

## **Threats on women all around the world A Covid-19 impact analysis**

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**The Covid-19 pandemic crisis negatively affects women’s rights and lives all around the world, and threatens them with short, medium and long-term backlashes. Marlène Schiappa, the French secretary of State for Equality between women and men and for the fight against discrimination, draws up an overview of this issue worldwide, as well as the post-coronavirus challenges.**

Surely, women are on the front line at work – as caregivers, cashiers etc. – and at home, where the responsibility of domestic tasks, combined to home-schooling, falls even more to them, sometimes creating situations close to parental burn-out, as telecommuting adds itself in the same space-line.

Confinement, essence of the lockdown, increases domestic violence, while decreasing their opportunities to find help or to end the cohabitation. In some countries, this pandemic calls into question the access to women’s sexual and reproductive rights, be it because of political decisions or *de facto*, when the increasing flow of patients sometimes prevents access to abortion.

Schools closure, as decided in most of the pandemic-affected countries, pushes girls away from education and, as it happened during the Ebola outbreak, leads to dangerous situations such as forced marriages or early pregnancies And this does not only happen in Africa.

Finally, public debates in times of crisis tend to reduce the visibility of women, whether scientific experts or journalists, as well as their participation in decision-making processes.

Many women warn about possible setbacks in the long term, when it comes to the place of women in the economy, or even, to a lesser extent, the valorisation of women’s sport. Professional inequalities between women and men are likely to increase over the medium term, and engagement for women’s rights can be materially endangered in a context of economic crisis.

The prospect of confinement being lifted also raises fears of a collective “decompensation” phenomenon, which risks creating a breeding ground unfortunately favourable to sexual violence, in a context where conservative societal reflexes endorse a backlash against the emancipation of women, as well as a possible massive comeback of housewives. This text

offers an analysis of these global phenomena, and calls for collective engagement to face these global threats.

### Nurses, teachers, cashiers: women on the front line

Let's first share an overview and statistical analysis: the most mobilised jobs in the context of the pandemic - care, education, department store cashiers - are so-called care jobs, largely occupied by women. Many publications point out that, all over the world, women are on the front line to care, protect, educate or feed during the crisis. The most represented profession in a hospital is the nursing profession. However, out of the 28 million nurses on the planet, 90% are women, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), which analyses in a report on the situation of nurses in 2020: "Nursing remains a highly gendered profession with associated biases in the workplace. (...) few leadership positions in health are held by nurses or women. There is some evidence of a gender-based pay gap, as well as other forms of gender-based discrimination in the work environment."<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, women represent almost 47% of doctors according to the OECD, 90% of caregivers, and the vast majority of hospital cleaning workers who are usually "invisible" to many.

In her essay "Le Soin est un humanisme" (*Care is a humanism*, published by Gallimard)<sup>2</sup>, the French philosopher Cynthia Fleury, who defends a "society of care", writes: "Care is what founds our humanism. This further step in humanism takes place with caring. We sanctify the other person. And we consider that to be what inscribes us in space-time today". Caregivers certainly are putting us more than ever in a long and slow biological temporality, and the current overview of forces makes us see how active women are there.

Beyond healthcare professionals, women are also a majority among volunteers, or groups set up for the occasion, all over the world. Take for example, the "seamstresses" who voluntarily make masks for their neighbourhoods. Therefore, "Ethiopia relies on a battalion of 40,000 women for coronavirus prevention," said Ethiopian Minister of Health Temesgen Ayehu in a Reuters report last April. "They are health auxiliaries and the confidence that these women have built over the years will help us reach the various communities more quickly". Celebrated and applauded, they are nevertheless the target of individual malevolences on the grounds of their profession.<sup>34</sup>

Not only are they overrepresented in the care sectors, but also in another sector on the front line: education. According to data compiled by the World Bank, more than 66% of teaching staff are women worldwide<sup>5</sup>, and this is particularly pronounced in the countries affected by the pandemic who had to go through a period of said "home-school": 87% in Germany, 87%

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<sup>1</sup> « State of the world's nursing report » WHO (2020)

<file:///C:/Users/ymlaraha/AppData/Local/Temp/9789240003279-eng-1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> « Omicidio Lorena, l'omicida : «Ho il coronavirus» Ma tamponi lo smentiscono », *La Sicilia* (2020)

<https://www.lasicilia.it/news/agrigento/333523/omicidio-lorena-l-omicida-ho-il-coronavirus-ma-tamponi-lo-smentiscono.html>

<sup>3</sup> « Coronavirus : une infirmière expulsée près de Montpellier, ses propriétaires mis en examen », *France Bleue* (2020) <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/coronavirus-infirmiere-expulsee-pres-de-montpellier-les-proprietaires-mis-en-examen-1586964630>

<sup>4</sup> « They think I will bring coronavirus to building: Surat doctor on being attacked, abused by neighbours », *Indian Today* (2020) <https://www.indiatoday.in/msn-it/story/they-think-i-will-bring-coronavirus-to-building-surat-doctor-on-being-attacked-abused-by-neighbours-1664084-2020-04-07>

<sup>5</sup> « Éducation primaire, nombre d'enseignants (% de femmes) », *Banque Mondiale* <https://donnees.banquemondiale.org/indicateur/SE.PRM.TCHR.FE.ZS>

in Spain, 96% in Italy, 87% in the United States of America... These women therefore had to face confinement with their own children if applicable, but also to prepare classes remotely and continue working to ensure students education. As in other feminised sectors, their salaries in many countries of the world remain well below the average salaries of executives in the private sector.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, in mass distribution, women are a minority in charge of stores or large retailers, but a large majority among cashier or sales staff, who are most in contact with the population. This observation leads the French feminist newspaper *Les Nouvelles News* (The New News) to mention a first line formed by "feminine soldiers of care"<sup>7</sup> in this "war". The soldiers on the frontlines are overwhelmingly women, with all the risks that this entails, during and after the battle, and always with a lesser salary.

