

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and Gender+ Inequalities in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia: The Heteronormativity of Anti-Pandemic Measures and Their Impact on Vulnerable Groups<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Various research studies suggest that women and other vulnerable groups are the ones who were impacted most and who continue to suffer from the economic and social effects of the pandemic. However, these groups have often been omitted from the measures mitigating the pandemic impact due to their invisibility in the policy-knowledge nexus. This article draws on the findings from the international RESISTIRÉ research project, which focuses on how COVID-19 policies impacted gendered inequalities in Europe. Building on feminist institutionalism and an intersectional approach, we contribute to the debate on how existent gender regimes have shaped anti-pandemic policies in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. While examining policy responses, we identified two main meta-frames that are present across the countries in our analysis and that increased gender+ inequalities: the neoliberal model of active citizens that ties the redistribution of aid to labour market activity and the heteronormative family narrative. This narrative has led to those who do not fit within its framework being ignored in policies and to attacks on those groups in an effort to reinforce the narrative's hegemony. The impact of these frames was further amplified by

<sup>1</sup> This article derives from the RESISTIRÉ project, which received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 101015990.

practices of non-inclusive decision-making (in all three countries), where gender expertise was excluded as politicised and biased.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, heteronormative discourse, anti-gender campaigns, V4, gender+ inequalities

Černohorská, Vanda, Očenášová, Zuzana, Kende, Agnes. 2023. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Gender+ Inequalities in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia: The Heteronormativity of Anti-Pandemic Measures and Their Impact on Vulnerable Groups. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 24 (1): 114–134, <https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2023.007>

In the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, national governments introduced policies and measures to mitigate the spread of infection while offsetting the impact of the pandemic in areas such as the labour market, care, education, etc. The growing number of analyses focusing on anti-pandemic policies suggest that many of those measures were inadequate in terms of gender sensitivity and from an intersectional perspective (Cibin et al. 2021, 2022). As a result, COVID-19 disproportionately impacted women and other vulnerable groups, deepening existing inequalities while also creating new ones in various domains, from gender-based violence to the domain of care and the labour market (Axelsson et al. 2021; Cumming et al. 2020; Fisher et al. 2021; Rushovich et al. 2021). The economic, social, and health effects fell disproportionately on the shoulders of women. There was an increase in the number of cases and the intensity of gender-based violence (ECR 2020), the workload of women in relation to unpaid care and household responsibilities grew, and the unemployment rate among women rose (Czymara et al. 2020; Reichelt et al. 2021). The pandemic similarly had an unequal impact on other vulnerable groups in precarious positions due to sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, ethnicity, or migration/refugee status (Cibin et al. 2021). These groups, as Axelsson et al. (2021) point out, were significantly affected in strong gender regimes where categories like social class, migrant status, or age cut straight across domains such as work or care.

This article provides an analysis of policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in three countries that are part of the Visegrad Four (V4), identifying patterns and tendencies that led to an increase in existing gender inequalities. While the policies designed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic were presented as ‘gender neutral’, the dynamic these measures created often exacerbated existing inequalities and heightened the already precarious position of those groups who do not fit the traditional heteronormative framework. We argue that the narratives of traditional values and the idea of the ‘typical family’, paired with strong anti-gender campaigns and heteronormative discourse, translated into an anti-pandemic policy-knowledge

nexus. As the policy landscape of V4 countries has been influenced by struggles over 'gender ideology' and by opportunistic synergies (Graff, Korolczuk 2022) between right-wing parties and ultraconservative actors, the rights and needs of groups who are positioned on the margin due to sexual orientation, socio-economic status, precarious working conditions, ethnicity, or visa/asylum status were ignored or attacked both before and during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the fact that these groups were the ones most affected by the pandemic, they were often overlooked in measures designed to mitigate the pandemic's effects because of their invisibility in the traditional heteronormative narrative that shapes such policies.

The following text is divided into three main sections. The theoretical part introduces the theoretical framework of the article guided by feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al. 2010; Krook, Mackay 2011) paired with the concept of the gender politics of knowledge (Cavaghan, Kulawik 2020). It also provides an overview of the strong anti-gender campaigns and heteronormative discourse in the selected countries that, to a large extent, shaped the anti-pandemic response. The subsequent, methodological section presents information on methodology, sampling, data collection, and the research projects this article is based on. The second part of the paper lays out the main findings of the analysis of policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. It highlights three central policy patterns that have led to increased gender+ inequalities. These policy patterns are non-inclusive decision-making, the dominant neoliberal model of active citizens, and heteronormative family discourse. We argue that these three patterns led to the absence of a gender+ inclusive perspective and to the exclusion of certain vulnerable groups from the pandemic's crisis management.

