

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE EMPLOYEES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

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INTRODUCTION

The novel corona virus, COVID-19, caused significant disruptions around the world. Governments around the world, and Kosovo is not an exception, as a means to tackle the rapid spread of the virus, introduced and implemented a number of measures that affected all the sectors of social life, and economy. One of the first to be affected by these measures was the education sector. Ministry of Education and Science of Kosovo announced that all education institutions would be shut down to prevent the spread of the virus, on the 12th of March 2020.¹ While on the 23rd of March, it announced the implementation of distance teaching with lesson materials prepared to be broadcasted on public television for pre-university education institutions.² The rest were forced to shift to entirely online teaching. These measures affected around 450,000 students and around 31,000 employees in the education sector of all levels.³ While exceptional teaching in times of armed conflicts was not a new phenomenon for Kosovo, teaching during a pandemic of this scale, coupled with technology that had perfectly been utilized to deliver this teaching, proved to be at a different level of the exceptional and completely unprecedented. Education institution closures and implementation of distance learning affected the employees of this sector severely on different levels starting with: financial, as economies contracted and unemployment increased; professional, as teachers were suddenly forced to entirely virtual teaching without sufficient professional preparation and their professional development was placed online; and psychological, as complete lockdowns confined people to their homes and contracting economies decreased economic prosperity.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

COVID-19 pandemic had a huge and lasting impact on the economies of countries around the world. Kosovo is not an exception. OECD prognosticate that due to the COVID-19 outbreak, Kosovo's economy is going to contract by 1.6% to 5.2% in 2020.⁴ Even though the financial

¹ Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. 11 March 2020. Retrieved from: <https://masht.rks-gov.net/article/njoftim-31>

² Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. 23 March 2020. Retrieved from: <https://masht.rks-gov.net/article/njoftim-32>

³ Agency of Statistics in Kosovo. (2019). Retrieved from: https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5460/statistikat-e-arsimit-n%C3%AB%20kosov%C3%AB_2019-20_gjuheshqipe.pdf

⁴ OECD. „Covid-19 Crisis in Kosovo“. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Kosovo.pdf>

impact may not have been felt by every household, in a great number of households, it was felt profoundly. According to the June report by UNDP, around 49 % of households, had reported to have experienced a drop of income because of the pandemic.⁵ In a country where 64% of families have a cumulative income of less than 800 Euros⁶, this fact has had profound effects. According to an OECD report on COVID-19 effect in Kosovo, as of June 2020, the number of job seekers, between January and April 2020, rose by six times, compared to the same period in the previous year.⁷ Every sector of the economy experienced a financial blow, with some sectors being more affected than others, by the pandemic.

As far as the education sector is concerned, the main way that the pandemic has affected the employees within this sector financially, is through salaries. This being especially true for employees in the private sector with an emphasis on pre-primary education employees, supportive workers, and part time teachers on temporary contracts.

The salaries of the employees in the public education sector weren't as profoundly affected during the pandemic, and this is true for all the levels of education, as well as all other divisions within the Public Sector. According to a survey conducted by D4D, around 82% of the people who participated in it, from the public sector, confirmed that they hadn't been affected by the pandemic in any way, at their workplace.⁸ Teachers and professors were paid as usual and there wasn't a particular problem reported with the processing of the salaries. There haven't been major problems reported, with unanticipated termination of contracts or forced unpaid leaves. According to SBASHK Legal Office, all the educators of all levels, in the public sector, have been paid regularly, as they had been paid before the onset of the pandemic, without any delays or payment cut downs. SBASHK further ensures that there have not been any problems, incited, for substitute teachers or teachers with temporary contracts, in public education institutions. The same applies to administrative and maintenance staff and all the others that are members of the union.⁹

The case of the employees, in the private education sector, is different, though. As it is true for

⁵ UNDP. Rapid Socio-Economic impact assessment of COVID-19 in Kosovo 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/poverty/rapid-socio-economic-impact-assessment-of-covid-19-in-kosovo.html>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ OECD. „Covid-19 Crisis in Kosovo“. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-in-Kosovo.pdf>

⁸ Democracy for Development. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://d4d-ks.org/infografikat/si-ka-ndikuar-panemia-covid-19-ne-vendin-tuaj-te-punes/>

⁹ Shatri, Blendor. SBASHK. 2020. Interview.

most divisions in the private sector, as a D4D conducted survey shows, around 65% of the survey participants employed in the private sector, reported that the pandemic negatively affected them, in their workplace.¹⁰ This includes delay of salary payment, cut downs on salaries or unanticipated termination of contracts.