If this observation highlights the work carried out mainly by these women, the reflection on the changes in our economic and social models cannot be exempt from a reflection on the revaluation of these highly feminised professions, of which each of us now agrees to say they are essential for a society to function. Meanwhile, they are in the front line.

### Back home, potentially overworked women

Around the world, the distribution between educational and domestic tasks is usually organised very unevenly between women and men. This is regardless of the "free time" or the salary of each parent. Globally, women perform nearly 70% of household tasks. This imbalance, more or less important according to the habits of the different countries, exists in all countries without exception, from Denmark to India via China or New Zealand<sup>8</sup>. There is no country in the world where men do on average more unpaid work at home than women. None.

Lockdown sends many women and men home. However, the impact differs from one gender to another: confinement emphasises the uneven distribution of household tasks. On average, men do a little more on lockdown. On average, women do much more on lockdown. Sending men and women home does not have the same historical or sociological meaning. For generations, one of the two genders needed permission from the other to be able to go out to work. The stereotypical role of one of the two genders, for generations, has not been to get its feet under the table while reading the paper but to be busy in the kitchen. In France, a government study shows that 58% of women spend more than two hours a day doing household tasks, versus only 35% of men during the pandemic<sup>9</sup>.

Your confinement is not carried out under the same conditions depending on whether you spend hours maintaining the home and taking care of the children, or whether you benefit from the cleaning done by someone else. A German study also shows that men and women will use the flexibility allowed by working from home during lockdown differently. Women

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<sup>6</sup> « Teachers' salaries » *OECD* <https://data.oecd.org/eduresource/teachers-salaries.htm>

<sup>7</sup> « Les soldats du care en première ligne face au covid 19 », *Les Nouvelles News* (2020)

<https://www.lesnouvellesnews.fr/les-soldates-du-care-en-premiere-ligne-face-au-covid-19/>

<sup>8</sup> « Cuisiner, s'occuper des enfants, construire ou réparer : le travail non rémunéré à travers le monde », *OECD* (2011) <https://www.oecd.org/fr/els/soc/48448172.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> « Marlène Schiappa : Les femmes et les hommes ne vivent pas le même confinement ! », *Le Point* (2020)

[https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/exclusif-marlene-schiappa-les-femmes-et-les-hommes-ne-vivent-pas-le-meme-confinement-15-04-2020-2371613\\_20.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/exclusif-marlene-schiappa-les-femmes-et-les-hommes-ne-vivent-pas-le-meme-confinement-15-04-2020-2371613_20.php)

devote the time they don't spend in transports or in physical meetings to taking care of their children<sup>10</sup>.

“Crises are the breeding ground for conservative reflexes. With regard to gender relations, exceptional situations brutally highlight the perpetuation of a traditional distribution of roles and functions. In general, in so-called “normal” times, women already reduce their own activities to ensure childcare (part-time work, parental leave, etc.). This is exacerbated in times of crisis,” analyses consultant Marie Donzel for the EVE program.<sup>11</sup>

Lets' look at the cooking issue. Closing canteen services has increased the precariousness of many modest families (in countries that offered a school canteen service), because they no longer have access to financially accessible and, for most of them, nutritiously balanced meals. However, canteen services closure also means that women now prepare the large majority of meals. This, combined with the closure of restaurants, bars and fast foods, weighs mainly on women. I mention fast food because, whatever your opinion on this sector, it must be noted that Burger King serves 11 million menus per day worldwide. Every second, 706 people go into a McDonalds' somewhere around the world. The main customers are young people and families with children. Who will now prepare all these meals? In France, the Harris Interactive study for the government shows that in 63% of families, women cook all the meals and snacks for the children. In most families of four people, during two months of confinement, a housewife has therefore prepared 480 meals, from thinking it ("what are we going to eat tonight?") to the shopping list, including washing the dishes.

These concrete tasks add to the usual mental burden of women : the majority of family caregivers are women. In most families, they are the ones who plan or take the initiative to organise phone calls with elderly members of the family. “Elderly dependence is a woman's issue. Spread the word! They are in fact twice as concerned: they are the most dependent and main providers of assistance.”<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, women still receive injunctions on their appearance: anti-fat jokes on "before/ after" the lockdown, explaining how women will gain weight and therefore become undesirable in the eyes of men, flourish on social networks. Women's white hairs due to closed hairdressers as well as the lack of access to hair removal salons is mentioned as dramatic in several countries as dramatic. The Malaysian government has apologised for providing advice considered sexist to women during lockdown (putting on makeup every day to please their spouses)<sup>13</sup>. The point here is obviously not to judge individual practices of one or the other, but to emphasise these never ending injunctions to women.