## Theoretical framework

The paper is theoretically informed by a feminist institutionalist approach that highlights the gender aspects of norms and practices within institutions and their impact on gender inequalities (Mackay et al. 2010; Krook, Mackay 2011). In addition to feminist institutionalism, we also draw on the concept of gender politics of knowledge, as described by Cavaghan and Kulawik (2020), which focuses on the study of knowledge from a gender perspective, the changing modes of knowledge production, and the dynamics that influence the recognition of expertise. This perspective draws attention to the relationship between gender expertise and the interaction of knowledge with politics, the knowledge-policy nexus. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also allows us to take into account the mobilisation of neoliberal expertise in policy-making in terms of the knowledge it produces and the perspectives it ignores and the spots it leaves blank (ibid.).

The article emphasises that the existing gender regime in the three V4 countries studied here – though to different degrees and in varying forms – shaped the norms and processes introduced in relevant institutions that then played a role in forming the anti-pandemic responses and policies. Concretely, the analysis links the dominant narrative of the heteronormative ‘traditional family’ and its pairing with non-inclusive decision-making to the exclusion of certain vulnerable groups’ needs. It highlights how across the V4 countries the pre-pandemic institutional setting, which combined a neoliberal model of economically active citizens and (latent as well as explicit) with anti-gender policies, led to a deepening of existing inequalities. With this theoretical approach, the paper seeks to move beyond a descriptive and gender-blind approach to policy analysis and to emphasise the co-constitutive relationship between institutions, actors, implemented policies, and existing gender regimes, which, in the case of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, are influenced by ongoing anti-gender campaigns (Graff, Korolczuk 2022).

Within the last two decades, there has been growing anti-gender mobilisation throughout the United States and Europe. Driven by ultra-conservative forces and right-wing populists, these campaigns reframed the debate around gender (and about any national and trans-national policies pertaining to the domain of gender equality) as being a part of an orchestrated attempt to threaten ‘traditional values’ and dismantle the ‘traditional family’ (Korolczuk, Graff 2018; Kuhar, Paternotte 2017; Verloo 2018). The anti-gender narrative uses the term ‘gender ideology’ to refer to various forms of activism, policies, and debates regarding women’s rights and the LGBTQ+ movement. It resonates particularly around marriage equality, women’s reproductive rights, the trans community, gender-sensitive education, and violence against women and girls. In the V4 countries, the topics of non-normative sexualities and family configurations are contentious topics in the public eye (Graff, Korolczuk 2022). Often, the anti-gender narrative sees gender equality efforts as part of an orchestrated strategy (EPF 2018), with the European Union and other international actors being accused of imposing their agenda onto poorer states of the global South/East through financial and legislative ties (Korolczuk, Graff 2018).

The connection between the anti-Brussels and anti-gender campaigns amplifies the narrative, especially in the Czech Republic, the most atheistic of the V4 countries (Evans 2017) with persistent anti-EU sentiment (Eurobarometer 2019). In Slovakia, the position of the Catholic Church is much stronger and consequently the anti-gender campaign is supported and promoted by the Catholic Church but is officially organised by Christian organisations such as the Slovak Alliance for the Family (Aliancia za rodinu). Over the course of the decade in which the anti-gender discourse has existed, it has been adopted by the country’s political representatives and has shaped a variety of policy areas, and it led to the refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention (Očenášová

2021). These ‘opportunistic synergies’ (Graff, Korolczuk 2022), where populist right-wing parties team up with ultraconservative religious groups and actors to enhance their crusade against ‘gender ideology’, create a dynamic that allows for alliances to form that eventually lead to organisational changes in political and advisory bodies and in academic and cultural institutions.