Private education institutions, heavily reliant on student fee payments, were not able to pay their employees because of the lack of input i.e., student payments.

Pre-primary private education especially suffered a significant financial blow because a great number of parents, who back then were not going to work and were staying with kids at home for several months, unregistered their kids altogether from pre-primary institutions. Naturally, even those that maintained the registration, did not pay any fees because the children weren't going to their respective kindergartens and no regular online "lessons" were conducted, as the pre-primary education has different requirements when it comes to the conveying of educative "lessons". Lack of fund denoted lack of payments for the employed staff.

Consequently, most employees weren't paid at all during the months of the total lock-down and the contracts of many were terminated. This is especially true for pre-primary private education institutions that accommodate large numbers of children and which due to decrease in demand had to cut on staff.

Similarly, private pre-university education institutions as well as higher education institutions faced the same problems. Most of these institutions enable payments made through rates for their students. According to these institutions, especially those of pre-university education, because many parents and students were uncertain about the future, a great number of the former delayed the payments of school fees because they either had financial problems themselves or they were unsure about what the future would bring i.e. whether they would have sufficient financial resources in case of an economic depression. Several parents, also, according to these institutions, refused to pay the remaining fees because their kids were not attending school physically and they deemed online lessons as unworthy of any payment due to speculations on the latter's quality. This, in turn, was reflected on the salaries of the employees in these institutions. Because these institutions lacked financial resources, employees could not be paid fully or there were delays in the payments of the salaries.¹¹ This particularly affected substitute and part-time teachers as well as those on temporary

¹⁰ Democracy for Development. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://d4d-ks.org/infografikat/si-ka-ndikuar-panemia-covid-19-ne-vendin-tuaj-te-punes/>

¹¹ Ibrahim, Egzon. International School of Prishtina. Interview.

contracts because of their irregular working hours. When it comes to the delay of payments and cut downs on salaries, institutions claimed to have partly compensated their employees and that they continue to do so, as the financial situation got better with the reopening of the economy.¹²

A great number of employees however, at least for the beginning of the pandemic, with a particular emphasis on pre-primary private education employees, were solely dependent on the Emergency Fiscal Package. The Emergency Fiscal Package was approved by Kurti government on the 30th of March 2020, and provided, concerning the employees in the education sector, covering of expenditures for the monthly salaries in the amount of one hundred seventy (170) Euros for April and May, amounting to forty-one million (41,000,000.00) Euros, as well as other benefits for other sectors of state economy.¹³

However due to political instability with change of governments as well as, according to the Ministry of Finances and Transfers, due to a great number of mistakes made during the process of application for benefiting from the package, there were substantial delays in the implementation of the package.¹⁴ Considering that the amount of the benefits itself is not sufficient to be solely dependent on it, the delay of the payment, additionally, of those benefits, negatively affected the employees in the private education sector, financially. Of those, most negatively affected, were the employees within this sector, who couldn't work online, including maintenance, cleaning and catering workers. Because the services of these workers are directly linked to the institutions' buildings and physical attendance of students, the closure of these building and the lack of student attendance decreased the demand for their services, as a result of which, none of them were paid during the lock-down period and the contracts of many of these workers were permanently terminated. Even after the reopening of the schools, many of these services, especially catering services, continue to operate with reduced staff, as the government infection prevention measures prohibit the distribution of food in schools, therefore a great number of staff is not required.¹⁵ With no payments from their workplace received, and insufficient and delayed government benefits, these employees were led towards a deep financial crisis.

¹² Luta, Fadil. Kolegji Universi. Interview.

