360° Series

Fair Observer°

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How Will COVID-19 Shape Our Society?

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How Will COVID-19 Shape Our Society?

Atul Singh
June 26, 2020

Editor's Note: These are unprecedented times. A global pandemic has changed life as we know it. In recent months, we have examined the crisis through political, economic and social lenses, publishing articles from around the world. The result is three 360° series.

Just like the world wars in the previous century, the coronavirus pandemic is dramatically transforming our societies. This 360° context article explains the social impact of COVID-19.

Like past pandemics, COVID-19 will leave an indelible mark on society. A little over a hundred years ago, the 1918-19 influenza killed anywhere between 50 million and 100 million people. This put public hygiene, health, nutrition, housing and even inequality in stark focus.

The idea of socialized medicine, free for all at the point of delivery, took off. The newly formed Soviet Union was the first to create a centralized public health-care system. Germany, France and the UK eventually followed suit. Not only countries but cities, towns and villages focused on public health and long-neglected social issues. In the remote city of Östersund in then-poor Sweden, "people of all political convictions and stations in life" overcame class and political divisions to forge a new social solidarity.

Many other major changes ensued. Nursing rose in prominence in society. Most nurses were women who cared for their communities and earned great respect. This set the stage for a greater role and increased remuneration in the future. In 1920, women won the right to vote in the US and the UK. A hundred years on, COVID-19 promises to unleash several tectonic changes in our daily lives, society and culture.

Psychological, Social and Cultural Impacts

Never before have so many people been immobilized at once the world over. About half the world's population is cooped up to prevent the spread of the pandemic on an overcrowded planet of over 7.5 billion people. This forced isolation is leading to challenges that are much more than just economic.

Numerous papers have been published analyzing the impact of loneliness as a result of social isolation. The World Health Organization (WHO) has found that "the main psychological impact [of COVID-19] to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety." Quarantine affects people's usual activities, routines or livelihoods, causing various mental health issues.

As per The Lancet, the effects of long-term social isolation on stress levels of non-human animals include "increased neuroendocrine responses and stress reactivity." This could lead to increased cravings for food, alcohol and drugs. While some are eating more healthily, many are turning to carbohydrates and sugars as a relief from stress and boredom.

Australian researchers have made a surprising finding: 10.8% of men reported increased alcohol use in contrast to 18% of women. Women are drinking more during the COVID-19 pandemic because international data reveals they are "more likely to experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression." Women are "almost three times more likely than men to be looking after children full-time on their own" during this pandemic. Women also make up the majority of the casual workforce. During these times, they are more likely to be disproportionately affected by the changes to our daily lives, and gender inequality seems to be on the rise. As if home and work pressures were not enough, domestic violence is on the increase around the world.

In the US, the cannabis industry has made a great leap forward thanks to COVID-19 as some

states declared it to be an "essential good." Similarly, the consumption of pornography has boomed. In India, where alcohol, cannabis and even food have been hard to get, traffic on porn sites shot up by 95% during a draconian lockdown. In the US, gun sales saw their highest-ever spike, with about 2 million sold in March alone.

The pandemic has led to grandchildren staying away from grandparents out of fear that they could transmit a potentially fatal infection to their loved ones. Many have died alone, with often just a video call with the family available at the deathbed. Those with disabilities have found support has been hard to come by. Inequality is increasing around the world. The poor and the vulnerable have few assets or savings to fall back on when they lose their jobs. Consequently, an even more egalitarian Europe is becoming less equal while the World Bank projects that "COVID-19 is likely to cause the first increase in global poverty since 1998."

Schools and colleges have closed, with teaching shifting online. Most teachers are struggling and so are students, especially the young ones. With restaurants, bars, clubs, gyms, offices and entertainment establishments closed, more people are finding love on dating apps, with Tinder reporting its highest number of swipes ever on March 29. Those who can are working from home. Churches, temples and mosques have been empty. This year, Muslims observed Ramadan and marked Eid al-Fitr without communal celebrations.

Where governments have often failed, many communities have risen to the occasion. Doctors, nurses and other front-line workers like shopkeepers and bus drivers have been nothing short of heroic, risking their lives on what is often unacceptably low pay and even less adequate personal protective equipment. Volunteers have brought food and medicines for those in isolation. As during all times with dark clouds, rays of hope have kept people, communities and societies going.

Why Do the Impacts of COVID-19 Matter?

Every few decades, an event changes society dramatically. COVID-19 is such an event. It is setting in motion long-term changes that are hard to see in the heat of the moment.

A key fact everyone is talking about from Boston to Beijing is the sudden improvement in the environment. With fewer cars on the road, hardly any planes in the sky and many factories closed, the air is cleaner, the rivers clearer and birdsong louder. The environmental impact of curtailing human activity is now center stage. There is skepticism that, just like emissions fell after the 2008 crisis, they will bounce back again, perhaps even with renewed vigor.

But there is also hope that, having seen what massive changes can be achieved, people are going to care more about the environment and invest more in fighting climate change. With energy demand collapsing by nearly 30%, the COVID-19 lockdown is speeding India's shift from coal to solar power. In the US, oil companies have been collapsing while wind and solar ones have proved more resilient.

Similarly, health-care systems will experience major changes. For the last two decades, massive privatization of health-care occurred in many parts of the world. In some developing countries like Nigeria and India, public hospitals virtually collapsed over the last two decades. That privatized model will come into question. Profit-maximizing has not worked in health-care even in the US. In developing countries, a move toward a more European system that focuses on public health might be in the offing.

In some countries, the social fabric is under strain. In India, tensions between Hindus and Muslims have increased because the latter have been blamed for spreading the coronavirus. The police killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, in the US city of Minneapolis has led to widespread anti-racism protests around the world. Systemic racism and police brutality have become part of public discourse, as has the violence against journalists that has also been on the rise.

However, as the Financial Times notes, COVID-19 has "injected a sense of togetherness into polarised societies." It has thrown hitherto eccentric ideas such as universal basic income and wealth taxes into the policy mix. Spain has launched a national minimum income policy that will benefit an estimated 2.3 million people and cost about €3 billion ($3.4 billion) a year. About 850,000 lowest-income households will get around $500 per month. In Europe, the welfare state emerged from the ashes of World War II. As millions around the world lose their jobs, this is the time to reimagine the current social welfare systems as well as reconsider what we place value on in our societies.

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Xenophobia and Denial: Coronavirus Outbreak in Historical Context

Hans-Georg Betz
February 28, 2020

Today's coronavirus hysteria — as well as the response from public authorities — is depressingly familiar.

The bubonic plague pandemic — the Black Death — was arguably the greatest catastrophe to hit Western Europe in the Middle Ages, killing tens of millions of people or around a third of the continent's population.

The disease originated in the vast plains of central and eastern Asia, from where it was carried to the trading outposts of the European merchant cities. Borne by rats hosting infected fleas, the plague was brought into Western Europe via the port of Kaffa on the Crimea by Genovese merchant ships that dispersed it throughout the Mediterranean ports.

