN DOMESTIC WORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The term "domestic work" refers to the work, which needs to be done inside of a household and can also be defined basically as housework. The housework includes chores and care of the individuals in the household. Domestic work can also be carried out for an employer for a daily wage or any type of monetary compensation.

Due to the gender roles that society imposes on women, they have not found chances to work for a long time since the emergence of the social division of labour, only taking on "feminine" duties such as housework and childcare. With the Industrial Revolution, the need for labour increased and women began to participate actively in business life. For a long time, they were only employed in areas that were coded as women's work, such as cleaning, caregiving, and nursing, due to the social roles assigned to women.

The traditional gender roles in the past for women inside the family like childbirth, home and childcare, have transformed for economic reasons and women had taken place in working life.

The domestic work sector is highly dependent on women. Globally, 80 percent of all domestic workers are women while the remaining 20 percent represents men and children labour.^[3] Women in the global labour market are over-represented in low-paid jobs in economic sectors or occupations. Domestic work is, for many experts in the area, “one of the sectors that is among the lowest-paying jobs in the labour market”^[4].

Between March 2020 and March 2021, rapid gender assessments were conducted in 52 countries on economic activities, domestic and care work, which is unpaid, access to goods and services, emotional and physical well-being, and relief measures.^[5]

The measures taken during the pandemic, have impacted family dynamics, such as family income, interpersonal relations, social activities, education of the kids, and many more which created consequences for women. Because of lockdown or the change of working conditions, like home office, many women had to continue their working lives with their families at home which can be sometimes considered a positive situation, but when the kids are small and continue their education online at home or elderly parents at home whom they should take care of, it can create a conflict between working life and the family life for women.^[6]

[3] ILO, “Who Are Domestic Workers?,” 5 April 2013, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/WCMS_209773/lang-en/index.htm

[4] Martin Oelz and Uma Rani, “Domestic work, wages, and gender equality: Lessons from developing countries,” *ILO Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch Working Paper No. 5* (2015).

[5] https://data.unwomen.org/rga?gclid=Cj0KCQjwyOuYBhCGARIsAIdGQRNvT6KtRiHGfv7aRSLB8wj-Yf9t8qJo_S6LAV9zPcKQdbl6jF9YdUQaAr7AEALw_wcB

[6] Serge Rozenberg, Jean Vandrommea and Charlotte Martin, “Are we equal in adversity? Does Covid-19 affect women and men differently?,” *Maturitas* 118, (2020): 62-68; G.M. Bwire, “Coronavirus: Why Men are More Vulnerable to Covid-19 Than Women?,” *SN Comprehensive Clinical Medicine* no. 2, (2020): 874–876.

During the COVID-19 crisis, many national and international institutions published their research on the impacts of this period on women. In the academic world, there are hundreds of articles and books about the challenges, which women faced during the pandemic. According to the report of UN Women, it is declared that men and women are experiencing the pandemic period in different ways according to the places they live and they work. UN Secretary-General António Guterres mentions in the policy brief, the impact of COVID-19 on women “Early data indicates that the mortality rates from COVID-19 may be higher for men. But the pandemic is having devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls.”^[7]

Because of the crisis in the economic world, many markets were fallen down and businesses were closed, so millions of women lost their jobs. At the same time, women’s unpaid work at home has increased. as a result of school closures and the needs of old people under their care. According to the United Nations’ “Policy Brief: The Impact of Pandemic on Women” dated 9th April 2020, the impacts of COVID-19 will result in a “prolonged dip in women’s incomes and labour force participation”; especially there are compounded impacts on women already living in poverty.^[8]

According to ILO, COVID-19 threatened “the livelihoods of more than 55 million people engaged in domestic work, including 37 million women”.^[9] Previous predictions and thoughts on worldwide GDP have been confirmed as the GDP decline is visibly apparent in 2022. Many firms faced financial distress while small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) went bankrupt. These negativities led to labour market issues which affected households and domestic workers around the world. Many developing and

[7] <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

[8] <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Policy-brief-The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women-en.pdf>

[9] ILO, *Making decent work a reality for domestic workers – Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention 2011 (No. 189)*, (ILO, 15 June 2021), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—dgreports/—dcomm/—publ/documents/publication/wcms_802551.pdf

underdeveloped countries, reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence numbers increased.^[10]

C) VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Violence against women is one of the most common human rights violations in many parts of the world. Women are faced with various forms of violence in many areas, without any distinction. As it is known, violence can be physical, sexual, psychological, and economic not only in a specific area but also in many areas, for this reason, it is difficult to determine its boundaries.

