

On the gendered impact of the COVID19 lockdown

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In the early weeks of this pandemic, I remember scrolling through my newsfeed to a picture of some graffiti on a wall in Hong Kong. It read, “We can’t go back to normal, because the normal we had was precisely the problem”. It is a message that has stuck with me as this emergency has unfolded. It is this “normal” that we had, a normal that governments insist we should “snap back” to, that is shaping who will feel the effects of the pandemic the most. Because while the virus infects indiscriminately, state responses and economic, social and health outcomes do discriminate. The extent to which the cost of the coronavirus, in both economic and health terms, will be borne by the oppressed people of the world is not so much caused by the virus itself, but rather by the violent and illogical system within which we live — a system incapable of meeting human need, a system that exacerbates the divisions between us (no matter how many times our leaders insist that “we are all in this together”). Today I’m going to speak to the effect of the coronavirus on women.

One of the clearest examples of how the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities is in the economic fallout of this crisis and its effect on working class women.

Employment insecurity disproportionately affects women. In Australia, women are 50 per cent of all employees — but they are 57 per cent of employees without leave entitlements and 61 per cent of award-reliant employees. Female dominated and massively casualised industries such as retail and hospitality have been hit hard by this crisis. Casuals without paid leave entitlements make up two thirds of food services workers in Australia, and the majority of those are women (I’m one of them!). Through my activism in my union, I’ve encountered countless stories of women who are suffering as a result of this insecurity — women made financially dependent on their partners, mothers skipping meals to feed their kids. This insecurity means that women will also disproportionately miss out on the JobKeeper scheme, which makes no provisions for casual workers without long-term employment. Many women have been forced to access their super early for immediate economic relief— despite the ongoing insecurity that this will mean for women in their retirement, where Australian women already retire with an average of 40 per cent less superannuation than men. Women are losing their jobs at higher rates than men, and they were making less money to begin with.

We also know that the employment insecurity women face has an adverse impact on public health. A 2019 study found that temporary workers are more likely to turn up ill to work due to financial pressures. Having worked more than eight years in hospitality, I can confirm this phenomenon firsthand. In the context of a public health emergency, it should be abundantly clear to us all what insecure workers have known all along: no worker should be made to choose between paying rent and risking the health of their colleagues and the broader community.

Women's labour is also significant in that women take on the bulk of unpaid family care at home — a burden that has become even more significant amid social distancing and self-isolation. Capitalism's reliance on the invisible and unpaid labor of women has been made starkly visible in this crisis. Children out of school, the intensified care needs of older people and ill family members, and the overwhelmed health services in many countries will adversely affect the women who already do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men.

One of the most obviously violent impacts of this crisis on women is the spike in domestic violence worldwide.

Before the pandemic, it was estimated that one in three women will experience violence during their lifetimes. Many of these women are now trapped in homes with their abusers. Alongside the increase in incidences of violence, violence against women is also taking on new complexity as abusers threaten victims with exposure to COVID-19 and exploit the inability of women to call for help or escape; women that do reach out to over-stretched support services risk being thrown out onto the street with nowhere to go.

As the already inadequate domestic violence services struggle to cope with this increased demand, as the justice system struggles with a spike in urgent Family Court cases, and as domestic violence perpetrators are released into the community without any consultation with victims or their support services, it is obvious that society, as it is organised now, cannot address the symptoms of the violence experienced by women in their daily lives, let alone its causes.

It is not only domestic violence that will adversely affect women's health. Access to critical services for women, such as reproductive health services and maternal care, may become dangerously limited as health systems are overwhelmed, as was the case for many women during the Ebola outbreak. In the US, some states have moved to further restrict abortion access in the pandemic (and here we should also note that even where legal impediments to abortion do not exist, women's right to abortion is only realised when this service is free and easily accessible). That women's health is not sufficiently prioritised, despite women making up 70 per cent of the health and social care workforce globally, points to a health system in which women are systematically excluded from making decisions around what this care should look like. Women workers are on the frontline of this health emergency — and in a society organised around human need, they would be the workers leading our health response.

It is obvious that the way our society is organised today cannot provide an adequate solution to the problems that women are facing, before, during or after this crisis. But how can we build towards the new normal that we so urgently need?

Liberal feminist voices are calling for more women in leadership positions, as if more female world-leaders would somehow address these problems (and I'm certainly looking forward to seeing how a female dictator in North Korea is going to advance women's interests). Yet if we must grant the liberals some small credit, these voices do identify that women must play a role in organising society in their interest. We must, however, go further and demand that the fight against women's oppression is not merely a fight for equality with men within a broken system.

We must recognise the need to overcome this oppressive capitalist system — a system that prioritises the interests of the few over the interests of the many; that divides us, exploits us, and kills us in those interests. Capitalism was built on the exploitation of workers, and it thrives on the oppression of marginalised people. Another world is only possible when working class people organise society in their interests. We do not demand equality for women, we demand liberation!

