

Dr Mary P. Murphy, Maynooth University

## **Gender Impacts of Covid-19: towards a gender sensitive recovery**

The C-19 pandemic has tracked existing social and economic fault lines. It thrives and lays bare existing inequalities and has been particularly impactful on those experiencing multiple inequalities, gender, ethnicity, inequality and class. Behind these inequalities is an 'underlying condition' – a gendered political economy that works with a male breadwinner tax and welfare system where access to essential services is increasingly through the market.

These underlying pre Covid inequalities and (m)anomalies create economic and social vulnerabilities. Some women are more exposed than others, including women experiencing ethnic inequalities and racism, Traveller women, Roma women, women of African descent, and migrants. Lone parents are particularly vulnerable to structural inequality while poverty traps women in domestic violence.

We need to bring women's lived experiences, voiced and participation into public policy, we need to gender and equality proof policy to create a gender sensitive and 'careful' recovery. Reform is needed in the shape of a new welfare state characterised by universal basic services, participation income and a facilitative inclusive state characterized by greater tax effort.

In Ireland, against international trends women comprised 57 percent of confirmed C-19 cases and 50.5% of C-19 deaths. [O'Connor](#) identified key reasons including the higher number of older women in nursing homes, the degree to which women make up the of health workers and the majority of those caring. Women also comprise the majority of essential workers, who cannot avail the preventative space offered in remote working.

### **Ireland's underlying condition**

Ireland's pre C-19 'underlying condition', is that of a gendered political economy and welfare state. Good quality jobs in the Foreign Direct Investment, export-led and public sectors coexist along with gender segregated low paid indigenous jobs – [often in the essential economy](#). This Irish political economy is centered on [a per capita low tax effort](#), and available revenue is often invested through income tax and transfers. These are structured in a male breadwinner family based system which assumes a male earner in life-long full time employment with women primarily in caring role. This creates many social welfare, tax and pension 'manomalies.

Low levels of taxation means historical and contemporaneously poor investment in public services, leading to heavily marketised essential services.

70 percent of childcare, eighty percent of nursing homes and 85% of recent social housing produced as market products to be purchased by citizens.

Austerity taught us women suffered more because of [their greater dependence on public goods](#); on income support, care/social services and public sector employment. The lessons from C-19 show us that low paid women perform 70% of jobs in the essential economy, while poorer women are left vulnerable depending on the private essential economy to meet their basic needs.

[Women and Men in Ireland \(CSO 2019\)](#) shows the segregated nature of our economy with women dominating in administration, accommodation and food, education, health and social work activities. There are significant gendered gaps in that economy, labour market participation gaps of 12 per cent, a gendered pay gap of 14.4 percent, a pension gap of 26 percent a low pay gap of percent, and part-time gap of 40 percent. [Early Covid-19 Job Loss](#) were in gender segregated sectors (retail, accommodation, food), impacting disproportionately on women, migrants and young people with 38% of PUP recipients (almost 200,000 people) earning less than €200pw.

C-19 taught us lessons about the gendered nature of essential jobs, where workers were often exposed and unable to avail of the protection of home or remote working. [ESRI \(2020\)](#) find women comprise 70 percent the essential economy which makes up 22% of the full economy. We need to dismantle economic and salary norms that result in these gender inequalities and reassess the economic value of women's work. Living wages and upskilling policies are needed alongside enhanced in work family benefits to eradicate in-work poverty.