From there, the plague traveled north to finally reach the German lands. The arrival of the Black Death in German towns triggered a new wave of deadly anti-Semitic pogroms. Jews were accused of poisoning wells and streams, tortured and burned alive.

Everything Is Under Control

In 1853, a yellow fever epidemic hit New Orleans, one of the most important ports of the American South. Within a few months, thousands of residents of the city had died. Yellow fever is spread by mosquitoes thriving in a warm, humid climate. At the time, however, this was hardly common knowledge. Instead, the good citizens of New Orleans blamed convenient human targets: Irish and German immigrants accused of not only "practicing bad hygiene" but also of living "in miserable conditions" that made them "highly susceptible to the disease."

Then, in 1918, a new epidemic hit the United States, this time a particularly vicious strain of influenza. It was part of a global pandemic of what became known as the Spanish flu — Spain was one of the hardest-hit countries — that killed anywhere between 50 and 100 million worldwide and more than 650,000 in the United States. At the time, the US was fighting in the First World War. Under the circumstances, keeping up morale was paramount. As a result, public officials made a concerted effort to play down the disease.

In town after town, local officials assured the public that there was no need to worry, that everything was under control, and that public health officials were perfectly prepared to keep the disease in check. And even when it became blatantly obvious that this was not the case, "officials almost daily assured the public that the worst was over." Unfortunately, it wasn't, and more people died.

An even worse case of denialism happened in San Francisco during the 1900 outbreak of the plague, which originated in China and quickly spread abroad. Once again, the transmission occurred via merchant ships docking at California

ports, particularly San Francisco, which had a large Chinese population, on the way back from Asia. Yet at the time, both city officials and the governor of California denied that there was a problem. The reason was simple. There was great fear that the news would cause harm to California's economy, particularly its main staple — fresh produce. In fact, California's officials went so far as to persuade the surgeon general of the United States to keep mum about the disease.

Today's coronavirus hysteria — as well as the response from public authorities — is depressingly similar. Once again, a fundamental challenge to public health has turned into a cheap excuse for ethnocentric, xenophobic outbursts. In the past, in the United States, poor European immigrants were blamed for spreading infection — charges oblivious to the fact that it had been earlier European arrivals who brought with them diseases that decimated the native population across the Americas. Today, the blame squarely falls on hapless Chinese tourists, students and residents who are no longer welcome anywhere, even as customers.

Precautionary Measures

In the 1950s and 1960s in Western Europe, there was much talk of the "yellow peril." Even the Soviets were increasingly afraid of their erstwhile ally. A joke from that time that went something like this: "Why do the participants of the May Day parade in Moscow feel as if the posters they are carrying this year are much lighter than the ones they carried last year? Because they are not carrying posters, they are flying kites." Following the COVID-19 outbreak, which originated in Wuhan, in China's Hubei province, "yellow peril" has come back with a vengeance, if only in microscopic form, and anyone who looks Asian potentially pays the price.

At the same time, as Paul Krugman points out, the greatest president in American history has followed in the footstep of the California governor in 1900, first denying that there is a problem, then blaming the media and the Democrats, and, finally, putting the most incompetent person imaginable — the science-skeptic vice president, Mike Pence — in charge of dealing with the impending crisis.

Cynics might note that, at least, this time Donald Trump is not blaming "bad hombres" for carrying the virus with them across the border. In fact, the bad hombres might be tempted to close the border to prevent American gringos from spreading the virus south of the border.

After all, given the Trump administration's and the Republicans' hostility toward universal health insurance, there are potentially thousands of Americans with cold-like symptoms whose coronavirus infection remains undetected because they can't afford to visit a doctor. Under the circumstances, it might be prudent if the rest of the world takes the necessary precautionary measures and stops all flights to the United States.

According to some worst-case projections, COVID-19 could infect up to 60% of the world's population if it's not contained. As the coronavirus continues to spread around the world, it is worth looking back at this fraught history of death and disease to remind ourselves that racism and xenophobia will not stop a pandemic, and that if governments want to retain public trust when societies finally begin to recover from the effects of this latest outbreak, transparency would go a long way.

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The News Media and Public Health Crises

Virgil Hawkins
March 19, 2020

As the media focuses on the coronavirus pandemic, it is perhaps time to remember that other major public health crises also desperately deserve our attention.

The novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19, continues to threaten the health and lives of large numbers of people throughout the world. It has also wrought havoc on social and economic activity, most notably in high-income countries in Asia and the West. It has also captured the attention of the media, displacing all manner of domestic and world news in its wake.

But at a global level, the levels of attention are not necessarily proportionate with the level of the threat to human life. At the time of publishing, COVID-19 has infected more than 240,000 people and killed around 10,000 worldwide.

In Perspective

To put this into perspective, each year, malaria infects more than 200 million people and kills over 400,000 worldwide, with more than 90% of these deaths being in Africa. Tuberculosis infects 10 million annually and kills roughly 1.5 million of those people. Diarrhea, caused by contaminated food and water, kills more than all those who die of malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS combined. All of these diseases, like COVID-19, have a global reach (with the exception of malaria), although they are most heavily concentrated in the "global south."

These are millions of lives lost each year that are largely preventable, and yet these deaths, and the threat that such diseases continue to pose to humanity, are routinely ignored by the news media. A search of The New York Times website found that, in 2019, there were just six articles about tuberculosis (containing the word in the article title) and four articles about malaria (two of which were about an anti-malaria drug at the 2019 Beijing Expo). From the perspective of the news media, the deaths caused by these diseases, whether preventable or not, have been "normalized" and are "acceptable" to the point that they are neither newsworthy nor noteworthy.

The obvious conclusion here is that the levels of media and public attention to such diseases are not determined by the loss of, or threat to, human life per se, but are largely dependent upon the question of whose lives are being lost or threatened. Just as can be seen in the massive gaps in terms of the haves and have-nots with media coverage of armed conflict (and of coverage of the world in general, for that matter), the geographic location, nationality, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the victims are major determining factors. COVID-19 impacts high-income Western countries, but malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhea-related diseases do not.

The Outbreak of Ebola

Similarly, the 2014-16 outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa, which became the worst in history, did not begin to grab the headlines until the disease began to be seen as a threat to people in high-income countries. Those living in these countries could perhaps be forgiven for not noticing that we are just now overcoming the second-worst outbreak of Ebola in history, one that has been ongoing in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 2018. It has hardly been making headlines in the Western media.

Yet the levels of news attention depend not only on the location and identity of the victim, but also on novelty — the characteristic of something being "new." Malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhea-related disease kill large numbers of people, but it is a constant stream of threat and tragedy. But COVID-19, like other coronaviruses such as MERS or SARS, is a rare occurrence

with outbreaks appearing (at least at current trends) several years apart. New developments, threats and deaths that we have not yet normalized are considered particularly newsworthy. This applies even in high-income countries.

As is already being pointed out by many, the annually occurring seasonal influenza kills tens of thousands of people in the US alone each year — far more than COVID-19 has so far, and yet the media is calm and relatively low-key in its response. Although the threat is grave, it is something that has been normalized by society and the media.

