

# CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN PRECARIOUSNESS: LABOUR MARKET POLICY, GENDERED PATHWAYS AND COVID-19 CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

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*“Work is intimately related to other social, economic, and political issues, and so the growth of precarious work and insecurity has wide spread effects on both work-related and non-work phenomena” (Kalleberg, 2009:8).*

*The paper employs a theoretically grounded analysis on precarious employment interrelated with gender-based inequalities and labour market changes in the recent COVID-19 outbreak. The concept of precariousness involves a complex understanding of the insecurity of continuous employment on both institutional and individual level. While the post-Fordist society marked radical changes in the labour market, recent neoliberal policies created new vulnerable groups that experience insecurity, the blocking of professional opportunities and insufficient income over time. This article builds on the idea that the 'stable' and 'flexible' labour market normalized the work insecurity in the context of the economic crises and led to precariousness. Work-related insecurity occurs in a gender-segregated labour market. For the exploration of ongoing processes of the precarization phenomenon, this article focuses on the connection between multidimensional concepts covering the economic, social and psychological consequences of labour insecurity. First, the paper aims to discuss a theory-based conceptualisation of precariousness understood as a multidimensional phenomenon in research literature. Second, the paper includes secondary empirical data on precarious employment, absence from work and COVID impact on gender-segregated labour market at the EU level from Eurostat (2020), EIGE (2020), ILO (2020) and Eurofound (2021). Finally, the results problematise existing approaches on precarious employment and gender inequalities in the context of labour market changes of the COVID-19 crisis.*

**Keywords:** precariousness; COVID-19 outbreak; gender roles; labour market; absence of work.

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## INTRODUCTION

The context of the recent COVID-19 outbreak involved massive consequences on working life as we know it. Some of them accelerated the uncertainty about the future of work, and highlighted existing structural problems in many hard-hit industries. The COVID-19 crisis increased precarious mini-jobs as a countermeasure for the labour market. For the vulnerable categories of workers directly affected by unemployment or losing jobs, the precarious jobs and ‘gig work’ become new sources of income (Badoi 2020).

In the academic discourse, the construct of precariousness is well documented by the post-Fordist labour theories (Standing 2011; Vallas 2015; Kalleberg 2009; 2011). However, the association with radical neoliberal changes of labour regularities marked the research on precariousness and labour market, in the context of the past economic crisis of 2008 (Harvey 2005; Kalleberg 2009; Trif 2013; Ban 2016). By theorizing precariousness at the crossroad of interdisciplinary research on labour studies, this paper argues that precarious employment creates new social classes, mainly consisting of various groups under threat of being marginalized or subjugated. In this regard, additional definitions of precariousness under new forms of material deprivation are considered in the research literature: massively decreased tenure, increased involuntary job loss, long-term unemployment and insecurity about the future of work (Standing 2011; Olshoorn 2013). The theoretical framework on the concept of precariousness emphasises the existence of new factors marked by the labour market changes, mainly based on low-paid flexible work and low-quality jobs (Castel 1996; della Porta 2015; Kalleberg 2011). Moreover, the uncertainty regarding the future of the working life was associated with mechanisms that increase the risk of long-term poverty, and lead to precarious employment (Vallas 2015).

This article builds on the idea that precariousness is a multidimensional phenomenon that challenges changes in the labour market. By underlying the interconnection of work insecurity and quality of employment dimensions in the research of precariousness (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989; Kalleberg 2011; Eurofound 2021; Eurostat 2020), this paper employs the existing literature for constructing a theory-set based on theoretical dimensions developed first by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), and lately consolidated by Standing (2011); Kalleberg (2011); Ambles and Vives (2006; 2015) for the case of Spain and Vandenbrande *et al.* (2013), and Van Arden and Vanrouelen (2018) for the vulnerable workers in Belgium. The scope of the paper is to develop sociological knowledge on the construct of precariousness as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in Europe. Finally, the purpose will be to provide a preliminary analysis on labour market changes accompanied by new labour risk of precarious employment, in the context of COVID-19, interconnected with gender and care work.

The current paper consists of three parts. First, the paper looks at the academic discourse on precarious employment in Europe, by looking through the lens of labour theories in the post-Fordist context. While the new economic risks mediated by the past economic crisis of 2008 and the recent COVID-19 pandemic are considered for the analysis, in the first section, the paper assumes a theoretically grounded approach on empirical dimensions, and scales of precarious employment measurement in Europe. Second, the paper explores a brief case study on the gendered pathways of precariousness that overlap working life with family life in the recent context of COVID-19 consequences on the labour market. So far, the focus on precarious employment measurement related to gender and care work was sporadically analysed in academic research on past economic crisis impact (Vieira *et al.* 2020; Wenham *et al.* 2020). In this regard, recent literature indicates that the pandemic crisis accelerated the precarious employment among women, and exposed existing gender roles more than the past economic crisis of 2008. New social factors contribute to the exposure of women, regardless of their flexible nature of employment, and additional gender roles assumed in unpaid and care activities (EIGE 2021; Cook and Grimshaw 2021).

The research methodology includes descriptive analysis on secondary empirical data at the EU comparative level from Eurostat (2020), EIGE (2020), ILO (2020) and Eurofound (2021) on the following indicators: absence of work during the first quarter of COVID-19 crisis, gendered impact on labour market during the first period of COVID-19, and the quality of employment in 2020, using the precarious employment indicator. Finally, the article problematizes the existing theoretical framework on precarious employment, with various stages of the labour market changes that marked the gendered employment pathways in the COVID-crisis. This paper is part of an ongoing research. The wider focus of this ongoing study is to follow alternative strategies of neoliberal flexible employment, and new economic vulnerabilities associated with changes and continuities of precarious work along with gendered lens on the labour market, in the context of COVID-19.

