

## COVID-19

### APPLYING THE GENDER LENS

Controlling the COVID-19 pandemic and the immediate healing is a priority. But analyzing and looking back at the fissures in our societies and governing systems permeates throughout our immediate concern. Lessons learnt should inform our mid-term and long-term recovery and solutions. As much as this pandemic is a catastrophe it is both a wake-up call and an unexpected, maybe catalytic, opportunity to get some things right.

Above all this is a time for the progressive, left, social-democratic forces to recoup, revisit where they fell short in the protection of equitable socio-political systems, social justice and solidarity. They should assume the lead in launching ambitious and bold recovery plans and guide the strategic choices we make for the “new” post-Corona order at all levels.

In the words of a Swiss comic: ‘the ultra right is happy for the closure of borders; socialists are happy because the state will provide a financial stimulus; the greens are happy because there is no pollution; and the demochristians are happy because families SIT together’.

How to stimulate the economy and finance the recovery? How to rehabilitate the public health sector, how to deal with unemployment and poverty, how to use this unfortunate situation to make our countries and systems more socially sensitive, gender sensitive and just? Will democracy be in peril as authoritarian leaders flaunt their “strong grip” reassuring the population of their supreme control? Will globalization be demonized as the main culprit for the spread of COVID-19 and be put on hold by isolationist trends from the USA onwards? Were our countries prepared for globalization and global transfers?

Can Europe lead again in seizing the moment and using all available instruments it has developed, like the European Green Deal, to reverse the backsliding and chart a new course of social justice, equality, solidarity and sustainability.

The announced stimulus packages are palliative solutions to meet the moment. They do not envisage an overhaul of social systems that have been exposed as unsustainable, unreliable, not responding to the needs, overstretched and unequal. Gender based discrimination is not even taken into consideration as these measures pop up. “We fear that the measures proposed by governments and European Union institutions will not be enough. The full use of the flexibility of the Stability and Growth Pact will be like drops in the ocean, if not accompanied by additional measures.” (Sergei Stanishev, [www.pes.eu](http://www.pes.eu)).

Measures should not be austerity measures, but rather forward looking and bold undertakings that would stimulate the green economy, production, consumption, construction and investments especially the infrastructure, income generation, equitable tax policies, employment and the revival of the well supported and financed public sector.

Austerity as we learned after 2008 can be counterproductive and create more hardships, social marginalization and poverty. Do no harm should guide the recovery. In the recovery, as PES Women point out in their policy “There is a need to re-think the global economic and financial system... A fair and feminist economy can be shaped through progressive taxation, gender budgeting, corporate accountability, progressive public services, social protection, fair work-life-balance, the recognition and distribution of unpaid care work, sustainable infrastructure and decent work.” (<https://www.pes.eu/en/pes-women/about/>)

There is a lack of gender disaggregated data on how the COVID-19 affects women. Most of the evidence is anecdotal and spans from medical/biological explanations to social roles and exposure like travelling or greater male engagement in sports. And yet women are predominant in the health sector and the care economy (up to 70%), the informal economy, tourism, service industries like catering, shops, pharmaceutical industry.

Currently there is hardly any information on gender implications of the quarantine. Is violence against women (VAW) more prevalent when couples are under stress of confinement? VAW hotlines are circulating on the web. On the average 137 women are killed per day by a member of their own family. At a time of home isolation and glued to our computers and the web, cyber bullying and harassment, especially among the younger generation is also on the rise. Stress and angst take their toll...

Older women relying on their already small pensions often due to the persistent gender pay gap, are extremely at risk of poverty. Marginalized women, single mothers, widows, minority women, migrant women seem invisible categories at this point. According to UN Women there are 8,5 million migrant women domestic workers who are both exposed to the virus, stuck in the countries where they worked and at the same time deprived of income. It is a multifaced picture.

It is, therefore, time we started addressing the need for disaggregation– for medical reasons as well as to address socio-economic immediate, short term and longer governance responses on different vulnerabilities that women and men have in view of this pandemic. There are lessons from previous crisis like the SARZ and Ebola. “COVID-19 provides us with an opportunity for radical, positive action to redress long-standing inequalities in multiple areas of women’s lives. There is scope for not just endurance, but recovery and growth.” (Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director).

Apart from overall gender disaggregation – from data collection to gender mainstreaming, there are positive measures governments can do, for instance to prop up the service and care sectors where women are prevalent in the labor force, fiscal policies and new budgeting should also be gender sensitive.

It is also time to launch a discussion on precarious work, short term contracts and alike, especially affecting women in the informal and service sectors, that do not generally provide income security and social protection. Is there priority in employment in times of crises? According to a PEW poll (October 2019) “Slovakia is the only country (in Europe) where a majority says men deserve preferential treatment when jobs are scarce. But four-in-ten or more share this view in Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, Ukraine, Russia and Greece.” This view is prevalent mostly among those who are less educated and earn a lower income.

The transition in Central and Eastern Europe is a testimony to the fact that neo-liberal reforms have often benefited the wealthy few and were not people-centered, socially just and equitable. The effects have been exposed by the Corona crisis but these may well, in the current political climate, guide the recovery.

A question to ask is how much private hospitals and out-patient clinics have been engaged in providing care for the Corona virus victims? Have they volunteered? The brunt of the pandemic has been put on the shoulders of the already depleted national health systems – depleted of finances, infrastructure and staffing. Migration of doctors and nurses from South Eastern Europe into developed West European countries has peaked. Now the small army of courageous doctors, nurses and care givers has to fill in the gap. Is this a lesson that can guide the refurbishing of social public systems from health to education and employment? Can this opportunity be used to discuss how to address discrimination overall, especially gender based discrimination and stereotypes in the private and public spheres.

Even before the pandemic subsides certain policy positions and strategies could be charted to initiate these broad dialogues and coalitions and build solidarity channels. It will not be enough just to restart the economy, go back to the life before COVID-19. The virus has unearthed the loopholes and injustices of the system, its lack of sustainability and resilience. It is time to move on with ambitious and bold political, economic and social undertakings.

Progressive forces, from parties to trade unions and feminist organizations, are now put to their biggest test – will they be able to talk the walk in post-COVID 19 times. If not we shall denounce centuries of our struggle for equality, social justice, democracy and human rights. Women and men deserve better. We need to leave a better legacy for the generations to come.