

Facing yet another crisis? Gender-based violence policies at the Spanish local level during COVID-19

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Received: 08-10-2022
Accepted: 20-02-2023
Published: 22-05-2023

Recommended citation: PALEO MOSQUERA, Natalia; ALONSO ÁLVAREZ, Alba; and DIZ OTERO, Isabel (2023). "Facing yet another crisis? Gender-based violence policies at the Spanish local level during COVID-19". *Papers*, 108 (3), e3171. <<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3171>>

Abstract

Analyses show that crises like the COVID-19 pandemic had gendered effects. This paper explores its impact on gender-based violence (GBV) policies in Spain. We carry out an empirical analysis addressing the case of *Information Centres for Women*, a local institution in the region of Galicia aimed at promoting equality and tackling GBV. We use a survey to gather information on three key dimensions of GBV policies (resources, actions and coordination) before, during, and after the pandemic. The study shows that there were no significant setbacks in terms of funding and personnel during lockdown. Yet, resources were not enlarged despite increasing levels of violence. Actions had to focus on priority issues and preventive measures were mostly paralyzed, while coordination with other institutions became more difficult. Data gathered for the post-pandemic period indicates that some of these changes remained in place. The article contributes to academic debates by delving into an understudied policy issue: the impact of the pandemic on equality policies at the local level.

Keywords: equality policies; local level; crisis; gender-based violence; Information Centre for Women; Spain; Galicia

Resumen. *¿Hacer frente a otra crisis? Las políticas de violencia de género en el ámbito local español durante la COVID-19.*

La literatura muestra que crisis semejantes a la generada por la pandemia de la COVID-19 tuvieron un impacto de género. En este trabajo exploramos los efectos de esta última crisis sobre las políticas de abordaje de la violencia de género (VG) en España. En concreto, llevamos a cabo un análisis empírico sobre los Centros de Información a la Mujer (CIM) de la comunidad autónoma de Galicia, instituciones locales destinadas a promover la igualdad y abordar la violencia de género. Utilizamos una encuesta para recopilar información sobre tres dimensiones clave de las políticas contra la violencia de género (recursos, acciones y coordinación) antes, durante y después de la pandemia. El estudio muestra que no hubo retrocesos significativos en términos de financiación y de personal durante el confinamiento. Sin embargo, los recursos de los CIM tampoco fueron ampliados, a pesar de que se produjo un aumento de los niveles de violencia contra las mujeres durante dicho periodo. Como resultado, las acciones realizadas desde estas instituciones locales se centraron fundamentalmente en cuestiones prioritarias vinculadas a la atención directa de las mujeres en situación de violencia de género. El resto de las medidas se redujeron drásticamente o incluso fueron paralizadas. Asimismo, la coordinación con otras instituciones fue más difícil. Los datos recogidos para el periodo pospandémico indican que algunos de estos cambios persistieron. El artículo contribuye a los debates académicos actuales profundizando en una cuestión política poco estudiada: el impacto de la pandemia en las políticas de igualdad en el ámbito local.

Palabras clave: políticas de igualdad; ámbito local; crisis; violencia de género; Centros de Información a la Mujer; España; Galicia

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1. Introduction

On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a “public health risk of international concern” (WHO, 2020a). Within a few weeks, its presence had already been detected in 114 countries, and more than 4,000 people had lost their lives. COVID-19 was officially considered a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). The lethal nature of the disease and its rapid transmission led governments around the world to implement a series of social distancing measures. Lockdowns lasted for months in some countries, mobility was limited to different degrees, and social gatherings of all kinds were banned (Sánchez et al., 2020). In Spain, the national government declared a state of emergency [*estado de alarma*] on 14th March,

in order to control the health crisis (Real Decreto [Royal Decree] 463/2020), and a lockdown was established from 15th March to 2nd June. Subsequently, measures were progressively loosened (freedom of movement, social gatherings etc.), although the increase in cases forced the extension of the state of emergency until May 2021. Those measures are considered effective in controlling the spread of the virus (García & Sánchez, 2021). However, the Covid-19 response also generated political, social and economic effects that need to be carefully analysed. Just like in former pandemics, COVID-19 had specific and disproportionate consequences for women (Zarra & Ceron, 2021; Rubery & Tabora, 2021). Available data shows the impact of the pandemic on access to sexual and reproductive health services, on levels of unemployment, and on housework and caregiving, which affected women's jobs as well as their mental health (United Nations, 2022; European Union, 2022).

In this article, we explore a key area of interest: gender-based violence (GBV). Unlike previous crises, international organizations such as the WHO and especially UN Women proclaimed the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 response from the beginning of the pandemic, urging governments to embrace a gender perspective (Wenham et al. 2020; Tomsick, et al. 2022). The prominence of more 'urgent' issues though – especially during the initial stages –, combined with a lack of political will, meant that gender equality was a rather secondary political goal in this period. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) analysis of the COVID-19 response in 206 countries revealed that only 12% of them took a significant number of gender-sensitive measures, while 42% of them had none (United Nations, 2022). Negative impacts have been particularly severe regarding GBV (Sánchez, et al. 2020; United Nations, 2021). Surveys carried out by the UN revealed alarming figures, while the executive director of UN Women herself referred to this type of violence as a 'shadow pandemic' (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020).

This article contributes to this crucial research agenda by exploring the case of Spain, a country that has undertaken a myriad of measures to address GBV since the beginning of the pandemic. Specifically, our study focuses on local GBV policies before, during and after the lockdown period. Gender equality policies in Spain are multilevel in nature (Verge & Alonso, 2020); in this article we explore empirically GBV policies at the local level in the region of Galicia, focusing on *Information Centres for Women* (ICWs) (84 municipalities). These local institutions have a primary role in delivering services to attend women experiencing GBV. We use a questionnaire to gather information on the impact of the pandemic on three dimensions of local GBV policies: resources, actions and coordination with other key institutional actors. Academic works have mostly focused on analysing the impact of the pandemic on gender inequalities (Wenham et al., 2020), the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the governments' responses, or the key role played by some critical actors such as UN Women (Mintrom & True, 2022; Tomsick et al., 2022). This study expands on former contributions by delving into a policy issue and a level of government that have been rather understudied.

Section one of this article reviews the literature on the changes affecting gender equality policies during crises; section two introduces a brief description of GBV policies in Spain and Galicia. Next, the methodology of the study is presented, followed by an empirical section which introduces its main findings. Finally, the conclusions section discusses the implications of the study for the literature on GBV policies, as well as for state intervention in this area.

2. Challenges for the development of gender equality policies: The role of crises

2.1. Gender equality policies: Setbacks and developments

Gender equality policies have been progressively consolidated in different countries and at different levels of government (Htun & Weldon, 2018; Mazur, 2015). Specific institutions, strategies and instruments have been developed, giving shape to a differentiated policy sector (Alonso, 2015; Paleo & Alonso, 2014). Yet, gender mainstreaming has rapidly become a key approach to promote equality in every realm of public intervention, while equality bodies have progressively expanded their scope of action, strengthening their role as agenda-setters and influencing all areas of government (Alonso, 2015). Gender equality has not yet reached a central position in most national and international agendas and the goals of gender mainstreaming are still far from being achieved in post-industrial democracies (Waylen, 2017; Verloo, 2018). The adoption of policy programmes as well as their effective implementation remains challenging, as gender equality initiatives often have limited funding and resources (Engeli & Mazur, 2018). Their impact depends significantly on the personal commitment of so-called *femocrats* – political and technical staff of equality bodies – and their ability to influence personnel in other areas and levels of government. Likewise, equality structures tend to occupy a marginal position in the institutional architecture, which limits their capacity to shape other policies (Alfama & Paleo, 2022). *Resistances* emerge and developments are rather slow and uneven, even in institutions with a significant level of performance regarding equality goals (Mergaert et al., 2014). Recent research agendas go a step further and identify the key role of oppositional actors who push to dismantle equality policies altogether (Verloo, 2018).