### **PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND LABOUR MARKET CHANGES: ACADEMIC DEFINITIONS**

Precariousness is a worldwide phenomenon. The precariousness is multidimensional because of its consequences connected with the insecure and vulnerable situations: low income, social inequalities, vulnerabilities against abusive dismissals and lack of social protection. Precariousness was rather studied at the European level, with a specific focus after 1989 when workers become vulnerable due to labour mobility and flexibility policy changes within the EU labour market. Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) are explaining in detail the consequences of precarious work in Europe in one of the first research studies on the topic of precariousness.

Following the history of labour studies, since 1970, the rising of precariousness has been a major cause of insecurity among the European population. Using '*precarité*', Bourdieu (1964) considered precariousness for referring to threatening insecurity caused by uncertain employment status and risk of poverty. For Castel (1996), the precarization of work is a new societal issue related to the direct consequences of the technological changes of modern capitalism. The insecurity of work has significant repercussions for many people across different social classes. Also, these consequences are relating to one's working conditions, but also to additional effects on work – life balance and poor life strategies for ensuring a decent life. At the economic level, the precarization effect contributed to economic growth, by widening inequality and social destabilisation of any work considered stable and secure in contemporary society (Castel 1996, 410). The complexity of precarious work was associated with temporary and fixed-term contracts, along with the rise in financial inequality and poor work – life balance (Eurofound 2021). Working in precarity is a direct consequence of financial resilience that overlaps with long-term job insecurity and poor life satisfaction of people (Kalleberg 2009).

Precarious employment is closely related to the well-being of workers and the difficulty to make ends meet. Standing (2011) defined precariousness as a social category where the following dimensions are absent: employment opportunities, skills production, collective representation, a voice within the institution and quality jobs. Precariousness refers to the quality of employment that is below a decent standard (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989; Burgess and Campbell 1998).

The labour market changes are linked to the theory of polarization (Kalleberg 2009). The labour market polarization contributes to the creation of standard well-paid contracts and 'good' jobs. In addition, for adapting to continuous changes in the labour market, the bad 'bullshit' jobs become precarious and insecure, with poor life prospects (Graeber 2018). Precariousness is a result of the increased demand for labour flexibility in Europe, with massive changes in the social dialogue negotiations and Labour Law at the EU level, mostly after the economic Recession in 2008 (Valls 2012; 2015). The labour market changes after the economic crisis in 2008 normalised insecurity, and led to the creation of new issues linked to the time spent in unpaid activities and 'unproductive' work. Recent research on COVID-19 showed that time consumed outside paid employment became a relevant gendered issue (Zamarro *et al.* 2020).

The next section of the paper will draw theory-based indicators that were used for measuring precarious employment in Europe. This theoretical framework aims to move towards theoretical multidimensional constructs for understanding how precarious employment is studied at EU level. First, the constructs will imply characteristics of precariousness that represents the level of job insecurity, overlapping with indicators of income and contract dimension. Second, the article

will be focused on three additional indicators of precarious work that were previously developed in the literature of precariousness.

### **INVESTIGATING PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT FROM 1989 TO PRESENT: EMPIRICAL SCALES AND DIMENSIONS**

Following the literature review presented above, the focus is on precarious employment construction that links the risk of labour insecurity with various non-tested dimensions that take the shape of a risky and uncertain quality of life. The purpose of this inventory of scales and dimensions of precariousness is to expose potential risks and consequences of precariousness in both the social and working life of workers. Precariousness as a multidimensional phenomenon is analysed in theoretical models and conceptualisations of the policy reports of the European Commission (from 2005), Eurofound policy brief reports on the vulnerable workers (2010, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020), but also in non-tested theoretical models developed by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), Vosko (2006), Quinlan (2001) and Kalleberg (2009; 2011).

A first case study on the multiple characters of precarious work was developed in 1989 by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989, 3). The model contains four dimensions for studying precarious work: temporal dimension – the degrees of safety over the continuity of employment; organisational dimension – individual and collective control over work: working conditions control over working-time, shifts and schedules, work intensity; economic dimension – sufficient pay and salary progression. social dimension – collective protection against unfair dismissal, discrimination, and unacceptable working practices. The model of Rodgers and Rodgers defines precariousness through the existence of one or more multi-disciplinary dimensions: (1) employment instability – the uncertainty regarding the continuity of the work; (2) lack of individual or collective control over work conditions, remuneration, work schedule, etc.; (3) insufficient protection against abuses at work (practices of discriminations, abusive dismissals, etc.), as well as an insufficient level of social protection (access to retirement pension, health services, redundancy allowance, etc.); (4) uncertainty regarding work remuneration – income that is insufficient and irregular. Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), completed by Kalleberg critics on precarious work in the United States (2009), argues precariousness as a situation in which employment does not provide the security of a minimum standard of decent living.

In the context of the past economic crisis in 2008, the concept of precariousness goes beyond the employment situation described by Rodgers and Rodgers, for being described as a state of threatening insecurity or risk (Benach et al. 2015; Bosmans, Van Aerden and Vanroelen 2016). However, the following additional factors of insecurity were calculated as a score of precarious work: security at work, career opportunities and prospects, fair treatments, work – life

balance, work dependence and subordination, equality and human rights, social protection & health insurance (Bosmans, Van Aerden and Vanroelen 2016). Last, precarious work as insecurity was analysed with two of the dimensions described below: employment instability and insufficient work remuneration. Both dimensions are considered the pillars for understanding precariousness (Olsthoorn 2013). In this regard, Rodgers and Rodgers formulated two questions for understanding precariousness: (1) *“Is the employee able to secure a sufficient income with which to support a decent standard of living?”*; (2) *“Is it likely that the employee’s job will end in the near future?”* (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989; Olsthoorn 2013, 3–4).