The prime example of such synergy is found in Hungary and it demonstrates how this alliance can be advantageous for both of the parties to it, as Fidesz works closely with ultraconservative experts and advisors in policy-making. With their support, the party introduced ‘traditional family’-oriented programmes coupled with a narrative about ‘gender ideology’ and homosexuality as a threat to children. These advisors position themselves as representing the ‘true’ expertise and civil society, as opposed to ‘ideologically-compromised’ academics and foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (Graff, Korolczuk 2022: 92–113).<sup>2</sup>

Anti-gender strategies designed to combat gender equality policies and civil society pose a challenge not only to the feminist movement but also to gender expertise-informed knowledge production and the ability to involve this expertise in the policy-making process (Engeli 2019). Graff and Korolczuk point out that anti-gender campaigns on the national and transnational level ‘are a continuation of struggles around politics of expertise and the knowledge-policy nexus’ (Graff, Korolczuk 2020: 695). Because anti-gender campaigns have become so widespread in the V4 countries in the past two decades, policies that are gender-sensitive and informed by gender expertise have usually only been adopted as a result of pressure from the outside through EU (and EU-funding) related requirements (Warat 2018). In this light, we would argue that the recent struggles over ‘gender ideology’ paired with traditional heteronormative values played an important role in the pre-pandemic years, creating specific dynamics that then influenced the character of the anti-pandemic policies and the omission of gender and intersectional-inclusive perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the ties between conservative advisors and political representation is not as strong in the Czech Republic, the recent rise of conservative tendencies in Parliament with the emergence of the SPOLU coalition in the 2021 elections was followed by investigative reporting in the media that revealed the involvement of advisors from the Czech ultraconservative organisation Alliance for the Family (Aliance pro rodinu) in the Ministry of Social Affairs (*Deník N* 2022a) and their involvement in anti-marriage-for-all efforts (*Heroine* 2022). ‘Anti-gender’ advisors were also identified at the Ministry of Finance, where they reportedly worked to block proposals relating to gender equality propositions related to gender equality (*Deník N* 2022b).

## Methodology

The article draws primarily on data collected during work on the international RESISTIRÉ research project, which analysed the impact of COVID-19 policies in the EU–27, as well as Serbia, Turkey, the UK, and Iceland. Through a network of national researchers and over the course of three research cycles (2021–2023) the project collected qualitative and quantitative data that were subsequently analysed using solution-driven and co-creative methods inspired by design thinking (Boyer 2011). The project's research design combined data from an extensive mapping of policy and societal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic ( $n = 575$ ) with an analysis of Rapid Assessment Surveys ( $n = 310$ ), and narrative interviews were also conducted with communication partners from vulnerable groups ( $n = 188$ ). These materials were used to analyse the economic, social, and environmental impacts of COVID-19 and related anti-pandemic measures and policies, with a focus on the lived experiences of marginalised groups.

The topics and issues identified in the project's pan-European policy analysis (Cibin et al. 2021, 2022), quantitative mapping (Stovell et al. 2021, 2022), and qualitative analysis (Axelsson et al. 2021, 2022) were then used in the next step of the research design, the 'Open Studios' part of the project, in which various relevant experts and stakeholders co-created a set of operational recommendations (aimed at mitigating inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic) and the launch of pilot actions designed to test the potential impact of proposed solutions (Strid, Schrodi, Cibin 2022). The research agenda focused on nine priority domains that overlap with the key gender inequality domains as defined in the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (EC 2020). These are gender-based violence, work and the labour market, the economy, gender pay, the pension gap, the gender care gap, decision-making, environmental justice, and human rights.

This article derives primarily from the section of data collected as part of the research agenda focusing on the mapping of policy and social responses to COVID-19 in the nine domains identified above in the selected countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. The original mapping of policies and societal responses took place from 15 May to 30 June 2021 and covered the period between March 2020 (the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region) and June 2021. The main objective of the policy and societal responses analysis was to provide an overview of the behavioural, economic, social, and environmental impact of the pandemic and to collect examples of actions developed by different stakeholders (CSOs, civil society, local governments, etc.) to alleviate or remediate the impact on specific target groups. The analysis focused not only on policy actions that were actually undertaken but also on what was omitted or missing from these policies, and on what gaps other actors

in (civil) society had to work to fill in to replace the lack of public action. Additionally, the analysis looked into who was involved in the process and who was excluded from the policy-making processes.

