

COVID-19: A THREAT TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS EVERYWHERE

HOW DOES THE PANDEMIC INCREASE GENDER INEQUALITY?

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“Never forget that it will only take a political, economic or religious crisis for women’s rights to be questioned. Those rights are never fully acquired.” Simone de Beauvoir said. Since January 2020, the world is going through a (mostly) sanitary crisis, and the consequences of this crisis are multidimensional and make us fear women’s rights in the world might be threatened.

Women are the main care providers

At the scale of the planet, although women seem to be as affected as men by COVID-19, the latter are 50% to 80% more likely to die from the virus than women¹. Yet, women are the ones on the frontlines facing COVID-19. Women are over-represented in care professions, i.e. in every occupation that involves homely, sanitary, social and educational capacities, which are traditionally assigned to women in the family environment². In the European Union, 80% of care is administered by informal auxiliaries, of which 75% are women, many of whom are immigrants³. In these times when dependent and vulnerable people have to be protected, medical and social workers are over-solicited. Care workers have to keep on working, exposing themselves to contamination⁴.

In addition to representing 70% of the world’s healthcare and social services workforce, women are also three times more likely taking on the unpaid care work at home, on average⁵. In developed countries, men dedicate 1 hour 45 minutes to domestic and unpaid care work, when women dedicate 3 hours and 30 minutes to the same tasks. In developing countries, the gap is more significant with 1 hour 31 minutes for men against 4 hours 11 minutes for women⁶. In a situation where more than 3.4 billion people are confined at home in more than 80 countries⁷ and 300 million primary and secondary students saw their schools shut down to slow the spread of the disease⁸, a rise in these inequalities is to be feared.

The sanitary crisis is a favorable ground for gender based violence

In the world, 243 million women and girls have been victims of sexual and/or physical violence at the hands of their partner in the past 12 months⁹. This number is bound to rise with all of the security, health and money issues that COVID-19 brings because of confined living situations. According to UN Women, in France, reports of domestic violence have increased by 30% since confinement started on March 17th, 2020. In Argentina, emergency calls for domestic abuse cases have increased by 25% since March 20th, 2020. In Cyprus and Singapore, telephone helplines have registered an increase in calls of 30% and 33%. In Canada, Germany,

¹ Global Health 50-50. (2020, Avril). COVID-19 sex-disaggregated data tracker. Retrieved from <http://globalhealth5050.org/>: <http://globalhealth5050.org/covid19/>

² Geneviève Cresson et Nicole Gadrey. (2004). Entre famille et métier : le travail du care. Nouvelles questions féministes, pp. 26-41.

³ Commission Européenne. (2020). Une Union de l’égalité : stratégie en faveur de l’égalité entre les hommes et les femmes. Bruxelles.

⁴ Commission Européenne. (2020). Une Union de l’égalité : stratégie en faveur de l’égalité entre les hommes et les femmes. Bruxelles.

⁵ Wenham C Smith J Morgan R. (2020, Avril 11). COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak. Lancet, p. 395.

⁶ International Labour Organisation. (2016). Analytic brief – Women at work. Geneva: International Labor Office.

⁷ Rédaction, « Coronavirus : quels pays sont confinés ? », Le Monde, 06.04.2020, disponible sur : https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2020/03/30/coronavirus-quels-pays-sont-confines_6034936_3244.html

⁸ Lionnet, E. (2020, Mars 10). Coronavirus : 300 millions d’enfants privés d’école à travers le monde. Récupéré sur TV5 Monde : <https://information.tv5monde.com/info/coronavirus-300-millions-d-enfants-prives-d-ecole-travers-le-monde-350054>

⁹ UN Women. (2020). COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. New York: UN Women.

Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, an increase in the number of domestic violence cases and emergency shelter requests has also been seen¹⁰.

Apart from domestic violence, gender-based cyber violence has also increased. Before the pandemic, one in ten women in the European Union said that they had been victims of cyber bullying (receiving unsolicited, offensive and sexually explicit emails or text messages, or inappropriate advances on social media)¹¹. Since COVID-19 and the travel restrictions that came with it, the use of online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Skype, Zoom, etc. has increased these past few weeks. There has also been a recrudescence of cases of revenge porn – that consists in posting intimate photos without the consent of the person appearing on them¹². In addition to these cases of cyber bullying that perpetuate rape culture and mostly affect teenagers and young women, women working from home also have a higher probability of becoming victims of sex trolling such as the broadcasting of pornographic videos or unasked for intimate photos while they log on to virtual chat rooms¹³. Finally, an increase in online searches for child pornography content has been observed¹⁴.

Travel restrictions impact people's psychological state, and economic pressures weigh on households during epidemics and modify families and communities' dynamics. That has been observed during the Ebola pandemic in 2014 and 2015 in West Africa, where there was an increase in sexual violence in households and communities¹⁵. If some of this violence is inherent to the fact that crisis contexts always come with an increase in sexual violence, others are due to economical resilience strategies. Indeed, economical precariousness following the loss of one or several family members that used to provide for the family pushes women and girls to resort to prostitution¹⁶.