Violence against women is a global, social, and legal issue that existed before the COVID-19 crisis, which can be caused by many reasons, such as social causes, rapid and social changes, economic inequalities, gender inequality policies, poverty, weak economic security, inadequate implementation of laws, cultural norms that reinforce violence, weak institutional policies, insufficient services for victims and etc. Since it has been a serious problem, at the end of the 20th century, new policies regarding the prevention of domestic violence began to be adopted and international agreements have been enforced to ensure the prevention of violence against women, taking protective measures, and deterring them with punishment mechanisms.

During COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the lockdown periods, reporting of domestic violence and sexual abuse towards women increased. This is mainly because, in *patriarchal societies*, “abusive men are ventilating their frustration about joblessness, wage reduction, and alcohol non-availability caused by the pandemic on women at their home”, as the research on Indian women show observations of psychological stress, confusion, and restlessness caused during the pandemic.^[11] In many other developing and underdeveloped countries, the result is the same. Not only their mental health was affected negatively, but this change in their psychological state

[10] Leda M Pérez and Andrea Gandolfi, “Vulnerable Women in a Pandemic: Paid Domestic Workers and COVID-19 in Peru,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 39, no. S1 (2020): 79-83.

[11] Lekha D. Bhat et al., “Fear, Discrimination, and Healthcare Access during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Women Domestic Workers’ Lives in India,” *Agenda* 35, no. 4 (February 2021): 140-150.

affected their physical health decisions as well. “The majority of women either discontinued or stopped their ongoing treatment both for reproductive health and chronic diseases during the pandemic” due to lack of income and lack of mental support.^[12] It is apparent that COVID-19 pandemic processes are important factors triggering the changes in the psychological and sociological structures of different societies.^[13]

Unfortunately, the research and official reports show that violence became a bigger issue than before during the pandemic that requires an urgent response. The reports show that there is an increase in the cases of violence against women around the world, which increased by more than 25%, that could be reported in some countries during the pandemic in some countries it was doubled. Without access to private spaces, many women struggled to make a call or to seek help online.^[14]

Sanchez et al^[15] analyzed 38 articles, which deal with the violence against women during the pandemic and found out that in that period, the home was an unsafe place for many women. The increase in the consumption of alcohol was also seen as a catalyst for violence in society. The articles that were analysed in this study, show that the pandemic has revealed several violations of rights in the life stories of women from different backgrounds such as veterans, migrants, pregnant women, or adolescents.

As it is indicated above, the COVID-19 pandemic affected humanity with unpredictable negativity and irreversible doom, groups that are considered minorities including women, people of colour, people living with low-income levels, and immigrants were disproportionately involved.^[16]

[12] Bhat et al., “Fear,” 140-150.

[13] Çiğdem Demir Çelebi, Neslihan Yaman, and Simel Parlak, “Being a Female Domestic Worker During the Pandemic Period from the Hope Perspective,” *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies* (2021).

[14] UN, “UN Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 On Women,” 9th April 2020, 17.

[15] Sánchez, Odette R., Diama B. Vale, Larissa Rodrigues, Fernanda G. Surita, “Violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic: An integrative review,” *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics* (2020).

[16] <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2020/12/03/domestic-workers-covid19-pandemic/>

For that reason, it is the main duty of the states to take effective measures against any kind of violence against women and children in society.

Available services and facilities should be given to women and public campaigns, leaflets, and handouts are needed to raise the awareness of the society on violence against women. Under these conditions, public policies and strategies should be implemented which focus on gender rights. In addition, training health professionals is one of the key factors. Health and safety systems should be prepared to track cases of violence, by collecting and systematizing data on the course and dynamics of violence during the pandemic where public sector, the health and social assistance sectors, including civil society can work together in collaboration.

D) WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many decisions have been made by the official institutions at diverse levels from local policies to nationwide elections. Not only the pandemic-related decisions, but all kinds of political decisions get special interest since they were under the impact of an exceptional pandemic environment. Women's participation in these political decisions is a matter of discussion with regard to the concepts of democracy, equality, and human rights. In general meaning, political participation can be explained as citizens' active involvement in the decisions made by central or local governing institutions, which is clearly a constructive element of participatory democracy.^[17] The aim of the citizens while participating must be to direct the political authority and the activity of the citizens must be able to exercise influence over the political actors both at the local and national level and in all institutions including the central government.^[18] Therefore, political participation, shaped by the theory of human rights, should be considered as a concept now open to new forms of participation

[17] Thomas Zittel, "Participatory Democracy," in *Participatory Democracy and Political Participation*, ed. T. Zittel and D. Fuchs (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 8.

[18] Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, (Yale University Press, 1991), 141.

aimed at forcing the political authority at all levels from all perspectives and by diverse means.^[19]

In general, the rise of human rights under international law was not sufficient to provide equal protection for all components of society, and in this direction, first of all, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1954) was prepared under the guidance of the Commission on the Status of Women (1946), in order to implement the principle of equality of rights between men and women.^[20] Within the scope of the Convention, it was emphasized very clearly, briefly, and directly that everyone has the right to participate in the administration of their country and the inequality between women and men must be eliminated on this issue; in addition, the necessity of protecting the right to vote, to be elected and to access the public service, which is considered together when the right to participate is in question, has been repeated for the women specifically.^[21] In this direction, the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which speaks about the maximum participation of women in all political, economic, social, and cultural fields, was adopted^[22] and finally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which entered into force in 1981, not only guarantees the equal participation of women with men in all fields, but also underlines the establishment of the necessary social policies and services to overcome the obstacles that may arise from family and maternity situations in achieving this equal participation.^[23] In addition to its national importance, the issue

[19] Anıl Güven Yüksel, *Toplumsal Yaşama Katılma Hakkı*, (İstanbul: Oniki Levha, 2022), 22.

[20] Aysel Çelikel, "Kadınların Siyasal Yaşama Katılımı Konusunda Yeni Uluslararası Çalışmalar," *Journal of Istanbul University Law Faculty* 54, (1994): 45.

[21] Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW) (1954), https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVI-1&chapter=16

[22] Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) General Assembly Resolution 48/104, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/eliminationvaw.pdf>

[23] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1981), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article7>

of equal and effective participation of women, which has been repeatedly stated in the declarations and reports produced by the United Nations, has been stated as a key priority in terms of international peace and cooperation through the Declaration on the Participation of Women in Ensuring International Peace and Cooperation.^[24]

As it is evident, both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and CEDAW protect the equal participation of women in politics and decision-making in a strong sense. In addition, United Nations Security Council Resolution (R.1325) highlights several times the significance of women's participation while solving societal conflicts and creating peace. However, some women's rights defenders and female political leaders recently emphasize "some emerging risks to women's political inclusion as the pandemic continues".^[25] This brings the issue to the context of vulnerability and health crises, which create together a fundamental theme to examine in line with the participation of women.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in this direction, is an important issue in which constitutional protections and national practices can be tested regarding women's participation, with its quickly-spread impacts that alarm all the states of the World. In the process of the management of the pandemic, which was announced in March 2020, some states declared a general state of emergency; some declared a public health-specific state of exception in line with their constitutional systems; and some tried to overcome this crisis within the limits of ordinary law. In terms of those declared a state of emergency, the suspension of fundamental rights and freedoms has come to the fore, and international obligations have been derogated.^[26] It should be noted that in the declared emergency periods, both the compliance with some international obligations such as notification and supervision, which are still binding, and the operation of guarantees such as judicial review

[24] Declaration on the Participation of Women in Promoting International Peace and Co-operation (1982) UNGA R. 37/63, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/528de9544.html>

[25] UN WOMEN, *Policy Brief N. 18 -Covid-19 and Women's Leadership: From an Effective Response To Building Back Better*, (UN, 2020).

[26] See the webpage of Council of Europe <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/derogations-covid-19>.

regarding the legality of these periods at the national level have been the subject of discussions.^[27] Therefore, this global pandemic has become one of the most important issues that necessitate discussion of the new meanings of concepts such as the state of emergency and fundamental rights in the context of public health, and accordingly the adequacy of national constitutions in solving the crisis without interfering the core of the fundamental rights of the vulnerable parts of the society. These periods of major crises can revive the traditional inequalities or the tendencies of discrimination and can even lead to backslidings within the gender perspective in human rights.