The research identified ten national or subnational policies and ten examples of (national or sub-national) civil society responses in each country, trying to cover as many policy domains as possible.<sup>3</sup> The policies were then analysed and reported on using a standardised grid that focused on several key aspects – namely, the overall description, time frame, content (including aspects that might limit accessibility, the presence of gender+ stereotypes or implicit assumptions, information on monitoring, evaluation, and gender impact assessment, potential revisions over time, and contested issues emerging in the public debate), target groups, and the actors involved, the level of inequalities, and intersectional visibility. The societal initiatives were analysed and reported on using a separate standardised grid that focused more on the actors involved, the means and resources, whether the civil society response was a reaction to an adopted policy that failed to address certain vulnerable groups or needs, and so forth. For each country, an overall analytical report was then produced based on the analysed policies and civil society initiatives, including an assessment of the extent to which the policies mitigated or aggravated gender+ inequalities, whether the process of policy development and adoption was influenced by emerging debates on gender+ inequalities and the COVID-19 pandemic, and so forth. The complete grid and report templates are part of the overall mapping report (Cibin et al. 2021). For the purpose of this article, the authors then carried out additional revisions of the identified policies and societal initiatives, looking for their evolution and revisions, and examining new measures and initiatives in the relevant domains, which was accompanied by further desk research and a literature review in August and September 2022.

Conceptually speaking, this article works with several key concepts that require further specification. When referring to gender inequalities or the gendered impact of institutions and policies, the article works with the concept of gender+ (Verloo 2007). The gender+ perspective conceptualises gender as always interacting with other inequality grounds and social categories (see also Lombardo et al. 2017),

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this analysis, public policy is defined ‘as a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives’ (Kilpatrick 2010: para 1). Hence the mapping could involve regulations, codes of practice, specific proposals, and initiatives introduced by the government or its executive arms together with specific laws issued to regulate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil society responses are defined as all forms of bottom-up actions promoted mainly by individuals and organisations that are part of civil society to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on gender+ inequalities and particular vulnerable groups. They may be implemented by informal groups, CSOs, advocacy groups, religious groups, and even by digital communities created around mutual aid platforms.

making it an intersectional approach (Walby et al. 2012; Hankivsky, Kapilashrami 2020). As such, gender inseparably intersects with age, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and migration/refugee status, since these are significant when analysing the impact of the anti-pandemic measures and policies (Lokot, Avakyan 2020). The analysis uses gender as a central reference point and an organising principle that allows other inequalities to be located (Risman 2004). Additionally, it combines the concept of inequality with that of vulnerability, which in the framework of social exclusion approaches (Sen 2000) is understood as focusing on the multidimensionality, intensity, and cumulation of risk factors, including the worsening of socio-economic conditions, gender gaps in various domains, and health risks. The methodological connection between inequality and vulnerability highlights the fact that gender+ inequalities are a precondition as well as an effect of exposure to risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia responding to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Analysis of the policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia showed three main policy patterns, similar in the three countries, that exacerbated gender+ inequalities and increased the vulnerability of already vulnerable groups. These policies proved themselves – to various extents depending on a particular country's context – to all be deeply rooted in the selected countries' political systems and produced imbalanced policy responses that exacerbated the already existing vulnerabilities of these groups. First, non-inclusive decision-making and the concentration of power in the government led to the absence of a gender+ perspective and the omission of attention to the pandemic's impact on the most vulnerable. Second, the neoliberal model of economically active citizens that predominates in all three countries further hindered the development of adequate policy responses for those who do not fit into the model. The prevailing heteronormative 'traditional family' narrative excluded a significant proportion of families, such as single mothers and LGBTQ+, from available measures and reinforced the care gap.

#### **Non-inclusive decision-making and the absence of a gender+ perspective**

The pandemic required swift reactions from governments across the globe and delimited standard policy-making procedures, including consultation processes, were subject to a 'crisis policy regime' (Guasti 2021). Despite the fact that the balanced inclusion of women and minority voices in decision-making plays a crucial role in inclusive and efficient crisis management (Davies, Bennett 2016), their perspectives



were not included in the anti-pandemic policymaking, as they were largely absent from expert advisory bodies. A similar trend was observed across the EU (EIGE 2020) and globally (EC 2021). Nevertheless, as the country cases we examined prove, how absent these perspectives were from official gender+ advisory bodies and how much the pandemic was used as a pretext for democratic backsliding varied between countries. While Czech democratic institutions proved to be resilient, in Slovakia certain disruptions occurred and in Hungary the already illiberal regime continued to flourish (Guasti 2021).