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<sup>10</sup> « Germany : Flexible working conditions lead to overtime, study shows », *DW* (2019)

<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-flexible-working-conditions-lead-to-overtime-study-shows/a-47771436>

<sup>11</sup> « Face aux crises, quelle condition des femmes ? », *Programme Eve* (2020) <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-flexible-working-conditions-lead-to-overtime-study-shows/a-47771436>

<sup>12</sup> « Egalité entre les femmes et les hommes : le cas des aidants familiaux », *Cairn* (2016) <https://www.cairn.info/revue-regards-2016-2-page-99.htm>

<sup>13</sup> « En Malaisie, le gouvernement s'excuse après avoir prié les femmes de ne pas embêter leur mari », *Madame Figaro* (2020) <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/societe/en-malaisie-le-gouvernement-sexcuse-apres-avoir-donne-des-conseils-sexistes-aux-femmes-confinement-coronavirus-030420-180588>

The British sociologist Heejung Cheung from Kent University even mentions a "return of the 1950's housewife" and an assignment to stereotypical roles because of confinement<sup>14</sup>. At the end of the lockdown, many women run a risk of silent exhaustion for being caught between these different phenomena. Not to mention the economic crisis that might spark a debate within heterosexual couples with children: Which one of us will stay home looking after the children and which one of us will go back work? We all know the answer.

### Increase in all gender-based and sexual violence

While the exact prevalence is difficult to quantify precisely due to the lack of reliable immediate indicators, many countries report an increase in complaints to the police or in the number of domestic violence-related judicial affairs processed during confinement. "In the past two weeks, in Mexico City, the people arrested for domestic violence over the Covid-19 period has increased by 7.2%, and 1,608 domestic violence investigation files were opened, according to the office of the Attorney General" reports an article in the newspaper *El Pais*, also providing information on an increase of up to + 60% in calls according to some associations<sup>15</sup>. Authorities in the UK mention three times as many women killed by their spouses during confinement<sup>16</sup>. In France, the police received five times more reports of domestic violence on their online platform.

Confinement with a predator or an abusive man is obviously the first cause, but we can also note a greater difficulty for women to go out and find help from colleagues, friends or their families. In addition to that, confinement can escalate tensions and create conflicts: without confusing conflicts and violence, one can lead to the other and the escalation can accelerate without any way of unwinding, external intervention by a third party, or easy access to an alternate shelter. In other countries, domestic violence appears to be increasing but the rate of femicides seems to be slowing down at the same time. The current data must however be taken with great caution: we know that femicides often occur after a trigger, such as, in at least half of the cases, the announcement or fear of a break-up or of the woman leaving. The violent man, who considers his partner as an object that belongs to him and dehumanizes her, prefers to see her dead rather than autonomous and then proceeds to act. These scenarios are *de facto* limited during confinement, but may explode in several countries when confinement is lifted if, like in China, divorce requests increase after lockdown is over<sup>17</sup>.

Beyond domestic violence in a couples, domestic violence on young boys and girls follows the same path. In quarantine, young girls are more exposed to their families' sectarian drifts when they force radical practices on them. Within families, and beyond marital rape, sexual violence is more often committed against children, especially young girls. Thousands of them are currently being quarantined with a rapist or sex-offender that is taking advantage of this time when neither school nor family members can intervene to protect her, and when all of the common strategies for young victims (sleepovers at a friend's house, going to her

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<sup>14</sup> « Return of the 1950s housewife? How to stop coronavirus lockdown reinforcing sexist gender roles », *The Conversation* (2020) <https://theconversation.com/return-of-the-1950s-housewife-how-to-stop-coronavirus-lockdown-reinforcing-sexist-gender-roles-134851>

<sup>15</sup> « Las llamadas por violencia de género en México aumentan 60% durante la cuarentena », *El Pais* (2020) [https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2020/04/02/mexico/1585780887\\_471083.html](https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2020/04/02/mexico/1585780887_471083.html)

<sup>16</sup> « 3 times more women killed by men than average during U.K. coronavirus lockdown, data show », *CBS NEWS* (2020) <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/domestic-violence-uk-coronavirus-lockdown-3-times-higher-than-average-data-shows/>

<sup>17</sup> « China's Divorce Spike Is a Warning to Rest of Locked-Down World », *Bloomberg Business* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-31/divorces-spike-in-china-after-coronavirus-quarantines>

grandparents, etc.) are prevented. These silent violences resonate in the background. Knowing the prevalence of sexual violence against children, there is no doubt that quarantining a whole generation presents important risks on how these children will shape themselves. We will need to provide constant aid and support for these psychological traumas.

Likewise, the idleness of confinement, lack of supervision and the feeling of impunity of cyber-attackers behind their screens tend to favour online harassment. Sexist digital raids targeted against influencers or young women, targeted cyber-harassment of public, scientific or political women who speak in the media, as well as revenge porn skyrocket during confinement. In France, one of these operations even has a name, “fisha”. The aim is to upload intimate photos or videos of very young girls, taken during rape or consensual intercourse, with their contact details and their identity in order to humiliate them. About fifty young girls were victims of this operation<sup>18</sup> (the content was finally removed at the request of associations, lawyers and the government), while on online platforms, moderation is sometimes slower than usual. In response to reports of sexist comments, one currently receives this message from Twitter: "We will investigate your report as soon as possible but it will take longer than usual". According to Twitter, the victims must wait.