Table no. 1

**Evidence-based multidimensional models of precariousness: scales and indicators**

<b>Rodgers and Rodgers (1989)</b> <b>Quinlan (2001)</b> <b>Vosko, (2006)</b> <b>Kalleberg (2009; 2011)</b> <b>Standing (2011)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Employment instability</li> <li>2. Lack of individual or collective control over work conditions</li> <li>3. Insufficient protection against abuses at work</li> <li>4. Uncertainty regarding work remuneration – insufficient remuneration</li> </ol>	The theoretical model of work insecurity as a predictor of precariousness (non-tested)
<b>Amable 2006;</b> <b>Vives et. al, 2006; 2015</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Instability (contract duration),</li> <li>2. Disempowerment (individual-level bargaining over wages working hours)</li> <li>3. Low wages</li> <li>4. Rights (entitlement to sick leave, weekly rest, vacation)</li> <li>5. Vulnerability (unfair or abusive treatment)</li> <li>6. The capacity to exercise rights</li> </ol>	Employment precariousness scale for Spain (EWCS)
<b>Bosmans, Van Aerden and Vanroelen (2016; 2018)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Contract dimension,</li> <li>2. Income dimension</li> <li>3. Flexible working time</li> <li>4. Involuntary part-time employment</li> <li>5. Training dimension,</li> <li>6. Formal employment relations</li> </ol>	Precariousness score for the Belgium case (EWCS)
<b>EUROSTAT 2020b</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Safety and ethics of employment</li> <li>2. Income and benefits from employment</li> <li>3. Working time and work-life balance</li> <li>4. Security of employment and social protection</li> <li>5. Social dialogue</li> <li>6. Skills development and training</li> <li>7. Employment-related relationships and work motivation</li> </ol>	UNECE indicators on the quality of employment in the EU

*Table no. 1* presents a brief inventory of precarious work dimensions from 1989 to the present. Precarious employment is conceptualized as a combined model of insecure work, along with a very low or insufficient income for a decent life. The conceptualization is inspired by a theory – set of Rodgers and Rodgers (1989); Quinlan (2001); Vosko, (2006); Kalleberg (2009; 2011). Bosmans, Van Aerden and Vanroelen (2016) construct a precariousness score for the Belgium case. They used indicators from the European Working Conditions Survey from 2005, 2010 and 2015. Vanroelen *et al.* (2013) created a precariousness score of a set of items: (1) temporary contract, (2) low earnings, (3) limited training opportunities, (4) intensive working times, (5) flexible working time, (6) information about health and safety, (7) limited voice and (8) limited say (Vanroelen *et al.* 2018: 4). They distinguished seven dimensions with equal weight in the precariousness scale: (1) contract dimension, (2) income dimension, (3) flexible working time, (4) involuntary part-time employment, (5) training dimension, (6) formal employment relations, and (7) informal employment relations.

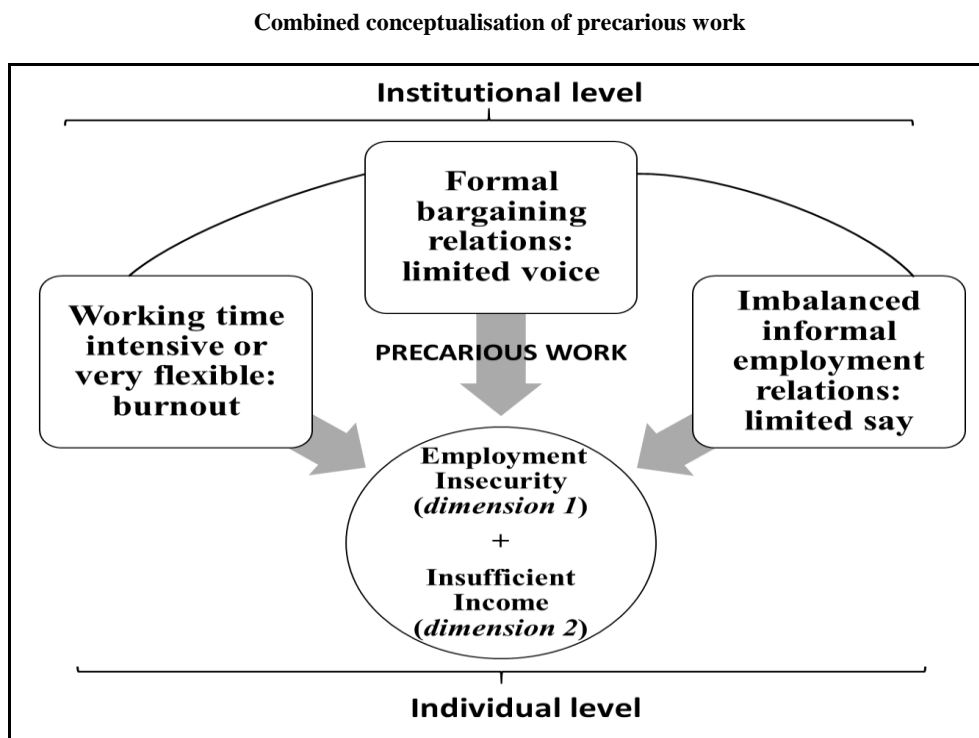
The Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES) is a theory-based model used in Spain for the sociological study of working conditions of salaried workers. Employment precariousness scale (EPRES 2010; Amable 2006; Vives *et al.* 2011; 2015) acknowledges the unequal power relations underlying flexible employment situations with six dimensions: (1) instability (contract duration), (2) disempowerment (individual-level bargaining over wages, working hours), (3) low wages (monthly salary, capacity to cover regular/unexpected expenses), (4) rights (entitlement to sick leave, weekly rest, vacation), (5) vulnerability (defencelessness to unfair or abusive treatment), and (6) the capacity to exercise rights (Vanroelen *et al.* 2018). Based initially on the ‘employment precariousness construct’ (Vives 2006; 2015; Amable 2006), the EPRES was developed and empirically tested on a sample of Spanish employees to outcome measures of worker’s health and well-being (Vives *et al.* 2011; Ferreira 2016, Vanroelen *et al.* 2018). Moreover, the measurement of quality of employment in Eurostat (2020b) is divided into seven dimensions: 1. Safety and ethics of employment, 2. Income and benefits from employment, 3. Working time and work – life balance, 4. Security of employment and social protection, 5. Social dialogue, 6. Skills development and training, 7. Employment-related relationships and work motivation.