Similar trends arose in relation to gender+ mechanisms during the crisis. In the Czech Republic, the Working Group on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender Equality (hereinafter ‘the Working Group’) was created under the Government Council for Gender Equality, a permanent government advisory body in the area of equal opportunities for women and men. The Working Group issued two statements (2020, 2021) pertaining mainly to education, the precarious situation of families with children, and rising social tensions, and accompanied them with concrete recommendations on how to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups. Despite the fact that the recommendations addressed deepening gender+ inequalities, they were completely overlooked by the government. From a symbolic point of view, the expertise produced by the advisory bodies has a low status in political-knowledge dynamics also because they are partly made up of representatives of feminist organisations and gender experts, whose knowledge is perceived as ‘politicised’ and ‘biased’ (Cavaghan, Kulawik 2020).

In Slovakia, COVID-19 policies were often regulated by governmental decrees in the form of ministerial and Public Health Office regulations, which do not require consultations with CSOs. Despite the fact that by April 2020 several CSOs had already published a statement on the impact the pandemic was having on various gender+ vulnerable groups, including recommendations, they were ignored by the government. The only official advisory body dealing with vulnerabilities was the Government Pandemic Commission’s Expert Working Group for Marginalised Roma Communities, which was not established until November 2020, after the vastly criticised discriminatory practice of quarantining entire marginalised settlements in the case of just 10% positivity in the community.

In Hungary, during the first two years of the pandemic, the government relied solely on its own central resources and did not organise any cross-sectoral cooperation. The coordination of anti-pandemic work (between the government and civil society) was somehow more effective on the local level; the Budapest city council (led by the opposition) issued a civil decree that formalised regular cooperation with CSOs in several thematic domains such as housing, equal opportunities, and the environment (Kövér et al. 2021). Moreover, Victor Orbán’s government seized the

pandemic as an opportunity for the further erosion of democracy (Guasti 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, the Hungarian National Parliament enabled the Prime Minister to rule by decree. As stated in a report by Átlászó (2020), an investigative CSO, the government adopted 104 state-of emergency decrees by mid-May 2020. While some were directly linked to the pandemic, such as financial measures and economic protection schemes, others were not pandemic-related. Orbán's government, for example, issued decrees stripping local (often opposition-led) municipalities of some of their powers and funding (ibid.). This legislation was replaced in June 2020 by a medical state of emergency, the declaration of which could be done by the government alone without Parliament's approval (Vegh 2020, 2021).

The extremely far-reaching pandemic mandate was extensively used to further enhance the ruling party's crusade against the LGBTQ+ community and women's rights. In May 2020, the legal recognition of transgender and intersex citizens was banned, barring them from changing their legal gender. In December 2020, the Hungarian government amended the Constitution, so it newly contains a definition of a mother (as a woman) and a father (as a man) and further prevents adoptions by single parents and non-married couples. Additionally, one of the new amendments also concerns the rights of the child, stating that 'Hungary protects the right of children to self-identify according to their sex at birth', which is defined as 'a gift or a factor that cannot be changed' (Ninth Amendment and Explanatory Memorandum 2021: 7). The law was strongly condemned by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA), Transgender Europe, and Amnesty International, which state that these laws are discriminatory, homophobic, and transphobic and that they represent yet another attack on LGBTQ+ people by the Hungarian authorities under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic (Amnesty International 2020).

### **The neoliberal model of active citizens**

In the neoliberal model of economic citizenship, citizens' rights and duties are interconnected, and rights become merited on the basis of a citizen's activities and contribution. The citizen is thus constructed as an economically successful (often male) contributor to the state economy (Yuval-Davies 2008). This understanding of citizenship is significantly present in all three countries studied here (e.g. Ostertágová 2012; Kim 2020), but it is strongest in the case of the Hungarian 'work-based society', which was announced in 2010 by the conservative-nationalist government. The Hungarian 'work-based society' negates the values of the welfare state and a meritocratic principle is made conditional on the basis of a stable labour market position. In this same vein, protecting the most vulnerable citizens is only possible if they accept the conditions of the public works programme (Szikra 2018).

