
WIDE+ reflection on COVID-19: underlining the urgent need for a ‘new normal’ of care work in Europe

In recent months, WIDE+ network members have been reflecting on challenges they have faced from the COVID-19 pandemic and key issues stemming from it that would call for collective feminist action. This review, written by WIDE+ coordinator Gea Meijers, outlines the main issues that have arisen from these reflections. While not presenting an exhaustive review of COVID-19 and its impact, this article will hopefully stimulate further reflection and action that may provide new alternative models for our care economy.

With recovery packages being designed and implemented across Europe, including an EU package, WIDE+ is calling for a systemic review of and investment in care work and a real inclusion of women* into these packages, including migrant women and women in the global south.



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COVID-19 and a ‘new normal’ for our care economy

Covid-19 has highlighted fundamental flaws in the approach to care work by European governments. We feminists are again proposing a political review of **care work in the context of promoting a ‘care economy’**, which demands placing care work at the heart of the economy. To be clear, this is not only or mainly about the formal health sec-

tor, but about all economic ‘caring’ activity, paid and unpaid. In a feminist concept of the care economy, the unpaid economy is seen as an economic contribution, something that dominant conceptions of economic growth ignore. It is a well-known fact that women globally do a majority of the unpaid work, such as taking care of the household as well as people in their family and community. They are also overrepresented in the informal sector, which is a very important employment sector globally.

Emergent issues for WIDE+ members resulting from the pandemic

Increased violence against women & girls

Of course, an increase in violence is a topic of huge concern to WIDE+ members and the rise in **violence against women** as a result of COVID-19 has gained public attention in many places around the world. UN Women has branded this the 'shadow pandemic', and several online websites have been set up to track rises in violence and review policy responses. WIDE+ members have reported failing policy responses in different European countries during lockdown. These include unreasonable restrictions on entering safe houses, no opportunity for refugee women in asylum centres to access alternative accommodation when they want to escape violence, or to access face-to-face contact with support workers in NGOs. There have however been some positive examples of helpful policies during lockdown, such as the creation of additional telephone hotlines.

Continuing backlash against women's rights

The pandemic has done little to stop the backlash against women's rights in several European countries, in the context of a general attack on social values of diversity, migration, a free press and democracy by ultra-conservative groups. For example, in Hungary the parliament continued to strip the rights of transgender people by voting for a proposal that makes it illegal to change gender (passed in June of 2020). In Poland the ruling PiS ensured that proposals to criminalize abortion were kept on the parliamentary agenda (proposal passed in April of this year) and recently the government announced its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which proposes minimal standards to improve protection against gender-based violence. Poland has followed Bulgaria, whose high court rejected the Convention in 2019 and the Slovakian parliament who rejected it in February of this year.

Loss of income for women

As women are overrepresented in the public sector and client-based industries throughout Europe (restaurants, hospitality, etc.), **many women have lost their jobs** during the COVID pandemic.

Restaurants, shops and other service industries have been temporarily closed and only reopened under specific conditions. Many companies in these sectors are still not fully operational. We see in Europe that many women, especially migrant women, now face a loss of income. A relevant number of jobs in the care economy (including service industries) are provided through **the informal sector, often by migrant women with no formal or income protection. These women have faced job losses and abuse.** For example, some migrant domestic workers in Spain have been forced to live and work in their employers' homes during lockdown under threat of being fired.

Increased burden of unpaid work

The amount of **unpaid care work mostly carried out by women has been increased. And possibly these increases will remain over a longer period of time.** Gender norms and the structure of our economies mean that women will likely be the first to step in when formal care arrangements come to an end, for example teaching their children when the schools closed during COVID-19. In some instances, the growth of care work meant an increase in the overall time women were spending doing work. In other cases, women lost access to paid work and were pushed further into traditional gender roles.



Image by Lena Helfinger, at pixabay.com.

It is uncertain if women will be able to reduce these care burdens in the coming months or years. First of all, countries in Europe still face measures such as lockdown and school closures, for as long as there is no vaccine or herd immunity. This may be for the remainder of 2020 and beyond. In addition, many European states face a significant economic downturn, from which a quick rebound to original levels is unlikely. This will have a negative impact on women finding paid employment again. And future government responses to finance recovery packages to COVID could lead to other policy measures in which governments propose cuts to the public sector where many women work, as well as other austerity measures and demands for further privatizing public sectors. Such policies could be pushed on European states through political pressure from institutions such as the EU.