Further in the paper, we will discuss Eurostat data on precarious employment at the European level. According to empirical evidence, precarious employment affects various categories of employees, both with standard and flexible contracts, and the context of COVID-19 increased the risk of precarious work.

A growing literature on the multi-character of the precarious work reproduced models of measurement and conceptualisation for the vulnerable employees. This paper discusses a multidimensional model integration of precarious employment, combined with several dimensions. The conceptualization of precarious employment is based on theory-set dimensions of Rodgers and

Rodgers (1989), and inspired lately by Standing (2011) and Kalleberg (2011), and on the scaling proposal tested using EWCS indicators by Ambles and Vives (2006), and Bosmans, Van Aerden and Vanroelen (2016). The present model reproduces definitions of precariousness as a distinction between precariousness as insecurity (dimension 1) and precariousness as insufficient income to cover subsistence costs (dimension 2). First, the model implies characteristics of precariousness that represent the level of job insecurity – income and contract dimensions. Second, three dimensions are linked to precarious work as the principal threat of job insecurity.

Figure 1



Source: Author's model interpretation after non-tested theoretical dimensions of precarious work (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989; Quinlan 2001; Vosko 2006; Kalleberg 2009; 2011; Standing 2011).

The conceptual model seeks to analyse the combined dimensions and scales in a single model of precariousness – insufficient income and employment insecurity (dimension 1 and 2), with potential effects and risks for work continuity: working unsocial hours, very intensive or very flexible, with schedule unpredictability and supplementary unpaid working hours, associated with mental health issues and burnout experiences (dimension 3); the lack of social security and



collective representation – enforcement gaps with the limited voice in the institution (dimension 4) (Eurofound, 2013); Informal and power relations at workplace, the possibility to choose the working tasks and to participate in the decision making processes – limited say (dimension 5). The precarious employment is present when the first two dimensions meet the last three dimensions of the model.

First, dimension 1 of employment insecurity is constructed using the type of contract indicator (Barbier 2004; Quinlan *et al.* 2001; Vosko 2006; Olstroom 2013). Regardless of the theoretical interpretation, the type of contract indicator shares fundamentals of job insecurity due to lack of continuity and long-term stability. The employment insecurity dimension is related to the possibility that the employee's job will end in the near future (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989). Although interpretations of labour legislation differ in defining the contract situations, many scholars interpreted the decline of 'typical – standard' as a sign of rising precariousness in Europe (ILO 2020).

Secondly, dimension 2 defines the insufficient income for covering subsistence costs of living. Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) ask the following reflexive question: 'Is the employee able to secure a sufficient income with which to support a decent standard of living?'. In this regard, we argue that the insufficient income dimension is relevant by referring to the low level of wages and risk of poverty concerning decent working conditions. The insufficient income dimension is considered precarious usually by assessing the lowest quartile of income for the main paid job (EWCS 2013; Bosmans, Van Aerden and Vanroelen 2016; 2018). EWCS (2013; 2015) includes net monthly earnings from the main job. The workers' wages indicator is constructed through a scale including – net monthly earnings – from the main paid job and the over-time incomes and compensations, along with supplementary pay in the main job (bonus, performance, extra-paid projects, etc.)

The intensive and very flexible working time (dimension 3) is related to the organisational dimension of Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), which was previously analysed as a marker of the employment relations, since the post-Fordist period in Europe (Clarke *et al.* 2007; Vanrouelen *et al.* 2018; Vandenbrande *et al.* 2013). The working time dimension reflects the auto-declared number of hours worked in the main paid job, and the number of days per week worked in the main job. A large proportion of the precarious contracts are assumed to be intensive and very intensive, because of the working hours that reflect imbalanced work – life, burnout and cognitive experiences (Eurofound 2013). This dimension is connected to the 'schedule unpredictability' and the lack of control over the working schedule. Moreover, precarious working conditions are those with more than 40 hours per week, with an unusual, short-noticed and very flexible schedule (nights, weekends) that follows burnout experiences and mental health issues.