By the same logic, however, the media could be expected to have been responsive to the outbreak of Ebola in the DRC. It is, after all, a major disease that is extremely infectious and deadly and that only occurs occasionally.

The same can be said for the world's worst measles outbreak, also occurring in the DRC, which, unlike malaria or tuberculosis, is also a new development. The number of people that measles has infected and killed in the most recent outbreak there is also comparable to COVID-19. Both Ebola and the measles have an additional novel characteristic in the sense that the ongoing armed conflict in the DRC has compounded the problem, hindering efforts to stop both diseases. And yet it has struggled to attract any small measure of media attention. Clearly who the victims are is more important than the novelty factor.

What's Newsworthy?

But there still remains one final factor that is related to novelty: the fear of the unknown. Ebola and the measles occur as occasional outbreaks, but they have happened before and much about them is already known. COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus and, as such, its impacts are yet — to a degree — unknown. Scientists are still trying to understand just how infectious and deadly it is. Fear of the unknown regarding the virus, and the panic it creates, serves the public appetite for constant updates and information and, simultaneously, the interests of the commercial media.

Interestingly, these patterns in the media are not only seen in the countries greatly impacted by public health threats, but throughout the world as a whole. The media in southern Africa, for example, which has been largely spared from COVID-19 so far, is also devoting a considerable amount of its attention to the spread of the virus. Global news flows — the determination of newsworthiness and the spread of information worldwide — are largely determined in the countries in which economic and political power resides.

This is not to downplay the suffering (actual and potential) caused by COVID-19. The disease does indeed pose a major ongoing threat to people throughout the world, and Africa will undoubtedly struggle to contain the spread and its consequences if the number of cases begins to rise substantively. But by the same token, if preventing the loss of human life — regardless of its location, nationality, ethnicity or socioeconomic status — is the prime goal in stopping COVID-19, then it is perhaps time to remember that other major public health crises also desperately deserve our attention.

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The Art of Social Distancing According to Hannah Arendt

Kate Bracht
March 23, 2020

While anyone who finds oneself alone can practice solitude, social distancing provides the perfect opportunity to regain this lost art.

It seems that on the highest levels, everything is going wrong. In the past few years, populism and authoritarianism have reared their ugly heads. The economy has just reached historic lows, and we are only beginning to reap the effects of a ruined environment. Suicide rates are climbing, refugee crises continue like low-grade political fevers, and now we're facing a global pandemic. It's as if we've reached the edge of the civilizational map and are staring over the edge, discovering that, indeed, here there be monsters.

But that's not the end of the story. Hannah Arendt, the celebrated German-American philosopher noteworthy for her love of the world, strove to make sense of horrors such as totalitarianism and the Holocaust. Many of her answers may be useful to us today. In fact, her work suggests that there could be a golden — not just a silver — lining to coronavirus-motivated social distancing, and it lies in the ancient connection between politics and psychology.

Dialogue With the Self

Perhaps surprisingly, Arendt ends her masterwork, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," published in 1951, with a reflection on loneliness. She points out that since ancient times, tyrants have worked to isolate citizens from each other. Sowing separation and distrust among citizens prevents people from acting in concert and generating power that can overthrow tyrannical dominance. What was different, even at Arendt's time of writing, was the epidemic of loneliness.

For Arendt, isolation was strictly a political experience, the inability of citizens to act together in the public space, generating power. Loneliness was a more existential experience, characterized by the inability to connect with others or being exposed to others' hostility. Today, loneliness has reached epidemic proportions, especially among young adults.

Paradoxically, Arendt's antidote to both isolation and loneliness was not togetherness, but solitude. Solitude is different from both isolation and loneliness in that it requires being physically alone, but, in solitude, the self is not existentially alone. The self keeps company with itself, in dialogue with itself. While both loneliness and isolation are marked by disconnection and desertion, in solitude the individual remains connected to herself and the world. In the dialogue of self with self, the solitary individual represents the world to herself. Conversely, the two conversing selves of solitude converge through reconnection with another human being who affirms the solitary individual's unique, unexchangeable identity.

For Arendt, the practice of solitude issues in thought, conscience and creativity. In "The Origins of Totalitarianism," she notes that "all thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself." Indeed, solitude is the natural condition of the philosopher. In "The Human Condition," Arendt comments further that "to be in solitude means to be with themselves, and thinking, therefore, though it may be the most solitary of all activities, is never altogether without a partner and without company." Moreover, for Arendt, the activity of thinking generates insights that may be committed to paper and shared with others, crossing from thought into creation, gaining permanence and becoming part of our shared world.

The dialogue of the self with the self in solitude is also the source of conscience. In her introduction to "The Life of the Mind," Arendt returned to the trial Adolf Eichmann, a central figure of the Third Reich's Final Solution.

Specifically, she reexamined her notion of the banality of evil, noting that with Eichmann, extreme evil didn't seem to come from pride, envy, hatred, covetousness or moral monstrosity, but rather from sheer thoughtlessness. She writes:

"I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer — at least the very effective one now on trial — was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but thoughtlessness."

Arendt noticed Eichmann's utter helplessness during his trial, his inability to know what to do or say in the absence of procedure or routine. She goes on to say that "clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence."

Even at the time of writing, Arendt commented how "this absence of thinking … is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we hardly have the time, let alone the inclination, to stop and think." Arendt raises the question of whether thinking itself was opposed to evil-doing, regardless of the content of thought, and linked the activity of thinking with conscience: "the very word 'con-science' … means 'to know with and by myself,' a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process."

From Tyranny to Totalitarianism

Finally, solitude is necessary for creativity. Creativity, *poeisis*, necessitates separation from action, *praxis*, and the world of common concerns. However, the isolated, creative individual remains connected to the shared world of things, and in creating something tangible adds to our shared world. In "The Origins of Totalitarianism," Arendt mentions private creativity as a mode of coping with tyranny: When the public space is destroyed under tyranny, the individual may at least retreat into the private space with her own thoughts, or with creativity. Indeed, historically, the arts have often flourished under enlightened dictators of various stripes.

All three effects of solitude — conscience, thought and creativity — are essential for world-renewal. In fact, they created the life-world we inhabit in the first place. For Arendt, "world" is a technical term — it is the durable space we are born into and inhabit, and hopefully leave behind when we die. It's comprised of laws, literature, art, music, philosophy, institutions and all the physical things that both bring us together and separate us, sheltering and orienting us in our shared life. It is human-made, but more durable than human life. At the same time, because it's human-made, it does get worn down and stands in constant need of renewal. This is part of the task for each generation.

This should be comforting news when we read that in America, trust in other people and key institutions is failing, particularly among younger adults. Arendt would remind us that this is to some extent normal — institutions erode over time. The situation has become dire only because we haven't properly engaged in renewing the world, in part because we haven't properly engaged in solitude. We've forgotten how to be alone.