The expanding obligations of states from political rights to economic and cultural conditions in order to eliminate barriers to women's participation in politics are addressed in the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation on Temporary Special Measures. According to the Committee, states are under an obligation, including temporary special measures, if necessary, to ensure the equal participation of women in all areas of political and public life, including administrative activities.^[28] These temporary measures, which should be directed towards a specific purpose, may include some privileges in the public service, private sector, or political life with the cooperation of public and private institutions, political parties, or voluntary institutions in order to transform the understanding of equality into practice.^[29]

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as one of the processes – and recently the most important one – that require special measures to be taken in terms of women's participation, and which has the potential to hinder participation in many respects, and recently the most important one. During the COVID-19 period, many problems specific to women have been addressed in terms of participation, both in the traditional sense of elections and in the formation of policies in a more contemporary sense. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights clearly states, “with COVID-19, the situation for women human rights defenders and the prospects for

[27] Anıl Güven Yüksel, “İspanya’da Olağanüstü Hal Dönemlerinin İnsan Haklarının Kısıtlanması Bakımından Güncel Gelişmeler Doğrultusunda Değerlendirilmesi,” *Yıldırım Beyazıt Law Journal*, no. 2, (2022): 680–682.

[28] CEDAW Committee, “General Recommendation,” No. 25, art. 4 paragraph 1 of CEDAW–temporary special measures (2004)

[29] CEDAW Committee (2004) art. 21, 32.

women's full participation in building peace, has become vastly worse".^[30] This determination is valid both for the women's role in traditional politics and in civil society.

According to the analysis of International IDEA on "Global Overview of COVID-19: Impact on Elections" for a period between 21 February 2020 and 21 February 2022, nearly 80 countries in the World initially postponed the national and local elections due to the pandemic; while nearly 160 countries initially decided to hold the elections without changing the plan during this period.^[31] In the end, nearly 130 of those 160 and 65 of those who initially postponed the elections held the elections in their territories including the referendums.^[32] During these elections held, it is stated about the political campaigns tendency by another research specifically on women's exclusion that "candidates often have to pay a substantial fee to even be included on parties' electoral lists".^[33] In addition, it is observed from these election periods that emerging setbacks resulting from the pandemic measures may encourage and enhance the informal, and so the *traditional*, political practices, which might somehow exclude the women candidates. Finally, as a stunning part of the research, it should be quoted directly that "the switch to online campaigning and voter engagement creates new challenges for female voters and candidates". Since the women already suffer from the lack of opportunities to use online facilities, they are accordingly in a weaker position in using online tools and getting information about the political processes from the online platforms.^[34]

[30] UN News. "Bachelet: Women's participation forging peace worldwide, vastly worse post pandemic," accessed 20 May 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109992>

[31] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), *Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections*, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

[32] International IDEA, *Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections*.

[33] Saskia Brechenmacher and Caroline Hubbard, "How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion," *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace* (2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/17/how-coronavirus-risks-exacerbating-women-s-political-exclusion-pub-83213>.

[34] Brechenmacher and Hubbard, "How the Coronavirus Risks," 3-4.

On the other hand, according to the UN Women's Report in 2020, in far too many areas of public life, women remain already under-represented in decision-making institutions before the pandemic impact. Women cover only a quarter of the whole seats in national parliaments in the World and a bit more than one-third of local bodies, who take office by elections.^[35] The policy brief continues to indicate the significant number of women's lack of representation among the health ministers of the World in which women occupy 70 percent of health sector workers. Moreover, the few numbered positions of women in the media sector increase this indivisibility on the frontline for emergency response, while the women, whose participation is essential in response groups, continue to be mostly excluded from the groups of experts in relation to the *health, education, social affairs or national gender equality mechanisms*.^[36]

In light of the current situation, in a survey of 30 countries, which is conducted by CARE, it is revealed that only a quarter of committees, which are formed in response to COVID-19 at the national level are women.^[37] Even though the percentage of women's participation in national and global COVID-19 decision-making bodies seems to be weak, it must be mentioned that women have taken the lead, especially in the frontline of health issues during the whole crisis at every level.^[38] In the analysis of CARE over 27 countries, it has been also claimed that a link can be determined between the women leaders and effective COVID-19 responses considering the other statistical analyses on the numbers of cases and daily deaths between

[35] UN Women, *Policy Brief N. 18, Covid-19 and Women's Leadership: from an Effective Response to Building Back Better*, 2020.

