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Gender Gap Widens during COVID-19: The Case of Georgia

Gender inequality has been a persistent (albeit steadily improving) problem for years. The COVID-induced crisis put women in a disproportionately disadvantaged position, jeopardizing decades of progress achieved towards equality between men and women. However, these effects of the pandemic were not universal across countries. This policy brief aims to evaluate the gender-specific effects of the COVID-19 crisis in Georgia, looking at labor market outcomes and entrepreneurial activities. As expected, the impact of the pandemic was not gender-neutral in this regard, being especially harmful for women. As the Georgian economy rebounds after the crisis, we show that the widened gender gaps are partially offset only in certain aspects. In order to countervail the disproportionate effects of the pandemic, targeted policy measures are needed to stimulate women's economic activity.

Introduction

Past economic recessions, including the COVID-induced crisis, have never been gender-neutral (e.g., Liu et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2020). While economic crises are usually associated with disproportionate negative impacts on labor market outcomes of men compared to women, the impact of the crisis is, debatably, more severe for women-led businesses as compared to their male-led counterparts (e.g., Torres, 2021; Nordman and Vaillant, 2014; Grimm et al.,2012).

The disproportionate labor market outcomes of economic crises are claimed to be due to the fact that men are predominantly employed in cyclical sectors such as construction or manufacturing; therefore, women have to increase their employment during economic downturns as a means of within-family insurance (Alon et al., 2021). The recent COVID-induced crisis, due to its unique nature, turns out to be an exception in this regard. The pandemic and the subsequently-adopted measures primarily adversely affected contact-intensive sectors (where the worker is required to perform tasks in close physical proximity to other people) that predominantly employ women (Mongey, Pilossoph, and Weinberg 2020; Albanesi and Kim 2021). Moreover, large-scale lockdowns increased the burden of unpaid care, which is generally shouldered by women disproportionately (Babych, 2021), leaving less available time for them to work. It should be noted that gender gaps in the labor market were a persistent (albeit steadily improving) problem even before the pandemic (Eurofound, 2016). Therefore, COVID-19 poses a threat jeopardizing the progress achieved in this direction and worsening gender inequality.

COVID-19 brought unprecedented adverse consequences for not only employed workers but entrepreneurs as well. Increased unpaid care and housework pose additional burdens on female top managers, making women-led businesses more vulnerable to the crisis.

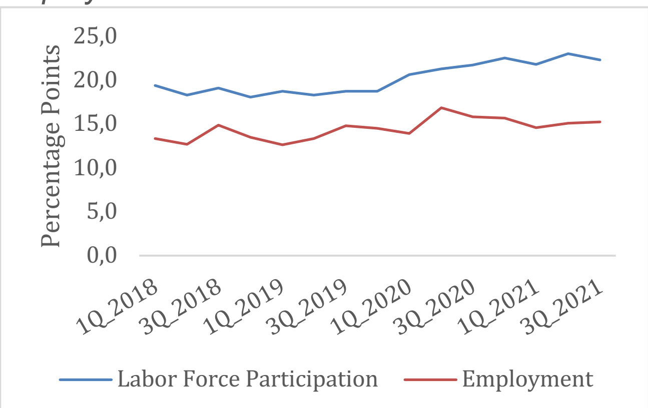
The unequal gender implications of the COVID-19 crisis have been widely debated. Growing evidence (Albanesi and Kim 2021; Torres et al., 2021; Alon et al., 2020; Caselli et al., 2020, Fabrizio et al., 2021) attests that, on average, the effects of the pandemic put women in a disproportionately disadvantaged economic position. However, the extent of this effect varies across countries and is absent in some cases (Campa et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2021).

This policy brief aims to examine the gender-specific nature of the COVID-19 crisis in Georgia. With this aim, we study the differential effects of the pandemic on the economic activity of women in terms of labor market outcomes and entrepreneurship. First, we contrast labor market outcomes for Georgian men and women during the COVID-19 crisis. Secondly, we try to assess the magnitude of the disproportionate impact on women-led businesses compared to men-led ones. We calculate gender gaps across different measures of firm-level performance, such as sales revenue, liquidity and owners' expectations of falling into arrears. Finally, we examine whether there are any signs of recovery yet in 2021 and draw policymakers' attention to emerging issues.