Remember those monsters? Authoritarian politics, frightening ideologies and senselessly destructive behavior have resurfaced with a vengeance. Arendt would argue that there's a connection between the epidemic of isolation and loneliness, and the increasing draw of populist and authoritarian movements. In "The Origins of Totalitarianism," she argues that loneliness itself is pre-totalitarian. It's a sense of desertion by all,

including oneself, that leaves the individual vulnerable. She writes:

"What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century. The merciless process into which totalitarianism drives and organizes the masses looks like a suicidal escape from this reality. The 'ice-cold reasoning' and 'the mighty tentacle of dialectics' which 'seizes you as in a vise' appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon."

When "nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon," the antidote is solitude, the dialogue of the self with the self, which generates conscience, thought and creativity. These, in turn, rebuild the world.

One caveat: For Arendt, solitude is possible under tyranny, but not under totalitarian domination. Tyranny controls the public space, but leaves the private space alone, preserving the capacities of thought, conscience and creativity. Totalitarianism invades the private space, disrupting the self's presence to the self through terror, loneliness and ideology. The challenge today in practicing solitude is not to allow oneself to become mentally colonized, to instead preserve connection with oneself and with the world.

A Call for Heroes

In this story, we all can be the hero. Many are on the frontlines of the pandemic as their jobs require their physical presence to keep our world running. But those encouraged to practice social distancing should try to also practice solitude, not succumbing to terror, rescuing the dialogue of the self with the self.

Our world is sorely in need of renewal, but renewal most likely won't come from the top. It will come from below, in the everyday choices made by individuals. Ultimately, what solitude restores is the capacity for beginning, the ability to bring something new into the world. For Arendt, this capacity to bring something unique into a world needing renewal is a gift each of us receives at birth. For her, it constitutes a sort of miracle and is a source of faith and hope.

Our task today is to transform moments of loneliness into solitude. While anyone who finds oneself alone can practice solitude, social distancing provides the perfect opportunity to regain this lost art. Solitude is more necessary than ever, both for weathering the coronavirus and for restoring the world. After spending time in solitude — engaging in thought, examining our conscience, creating something new — we can reengage with the "trusting and trustworthy company of [our] equals" to renew the world.

***Kate Bracht** is working on her first novel after an education in philosophy and theology.

Going Vegan in the Time of Corona

Alicja Rybkowska
April 10, 2020

In these dystopian times of social distancing and the curtailment of freedoms, we can choose to change our approach to food.

Given the restrictions introduced to curtail the global spread of COVID-19, many people are experiencing significant changes to their eating habits. Current regulations are affecting both local and global supply chains. Even in the regions where they remain stable, fear of shortages during a lockdown prompted many to stockpile food. In mid-March, the media worldwide posted pictures of empty supermarket shelves, which only encouraged further panic buying.

Now, citizens around the world must limit their visits to supermarkets to an essential

minimum. Online shopping is no longer an alternative as waiting times for deliveries can be weeks long. In many countries, restaurants are closed, and even ordering a takeaway is no longer possible. Hence, many people are turning to canned foods and dry goods instead of typical, day-to-day purchases. Working from home, they need to prepare their own meals. School closures in many countries mean that parents have to provide nutrition for whole families around the clock.

Unhappy Meat

This is a good time to reflect on our personal food preferences and habits, as well as the global system of its production and consumption. After all, the novel coronavirus seems to have first appeared at a food market in Wuhan, China. It is widely assumed to originate in bats, with pangolins being the intermediary in transferring the disease to humans. Pangolin, the most trafficked animal in the world, is a delicacy in China. Its scales are thought to have healing properties, which poses a further threat to this nocturnal mammal. Its poor vision makes it easy prey for poachers.

The custom of selling living animals at markets, often located in urban settings, seems horrific to the Western world. Probably the biggest difference is that such practices undermine the "happy meat" approach to production and retail adopted in the West. It argues that the regulation of farming and slaughtering conditions is enough to render meat consumption morally unproblematic. This position holds that industrial livestock production does not need to conflict with animal welfare. Its best articulation is the EU's aim to ensure that animals do not endure avoidable pain or suffering. The question of which types of suffering are unavoidable remains open.

However, a zoonotic disease pandemic — one in which an infection is passed from animals to humans, like the current coronavirus — indicates clearly that animal welfare and human welfare are interconnected. Many potentially deadly human diseases originated in animals. While some of them, like rabies or Zika, are not related to farming practices, many of them are.

The rapid increase in global meat production translates into a constantly increasing risk of spreading existing diseases as well as of the emergence of new ones. Animal farming relies on an unnatural diet, with breeds lacking genetic diversity and enduring prolonged stress, making them especially prone to infections. High population density and poor sanitation make meat production and retail sites potential sources of new outbreaks.

Contrary to popular belief, the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, which took place long before the achievement of the current intensity of meat production, originated not in Spain — the country hit hard by the disease, thus giving the epidemic its name — but on a chicken farm in Kansas. Meat industry employees, often low-skilled and unaware of the biological risk, work in extreme temperatures and are regularly exposed to animal secretions. The system creates not only incubating zones for viral infections, but also potential super-spreaders.

Struggling to maintain our eating habits under extensive restrictions, we may take this opportunity to adjust them. In these dystopian times of spatial distancing and the curtailment of freedoms, we can choose to voluntarily change our approach to food. Thus, we could contribute to one undeniable positive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic — that upon the environment. However, if the big-cause incentive is too broad to be convincing, there are more reasons to change to a plant-based diet.

Why Not Eat Vegan for a Change?

Firstly, it is practical. Changes in grocery supplies and purchases mean that many people have to cook inventively, using the products available and not what they would typically buy. Relying on meat and dairy increases the risk that some of the key ingredients will not be available. The more types of products we include in our diet, the easier it becomes to compose healthy,

sustainable meals. It is a great way to include new flavors in the daily menu when cooking and eating becomes monotonous.

A plant-based diet also helps to reduce the frequency of buying groceries and to optimize their storage, as essential ingredients such as legumes, nuts, seeds or nutritional yeast have long shelf-lives and do not need to be refrigerated. They can be purchased in larger quantities without the risk of being wasted.

Secondly, it improves time management. Extra time to cook at home may be used for experimentation. And, conversely, if reducing the time spent in the kitchen is the goal, vegan dishes are suitable for meal prepping since they are often less perishable than animal-based products. Thirdly, cooking is a great way to deal with the current confinement. Studies in psychology suggest that taking up a new activity or learning a new skill gives us a sense of self-agency and control. Exploring vegan cuisine could also foster interaction with the vegan community online and promote an exchange of ideas in times of spatial distancing. Self-isolation is a time of tranquility as much as it is a time of uncertainty and concern. It offers time and space to question our choices and priorities.

If eating a pangolin is unimaginable to many of us, so could be the consumption of other animals. When we are all forced to change our lifestyles and reconsider our priorities, one more change may seem to be less of a challenge. Or, if challenges and new projects are what one needs in isolation, going vegan could be a good start in preparation for the inevitable future outbreaks of similar diseases.

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During the Coronavirus Pandemic, Migrant Workers Are Being Overlooked

Brennan Kau
April 30, 2020

Despite the obvious vulnerability of migrant workers, not enough has been done worldwide to ensure their safety and survival.

