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The COVID-19 lockdowns brought to light the challenges that women face in Mediterranean universities

Anastasia Zabaniotou a, b, *

a Chemical Engineering Department, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, 54124, Greece
b Ress Mediterranee des Ecoles d’Ingénieurs (RMEI), Ecole Centrale Marseille, Cedex, 20, France

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has caused considerable upheaval, necessitating a rethinking of higher education. Distance education has emerged as a major parallel issue that is changing the educational landscape. The lockdowns brought to light the challenges that women confront in academia. This study examines the impact of distance education on women’s research activity at Mediterranean institutions, focusing on the additional constraints women faced as a result of e-learning. During the first lockdown (March to May 2020) there was a growing volume of media coverage, but fewer articles investigated how the pandemic’s lockdown had affected women and men which increased fast in 2021. According to the findings, while the Mediterranean countries utilized different approaches to combat the epidemic, the impacts are surprisingly similar and must be recognized to avoid long-term consequences for women in higher education, science, and research. Lockdowns put added family responsibilities on female researchers, who were faced with more childcare and homework, resulting in less time to be part of a cohort creating new knowledge. Traditional cultural gender preconceptions were also uncovered, indicating the need for structural changes and repositioning. To meet UN SDG 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education,” we must emerge from this pandemic more equal and robust to establish viable and inclusive universities that should implement policies and interventions to capitalize on female contributions to science, research, and innovation.

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 began as an epidemic and swiftly spread into a pandemic, prompting the implementation of social separation, lockdowns, and the restriction of physical presence in university classes [1]. Distance learning is used in education at all levels. Distance learning, also known as distance education, e-learning, mobile learning, or online learning, is a type of education in which teachers and students do not interact physically during the teaching and learning process [2]. Furthermore, border closures stifled scientific mobility for research cooperation and attendance at foreign conferences, all of which resulted in several significant changes in the academic world [3], (Fig. 1). Academic men and women are affected differently by COVID-19 [4–7]. Closing schools had an impact on the distribution of childcare at home, as it increased the burden on mothers [8]. Women in academia have less time to devote to research outcomes than their male counterparts, many of whom do not have comparable family commitments [5,9,10]. The scientific female productivity was decreased due to family's duties [11,12]. Although a high submission rate of scholarly articles was made by men during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, women and especially junior cohorts of women academics submitted proportionally fewer manuscripts than men, as it was shown by Squazzoni et al. [6], who looked at submitted manuscripts and peer review activities for all Elsevier journals between February and May 2018–2020. As evidenced by a 14% decrease in the number of women first-authors in research articles in 2020 compared to 2019 [13,14], and a 14% decrease in 2019 [15], lockdowns have a major
impact on the scientific outputs produced by women academics. King and Frederickson [16] evaluated 450,000 authorships in the arXiv and bioRxiv scholarly preprint repositories by gender composition before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and discovered that women scientists were underrepresented in the last authorship position required for retention and promotion in research. Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya [7] created a survey with a series of questions about academics' experiences with perceived changes in housework and childcare responsibilities during lockdowns in Norway, Sweden, Italy, France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and discovered that children are the most important predictor of perceived changes in work and housework, with women being more heavily affected.

COVID-19 should be viewed as an opportunity for universities to think and act more broadly towards gender equality [17]. Gender conventions, roles, and relationships that influence women's and men's work lives must be addressed [17]. It's also crucial to consider the negative and positive effects of remote teaching or teleworking on students' performance and academic success. For example, science and technology outcomes are positively ascribed to the changeover to remote teaching mode, which was made possible by modern information and telecommunication technologies. It is critical to incorporate a gender analysis into planning and activities to improve intervention efficacy and promote equality and female leadership in universities [17,18].

The goal of this paper is to identify female academic challenges and potential benefits from distance learning and to suggest practices to improve the conditions of women in universities towards equal opportunities with men, for the post-COVID-19 era of digitalization. The objectives are to shed light on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on women in universities, to assess their performance given the competence they were given with e-teaching tools, and due to devoting more time to childcare (Fig. 2).

Therefore, the paper is focusing on:

- Identification of the challenges female faculty members and researchers are facing in using distance teaching tools.
- We are exploring the negative and positive aspects of the online education transition because of COVID-19.
- Recommending appropriate steps to be taken by universities concerning gender equality sensitive initiatives.