The neoliberal model of economic citizenship significantly guided the governments' economic responses to the pandemic in all three countries. Initially, the economic aid schemes targeted employers with the expectation that this would trickle down to employees. Nevertheless, these schemes were premised on the assumption of people having regular employment contracts and ignored other, more precarious working arrangements or self-employment. Adjustments were made only gradually and only in response to criticism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In Hungary, economic aid for the self-employed was not adopted until April 2021 and no remedies were introduced to cover precarious working contracts. Additionally, no direct measures were introduced during the COVID-19 crisis to help the unemployed, the inactive, or the poor.

The reluctant support given to people with precarious employment contracts and the self-employed had an imbalanced gender impact, as women with small children and single mothers in these countries often opt for these types of employment, which allow them greater care flexibility (Dudová 2021; Očenášová 2022). Moreover, precarious working contracts and the earnings that stem from work in the informal economy constitute an important source of income for other vulnerable groups such as migrants or the Roma. Without these earnings, these groups are at a greater risk of poverty, as even a small decrease in income can leave them ambushed by poverty (Hidas et al. 2022). Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of policy compensation mechanisms led to a deterioration of the economic situation of vulnerable groups. For example, in the Czech Republic, 43% of households headed by single mothers experienced a worsening of their economic situation in 2020 and 35% had lower income than the preceding year (Dudová 2021). According to the ERGO network survey (2020), 74% of Hungarian Roma households had difficulty paying for their electricity and 61% had difficulty paying their water bills. In Slovakia, water bills were a problem for 30% of surveyed Roma and 34% of them struggled to pay their rent.

### **Heteronormative family discourse**

Heteronormative family discourse is a pervasive feature of all three countries, and in Slovakia and Hungary it has even been codified in the constitution. There have been attempts to do the same in the Czech Republic (Vodrážka, Moláček 2022). The heteronormativity of family discourse has been further reinforced by growing anti-gender campaigns in the region, which seek to replace individual rights with family values and construct the family as a new political entity (Korolcsuk, Graff 2018). The influence of the anti-gender campaigns is not evenly distributed across the three countries, as it has gained greater traction in the official political arena in Hungary and Slovakia and is not as strong in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, heteronormative

family discourse has informed family policies for decades. Given that policy responses to the pandemic were primarily built on the existent system, the heteronormative bias was reproduced in the measures designed to mitigate the impact of closing schools and childcare facilities.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia adopted pre-existing care leave policies and prolonged their duration to apply throughout the period of school and childcare facility closures. Care leave, however, was designed to cover a temporary absence from work, as it reduces the earnings of the person on care leave. When people began taking long-term care leave, this significantly impacted household income, particularly if the caregiver was the sole contributor to the household economy. Care leave policies are apparently designed according to the nuclear family model of two parents and children. While both parents are expected to be economically active, the burden of care lies mostly on mothers, while fathers are the primary breadwinners. This heteronormative bias ignored LGBT+ families and had a significant impact on single mothers who do not have a second household income to rely on. The imbalance was partially remedied in the Czech Republic, where the care leave allowance was increased during lockdown periods, but often with some delay and retroactively and with a changing amount. The parents thus could not make informed decisions (Dudová 2021). From the perspective of the gender division of care and unpaid labour in households, the Czech anti-pandemic measures are seen as having further reinforced the precarious position of women, worsening their position in the labour market, exacerbating their economic situation, and increasing their dependency on the social support system (Dudová, Křížková 2022; Hašková et al. 2022). In Slovakia, the care leave allowance was increased only for a period of one month in April 2021, and although the allowance's unequal effect on single mothers was highlighted in policy debates at the beginning of the pandemic the government dismissed this information (Tódová 2022). Conversely, Hungary did not introduce any measures to mitigate the effects of closing schools and childcare facilities, and parents had to rely entirely on what arrangements they could make themselves with their employers, such as taking non-paid leave or holiday time – a reality consistent with the familialist approach that seeks to replace social welfare safety net with family care (Fodor et al. 2021).

Additionally, none of the governments paid appropriate attention to intimate partner violence, despite the fact that this issue was raised during the pandemic (Očenášová 2022; Nyklová, Moree, Maufras Černožorská 2022; Loren 2022). The pandemic thus only further highlighted and reinforced issues present in the pre-pandemic IPV response system, such as the inconsistency of the support system for survivors, the insufficient capacity of CSOs working in the field, and the lack of shelter housing. In May 2020, the Hungarian Parliament moreover refused to ratify

the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and instead backed a government declaration that the instrument promotes ‘destructive gender ideologies’ and ‘illegal migration’. While the substance of the Istanbul Convention was not contested, the government claimed that all the legal guarantees necessary to protect women from domestic violence already exist in Hungarian law and the government can adopt satisfactory measures without the convention, even though it was hesitant to do so during the pandemic (Kováts 2022).

