



Question 1: Covid & gender

As part of the Feminist Futures Programme launch, we have asked five leading economists four broad questions regarding the most pressing issues relating to work and gender today. Below you can find the first question, their responses and their bios. These interviews were led by Autonomoy research affiliate Danielle Guizzo.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis we've seen a lot of news stories about the different ways in which particular demographics have been impacted by the pandemic (e.g. unemployment, increase on domestic burden, care duties). What do you see as the key gendered impacts of the crisis, and do you think they will have any long-lasting effects? How do you see these potential setbacks affecting women's progress in terms of reaching more equal conditions on the labour market and at home?

Alma Espino



To start, it is necessary to say that women of Latin America and the Caribbean are a crucial part of the frontline response to the pandemic. Most of those employed in the health sector are women, who face extreme working conditions and an increased risk of contagion. Furthermore, salary discrimination persists in the region and especially within the health sector: women health workers have a salary 23.7% lower than male colleagues in the same sector (CEPAL 2021).

Paid domestic work in the region is also highly precarious, informal and – since it cannot be performed remotely – has been one of the areas most harshly affected by the Covid crisis. The sector employed 11.1% of working women in the region in 2019, but in the second quarter of 2020, employment levels in paid domestic work had fallen dramatically: -24.7% in Brazil, -46.3% in Chile, -44.4% in Colombia, -45.5% in Costa Rica, -33.2% in Mexico, and -15.5% in Paraguay. Furthermore, the dramatic drop in tourism demand continues to affect women working in accommodation and catering services. This sector is characterised by high rates of informality, low pay and low skills, and is highly feminized, with 61.5% of jobs in the region being held by women in 2019.

So, we can say that some of the relevant gendered impacts of the crisis are related to the economic empowerment processes of women. This crisis has engendered serious setbacks and damage to women's economic autonomy due to the decrease in their labour market participation – having had to withdraw from the labour force – and because they were particularly affected by high unemployment rates. In fact, according to CEPAL, in the Latin American region the rate of job market participation by women was at 46% in 2020, while for men it was 69% (in 2019, these rates were 52% and 73.6%, respectively). The unemployment rate for women reached 12% in 2020 – but this rises to 22.2% if we factor in women's participation in the labor force in 2019.

Women who left the labor market lost their own income, which limits their decision-making, especially in conditions of domestic violence at home. Many of them will find it difficult to re-enter the workforce due to economic conditions of their countries. ECLAC estimates that around 118 million Latin American women are living in poverty, 23 million more than in 2019. These effects of the crisis might prove to be long-term, with the sexual division of labor reinforced, seeing women confined to the domestic sphere, with the opportunity to attain the experience and qualifications necessary to improve their working status now lost.

Author bio

Alessandra Mezzadri



We've seen highly gendered features in how the Covid-19 crisis has been manifested and socialised. Women have had to internalise a rising crisis of care, given the difficulties in accessing childcare or other forms of support during the pandemic, and have also been hit disproportionately by the rise in unemployment. At present, in countries like the UK, we've also seen that women have been further

hit by a slower return to work than male counterparts. On the one hand, most obviously with the need to home-school children, women have been particularly exposed to the restructuring work and domestic life under lockdown, taking on ever greater care responsibilities, and an increase in time spent on wider domestic duties. There's been research by the ONS for instance, reported on by The Guardian, showing how 67% of women have led home-schooling during the most recent lockdown, compared with 52% of men.

In terms of the realm of work, the situation is more geographically uneven. In the Global North, there's been a massive rise in homeworking, which has impacted women through a rising 'double burden', as productive and reproductive work and space have been increasingly conflated. However, in Global South, it's a fairly different picture. Research by Janine Berg and others from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has shown that while there's been around a 30% rise in homeworking in some areas of the Global North, for many areas of the Global South it's been much lower at around 6%. In countries of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, this is often due to the way informal economies dominate these areas, alongside an existing tendency for productive and reproductive activities and spaces to be conflated. During Covid, there has also been less possibility for workers in these areas to stay home and maintain forms of livelihood provision.

Furthermore, the work of Lyn Osseme on southern Africa, for example, has highlighted how unpaid care performed by women has supported the wave of unemployment and retrenchment which informal workers have recently experienced in the Global South. Bina Agarwal has made similar observations regarding India, where women have faced a 'double burden' through a loss of earnings, and increased care duties for returning migrants, many of whom have checked out from urban economies during Covid, making their way back home, in striking images seen on international news.

Across many countries, the problem remains that women have seen a far slower return to 'normality' - whatever that may now mean - in the labour market. In the UK, for instance, the government has largely prioritised the restart of male-dominated employment sectors, as opposed to those dominated by women workers like the hospitality sector, which have largely excluded from their short-term reopening plans. Many feminist scholars have therefore worried about how this return of the women to the home and care provision might significantly impair the gains made in recent decades in terms of access to paid employment, independence, freedom from care duties, and so on. We'll have to wait and see which policies follow post-pandemic to find out which of these trends are here to stay, and which will begin to subside. But looking at over 200 million jobs lost globally according to ILO, one would suspect that in the short to medium term, it will be women that have to 'socialise the crisis in terms of lost access to employment.

