



COVID-19

IS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAVING A GREATER EFFECT ON WOMEN THAN MEN?

COVID-19 has been described as non-discriminatory. The virus can be carried by and transmitted to people of all countries, regions, ethnicities, cultures, religions, ages, races, belief systems, socioeconomic statuses, professions, and genders.

Levels of risk, post-infection outcomes, recovery, and mortality rates, however, can be influenced by some of these factors.¹ Data shows, for example, that older generations and those with underlying medical conditions are more at risk physically when infected with COVID-19.² Recent reports have also shown that 68% of worldwide deaths from COVID-19 to date have been male.² Explanations for this distinction have included stronger immune systems in women, and differences in lifestyle choices between the genders.³

Women, however, are being affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 in less obvious ways. These repercussions are being felt primarily as a result of vocational and professional choices; pay inequalities; care duties; and access to healthcare.

FRONTLINE CARE

A UN report demonstrates that women represent well over half of frontline health workers.⁴ Some statistics even suggest that the figure is close to three-quarters of health care workers.^{5,6} Where information is available, it has been found that infections have been reported in one in every 13 frontline health workers; a group of which women are the majority.² This means that on a day-to-day basis, in the 60 countries affected by COVID-19 at the time of publishing this report, a large proportion of those risking their lives to treat and attend to people with the virus are female.²

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

The pay gap between men and women continues to exist to varying degrees on a global scale. Within the healthcare sector, there is an average gender pay gap of 28%.⁵ This year, the Global Gender Gap is 31.4%; no country has yet achieved gender pay parity.⁷

In addition to earning an average lower salary than their male counterparts across the world, it has been reported that women are being heavily affected economically by this particular pandemic. This is a result of business being affected by the virus, containment measures being taken, and the informal nature of work agreements that are in place.⁴ This situation could continue for the foreseeable future, as a consequence of the recession that is forecast post-pandemic.



Women represent a considerable proportion of care givers and domestic workers in the “informal economy”; a work sector characterised by lack of agreements, contracts, and guarantees.^{4,8} This lack of stability and regulation can exacerbate the risks to which workers are exposed, particularly in terms of health insurance, sick pay, and other work-related benefits.

In addition, sectors that have been severely restricted or brought to a complete halt by the pandemic, such as tourism, hospitality, and food production, are heavily staffed by women.^{4,9} In fact, the Institute for Fiscal Studies in the United Kingdom found that women are approximately 30% more likely to be working in one of these hard-hit sectors.¹⁰ Young people are also considered to be at extra risk economically.¹¹ The pausing of business within these sectors is likely to lead to lasting, hard-hitting effects that are projected to continue well beyond the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research indicates that job losses during a recession can lead to more severe, persistent, and ongoing loss of earnings than would otherwise be the case, as well as less secure future employment.¹⁰



CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES

It is estimated that before the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world upside-down, women were doing as much as three times unpaid care work as men.⁴ As reported by the International Labour Organization, the development of women’s involvement in the workforce, alongside their continued responsibilities in the home, have led to them shouldering a “double burden”.¹¹

School closures across 185 countries are currently affecting nearly 90% of children of school age, equivalent to more than 1.5 billion children.^{12,13} With citizens around the world staying at home to protect themselves and others from the virus, both women and men are finding themselves caring for family members, both young and old; home-schooling children; taking on increased levels of housework to maintain the occupied house; and, in many cases, continuing to work from home. This is often being done without the help and support of grandparents, friends, neighbours, and other members of a family’s

support network. Studies are suggesting that mothers are more likely to be affected by this increase in responsibility than fathers, and that single mothers are expected to feel the effects the hardest.⁹

PERSONAL HEALTH RISKS

Women are at a greater risk of domestic violence than men; a risk that increases amid the current circumstances of being housebound, suffering greater stress, and confronting a potential recession; a time in which domestic violence episodes have been seen to increase.^{4,9} Domestic violence figures have already increased in the United Kingdom; with deaths more than doubling since lockdown began.¹⁴

Access to women’s health services, including family planning and maternity services, could also be reduced during times like these; in many countries, health services are limited to essential services only.¹⁰ Recent research focusing on the lockdown brought about by the outbreak of COVID-19 suggests that women are more susceptible to loneliness and distress during this situation than their male counterparts.¹⁵



DECISION MAKING

While women are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching repercussions, it is men who occupy more than 90% of heads of state or government positions; 75% of global parliamentary posts; and 75% of senior health leadership positions.^{4,6} In the US, women comprise 65% of the healthcare workforce, yet only 13% of them are CEOs and approximately 30% of them hold executive positions in the field.¹⁶ Statistics such as these suggest that there is a severe lack of women in roles that give them the opportunity to make decisions and influence procedures that ultimately affect other women around the world.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

The outbreak of COVID-19 and consequent measures taken concerning the health system, the economy, working practices, and social welfare have put a spotlight on standard practices, accepted roles, and the status quo of society. With this focus comes potential for positive improvements for increased gender equality.

To accommodate the COVID-19 pandemic and continue functioning where possible, companies are adapting. They are putting in place procedures, solutions, and structures: equipment is being dispatched to support homeworkers; IT systems are being set up to enable videoconferencing; and schedules are being altered and flexible working options made available to accommodate non-work commitments.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the United Kingdom encourages flexible working as a way of combatting stress, overwork, and poor work-life balance among employees; not just during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷ As a result of the exceptional circumstances in which we find ourselves, organisations are becoming aware of childcare responsibilities or commitments to caring for ageing relatives, and are adapting demands, expectations, and understanding accordingly. As awareness surrounding multiple commitments and work-life balance and coordination increases, so does the opportunity for businesses to adapt and evolve company policies and procedures to better meet employee needs. With many women carrying the so-called “double burden”¹¹, they have the potential to better benefit from such improvements.



In addition to changes within the workforce, there is potential for the COVID-19 pandemic to lead to changes at home. There are cases in which women are able to continue working, when men cannot; in health care, or for businesses that remain open, such as supermarkets, for example. There are other instances where women must physically go to work while men can work from home, or not at all. When this occurs, a reshuffle of responsibility is likely, with men potentially taking on more caregiving, housework, and domestic tasks. This could lead to a reallocation of duties in the longer term.⁹

The ramifications of COVID-19 are being felt and suffered all over the world. In many, perhaps less apparent while still significant, ways women are being affected to a greater

extent than men. Vocational choices put them at the front line, fighting the virus; caregiving responsibilities place additional pressure on their time allocation; restrictions and isolation have the potential to jeopardise their health; and economic implications may threaten their financial stability.

As we begin to see the lifting of restrictions, the relaxing of rules, and the gradual return to “normal” life in some regions, we have an opportunity to reset the balance, assess and modernise the status quo, and incorporate positive changes and improvements to everyday life that can be beneficial for women and men alike.

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