Crises represent a key challenge for the effective implementation of gender policies. Academic works have repeatedly shown how economic crises have generated impacts and how gender equality policies are likely to experience significant setbacks in those periods (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Paleo & Alonso, 2014; Gálvez & Rodríguez, 2013; Gálvez, 2012). They emphasize the need to include a gender perspective in policies aimed at dealing with economic and financial constraints. In this regard, the 2008 financial crisis brought up important lessons, as the EU's response based on austerity and the fiscal control of Member States lacked a gender perspective (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022). The crisis revealed the fragility of equality policies and how

developments could be easily reversed (Alfama et al., 2014; Beteta, 2013; European's Women's Lobby, 2009). Gender mainstreaming was simply not applied (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013), and austerity policies had a very negative impact both on the situation of women (Bettio et al., 2012; European Women's Lobby, 2012) and on gender equality policies. The marginalization of the feminist agenda (for example, by eliminating equality bodies or reducing their budgets) represented an indicator of a government's adequate response to the crisis, and contributed to framing equality as a rather marginal policy goal. All in all, the 2008 crisis represented a critical juncture for the promotion of equality in many countries (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013).

2.2. The COVID-19 crisis from a gender perspective

Academic works have explored the gendered nature of the COVID-19 pandemic since the very beginning and rapidly concluded that this crisis also contributed to increasing inequalities between men and women (Al-Ali, 2020; Nazneen & Araujo 2021; Wenham et al., 2020). Three areas are of special interest for exploring this impact: decision-making, work (paid and unpaid), and GBV. Concerning the former, scholars have emphasized the underrepresentation of women in key decision-making arenas related to the COVID-19 response. Women were more likely to comply with restrictions such as social distancing, and more likely to consider the pandemic as a critical issue. Yet their potential contribution as leaders wasn't equally considered during this period (Smith, 2020; Zarra & Ceron, 2021), and the glass ceiling kept female experts away from high-level decision-making bodies defining the response to the crisis. The underrepresentation of women raised concerns about the legitimacy of those decisions and anticipated their negative impact on gender inequalities (Smith, 2020).

Moreover, the effect of the pandemic on women's paid and unpaid work was different from former crises, as they were overrepresented in key economic sectors. Institutions at the frontline of the COVID-19 response, such as health-care or social services, were highly feminized. Although that gave them greater visibility and social recognition, it also meant that women were more exposed to the virus, while often lacking adequate protection measures. Other economic sectors highly affected by restrictions, such as tourism or hospitality, were also feminized (Cook & Grimshaw, 2021). According to ILO data, in 2018 84% of employed women worked in the private services sector across Europe, compared to 61% of men (Blaskó et al., 2020). Women were also over-represented in non-standard and precarious forms of employment, which faced a higher risk of dismissal during lockdown and when the economic crisis hit. Finally, social distancing and school closures increased the burden of housework and caregiving. Traditional gender roles whereby women are expected to be principal carers while men perform a breadwinner role were exacerbated during the pandemic in most EU countries (Blaskó et al., 2020). Researchers predicted a large increase in female unemployment and a wider wage gap (Alon et al., 2020), and data

from the US and Canada soon revealed that women with children were more likely than men with children to have reduced their working hours or to have left their jobs (Collins et al., 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020).

A third consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak was an increase in the prevalence of GBV. This type of violence was already a major global problem. According to WHO data, one in three women has suffered physical and/or sexual violence by her partner at some point in her life (World Health Organization, 2021). Social distancing measures and the economic and social consequences of the pandemic resulted in an even greater level of prevalence. The European Parliament estimated that GBV increased by a third during lockdowns in some EU countries. The significant rise in the number of calls received by GBV hotlines shows this shift (OEA, 2020; United Nations, 2020, 2021). In the case of Spain, calls to the 016 hotline increased by 51.43% in the second trimester of 2020, during a strict national lockdown (University of Granada, 2022), and the first month of this period of lockdown witnessed a rise in online consultations of 443.5% compared to March 2019 (Ministry of Equality, 2020). Eurobarometer data shows that 75% of women in Spain perceived an increase in GBV and up to 47% affirm that lockdowns and curfews had a negative impact on their mental health (six points more than the European average) (European Union, 2022). Paradoxically, existing data also indicates a decrease of GBV cases reported to the authorities, especially during lockdown. We can thus assume the negative impact of the pandemic on the capacity to report a case and to access GBV services (Ruiz-Pérez & Pastor-Moreno, 2021). In fact, the number of women attended increased when restrictions were lifted (Universidad de Granada, 2022).

UN Women provided several indicators to grasp the severity of the situation. In coordination with 58 countries, in April 2020 UN Women conducted surveys on the gendered impact of the pandemic. Up to 45% of the women interviewed declared having been directly or indirectly exposed to at least one form of GBV (that is, them or their acquaintances had experienced one or more forms of violence) during COVID-19 (United Nations, 2021). Verbal abuse and deprivation of basic resources were the most common forms of violence (23%), while 21% of those surveyed reported having experienced prohibition to communicate, which was probably aggravated by different restrictions (lockdowns, curfews and social distancing). UN Women urged governments and other key actors to understand that homes were not safe places for women, and became a global promoter of GBV policies (Mintrom & True, 2022). National institutions were expected to increase funding for online services and civil society organizations; ensure that judicial systems worked properly; establish emergency alert systems in pharmacies and grocery stores; consider women's shelters as essential services; and create safe ways for women to seek support (United Nations, 2020). Up to 149 countries introduced some of these policies; local, subnational, and national governments around the world responded to UN Women's political initiative by expanding their capacity to deliver services remotely (Mintrom & True, 2022).

The EU response to COVID-19 differed from that of other crises. EU institutions committed to provide sufficient funds for addressing the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. The so-called *recovery funds* entailed the end of austerity, characterized by a neoliberal and degendered approach (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022). The inclusion of a gender perspective in those policies was rather limited, and women were not equally represented in key decision-making arenas. Yet lessons learnt from previous crises helped feminist critical actors to seize their opportunities and navigate resistances. Despite a hostile context, equality issues were incorporated in the COVID-19 response, thanks, among others, to feminist actors in the European Parliament. Their coordinated efforts were successful in incorporating gender-sensitive actions in the recovery funds, even though measures were not transformative and remained at a rather technical level (Elomäki & Kantola, 2022).

Similarly, analyses exploring the national level showed that *national recovery and resilience plans* (NRRPs) unevenly incorporated a gender perspective (Zarra & Ceron, 2021). Spain appears to be one of the countries where this approach was more coherently adopted. Considerable resources were allocated to education and training policies, promoting women's digital skills while seeking to improve the presence of women in the STEM sectors. Public investment was also directed to developing the *care economy*, which in turn would boost female employment rates and decrease time devoted to housework (Zarra & Ceron, 2021).