## Conclusion

The absence of gender+ or intersectionality informed policies during the COVID-19 pandemic deepened pre-existing inequalities (in Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic). This absence did not emerge through the crisis as it was already embedded in these countries’ policy and political context, and most notably in the neoliberal model of active citizenship they advocate, their heteronormative family discourse, and their reluctance to practise inclusive decision-making. Although there were differences between countries in terms of how these tendencies manifested themselves in pandemic policies and on what level of government, they nevertheless had a significant influence on governmental actions. While in the Czech Republic pandemic measures were based on a gender-neutral approach and were amenable to certain corrections in response to external criticism, in Hungary the government used the pandemic to strengthen its position and perpetuate familialism and anti-gender discourse. Slovakia to a certain extent combined the two.

Gender expertise was left out of pandemic policy-making in all three countries. The source of the legitimacy of gender expertise in the institutional dynamic is largely external (the EU) and built on the work and knowledge of CSOs engaged in women’s rights and gender equality, which are often described as ‘political’ in the anti-gender narrative promulgated in Hungary and Slovakia in particular. In the Czech Republic, gender is perceived as an obsolete issue, an additional topic that can be put aside during a crisis, rather than an indispensable part of effective and inclusive crisis management. As a result, a gender-sensitive perspective has only a limited capacity to penetrate the area of policy-making in non-crisis times, let only in the midst of a global pandemic (a similar attitude towards a gender-sensitive perspective has also been observed during the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the related refugee crisis).

Additionally, aid and policies in all three countries were underpinned throughout the pandemic by the neoliberal model of active citizenship, as the focus was on heteronormative, white, and economically active citizens, while support for

those outside this category was neglected. Furthermore, the pandemic measures reproduced the dominant heteronormative discourse, which is based on the idea of a 'traditional, nuclear, two-parent family and leaves out single parents and LGBTQ+ couples, whereby the hegemony of this narrative is strengthened. Particularly in the case of Hungary and Slovakia, the pandemic reinforced the familialism narrative that views traditional families as the foundation of the nation as opposed to individual entitlement in the neoliberal order (Kemper 2016), as during the pandemic families proved (or were rather forced) to be an essential societal unit and source of resilience. Consistent with this then is the neglect of survivors or of intimate partner violence and single mothers during the pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic highlighted the existence of a gender care gap, which could lead to possible contention over the social and family policies currently in place. Governments may need to ramp up their efforts to re-naturalise heteronormative families and traditional gender roles in order to prevent disruptions (Linnamäki 2021). The attacks on LGBTQ+ rights and the increased traction of other anti-gender mobilisation discourses in Hungary and Slovakia are utilised to this end, while 'cultural wars' serve to divert political debates away from social problems caused by the handling of the crisis.

Even though a gender-sensitive perspective was present in the civil society debate and among non-legislative actors, the absence of any approach informed by gender expertise in the actual anti-pandemic measures and policies is a clear testament to the prevailing institutional setting and the presence of anti-gender tendencies in the three countries – even though these tendencies are not always as explicitly visible in the Czech Republic as they are in Hungary and Slovakia. The seemingly 'gender-neutral' decision-making process and the (diminishing) perception of knowledge production informed by gender expertise are important aspects of the institutional dynamic. In closing, while policies designed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were presented as 'gender neutral', the dynamic these measures created often deepened existing inequalities and heightened the already precarious position of those groups who do not fit into the traditional heteronormative and neoliberal framework. These narratives, often paired with strong anti-gender campaigns, were translated into the anti-pandemic policy-knowledge nexus and were in some cases used instrumentally to preserve the status quo. The rights and needs of groups positioned on the margin, due to sexual orientation, socio-economic status, precarious working conditions, or ethnicity, had been omitted or attacked before the pandemic, but they continued to be ignored and attacked during the COVID-19 crisis, despite the fact that these groups were often the ones most affected by the pandemic.

