

Coronavirus puts women in the frontline



In Europe, we are all adjusting to new ways of living because of the effects of the coronavirus. We are learning what it means to self-quarantine, work from home, home-school children, lose a job or even a loved one. Each person's situation is different, but for sure, the coronavirus will reveal the different realities of women and men.

At the frontline of this coronavirus pandemic are the healthcare workers who are working around the clock and putting themselves at risk to care for patients. Most of the nurses and healthcare workers in the EU are women. Their workload is very demanding, often taking an emotional toll. Yet their profession is one of the most undervalued, and under-paid jobs in the EU.

Men's mortality rate is higher

Preliminary figures show that women and men are being infected by the coronavirus in about equal numbers, but the mortality rate is higher for men than for women ^[1]. The World Health Organization recommends to keep up healthy food and exercise habits to boost the immune system and avoid unhealthy ones such as smoking and consuming excessive alcohol. More men smoke than women and are therefore more likely to be at risk of developing a serious disease if infected with the virus.

Extra challenges for public transport users

Our Gender Equality Index findings show that women rely much more on public transportation than men. This puts women at greater risk of coming into contact with the virus, when they have to either get to work, visit a doctor or do the grocery shopping. This is especially the case with single parents, who are less likely to have a car due to financial reasons. 18 % of them say that public transport is the only method of transport available to them. In countries where restrictions on movement have tightened, public transport has been reduced or even shut down. This makes life more difficult for people who rely on these services and still need to get to work, visit a doctor or do the grocery shopping

Concern for severe job losses in women-dominated professions

The closure or near-closure of many businesses could have a severe effect on many women-dominated professions. Flight attendants, tour operators, sales assistants, hotel cleaners and hairdressers are often already in precarious jobs and will probably not be paid nor entitled to paid sick leave. These people are likely to have difficulty paying for basic necessities such as groceries, rent and bills in the coming days and months. EIGE's research shows that a quarter of women employees across the EU are in a precarious job. For migrants, the situation is even worse. Nearly one in three non-EU born women (35 %) and one in four men (24 %) work in precarious jobs.

Unpaid care work will increase

Even without a crisis, caring responsibilities usually fall heavily on women. Now with the closure of schools and workplaces, their unpaid workload is likely to further increase. If older relatives get sick, they will also need looking after. The situation for single parents can be even more difficult, especially when options for informal childcare are unavailable.

Physical distancing is not an option for everyone

In the EU, nearly a quarter of households depend on informal care from relatives or friends. As physical distancing and confinement measures become the norm, it will become harder for family, friends and neighbours to provide or receive such care.

There are also many people in our society, for whom physical distancing is not an option. We have 61 million women and 47 million men with disabilities in the EU. Many of them depend on help from others to eat, dress or shower, which makes physical distancing almost impossible. Across the EU, most of the professional carers working with people with disabilities or older people are women (83 %).

Domestic abuse increases in times of crisis

These times of social isolation increase the risk of domestic abuse. Women in violent relationships are stuck at home and exposed to their abuser for longer periods of time. This makes it very difficult for them to call

helplines as the perpetrator is always around. It can also be harder for women to leave their abuser once the crisis is over, due to the financial insecurity that might follow.

Neighbours or relatives can have an important role in contacting the police if they suspect that violence is occurring, especially when the victim is not able to call for help.

Where are women decision-makers?

While nurses are working non-stop behind the scenes in hospitals to look after patients, we mostly see men out in the public domain, making the news headlines. They are the ones who hold most of the positions of power in our society. In this crisis, it is usually men who are making all the important decisions, which affect the everyday lives of citizens. This imbalance of decision-making power means that women are left out from shaping the decisions that affect their own lives.

Policy measures must consider the different needs of women and men

The response from policymakers must consider the different experiences faced by women and men during a pandemic to ensure that everyone gets the help they most need. There is a big need for sex-disaggregated data to fully understand how women and men are affected by the virus. Not only for infection rates, but also the economic impacts, the distribution of care work and the extent of domestic violence. It is also time for leaders to recognise and give more value to the important work done by those who are in the frontlines of a health crisis, such as healthcare workers, home carers and domestic workers.

[1] The Lancet (2019), COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak, Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext#%20](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext#%20)

COMING SOON: EIGE is preparing a webpage with more information about the coronavirus pandemic from a gender perspective.

Further reading