3. Gender-based violence policies in multi-governed Spain

3.1. *The institutionalization of GBV policies*

GBV has long been considered a policy problem of public concern in Spain. The women's movement framed GBV as a key issue from the transition period and mobilized intensively in the following decades (Valiente, 2013). Policy development in Spain is often divided into different phases. The first phase corresponds to the 80s and 90s, when GBV was included on the policy agenda and actions were developed at different levels. The creation of the national *Women's Institute* in 1983 represented a key milestone for the promotion of equality in Spain (Bustelo, 2016), and soon after that, pioneer measures were undertaken. The penal code was reformed in 1989 to address "domestic abuse", in parallel with the creation of the first women's shelters across the country. GBV was subsequently included in the equality plans developed both at the national and regional level. Yet, this issue rose to the top of the political agenda at the end of the 90s, following the killing of Ana Orantes, which attracted significant media attention. A second reform of the penal code was undertaken to increase the protection of victims, and specific plans and measures (hotlines, special surveys, databases etc.) soon reflected the existence of broad social and political concern on the matter (Ferrer & Bosch 2014).

The second phase starts with the approval of the *Ley Orgánica 1/2004 de medidas de protección integral contra la violencia de género* [Organic Law 1/2004 of protection measures against gender-based violence]. Achieving vast political consensus, this law introduced a gendered approach to addressing violence against women. For the first time in Spain, this ‘policy problem’ was framed as rooted in structural gender inequalities (López, 2011; Bustelo & Lombardo, 2007), which required a wide variety of measures relating to prevention and awareness-raising (the education system, media etc.), comprehensive attention for victims in different areas (healthcare, social services, etc.), and protection (police, judiciary etc.). This law included the creation of brand-new institutional devices such as GBV courts and a *government delegation on gender-based violence*, and rapidly became internationally acclaimed good practice (Pastor-Gosálbez et al., 2021; Roggeband, 2012). Nevertheless, the economic crisis jeopardised its development, seriously affecting the resources available to implement existing policies (Paleo & Alonso, 2015; Lombardo & León, 2015), and deepening some key weaknesses, such as the lack of inter-institutional coordination or of sufficient awareness-raising and training activities directed at key roles (judges, police officers, etc.) (Verge & Alonso, 2020).

These concerns triggered intense mobilisations from the feminist movement and led to the main milestone that initiated the third phase of GBV policies in Spain. The *Pacto de Estado contra la Violencia de Género* [State Agreement Against Gender-Based Violence] was signed by all political parties in 2017, following growing demands to improve existing measures and to implement the *Istanbul Convention*, ratified by Spain in 2014. In line with this international treaty, the agreement included a broader concept of GBV, enlarging the existing legal framework, which limited its scope to intra-partnership violence. Improving implementation of Law 1/2004 represented another key achievement, thanks to 290 specific measures directed at fostering policies at all levels of government and inter-institutional coordination (Pastor et al. 2021; Villacampa, 2018). Resources represented another key component of the agreement, although these were only significantly increased recently (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018).

COVID-19 constituted the most recent challenge for GBV policies in Spain. The newly created *Ministry of Equality* of the PSOE-Podemos coalition government had to respond to this uncharted scenario. Fifteen days after starting a strict national lockdown, the government issued *Real Decreto 12/2020, de medidas urgentes en materia de protección y asistencia a las víctimas de violencia de género* [Royal Decree 12/2020, of urgent measures to protect and assist victims of GBV], under which all public services relating to GBV were classified as “essential”, allowing institutions to continue to attend to victims (shelters, psychological counselling etc.). Using economic resources from the *State Agreement*, this decree included a myriad of urgent measures to direct funding to regional and local authorities, in order to facilitate the adaptation of all services to the new scenario (Ruiz-Perez & Pastor-Moreno, 2021).

The national government also sponsored specific actions such as nation-wide information campaigns, guidelines for public authorities and new helplines.

3.2. GBV policies in Galicia and the role of local authorities

The development of GBV policies in Spain cannot be understood without considering the quasi-federal nature of the Spanish state. Since their inception, GBV has also been addressed by regional and local authorities. Sub-national governments pioneered the development of key policies in Spain, mirroring their leading role in other key areas such as gender mainstreaming. The first specific legislation on the issue was passed at the sub-national level, and the types of violence addressed have been traditionally broader (Verge & Alonso, 2020). Additionally, regional and, notably, local institutions are at the forefront of GBV policy implementation, as many essential services are provided, supervised or coordinated at those levels. Interestingly, academic research has paid limited attention to the role of local authorities in Spanish GBV policies. This article addresses the case of Galicia, which has a similar approach to other regions and has developed specific legislation and plans to address GBV. Most regional policy measures aim at providing resources to local authorities, as municipalities in Spain enjoy specific powers to develop actions to promote gender equality and other welfare services. Local equality policies and institutions are now widespread (Alfama & Paleo, 2022; Paleo & Diz, 2021; Paleo, 2018), and GBV represents a key area of intervention, thanks, among other things, to those state and regional-wide policies that emphasise the role of the local level. Galicia is no exception, and municipalities are at the core of GBV policy implementation. In this region, *Information Centres for Women (ICW)* [*Centros de Información á Muller*] have been set up in many counties (eight in total) and municipalities (76 in total). Most of them are part of a local institutional setting. Their functions and structure are regulated by the regional *Decree 130/2016*, which establishes that ICWs are “permanent institutional resources that articulate a comprehensive intervention targeted at supporting women and providing legal advice, psychological counselling, and social and career-related advice, as well as at developing any other action to promote effective equality between men and women.” Their mandate is thus rather broad, and ICWs frequently undertake awareness-raising campaigns, promote women’s associations or foster gender mainstreaming in local policies (Paleo & Diz, 2021; Paleo, 2018). Yet *Decree 130/2016* establishes that combating GBV constitutes a central and defining goal; accordingly, all ICWs must have at least a lawyer and a psychologist among their staff, both with training on gender equality issues. This legislation also contemplates their key role in the wider institutional network tackling GBV, as they must coordinate with institutions at various levels, including the regional government. They must also act as a key liaison in their own territory, leading local inter-institutional coordination bodies on GBV [*mesas de coordinación inter-institucional*]. These types of mechanisms have been set up in Galicia in the last ten years to estab-

lish cooperative practices at the local level, both across institutions and with civil society actors.

Thirty-six percent of Galician municipalities (114 municipalities) currently have ICWs, covering 73% of the population of this region in all four provinces (A Coruña, Lugo, Ourense, Pontevedra). Provinces are local entities with their own legal status that embrace several municipalities. Their governing bodies, the provincial councils, often perform a very active role in promoting local GBV policies, which has a positive impact on the activity of ICWs. In the case of Galicia, the provincial council of A Coruña stands out precisely for its long history of promoting such policies. Most ICWs are located in the provinces of A Coruña and Pontevedra, where municipalities are more populated and gender policies more developed (Paleo, 2018).

It is worth noting that ICWs receive funding from several institutional levels (Paleo, 2018). Existing data indicate that the regional government provided funding to 87% of them, whereas provincial councils and the central government gave resources respectively to 13.6% and 8% of them, and the EU only to 7%. Paleo shows that in A Coruña more than 30% of the municipalities have received funding from their provincial council, while other provinces had lower figures (Paleo, 2018). Interestingly, austerity policies and the approval of the *State Agreement on GBV* had an impact on funding. In Galicia, the national government and the UE increased their share in providing economic resources.

4. Methodology

The empirical analysis presented in this article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local GBV policies by focusing on the role of ICWs in Galicia. It looks at four key dimensions: 1) the general characteristics of each ICW (year of creation, institution it is affiliated to, sources of funding, territorial scope of action); 2) the economic and human resources available to carry out their duties; 3) their performance (actions, type of attention -face-to-face/online-, number of women using the services, difficulties of access, difficulties experienced by professionals, impact of the *State Agreement on GBV*, assessment of housing resources); and 4) the coordination with other key public institutions (Table 1).