In the face of so much violence against women, law and order feminism would have us believe that we must turn to the state to protect us. But legislation and policing do not prevent this violence from occurring (and I'm sure it's not news to anyone reading this that police perpetrate acts of domestic violence at a higher rate than the general population, that police misidentify and endanger domestic violence victims, and that victims of sexual assault are routinely dismissed by police). In her *Overland* journal article on policing during coronavirus, Lizzie O'Shea remarks that "it's not the all-powerful state that is saving people's lives from this horrible virus. It's the everyday people showing up to work in hospitals and supermarkets, and doing shifts delivering food. It's the millions of people who are doing their best to keep their distance, washing their hands, and trying to avoid transmission, while caring and educating others ... What will get us through this virus is not coercion and fear but advocating for and carrying out the politics of care and solidarity." It is this practice of the politics of care and solidarity that will best protect women during the crisis, and moving forward.

I look around me, and in the face of so much horror, I've seen ordinary people come together to practice this politics. Activist networks around the world, grown over months of organising in recent struggles, are now being used to distribute medical supplies and share information on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In Hong Kong, activists have used their networks to share tips and reminders on avoiding coronavirus and to import and distribute more than 100,000 medical masks. I don't have the scope here to discuss the union movement in the crisis and the betrayal of the rank-and-file by the bureaucracy, but it is important to note that despite the many challenges facing unionists, wildcat strikes and rank-and-file organisation have proven themselves to be a way for working people to assert their power—defending their lives and livelihoods from the virus and their bosses.

We can also take inspiration from the mutual-aid networks that have sprung up in response to the virus and the inadequacy of state responses. In a moment of need, of anxiety and social isolation, people around the world have come together to look out for their communities. Just as Kropotkin used the term mutual-aid to point to the inherent flaws in the Social Darwinist view of nature as a competitive fight between self-interested individuals, the appearance of mutual-aid networks to address the challenges of COVID-19 can be used to point to the flaws in our state responses, to people's cooperative and social nature, and to the impressive capacity of ordinary people to organise around and meet human need.

In Chile, *Coordinadora Feminista 8M*, a feminist collective central to the large-scale feminist mobilisations over the last five months, has incorporated all of these strategies into its coronavirus response—articulated in its Feminist Emergency Plan. They articulate a plan for addressing the risk of domestic violence to women and children in quarantine, including concrete community protocols in the event of an emergency, as well as funding and refuge to be made available to those fleeing violence. They make demands for budget allocations that will facilitate community organisations in their work. They call for a "strike for life", emphasising the need for non-essential workers to stay home, and a general production strike as a mechanism to win these demands. The *Coordinadora's* plan is centred around an insistence that *our* lives are worth more

than *their* profits — and an understanding that we must fight for the right to live in a society that reflects that.

What is clear, is that implementing these demands requires organisation, and it requires struggle.

On International Working Women's Day this year, millions of women around the world took to the streets to protest against inequality and the oppression of women. In Mexico, tens of thousands of women joined demonstrations against femicide and the government's complicity in the epidemic. In Turkey, riot police fired tear gas at demonstrators, and in Kyrgyzstan security forces arrested about 60 people. Women rallied in cities across Pakistan despite court-filed petitions seeking to stop them. In Chile, a feminist general strike brought millions into the streets in what was to be a historic day as women raised their voices against the violence they experience on a daily basis; a protest that was also fundamental in maintaining the momentum of the October Revolts, rejecting the legitimacy of the government and defending the right of the Chilean people to protest. The capacity for such protests has diminished in recent weeks, and the need for our resistance has only grown larger. But working class people are more creative and more innovative than capitalism can ever be — and we have everything to gain.

I've mentioned the protests that marked International Working Women's Day, and as I was reading up for this article, it made me reflect on my own experience at the protest here in Melbourne. A Latinx feminist collective performed "Un violador en tu camino", the feminist anthem of the Chilean movement, in a powerful expression of international solidarity between women around the world. My own contribution was much more modest, but I am proud to share the illustration I made for the protest. I wanted to make a tribute to the women around the world who stand on the frontline of the struggle against a system built on exploitation and violence, and to connect their struggle to a proud history — the ongoing fight for liberation. From Sudan to Chile, and India to Lebanon, women have stepped up and resisted a world that demands they be passive victims; that demands they "stay in their place". But we know that a woman's place is in the struggle. That struggle might have shifted off the streets for the time being, but it does continue, and it must.

The UN Policy Brief on gender and COVID-19 says that in the context of the coronavirus, "Limited gains made in the past decades" toward gender equality "are at risk of being rolled back". It is a stark reminder for us that every reform that we fight for and win can be taken away from us. In the closing paragraphs of the brief, the UN warns against "choosing to simply repeat past policies and failing to use this moment to rebuild more equal, inclusive and resilient societies." A workers' revolution might not be quite what the UN policy wonks have in mind, but as the violence of bourgeois social relations are laid bare in society, and the essential role of labour (especially that of women) is plain for all to see, we have a responsibility to avoid the mistakes of our own movement's past and to use this moment to work towards building a struggle that draws its power from below, capable of reorganising society to liberate all oppressed peoples.

We need a movement that goes beyond reform, and an understanding of society that connects the oppression of women, workers, and Indigenous peoples with the power of capitalism and the state. We must join together in a shared struggle for liberation. History has shown us, as will the future, that women can and must lead us there.

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