Labor market highlights

The adverse effects of the pandemic on female employment were conditioned by both supply and demand-side factors. The latter include decreased economic activity, mainly in service-related sectors (hospitality, personal care, etc.) that are dominated by women (Eurofound, 2021). In Georgia, as of 2019, women constituted the majority of workers in sectors such as hospitality (56%), education (83%) and activities of households as employers of domestic personnel (99%) that experienced some of the sharpest declines in employment during 2020. Moreover, women are more likely to be employed in part-time and temporary jobs (14% of women, as opposed to 11% of men, were employed part-time as of 2019, Geostat Labor Force Survey 2019), leaving them more vulnerable during times of crisis. Supply-side factors were triggered by the unequal burden of unpaid work generally undertaken by women in Georgia, mainly due to cultural reasons as well as the higher opportunity cost of time for men (women in Georgia on average earned 64% of men's salaries in 2019, Geostat). School and daycare closures and decreased childcare involvement of grandparents increased household responsibilities for women. A UN Women's survey-based study showed that in the midst of the pandemic in Georgia, around 42% of women reported spending more time on at least one extra domestic task as opposed to 35% of men (UN Women, 2020). This would naturally lead to more women than men leaving the labor force. Indeed, looking at the data, we see that in one year after the COVID-19 outbreak, women contributed 98% (48,000 individuals) of the decrease in the Georgian labor force in 2020 (Geostat). Moreover, a close look at the percentage point difference between the labor force participation rates for Georgian men and women reveals a notable growth in the gender gap starting from 2020. The same can be said about employment rates (Figure 2).

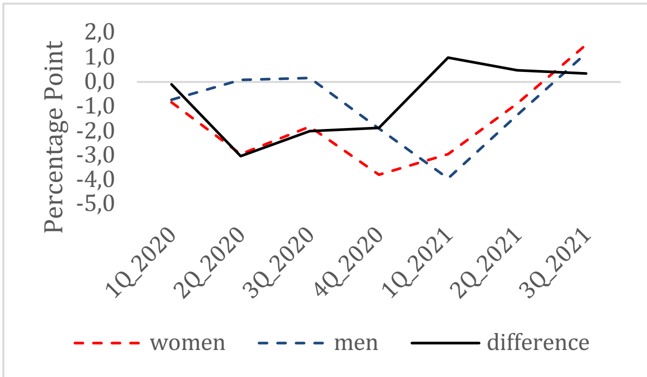
Figure 1. *Difference between male and female labor force participation and employment rates*



Source: Geostat

To further elaborate on the tendencies in employment, Bluedorn et al. (2021) look at the differences between employment rate changes among male and female workers in 38 advanced and emerging economies. Replicating the exercise with the Georgian data, we can observe results similar to those obtained in Bluedorn et al. (2021). In Figure 2, we see differences between female and male employment rate changes. For each gender group, the latter is computed as an absolute difference between the quarterly employment rate and its annual average level from the previous year. Once the difference takes a negative value, implying that the drop in employment was sharper for women, we can say that we observe a phenomenon of "She-cession" as termed by Bluedorn et al. (2021). As we can see, in 2020, the employment rate of women fell more than that of men. This widened gender gap was partially offset in 2021.