“When smartphones and social media became ubiquitous for students, cyberbullying rates went up. This makes sense, of course, because there was now an almost limitless number of potential targets and aggressors” analyses Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D., professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within the College for Design and Social Inquiry at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, in a Gisele Galoustian article for the University of Florida<sup>19</sup>. “Well, during this unprecedented time when they’re all stuck at home, those same students will be using apps even more than they already do with them being *forced* to use online platforms for learning, regardless of their level of comfort or proficiency. Teachers are delivering education not just in learning management systems like Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle, but even on Roblox, Twitch, and YouTube, among others”. The downside to this virtual educational continuity is that the harassers' access routes to their victims are multiplied and have now become essential for children and teenagers.

Similarly, pornographic websites indicate an increase in consultations (25 to 50% more traffic depending on the country) in such a way that some have even had to promise authorities to reduce their bandwidth in order to leave some available for teleworking. Several platforms have taken advantage of the lockdown to launch marketing operations with free amateur content<sup>20</sup>, and this daily consumption leads some internet users to want to watch more violent or shocking content. The report from Indian NGO ICPF, indicates an increase of "up to 200% of the demand for violent content that shows children ‘suffocated’, ‘bleeding’ and ‘tortured’ over the study period" during the pandemic. The demand for new content intensifies, and women and girls in the most precarious and difficult situations therefore suffer from it, in

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<sup>18</sup> « Harcèlement sexuel : avec le confinement, le retour en force des comptes « fisha » sur les réseaux sociaux », *Le Monde* (2020) [https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2020/04/07/harcèlement-sexuel-avec-le-confinement-le-retour-en-force-des-comptes-fisha-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux\\_6035853\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2020/04/07/harcèlement-sexuel-avec-le-confinement-le-retour-en-force-des-comptes-fisha-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux_6035853_4408996.html)

<sup>19</sup> « Unintended Consequence of COVID-19: Cyberbullying Could Increase », *Florida Atlantic University* (2020) <http://www.fau.edu/newsdesk/articles/covid-19-cyberbullying.php>

<sup>20</sup> « Covid-19: Porn site’s free service during coronavirus raises sex trafficking fears », *The Star* (2020) <https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2020/03/27/covid-19-porn-sites-free-service-during-coronavirus-raises-sex-trafficking-fears>

horrific conditions<sup>21</sup>. This over-consumption of porn - whose scenarios are far from feminist - fatally reinforces the stereotypical representation of sexuality and helps distorting the image of women, which will not help to reaffirm the notion of sexual consent when confinement is lifted for good.

As for street harassment, if one could instinctively estimate that women, when confined, are less likely to be followed in the streets, numerous testimonies indicate a more nuanced reality. "We're in the middle of a pandemic and I just got catcalled!" claims the title of an article in the Telegraph<sup>22</sup>. In India, all types of sexual violence seem to have increased during confinement: "According to the data by National Commission For Women, a staggering 257 cases of crime against women for a duration of 10 days (23 March to 1 April) of lockdown were recorded as compared to 116 cases that were recorded for a duration of seven normal days (2 March to 8 March). 13 cases have been registered under Rape/Attempt to Rape as compared to the average of two cases during the normal days. The ten days of the lockdown also saw an increase in domestic violence cases which rose to 69 as of 1 April, as compared to 30 cases between 2 March to 8 March" reports an article by Indian journalist Anushika Srivastava<sup>23</sup>.

We can also fear a terrible and substantial increase in what is known as street sexual violence with the quarantine being lifted, when decompensation phenomena might bring out various risky behaviours, a feeling of impunity and omnipotence of sex offenders. These must be anticipated everywhere to be avoided, or fought against.

### Threats to sexual and reproductive rights

As noted by Susan Papp and Marcy Persh from the Canadian NGO Women Deliver<sup>24</sup> "Education on emotional and sexual life ceases (with confinement), but part of life continues during confinement: young girls continue their puberty, some will have their first period during confinement, find out they are pregnant, give birth".

However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, several factors threaten women's access to their sexual and reproductive rights. First and foremost, some anti-choice decision-makers are using this crisis to push through or try to push through their decisions to restrict or prohibit access to abortion (Texas, Poland, etc.). Secondly, many women, staggered by the crisis and the lockdown, risk pregnancy denials during this period, or even a disruption of their usual cycles, making the observation of pregnancy less obvious. Finally, they might fear going to the hospital, these might be less available, or women might think they are, depending on the countries. Therefore, as perfectly accurately summed up by Canadian Journalist Leah Rumack, access to abortion remains threatened, even in the most progressive and advanced countries in terms of women's rights.<sup>25</sup> "While Canadians likely won't ever face a situation

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<sup>21</sup> « Did demand for child sex abuse material fuel Indian traffic on Pornhub in lockdown? », *The News Minute* (2020) <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/did-demand-child-sex-abuse-material-fuel-indian-traffic-pornhub-lockdown-122572>

<sup>22</sup> « We're in the middle of a pandemic and I just got catcalled' - how coronavirus is impacting women », *The Telegraph* (2020) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/middle-pandemic-just-got-catcalled-coronavirus-impacting-women/>

<sup>23</sup> « India Witnesses A Steep Rise In Crime Against Women During Lockdown », *She The People* (2020) <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/india-lockdown-crime-women-rise>

