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Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism

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Coronavirus Pandemic

Take-Aways

- COVID-19 makes men physically sicker than women, but pandemics damage women in other ways.
- Dual-income couples enjoyed the advantages of outsourcing child care, but social-distancing measures upset that balance.
- The pandemic is even harder on single-parent households.
- Examining the Ebola outbreak reveals some peripheral side effects of pandemics.
- Providing emergency child care and giving stimulus checks directly to families could mitigate the pandemic's outsized impact on women.

Recommendation

Writing in *The Atlantic*, Helen Lewis details the ways that women face outsized consequences in a pandemic and what governments could do about it. As she notes, William Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* and Isaac Newton's work flourished during the Great Plague of London, but they weren't sheltering in place with children. Lewis offers telling anecdotal and statistical evidence that during the coronavirus pandemic women are likely to shoulder the lion's share of child care and domestic work and are more likely to lose or give up their jobs, all while governments pay scant attention to their thoughts or needs.

Summary

COVID-19 makes men physically sicker than women, but pandemics damage women in other ways.

When the kids are home, when the elderly are isolated, when sick people require care and when the whole family needs supplies, women bear the brunt of providing unpaid labor. This holds true in developed and undeveloped nations.

"Across the world, women's independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic."

The Ebola outbreak provided a compelling example. Most West Africans suffered financially, but men's income levels recovered more quickly afterward than women's. Experts fear the same is likely to be true for COVID-19. This is a health catastrophe and an economic one, as well. Economic disaster brings stark cultural change; couples may find that the coronavirus transports them "back to the 1950s."

Dual-income couples enjoyed the advantages of outsourcing child care, but social-distancing measures upset that balance.

As schools and day care centers closed to comply with social distancing measures, child care shifted from the realm of paid workers to the unpaid realm of the home. Two-job couples previously had the luxury of paying child care workers. No more. Families must take on these previously outsourced tasks. Certainly, some men will rise to the occasion and take equal shifts looking after bored and restless children. But many couples face difficult decisions about whose career will continue as normal and who must neglect his or her career to look after the children.

"Some women's lifetime earnings will never recover."

Women worldwide enjoy less time for leisure than men. Even if traditional social roles don't routinely influence your family's decisions, dynamics are at play that may make it more financially sensible to let the woman's job fall by the wayside. In England, for example, 40% of women work part time, while only 13% of men do. Women in heterosexual couples usually earn less than their male partners. Couples tend to perceive the woman's job as a lower priority. Given the looming timeline of the pandemic, many women's lifetime earnings will plummet and may never return to pre-pandemic levels.

The pandemic is even harder on single-parent households.

Rachel Patzer is an epidemiologist at Emory University, and her husband is an emergency department physician. The couple decided that he would continue to work during the pandemic while Patzer stays home to care for their children. Patzer is dealing with two young kids and a three-week-old infant. She's trying to homeschool her older children while dealing with a crying baby.

“As I attempt to home school my kids (alone) with a new baby who screams if she isn’t held, I am worried about the health of my spouse and my family.” – Rachel Patzer

Patzer’s plight is difficult, but school closures are even more difficult for single-parent households, 90% of which are led by women. A single provider often must choose between work and child care.

Examining the Ebola outbreak reveals some peripheral side effects of pandemics.

Countries that experienced previous epidemics or pandemics learned difficult lessons. Between 2013 and 2016 – the span of Ebola’s impact on Sierra Leone – obstetric complications killed more women than Ebola did, probably because medical resources were funneled to the outbreak. During that time, access to contraception dropped; teen pregnancy rose. Girls dropped out of school. Fewer children received vaccinations for other preventable illnesses. When those children got sick, women took off work to look after them. Domestic abuse also increased.

“Stress, alcohol consumption and financial difficulties are all considered triggers for violence in the home, and the quarantine measures being imposed around the world will increase all three.”

Women’s Aid suggests that domestic abusers will exploit “social distancing and self-isolation” to further intimidate and constrain their victims. These trends affect developed countries as well. Stress, increased drinking and economic hardships are “triggers” for domestic violence. Quarantine and social isolation ramp up all these factors.

Providing emergency child care and giving stimulus checks directly to families could mitigate the pandemic’s outsized impact on women.

Research offers little data about the gendered impact of previous pandemics. Clare Wenham, who teaches global health policy at the London School of Economics, is seeking to fill that gap by studying the societal change that coronavirus is wreaking on women.

“Grim as it is to imagine now, further epidemics are inevitable, and the temptation to argue that gender is a side issue, a distraction from the real crisis, must be resisted.”

Wenham suggests that funds for “emergency child care,” stimulus for owners of small businesses and financial aid should be paid to families. But she fears aid packages will continue to follow a “gender-neutral approach,” even though the economic effects of the virus probably won’t. Wenham views governments as

“short-termist and reactive.” She raises heartfelt question about whether governments ever listen to women, a particularly pressing issue during a pandemic.

About the Author

Helen Lewis is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of *Difficult Women: A History of Feminism in 11 Fights*.



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