The following research questions were addressed in order to investigate the persistent dimensions of women-to-man inequality in universities:

1. What is the impact of remote and online teaching and research on university women?
2. How can we pursue sustainability while regaining ground in equality and digitalization at universities?
3. How does the current pandemic perpetuate the existing women's injustices at universities?
4. Can these be mitigated through new caring social norms and soft leadership in Mediterranean universities?

Therefore, the scientific objectives were:

1. To collect data from female academics on how COVID-19 revealed issues of preparedness and policies for equality in academia, in order to spark a discussion about the need for new caring social norms and policies.
2. Collect data on how female scholars perceive the transition to digitalization and hybrid education.
3. To consider future learning methodologies.
4. Advising universities in the Mediterranean region on gender equality-sensitive strategies.

2. Methodology

Built upon the objectives, a tailored research methodology was designed based on evidence-base, by searching the latest publications and internet-based reports on COVID-19, affecting women in universities. Bibliographic databases and tables of content of relevant journals were searched, while data was collected and analyzed using standard analytical methods.
A growing body of journalistic accounts and fewer papers (papers take time to appear in the literature due to the reviewing process) during the first year of the pandemic, 2020, when this study was conducted, raised the possibility that the pandemic’s lockdown had affected women and men in different ways. Since a result, the study cited a limited number of publications at first but was later supplemented with additional papers during the review process, as paper output expanded significantly in 2021.

This tailored methodological approach was adjusted to the special case of COVID-19 and its impact on the specific characteristics of Mediterranean universities (Arab and European). More specifically, female academic challenges in the universities of the Mediterranean context were critically analyzed by using the case-study methodology to investigate instances where COVID-19 and women’s challenges were tightly coupled with remote work and e-learning.

The authors’ experience with the EU TARGET project, which stands for “Taking a Reflexive Approach to Gender Equality for Institutional Transformation” (https://www.gendertarget.eu/), supplemented the case-study methodology. The author of this paper is the co-chair of the Network of Mediterranean Engineering Schools (RMEI)gender’s equality working group [19] (Fig. 3).

3. Discussion

3.1. COVID-19 lockdowns have a negative impact on female academics in the Mediterranean

Globally, the changes caused by the pandemic COVID-19 are reaching the core of the socio-economic model of globalization, which is based on assumptions being challenged by the new reality. For all societies, this reality reveals the necessity to look at social inequalities and shed light on the patriarchal patterns of power at universities [20–22].

The concept of open borders and free movement of goods, products, and people, which is the basic assumption and pillar of globalization, is being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Travel restrictions caused uncertainty for many academics, many of whom were used to traveling for scientific purposes and collaborative projects, while online teaching has gendered implications [17].

Universities adopted work-from-home and telecommuting opportunities for the first time in reaction to the pandemic. Closure of schools in most nations throughout the world to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus had a different impact on women, who supplied the majority of the care inside the home, resulting in less time for academic research [23]. Because their homes become the arena of caring labor, which is typically characterized by power relations, especially in most Mediterranean Arab nations, women in academics and research professions are disproportionately affected by school closures. Academic women struggle to strike a balance between their academic and personal lives [16,24]. While male faculty members may see this as an opportunity to devote more time and attention to study, producing articles, and research projects, female faculty members should prioritize their family, children, and the elderly. Lockdowns had an effect on the division of labor at home, resulting in a reduction in academic women’s research activity [25].

COVID-19 has unraveled women’s challenges in the academy and family that always existed [4]. Although family structure and employment patterns have changed in Europe in recent years, and gender lens has implemented new family policies with a strong effect on parental employment patterns [26], universities in Mediterranean countries where the socio-economic model is characterized by patriarchal patterns of power are still challenged by the shrinking or abolishing of gender equality, while family care remains the central duty of women, even of women with responsibilities of a higher-level academic position [27,28]. The challenges women are facing in Arab countries are different from those European women are facing due to different cultural and
religious factors. While in the European Mediterranean countries, inequality is mostly linked to the social sphere, in the Northern African and all Arab countries, the situation is more complicated, as the social and private spheres are overlapped, especially for women. Cultural and religious factors have a great impact on women’s autonomy beyond the family [28].

Working from home and teaching online posed a challenge for academic women who are mothers of young children and whose husbands do not share equally the housekeeping and childcare responsibilities. These women are desperately trying to balance academic work with increased caregiving responsibilities. In most Mediterranean and Arab countries, even prior to the pandemic, women have been doing more domestic labor than men [29], even among highly educated couples.