An online questionnaire was sent to all 84 ICWs in Galicia in July 2022. Contact information was gathered from the regional government's database, and an email with a summary of the research goals and a link to the online questionnaire was sent to all of them. Each ICW was subsequently contacted by phone to check whether the email had been received and to explain in detail the importance of their participation in the study.

The questionnaire consisted of 36 questions and was delivered via the *SurveyMonkey* platform. The period for answering the questionnaire was three months, between 26th July and 26th September 2022. The response rate was 70.2% (N=59). 76.3% of the questionnaires were answered by the chief direc-

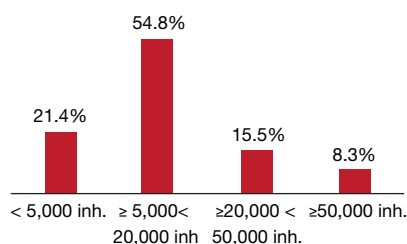
Table 1. Dimensions and indicators analysed in the online questionnaire for ICWs

Dimensions	Indicators
General characteristics	Year of creation. Institution it is affiliated to. Sources of funding. Territorial scope of action.
Resources	Evolution of economic resources. Evolution of human resources. Funding to address GBV during the pandemic. Impact of the <i>State Agreement on GBV</i> .
Performance	Evolution of the type of actions. Evolution of type of attention provided (face-to-face/ online). Difficulties experienced by professionals in providing the service.
Coordination with other key public institutions	Evolution of level of satisfaction with the coordination with other key public institutions. Participation in coordination bodies.

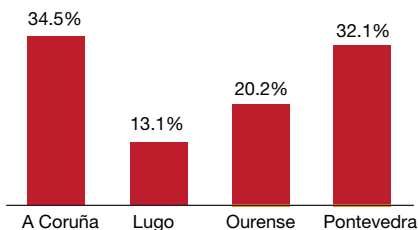
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tor of the ICW, 10.2% by the professional specialized in legal advice, 6.8% by the professional specialized in psychological counselling, and 6.8% by other staff (for example, equality experts). 97% of the respondents were women and 3% were men.

The composition of the sample shows similarities with respect to the universe in relation to two key factors: the size of the population (Graph 1) and the province where the ICW is located (Graph 2). However, municipalities that have between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants are slightly underrepresented, and those with more than 20,000 inhabitants are slightly overrepresented. Similarly, the province of Ourense has a greater presence compared to the uni-

Graph 1. Composition of the universe by population size

Source: authors' own.

Graph 2. Composition of the universe by province

Source: authors' own.

verse, while the province of Coruña is slightly under-represented. Differences are not substantial enough to influence the results of the analysis.

Data is analysed using descriptive statistics, presenting frequencies and percentages. As we are interested in assessing the impact of the pandemic, for most indicators we gathered information for three different periods: pre-lockdown (2019), lockdown (2020) and post-lockdown (2021). This provides a longitudinal perspective for analysing key dimensions of GBV policies at the local level. The empirical material is thus of great interest for exploring changes that might have remained after the pandemic.

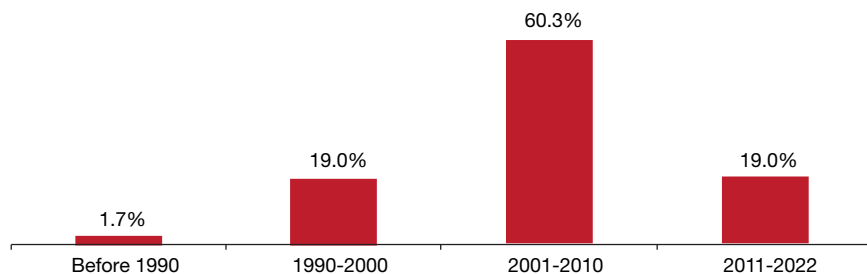
5. Results

5.1. ICWs' general characteristics

ICWs were set up in Galicia more than two decades ago. Graph 3 shows that 19% of these organizations were created during the 90s and 60% during the 2000s. They enjoy a considerable track record, which has surely provided notable capacity to respond to the pandemic, as most of the chief staff of these centres had to confront the former economic crisis. This experience was useful in knowing how to establish goals and strategies during the COVID-19 crisis.

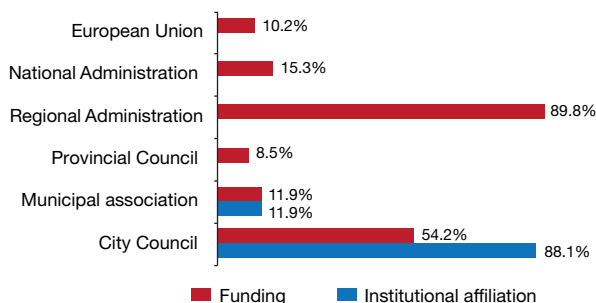
ICWs are part of a broader institutional setting at the local level. 88% of ICWs belong to a local council, and 11.9% to an association of municipalities (*mancomunidad*) (Graph 4). This second type is regulated by *Decree 130/2016* and is particularly common in small towns. Respondents indicate that over half of the ICWs (54%) receive funding from the local institution they are affiliated to. This figure differs from the situation in 2010, when 100% of these organizations claimed to receive municipal funding. Austerity policies and their impact on public expenditure at the local level may well explain this significant change (Alfama & Paleo, 2022). Moreover, the lack of centrality of gender equality issues should also be considered. That is, local governments seem to promote the creation of ICWs, but they do not represent a priority on their agendas. Other institutions are key for their funding capacities as well.

Graph 3. Period of creation of ICWs



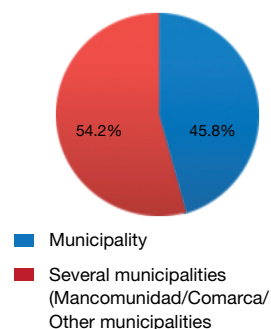
Source: authors' own.

Graph 4. Institutional affiliation and source of funding of ICWs



Source: authors' own

Graph 5. Territorial scope of action



Source: authors' own

90% of all ICWs receive regional funds (a percentage very similar to 2010), while 15% receive funds from the central government and 10% from the EU. Additionally, 12% of ICWs receive economic resources from the association of municipalities they are affiliated to.

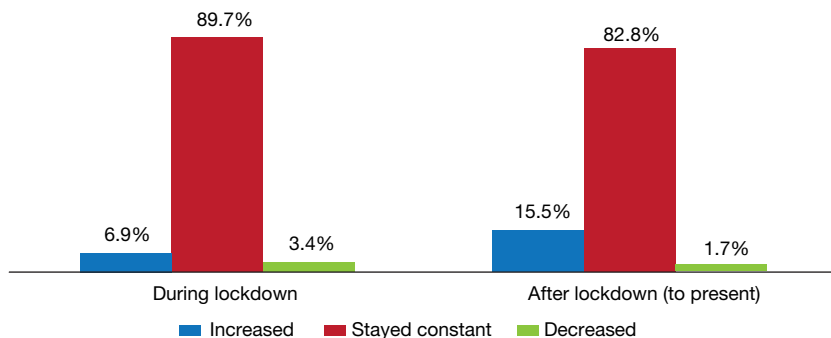
In Graph 5, we see that while 46% of the ICWs indicate that their territorial scope is the municipality in which they are located, 54% embrace more than one municipality. ICWs are present in only 36% of Galician municipalities (including municipalities sharing an ICW) but they provide services to 73% of the population. They make a crucial contribution, guaranteeing that women in situations of violence living in municipalities with no ICW (normally the smallest ones) can have access to these public services.