Up until April, the COVID-19 outbreak in Singapore had largely been kept under control, to the extent that it was considered one of the best examples of pandemic response in the world.

By speedily rolling out measures — including contact tracing, aggressive testing and isolating potential carriers — the Singaporean government had done well enough to merit significant praise from international observers and the World Health Organization.

Yet, despite signs that all was going well, on March 23, a letter was published in the Straits Times by a Singaporean migrant workers' rights group, TWC2, highlighting the significant dangers posed to their community. "Migrant worker" in this context specifically refers to low-wage foreign nationals engaged in construction, public utilities maintenance, cleaning and other relatively labor-intensive areas of work. In particular, the group pointed out the dense, clustered accommodation in dormitories and the restrictive policies by employers that put these workers at a high risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus.

In hindsight, the letter was prophetic. Less than two weeks later, infection clusters began to form in dormitories across the island. As of now, more than half of all the cases in Singapore have been attributed to migrant workers, leading to an exponential jump in infection numbers even as Singapore waits to be released from its "circuit breaker" lockdown protocol.

Left Out

Around the world, migrant workers suffer amidst the pandemic. In India, hundreds of thousands of out-of-work day laborers have trekked across the country — in what is the biggest exodus since the Partition crisis of 1947 — in an attempt to reach their homes.

This massive movement of people, sparked by fears for their livelihood, has already claimed lives and added to the state and federal governments' worries. In Thailand, they have been left out of the government's pandemic response, unable to either stay due to lack of work or return home because of closed borders. Facing financial uncertainty, there are fears that migrant workers will simply move around the country in search of jobs. In the Middle East, migrant workers still remain in lockdown in crowded, unsanitary camps.

It is clear that not enough has been done to ensure not just their safety, but their very ability to survive. Four factors compound to amplify the disproportional risk migrant workers must bear during the pandemic.

First, migrant workers are over-represented in physically demanding and labor-intensive jobs such as construction, agriculture and maintenance, which often conform to the 3D term of being "dirty, dangerous, and demeaning." Their day to day involves close contact, inadequate sanitation and lengthy travel — all potent vectors for the spread of the virus.

Second, remuneration from these same jobs often does not guarantee an adequate standard of living, with migrant workers largely sending their already meager low salaries home to their families. Oftentimes, as is the case in Singapore, Bangladeshi migrants must make payments of up to $12,000 to their agents simply to secure a job. Such financial stresses place limits on their financial flexibility to protect their own health.

Third, as mentioned earlier, migrant workers often have no other option but to put up with communal living in dormitories and other similar forms of housing, which hastens the spread of viral infections. Constrained by low income, such housing methods allow for more effective control by their employers and agents. In this case, cramped living makes adequate social distancing virtually impossible, increasing the likelihood of virus clusters.

Lastly, and most significantly, migrant workers are prone to exploitation by their employers. As highlighted by TWC2, some examples of how migrant workers may be exploited include their precarious legal status, restrictions from changing jobs, illegal deductions from their salaries, employers' refusal to pay their medical bills and the risk of forced repatriation. In the Middle East, the *kafala* sponsorship system, which requires employers to sponsor workers, forces laborers into a relationship of total dependency on their employer.

Moreover, as foreigners, migrant workers often become victims of racial or social discrimination from society. Unfamiliar with local customs or unable to speak the language, many are cut off from all lines of support and find themselves pressured into accepting their employers' policies or rules. Some of these policies include being forced to turn up for work in spite of illness and paying for their own medical treatment, all of which incentivize behaviors conducive to the spread of the virus.

All at Once

Individually, physical labor, low wages, communal living and exploitation are all issues that can be experienced by many other groups in society. What makes migrant workers special is that they are the only group to be most commonly subject to all four at once.

When it comes to the financial aspect, UK think tank IPPR notes three more reasons why migrant workers are at risk during the pandemic. They tend to work in sectors such as the construction industry that are particularly vulnerable during an economic recession. They often have less access to public funds due to their special work status in a foreign country. They are also often more willing to continue work in

compromised circumstances. Given this long list of vulnerabilities, migrant workers should have been prioritized in any decent pandemic response. Why have they continued to be overlooked?

Some issues point squarely toward the mentality of societies that accept these migrant workers. It is hard to ignore the role racism plays in discrimination against migrant workers. Not long after the dormitory clusters became an issue, a controversial letter was published in Singapore's Chinese-language newspaper, Lianhe Zaobao, attributing the outbreaks to their "personal hygiene and living habits," implying the backwardness of their countries of origin — predominantly India, China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines.

Singapore's law and home affairs minister, K. Shanmugam, denounced the letter as "typecast[ing] an entire group" and effectively using this prejudice to blame the victims for their own plight. But the fact that the letter was even published speaks volumes of public attitudes.

Moreover, migrant workers are often employed in occupations considered to be "beneath" the local population. There is sometimes an outright reluctance to engage in such jobs. In the UK, for instance, when locals were called upon to help fill over 70,000 seasonal agricultural positions, there were only 35,000 expressions of interest, with just 5,500 willing to proceed to the interview stage. Such attitudes expose an unspoken arrogance and societal segregation that excludes migrant workers from the rest of the community.

The Changing of Attitudes

However, while sentiments of racism or arrogance do exist, most people admit that many of their daily comforts are reliant upon the labor provided by migrant workers, which promotes an implicit culture of acceptance of these workers as critical to the functioning of society. It might be more accurate to describe the attitude as one of apathy, which quietly acknowledges the problems migrant workers face but lacks popular motivation to do much about it.

But with the pandemic now shining the light on the importance of what we now call "essential," and previously "low-skilled," workers, there is an overdue impetus for change. In Singapore, a petition to the Ministry of Health calling for better conditions for migrant workers has already gathered over 70,000 signatures. A community initiative named MaskForce has also recently been formed to provide migrant workers with the masks they need.

Of course, it is difficult to imagine a simultaneous, massive worldwide revolution in the treatment of migrant workers. However, the common struggles faced by everyone during this time of crisis can hopefully breed greater solidarity with those who keep our essential services running. For the rest of society, lockdowns and the struggles of everyday life have sparked a greater openness to new ideas and ways of doing business, such as what some are calling a work-from-home revolution. Hopefully, this greater openness can also lead to tackling the apathy that enables the exploitation of migrant workers around the world and initiate the long-term strengthening of their rights.

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COVID-19 Will Have Long-Lasting Effects on Migration

Michelle L. O'Brien & Maureen A. Eger
May 14, 2020

The vicious cycle of suppression, spikes in migration, renewed hostilities and reintroduction of restrictive policies could continue for years after the pandemic.

A dangerous cycle for immigrants has begun. On April 20, President Donald Trump announced that he would sign an executive order to temporarily halt immigration into the United States in order to curb the spread of COVID-19.

