Women at universities and the Covid-19 pandemic

Comparative research on women’s work

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
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The presented publication is a summary of the project “Women at universities and the Covid-19 pandemic. Comparative research on women’s work”. The project was carried out at the University of Warsaw in partnership with the University of Milan from September 2021 to August 2022. The research study is based on purposive sampling. It fits into a rather bleak and pessimistic picture of the modern university as an institution “in crisis”. The pandemic exacerbated the state of instability by revealing the tensions between the pursuit of progress and constraints, if only financial, and the strong habit to the traditional model of work.

The university is not only a place to study, but also to work. And this aspect, more specifically, women’s work, was the focus of our research. We talked about women’s work at the university not only with female academics, but also with administrative, technical and IT support staff. We wanted to find out more about the experience of working under pandemic conditions and the challenges of post-pandemic reality. We believe that the women’s needs recognized in the course of the study and the proposed solutions (recommendations) can provide practical inspiration for change at universities that aim to improve gender equality and build more equal workplaces.

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Introduction

The university is a workplace not only for female academics, but also for those involved in administrative, technical and IT support. In many ways, it represents a rather unusual place to work, and the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted its uniqueness. Since the introduction of the state of epidemic in Poland (March 2020), along with a number of restrictions affecting the labour market and reshaping the existing work, a number of ad hoc measures have been taken to ensure the continuity of university work and adapt the work and teaching system to the new reality. It soon became apparent that the pandemic not only triggered a number of new challenges on an unprecedented scale (working and learning remotely), but also – like a lens – focuses the existing social and gender inequalities that require intervention. At many universities, the intensification of undesirable phenomena coincided with plans to introduce gender equality strategies (University of Warsaw adopted a Gender Equality Plan in 2019), and this coupling entailed the need to analyze the consequences of the pandemic in terms of equality. The idea for our project arose precisely from the need to analyze the current reality, as well as the need to propose concrete measures aimed at improving the situation of women, who make up the majority of university staff in general, but the vast minority when it comes to professorial and management positions.

THE UNIVERSITY HAS A GENDER

Only 43 of the top 200 universities in THE World University Rankings 2022 are managed by women. In Poland, 22 women perform rectory functions (term 2020-2024).

The number of women in universities increases as the level of governance declines. Women constitute on average about 60% of people employed at universities in Poland.

UW AND GENDER IN NUMBERS:
http://rownowazni.uw.edu.pl/uw-i-plec-w-liczbach/

GENDER EQUALITY PLAN at the UNIVERSITY OF MILAN:
https://www.unimi.it/sites/default/files/2022-01/GEP_2021_final%20EN_0.pdf
Methodology

The title term “women at universities” includes two groups of working women associated with the university: (1) academic staff, i.e. female lecturers, researchers, including doctoral candidates, and (2) female administrative and library employees and women employed in the technical and support service sectors. Notably, while the former group has been the subject of much research for some time, female non-academic employees are an overlooked group in research. Our goal was to make both groups heard.

The main research objective of the project was to explore the so-called feminization of the pandemic; we wanted to find out more about the challenges that women at universities faced because of the pandemic, as well as their experiences and needs related to working under pandemic conditions. We distinguished four groups of categories of interest related to the area of “women’s work”:

- professional work and career.
- household duties.
- care and emotional work.
- work-life balance.

We wanted to explore the feminization of the pandemic, by referring to the feminist standpoint theory, which emphasizes women’s knowledge derived from their situated experiences and a critical approach to the absence of women in scientific research. Hence, we did not include men in our research, and only considered the point of view of female employees.

In order to carry out the research, we adopted a qualitative research paradigm; thus, the research sample was purposively selected. The selection was based on experts and on the availability of the respondents – we selected women with specific characteristics, such as belonging to one of the employee groups at the university (academic staff, administration, technical and IT support).

Three phases of research took place:

- Questionnaire survey [November 2021];
- IDI interviews [December – January 2021/22];
- Expert Groups [May 2022].
A total of 631 people participated in the research study, half of whom were administrative workers. 551 women participated in the survey, 62 in interviews and 18 in expert groups. Their age ranged from 21 to 71, with the largest age group at the University of Warsaw being women between 31 and 40, and at the University of Milan women between 41 and 55. Women most often occupied the position of assistant professor in the group of female academic employees and clerk/specialist in the case of female administrative employees. The vast majority of respondents (70%) worked under an employment contract for an indefinite period. The most common length of service was between 1 and 4 years (University of Warsaw) or more than 15 years (University of Warsaw, University of Milan). Half of the female participants in the study, both at the University of Warsaw and at the University of Milan, had children. In the assessment of their financial situation, the prevalent answers were: “rather good” in the case of the University of Warsaw and “so-so” in the case of female employees at the University of Milan.

