

The first and most resilient responders

Mothers have had to make very difficult choices during the pandemic

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Due to the effects of the crisis response, parents have to face a pronounced slowing of job growth, employment uncertainty, remote learning of their children and lack of child care. A situation that has impacted the parental status where women fall back into traditional roles in the household.

A whole generation of women, regardless of their commitment to their families, may be pretty badly scarred by COVID. Mothers worldwide are sacrificing market skills to help their family members while putting a lot of stress into their marriages and financial security. For example, a Pandemic Parenting Study conducted by Jessica Calarco has found that 40 percent of her respondents are reporting increases in pandemic-related frustrations with their partners, and child care is a major source of strife. Rather than ask their partners to step up their domestic contributions, "mothers blame themselves for these conflicts and feel responsible for reducing them, including by leaving the workforce, beginning use of antidepressants, or ignoring their own concerns about Covid-19."

For instance, even before the virus, child care was outrageously expensive in many parts of the world, making families pay more for care and other work-related expenses than they

The COVID-19 global health emergency and its economic and social impacts have disrupted nearly all aspects of life for all groups in society. People of different ages, however, are experiencing its effects in different ways.

Many women are finding themselves in the untenable position of making decisions that are sensible for their families in the near term, but are also emotionally devastating and have long-lasting consequences in their personal and professional life. "Women are responding in the ways that they often do: with an incredible display of resilience", says Loyce Pace, president of Global Health Council. Women in the family have long been considered the resilient link that holds them together.

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Participation and decision-making *

The 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2021 will consider 'Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls' as its priority theme. To take stock of current research, and assist the Commission in its deliberations on the priority theme, UN Women convened a virtual Expert Group Meeting (EGM) from 5–8 October 2020.

The EGM built on the priority themes of the preceding CSW sessions, taking special note of the 50th session which also considered equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. While the EGM acknowledged the evolving manner that women participate in, and influence, public life and decision-making, progress on women's political participation at all levels of decision-making has stalled in many regions and even regressed in some places.

The EGM recognized the diverse situations and experiences of women in different parts of the world, noting the multiple and intersecting identities held by women in public life – including age, class, racial or ethnic identities, sexual orientation and gender identities and those living with disabilities – as well as the different inequalities they face in various aspects of public life relating to their social location.

The EGM also considered the erosion of democracy and rise of authoritarian politics in many parts of the world, and that increased numbers of women participating in public life have rarely prevented a regression in gender equality. The EGM observed the role feminist organizations play in supporting and amplifying the work of women in public life, including their calls for more open and enabling environments, safe spaces online and offline for organizing, and more support for capacity-building. The pressing issue of violence against women in political and public life was raised throughout, with particular attention focused on its causes, manifestations, effects and ways to prevent it, as well as concerns about gender-based violence in contexts of democratic backsliding.

The EGM developed action-oriented recommendations to address gaps and support implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

* Report of the Expert Group Meeting, 5–8 October 2020.

make in salary. Usually, this decision makes sense for the long haul, because of the ample evidence that mothers are financially penalized for taking time out of the workforce, and child care costs go down when children enter school. Although, without school, the calculation implodes. If families can even get child care, the high expenses sum up with more housework to be done and more child-related tasks to complete.

Policymakers should focus on mothers to determine how families are coping with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis response consequences. They should keep in mind that the family unit is the best means for social change and, within families, mothers often take on more responsibility when it comes to childcare and household chores, and they tend to be the decision makers in the family. Mothers are the key to family care, health and cohesion. So, by focusing on mothers, we are getting a good look at how the post-pandemic era will be.

Mothers struggling at home

Women have long done an unequal share of childcare, compared to men, and the pandemic isn't different. With schools and daycares closed, the pandemic has caused tremendous changes in mothers' childcare responsibilities, which are taking a tremendous toll on mothers' relationships and wellbeing. According to Raquel Lagunas, director of the gender team at the United Nations Development Programme, "because of their reproductive role in society, they are the ones taking care of the kids, the house, the food, the survival of families."