<sup>24</sup> « Susan Papp », *Woman Deliver* (2020) <https://womendeliver.org/personnel/susan-papp/>

<sup>25</sup> « How COVID-19 Is Making It Harder To Get An Abortion In Canada », *Refinery 29* (2020) <https://www.refinery29.com/en-ca/abortion-clinic-canada-pill-access-covid-19>

like women in Ohio or Texas — where anti-choice politicians are using COVID-19 as a completely transparent ruse to stop or indefinitely “postpone” abortions — there’s a very real concern that reproductive healthcare is going to slip down the priority list as the pandemic deepens and resources are stretched thin.” And this while an abortion cannot, by its nature, wait or be postponed - this is what has led France to extend the legal deadlines for medical abortions<sup>26</sup>.

UNFPA<sup>27</sup> also analyses: "Drawing lessons from the Zika virus outbreak, differences in power between men and women meant that women did not have autonomy over their sexual and reproductive decisions, which was compounded by their inadequate access to health care and insufficient financial resources to travel to hospitals and health care facilities for check-ups for their children, despite women doing most of the community spread control activities. Many times there is also an inadequate level of women’s representation in pandemic planning and response, which can already be seen in some of the national and global COVID-19 responses.” All of these threats to the situation of women are intertwined. When women and feminists are less represented in decision-making processes, it is rare for an exclusively male assembly to spontaneously address the issues of endometriosis, maternal exhaustion, preparation for childbirth in confinement or abortion - here is the moment for us to thank the few men of power committed to women's rights and who actually do it.

In addition, anti-choice people do not give up on their fight against women’s rights to control their own bodies during this time, and use the fight against the pandemic with arguments like "the world saves lives, you want to kill" using their traditional rhetoric. This is also fuelling a wave of homophobia aimed at lesbians, amid conspiracies and hazardous statements about the origins or transmission of the virus. We should also note the even more difficult access specific to women who suffer from cross-discrimination: a woman transitioning from Male to Female will have harder times accessing her treatment; a woman with a disabilities will find it more difficult to independently access physical appointments or teleconsultations with doctors or midwives; a woman with mental disabilities will be less able to notice the first signs of an unwanted pregnancy, even though they are statistically more victims of rape and less informed about contraceptive methods. This will have direct consequences on women’s health. Finally, in many countries around the world, poor, uninsured and foreign women (criteria vary according to the country) do not have free access to care, and will therefore have to resort to clandestine abortion, risking their lives.

Already threatened before Covid-19 by increasingly powerful and offensive realms around the world, the sexual and reproductive rights of women will face an immediate and long-term setback if we look elsewhere for three months.

### Closed schools = forced marriages and early pregnancies

According to the unanimous opinion of all experts on education, women's rights or the conduct of peace processes, "the experience of Ebola has shown that closing schools often leads to early marriages and unintended pregnancies". Stefania Giannini, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, and Anne-Brigitte Albrechtsen, Director-General of Plan

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<sup>26</sup> « Confinement : le délai de l'IVG médicamenteuse à domicile étendu à neuf semaines », *Madame Le Figaro* (2020) <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/societe/confinement-le-delai-de-livg-medicamenteuse-a-domicile-etendu-a-neuf-semaines-110420-180682>

<sup>27</sup> « COVID-19:Une optique sexospécifique », *UNFPA* (2020) [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/French.COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note\\_edits\\_clean\\_file\\_0.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/French.COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note_edits_clean_file_0.pdf)

International, point out that “school closures around the world due to COVID-19 will hit girls more harshly.”<sup>28</sup> Girls and boys left school at the same time, but the impact is not the same. “Even though many girls will continue their education once the doors reopen, others will never return.” According to them, the risk of not adapting an educational response specifically to the challenges for girls and young girls would amount losing “20 years of progress made in favour of the education of girls”.

During the Ebola crisis, many girls were sexually assaulted by men in their families, forced into marriage, or became mothers after being raped, recall Stefania Giannini and Anne-Brigitte Albrechtsen, noting the 65% increase in teenage pregnancies in Sierra Leone over the period. All experts have long underlined the link between school dropout and forced marriage. Alice Albright and Mabel Von Oranje wrote in 2016 in *The Telegraph* for “Girls Not Bride”<sup>29</sup>: “the life stories of child brides and out-of-school girls are intertwined. Girls who are out of school are far more likely to get married and get pregnant. Married girls have responsibilities as mothers and caregivers that offer little, if any, opportunity to continue learning. Resuming their education is usually out of the question as social norms and laws often forbid pregnant girls and young mothers from returning to school. We know that girls who are married early and drop out of education are more vulnerable to violence, poverty, ill health and disempowerment. Sadly, their children are also poorer and less healthy”.

The conservative way of dealing with crises mentioned above can be expressed in European or Western countries by a new stereotypical ideal of a “good housewife”, as we have mentioned earlier. In the villages of certain African countries, this crisis reflex to go back to traditions, to what we know, might lead to giving up on the work carried out by NGOs and several African governments for years to leave “harmful practices” behind, such as genital mutilation or the marrying little girls with grown men able to support them. The World Bank points out that more than a third of sub-Saharan girls are married before their 18th birthday, representing a colossal financial cost for the continent<sup>30</sup>. Once married to older men, or pregnant, these little girls will most likely not go back to school, with everything that it implies on their autonomy, their knowledge, their ability to defend themselves against domestic violence or their health.