### **Male Breadwinner Income Supports (M)Anomalies**

Of those depending on new C-19 income supports we see more men in absolute terms and proportionally more men on the Temporary Wage Subsidy (with greater likelihood of returning to work) than the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

	Live Register	Pandemic UP	Wage Subsidy	Total
Male	124,960	296,358	261,987	650,832
Female	100,702	246,806	174,357	489,747

[Live register CSO, June 2020](#)

These payments, while new, are embedded in male breadwinner systems, which without gender sensitive policy making create '(m) anomalies'. Barriers in the Temporary Work Subsidy Scheme denied access for many women returning from maternity benefit. The perceived generosity of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment mirrored existing household payment rules but as an individualized payment enabling full access for women in coupled households. This innovatively points a way forward for individualized payments. The opposite is the case for the mainstream job seeker payments which require women to demonstrate access to childcare and availability for full time work and which denies coupled households two adult full payments, leaving 80,000 qualified adults (90 percent women) without independent income. Over 564,000 depend on other working age adult payments (disability, carer's, lone parents, etc) and consequently have less access to labour market supports ([DEASP 2019](#)).

### **C-19 magnifies pre-existing poverty & inequality**

Those who have lost jobs through C-19 and who are on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment were often precarious and low paid ([DEASP 2020](#)), with low skills and little tertiary education, they experienced in-work poverty and entered unemployment with few liquid assets, in debt, and often dependent on private rental accommodation. They had already experienced pre-C-19 structural gendered vulnerability through a male breadwinner tax and welfare system and/or as low pay 'essential' workers forced to purchase essential needs in through private markets. They often live with the 750,000 citizens who pre C-19 were depending long term on inadequate welfare payments and poor services.

C-19 magnifies pre-existing poverty & inequality. [Oxfam \(2020\)](#) have made clear how globally pandemics exacerbate underlying inequalities impacting the poorest and women most because they have least resources to respond and least power and voice. We need to understand the lived reality of gendered marginalization, we need gendered knowledge and women's voices influencing policy through political participation, advocacy and gender disaggregated data.

The Focus Ireland Regal Project works to reduce employment barriers for women who had been homeless. Lone parents are very vulnerable to low pay and in-work poverty ([SVP, 2019](#)). 47% of those assessed in need of social housing are lone parents. Quarantine was difficult and isolating, and now as we exit lock down there are serious issues relating to access to childcare. Lone parents already experience the highest levels of poverty, 42% experienced deprivation in 2018. This economic vulnerability increases their

disproportionate risk of homelessness (66 per cent of homelessness families were headed by a lone parent in 2019, over 90 percent women).

*Childcare is very dear. You try to go back to work, but it's impossible – the childcare costs what you earn*

*Taking out loans, You're never in the clear,*

*You're a gerbil on a wheel, you can - and will - 'break' at some stage*

C-19 brought a shadow pandemic of domestic violence which increased by more than *30 percent* (phone calls to Women's Aid increased 39 percent and website hits increased 74 percent). Women are denied economic dependence and often trapped in circumstances of coercive control and violence. Responses to C-19 left many women isolated, vulnerable and locked in their homes, while services had to cope with unsuitable communal refuges, and issues relating to court access. We also saw creative collaboration in the 'Still Here' campaign and in Safe Ireland's successful campaign for C-19 rule changes to enable Rent Supplement be used to for alternative emergency accommodation. Domestic violence will not end with C-19. Mary Louise Lynch - Sisi, a survivor participation project said

*," when you are experiencing domestic abuse, it is like living in permanent lockdown. For women who have left their abusers and are trying to move on, abuse can continue through child access and through court processes. As we return to normal, this living a half-life will resume. This must be factored into any post-Covid response to domestic abuse and the pandemic.*

### **Emotional Labour of C-19**

When we turn to understanding the impacts of C-19 we see clear gendered evidence of the impact of unequal emotional labour. The innovative NWCi/Uplift campaign to extend maternity leave for women who had given birth over the C-19 lockdown period made visible our interdependence and how central reciprocal caring relationships are in our lives. [UL \(2020\)](#) found women significantly more likely to experience more loneliness, depression, anxiety, while [CSO \(2020\)](#) analysis demonstrates a harder social impact of C-19 on women. WHO's [Dr David Nabarro \(2020\)](#) pointed out that Ireland's containment measures disproportionately impact women

### Social Impact of Covid-19 on Women and Men, April 2020

	%	
	Male	Female
<b>Extremely Concerned Somebody else's Health</b>	20.1	27.6
<b>Low Overall Life Satisfaction</b>	22.1	36.7
<b>Increased Tobacco Consumption</b>	26.2	34.7
<b>High Compliance with Government Advise</b>	72.5	88.4

The same CSO survey found 48.6 percent of women wanted to end remote working compared to 31 percent of men. Academic journals have recorded higher male productivity over the lock-in period. We see the [Irish Midwife and Nurses Organisation](#) campaign about pay, working conditions and low staff ratios of predominantly female nursing staff, as well as health risks for nurses.