In this regard, mothers are spending more time caring for their children, and others are simply having a hard time negotiating a good balance of childcare with their spouse/partner while working at home. These changes are causing a significant increase in stress for women and are exacerbated in situations where they feel that their spouses/partners are not doing enough to help with the new childcare responsibilities. In some parts of the world, mothers are considering quitting their jobs scaling back their work hours so that they can continue providing full-time care or even homeschooling for their children long-term.

Some studies are examining how disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic are creating conflicts for couples with young children. Pre-pandemic research suggests that pandemic-related disruptions may create conflicts around paid work and parenting, economic security, politics, and health decision-making. For example, mothers are extremely or very concerned about the virus considering the most trusted news sources to be public health agencies, spouses/partners and family healthcare providers. Various results have reported a substantial number of mothers with pandemic-related increases in their frustrations with their partners. These frustrations are particularly common among women whose partners are providing insufficient support with pandemic parenting or dismissing mothers' concerns

about COVID-19. They usually blame themselves for these conflicts and feel responsible for reducing them, including by leaving the workforce, beginning use of antidepressants, or ignoring their own concerns about COVID-19.

Women are disproportionately expected to shoulder the burdens of household and caregiving responsibilities during the workweek and are experiencing more reported feelings of anxiety than men. Significantly more mothers than fathers find it difficult to “switch off” their mind from work at the end of the day; mothers usually do most of the childcare tasks, whereas fathers are more likely to expect their partner to manage tasks across the board; mothers worry more than fathers that they would not be able to support their children with school tasks as much as they need to. Mothers are also more likely than fathers to feel guilty when working because they are not able to attend to caregiving responsibilities.

It is clear that this crisis has exacerbated long-standing sources of conflict related to partners’ insufficient support with parenting and created new sources of conflict related to partners’ dismissals of mothers’ concerns about COVID-19, with serious implications for mothers, families, and public health. It is crucial that, looking at the way families, particularly mothers, make decisions during times like this, can help us determine what messaging is necessary and what source mothers will turn to in protecting themselves and in turn, their communities.

Challenges of mothers in the workplace

Women accounted for more than half of the jobs lost since the beginning of the pandemic with their unemployment rate surpassing men’s. This has been called a “shecession” by Nicole Mason, president and chief executive of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, in a nod to the 2008 recession that came to be known as the “mancecession” because more men were affected. In this recession, female-dominated jobs, like hospitality or child care, tend to also be underpaid and undervalued, which means that many of the newly unemployed women now have less of a financial cushion to fall back on. Without mentioning that young women are more likely to be unemployed than young men, increasing the pressure over single-mothers and recently formed young families.

In the workplace, both mothers and fathers may feel that being a parent is a strike against them during the pandemic. And both mothers and fathers may fear taking advantage of parental benefits offered, as it has been the case in many other situations. During the crisis, parents are caught in a difficult predicament, tasked with making challenging decisions about their family and career daily. That is why, regardless of gender and race, parents may fear they will be negatively affected by employer decisions because they are parents. Particularly,

Families in a changing world *

Today, there are many indications that women are increasingly able to exercise agency and voice within their families. These include the rising age of marriage; greater social and legal recognition of a diversity of partnership forms; declines in birth rates as women are better able to choose whether and when to have children, and how many; and women’s increased economic autonomy. These transformations are both causes and consequences of large-scale demographic changes, dramatic shifts in women’s and girls’ access to education and employment, ideational and normative changes, and legal reform, often driven and inspired by women’s activism.

This activism and a strong reaffirmation of human rights values are needed more than ever, in a context in which backlash against the gains that have been made is growing stronger by the day. Concerted efforts to roll back the achievements of many decades of work for gender equality, by those who deny women the right to make their own decisions, have recently been cloaked in the rhetoric of ‘family values’. In reality, the proponents of these views have not only sought to undermine women’s rights, but have simultaneously adopted policies that erode the conditions that enable families and their members to thrive.