If Africa counts, at this stage, in proportion, fewer people who died from Covid-19 than other continents, the response to a global crisis must be global and must anticipate the impact on women’s rights, including taking into account the specificities and experience of each continent and each country. As French President Emmanuel Macron said, “We owe solidarity to Africa<sup>31</sup>”. And to African women.

## Decrease in the number of women in public debate and decision-making processes

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<sup>28</sup> « Pushing for equality for girls in the age of COVID-19 », *Plan International* (2020) <https://plan-international.org/blog/2020/04/equality-for-girls-covid-19>

<sup>29</sup> « Girls should be walking to school, not down the aisle », *The Telegraph* (2019) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/women-and-girls/girls-should-walking-school-not-aisle/>

<sup>30</sup> « Rapport : les mariages d’enfants font perdre des milliards de dollars à l’Afrique », Banque Mondiale (2018) <https://www.banquemondiale.org/fr/news/press-release/2018/11/20/africa-loses-billions-of-dollars-due-to-child-marriage-says-new-world-bank-report>

<sup>31</sup> « Emmanuel Macron sur RFI: « Nous devons la solidarité à l’Afrique » face au coronavirus », *RFI* (2020) <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/20200415-emmanuel-macron-rfi-afrique-raoult-coronavirus-covid-dette>

Is it because they are statistically busier on the front line, more numerous among caregivers and teachers, busy at home or even struggling before sexual violence? Or is it the “conservative reflex in times of crisis” mentioned above? Is it because they are more victims of cyber-harassment when they appear on television? Do they not get invited anymore? The fact remains that in many countries of the world, women are gradually disappearing from the public debate. The requirement goes from "parity, 50% of women among the speakers" or in the panel to: "at least one woman among the speakers, that's good enough". This requirement sometimes even disappears. It only took a few days for battles fought for generations and on the public agenda of all Western countries, to be endangered. All over the world, without even meaning to, magazines or newspapers have published “men only” headlines or files, arguing that "we are facing a crisis".

In an article from *Die Zeit* entitled "Die Krise der Männer"<sup>32</sup> (The men's crisis), German journalist Jana Heinsel points out the over-representation of men in the media since the beginning of the pandemic: "Markus Söder, Jens Spahn, Olaf Scholz, Armin Laschet, Lothar Wieler, Alexander Kekulé, Hendrik Streeck, Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit, Clemens Fuest are the faces of this crisis", referring to German politicians, scientists and journalists, all men, most often appearing in the media to give their vision of the situation. She highlights how women are less present as experts on the screens. True in Germany and everywhere else in the world. "When any one of us switches on the television anywhere in the world we see a sea of men." wrote Anita Bathia, UN Women Deputy Executive Director, in a UN note<sup>33</sup>.

Women, more numerous “on the field”, in hospitals, with elderly people, more prone to Covid-19, more active in caring for families, more numerous in education as we saw above, would seem by nature better suited as a group to share concrete observations from their experiences on the field and to imagine possible solutions. Or at the very least, as suited as men. However, they are partially excluded from the formal or informal decision-making processes during the pandemic. The multiple fears - for our health, that of our loved ones, fear of death, fear of the economy collapsing, fear of losing one's job etc. make us want to feel "reassured", and it seems that the international collective unconscious has decided that men are more "reassuring", thereby validating the theory of men's "presumption of competence", vs. women's "presumption of incompetence". When gender analysis appears in public debate, it is about the surprising perspective explaining that women have been “much better at managing the crisis” (Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Tsai Ing-Wen in Taiwan, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand) than men. And they would have managed it well... for being women!<sup>34</sup>. This is a use of benevolent sexism to deny women their own skills and qualities as human beings, and show them as “women” instead of “head of State or government”. The essentialising that tends to insinuate that women have qualities such as attention to other is a slippery slope that justifies unpaid work be performed essentially by women, because they have a natural gift for it. Let's not go down this road.

### Exacerbated economic inequalities between women and men

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<sup>32</sup> « Die Krise der Männer », *Zeit Online* (2020) <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2020-04/gleichberechtigung-coronavirus-maenner-frauen-wissenschaftler-politiker-systemrelevante-berufe>

<sup>33</sup> « Women and COVID-19: Five things governments can do now », *Un Women* (2020) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-women-and-covid-19-governments-actions-by-ded-bhatia>

<sup>34</sup> « The secret weapon in the fight against coronavirus: women », *The Guardian* (2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/secret-weapon-fight-against-coronavirus-women>

As we have seen above, the time spent taking care of their house, children and home-schooling them is more time-consuming than ever for women. Statistically, in a same work department where a woman and a man work, the woman will have less free time than the man to work. Their telecommuting conditions are therefore different: either women work as much as men and cut back on their sleep time; or they have less working time and therefore less time to advance their careers.

"Young women's careers may never recover from the coronavirus crisis," warns Sarah Fielding<sup>35</sup> in an article in the women's newspaper *In Style*. "As a group, they're not only at a disadvantage because of the pre-existing wage gap between men and women, as well as gender bias in the workplace, but, more so than their male counterparts, they're expected to act as caregivers for their aging parents and young children during quarantine, which takes them away from work that pays. Altogether, these factors can put a halt to their careers during this time, more so than men who are not expected to have the same role" she said. The crisis linked to the coronavirus pandemic might therefore deepen the inequalities between women and men at work in the medium term. Let us be reminded that no country has an average wage inequality that favours women.