Dimension 4 indicates the workplace formal bargaining relations and limited voice in the institution. In the research literature of the conceptualisation, precarious employment involves the lack of individual labour rights and work organisation. This dimension was particularly analysed for the social protection rights and social security issues, along with collective rights – trade union representation or committee representing employees. The limited voice in the institutions means high risks of insecurity regarding work continuity, fear of contract ending, lack of social protection due to unemployment, annual or maternity leaves.

The imbalanced relations with limited say (dimension 5) refers to the power relations at work. By indicating hierarchical and very bureaucratic relations between the employee and the superior, precarious working conditions are those where the employees are not informed about their employment status and the possibilities for work continuity. Limited say in the institution is associated with a ‘power play’ and informal relations. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities for communication with superiors and colleagues, and for transparent participation in working tasks is considered precarious. The limited say dimension construction is relevant for the quality of employment measurement, along with the consultation and negotiation of tasks, and transparent decision process of work organisation. Based on the theoretical explanations on precariousness, this paper will frame analysis on new risks of precariousness in the context of COVID-19, with additional dimensions of gender and care work

### **GENDERED PATHWAYS OF PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT IN RECENT COVID OUTBREAK**

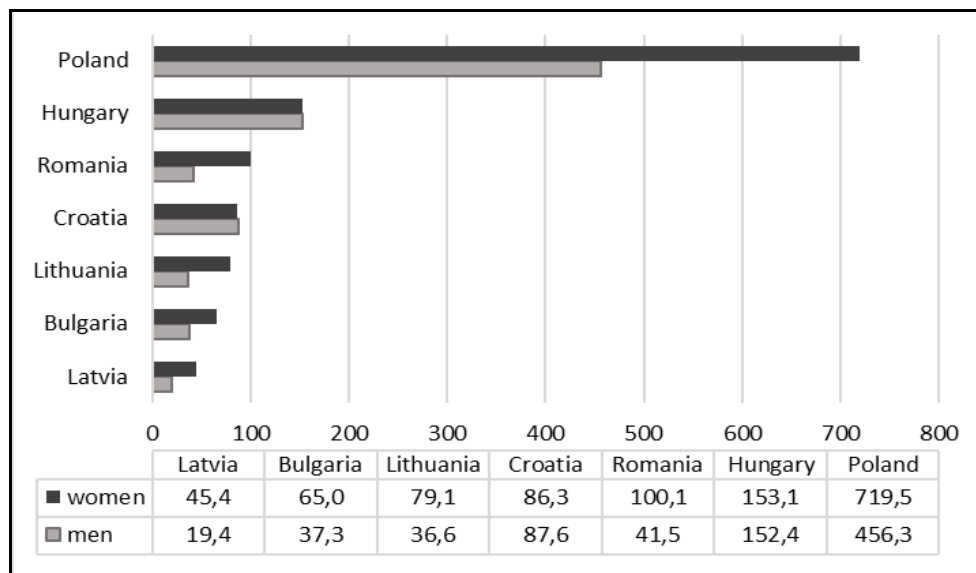
The recent crisis of COVID-19 produced massive economic consequences on the personal lives of people. Due to early responses to COVID-19, many European Union countries were under strict lockdown measures in spring 2020 and 2021. Some of the governmental measures caused uncertainty for the future of work, and led to gender-based economic insecurity (ILO 2020; EIGE 2021). The pandemic highlighted the relevance of both paid and unpaid work (Eurofound 2021). Through social distancing measures – the closure of schools, kindergartens and nurseries, as well as essential care services – the pandemic intensified the burden on women and men working from home, by driving to economic resilience and additional pressure for care-related activities (Voicu and Badoi 2020). Therefore, couples and families with children have been under the influence of new sets of pressures regarding the separation of the paid activities from the intimacy of family life.

Because of the pandemic, the opportunities for active participation in employment has been restricted in both cases of men and women working in hard-hit industries, but the women were the most exposed to precariousness risks

(Power 2020; Minello *et al.* 2021). Some economic sectors were severely affected by pandemic emergency measures, being shut down or temporarily suspended, while some people started to work from home (EIGE 2021). The number of people absent from their jobs reflects particular labour market changes. While European countries adopted strict measures for temporarily suspending the work, unemployment leave or working from home for parents with children, men and women were not equally absent from work. According to Eurostat (2020a), for the majority of the European countries, the share of absence was higher among women than among men. The absence from work was motivated by reasons of illness, temporary lay-off, holidays and others motives. Considering the case of Central and Eastern European countries, the absence from work was 14.2% for women compared with 9.8% of men (Lithuania, 17.1% of women compared to 6.5% of men; Hungary, 13.2% of women compared to 5.5% of men; Poland, 12.1% of women and 5.1% of men; Latvia, 12% of women and 5% of men) (Eurostat, Q1 2020a). While the absence due to unplanned illnesses and lay-offs can disturb the working life of people and led to temporary precariousness, the ‘other motives’ are associated with absences due to personal or family responsibilities: “On average, for the four consecutive quarters of 2020, the shares of women having this reason for being absent from work were 2.5 p.p. higher than for men” (Eurostat 2020a).

Figure 2

Absence from work in Eastern and Central European countries (Q1, 2020, in thousand)



Source: Eurostat, 2020a Q1, online code [lfsi\_abs\_q] (i.e. neither seasonally adjusted nor calendar adjusted data).

The outbreak of COVID-19 affected women's employment, in either case of losing the job, or quitting because of the pandemic. The close link between employment and work – life balance appears in the literature as a turning point for women to more traditional gender roles division at home (Buckingham *et al.* 2020; Cook and Grimshaw 2020; Zamarro 2020).