Child marriage also increased during the Ebola pandemic¹⁷. For example, in Sierra Leone, forced marriages were used to legitimize early pregnancies, which had risen dramatically during the sanitary crisis¹⁸. These teenage pregnancies can be explained in part by the fact that access to contraception and sexual and reproductive health facilities is very limited in such a

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Luxembourg: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

¹² Eric Morin. (2020, Avril 9). Tweet – State Secretary to the French Prime Minister, in charge of gender equality and the fight against discrimination. France. Available at:

https://twitter.com/Egal_FH/status/1248234210575384578?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1248234210575384578&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rtl.fr%2Fgirls%2Fsociete%2Fconfinement-les-actes-de-revenge-porn-explosent-sur-snapchat-7800383295

¹³ Davies, S. (2020). Reuters. Risk of online sex trolling rises as coronavirus prompts home working. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-women-rights-cyberflashing-trfn-idUSKBN2153HG>

¹⁴ Grierson, J. (2020, April 2). Coronavirus lockdown raises risk of online child abuse, charity says. Available on The Guardian website: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-lockdown-raises-risk-of-online-child-abuse-charity-says>

¹⁵ High-level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises. (2016). Protecting Humanity from Future Health Crises. Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016-02-05_Final_Report_Global_Response_to_Health_Crises.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Plan International. (2014, November 21st). Forced marriages rise in the time of Ebola. Available at <https://plan-international.org/blog/2015/05/forced-marriages-rise-time-ebola>

¹⁸ Comité international de la Croix-Rouge (Red Cross International Committee). (2016). Répondre à une épidémie de maladie à virus Ebola - Guide opérationnel (Responding to an Ebola virus epidemic – An Operational Guide). CICR.

time. That is why a group of researchers from the scientific review/journal *The Lancet* asks to “put sexual and reproductive health and justice at the core of the global response to COVID-19”¹⁹:

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Disruption of services and diversion of resources away from essential sexual and reproductive health care because of prioritizing the COVID-19 response are expected to increase risks of maternal and child morbidity and mortality. Globally there are anticipated shortages of contraception.

Past humanitarian crises have shown that reduced access to family planning, abortion, antenatal, HIV, gender-based violence and mental health care services results in increased rates and sequelae from unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy complications, miscarriage, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, intimate partner violence, and maternal and infant mortality.

Additionally, systemic racism, discrimination and stigma are likely to further compound logistical barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health care for women and marginalized groups.

Will the crisis' economic consequences be unfavorable to women in the end?

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community seems to have started a process of raising awareness about socio-economic models in globalized societies. Many political leaders said they have understood that political choices that only favor an absolute market-based rationality – according to which the market works by itself and states' interventions only break the balance – prevent national systems, especially healthcare systems to absorb the shocks created by the COVID-19 sanitary crisis. On March 2nd, 2020, the French President affirmed his will to “interrogate the development model that the world has adopted decades ago and that is starting to show its failures in the light of day, and interrogate our democracies' weaknesses. (...) What this pandemic reveal is that there are goods and services that must not be subjected to market laws. To delegate our food, our protection, our capacity to heal and our life's environment to others is a folly. We have to take back control.”²⁰. Problem is, when one looks at the decisions that have been taken after the financial crises of 1987, 1997 and 2007-2008, one can see that happy globalization was the ideal states were aiming for. In her book, *La stratégie du choc – La montée d'un capitalisme du désastre* (which translates to *The shock strategy – The rise of disaster capitalism*), journalist and essayist Naomi Klein promotes the idea that in

¹⁹ Kelli Stidham Hall, Goleen Samari, Samantha Garbers, Sara E Casey, Dazon Dixon Diallo, Miriam Orcutt, Rachel T Moresky, Micaela Elvira Martinez, Terry McGovern, Centring sexual and reproductive health and justice in the global COVID-19 response. *The Lancet*, 11.04.2020, pp. 1175-1177.

²⁰ Elysée. (2020, Mars 12th). Adress to the French people. Available at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/12/adresse-aux-francais>

recent History, crises, as shocks, served as opportunities to further the neoliberal ideology within economies²¹.

At the same time, numerous researchers in political economy have concluded that capitalist systems are intertwined with patriarchal systems. According to their research, these two systems feed each other and answer to the same logics of exploitation and dominance from which structural inequality emerges. The sexual and international division of labor marginalizes women. Between the glass ceiling and lower wages, forced part-time jobs and unpaid domestic work, the global economic system impacts women in many ways. The sociologist Jules Falquet sums it up: “if one observes the long history, it allows one to think that we are witnessing today a new phase of accumulation thanks to the simultaneous hardening of social relations of sex, race and class”²².

In regard to these theories, the economic crisis threatening the world because of the measures that have been taken to stop the propagation of the virus makes one think that women will be its first victims. First, countries will likely adopt austerity policies, which means cutting public spending. The responsibilities linked to social issues, education and healthcare that were previously being taken care of by the state might be delegated to the civil society and especially to women, who traditionally take them on²³. To fight the Zika virus in 2016 in South America and the Caribbean, women and girls were forced to stop going to work to take care of their sick family members²⁴. In addition to carrying these social costs instead of the states, women are laid off more often: 48.5% - which is 26.5 percentage points inferior to men's – and women's global unemployment rate is approximately 0.8% higher than men's. In other words, for ten men that are employed, 6 women only are employed²⁵.