Furthermore, face-to-face online meetings with international collaborators require an individual’s space and time, while scientific writing requires silence, concentration, and isolation. This became more difficult for women academics working from home during the lockdown, having the larger family share the same space, with children requiring time, attention, and space [30]. Obviously, this created a big burden for Mediterranean and Arab female scholars-mothers, inhibiting them from reaching scientific scores in the academic concept of excellence.

3.2. COVID-19 lockdowns have a positive impact on female academics

A major positive change that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to universities is workplace flexibility, the quick introduction of online education, teleconferencing, remote work, and e-learning modes. The fast transition was made possible due to digital technology advancements. In other words, with the digital platforms, the education process continues. Working from home benefited academic women by allowing them to balance work and family obligations thanks to workplace flexibility and no commuting time [4]. This is the case for senior scholars or single young people who would be able to focus on their scientific work without having to waste time traveling [31].

Another good effect of COVID-19, which is especially relevant for prospective cultural shifts, is that the lockdown has compelled some fathers to share housework and childcare. Crises have been seen to cause certain changes in family arrangements in the past. Even short-term engagement of dads can result in long-term changes in the sharing of childcare tasks, according to policy experiments with paternity leave [32]. Childcare arrangements prompted by the present COVID-19 crisis may result in significant future alterations in social standards, such as both parents sharing childcare responsibilities. Evidence suggests that ‘forced’ changes in gender roles can have long-term repercussions, such as speeding up the evolution of norms and weakening gender competitive advantages [8].

3.3. The future of distance learning

With the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning is already established in many institutions’ programs, and it is expected to become an even larger part of the education sector. Digitalization is transforming all facets of society, including work environments and educational contexts. Although the integration of technology into teaching and learning is not new, the pace of digitalization transition has become rapid due to the “storm” of the COVID-19 virus [33]. Distance and online learning create new sorts of teacher-student and student-classmate relationships, as well as more flexible and cheap education possibilities. Higher education’s shift to online operations necessitates a completely new approach to learning [34].

Compared to traditional teaching methods, digital remote learning has a number of advantages. Some of the benefits include increased independence, a far bigger amount of material available through online learning provided via webinars, flexibility in where
you reside, and stronger personal responsibility in determining when, when, and how to learn online. As a result, it can be claimed that digitalization’s revolutionary potential in higher education brings many opportunities as well as obstacles [35]. Teachers benefit the most from the increased flexibility of remote learning since they can choose the venue and teaching techniques that best suit their needs. This, however, necessitates a more organized approach to potential scenarios. To successfully finish the course and meetings, research work, projects, and studies conducted by the students, it also requires higher levels of discipline and planning. Remote learning’s credibility is also a concern, as it is dependent on the instructor and the platform itself [36]. Universities are accountable for assisting faculty members in their teaching so that students can learn more effectively and receive a high-quality education.

4. How to turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity for transformation at the Mediterranean universities?

4.1. Distance or hybrid education in the future?

The study yielded a number of recommendations for the future of distance learning choices in education. These are associated with:

- Balanced online course load through capacity growth (skills and stable technology infrastructure).
- Adopting a hybrid format allows for a seamless transition.

4.2. Towards equal career opportunities for women and gender equality in the Mediterranean universities

The situation of disproportionate academic women’s research productivity in Mediterranean universities, due to higher family workload and existing bias, has the potential to bleed women out of senior positions and leadership in universities, as well as science, research, and innovation, affecting their equal participation, which is critical for academic excellence. Scientific expertise, knowledge and innovation produced by both men and women are essential to build diverse, inclusive, and sustainable universities.

The COVID-19 brought into sharp relief the challenges women in academia are facing at all times, striving to achieve a work-life balance while juggling professional and domestic responsibilities. These are challenges for university leaders to think of the changing of institutional cultures that are male-dominated, to provide institutional support for women in terms of maternity leave and childcare facilities, flexible working hours to balance competing family responsibilities, etc.

The reaction to COVID-19 should consider if we care about the well-being of half of the world’s population (women) and whether we want empathy, reason, and solidarity to be the principles of higher education. Governments and higher education institutions must take into account the gender inequality characteristics revealed by the COVID-19 epidemic and take actions to avoid them from resurfacing in the future.