Families are a key building block of societies, without which communities and economies could not function. It is through families that people share resources such as housing and income, look after those who are sick and frail, and reproduce, nurture and care for the next generation. Families can be places of love and affection, and pivotal for each member’s sense of identity and belonging. However, within families, women and girls too often face violence and discrimination. Over their lifetimes, around one in three women can expect to experience physical or sexual abuse at the hands of an intimate partner. In some countries, girls are not able to inherit property, while in others, women are required by law to obey their husbands, their voices stifled and their agency eroded. The recognition of families as a contradictory space for women and girls is at the heart of this Report.

The inequality, discrimination and disadvantage that women and girls can face in their family lives and relationships are neither natural, nor inevitable. Therefore, the urgent challenge for policymakers, activists and people in all walks of life, is to transform families into places of equality and justice, a springboard from which women and girls can realize their rights.

* UN Women, ‘Families in a changing world’, Report on the Progress of the World’s Women 2019–2020.

mothers are not aware of the plans their employers have in place for parents, or know that these plans simply do not exist at their company. They are relying for support on their work relationships, such as their managers or work colleagues.

As many other citizens, parents have reasons to believe their performance has suffered as a result of the pandemic, and they will have now to rethink their futures. A large number of senior-level mothers have reported that they have been unable to perform optimally. Parents are anxious about less job security and fear being penalized because they have childcare responsibilities. While all parents are under enormous strain, it is clear that, generally speaking, mothers are bearing a greater burden than fathers, as they are disproportionately expected to fulfill household and caregiving responsibilities during the workweek. Moreover, mothers tend to hide their caregiving struggles from their colleagues.

Mothers' predicaments: childcare and education

Child care facilities are slowly reopening, but they serve just a fraction of the number they enrolled before the pandemic, and their financial futures are uncertain. The industry already operates at the margins, and facilities that are open are running under capacity to comply with strict health guidelines. Many centers have delayed paying their rent or mortgages until they can afford it. Owners say that many workers have left for babysitting gigs or other minimum-wage jobs that reopened sooner.

Sadly, mothers receive less workplace support than fathers do in managing childcare. According to working mothers, employers either have no plans in place to help with childcare or they have not been made aware of such plans. Among those whose employers do have plans, more flexible schedules are the most common solution. Still, just a low percentage of mothers have reported that their employer has been moderately or very proactive in expanding parental benefits since the pandemic began.

On the other hand, uncertainty around schooling has altered many parents' lives. They face tough decisions about their children's educational plans, and many choose to place their children in 100% remote learning during the pandemic, they are facing very

real challenges in their careers, in their caregiving roles, and in their personal development.

Conclusion

The pandemic has made it more difficult for parents to deal with the strain of juggling family and work. Most mothers and fathers have had to modify their work routines to adapt to caregiving needs and balance their family responsibilities. This disruption has left parents across genders, races, ethnicities and job levels feeling guilty about caregiving responsibilities.

Even as schools reopen, most children will be engaging in virtual learning. Additionally, many parents worry about the impact on their careers of the pandemic and uncertainty about school reopening. Parents are concerned that they are not currently performing to the best of their abilities and that the Covid-19 crisis will affect their job security and career growth.

Many parents have also experienced intense personal challenges due to the coronavirus crisis, including suffering grief due to a loss of life. Overall, many have experienced financial hardship, with some having lost job-related income or faced difficulty getting needed resources. In particular, some parents report having had to move their residence or ask a relative to move in with them to receive support.

The fact is that mothers are experiencing a greater burden than fathers throughout the workweek, such as preparing meals, supervising homework, and even monitoring playtime with their children. Mothers feel more guilt in attempting to meet work-life demands, and experience more feelings of anxiety.

Companies must do more to communicate and enhance their programs, as well as to create psychologically-safe spaces for parents to take advantage of these options. Doing so will smooth the path towards a more fair, inclusive, and responsive workplace in these uncertain times

Parents, and especially mothers, need more work-related support and communication. To alleviate the challenges parents are facing, the public and the private sectors must provide increased transparency around available benefits and create an environment in which employees do not feel they are faulted for being parents. Communication needs to be empathetic toward their concerns and delivered both as overall company directives and through more personal channels.