[36] UN Women (2020); Lutz Peschke, "Subject Women, Object Women. Image Building in Social Media," in *A Comparative Study of Women Issues*, eds. Seldağ Güneş Peschke and Lutz Peschke (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2020), 171.

[37] Lina Aghajanian and Ella Page, "Help Desk Report: COVID-19 and the participation of women and women's rights organisations in decision-making" (2020) <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15532>.

[38] Boniol M, McIsaac M, L. Xu, T. Wuliji, K. Diallo, J. Campbell, "Gender equity in the health workforce: analysis of 104 countries," *Working paper 1. Geneva: World Health Organization* (2019) (WHO/HIS/HWF/Gender/WP1/2019.1).Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

the countries led by men and women.^[39] In line with these data, it is clear that the meaningful role of women in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore their participation in the decisions taken in this struggle is necessary. Women should play an active role in making all decisions and policies regarding the management of the pandemic. In this sense, special measures should be taken in addition to the measures taken in ordinary periods, in the face of risks such as obstacles that may be created by extraordinary periods and the re-determination of traditional gender roles; participation of women should be ensured by the states. This protection should be strengthened with both special participation measures and financial and social supports in order to eliminate risks such as the *return to traditional gender roles, the unofficial implementation of male-dominated practices, the lack of equal access to online platforms, or the less visible women in political life.*^[40]

Apart from the traditional ways of participation, participation in decision-making processes at local or regional levels, including the assemblies and associations is essential for women to be heard during crisis management, as well as for the balancing of these inequalities.^[41] Although women have a leading role in the combat against the current health crises, not only working in the health and support services but also supporting the community they live in diverse manners, as the UN reports clearly state “women’s representation in policy development and decision making on COVID-19 is limited” all over the World. It is also revealed in the same direction that the lower levels of education and literacy make women more vulnerable and less equal in the face of access to information and communication technologies. In this

[39] Aghajanian and Page, 4. A statistical analyse is mentioned as: “Fioramonti et al. (2020) ran statistical analyses with data from 35 countries, finding: Countries with governments led by women suffered six times fewer confirmed deaths from COVID-19 than countries with governments led by men; female-led governments have been more effective and rapid at flattening the epidemic’s curve, with peaks in daily deaths about six times lower than in countries led by men; the average number of days with confirmed deaths was 34 in countries led by women and 48 in countries led by men”.

[40] Brechenmacher and Hubbard, “How the Coronavirus Risks,” 2-4

[41] OHCHR and African Union (2020), *Possible Actions*. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Events/COVID-19_and_Women_Rights_7_Possible_Actions.pdf

regard, some measures have been declared by international instruments and leading scholars. Primarily the inclusion of women groups, community-based and civil society organizations in “decision-making and budget resources” must be secured.^[42] And in the same direction, gender experts should *be included in management groups*; implementation of the specific measures must be guaranteed through some territorial links *in all parts* of the subject countries; specific information about the *different issues and challenges that women are facing* in these periods must be gathered from diverse sources; and finally, the impact of the taken measures must be monitored after the crisis concerning the “specific guarantees on the rights of women”.^[43]

II. PANDEVITA FOCUS GROUP STUDY ABOUT WOMEN IN COVID-19 CRISIS^[44]

PandeVITA Women’s Focus Group Study has a pivotal role in the PandeVITA Project, in order to gather opinion-based data from the participants in leading roles from different sectors. Within other research topics, the PandeVITA project focuses on how the pandemic period affected women since the first wave of the pandemic period, and in relation to that, a focus group event is organized in Ankara on 20th October 2022 to find out possible solutions for women from different perspectives, which can be a guide for the public and private institutions, based on the experiences of the participants of the focus group event.

A) THE DESCRIPTION OF THE FOCUS GROUP EVENT

A focus group study is a research method, which uses a group interviewing, approximately six to twelve people who share similar characteristics or common interests on a specific subject.^[45] Focus group study is a type of

[42] UN Women (2020).

[43] OHCHR, *COVID-19 and women’s human rights: guidance*, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/covid-19-and-womens-human-rights-guidance>.

[44] This focus group event was evaluated and approved by the Ethical Committee of Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (TSHD), Tilburg University, the Netherlands [Document No. REDC 2021.73].