Women’s work – needs and experiences

The gathered women’s responses during interviews point to specific needs and demands for change resulting from the experience of working under pandemic conditions. These needs can be divided into three main groups: those related to (1) a “sense of lack” (2) technical and psychological support, and (3) work-life balance.

**MY NEEDS...**

- **Security**
  - Equal treatment on many levels
  - Being able to choose the form of work at the university

- **Space for consultation and advocacy**
  - Full knowledge of the university rules
  - Taking into account the needs of those involved in care work

- **Agency and reduction of hierarchy**
  - Access to university equipment and technical support
  - Trust from superiors

- **Belonging, identification with the university/unit**
  - Equal information about available training courses and workshops
  - Adequate remuneration and transparency in the financial management of units

- **The possibility to “vent” difficult emotions**
  - The use of existing resources
  - Increased awareness of the rights in the area of equal treatment and work-life balance
I need to be heard

The first group of needs centered around the “sense of lack,” such as security in a crisis situation, a sense of agency, identification and belonging or equal treatment. Women feel that they do not have a “voice” that is heard at the university, that there is still a lack of space for advocacy and consultation.

There is no way to “vent” the difficult emotions that have accumulated due to the pandemic; their release would translate into greater efficiency of work.

I didn’t feel the employer offered me safety; the employer maintained that they didn’t know, or there was no regulation.
I find it difficult to voice my opinion.
I never had the feeling of being part of a network, of being listened to, I never had such a feeling; the pandemic helped in a way.

No one cared how we worked, as long as no one complained that we failed to connect or that we were always late.
I was left alone with it all and had to deal with it myself, learn the tools, figure out what to do with myself.

I need access to tools

Effectiveness of work, according to the women, depends on a number of factors, primarily access to adequate tools and resources, including those developed during the pandemic. Digital skills and competencies acquired in a crisis represent the capital, both human and organizational, that can be used in different circumstances and for different purposes.

Working under pandemic conditions meant that the lack of adequate infrastructure and technical support, just like the lack of access to information and rules structuring work, including remote work at the university, was so acute that it was impossible to pretend it did not exist.

I see and hear from people in the administration mainly that they were better off in the pandemic when they were working remotely or hybrid, that they would like it to continue, and they don’t understand why the university is so conservative and completely persists with this idea that they all have to be physically present at work...

A matter of at least hardware, yes, well, that’s what it was all along – working with our own hardware, with our own network
A real barrier to performance is the supervisors’ low confidence in flexible work arrangements, especially remote work, which is perceived as “no-work”. In reality, however, working remotely meant being available and accessible at all hours, which often led to excessive physical and mental strain and violations of working time regulations (such as no overtime pay).

The problem is an attitude of distrust and a need for control on the part of supervisors, who are attached to the old management styles. According to women, this model of work organization has a negative impact both on the relations with supervisors and on work culture. Remote work raises a number of different opinions – it has both upsides and downsides. For female academics, it was not entirely new, because in their case, work at the university “always” involved several simultaneous modes: conceptual research / scientific work mainly at home, and teaching at the university.

On the other hand, the remote mode for administration staff was a completely new experience. For female administration employees, it quickly became apparent that onsite work was neither the most preferred nor the most effective form, especially since task-based types of work prevail at the university. In this regard, flexible working hours, and therefore the ability to choose the form of work (smart work) should, according to the women, be the standard of work at a modern university that initiates and implements knowledge transfer based on innovative and interactive educational methods and focuses on internationalization.

The possibility of flexible working hours – working in a hybrid system – is particularly important if there is insufficient space for onsite work at the university.
Flexible working is a solution that makes it possible to combine professional responsibilities and household chores more efficiently. Addressing the needs of parental and caregiving roles is important for women in the context of recognizing one of the main sources of inequality, which is still dependent care and women’s unpaid work at home. Supporting progressive care regulations is a sign that the university as an employer is implementing and promoting gender equality and inclusivity strategies in practice.

The need for equality also relates to adequacy with regard to the salary for work and the right to information on the transparency of budgets at the level of universities and units.

Gender equality is both the representation of women in decision-making bodies and the creation of space for women to introduce a new model of work culture, one that is not based on a system of power and control but is situational leadership. For this to be possible, education and empowerment, especially of managers, in social relations, communication and teamwork are needed.