The women are more likely to work in precarious and lower-paid jobs in the hard-hit industries economically affected by the pandemic, such as wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, food services, accommodation service – hotels, cleaning or cooking and real estate (see *Table no. 2*) (ILO 2020). Furthermore, young women and working mothers were more affected than men by job insecurity, income inconstancy and gender segregation in the labour market (Wenham *et al.* 2020). The precarious employment among women working in essential jobs put them in a vulnerable position of economic instability and direct exposure to COVID-19. In the essential work of the retail trade service, about 82% of front cashiers and 64.6% of shop sales employees are represented by women in the EU (ILO 2020). By assessing the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the economic sectors, ILO (2020) estimates that about 54.1% of women were working in the industry of accommodation and food services (see *Table no. 2*).

*Table no. 2*

**Workers at risk during pandemic: Sectoral perspective (global estimates for 2020 before COVID-19)**

Economic sector	Share in global employment (%)	Share of women (%)
Accommodation and food services	0,71	54,1
Real estate; business and administrative activities	0,97	38,2
Manufacturing	0,95	38,7
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	0,86	43,6
Human health and social work activities	4,1	70,4

Source: ILO, 2020.

The COVID-19 outbreak highlighted also gender inequality in the health and care sector employment distribution. Higher employment among women is concentrated in human health and social work activities, around 70% of the global health workforce and 76% in the European Union (EIGE database 2019; Wenham *et al.* 2020). In China, around 90% of healthcare workers are represented by women (Boniol *et al.* 2020). In other EU countries, as Romania, about 90% of the total labour force in the health sector is represented by women, and only 10% is represented by men (Eurostat 2020). Given the pandemic health crisis and the predominant roles occupied by women in the frontline of the healthcare system, they were exposed to a significant risk of infection and disease (Wenham *et al.* 2020).

Globally, ILO (2020) estimates that 136 million workers in human health and social work activities (nurses, doctors and other health workers, workers in residential care facilities and social workers) faced a serious risk of COVID-19 infection in the workplace.

The pandemic consequences on the labour market are evolving rapidly as a result of flexibility and work-from-home policies within the European Union. Although increased flexibility of the labour market encouraged the creation of new policies for temporary or remote work, the uncertainty about long-term job security is still threatening the quality of jobs (Eurofound 2021). According to a recent EIGE report (2021), in the past decade, precarious employment among women increased. Women have low wages, precarious jobs with short working hours and dire employment. In 2014, 26.5% of females and 15.1% of males in the EU had precarious jobs (Buckingham *et al.* 2020, 29).

EIGE analyses precariousness by namely a job with either one or a combination of the following factors: very low pay, very short working hours, or low job security. The largest gendered difference can be observed for the low-income dimension. “Among EU employees in 2014, 19.0% of women compared to 8% of men received very low pay” (Buckingham *et al.* 2020, 30).

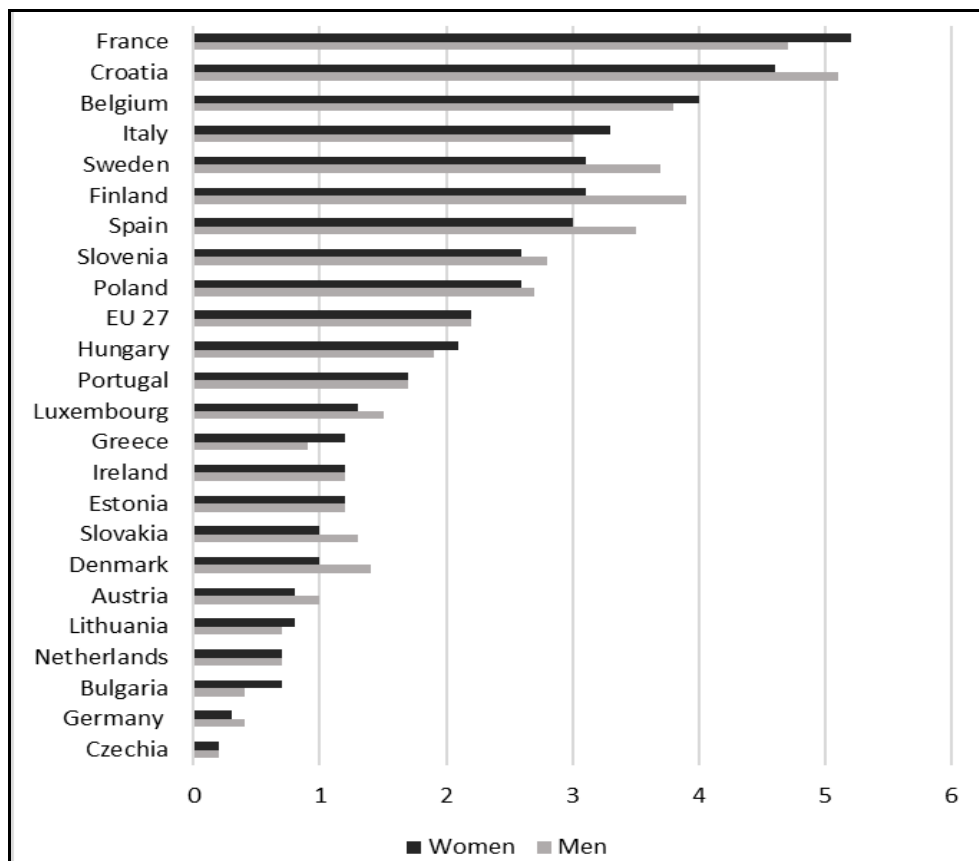
Gendered precarious employment is analysed in this paper through the quality of employment indicators from the Labour Force Survey and Eurostat quarterly data of 2020. As we mentioned in the above section, Eurostat measures precarious employment, by using seven combined dimensions of the quality of employment: safety of employment; income; working time and work-life balance; security and social protection; social dialogue; skills development; work motivation. Eurostat conceptualizes precarious employment in statistically explained reports by referring to the ‘quality of employment’ as a multidimensional dimension (Eurostat 2020b).