Economic inequalities, feminization of poverty and casualization of female employment following COVID-19 will particularly impact women in developing countries. Gender anthropologist Françoise Héritier explains that “under-development feeds on maintaining women in a state of subordination and illiteracy²⁶”. Indeed, in an article titled “Femmes, sciences et développement”²⁷ (“Women, science and development”), she explains that a situation of economic under-development and the precariousness of the female condition are two intertwined phenomena that feed into each other. Nobel of Economy recipient Esther Duflo explains²⁸:

²¹ Klein, N. (2008). La Stratégie du choc - Montée d'un capitalisme du désastre. Actes Sud.

²² Falquet, J. (2014). Ce que le genre fait à l'analyse de la mondialisation néolibérale : L'ombre portée des systèmes militaro-industriels sur les « femmes globales ». Regards croisés sur l'économie, pp. 341-355

²³ Prévost, B. (2017). L'économie du genre : Les femmes, au coeur du développement. Available on France Culture's website: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/entendez-vous-leco/entendez-vous-leco-mercredi-8-novembre-2017>

²⁴ Magdy Martinez-Soliman & Jessica Faieta. (2017, Avril 06). Pour lutter contre le virus Zika, il faut aussi lutter contre la pauvreté et les inégalités. Récupéré sur Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement : <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/fr/home/blog/2017/4/6/To-fight-Zika-fight-poverty-and-inequality.html>

²⁵ Internationale Labour Organisation. (2018, Mars 8th). According to the ILO, women are still less susceptible than men to be active on the labour market in most regions of the world. Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_619567/lang--fr/index.htm

²⁶ Duflo, E. (2018, 07 13). Les femmes, moteurs de l'économie ? Available on France Culture's website: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/avoir-raison-avec-francoise-heritier/les-femmes-moteurs-de-leconomie>

²⁷ Ockrent, C. (2006). Le livre noir de la condition des femmes. XO Editions.

²⁸ Duflo, E. (2018, 07 13). Les femmes, moteurs de l'économie ? Available on France Culture's website: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/avoir-raison-avec-francoise-heritier/les-femmes-moteurs-de-leconomie>



“There is an interaction between a country’s social structures and its economic conditions. Imagine a small boat sinking and you have to choose who is going to be thrown overboard. If you systematically throw the little girl and not the little boy for deep-rooted reasons, it means that when the boat becomes fragile, the situation becomes more fragile for the girls than for the boys. In real life, we can see that when households are facing a drought and there isn’t enough food for everyone, child mortality will increase more for girls than boys.”

That is why traditional representations and gender social distribution matter: because women are not considered as useful economically as men, it means that in times of crisis maintaining their activity seems less important. For example, the bread-winner figure²⁹ is reserved to men – like in Senegal, where they hold parental authority - so it seems more relevant to guarantee their financial stability since this chief of family status comes with the obligation to provide for the household.

Beyond symbolic considerations, conjectural socio-economic destabilization brought by COVID-19 may pile up atop structural factors already provoking economic inequalities. Among those factors, one can count women having less qualification than men, which is itself linked to the access to education which then influences level of remuneration and access to high-responsibility jobs. To this, one can add the over-representation of women in part-time jobs which explains some inequalities, most notably wages inequalities. There also are some discriminatory practices during the hiring process. For example, in Nigeria, young women are sometimes forced to sign contracts prohibiting them from getting pregnant during their first three years on the job³⁰. Finally, women are over-represented in the informal sector – also called non-structured sector. According to the NGO Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, more than 70% of women in sub-Saharan Africa were working informally in 2014. But working in that field means harsh working conditions, a lack of social protection, no regular wages nor job security. The absence of a social safety net during COVID-19 makes us fear a decline of their livelihood and of small agriculture and commerce as it has been seen before and after Ebola³¹.

Being on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19, women also have to fear a rollback of their rights because the pandemic provokes socio-economic and political destabilizations. In order to limit this erosion of women’s fundamental rights, it is crucial to take into account the gender specific dimensions of COVID-19 and question gender specific social stakes to be ready to strike back. And because what is done without women is done against women, they need to be included more in the decision-making process to *plan* the response to the sanitary urgency and the way out of the crisis. After all, “what holds society together is first and foremost a bunch of women” said Christiane Taubira, the former French Minister of Justice on April 13th 2020.

²⁹ The ones that brings bread to the table.

³⁰ OCDE. (2014). Social Institutions & Gender Index: Nigeria. Social Institutions & Gender Index.

³¹ Barrio, T. J.-B. (2015). Opinion of the committee on Women's rights and gender equality for the Committee on Development on the Ebola Crisis: the long-term lessons and how to strengthen health system in developing countries to prevent future crises. Brussels: European Parliament.

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https://twitter.com/Egal_FH/status/1248234210575384578?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1248234210575384578&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rtl.fr%2Fgirls%2Fsociete%2Fconfinement-les-actes-de-revenge-porn-explosent-sur-snapchat-7800383295

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