

Covid-19: Globally, the pandemic hits women

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In his article, “C’est la lutte finale”, Mike Davis argues: “The current pandemic on a global scale exposes and widens the existential divides within and between societies, and reminds us that the survival of the poorest fifth of humanity is increasingly at question.” [1] It’s an important piece in many regards, but there is a significant omission - the word women does not appear in almost 9,000 words.

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In this article, I start to explore the impact of the pandemic, and the sharp economic crisis that has deepened in its wake on 52 per cent of humanity – on women. The current political situation is both laying bare and exacerbating existing inequalities. To assess it without making women’s position central will not adequately equip us to respond to either the profound challenges or the seeds of positive change facing us.

While statistics indicate that a greater proportion of men than women have died as a direct result of Covid-19, in other significant ways women’s position is more adversely affected.

The International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) June report on the world of work puts it like this;

“In contrast to previous crises, women’s employment is at greater risk than men’s, particularly owing to the impact of the downturn on the service sector. At the same time, women account for a large proportion of workers in front-line occupations, especially in the health and social care sectors. Moreover, the increased burden of unpaid care brought by the crisis affects women more than men.” [2]

And the Informal economy?

This quote from the ILO ignores the informal economy, which has also been particularly impacted.

People working in the informal economy in the vast majority of cases live hand to mouth, with neither savings nor food supplies to fall back on if they are not able to engage in their “normal” activity. These two billion workers represented 60 per cent of the world’s employed population in 2018. For many of them, the need to quarantine if they show symptoms of the virus, or to physically distance while selling their wares, is impossible. This raises the serious risk of further spread of the virus. The fact that a high proportion live in dense shanty towns exacerbates the risks even further.

In its April 2018 report, “Women and men in the informal economy; a statistical picture (third edition)” the ILO notes;

“Countries with the lowest level of GDP per capita tend to have the highest level of informality The gender gap in the share of informal employment is also more likely to be positive in countries with the lowest level of GDP per capita, which means that women are more likely to be in informal employment than men. The gender gap is actually positive in two out of three low- and lower-middle income countries.” [3]

Those who work in the informal economy are more likely to feel impelled to continue to work, despite the threat to their and their families’ health, than those in more secure forms of employment. But it’s not always possible.

If you make your living selling to tourists, as huge numbers do across different continents, when there are no tourists, there is no income. If you normally travel to your place of informal work on cheap public transport, several hours walk from where you live, and there is no public transport because of the pandemic, you cannot sell your goods. If you are a sex worker, whether working on the streets or as an escort, the market for your services is severely affected by lockdown in many countries.

For many informal workers, the repression and militarisation that has frequently accompanied lockdowns (from Duterte’s Philippines to Bolsonaro’s Brazil, from Orban’s Hungary to Trump’s USA) make their lives even more precarious. This is particularly the case for those whose migration status and or lack of gender conformity pushes them further to marginalisation. [4]

Multiple whammy

To unpick this further we can say that women are faced with a multiple whammy:

- Women have lost income, as sectors such as hospitality are disproportionately affected by the crisis. There have been measures of partial protection, mainly in the global north, where workers have not initially been sacked but laid off and paid a proportion of their normal income by the state. But even here women are disproportionately hit.
- If your pre-pandemic life, working two or more jobs, left you on the edge of poverty, then the loss of even part of that income is even more disastrous. And many of these jobs will permanently disappear as the crisis deepens. And for many women, employment also means some independence and self worth.
- Significant numbers of women work in socially necessary services – health, education, care, food production and distribution, and transport. In these sectors, the provision of personal protective equipment and other essential health and safety measures have often been life threateningly lacking. This criminal deficit has been met with resistance, as we can see from the hunger strikes of doctors in Pakistan in April or the action of Nigerian doctors in June and Zimbabwean nurses and doctors as I write. Women, and particularly migrant and indigenous women, are more likely to work in the least protected jobs within these sectors e.g. as cleaners in the health service or in care homes. [5]
- “Stay home stay safe” is dangerous for those of us for whom home is a site of abuse. [6] In 2017, 38 per cent of murders of women in Europe were committed by a male intimate partner. 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner in their lifetime.

- This also applies to younger people including LGBTQI youth forced back into parental homes by the economic crisis, or deprived of the social support that community organisations or places to socialise previously offered.

The dangers are compounded where increased criminalisation and militarisation accompanied lockdown.

Domestic labour

The most gendered effect of the pandemic is the reprivatisation – and feminisation – of domestic work. Women spent more than 3.2 times as much time on unpaid work as men before the pandemic. The gap between the hours of domestic work carried out by women and by men was narrowing very, very slowly.

Food poverty has deepened during the pandemic including in the global north. The lengthening of queues in shops and food projects, the shortages of supplies of basic staples as well as the closure of cafes and restaurants disproportionately affect women. Women often make sure that children and adult males are fed before themselves.

But childcare is also central. For millions of people the informal support that was central to the patchwork that makes up childcare, from older relatives and family friends, has been torn away. The fact that the pandemic itself is generally more often fatal amongst older people is a factor, but so too are the effects of lockdown and sometimes militarisation.

Schools have closed in 190 countries according to the UN. [7] Where online education has been provided, this has served to illustrate the sharp digital and other forms of poverty that exist in working class communities. Living in overcrowded homes is not conducive to learning, even where individual motivation and parental support exist.

Even for those working from home, the differentials are sharp. In households where two adults in a heterosexual relationship live with children and both work at home, there are many anecdotes that tell how women's working day is interrupted to deal with children while men seem much more able to ignore them.