As of April 1, 90% of the world's population already resided in a country that implemented at least partial border closures. With the intention of stopping the spread of COVID-19, these border closures come at a moment when hostility toward immigrants and opposition to immigration is widespread. Not surprisingly, other political leaders have also used this crisis as an opportunity to halt asylum seeking and deport refugees, including in Canada and many European countries.

The pre-virus political climate was already characterized by skepticism of international migration, and to the extent that political leaders mobilize fears of immigrants, restrictive immigration policies could endure long after the pandemic. These fears will not make immigration less critical to national economies, however, and the tension between nativist fears and the demand for migration will remain. Thus, a more likely scenario is that most countries will lift restrictions on immigration in the coming months.

Opening Borders

When the borders open, there will be a spike in international migration. Increased border control generates a build-up of unmet demand for opportunities to migrate from sending countries, where remittances will decline and unemployment will increase. Demographic research suggests that when disasters and wars have restricted behaviors such as fertility, marriage and migration, these temporary suppressions have resulted in subsequent "spikes" of such behavior.

Based on recent migration trends, an estimated 7.5 million foreign nationals would have traveled to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries and Russia for work or long-term stays in 2020. With a suppression for three to six months of an estimated 1.7 to 3.5 million migration trips, the subsequent spike in migration will not go unnoticed — especially not by radical-right parties poised to exploit COVID-19 to mobilize for more restrictive immigration policies.

How is this mobilization facilitated? Sociological theories suggest that influxes in immigration can be associated with prejudice due to perceived threats, or, on the other hand, they may induce positive intergroup contact and ultimately reduce prejudice. While people may over time become familiar with high levels of diversity so that small increases in the relative share of an outgroup no longer intensifies prejudice — as has been the case with anti-Muslim attitudes in the Netherlands — migration spikes have the potential to upend that trend.

For example, influxes of immigration have been tied to radical-right violence against and hostility toward migrants, asylum seekers and foreigners in Germany in the 1990s and in 2014-15, as well as in Norway, Russia, Britain and the United States at various points in time. As nativist fears of immigration increase, so too does the ability for the radical right to lobby for exclusionary policies consistent with their neo-nationalist ideology.

The vicious cycle of suppression, spikes in migration, renewed hostilities and reintroduction of restrictive policies could continue for years after the pandemic. This is particularly true in

light of evidence that restrictive immigration policies almost never result in their intended goal of stopping migration. Paradoxically, such policies instead tend to change migration from legal and temporary to undocumented and long term.

Radical-Right Mobilization

There is another particularity of the COVID-19 restrictions that makes radical-right mobilization particularly likely. The fact that it was a pandemic that precipitated the border closures in most countries means that migrants have already been stigmatized as carriers of disease. Of course, the initial spread of COVID-19 was facilitated by movement, in the form of both tourism and migration, and, to be clear, border closures are helping curb the spread of the disease.

Nevertheless, political rhetoric on the dangers of tourism has not yet emerged, while violent scapegoating against people labeled as non-native has: against Asian Americans in the United States, against African migrants in parts of China, against those perceived to be of Chinese or Asian descent in Europe, and surely other cases that have yet to be reported. In most democracies, laws exist to protect migrants from discrimination or persecution, but enforcement of any such legislation is contingent on the will of political leaders to do so in the face of anti-immigrant prejudice, radical-right mobilization and increasing neo-nationalist claims.

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Abuse in Lockdown: Gender Violence in the Philippines

Christianne France Collantes
May 20, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is a lens that provides a magnified glimpse into injustices and restrictions that were already embedded in our societies.

On April 6, it was reported that the Commission on Human Rights was calling for stronger measures to tackle the increased rates of domestic violence incidents in the Philippines due to the lockdown measures that were implemented on March 16.

The quarantine is worsening the problem of domestic abuse suffered mostly by women and children and, of course, those in the LGBTQ community who are especially vulnerable to such violence. Within the context of lockdown and quarantine, victims of domestic abuse and violence are also experiencing equally increased difficulties in seeking help.

As Gaea Katreena Cabico points out in her piece for the Philstar, according to the Center for Women's Resources, at least one woman or child is abused every 10 minutes in the Philippines. Similar to other parts of the globe, this is an alarming issue that the state is being called to address in addition to managing the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis.

On March 16, the entire Luzon region, which includes metropolitan Manila, a city of nearly 13 million, was put under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) ordered by President Rodrigo Duterte. Different cities and municipalities within the region began implementing curfews, drastically reducing the movement of Filipinos in and around public spaces. Several checkpoints between the metropolis and its neighboring provinces were established. Shopping malls,

gyms, bars and other nonessential businesses began shutting their doors to the public.

These measures allow Filipinos to leave their homes only to purchase food, medicine and personal protective equipment from essential businesses such as supermarkets and pharmacies. As in other parts of the globe, ECQ is part of the country's strategy to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis. At the start of the quarantine, there were 140 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines. As of May 20, the number has climbed to 13,221 confirmed cases with 842 deaths and 2,932 recoveries.

Lockdown Inequality

The side effects of the quarantine measures almost immediately magnified the already glaring class differences and economic inequalities in the country. With newly implemented restrictions of movement and checkpoints, as well as the suspension of public transport, news coverage of the first few days of the quarantine highlighted the strife of workers, most of them medical and front-line staff, attempting to enter Metro Manila from the provinces to attend work. These include employees without access to private vehicles and who until the commencement of the quarantine relied on public transportation such as the pubic rail system, jeepneys and busses. Parts of Luzon have only begun to gradually lift some of the restrictions on movement for employees of selected industries under the modified enhanced community quarantine, or MECQ.

The country's poorest cannot afford to work from home or practice social distancing due to crowded, impoverished or precarious living conditions. Moreover, much of Luzon's residents have lost their means of income while being asked to remain in their homes. The authorities are faced with the complex task of providing for families who are in need of food, basic goods, medicine and financial aid in a timely fashion.

Several articles have already explored how the crisis surrounding COVID-19 has amplified existing social, political and economic inequalities at both state and global levels. As Max Fisher and Emma Bubola note in The New York Times, the economically disadvantaged are likelier to die from the disease. Also, "even for those who remain healthy, they are likelier to suffer loss of income or health care as a result of quarantines and other measures, potentially on a sweeping scale."

The rural and urban poor, the elderly, migrant workers and persons with disabilities were certainly already in vulnerable social and economic positions prior to the spread of the pandemic and to the debilitating quarantine restrictions. But lockdown protocols or any kind of quarantine measures also intensify cases of domestic abuse and gendered violence worldwide — whether physical, emotional, psychological or a combination of all three. This has already been noted in a number of recent reports in regard to the global spread of the coronavirus.

Lara Owen provides insight into domestic abuse cases in China during lockdown, including urgent social media appeals calling attention to these incidents, writing for the BBC that "some women have created posters reminding people to counteract domestic violence when they see it and not be passive bystanders. The hashtag #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic has been discussed more than 3,000 times on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo." According to The Guardian, "from Brazil to Germany, Italy to China, activists and survivors say they are already seeing an alarming rise in abuse."