So there are a number of setbacks along the lines of gender - and we've not even touched on important social problems like the escalation in domestic violence, which has arisen out of the return of women to the household, which many charities and NGOs have suggested is part and parcel of the recent restructuring of work and life under Covid.

Author bio

Julie A. Nelson



In the United States, the massive job losses caused by the pandemic have disproportionately affected women. In contrast to other recessions, in which male-dominated industries such as construction bore the brunt, the pandemic has had major effects on the types of employment in which women predominate. When employers such as schools and childcare centers, restaurants, personal care services, and travel services shut down, it is women who are disproportionately put out of work. And in addition—and very importantly!—the sudden partial or complete shutdowns of even the very rudimentary supports provided in the U.S. for the care of children—schools and (mostly parent-financed) childcare—have caused many parents, working in any industry, to reduce their hours

or quit their jobs. Given the still predominant expectations about mothers in our society, that burden, too, has fallen mostly on women. The figures I've seen say that women have, on net, lost about 5 million jobs during the pandemic, while men have lost 4 million. A national poll conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy research found that 40% of women said they had reduced their hours or left their jobs because of increased caregiving demands.

One would expect long-lasting negative effects on gender equity, since it is women who have disproportionately lost income, lost opportunities for gaining job experience and skills, lost seniority, and perhaps gained a reputation as "less committed" in the eyes of their employers. The only silver lining would be if our societies, and the men in our societies in particular, finally wake up to the fact that caregiving is not something "outside" our economies. It is central and basic to our economies! It's well past time for that to be recognized and for caregiving to receive more resources—including more of men's time at home, better pay for childcare workers, and public subsidies for care.

Author bio

Abena D. Oduro



In Ghana, women and men have not been equally impacted by the crisis because their employment tends to be concentrated in different sectors of the economy. They have different care responsibilities and vulnerabilities. With respect to employment patterns, for example, the transport and storage sector is dominated by men and the retail trade sector is dominated by women. The transport sector was badly hit by the three-week lockdown and took a much longer time to recover after the lifting of restrictions. Business closures were less frequent in the retail trade. However, the personal care services sector (hairdressers, beauticians, dressmakers and tailors) with a large concentration of women was quite badly hit and took a much longer time to recover. Women tend to own micro-sized firms; these are firms with less than five employees. These firms were hardest hit by the lockdown and were more likely to have remained shut when the restrictions were lifted. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated gender inequalities with adverse implications for women entrepreneurs, especially those in the informal sector. These inequalities will persist if they are not countered by policy measures designed to address them.

Schools were closed for 10 months beginning in March 2020. Women had to revise their daily schedules to accommodate this, sometimes involving a reduction in time spent on income generating activities and more hours spent on child care. Anecdotal evidence suggests that men did not tend to increase the time spent on housework and child care. Domestic violence, particularly against women, increased. Depending on the severity of the abuse, women can lose hours at work and therefore income. The psychological effects of abuse can persist and have long-term effects. With the extended period out of school, girls were vulnerable to becoming pregnant, thus reducing the likelihood that they will complete their basic or secondary education. Without basic or secondary education, these girls' employment choice set becomes severely limited.

Author bio

Stephanie Seguino



There are two countervailing effects on gender equality. On the one hand, women's care labor is has been critical to addressing the pandemic. Women, as the majority of health care workers, play a frontline role in fighting COVID. They are also disproportionately low wage workers, many of whom cannot afford to stay home during the pandemic, and they are thus at higher risk for infection as are their families. Women provide the bulk of unpaid caring labor at home. Those care demands have increased with the pandemic. At home, due to lockdowns and restricted movements, for example, more meals must be prepared at home. In developed countries, we see women dropping out of the labor force at a higher rate than men, in part because they are unable to find a job in hard-hit public facing employment, and also because of increased care responsibilities at home, such as for children who are out of school, care for sick family members. For other women who can work remotely, their work has intensified as they attempt to also care for children while working.

On the other hand, because of lockdowns and teleworking, men are spending more time at home, and observing the unpaid care labor that is required to keep the family afloat. In some cases, men have increased their contribution to household and care labor. It is possible that their taking up this work will continue to some extent after the pandemic. We just do not know yet what the long-term effects will be, and if men will continue sharing the responsibility for unpaid work.

But it is reasonable to predict that for those women who have had to withdraw from the labor force, some portion will have long delays in returning to paid work, if at all. In part, this is due to the effect of job interruptions on employability. It is also likely recovery will be delayed because many businesses, especially small ones that disproportionately hire women, will not survive. Gender norms often put men at the front of the line for jobs when jobs are scarce.

Author bio

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with Professor Ann Oakley



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