Figure 2. *Employment rate changes by gender (deviation from the previous year average)*

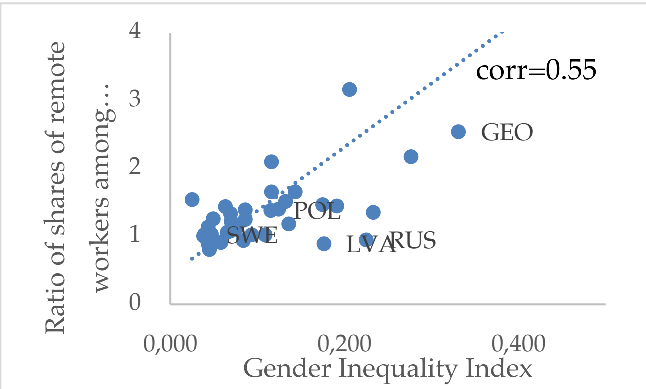


Source: Geostat

Remote work: a burden or a blessing for women?

One important aspect of the COVID-19 crisis was a wide-scale switch to remote work. This development had some gender-specific implications as well. The evidence shows that the prevalence of the switch to remote work was higher among women compared to men (41% vs. 37%) in the EU (Sostero et al., 2020). This tendency also holds in Georgia, where 11% of women as opposed to only 3% of men reported usually working from home in the last three quarters of 2020 (Julakidze and Kardava, 2021). It is not clear whether this tendency can be explained by gender-related occupational differences of male and female jobs (Dingel and Neiman, 2020; Boeri and Paccagnella, 2020; Sostero et al., 2020) or, rather, different personal choices of men and women working in the same occupations. Interestingly, across different countries, we observe a positive correlation between gender inequality (as measured by the Gender Inequality Index) and gender differences in the switch to remote work (measured by the ratio of the share of remote workers among female and male workers). To account for this observation, we can stipulate that gender differences in switching to remote work might be explained by differing gender roles in households, and in society at large, across countries (as proxied by the gender inequality index).

Figure 3. *Relative prevalence of remote work among female and male workers*



Source: Eurostat, Statistics Sweden, Statista, Geostat, UNDP Human Development Reports

Regardless of the reason, remote work is likely to have some important implications on gender roles. However, the directionality of these implications is not straightforward. On the one hand, remote work offers flexibility for women to juggle household and work responsibilities. On the other hand, since women compared to men have been shown to be more likely to use the time saved from commuting to engage in housework, the switch to remote work might increase their "total responsibility burden" (Ransome, 2007) and lead to time poverty (Peters et al., 2004; Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson and Andrey, 2008). Indeed, according to CARE International South Caucasus (2020), around 48% of female survey participants in Georgia placed additional effort into housework and childcare in the midst of the pandemic. Moreover, as women are more likely and expected to use remote working as a means of balancing work-life responsibilities (Moran and Koslowski, 2019) their bargaining power at work decreases relative to their male counterparts. This could have some adverse career implications for female workers. Recent enforced lockdowns might pose an opportunity in this regard, as once-remote work becomes something close to a "new normal" employers will likely decrease the penalty for remote workers.

Spotlight on women-led business performance during the COVID-19 crisis

Calamities brought by the pandemic worsened financial outcomes for enterprises, affecting their ability to operate and have stable financial income. Similar to other crises, the pandemic has not been gender-neutral (Liu et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2020) in terms of the effect on business performance.

Gaps in the performance of women- and men-led businesses have been prevalent beyond any economic crisis as well, and have been documented in a number of studies (e.g., Amin, 2011; Bardasi et al., 2011), registering gender differences in sales and productivity in favor of men-owned enterprises. As suggested by Campos et al. (2019), these performance gaps may be due to lower levels of capital owned by women as opposed to men, a smaller number of employees hired by women-owned firms, as well as different practices in using advanced business tools and innovation. In addition, the existence of these gender gaps has also been explained as stemming from the prevailing social norms that assign certain obligations to women. Nordman and Vaillant (2014) and Grimm et al. (2012) suggest that unpaid housework and family-care led to a constrained number of hours women could afford to spend on the work and management of firms, negatively affecting their productivity.

