

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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(IN)EQUALITY BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

Mónica Lopes, Lina Coelho

The COVID-19 crisis is having different effects on women and men. In Portugal, up to May 2020, women had the highest percentage in terms of infection (58 percent) and registered deaths (51 percent). And the data on socioeconomic developments shows that forced absence from the workplace, unemployment and loss of income are also disproportionately affecting women. The specificities of this crisis and the experience of previous crises enable us to predict a particularly severe impact on women, considering the prevailing “gender order”. Pre-existing inequalities have been re-configured and aggravated, which challenges us to think of alternatives to mitigate the gender impacts of this crisis.

Women’s employment revolves around care services and direct customer service and involves physical proximity with people, which creates a double vulnerability. On the one hand, women are more directly exposed to COVID-19 and the risk of contagion. On the other hand, those activities are severely affected by the recession, increasing unemployment among women. Moreover, women are more exposed than men to precarious forms of labour, lower wages and poor legal and social protection, which makes them very vulnerable to economic downturns.

Schools, crèches and other social facilities had to close (or operate on a reduced schedule), reinforcing the need for support for children and dependent people. This had a disproportionate impact on employed mothers, especially those in single-parent families. According to traditional gender roles, women generally carry out domestic tasks and the tasks of unpaid care. The increase in this workload has harmful effects for women, both in terms of

their psychosocial well-being and health and their career prospects, since they are forced to reduce their involvement in the professional sphere (as their working hours are cut, their careers interrupted, and their productivity in teleworking situations reduced).

“Gender lenses” need to be introduced in the decision-making process in this context, as an alternative to counteract the trend towards greater inequality between men and women. Such a strategy involves:

- Ensuring women representation in decision-making processes at the various levels and moments of the crisis response planning;
- Ensuring availability of and access to statistical data and information disaggregated by sex, an indispensable basis for decision-making;
- Valuing unpaid and (poorly) paid care activities which are essential to life and the harmonious functioning of the economy and society;
- Implementing measures to tackle occupational and sectoral segregation and improving women’s access to quality employment opportunities;
- Reinforcing investment in care, social support, health and education services;
- Creating gender-sensitive fiscal stimulus packages to ensure an economic recovery that is equally beneficial to men and women;

- Developing strategies to counter traditional gender stereotypes and roles by encouraging men's participation in domestic and family work and promoting the change in gender roles that is taking place in some households (particularly where men engage in teleworking);
- Providing exceptional support to families affected by the closure of schools and other social facilities, with particular attention to single-parent families and parents working in basic services;
- Enabling a reduced work schedule for people with care responsibilities, without pay cuts;
- Laying the foundations for social consultation on new ways of organising work (including working hours and working space), taking due account of the circumstances of women and men in the context of the "new normal".