The physical barriers that lockdown presents for victims make it harder for them to seek and obtain help. Professional care or assistance, including medical help and therapy, are more difficult to obtain simply because public and private health-care systems, as well as government services and personnel, are prioritizing those affected by the disease.

These are extremely trying times for victims of abuse, putting states in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, families and individuals need to remain locked down within the domestic sphere in order to prevent the spread of infection. Yet

these very measures and protocols only further endanger women and families who already find themselves in violent situations as they are being asked to remain confined within the same (often cramped) spaces as their abusers.

Gendered Freedoms and Restrictions

In the Philippines, the complex issues brought up by COVID-19 continue to pose great challenges for the victims of domestic abuse, but the social, cultural and economic backdrop already had barriers in place that impeded certain gendered freedoms. According to the Gender Gap Report 2020, the Philippines remains the top country in Asia in terms of narrowing the gap between men and women in categories such as educational attainment, health survival and economic participation and opportunity.

However, at the same time, mostly due to its Roman Catholic culture and political ties to the Catholic Church, the Philippines didn't have comprehensive legislation that supported reproductive health and family planning until the passing of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, which was only implemented in 2017 after being initially blocked by the supreme court.

Moreover, it is the only country in the world apart from the Vatican that does not legally recognize or offer the option of divorce. Many advocates who continue to fight for divorce and reproductive rights do so on behalf of the women who seek state and church-sponsored separations from unhappy marriages, as well as the right to make their own decisions on the number of children they want to have.

As the contours of the domestic space are reconfigured by this pandemic, it is important to remember that these abuses are not necessarily new products of the recent limitations in mobility. For those in abusive environments, lockdown protocols exacerbate these situations due to physical restrictions in their movements. But the social, religious, political and cultural infrastructure in the Philippines had already been designed in such a way that many gendered freedoms were already being restricted by the state long before the pandemic.

The measures that are now set in place to "flatten the curve" of COVID-19 unfortunately exacerbate the very dynamics that allow gendered violence to continue. Lockdown protocols can therefore be seen as additional hindrances to vulnerable women and children who already deal with a compilation of restrictions of certain freedoms surrounding their bodies, identities, relationships and intimate practices.

COVID-19 continues to claim lives, exhaust our health-care resources, sidetrack our economic progress and limit our physical and social movement. But it also operates as a lens that provides a magnified glimpse into injustices and restrictions that were already embedded in our societies.

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The Deadly Disorder Behind COVID-19 and Police Violence

Iziah Thompson
June 3, 2020

Black men are falling at the hands of police weapons and black patients are falling to COVID-19.

It was 1963 when the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, proclaimed, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever … [in] the name of the greatest people that ever trod this earth," referring to people with Western European ethnic ancestry. This and the ensuing pro-segregation forces in the US were very much a response to the 1954 Brown v. Board declaration that separate can never be equal, at least in public schools.

The Supreme Court found this essential penumbra existed in the US Constitution — this soul of the document — and it was antithetical to "separate but equal" because education was the foundation of good citizenship. Obviously, the South had a soul that was different. Southern states famously defied segregation orders up to and following National Guard troop escorts of black students through color barriers throughout Alabama, Georgia and other states.

Years from now, future Americans will look back on the crucial period we are in similarly to the way we view the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. The current pace of societal change, clashes over ideas that will dictate what societies look like and data left behind will all speak to what it was like to live in our time. Depending on the outcomes, how we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic and how our systems react to people saying enough is enough when it comes to police brutality will shade how this period is perceived. Ultimately, now and then, there is an aspect, a connectivity to these two crucial issues (and others) that cannot be ignored.

COVID-19

Take COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. For every 100,000 black Americans, 54.6 have died from the disease. That same figure is 24.9 deaths for Latinx Americans, 24.3 for Asian Americans and 22.7 for white Americans. We are talking about a difference that amounts to thousands of people. In fact, if people in every racial category died from COVID-19 at the same rate as white Americans, almost 13,000 black Americans and 1,300 Latino Americans would still be alive today, according to the APM Research Lab.

We find similar statistics when looking at what happens when Americans interact with the police. White males aged 10 and over account for the largest number of deaths by the hands of police, yet black and Hispanic males are almost three and two times more likely to die from lethal police force, respectively. But surely, for many, this isn't surprising.

In fact, both these sets of statistics may seem unsurprising, but what is more up for debate are the causes of these disparities. For COVID-19, we know that black Americans are at higher risk of exposure to the disease than white Americans. Predominantly, black counties are seeing higher rates of infection (threefold) than predominantly white ones and a sixfold higher death rate largely due to the prevalence of hypertension, diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease in these communities.

Comorbidities (additional diseases) may be driving deaths and sickness, but it is likely that overcrowding contributed greatly to the increased rate of infection. When the data is available, it is expected to be found that the cramped conditions in segregated communities like certain low-income areas of Chicago or areas with housing authority apartments in New York are to blame for such high COVID-19 rates amongst black populations. Lastly, it is clear that "essential" jobs during this current pandemic are overwhelmingly done by black and Latinx workers, putting them at a much greater risk.

The causal factors for the use of lethal force by police can be similarly laid out. Police encounters, from juvenile arrests to traffic stops and stop and frisk actions, are simply more likely to occur for blacks than whites, and to a lesser degree for Latinx Americans. Hence, this disparity exists whether or not the use of force was justified or not.

This finding matches what we know about the over-policing of communities of color. Commentators and researchers are quick to point out that there are factors like violence and petty crime incidence that likely contribute to this disparity. And while there are many confounding factors, similar to the comorbidities mentioned in regard to COVID-19, how big a role these factors play within and outside the context of race is a crucial question.

Disparity Beyond the "Comorbidities"

There is a video game known as "shoot don't shoot." It's a very simple game that simulates

decisions that can involve life-or-death scenarios. In the game, police officers hold a model gun (game controller), and on a screen complex, backgrounds like streets, hallways, campuses and apartments are displayed. A person is shown on the screen and the officer must decide whether or not to shoot based on if that person is armed or not. It's simple.

Yet researchers have found that participants were more likely to shoot an armed or unarmed target if the person was black, and they were more likely not to shoot an unarmed or armed target quicker if the person was white. Simply put, participants needed less certainty to decide to shoot blacks than whites; this was true for all races of participants (including blacks) but worse for white participants.

Studies like these tell us that while there are various factors that put black men primarily at risk to these use-of-force encounters, there is an underlying bias at play.

It is the same with COVID-19 and health care in America. We can talk about the poverty and income disparity all we want, but that does not explain why black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women in the United States. Most of these cases are the result of postpartum hemorrhaging, a completely preventable cause of death.

Data shows that income does not completely explain this disparity either. Infant mortality is more likely to devastate well-educated, middle-class black families more than poor white families with less than a high school education.

This terrible outcome is tied to the interactions black patients have with health care staff. Biases cloud the care received, so much so that, controlling for age, insurance status, income and severity of condition, black patients receive fewer diagnostic tests and have fewer surgeries. Like in the cases of blacks encountering police, the comorbidities do not explain much of these disparities. It is bias, and it is important to know that.

