



Women And COVID-19: The Impact of Crises on Gender Equality

- English Summary of IWN Report, April 2020 -

In a reality in which no country has managed to close the gender gap in all spheres of life, times of crisis may deepen existing gender inequality and disproportionately affect women as compared to men. The report, based on a review of international research, shows that these have already happened following the 2008 world economic crisis and the Ebola and Zika health crises, when a gender perspective was missing from the management of the emergency situation.

The 2008 Economic Crisis: Research indicates that in general, men are better positioned to deal with economic crises since they enjoy better economic security, as they have higher status and wages in the labour market and hold more wealth. Indeed, as international bodies indicate, the 2008 economic crisis, and especially the austerity measures that were adopted after it, led to greater economic insecurity for women, a rise in their precarious employment and an increase in discrimination against pregnant women. In some high and middle income countries, the gender gap in unemployment deepened, among other reasons, due to cuts in the public sector, and there is research suggesting that in the recovery stage men's employment rebounded faster than women's. In addition, women suffered disproportionately from cuts in public care and social benefits as they bear the burden of unpaid care work, accumulate less pensions and have higher poverty rates, older women in particular. Single mothers' families were also badly impacted by the crisis.

However, the overall response to the crisis hardly included a reference to the gender issue. Sporadic examples indicate that in the field of employment, there were countries that introduced special programs that have benefited women greatly, mainly through increasing their participation in the public sector. With regards to care, there were countries that introduced initiatives to help women return to work after childbirth as well as support accessible childcare services and encourage men to take paternity leave. Iceland is notable as an outstanding pioneer in adopting a comprehensive policy that protected women during the



crisis and mainstreamed gender into its recovery plans. Not only was the country praised by the IMF for its recovery, but it was ranked first by the World Economic Forum in gender parity.

The Ebola and Zika Crises: The report also brings evidence about the gender dimensions of the Ebola and Zika outbreaks. In 2013-2016, there were Ebola outbreaks in West Africa that created a serious health crisis, with severe economic consequences. Women's health, education, food security and livelihoods were hit badly. One of the main impacts was on women's health. This happened because facilities were converted to treat the Ebola on their account, there were movement restrictions, an overall fear of infection, and access to reproductive health services was restricted. Many women died while giving birth due to lack of resources. In addition, there are reports on an increase in domestic and sexual violence against women and children during the pandemic. The Zika outbreak in 2016, mainly in Latin American countries, further illustrated how poverty and gender intersections that were not taken into account in the crisis management, disproportionately impacted women: guidelines disseminated on issues of pregnancy and infection ignored the fact that in the areas most affected by Zika, the poorest regions, women didn't have the autonomy to make decisions on when to have sexual relations or on family planning and large numbers of them were living in violent relationships. The guidelines also ignored the lack of access to women's reproductive health services, and the fact that in some countries there were prohibitions regarding the possibility of abortion.

The COVID-19 Crisis: The report also relates to some trends that are beginning to emerge with regards to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women. International organizations including UN Women, the World Economic Forum and the OECD, have started to issue warnings about the gender dimensions of the crisis and to publish policy guidelines on the issue. In a reality in which women bear the burden of unpaid care work and their status in the labour market is considered lower than men's (women earn less, work more in part-time jobs and in sectors that lack job security), they are the first to lose their jobs. At the same time, they carry an increased burden of caring for children, adults and other dependents, when state care and educational institutions are closed. Data from the Israeli National Insurance Institute (parallel to social security) illustrates this with 58% women compared to 42% of men among the new unemployed workers during March 2020.



Another immediate and critical issue is the rise in reports on sexual and gender-based violence against women. Different countries report a 25% rise in cases during the shutdown, and in Israel an increase has been reported as well. In addition, data from the world show that globally, women constitute 70% of health care workers and in OECD countries they constitute 90% of the long-term care (LTC) workforce – illustrating that they are in the forefront of coping with the crisis and there are serious concerns about protecting them and responding to their unique needs. In Israel, the situation is similar: beyond many women working as doctors, women constitute an absolute majority in the LTC workforce (80%), and in the sectors of nursing, social work and welfare consultancy.

What Should We Do? Against this background, gender must be mainstreamed in all measures adopted to cope with the crisis and in any recovery program that follows. Different countries, including OECD members, have begun to take various emergency measures aimed at protecting women in shutdown from violence, assisting working parents given the closure of school and childcare facilities, expanding social security benefits and using gender budgeting tools.

Building on examples from other countries as well as on lessons from previous crises, our report calls on Israel to adopt measures that integrate a gender perspective. These include, among others, guaranteeing women's full participation in decision making and operation of services to protect them from violence, using gender budgeting tools, adopting family friendly policies with regards to the labour market, enforcing prohibition of discrimination against women and assuring social security benefits to vulnerable groups such as single mothers and older women.

There is no doubt that Israel needs both halves of its population to deal with the crisis. Based on studies showing the importance of gender equality in strengthening social resilience and increasing economic growth, now more than ever, reducing gender gaps and maintaining women's participation in economic activity and expanding it – will play a critical role in building the country's ability to recover from the current crisis. In turn, it will also fortify its resilience in facing future crises. In this context, it is clear that the crisis has two sides: a potential to erode hard-won achievements to women's rights, but also an opportunity to use gender equality as an engine for strengthening the entire society.