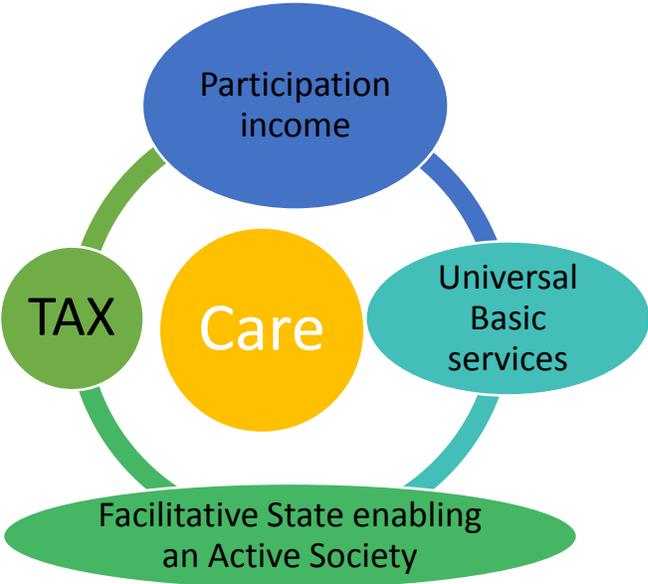
A critical issue here is that the dynamic of return from the PUP individualised to mainstream household payments coupled with a care deficit will push women workers into economic inactivity ([IES 2020](#), [Murphy et al 2020](#)). Avoiding this requires that we monitor economic recovery through a gendered lens. Inclusive recovery requires a gender sensitive Labour Market Policy. Pre C-19, women's unemployment was declining at a slower rate than men's, we need to monitor PUP exits and ensure that access to, and use of labour market supports, is not gendered. The Action Plan Jobs, Pathways to Work, and Education and Training focused Solas Strategic Plan need to ensure labor market supports are targeted, tailored and adapted to local needs, and equality proofed for Traveller, Roma, Disability, Migrants, age and gender.

### **A gender sensitive inclusive recovery**

While we saw screening delays in women's health , we also saw innovation in tele-medicene abortion services, e-health, and e-prescribing. C-19 has highlighted the inequalities and challenges for our current health systems, for women as service users and healthcare providers and how a feminist recovery must include a dedicated and reimagined response to healthcare provision in the form of universal healthcare.

Ending on a constructive note how can we translate the glimmers of innovation that we saw in C-19 responses into a post C-19 recovery. Women’s participation & equal opportunities requires not only constitutional and legal reforms but also gender sensitive policy reform. C-19 has evidenced the limits of the market and reminded us of the central role of the state, generous public policy, essential services and workers, and our reciprocal interdependence.

Gendered and feminist principles can inform welfare reform in two ways. Our income support can be moulded as an individualised ‘Participation Income’. This could enable economic independence and greater autonomy to divide our time between paid employment and care leading to greater care equality and co-responsibility, and other forms of reciprocal care including community, ecological and political participation. Income is not enough and needs to be underpinned by publicly funded Universal Basic Services overseen by a facilitative agile state that enables an active society. All this requires more tax effort, Ireland needs to increase revenue as a percent of national income to at least the EU average. There are various options to do this but we cannot avoid increased taxation effort as part of progressive, sustainable economy.



Ends 1900 words – a version of this text was delivered at the Citizen’s Assembly on Gender Equality, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020 (online private session). link