[45] CDC, “Evaluation Briefs–Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Focus Groups (2018),” accessed 24 April 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/>

qualitative research and is often used in marketing, library science, social science, and user research disciplines.^[46]

The study of the focus group event can be created by some basic steps, such as choosing an appropriate topic and then defining and creating a hypothesis. During the event, contributors' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences are discussed in terms of previously decided research topic which reflects the contributors' outputs as research material. That is why, the discussion topics or questions directed to the contributors are in the same context as the hypothesis of the study. While the focus group study is being conducted, notes and the comments of the contributors are taken and gathered as the output of the study.

B) AIM AND THE METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

Women, as a generalized coterie, were considered to be one of the high-risk groups during the COVID-19 pandemic.^[47] Even though every age and gender group got negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects on women in the general context is an ongoing issue to be discussed. Considering the hardships women face on a daily basis in terms of social and economic backgrounds, their issues and problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also differ from what the other gender group, men experience, biologically and perceptually.

PandeVITA Women's Focus Group Study was organized to determine the economic and social effects of COVID-19 and aimed to find out answers to certain problems that women face the most during the pandemic period, including health, employment, family life and various social issues, which aims to produce new policies and find out solutions to support women's employment and strengthen their social status in the society, so that people,

[evaluation/pdf/brief13.pdf](#)

[46] Tegan George, "What Is a Focus Group | Step-by-Step Guide & Examples," (6 February 2023), accessed 24 April 2023, <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/focus-group/>

[47] M. Keten and Elif Keten Edis, "Covid-19 Pandemisinin Kadın Sağlığı Üzerindeki Etkisi," *Sürekli Tıp Eğitimi Dergisi* 30, no. 4, (2021).

but most likely women will be least affected and not encounter similar difficulties during other pandemic periods that may occur in the future.

Although many articles and books have been written about the effects of the pandemic on women, case studies have not been shared much. Therefore, in this research, the method of conducting a focus group event was chosen to learn about the positive and negative experiences of women during the pandemic in order to receive processable data for the COVID-19 experience through the lens of women in a direct way. The thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences that were shared in this focus group event were later used in forming policy recommendations.

The focus group event organized in Ankara gathered women who are working in leading positions in public organizations, academia, private institutions and international organizations such as ILO and UN Women. The background of these women was in health, tourism, agriculture, industry, business and economy.

The event was moderated by the PandeVITA team members. Seven working women who have different backgrounds and positions in terms of their professions contributed to the focus group event with their answers as well as their additional opinions, both regards to their professions and their private lives, their womanhood. The questions of the meeting were focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Türkiye and in the world. The participants' professional opinions were thoroughly discussed within the event and the results and recommendations were created accordingly. Their opinions and observations coming from their personal lives and experiences of being a woman in Türkiye also enhanced the discussion questions.

In the PandeVITA women's focus group study, the impact of the pandemic on the lives and employment of women from different status (refugees, workers, health workers, housewives, etc.) were discussed, and experiences were shared. It was revealed that many physical and mental distortions started to happen among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fear of getting infected with the virus and possibly spreading it to people, including one's loved ones, made socialization outside of confined spaces unachievable. Curfews implemented by the government during different COVID-19 waves continued to isolate people from one another and make

people stay in their own confined spaces. This isolation, naturally, applied to women as well. During this period, women remained inactive for a long time in their living spaces which caused an inevitable state of inactiveness. Knee, waist, and shoulder problems increased in accordance with their lack of motion, and due to the increase of those kinds of problems, knee and hip osteoarthritis (calcification) cases increased, as well as knee and hip replacement surgeries due to osteoarthritis and osteoporosis. One of the biggest causes of osteoporosis is short-distance movements at home between the kitchen and the room during the pandemic, which women were forced to go through during the pandemic. Some women devoted themselves to cleaning their houses, and some started cleaning not out of necessity, but as a hobby or in order not to be idle. Even if this is the case, it did not stop women from being less active and gaining fat. As a consequence of not being able to leave their confined spaces, women started to cook more and eat more. It was understood that as the COVID-19 virus infected people, the COVID-19 pandemic brought many other problems along with social, economic, and political consequences.

In accordance with the declining physical status of women, stress-induced illnesses became more observable in female patients, such as fibromyalgia. Stress-induced teeth clenching cases also increased. The pandemic had put immense pressure on the health systems and it resulted in people struggling to receive needed care and treatments outside of the COVID-19 virus context. This struggle not only negatively affected patients with physical symptoms, but also affected people in need of psychological help.