Women's prevalence in hidden or so-called informal work is not without consequences. In several countries (Gabon, Cameroon, etc.), 73% of economically active women work in the informal sector, as detailed by African academics Fatou Gueye and Ahmadou Aly Mbaye in their research<sup>36</sup>. In Europe, according to the European Commission's barometer on undeclared work<sup>37</sup>, around a quarter of undeclared work relates to household or personal services, an overwhelming majority of which are occupied by women. Childcare, cleaning, domestic help for dependent elderly people; beyond the assessment of illegality, it is clear that people who usually live from these undeclared work are now deprived of this income because of confinement. They do not have any guarantee - this is the essence of undeclared work - that they will get their job back at the end of the pandemic, nor will they receive benefits as someone who has lost their job, for lack of fiscal contribution for it. The impact is likely to be strong on women in precarious situations, as it is on women who prostitute themselves and on people who live off illegal activities. "The women remaining in Spain (Author's note: during the pandemic) and who are among the 80% victims of trafficking, are forced to continue working because they do not have any financial mean" explains Rocio Nieto head of an NGO defending prostitutes, Amprem, and who assured the newspaper *Le Point*<sup>38</sup> that three-quarters of procuring locations remain open in Madrid.

In the longer term and on a larger scale, an economic crisis might dry out patronage of women from large companies and large private groups. Yet, the role of the private sector is essential to finance international commitments of associations or NGOs for women's rights or to support them directly through grants, funding, prizes etc. L'Occitane, L'Oréal, Tupperware, Unilever, to name a few, make a major contribution. Beyond funding the engagement for women's rights, large companies in many countries were just starting to organise funding for start-ups and businesses created by women. Recent positive advances were created to

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Fielding, <https://www.sarahpfielding.com/instyle>

<sup>36</sup> « Genre et secteur informel en Afrique centrale : une analyse à partir de données d'enquête sur les entreprises du Gabon et du Cameroun », *Coozook* <https://www.coozook.com/static/book-samples/2851A1EFB1-sample.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> « Le travail non déclaré au sein de l'Union européenne », *Commission européenne* (2007) [http://www.belspo.be/belspo/fedra/agora/ag137/eurobarom\\_fr.pdf](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/fedra/agora/ag137/eurobarom_fr.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> « Espagne : les prostituées victimes collatérales du coronavirus », *Le Point* (2020) [https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/espagne-les-prostituees-victimes-collaterales-du-coronavirus-04-04-2020-2370075\\_24.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/espagne-les-prostituees-victimes-collaterales-du-coronavirus-04-04-2020-2370075_24.php)

mobilise funds to finance businesses created by women and support their economic development all over the world, and most particularly under the leadership of the American government, via Kathryn Kaufman of the Global Women Issue<sup>39</sup>.

### Concerns for women's sport

This may seem like a subsidiary subject. In a pandemic, when all human beings of the world are being preoccupied by a matter of life or death, culture and sports might seem less essential. And yet, music, movies, books, yoga or gymnastics seemed to fill many families' quarantine, if we believe the photos shared on Instagram. But there again, serious threats are hanging over women's sport, a sector which has nevertheless recorded clear progress in recent years thanks to the full engagement of women in this field, with some strong symbolic victories in terms of players' wages, particularly in football, for example in the United States, as the Denver Post<sup>40</sup> reminds us.

After the stopping of championships, and with it the possible withdrawals of sponsors, combined with a lack of television revenue and linked to ticket sales (no game, no show, no money), the sports world is primarily looking at financial issues when thinking about resuming the games.

In this context, should games be played behind closed doors to avoid rallies while continuing the activity of the current sports championships? The question is on everyone's mind. Madeleine Pape, Australian sociology Ph.D. and middle-distance race running champion, raises the question of double standards between men and women athletes in *The Guardian*: "In a context where professional female footballers still attract a double take, vigilance is needed to ensure we don't relegate the women's game to the sidelines, elevate men's sport alone as critical to the nation's morale, or judge empty stands differently – 'normal' for women, as compared to the clear results of an unprecedented global crisis for men."<sup>41</sup> Putting an end to "non-essential" streams could be end up "putting an end to female teams".

In a column published on Yahoo Sports USA, Caitlin Murray underlines that the conditions for the resumption of male sport are fiercely negotiated while those of women's sport remain unclear. To date, no deadline is formally indicated for example for the resumption of women's basketball, "No one doubts NFL and NBA can rebound from coronavirus. For women's sports leagues, it's a different story"<sup>42</sup> she wonders.