5.2. The impact of the pandemic on ICW policies

5.2.1. ICW resources

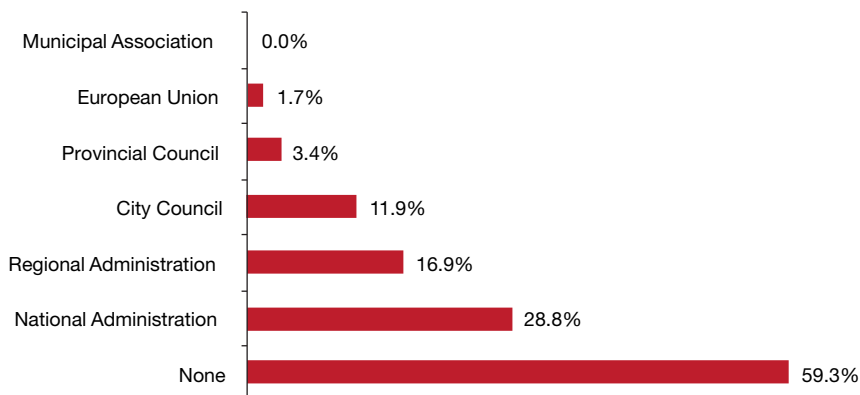
Resources are crucial for ICWs to discharge their responsibilities effectively, and the pandemic represented a significant challenge in that regard. When exploring economic resources, we see that more than 80% of the ICWs have not increased their budgets since the pandemic began. More specifically, our data show that during lockdown, 90% of ICWs continued to have the exact same level of economic resources, 3.4% experienced a reduction and only 7% saw an increase. It is worth noting that among the six large Galician cities that responded to the questionnaire (with more than 50,000 inhabitants), only two increased the budget allocated to their ICW (Vigo and Santiago de Compostela). After lockdown the situation was very similar. Only 15% of the ICWs said that their budgets – for 2021 and/or 2022 – increased. This data may indicate a positive trend and could be further reflected in 2023, but we must bear in mind that before the pandemic – during the 2015–2019 legislature – 71% of the Galician municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants

Graph 6. Evolution of ICW budgets



Source: authors' own.

Graph 7. Source of funding for GBV policies during the pandemic



Source: authors' own.

considered that the budget allocated to the promotion of equality was too limited (Paleo & Diz, 2021).

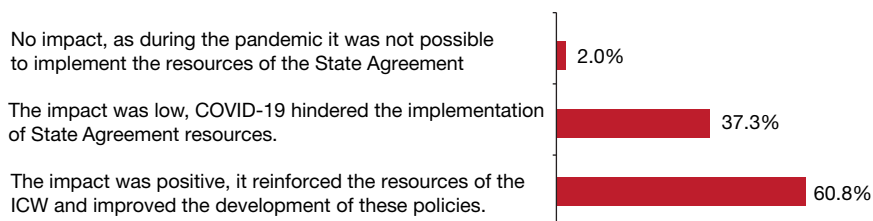
The lack of resources is also evident when we explore whether ICWs received any specific funding to address GBV during the COVID-19 crisis. 59% of them indicated that they did not receive any type of specific support to deal with GBV. Of those that did get funding, 29% stated that resources were transferred by the central government, 17% that they came from the regional government, 12% from the local council, and 3% and 1% respectively from provincial councils and the European Union.

Funding from the central government is related to the *State Agreement on GBV* that began to be implemented in 2018. Funding was allocated to local councils so that actions could be implemented at this level of government too.

This study contributed to gathering data on whether the *Agreement* had a positive impact during the pandemic. Graph 8 shows that 61% of the ICWs confirm that it did have a positive influence by expanding ICW resources. However, another 37% consider the impact to have been rather limited, and 2% did not see any effect at all. According to our data, almost 40% of ICWs indicate that the pandemic slowed down the implementation of the *Agreement* to some degree.

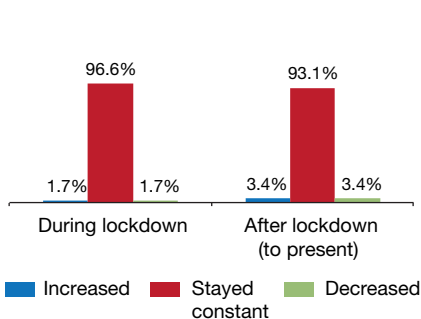
Human resources are equally important to effectively implement equality policies. The 59 ICWs that responded to our survey consist of a total of 171 members of staff, 91.2% of whom are women. Graph 9 shows that more than 98% of the ICWs did not increase their number of staff during the pandemic, while 3.4% reduced them after the lockdown. The regional government legislation mandates at least three roles: a director coordinating and leading the work of the ICW, a specialist in legal advice and a specialist in psychological counselling. These two specialists can also combine their responsibilities with performing the role of director. ICWs must provide at least ten hours a week of these services. Data produced for this study reveals that 43% of ICWs have two members of staff (Graph 10), only 37% have three, and 20% four or more. The most common option is therefore to combine the duties of chief with those of legal advice or psychological counselling.

Graph 8. Impact of the *State Agreement* during the pandemic



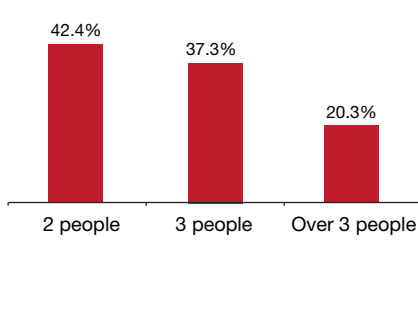
Source: authors' own.

Graph 9. Evolution of members of staff



Source: authors' own

Graph 10. Number of members of staff

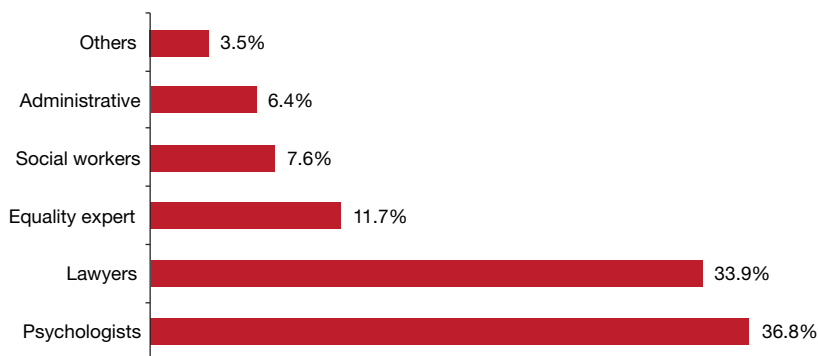


Source: authors' own

As expected, 71% of the staff have training either as a lawyer or as a psychologist (Graph 11), while other professional profiles such as equality expert, social worker or office worker have a rather limited presence. More than 40% of staff members are on part-time contracts. Likewise, 22% of them are not employed by the local institution directly (Graph 12), and work for companies providing external services.