According to the Women Entrepreneurship Report (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), 2021), the pandemic imposed an additional burden in terms of increasing family-care duties on women. The GEM survey (2021) conducted in 43 countries worldwide shows that the likelihood of enterprise closure is 20% higher for women-led compared to men-led businesses. The higher likelihood of closure reflects the adverse factors that may have hindered the operating capacity of firms. For example, a survey conducted by UNIDO (2020) suggests that, as a result of the Coronavirus crisis, African and Middle Eastern women-led firms experienced diminished revenues. In addition, 41% of women-led firms were short of cash flow and unable to fulfill financial obligations, while only 32% of male entrepreneurs were exposed to the same problem.

More rigorous analysis on this matter has been conducted by Torres et al. (2021) and Liu et al. (2021). They try to examine the asymmetric effects of the COVID-19 crisis on women-led firms in several dimensions utilizing new datasets from the World Bank: COVID-19 Follow-up Enterprise Survey and the World Bank Business Pulse Survey. The findings of Liu et al. (2021) for 24 countries from Central Europe & Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa confirm that during the pandemic women-led businesses are subject to a higher likelihood of closure than men-led businesses and that female top managers are more pessimistic about the future than their male counterparts. Finance and labor factors were mentioned to be the major contributors to these disadvantages; for example, women-led businesses were found to be less likely to receive bank loans compared to men-led businesses. Lastly, the disadvantages experienced by women-led firms were claimed to widen in highly gender-unequal economies and developing countries. Torres et al. (2021) study the impact of the early phase of the COVID-crisis on gender gaps in firm performance for 49 mostly low- and middle-income countries. The results demonstrate that women-led businesses experienced a greater reduction in sales and lower liquidity compared to their male counterparts, which has been reflected in a higher likelihood for women-led companies in several sectors to fall into arrears. On the other hand, as a response to changing circumstances, women-led firms were found to be more likely to increase the utilization of online platforms and make product innovations. Nevertheless, they struggled to obtain any form of public support.

The impact of the pandemic on firms was not gender-neutral in Georgia

The pandemic-induced fragile environment had an adverse impact on entrepreneurs in Georgia– the effects of the shock were significantly more severe for female entrepreneurs than for their male counterparts. In order to assess the gender differences in the impact of the pandemic on firms, we utilize firm-level data on Georgian enterprises from the second round of the World Bank COVID-19 Follow-up Enterprise Survey, conducted in October - November 2020.

Following the methodology as presented in Torres et al. (2021), we assess whether there are differences in the magnitude of reduction in sales revenue (self-reported percentage change in sales revenue one month before the interview as compared to the same period of 2019) and available liquidity for women- and men-led businesses, and whether falling into arrears in any outstanding liabilities is more expected by female top managers (in the next six months from the interview).

Depending on the type of dependent variable, continuous or binary, either Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) or Probit models are estimated, respectively. Along with the gender of the top manager of firms, we also control for sector and firm size. The Georgian database contains a total of 701 enterprises (581 SMEs and 120 micro-businesses).

Table 1. Magnitude of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women-led businesses in Georgia, October-November 2020

Indicators	Men-led Businesses	Women-led Businesses	Gender Difference (pp)
Predicted percentage change in monthly sales relative to the same period of 2019	-27.20%	-45.21%	-18.01 pp***
Average predicted probability of reduced liquidity of the firm	30.16%	43.10%	12.94 pp**
Average predicted probability of falling into arrears	18.56%	29.84%	11.27 pp**

Source: The World Bank COVID-19 Follow-up Enterprise Survey, Second Round. Author's calculations. ***Significant at the 1% significance level; ** significant at the 5% significance level.

Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis of gender differences among Georgian enterprises in terms of the impact of the pandemic. As observed, women-led businesses reported larger declines in sales, revenues, and liquidity. The predicted drop in sales was 18 percentage points (pp) higher for enterprises with a female top manager than for men-led firms. The larger drop in sales should have been reflected in the reduced cash flow availability and in hardship to cover operating costs. Indeed, as the results demonstrate, women-led enterprises are on average 12.9 pp more likely to have reduced availability of liquidity. This may explain women's negative future expectations. Moreover, the average predicted probability of expecting to fall into arrears is 11.3 pp higher for women-led firms in Georgia as compared to men-led businesses.