Better paid, better considered, more media cover but also more financially comfortable (causality), sportsmen are collectively considered as better "investments" than women for the sponsors, with rare exceptions. An Amsterdam/ Fifa Pro study published in *Le Parisien* thus mentions a depressive state in 28% of male players and in 50% of female players. The number of women players worrying about their future is also a little bit higher than that of men

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<sup>39</sup> « Investing in Women for a New Economic Future », CSIS (2019) <https://www.csis.org/events/investing-women->

<sup>40</sup> « USWNT paid more than the men over past eight years, U.S. Soccer says », *The Denver Post* (2019) <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/07/29/us-women-soccer-paid-more-than-men/>

<sup>41</sup> « Rapid rise of women's sport at risk of being halted by Covid-19 outbreak », *The Guardian* (2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/mar/19/rapid-rise-of-womens-sport-at-risk-of-being-halted-by-covid-19-outbreak>

<sup>42</sup> « No one doubts NFL and NBA can rebound from coronavirus. For women's sports leagues, it's a different story », *Yahoo Sports* (2020) <https://sports.yahoo.com/womens-sports-leagues-difficult-fight-returning-coronavirus-suspension-160046852.html>

players. When the championships resume with fewer financiers and a three-month gap in cashflow to fill, which games will be cancelled, which salaries will be cut? Probably not those of the great sports stars, most of them men, but more likely those of sportswomen, who play more often with an amateur status, in addition to another job.

Finally, when competitions resume, almost all games will take place around the same time. TV channels will have to make choices. And we know from experience who won't benefit from these choices if no one fights for them.

### Is gender equality a relegated global priority?

We observe that, beyond the direct effects of the crisis on women's rights, reactionaries around the world use it to belittle the principle of gender equality. *Die Zeit*<sup>43</sup> reveals that in Germany "the Union of Values, the highly conservative wing of the German Christian Democratic Union, demanded this: "Let us hope that this bad moment will make it clear to the latter that the professors of medicine, chemistry and biology are infinitely more important than those of *gender studies*". This sarcastic assertion maintains the whimsical myth of "gender study" being expensive for public funds - demonstrating above all the ignorance of the costs of these studies, involving very little public funds - which we could furthermore find regrettable. In fact, the people claiming all year long that the place of women in society is not a priority are using the pandemic to invent new cause and effect relations that should not arise, and require the abandonment of the current objectives in terms of gender equality.

But even those who defended gender equality could, for lack of time or comprehension of long-term issues, sometimes be tempted to relegate this principle to the fights of the world of before the pandemic if the engagement weakens or if it contents itself with vague slogans without a precise analysis.

The usual places and times to organise this global commitment have been undermined by the pandemic. The 64th United Nations Convention on the Status of Women (CSW) planned for March 2020 had to be cancelled because of the pandemic, to protect the participants. The Generation Equality Forum organised by France and Mexico under the aegis of the UN has been rescheduled from July 2020 to the first semester of 2021. These events unite women's rights advocates around the world and enable them, thanks to States' multilateral diplomacy and to a massive commitment from civil society, to implement actions of feminist diplomacy, which are now more essential than ever. No country has achieved gender equality and no country can achieve it on its own. We must reaffirm loud and clear this international ambition, while engagement is reinventing itself as we speak.

Some powerful voices are rising positively to keep gender equality on the agenda. Melinda Gates, whose commitment to the empowerment of women and in research against the coronavirus is well-known, is one of them<sup>44</sup>. Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, has expressed his fear of a setback in the hard-won progress of the recent years. Along with Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of UN Women, they made recommendations to all governments to take into account gender inequalities issues linked to the crisis, while launching the "He for She at home" program to support the engagement of men in educational and domestic tasks. Many governments are taking concrete action to

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<sup>43</sup> *Die Zeit* <http://www.diezeit.de/>

<sup>44</sup> « Melinda Gates: In pandemic, your actions can help save lives », *USA Today* (2020) <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/04/03/melinda-gates-coronavirus-pandemic-compels-us-rise-challenge-column/5104107002/>

restrain the negative impact of the Covid-19 crisis on women's rights – as a member of a government myself, I won't draw an inventory here. During the crisis, many female social workers, experts and volunteers from countless non-governmental organisations and associations are working to make sure that women's rights remain respected around the world.

The private sector is committing in new ways to support concrete initiatives for women, sometimes joining this cause. Pharmacists in Spain and France have turned into whistle-blowers for the police<sup>45</sup>. Some hypermarkets are coming together under governments' leaderships to inform and protect women. New supporters are joining the cause and committing. Let's take a French example: the Olympique de Marseille football club has transformed its training centre into a shelter for women victims of domestic violence. This is how a men's club creates solidarity with the other half of the human race. Attracting new actors to commit to this cause during the crisis will undoubtedly allow to defend it better afterwards.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that it would only take a social, economic or religious crisis to question women's rights. This threat exists, it is here, and we can all see it. Bringing it to light is already fighting it. Identifying sector by sector the swords of Damocles threatening the place of women in our societies is allowing to get rid of these threats. Of course, this implies a spirit of sorority and solidarity within organisations fighting for women's rights, in civil society, the private sector, NGOs or governments. It also means not overlooking any type of ideology affirming men's superiority over women, ideologies that allow all these threats to exist. We must face them together, with determination, for ourselves as well as for the coming generations. Surely, this fight requires a daily reaffirmation. Yet, as Maya Angelou wrote: "A wise woman wishes to be no one's enemy, a wise woman refuses to be anyone's victim."

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<sup>45</sup> « Algunas mujeres están usando palabras clave en farmacias para escapar de la violencia doméstica durante el periodo de confinamiento », *CNN Espanol* (2020) <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2020/04/02/algunas-mujeres-estan-usando-palabras-clave-en-farmacias-para-escapar-de-la-violencia-domestica-durante-el-periodo-de-confinamiento/>