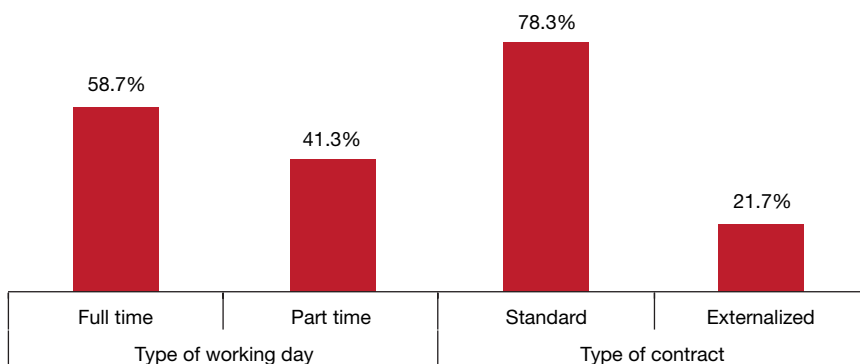
All these elements point to the persistence of poor working conditions and limited resources, something that did not change during the pandemic, putting professionals under great strain. ICWs and their staff were severely hit by the 2008 economic crisis, when human resources were cut and working conditions worsened (Paleo & Diz, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic did not involve an effort to reverse these tendencies. For years, the Association of Professionals of

Graph 11. Professional profile of members of staff



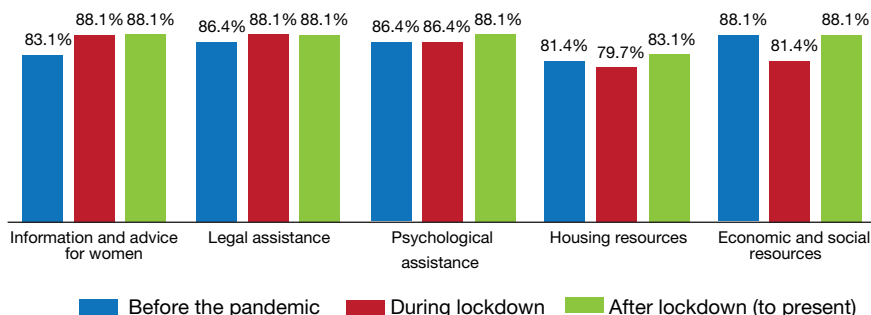
Source: authors' own.

Graph 12. Working conditions of members of staff



Source: authors' own.

Graph 13. Types of actions to attend women in situations of violence



Source: authors' own.

ICWs in Galicia has been drawing attention to the structural problems that affect these centres, particularly the effects of poor working conditions and limited staff. In a statement published on 8th March 2022, *Decree 130/2016*. Workers claim that staff are not replaced when they go on sick leave, and that ICWs do not provide the 10-hour service mandated in the regional legislation. This minimum number of hours is also considered insufficient to cover the needs of users, as demand is increasing. Additionally, the scope of professionals working in ICWs is considered too limited, as more gender experts and office workers are needed. Finally, they also stressed the need to have more stable contracts and to be incorporated in the institutional employees' framework (*RPT*) like any other member of staff; staff working in ICWs indicate that this is only the case in 27% of municipalities.

5.2.2. ICW actions

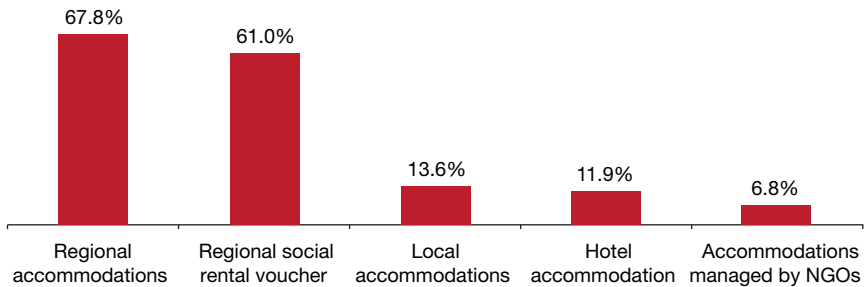
When exploring the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, assessing ICW performance is of relevance. First, Graph 12 shows the evolution of measures relating to the attention of women suffering GBV. Two types of actions increased during the pandemic: providing information and advice, and providing legal assistance. Measures relating to psychological counselling and to support to access housing resources also increased slightly, but only once lockdown was over. In contrast, support to access economic and social resources for women in situations of violence diminished by almost seven points during lockdown, before returning to pre-pandemic levels afterwards.

Housing resources (shelters, flats etc.) were especially important during the pandemic. More than 60% of the ICWs confirm that they helped women in situations of violence to get access to housing resources belonging to the regional administration (Graph 14). Up to 14% had housing resources at the local level, 12% occasionally had to find temporary accommodation such as hotels, and 7% worked with shelters managed by NGOs. More than 70% of ICWs consider that altogether these resources are not sufficient.

The pandemic resulted in a rise in demand for housing resources, as ICWs perceived that there were more women in need of accommodation. Yet around 80% affirm that the supply of public and private housing resources did not increase (Graph 15). Likewise, 41% of ICWs consider that the capacity of these services to offer a quick response worsened during COVID-19.

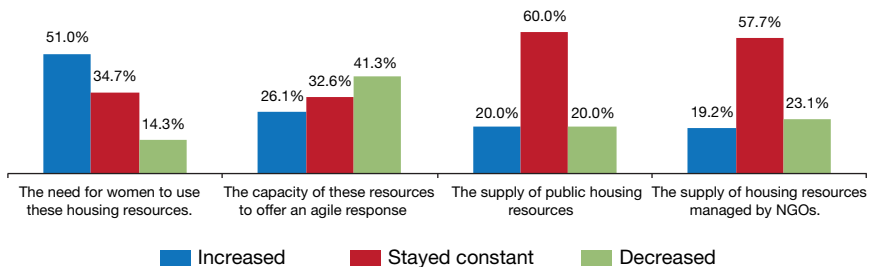
As for the performance of ICWs, the data indicate that actions relating to awareness-raising, gender training or gender mainstreaming were severely affected during the pandemic. Graph 16 shows that the percentage of ICWs that carried out GBV awareness-raising actions, promoted women’s well-being and health, implemented training on equality and GBV or undertook activities for non-sexist education dropped by more than 30 points during lockdown. More than half of Galician municipalities did not carry out this type of action at all. Interestingly, the presence of these interventions did not go back to pre-pandemic levels, except for non-sexist education activities. The impact on training activities is of particular concern, as gender knowledge and awareness-raising activities are crucial for implementing gender mainstreaming and involving all civil servants. Before the pandemic, almost 70%

Graph 14. Housing resources managed by ICWs



Source: authors’ own.

Graph 15. Impact of the pandemic on housing resources



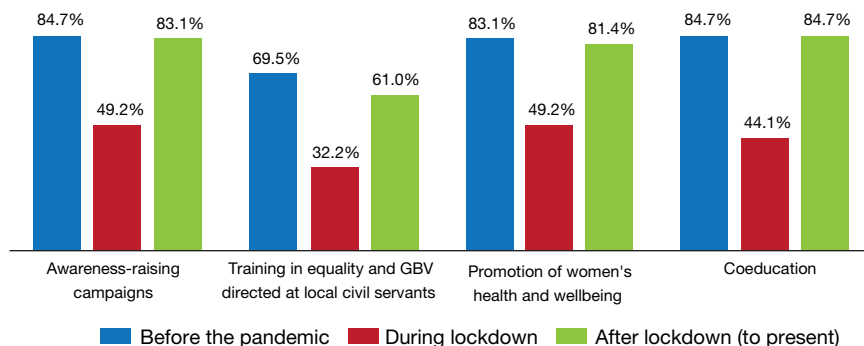
Source: authors’ own.

of the municipalities claimed to carry out gender training activities; now this percentage is 61%.

Figures are even more negative when we explore actions relating to women's participation and empowerment. In Graph 17, we see that these types of activities took place in 30% of the ICWs during lockdown, dropping by half compared to the situation before the pandemic. The presence of support groups for women suffering GBV replicates pre-pandemic levels. Yet both the promotion of women's associations and political participation dropped significantly (8%), showing the lasting legacy of the COVID-19 crisis.