European policies & responses => precarity for women in the global south

It is also important to consider the work carried out by women outside Europe to provide goods for people inside the EU. There have been huge losses of income in export sectors such as clothing and the flower industries. These sectors were already known for abuse and for paying extremely low wages and these horrible conditions have only increased as payments were suddenly halted by transnational firms.

While informal work is less common in Europe, it is the norm worldwide (more than 60% of workers are in informal employment according to the International Labour Organization). This makes the COVID-19 lockdown an immediate threat to the cost of living (ensuring access to food, healthcare and safe housing) since informal work generally offers no protection in the case of an emergency. For WIDE+ members it is obvious that our political demands in overcoming the damaging effect of the pandemic in Europe should include **repairing its impact on work, mostly informal, by many women in the global south.** This requires monitoring trade and development policies, including the funding instruments for pre-accession and neighboring states to the EU, as well as tracking funds from bodies like the IMF. These policies have set the stage for very unequal opportunities to create sustainable economies among states and people, while promoting economic production and consumption that is depleting natural resources. COVID-19 shines a light on the systemic

failures of the dominant neo-liberal, macro-economic principles that European governments are still promoting.

Exclusion of groups of women* from basic services and protection

Recovery packages of basic support and care in Europe directly discriminate against certain groups of women. In Spain for example migrant women in the informal sector have been excluded from the basic income scheme, because the government has excluded people with temporary citizenship status. In Sweden, migrant women have been presented with additional barriers to accessing medical care. And in Italy, access to sexual and reproductive healthcare has been reduced, making it more difficult for women to get an abortion during lockdown. These are just a few examples but there is available detailed evidence of many more. The key issue for feminists is **that COVID-19 measures should not bar women*, including those without permanent status, from receiving essential sexual and reproductive healthcare, from accessing food and safe housing or programmes that provide basic income support.**

Big tech companies continue to grow under opaque rules that disadvantage women

One group that has 'won' during the pandemic is the big tech companies. While small businesses had to close, online retailers have continued to operate, making huge profits. Women's activism has been pushed mostly online, but some other economic activity has moved further online, such as ordering from supermarkets online to avoid contact with people in shops.

There are not yet global or regional regulations to ensure fair play of online economic activities. Online trading and consumerism is happening under opaque regulations in which tech companies have a lot of opportunities to gather and own data, impose unfair rules on smaller companies and people offering goods and services on their platforms, and monitor workers by using excessive surveillance schemes. **Tax evasion** and the **digital economy is another cross-cutting issue** that deserves our feminist attention.

WIDE+ during COVID19

Highlighting the work of migrant feminists and women's rights advocates

- ◆ Publication of [interview series](#) with feminist groups in collaboration with Jennifer Ramme (the series is the result of the work carried out by Ramme and her team of students), and [review of feminist initiatives in Europe](#) initiated by WIDE+;
- ◆ Publication of members' and partners' expertise in [Strengthening Innovative Solutions to Protect Female Migrant and Refugee Rights](#). And webinars reflecting the work and campaigns of migrant (and refugee) women during COVID-19 ([webinar 8 July](#), [15 July](#), 2020).

Raising awareness on gendered impacts of COVID-19

- ◆ Collecting resources on [COVID-19 and women's rights](#), which include several links to other websites that provide comprehensive lists of articles, statements and data published, especially [feministcovidresponse.com](#), which is a global effort to collect information and advocate for feminist principles, which WIDE+ has joined;
- ◆ Collaborating with the Gender Trade Coalition and others in collective work, including: a public statement asking for [investment in the care economy for a just, green, feminist Covid-19 response and recovery](#) that is now signed by almost 200 associations.; statement by more than 400 [Feminists and Women's Rights Organizations from the Global South and marginalized communities in the Global North on how to deal with COVID-19](#).

Advocating for inclusion of women into recovery packages

- ◆ WIDE+ will soon publish a review paper with political recommendations on how to ensure migrant women are not left out of response packages to the pandemic;
- ◆ At national level, WIDE+ members have taken up different campaigns and collective actions to promote the inclusion of women into decision making processes and in recovery packages.

WIDE+ and COVID-19: our future plans

The pandemic has revealed **the structural injustices in the care economy**, while showing the urgent need for a stronger recognition of care work. It has reinforced our belief in advocating for transformative changes in European societies. In the WIDE+ network, we see a need to respond to the current situation in creating greater awareness of the structural failings in our care economy as well as promoting and developing concrete policy recommendations.