*We all depend on each other because we are equal, let’s be equal not only by name.*

*Salaries should be transparent. Transparency of salaries at all faculties, which would expose certain pathologies.*

*Systemic solutions are needed, because one can see financial discrimination; women are beating men by points (for publications, scientific activity), and yet men rule.*

*To achieve equality you need to educate men.*

*It is necessary to take care of communication methods.*

*Easy decisions are made quickly, but with difficult ones there is trouble, evasion.*
An area strongly emphasized by women is the reorganization and optimization of access to knowledge in the form of training and workshops. Particularly evident and manifested here are the need for evenly distributed information about available workshops and training, and the need to use the already existing resources to build and model a collaborative organizational culture. This refers to both the technical aspects of training (organization, duration, or tools used) and those related to meeting the development needs of employees (mentoring activities, among others). It is also particularly important to recognize the educational needs of male and female employees, so that the proposed workshops and training meet the educational needs of those working at the university.

Making the training offer available to all male and female employees regardless of the unit or division that they represent coincides strongly with the need to improve communication about the development offer and support activities undertaken by the university. Our research study shows that many women did not have adequate knowledge of how to benefit from training.

Likewise, many of them could not effectively benefit from the workshops because they coincided with their working hours, and their supervisors did not let them attend training or workshops as part of their working hours despite the fact that attending such workshops translates directly into improved professional competence and more effective work. Hence, there is an urgent call for introducing and promoting forms of synchronous and asynchronous work, using solutions that worked in the pandemic as well as using asynchronous teaching to optimize learning and the teaching process.

We view the presented examples of needs as calls for change leading to specific, multi-level and systemic actions that consider the diversity of university units as well as male and female community members.
As part of the project we not only examined the needs of female university employees, but also, based on the results of the research, we prepared a series of recommendations that can be used to change the forms and culture of work to more equal ones by reducing inequalities in various areas and to introduce best practices developed during the pandemic. We believe that the experience gained from the research of the University of Warsaw and the University of Milan can be replicated at other universities as well. Instead of writing detailed recommendations, we have prepared a checklist that can be useful to you to diagnose the state of gender equality at work at your institution, as well as can serve as a roadmap for making changes in this area.

**SMART WORK**

- The university has written regulations on hybrid work (flexible work)
  - A diagnosis of the needs regarding hybrid work was carried out among male and female employees of the various units of the university
  - Male and female employees, as well as those in managerial positions, are knowledgeable about the regulations associated with hybrid work. They know: how to get approval for hybrid work; what rules are applicable to such work; how such work is accounted for

- The university provides knowledge-related and technical support connected with work and hybrid education
  - The university provides all those working hybrid with the tools necessary for such work (both hardware and software)
  - Each unit has at least one person dealing with the technical support of remote work and education
  - The university provides space (e.g., a separate room) and equipment for people who would like to work or teach remotely (e.g., attend online meetings and conferences, lead or participate in remote classes)
The university seeks to compensate for gender inequalities and/or inequalities resulting from dependent care

- At the university, there are recommendations from the authorities to hold meetings of councils, chairs, committees etc., taking into account the availability of people taking care of dependent persons, so that such people can attend such meetings
- The university has an active policy on the prevention of gender inequality, for example, through the introduction of a Gender Equality Plan
- The university promotes work-life balance and provides education in this area

The university seeks to bridge inequalities between male and female employees working in different units

- The university promotes a work culture based on trust and confidence
- Supervisors and management know and work with the agile management model
- Non-academic male and female employees are treated as support staff
- The university seeks to harmonize the premises and technical conditions between the various units
- The university seeks to harmonize the salaries between units through, among other things, the transparency of salaries, clear criteria for granting pay rises; regulation of employees’ job scopes; and regulation of overtime work
- The university conducts a thorough (rather than pro forma) employee evaluation with in-depth feedback to the male and female employees in the form of an interview, both among academic and non-academic personnel
- Workshops and training for male and female employees are based on a prior diagnosis of educational needs
- Workshops and training courses organized by the university for male and female employees are attended within working hours, and if held outside working hours, the employees are entitled to overtime pay

The university provides space for male and female employees for advocacy and self-advocacy

- At the university level, as well as in individual units, there is a space/forum for male and female employees to discuss their needs and expectations
- The university organizes informal spaces to discuss the needs and expectations of the employees (e.g., supervisions, development groups, coaching, mentoring)
- A diagnosis of the needs of people working at the university in the field of equal treatment is carried out periodically, and the results of the diagnosis are then discussed in a wide group and afterwards implemented as far as possible
- At the university, risks related to gender inequality and the consequences of the feminization of professions in higher education are identified and addressed.