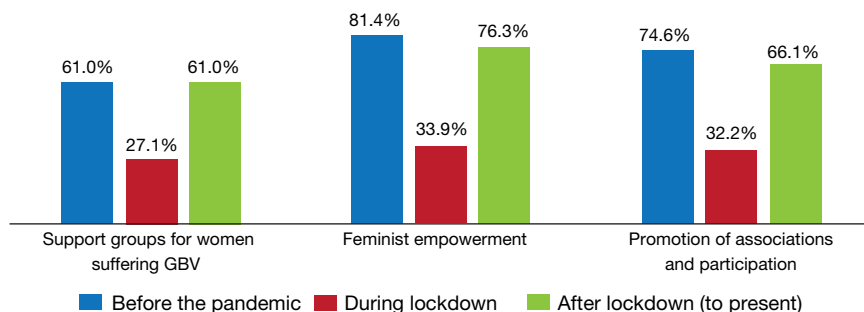
The pandemic forced public institutions to provide services remotely. ICWs were no exception and had to adapt abruptly to this new scenario. Graph 18 shows the extent to which ICWs provided face-to-face services before COVID-19. For instance, attention to women who suffer GBV (information, legal advice etc.) was offered using hybrid tools (remote and

Graph 16. Actions relating to awareness-raising and training



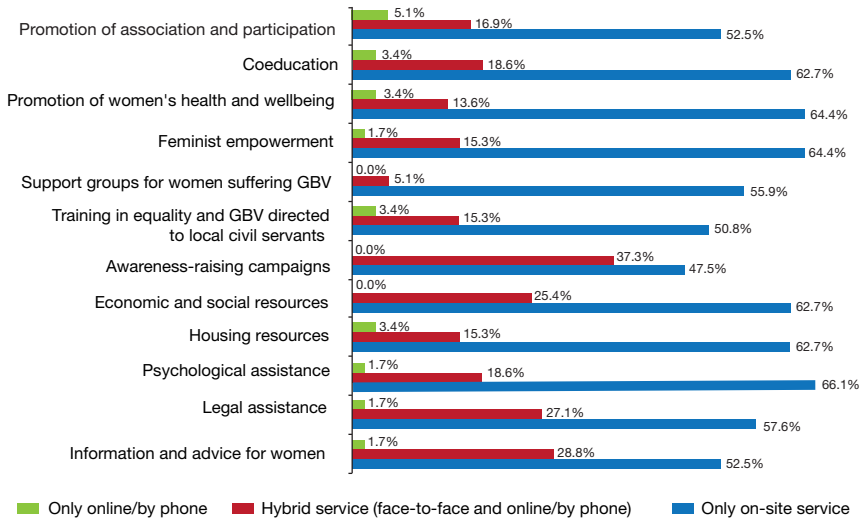
Source: authors' own.

Graph 17. Actions relating to the participation and empowerment of women



Source: authors' own.

Graph 18. E-administration before the pandemic



Source: authors' own.

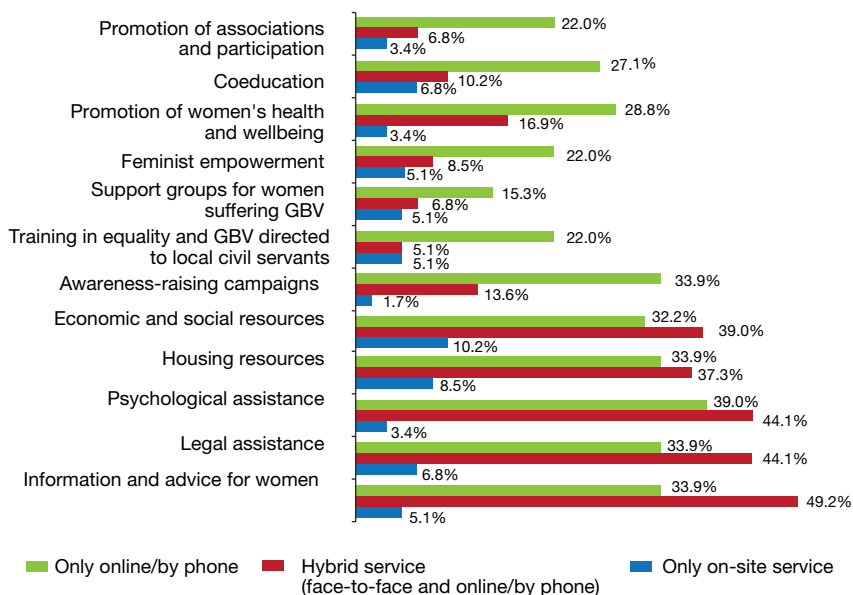
on-site) in only 30% of the municipalities; online provision was even more marginal.

The picture changed quickly when lockdowns and restrictions were enforced. Although ICWs continued to offer certain services to address GBV, the provision was mostly carried out online or in a hybrid mode (combining face-to-face with online/phone services) (Graph 19). The percentage of centres that kept offering on-site services was very small.

One key question is whether these changes remained in place once restrictions were lifted. Graph 20 indicates that hybrid forms of service provision seem to have been consolidated after the pandemic. Currently, more than half of ICWs use them to inform and advise women who suffer GBV or to provide legal assistance. Around 40% also use them to offer psychological counselling, to provide support to access social and economic resources or housing resources, and to carry out awareness-raising campaigns. For the remaining types of action, hybrid modes are used by approximately 30% of the municipalities.

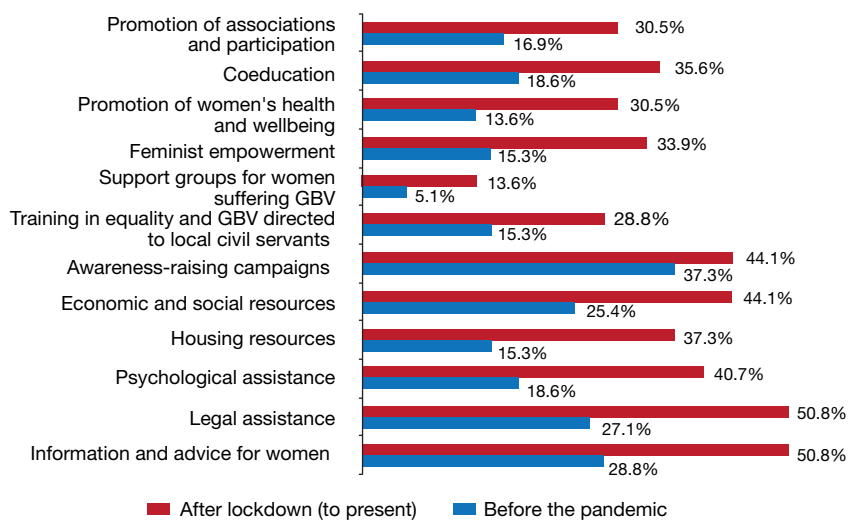
All these changes had a massive impact on staff. The survey included information on the challenges they encounter in performing their jobs. The level of difficulty was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was equivalent to non-existent or a very low level and 5 to a very high level of difficulty. As Graph 21 shows, ICW workers identify the worsening of working conditions as a key challenge: long working hours, increased health and safety risks, diversification of tasks, etc. The average score for this question is 3.4. The next problem,

Graph 19. E-administration during confinement



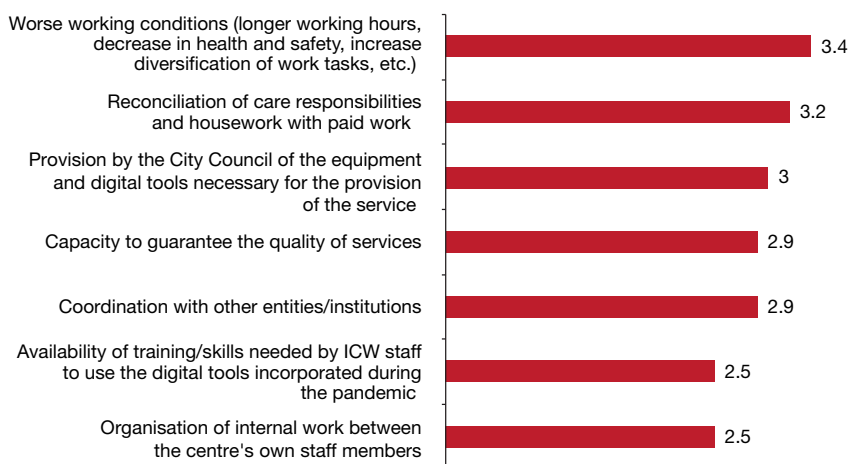
Source: authors' own.