By looking closely at the precarious employment distribution, as a percentage of total employment among women and men in EU countries, France has the highest precarious employment rate among women, 5.2% compared to 4.7% of men, followed by Croatia (4.6% of women and 5.1% of men), Belgium (4.0% of women and 3.8% of men), and Italy (3.3% of women and 3.0% of men), Poland (2.6% of women and 2.7% of men) and Slovenia (2.6% of women and 2.8% of men). According to Eurostat data, Romania lacks data on dimensions measuring the job insecurity of women in some economic sectors. The precarious employment is expected to increase in both cases of men and women, because of the confinement measures taken by the majority of the European countries. The policy measures led to economic resilience by the suspension of activities in some industries (ILO 2020). Although gender is one key dimension for analysing precarious work, Figure 3 shows that the common precarious employment patterns between men and women are not always visible in statistics. There are economic sectors dominated by women, and they tend to experience low pay and temporary or part-time

working contracts that lead to insecurity and the lack of stability for long-term employment (Buckingham *et al.* 2020). Employment patterns associated with low wages and part-time contracts can be found in industries, such as cleaning, accommodation, food service activities and the care sector (ILO 2020). Moreover, the men – dominated sectors, as agriculture, forestry and fishing (7.2% of precarious jobs), transport (2.8% of precarious jobs), industry and construction (2.0% of precarious jobs), and have the highest share of precarious work contracts because of the fragmented pay, less than three months working contracts, with the risk of being excluded from social protection benefits (Eurostat 2020c).

Figure 3

Precarious employment by sex in the EU countries, 2020 (%)



Source: Eurostat, 2020c Q1, online code [lfsa\_qoe\_4ax1r2].

However, a great cost for the COVID-19 outbreak is the increasing of precarization among female employment. This paper argues that the COVID-19

crisis disproportionately affects women, especially when it comes to low-quality employment linked to time spent in unpaid activities and care work responsibilities. Secondary data from EIGE, Eurostat and ILO (2020) represent key empirical evidence that women are more likely to be economically in a precarious situation, usually working with insecure and temporary working contracts. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more women were absent from work due to the suspension of activities, and they are also represented in frontline economic sectors with higher risk of infection. One of the explanations of precarious work among women is related to the time spent in unpaid work, caregiving roles and household work (Buckingham *et al.* 2020). Additional caring responsibilities can reduce the productivity of the paid work, because the women's economic participation in the labour market is more likely to be part-time, flexible, with low income (Power 2020 69).

The COVID-19 pandemic is relevant for the interconnection of gendered precarious employment and care work. Care work is related to the women's participation in the labour market that intersects with the work – life division. During the lockdown period, many external services as home cleaning, cooking or caring assistance at home were temporarily closed. Due to the lack of access to several services for caring work, such as childcare services, services for the elderly or disabled people, kindergartens closed, recent literature shows that women were the 'first candidates' for parental leave during the first lockdown period (Wenham *et al.* 2020). This fact led to further demand for household work, and the literature points to the involvement of women in both cases of families with children and people treating elderly or dependent children at home (Voicu and Badoi 2020; Power 2020). In many countries, the lack of access to basic care services put additional and unequal pressure on women by increasing the volume of housework. Among women who worked remotely or choose to stay home during the lockdown, the participation in the majority of care work concerned everyday life, while men are usually involved only several times a week (EIGE 2021, 16).

The recent pandemic crisis emphasises existing gender inequalities, and drove traditional gender roles within families and couples (Voicu and Badoi 2020). The persistence of traditional gender roles within families is associated with the gender care gap and unequal division of work responsibilities at home. Many women may choose to be absent from work, assuming domestic tasks due to 'other motives' for remaining home (Eurostat 2020a). According to the 'Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey' (2020) a poorer work – life balance was identified in the case of women with children. Recent studies showed that women will intensify their traditional role as the main care provider for the elderly, children and those with physical disabilities, because of social isolation and lockdown measures (Power 2020; Wenham *et al.* 2020).

The pandemic is now shaping the need to renegotiate gender roles within couples. Even the negotiations of gender roles within couples may traditionally

place women in the primary career position, and men in the position of the breadwinners (Pfau-Effinger 2005), the pandemic can lead also to a more equal gendered involvement in housework activities (Zamarro *et al.* 2020). Although, the reconciliation of paid work and family life remains a complex issue connected to the institutional arrangement of gender-neutral family policies in the EU countries (Hoorens *et al.* 2011).

### PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The paper looks closely at the labour transformations in the context of (post)-COVID-19 crisis. This paper demonstration has research limits and represents a first step in an ongoing study on precariousness and COVID-19. The purpose of our analysis was to frame the concept of precariousness as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in Europe. The main idea was to discuss a theoretical framework on labour market changes, along with new labour risk of precariousness in the context of COVID-19 interconnected with gender and care.