The unequal effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women-led businesses might have been fueled by the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and housework shouldered by women in Georgia, leaving less time available for work and managing enterprises. On the other hand, as Torres et al. (2021) claim, female business owners tend to employ more female workers (the social group more exposed to the unequal burden of the pandemic) than male owners. This, in turn, could further hamper the productivity of women-led businesses and increase their vulnerability to economic shocks.

On the road to recovery

2021 has been characterized by a rather rapid recovery for the Georgian economy, as evidenced by the 10.6% (preliminary estimate) annual growth rate of real GDP. Signs of recovery can also be observed in the labor market – the labor force increased by 4% (YoY) in the 3rd quarter of 2021, while employment was also characterized by a growing trend (1%, YoY).

Along the lines of economic recovery, the gender gap in the labor market also seems to be narrowing. For instance, the steadily growing gap between male and female labor force participation rates seems to stagnate over 2021 (Figure 1). Moreover, as is illustrated in Figure 2 above, the difference between women's and men's employment rate changes is positive in 2021, meaning that the employment rate was increasing more (or decreasing less) for women. If this tendency persists, we might stipulate that the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 crisis on female employment are on the way to recovery.

To examine whether Georgian firms have experienced concurrent movement in their performance along with the economic recovery, we utilize third-round data (from September 2021) of the World Bank COVID-19 Follow-up Enterprise Survey and scrutinize whether the gender differences have narrowed since the previous round of the survey (Table 2).

Table 2. *Magnitude of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women-led businesses in Georgia, September 2021.*

Indicators	Men-led Businesses	Women-led Businesses	Gender Difference (pp)
Predicted percentage change in monthly sales relative to the same period of 2020	-4.14%	-12.20%	-8.05 pp
Average predicted probability of reduced liquidity of the firm	32.48%	45.95%	13.47 pp***
Average predicted probability of falling into arrears	13.63%	25.15%	11.52 pp***

Source: The World Bank COVID-19 Follow-up Enterprise Survey, Third Round. Author's calculations. ***Significant at the 1% significance level.

Although the third-round survey data suggests that the predicted percentage drop in sales sharply declined for both men- and women-led businesses, the findings are not statistically significant and therefore cannot claim any signs of recovery in the gender gap in this respect. No signs of recovery are observed in terms of average predicted probability of reduced liquidity of firms and expectations of falling into arrears, either. Gender gaps in these two indicators still persist and are as strong in magnitude as in the second-round survey estimates (from October-November 2020). It seems that despite the economic rebound, not all traces of the pandemic crisis for firms have been eradicated from a gender perspective.

Conclusion

The pandemic came with high economic costs. It hit women disproportionately harder, adversely affecting their employment and entrepreneurial prospects. The unequal burden of the COVID-crisis shouldered by women in Georgia could be one of the reasons for the massive labor force dropouts among female workers and poor performance of women-led businesses. Georgian enterprises with female owners experienced a significantly larger decline in sales compared to their male-owned counterparts, consequently suffering from a shortage of cash flow and fears of falling into arrears.

Despite the great rebound in growth after the initial COVID-19 shock, the pandemic-associated increase in the gender gap seems to have been only partially offset in Georgia. In particular, there is a larger positive upsurge in women's employment rate, as well as a diminishing difference between male and female labor force participation and employment rates. Following the ongoing recovery in sales revenue of Georgian enterprises (though the predicted gender difference was statistically insignificant), the gender gap in sales is shrinking too. But, in spite of the economic rebound, differences in available liquidity and expectations of falling into arrears have not yet been eradicated, indicating that the adverse influence of the pandemic on women still persists. It leaves female entrepreneurs a still more vulnerable group, which could be of special interest to policymakers to ease their liquidity problems.

Policies should also be directed towards encouraging women to become more economically active. In this regard, remote work seems to pose an opportunity if coupled with affordable childcare support policies.

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