Graph 20. Evolution of services provided through hybrid mechanisms (face-to-face and remote)



Source: authors' own.

Graph 21. Type of challenges in delivering services during the pandemic (1=not difficult, 5=very difficult)

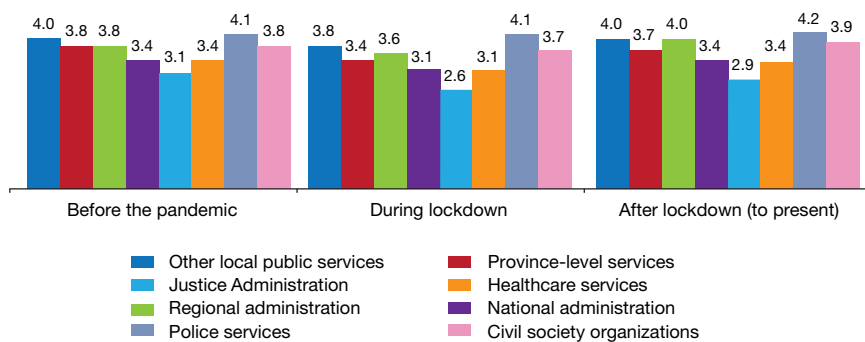


Source: authors' own.

with an average score of 3.2, has to do with reconciling personal life with work during the pandemic. It reflects how lockdowns had a massive impact on care and housework. Thirdly, respondents point to access to appropriate devices and equipment to provide services online. The capacity to guarantee the quality of services (a score of 2.9), the availability of training in using digital tools and/or the skills to do so (a score of 2.5), and the internal organization of work (a score of 2.5) emerge as less significant challenges.

5.2.3. *Coordination with other key institutions*

The final dimension of analysis refers to the coordination of ICWs with other key institutions for delivering GBV-related services. ICWs often represent the first service that women have access to. Indeed, regional regulations establish that ICWs should provide information and support to women when navigating the plurality of resources available in GBV policies. Data gathered for this study includes the average level of satisfaction of ICWs with inter-institutional coordination (Graph 22). This indicator is measured on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest level of satisfaction and 5 is the highest level of satisfaction. Likewise, professionals were requested to assess this item for three different points in time: before the pandemic, during lockdown, and after lockdown. The first period features an average score in the level of satisfaction of 3.7 out of 5. When exploring the assessment of the coordination with different bodies, we identify significant variations. The worst values correspond to working with the judiciary (3.1), followed by the regional healthcare service (3.4) and the national administration (3.4). In contrast, police services (4.1) and other local services (4.0) receive the highest levels of approval.

Graph 22. Level of satisfaction with coordination with other institutions (scale 1-5)

Source: authors' own.

The lockdown period shows an overall drop in the average value of this indicator (3.4). Again, differences arise when exploring coordination with several institutions. The assessment of working with the judiciary worsens even further (2.6), while police services are the only department that receives better figures. Finally, in the post-lockdown period, the average degree of satisfaction goes back to pre-pandemic levels (3.7). Figures improve especially for police services (4.2), regional administration (4), and civil society organizations specializing in GBV (3.9). However, the average does not reach the level of 2019. Although the assessment of staff is generally positive, it is worth noting the very negative evaluation of coordination with the judiciary, as this institution is crucial for protecting and attending to women.

Local Inter-institutional Coordination Bodies represent another key device for developing policies against GBV. They bring together local authorities (including local councils and/or associations of municipalities), representatives from regional and national governments, members of the police services (local police and the *guardia civil*), and civil servants from education and healthcare centres. This plural composition contributes to improving coordination and information-gathering at the local level. Data from this study indicates that 86.4% of ICWs take part in one of those mechanisms. Yet, most of them (66%) did not work during lockdown, a period when coordination was more necessary than ever, as cases were on the rise and most services struggled to cope.

6. Conclusions

The literature on gender policies has repeatedly shown that crises have a gendered impact, often leading to setbacks in terms of the promotion of equality. Austerity policies developed during the 2008 crisis, for instance, led to significant reversals in the equality framework. The global health emergency generated by COVID-19 had vast economic and social consequences, and from the very beginning, researchers sought to identify its differential

effects for men and women. They reported an increase in inequalities and the lack of a gender perspective in the political response to the pandemic. However, unlike previous crises, many governments did try to implement specific policies to mitigate some problems that were aggravated during this period, as was the case with violence against women. However, few analyses delve into this policy domain to map and assess the specific changes that were put in place.

This article addresses the need to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on this policy issue. We do so by exploring the case of Spain and focusing on GBV policies at the local level in Galicia. The study presents an original database that pioneers the analysis of key dimensions of GBV policies from a longitudinal perspective. It identifies changes that occurred during the pandemic and highlights those that remained after that period. In common with academic research on the 2008 economic crisis, the theoretical expectation was to find significant setbacks.

Data gathered for this study shows a rather mixed picture in the case of Galician ICWs. Their funding and human resources were not significantly affected, yet gender equality lacked centrality in the agenda. Despite the emergency situation and the increasing number of GBV cases, resources were not expanded, and services were provided thanks to the notable efforts of ICWs staff members. Indeed, the data reflect very clearly the extent to which working conditions worsened during this period (longer working hours, work overload, task diversification, stress, etc.). In terms of actions, attention to women suffering GBV was prioritized over other preventive measures (awareness-raising activities, gender training, participation, etc.). The provision of services had to be adapted to social distancing measures, just as in other public institutions. We see how digital and hybrid modes became the norm; and also, the extent to which they are currently widespread in the work of ICWs. Further research should explore the implications of such changes. Finally, the empirical evidence indicates that coordination with other institutions was less effective during lockdown. Key mechanisms did not work at all, and this had a negative impact on the quality and effectiveness of services to address GBV.

We can conclude that GBV policies have undergone another crisis that has deepened former constraints. Staff at ICWs have experienced a greater impact on their working conditions, and seen new setbacks in GBV policies that they have tried to mitigate. More research is needed to map the evolution of GBV policies at other local institutions during COVID-19, and to understand their implications for the quality of public services in the long run.

Acknowledgements

Natalia Paleo would like to thank Prof. Joaquim Filipe Ferraz Esteves de Araújo for his useful and constructive suggestions during a research visit to the University of Minho (Braga).

Funding

This research received funding from the Ministry of Science and Innovation under the R&D Program Oriented to the Challenges of Society - RETOS (PID2020-115760RB-I00), and from the Galician Ministry of Culture, Education and Universities under the Program for Competitive Research Groups (ED431B 2020/23).

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