Women in academia face challenges such as male-dominated institutional cultures, a lack of female mentors, recruitment biases, and a poor work-life balance. At Arab and some Mediterranean universities, institutional support for women at various levels and layers is lacking, to variable degrees depending on whether the university is located in a European or North African country (Maghreb country). Any endeavor to lower the socioeconomic cost of COVID-19 in the post-Covid-19 era without a gender perspective will reduce efficacy [37]. Gender equality should be part of a plan to promote human rights and boost democratic processes in universities and societies in general [12,38,39]. While short-term initiatives are needed to cope with the immediate implications of the present COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions should develop a long-term strategy for men-women equality, as well as increased gender equality and inclusivity. Any endeavor to reduce COVID-19’s socioeconomic impact must follow a sustainable path and reclaim lost ground in gender equality. Without a gender lens, initiatives for sustainability and resilience will be less effective, and the societal impact and advantages of science and innovation will be reduced.

## Table 1

Recommendations for national and institutional reforms in Mediterranean countries and Universities.

| National Policies |
|------------------|
| • Addressing family responsibilities, including family-care leaves and institutional support for child and elder care [41]. |
| • Design paid parental leave schemes based on caretaking status [42]. |
| • Changes in social norms [43]. |
| • Long-term invest in gender equality [44]. |
| • Preparing budgets from a gender perspective towards a more inclusive world [45]. |

| Universities specific policies |
|--------------------------------|
| • Equality in the academic community. Every university should create an academic community in which all members are treated equally, while family-care concerns are regarded as legitimate and important [40]. |
| • Integration of work and family responsibilities. For women academics and researchers to participate on an equal footing with their male colleagues in higher education operations and to advance at the same rate as their male colleagues, a more receptive climate for combining work and family responsibilities is required [47]. |
| • More flexible work arrangements. In addition to national leave policies, faculty members and academic professionals should have flexibility in work-family balance [46]. |
| • Institutional support. Women require this assistance in terms of maternity leave and childcare facilities [49]. |
| • Equal paid parental leave. Equal parental leave must be available to both men and women [42,48]. |
| • Extend the tenure clock for mothers. Universities should extend tenure clocks for faculty members with children under a certain age [50,51]. |
| • Control gender bias. This can be accomplished in universities by recognizing and resolving systemic implicit and unconscious biases [40]. |
| • Amplify women voices. It’s critical to case the voices of academic women who have a track record [52]. |
| • Collect gender-disaggregating data. Collecting and reporting institutional data on gender representation, including academic output and senior positions, will serve as the basis for gender budgeting [40]. |
| • Create students’ groups for learning. Gender preconceptions and assumptions about traditional gender roles must be dismantled among younger generations [19,22]. |

Gender equality. Scientific expertise, knowledge and innovation from all genders are essential to build diverse, inclusive universities [46].
University governance is a key element in being a driver of change in achieving institutional goals. University leaders must ensure that the gender perspective is not forgotten when it comes to making important decisions during and after the pandemic crisis and must find ways to mitigate the impacts of future distance learning on women in the era of digitalization. Equality-responsive policies should be developed while respecting cultures [40]. In order to best support sustainable results for the Mediterranean region, higher education systems in the region must strike a balance between educational quality and women's equal position in academics, as well as stronger wider governance standards.

Table 1 summarizes recommendations for measures to address inequity concerns for female academics and to enhance the family-work balance lives of researchers at Mediterranean universities.

5. Conclusions

The study found that the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental influence on academic women at Mediterranean and Arab institutions, due to lockdown and online teaching, as well as school and workplace closures, which posed unprecedented family care issues. Working from a distance had a negative impact on scientific productivity for several female faculty members, owing to the increased family workload during the lockdown, the national context, and patriarchal cultures encouraging husbands not to share equally in family responsibilities, particularly in Arabic countries.

It is necessary to expand the conversation in order to spotlight these experiences. Furthermore, the broader principle of gender equality in universities merits further investigation, beginning with identifying the causes of persistent issues, revising existing policies, and moving forward with proactive development of new policies to achieve gender balance in science and research by designing gender-sensitive policy plans, strategies, and initiatives. The disruption generated by COVID-19 has prompted a new understanding of higher education's role in regional development, as well as female equality in science, research, and innovation, in order to meet UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.”

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Data availability statement

All datasets generated for this study are included in the article.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anastasia Zabaniotou: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing — original draft, preparation, Visualization, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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