WIDE+ is setting up a new working group "Investing in the care economy" that will:

- ◆ Organize webinars and other online events for reflecting and strategizing around the impacts and policy recommendations re COVID-19;
- ◆ Advocate for 'inclusive' policies targeting decision makers at EU level and in European states (so that women are not left out of policies and decision making);
- ◆ Collaborate with others in civil society and in alliances to promote feminist perspectives and alternatives;
- ◆ Raise awareness of current shortcomings through writing articles, reviews, social media and other means.



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Impact of COVID-19 on feminist work

WIDE+ members have also reflected on the impact of COVID-19 and on how it has affected their ongoing activities.

The restrictions on meeting face-to-face have meant that some members' activities have been cancelled, and members use greater flexibility to adjust their plans to changing needs and circumstances. Some members have started to provide or create information on the gendered impacts of COVID, and plan to take on new issues, often related to current topics such as feminist macro-economic issues or the situation of migrant women. While some have succeeded in bringing their activities online, others struggle with online work as a main way of working, especially when working with groups/individuals without internet access. Some find it difficult to go online from home due to fulltime care duties, and/or prefer face-to-face meetings for particular issues. **Working digitally allows some feminist work to continue, but it cannot replace the face-to-face communication in our effort to bring about change and support women*.**

Some members work closely with migrant women and report that during the pandemic, many migrant women have experienced new barriers to accessing healthcare, food, safety from violence

and safe housing. This has propelled members to find ways of extending aid, for example by delivering food to people in their network, while keeping to distancing regulations. It has not been easy or straightforward to provide support in these circumstances. Associations that support partners in the global south have also faced a rising demand for assistance. **Several members report increased workloads, taking into account that many feminist associations and groups already face huge workloads.**

COVID-19 and policies towards 'recovery'

The pandemic and its economic effects will be with us for some time. Governments in Europe have started to implement recovery measures, such as providing substitute incomes, while an end of the social crisis is not in sight. If we want to avoid a further roll back of gender equality and women's rights, policy makers need to take action NOW.

EU and European states' **recovery programmes** and bailouts need to be analysed with gender budgeting tools. What do these bailouts mean for women* (from an intersectional analysis), in low-wage, part-time, flexible, or precarious work? Which kind of sectors and companies benefit the most and which the least? Who is excluded from receiving direct support? What is needed in terms

of re-balancing care responsibilities? Who is losing jobs, and what jobs are needed? These questions need to be answered by politicians and civil servants in Europe. And they need to act upon this knowledge.

In reviewing the EU package, a first [gender impact assessment](#) was carried out by the political group Greens and European Free Alliance within the European Parliament. They found that the EU's Recovery and Resilience Fund of €750 billion, or the "Next Generation EU", is largely gender blind (Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020). This fund is a financial instrument that aims to help EU member states recover from the economic shocks of the pandemic. Despite extensive evidence that COVID-19 has had gendered impacts, the recovery fund is primarily targeted towards aiding male-dominated industries, like construction, energy, and transport.

This large pool of funds on which the European leaders came to a deal on 21 July 2020, ignores the fact that the pandemic has put a great strain on sectors like education, healthcare and social work, as well as tourism and food services – sectors where a higher proportion of workers are women, more precisely migrant women. In conclusion, the proposed recovery fund seems to do little to repair the negative impacts of the pandemic on migrant women. If the EU chooses to invest in care infrastructure it will yield higher employment rates for women, in comparison to investing in the construction sector (Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020). This could ultimately reduce gender employment gaps and reduce job insecurity for women and men alike (Klatzer & Rinaldi, 2020). The European Parliament still needs to approve the final version of the budget, though so far it doesn't bode well for women's rights and gender equality.

Key recommendations to European (including EU) politicians:

- ◆ **Women's participation and leadership in COVID-19 related policies, for example setting up a national commission to assess and strengthen the care economy, or creating more mechanisms for young and migrant women to be listened to in policy making.** Women play a central role at the frontline of the pandemic and women need to participate strongly in political and policy discussions around post-COVID recovery plans.
- ◆ **Post COVID-19 funding and financial aid:** There must be a focus on women-dominated sectors, especially those that are essential during the pandemic. Internationally, there is a strong need for a new financial architecture that will provide the necessary means for the Covid-19 response in developing countries (mainly through grants and not only through new loans). This also means that the EU's policies and positions in terms of negotiations towards global trade, debt and tax agreements and mechanisms should be transformed in order to structurally ensure a more equal division of economic profit and costs.

* When we refer to women, WIDE+ means women and girls, including transgender, non-binary and other non-confirming persons as well as considering women through an intersectional analysis in which many persons face additional constraints or discriminations resulting from other aspects of their identity, such as age, perceptions based on their skin colour or migration status.