## Appendix 1: Analysed national policy responses – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia

Czech Republic	CZ01	Extraordinary Immediate Cash Assistance COVID-19 [Mimořádná okamžitá pomoc MOP covid-19]
Czech Republic	CZ02	The establishment of groups/facilities for children aged 3-10 of parents working in the Integrated Rescue System [Zřízení skupin pro děti 3-10 let rodičů pracujících v IZS]
Czech Republic	CZ03	Resolution on an increase of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports' budget to secure financial resources in the field of regional education for the acquisition of technical equipment for primary schools [Usnesení o navýšení rozpočtu MŠMT na zajištění finančních prostředků v oblasti regionálního školství na pořízení technického vybavení základních škol]
Czech Republic	CZ04	Accommodation for homeless people during the pandemic in selected Prague hotels and hostels [Zajištění ubytování pro lidi bez domova v pražských hotelech a hostelech během pandemie]
Czech Republic	CZ05	Policy limiting the presence of the father or other persons during childbirth in a health-care facility during the pandemic [Opatření omezující přítomnost otce a/nebo třetí osoby při porodu ve zdravotnickém zařízení během platnosti krizových opatření v souvislosti s covid-19]
Czech Rep	CZ06	Care Allowance [Ošetřovné]
Czech Rep	CZ07	Care Allowance for the Self-Employed [Ošetřovné pro OSVČ]
Czech Rep	CZ08	Measures supporting mental health for the second wave of the pandemic [Opatření v oblasti péče o duševní zdraví pro druhou vlnu epidemie COVID 19]
Czech Rep	CZ09	Policies targeting non-EU migrants in the Czech labour market during the pandemic
Czech Rep	CZ10	Isolation bonus [Izolačka]
Hungary	HU01	Financial stability of families during the state of emergency (567/2020. (XII. 9.) Korm. rendelet a családok anyagi biztonságának erősítése érdekében szükséges, a veszélyhelyzettel összefüggő egyes rendelkezésekről)
Hungary	HU02	Amendment to the Fundamental Law that introduces into the law rules such as 'a mother if female, a father is male' and the right of children to an identity that is in line with their sex by birth. (2020. évi XXX. törvény egyes közigazgatási tárgyú törvények módosításáról, valamint ingyenes vagyonjuttatásról)

Hungary	HU03	Amendment to the Fundamental Law that contains rules such as ‘the mother is female, the father is male’ and that children have a right to an identity in line with their sex by birth
Hungary	HU04	Decree on the professional duties and conditions of operation of child welfare and child protection institutions and persons providing personal care, on the professional and examination requirements for the training of surrogate parents, foster parents, family day-care operators, and on pre-adoption counselling and preparatory courses (2020. évi CLXV. törvény. Az egyes igazságügyi tárgyú törvények módosításáról)
Hungary	HU05	The extension of eligibility for certain health insurance and family benefits granted with regard to caring for and raising children (Government Decree 128/2021 (13 March))
Hungary	HU06	Measures to help families affected by digital education during emergencies (Government Decree 501/2020)
Hungary	HU07	Measures affecting the rights of women in labour
Hungary	HU08	Budapest Capital 6th District Terézváros Municipality Decree of its Board of Representatives on social benefits related to pandemic preparedness
Hungary	HU09	Payment moratorium (several decrees)
Hungary	HU10	Government Decree on certain economic protection measures during an emergency
Slovakia	SK01	First aid (plus) schemes (financial compensation for employers and self-employed)
Slovakia	SK02	Support of employment sustainability in kindergartens
Slovakia	SK03	Pandemic care leave
Slovakia	SK04	Grants for service providers to domestic violence victims
Slovakia	SK05	Plan to decrease the risk of COVID-19 spread among homeless persons and in acceptance of persons to selected public or private social services for dependants and centres for children and family
Slovakia	SK06	Project Korona te merel (National project to prevent spread of COVID-19 in marginalised Roma settlements)
Slovakia	SK07	Guidelines for accompanying parties, patients’ visits, and visits of a priest for spiritual services for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic



Slovakia	SK08	Governmental order no. 102/2020 on some measures in the area of social affairs, family, and employment services in the emergency situation and state of emergency in relation to COVID-19
Slovakia	SK09	New rules for teleworking (amendment of the Labour Code)
Slovakia	SK10	SOS subsidy for people without any other income

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