¹³ Primeminister Office. Retrieved from: <https://kryeministri-ks.net/en/approval-of-emergency-fiscal-package/>

¹⁴ Evropa e lire. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/bizneset-kosova-pakoja-emergjente/30669686.html>

¹⁵ Baruti, Egzon. International School of Prishtina. Interview.

The employees in the same sector, in public education institutions and at the same time members of SBASHK, did not face the same financial problems, as stated previously.

PROFESSIONAL IMPACT

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 crisis forced education institutions into virtual classrooms completely unprepared. When it comes to the professional impact, the most impacted of the employees in the education sector were the teachers and professors. Right from the implementation of measures from the government to halt the spread of the novel virus, teachers of all educational levels, were forced to transfer their whole teaching to online platforms or other means of teaching, within a noticeably short period of time.

Even though Kosovo ranks amongst the countries at top of the list regarding household internet access in Europe, with 93% of Kosovo households having internet access¹⁶, professional use of internet and its utilization for online teaching, makes a different question. Even in the EU, where digital connectivity in schools is a more common occurrence than in Kosovo, only around 25% of students are taught by teachers who are confident users of technology, according to a World Bank report.¹⁷

Hence, adapting to virtual teaching posed a difficult task for many teachers and professors. Concerning pre-university public education institutions, Ministry of Education and Science of Kosovo, due to the situation incited by the pandemic, prepared teaching materials for distance learning, introduced on the 23rd of March 2020, which materials would be broadcasted in the public broadcaster RTK1 and RTK4.¹⁸ The majority of lesson materials were broadcasted through television so it didn't leave any need for the teachers to implement different lesson plans, therefore no specific professional training was needed. Despite the broadcasting of the lessons, the teachers had to also organize occasional meeting sessions with the students through online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, which platforms require familiarity with the use of technology. This posed as a difficulty for some, especially for older teachers who are not familiar with the use of technology or its utilization for teaching. Around 40 % of

¹⁶ Eurostat. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals#:~:text=By%202019%2C%20the%20share%20of,in%202009%20\(55%20%25\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals#:~:text=By%202019%2C%20the%20share%20of,in%202009%20(55%20%25).).

¹⁷ World Bank. (2020). Retrieved from:

<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/590751590682058272/pdf/The-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-COVID-19-Education.pdf>

¹⁸ Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://masht.rks-gov.net/article/njoftim-33>

teachers faced difficulties of various levels. SBASHK stated that they had organized previously, through the years, different trainings, for teachers of all education levels, to familiarize them with the use of technology and continued to do so during the pandemic, in order to support them, but with end results of various satisfactory levels.¹⁹ Professionally, student performance evaluation posed considerable difficulty for pre-university teachers of public education teachers, as well, as due to TV broadcasted style of lesson delivery there was lack of interaction between teacher and student. Conduction of effective exams was of equal difficulty. The Ministry aimed to solve this by instructing teachers to grade students according to the grades of the previous semesters of the latter.

University professors, whose courses were entirely virtually conducted, faced, also, considerable difficulty. Many of them, especially of age, required help from members of their respective families to familiarize themselves with the use of Zoom, Google Classroom, and other virtual platforms.²⁰

There were also professors that, prior to the pandemic, had never utilized technology in their lectures, therefore online teaching, and the lack of blackboards, made it difficult for them, professionally, to adapt their teaching style according to the online world.

As for educators employed in the pre-primary sector, Ministry of Education and Science, with the help of UNICEF and Save the Children, launched a platform, on the 13th of April, "Distance Education- Care, Development and Education in the early childhood for children aged 0-6 years old", to support and help educators to develop professionally, that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, deliver the right education for the children of this age group.²¹ An instruction video was also made available for the educators to learn how to use the platform. The success of the implementation of the platform between private and public pre-primary institutions was of various degrees.

The case was slightly different for teachers employed in private institutions. Private schools had utilized and implemented technology, prior to the pandemic, in different and innovative ways in their lesson plans. Some report to have conducted online tests before and to have used smart boards with students, interactively. Therefore, transferring to an entirely virtual

¹⁹ Shatri, Blendor. Interview. SBASHK.

²⁰ Luta, Fadil. Interview. Kolegji Universi.