For a comprehensible understanding of precariousness, this paper analysed previous dimensions developed in theoretical models and empirical scales on precarious work in Europe. Based on a theory-set developed by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), Standing (2011) and Kalleberg (2011), and on the empirically tested scale by Ambles and Vives (2006; 2015) Vandenbrande *et al.* 2013, Van Arden and Vanrouelen 2018), we argued that precarious employment is not only an economic issue, but also a personal and social concern. Precariousness is multidimensional at both individual and institutional levels (Bourdieu 1976; Castel 1996). The COVID-19 outbreak becomes a relevant example in this paper because of its consequences on precarious working lives (EIGE 2021; Eurofound 2021).

The theoretical line focused on the understanding of precariousness as a concept in academic research and the literature review was limited for the purpose of this paper. First, the analysis was pointed out through post-Fordist labour theories, neoliberal policies and radical changes of the labour market in post-crisis contexts. Second, the article intended to create a conceptualisation of precariousness, to critically and methodologically reveal an interconnection with empirical dimensions proposed in the recent literature: poor career prospects, lack of control over work continuity, and the difficulty to balance personal life to professional attends in a gender perspective. The conceptual model was conducted along two main dimensions: employment insecurity and insufficient (low) income. Both dimensions were related to direct effects on vulnerable workers and the risk of precarious work. However, other dimensions of precarious employment were included in the model: empowerment relations, limited voice and limited say. In the literature, the informal relations at work with limited say are considered a barrier to gender balance, and also a source of power relations at the workplace, with limited possibilities to negotiate tasks and work schedules. Flexible contracts



and atypical employment are exposing workers to the impossibility of being collectively represented, so usually, any issue related to the continued employment and working conditions is a subject of informal negotiation. In the EU labour legislation, some flexible contracts and self-employment can be easily in a precarious situation, for not being protected by social dialogue and trade union representation. Informal negotiations of working conditions are also interconnected to financial-dependency and uncertainty of work continuity.

While the policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic is pointed to a gender mainstreaming approach in studying precarious employment, the priority is given to the impact on families and women. In the paper, gendered precarious jobs are analysed in the recent context of the COVID-19 crisis. Gender segregation in the labour market is a key factor for the COVID-19 pandemic research on precariousness. This paper included secondary data at the EU comparative level from Eurostat (2020), EIGE (2020), ILO (2020) and Eurofound (2021) on indicators related to gender differences in the labour market: absence of work during the first quarter of COVID-19 crisis, gendered impact on labour market during the first period of COVID-19 and the quality of employment in 2020. Based on secondary data from QI of COVID-19 pandemic, this article shows that the sectorial industries hit by the economic crisis and health risks are those with a large share of employment among women: accommodation and food services; real estate; business and administrative activities; manufacturing; wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, and human health and social work activities. Recent studies on labour market changes estimate that the COVID-19 crisis has been harder on women than the previous crisis of 2008. The differences between the two crises are associated with the deterioration of work–life balance, along with unequal gender division within families (Buckingham *et al.* 2020).

The context of the pandemic crisis is expected to cause economic instability and household budget restrictions. While external services and schools were closed during lockdowns, the share of unpaid activities and care responsibilities and household duties increased. Women become ‘first candidates’ for domestic work and they lived the “second shift” by providing care for children and the elderly (Zamarro *et al.* 2020). The link to care responsibilities is influenced by women’s active labour market position and time spent with housework activities. Even common precarious employment patterns among men and women were not particularly visible in the secondary data analysis, empirical evidence from EIGE and ILO showed that the risk of precarious employment, insecurity of work and low wages increased considerably in the case of women, especially in the women-dominated economic sectors hit by the pandemic. The theoretical framework proposed in the paper can be extended in further research on precarious employment and gender inequalities for understanding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis on precariousness may apply for empirical data and

practical policy research on the current consequences of pandemic on the gender-segregated labour market.

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**A**rticolul cuprinde o analiză fundamentată asupra ocupării precare, în conexiune cu inegalitățile de gen și schimbările apărute pe piața muncii în contextul pandemiei de COVID-19. Conceptul de "precaritate" implică, în prezenta analiză, o înțelegere complexă asupra nesiguranței ocupării pe termen lung, atât la nivel instituțional, cât și individual. Contextul societal al perioadei post-fordiste a marcat schimbări radicale pe piața muncii prin politici neoliberale și a condus la crearea de grupuri vulnerabile care experimentează nesiguranța ocupării, lipsa oportunităților profesionale pe termen lung și venituri insuficiente. Acest articol este construit în jurul ideilor neoliberale conform cărora piața muncii „stabile” și „flexibile” a normalizat nesiguranța ocupării îndeosebi în contextul crizelor economice și a condus la căderea în precaritate. Insecuritatea ocupării apare pe o piață a muncii care este segregată pe considerente de gen. Pentru explorarea proceselor implicate în fenomenul de precarizare a ocupării, acest articol se concentrează pe legătura dintre conceptele teoretice multidimensionale care acoperă consecințele insecurității muncii la nivel economic, social și psihologic. În primul rând, articolul își propune o analiză conceptuală bazată pe teorii ale precarității din literatura științifică. În al doilea rând, articolul include o analiză secundară de date empirice privind indicatori ai ocupării precare, absenței de la locul de muncă și impactul COVID asupra pieței muncii segregate pe considerente de gen, la nivelul UE. Datele prezentate sunt din Eurostat (2020), EIGE (2020), ILO (2020) și Eurofound (2021). În cele din urmă, rezultatele problematizează abordările teoretice recente privind ocuparea precară și inegalitățile de gen în contextul schimbărilor apărute pe piața forței de muncă în contextul crizei de COVID-19.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** precaritate; pandemia COVID-19; roluri de gen; piața muncii; absența de la locul de muncă.

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