So the differences between the levels of domestic labour carried out by women and by men are almost certainly increasing again.

And there is a vicious circle between increased domestic labour and unemployment for women. A survey conducted in Nairobi's informal settlements, for example, revealed that 42% of women were unable to get paid work because of an increased care and domestic workload caused by the pandemic. [8] In Britain, half of working mothers said they were unable to find the childcare they needed to return to work. [9]

Context of struggle

Objective reality seems bleak and governments and bosses are determined to make sure that the costs of the crisis are borne by the already dispossessed. But we are not passive observers of what is happening to our lives, livelihoods and communities.

In recent years we have seen a new wave of mass feminist movements and an increased

participation and leadership of women in mass broad protest movements and uprisings. [10] So internationally women went into the pandemic in a better position to resist backlashes than would otherwise have been the case.

The growth and international spread of the Black Lives Matter movement since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 is impressive. The movement was originally created by three women in 2013 to protest police violence in the United States. Now, millions, particularly of young people, have mobilised. Discussions about the legacy of slavery, of imperialism and racism were previously the preserve of Black activists, and to a lesser extent of the left. Now they are extensively covered by significant sections of the mainstream media.

And political debate is extending on other questions too. Across the globe, existing community organisations, spawned to deal with previous disasters, have reanimated, while others have sprung into existence, dealing with food poverty, isolation, state violence and more.

The pandemic has led to discussion about what kind of work is valuable in itself (creates what Marxists call "use value") and what forms of work have the primary function of producing profits for the employers through the extraction of surplus value from the labour of workers.

Food production and distribution, education, health and local transport are, as already noted, sectors in which large numbers of women work. This is the labour that holds societies together. But it is not valued, economically or socially, precisely because it is seen as traditional women's work.

Social reproduction

Despite decades of campaigning by feminists and sections of the labour movement, women's position in the labour market is largely circumscribed by what is assumed to be our "natural" role in the family.

The labour of cooking, cleaning, caring for our immediate and extended families, nursing, educating and socialising of our young is work carried out by women - and for no pay. Family forms and the specificities of women's unpaid labour, not to mention the division of labour between older and younger women, vary significantly in different societies. But core tasks and the reality of the division of labour between (the majority of) women and (most) men do not.

These tasks clearly require a multitude of skills - from complex timetabling, to the chemistry involved in cooking. It is assumed that anyone can carry them out - and therefore, because there is a greater supply than demand, they can be low paid.

One key aspect is that they involve emotional labour, because they are relational. They involve negotiation, persuasion and the ability to read other's needs and wants, including when they can't (or won't) articulate them, at least through verbalising.

But because the transmission of those skills takes place largely invisibly through family and community (although often reinforced through highly gendered education systems) they are not valued even when they are transferred into the labour market itself.

This is seen most sharply in paid domestic work, where the division of tasks between childcare, cleaning, shopping, cooking - and not infrequently providing sexual "services" to the men of the family - is entirely at the employer's will. Many women live where they work and many are migrant workers, with few if any rights, making them even more vulnerable to many forms of abuse.

Even where public services exist and therefore there is a great division between say education and health care, genderised pay differentials exist. In many countries, for example, education for young children is worse paid than that for older ones, and more feminised.

Questions about how to transform jobs in destructive industries, from arms production to fossil fuel-driven transport, into a green new deal based on renewable energy and on social justice for the global south are being popularised by ecosocialists. Given the depth of environmental devastation, it is indeed an urgent discussion. This is the case also for trade unions who too often react to the economic crisis in a purely defensive manner, more under the slogan of build back any old how. They forget that there are no jobs on a dead planet.

But we also need to use this opportunity to demand a stronger care sector in its widest sense - more care, education, youth services; what feminist economists call purple jobs, alongside the green jobs that environmentalists demand. And like green jobs we need to organise to make sure these are well paid, that the clapping that happened for carers in many countries does not continue to go alongside badly paid and insecure work for millions of women. [11]

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P.S.

- <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6807>

Footnotes

[1] *Progressive International*, 30 April 2020 "C'est La Lutte Finale": <https://progressive.international/blueprint/34da398a-af05-43bb-9778-c27023932630-la-lutte-final> e/en

[2] 30 June 2020 *ILO Monitor* [COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition](#).

[3] International Labour Office, April 2018 ["Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture \(third edition\)"](#).

[4] Outright Action International, 6 May 2020 ["Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ People"](#).

[5] AA, 27 April 2020 [Pakistan: Doctors on hunger strike over lack of PPE](#), *Garda World*, 16 June 2020 ["Nigeria: Doctors strike over lack of PPE and increased benefits from June 15"](#), *Eyewitness News*, 16 July 2020 ["Zimbabwe doctors to join nurses on strike as virus cases rise"](#).

[6] IWorld Health Organization, 29 November 2017 ["Violence against women"](#).

[7] UNDP, 18 June 2020 ["Unpaid care work in time of the Covid-19 crisis"](#).

[8] Oxfam Media Briefing, 9 July 202 [The hunger virus: how Covid-19 is fuelling hunger in a hungry world](#).

[9] *The Guardian*, 24 July 2020 ["UK working mothers are 'sacrificial lambs' in coronavirus childcare crisis"](#).

[10] Fourth International, ESSF (article 54733), [Draft Resolution: The new rise of the women's movement](#).

[11] Özlem Onaran ["Rebuilding an economy for all in the aftermath of the Covid 19 crisis"](#).