In the focus group study, the participants agreed that during the pandemic period, the social situation and work responsibilities of women have become even more severe and fragile. With the inability to leave the house because of the lockdowns, there has been an increase in cases of violence. The pandemic conditions, where the negatives were the majority, have improved with the end of the lockdowns, but neither the health of the people nor the job opportunities have been fully restored. While areas such as commerce and manufacturing provide flexibility to employees and bosses, most working or non-working women have had difficulty adapting to the new and more difficult responsibilities placed on them.

The common opinion of the participants was focused on the workload of the women which has increased at home and at work. It has been inevitable

that women have to face many negativities, especially in methods such as hybrid or working from home. Despite all kinds of negativities, this process also had positive contributions and effects. For some business areas, hybrid and work-from-home models have allowed people to spend time with their families. However, it should not be forgotten that this situation is valid in limited business areas and for a small number of families. The pandemic period and its aftermath have mostly not benefited women socially, economically, physically, or spiritually, making their situations and areas even more difficult.

CONCLUSION–RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, women's health, employment, family life, and various social problems, which are the most difficult issues for women during the pandemic period were discussed within a focus group study and some policy recommendations were prepared accordingly. As a result of these, possible solutions and requests related to women and COVID-19 were determined, to produce new policies and find out solutions to support women's employment and strengthen their social status in society which can be a guide for future pandemics and emergency situations.

In order to prevent unregistered employment new policies and strategies should be developed which encourage women to work under social and security insurance, in accordance with the examples of countries that have achieved success in this regard.

The employment of young women should be increased, the governments should focus on policies to support young entrepreneurs, increase laboratory opportunities for young women researchers and scientists, and encourage R&D projects.

More women should be involved in decision-making processes and new strategies and policies should be developed to raise awareness of women's educational rights. For that reason, economic aid should be provided to families with low socio-economic levels, especially in order to encourage the education of women and girls.

Psychological support and care are needed in the post-pandemic times for households, which especially have lower incomes. With the contribution of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, psychologists, social workers,

and psychological counsellors working within the Ministry can be assigned to provide services to citizens who have difficulties in accessing psychological assistance support. Improving the conditions of psychiatric services in public hospitals is also necessary to increase access to this service.

UN prepared a report in April 2020 “Policy Summary: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women” Report results should be put into practice.^[48] The report consists of themes such as placing women’s organizations in the centre of the COVID-19 crisis, taking care of unpaid care work of women, and designing socio-economic plans for the futures of women and girls.

Another report that should be taken into consideration by policymakers is ILO’s July 2021 “Building Forward Fairer: Women’s Rights to Work and at Work at the Core of the COVID-19 Recovery” study results.^[49] The report consists of themes such as promoting gender-sensitive employment policies, “investing in the care economy, working towards universal access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable social protection for all to reduce the current gender gap”^[50] in social protection coverage, removing pay-gap between genders, preventing violence against women, providing incentives to see women in the decision-making processes.

As a result, problems related to women’s participation also manifest themselves in the rights and freedoms related to working life, including political discussions on economic and social rights. Economic violence, which can develop based on established or cultural codes and make women economically dependent, prevents women from participating in working life. In this direction, first of all, employment, social service, social security and economic development policies should be produced with an approach based on women’s participation, equal treatment and equal opportunities in

[48] UN Women, 2020, accessed 24 April 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Policy-brief-The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women-en.pdf>

[49] ILO, *Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery*, (ILO, July 2021) accessed 24 April 2022 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—dgreports/—gender/documents/publication/wcms_814499.pdf

[50] A. Cordova and R. Gabriela, “Addressing the Gender Gap,” *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 2 (2017): 260-270.

business life should be protected by binding collective agreements and legal guarantees, and objection and complaint authorities should be established regarding the operability of these requirements.^[51]

Last but not least, in this economic order, where access to technological innovations is in line with the level of prosperity, the technological literacy rate of women in each country should be taken into consideration. Effective communication channels should be established for women which give reliable news with the help of technological advancements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is based on research that is executed within the scope of the project “PandeVITA – Pandemic Virus Trace Application for the Effective Knowledge Transfer Between Science and Society Inside the Quadruple Helix Collaboration”. The project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 101006316.

[51] ILO (1975) Declaration on Equality of Opportunity and Treatment for Women Worker, Official Bulletin Vol. LVIII Serie A, art. 9 – 13.

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