²¹ Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://masht.rks-gov.net/article/komunikate-44>

teaching platform, proved to be slightly easier, professionally, for the employees of these institutions.²²

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

The undertaken measures to contain the virus, affected people, not only financially and professionally but also psychologically. Being confined to the premises of the houses, unable to go out, the fear of death or sickness, profoundly, affected people, psychologically. According to a UNDP report, 28 % of the people who took part in their survey reported to have experienced effects on their mental and psychological health because of the pandemic. The most affected group appears to be the people of ages 25-44, while as for the region, Gjakova and Prizren are reported to be the most affected.²³

Teachers bore an extra burden on their mental health as they had to deliver their teaching during unprecedented times as well as during a global crisis. Additionally, they also had to support their students' mental health and emotional needs. Teaching online was stressful as most teachers were not prepared professionally for it. According to the Center for Psychological Assistance at the University of Prishtina, many teachers called for psychological consultation due to the stress induced by online teaching due to the former being unprepared professionally to conduct it effectively. Additionally, a great number of teachers, reportedly, faced considerable stress with student's performance evaluation, as stated previously, TV broadcasted and online lessons made it difficult to evaluate students. Many teachers also complained about mental distress caused by demanding parents of students who intervened in the formers' teaching methods and student evaluation results.²⁴ A considerable number of complaints of mental distress, at this center, were also made by male educators, who in a considerably traditional society, where males are the breadwinners that are typically found outside houses, could not cope with being confined to their houses.

When it comes to the traditional society division of male/female work spheres, there was one other aspect that profoundly affected the mental health of the teachers. The majority of the employees in the education sector is made up of women. According to a report by UNDP, there are far many more women working in the education and health sector, 23 % respectively,

²² Baruti, Egzon. International School of Prishtina. Interview.

²³ UNDP. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/library/poverty/rapid-socio-economic-impact-assessment-of-covid-19-in-kosovo.html>

²⁴ Halimi, Njomza. Center for Psychological Assistance, University of Prishtina. Interview.

compared to men, who make 8 % of work force in that sector. In the average Kosovan , still quite "traditional", household, the load of housework and childcare is mostly transferred to women. According to a number of reports conducted by D4D on the sharing of parental responsibility in childcare as well as the sharing of household chores, during the pandemic, around 30% of the participants in the survey have declared that mainly women have cared for the children, with 38% percent of the participants declaring other forms of childcare. Only 28% of the participants have reported of having shared the parental responsibility in childcare.²⁵ In addition to that, when it came to the sharing of household chores, during the lock-down period where men and women were confined to their houses, according to another report by D4D, approximately 1 in 4 men in Kosovo, spent 0 hours helping their wives with house chores. While 47% helped for 1-2 and 23.7 % for 2-4 h. Only a small number of men, 1.8 % helped for up to 8 hours.²⁶ Taking into consideration the previous fact that the majority of employees in the education sector is women then female teachers were one of the most affected groups, psychologically, as the pressure of the household and childcare doubled their stress, and the grappling with balancing both of these duties, added to their pressure, which in turn affected their mental health, profoundly. According to the Psychological Assistance at the University of Prishtina, many female teachers who called for Psychological consultation, complained about the hard time they were having at home and the difficulty of managing their professional life while having the majority of the household and childcare burden on their shoulders.²⁷

Additionally, financial instability, significantly, affected the mental health of the employees in this sector. Employees in the maintenance, cleaning and catering services were particularly affected, as stated previously, many didn't receive salaries and the contracts of many were terminated, so many were left without a job amidst a global pandemic. The Agency for Employment, in April alone, registered 32,377 new job-seekers.²⁸ With a country unemployment rate of 25,7%²⁹ being left without a job amidst pandemic, an uncertain future of financial security, brings significant distress and negatively affects the mental health of

²⁵ Democracy for Development. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://d4d-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2-ALB.png>

²⁶ Democracy for Development. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://d4d-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/info1ALB.png>

²⁷ Halimi, Njomza. Center for Psychological Assistance, University of Prishtina. Interview.

²⁸ GAP Institute. 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.institutigap.org/documents/97205_covid_tregu_punes.pdf

²⁹ Agency of Statistics in Kosovo. 2019. Retrieved from: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5412/labour-force-survey-2019.pdf>

these employees. Psychological Assistance was offered to the educators of all levels in public education institutions as an initiative by SBASHK, who employed a team of eight professional psychologists that worked online to offer assistance to any educator or support worker that needed it.³⁰ The Center for Psychological Assistance at the University of Prishtina, offered significant assistance and was open to anyone, including teachers. Most of private education institutions have psychologists employed at their premises and reported to have helped if needed. However, the stigmatization of mental illnesses and health is well established in Kosovo, therefore demand was considerably low despite great need.

COMPARISON

Most of the world was unprepared for the breakout of the pandemic, therefore from the onset of the pandemic, educators were immediately tasked with implementing distance learning often without sufficient professional preparation and guidance, which is true for most countries.³¹ Although cross-country data are unavailable regionally, clear indications pinpointed to the lack of sufficient professional competence of the teachers, across Western Balkans, to effectively conduct qualitative distance learning for a long period of time.³² Findings from many countries demonstrate that most education systems are unable to provide teachers with efficacious means, professionally, to teach remotely for a long time.³³ Even in the EU, where digital connectivity in schools is a more common occurrence than in Kosovo and the region, only around 25% of students are taught by teachers who are confident users of technology.³⁴ Regionally speaking, however, when it comes to digital competence, Serbia, for example, has a specific digital competence curriculum for teachers, while at the same time checks their ability to use digital technologies when assessing students. In Montenegro and North Macedonia, digital competencies for teachers are among general teacher competence

³⁰ Shatri, Blendor. SBASHK. Interview.

³¹ UN. 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

³² World Bank. 2020. Retrieved from: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/590751590682058272/pdf/The-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-COVID-19-Education.pdf>

³³ UNDP. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.mk.undp.org/content/north-macedonia/en/home/library/poverty/Inclusive-Education-Learning-And-Distance-Learning.html>

³⁴ World Bank. 2020. Retrieved from: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/590751590682058272/pdf/The-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-COVID-19-Education.pdf>

criteria, though that is not true of Albania and Bosnia (and Kosovo as well)³⁵. Yet, even though in Serbia, for example, digital competence is a part of the curriculum for teachers, fifty six percent (56%) of teachers surveyed reported that they still required a different levels professional development and training in ICT-related fields.³⁶ Nevertheless, adapting to virtual distance teaching and confident utilization of technology for teaching proved challenging, professionally, for most teachers around the world. Financially, as it is true for Kosovo, nearly two-thirds of Education Unions around the world, participants on an ISSUU conducted report, reported that education workers in private institutions were significantly affected by the pandemic, with an emphasis on part-time teachers on temporary contracts and support workers.³⁷ For example in Sri Lanka, as in Kosovo, teachers in private schools and preschools are not paid their salaries because students do not pay their monthly fees.³⁸ Thirty-two percent (32%) also reported that education support personnel's employment conditions were affected by the pandemic. As in Kosovo, almost two-thirds of the unions reported that Early Childhood Education workers were significantly affected.

To tackle mental health deterioration because of the pandemic, many countries integrated psychological support into their contingency plans and manuals for teachers and at the same time NGOs mobilized to provide additional support. Psychological help for teachers was provided by many education systems as a means to support teachers' mental health who continued to teach in unprecedented and difficult times.

While Kosovo continued with school closures and distance learning as the rest of the Western Balkans, until September, when the new semester started, some countries such as Germany, reopened schools at the beginning of May for students who were soon facing exams and primary school pupils, implementing a rotation strategy (one week school attendance, one week distance learning), which put the employees of this sector, at a higher risk for a possibility of infection with the virus.³⁹

³⁵ World Bank. 2020. Retrieved from: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/590751590682058272/pdf/The-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-COVID-19-Education.pdf>

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ ISSUU. 2020. Retrieved from: https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_covid19_survey_report_eng_final

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Local. <https://www.thelocal.de/20200506/germany-set-to-reopen-all-shops-and-schools-in-may>