A Proper Diagnosis

Why is it so important to pinpoint the causes of these disparities? Because the most basic factor, implicit bias, is far-reaching and much more poisonous than others.

The reality is that while the historic and institutional racism that has plagued the United States has had damaging and ever-present effects, we have, can and will watch them heal. In the 1960s, we watched racist laws get repealed, and while it is easy to see that the overt racism of these laws often was transformed into the dog whistle-coded policies of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and other US presidents, there is no shortage of movement to turn back the tides of theses hideous policies.

The current progressive movement focusing on the right to health care, housing, education and even a cushioning of the safety-net through the outright provision of income and jobs is astounding. Looking at this current political moment in the context of a longer arc of history, the policy priorities making their way through the body politic have the potential to undo decades of ruthless policymaking that left the average American behind — this includes black, Latinx and other minorities. So, if we are allowed a cautious slither of hope, one can say that this moment in time may lead us into a future with much less income inequality and racial disparity.

However, if it feels too early to celebrate, it is. For the specter of implicit bias may remain, even in that rosy future. Let's take a moment to understand how implicit bias really works.

There is no better exhibition than that of a 2011 study in the Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences journal. The study looked into the question of whether justice is blind and discovered, in fact, that justice was hungry. The authors went into courtrooms and observed judges. They recorded their activities, including their two daily food breaks. The two food breaks created three sets of decisions, those made before, in between and after both breaks. They found that the percentage of favorable rulings dropped from about 65% to almost zero within

each period. Then, after each lunch break, favorable rulings abruptly jumped back up to about 65%.

This is how implicit bias works. It doesn't announce itself. It doesn't come with dog whistles. It affects everyone, but no one admits to it. Like judges who see themselves as the beacons of impartiality and would never admit that their grumbling stomachs weigh in on their decision, everyone from real estate agents and hiring departments to doctors and the police are often in denial about inherent biases. This is bad when it means unfair treatment of the defendant with unlucky timing, and it is devastating when it indicts entire races.

Solving Implicit Bias

In order to fix implicit bias, we have to face it, which may be more difficult than facing the racism of yesteryear. It is easy in today's world to paint the American South as the stalwart of racial progress and symbol of racism. Documents like the 1956 Southern Manifesto, which 96 Democratic congressmen signed, perfectly display this. But seldom is it pointed out that the most segregated areas in the US today are in the North and the Midwest and have long surpassed the South in that category. This is due largely to implicit not explicit bias.

Segregation is important in the conversation about implicit bias because it is one of the most crucial steps between implicit bias and police killings, lack of access to health care and concentration of underhoused people. It is important to understand how the racial issues of today and tomorrow will not be that of the archetypal angry Southern racist(while that population may still exist), and its causes are not Ku Klux Klan violence, black codes or issues with incomes and wealth.

It is easier to talk about implicit bias, through a stepping stone like segregation because everyone can see it. In American schools, workplaces and neighborhoods, you can see it, and the stark realization that despite the fact that you don't know anyone who is racist but you exist in a largely homogenous community is visceral. Though being able to clearly see the manifestation of implicit bias is only half the battle.

Psychologists know that implicit biases are often not congruent with the possessor's conscious beliefs. For example, researchers have observed white men having increased levels of activity in parts of the brain needed to process threats when seeing a black face, and this heightened activity highly correlates with implicit bias. Studies have found that African Americans are given longer sentences than white defendants. The United States Sentencing Commission found that blacks received sentences 19.1% longer than similarly situated white male offenders.

The most popular solution rolled-out across the nation is addressing bias by raising awareness. The idea being that once a person knows they are affected by bias, they have control over it. The idea of awareness holds some theoretical veracity, but research has revealed that in some cases, the popular interventions to alter racial opinions can have minimal and sometimes an effect opposite of that which was intended. Simply telling people that biases exist is not enough.

Advances in neuroscience have allowed for the development of novel insights into the way the brain sorts, synthesizes and responds to massive influxes of stimuli. The preeminent theory on how the brain takes on this task is called predictive coding, a unified theory of brain function or the "hidden brain" as it has been referred to.

The research is largely in its infancy, but the idea is that incoming data is synthesized via an interplay between the "slow-thinking" part (frontal lobe region) and the "fast-thinking" part (ex. amygdala). The brain has "codes" for patterns from the past that it probabilistically matches to the incoming data. This makes us really good at quickly recognizing things in our world but also subject to problematic conclusions. Implicit bias occurs because of this process functioning efficiently.

Theoretically, it happens because we quickly sort people into groups, based on past experience. We build up an unconscious empathy for some groups over others, using aspects like how much like ourselves a person is or on what society, experience and education have taught us. This empathy is dished out largely due to how we group individuals — that's bias. Research has confirmed that the strongest of applications of this empathy comes when our brain believes something is similar or related to us, meaning that in high-tension environments, left unchecked, these outgroup biases are activated.

How do we fix what we cannot see or check what we do not even believe about ourselves? Rules, public policy and institutions large and small should be run as if everyone has implicit biases. While regular bias training and diversity initiatives have returned questionable results, there are some glimpses of hope.

Research actually shows that ownership of an outgroup body through the virtual reality (VR) experience can be used to reduce implicit bias. The user is tricked into another's skin, allowing that unconscious empathy to be shared more equitably. There are already researchers at the nonprofit group EQUALITY LAB applying this technique in the real world, including to police officers themselves. However, this technology is largely limited to how realistic the simulation is, so the best results await the creation of powerful VR tech.

In the meantime, it seems that political diversity does have a positive effect on intermediate steps between implicit bias and racial disparities. One study found that in cities with large black populations, court fees and fines become major sources of revenue, but this relationship is severely reduced by having just one black person on the city council.

Bringing up these types of bias-focused approaches does not mean we should not fight for lowering income inequality or holding police accountable for their actions. The point is not to lose sight of how race truly impacts American life.

Dealing With Bias

To be clear, the approaches to dealing with implicit bias may not be the best when confronting overt racism, and the more outward-facing bias still contributes to the disparities facing the United States. But while we do not seem to be suffering from a lack of awareness of racism, we seem to be falling into one of two camps: those ready to forget and ignore racism altogether and those wielding the word "racist" as a catch-all term.

It is important that we avoid falling too deep into the narrative that race-conscious politics can be forgotten in lieu of class-based politics, as Professor Adolph Reed Jr. seems to in his recent article, "Disparity Ideology, Coronavirus, and the Danger of the Return of Racial Medicine." While it is true that we should not use race "as a proxy for the social conditions of poverty, lack of healthcare, and mass inequality," it is just as true that giving everyone a health insurance card or $2,000 a month, and ensuring that police officers are punished for unlawful uses of force will not fix racial disparities in the US.

These are important goals, but they are detached from the problem of implicit bias. Similarly, we should be careful not to carelessly conflate institutional racism, implicit bias and overt racism as these are distinct and require different tools to mitigate.

Ultimately, thousands of people have hit the streets with the image of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin leaning his full weight behind a knee that dug into George Floyd's neck as officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao stood by and watched. Many Americans cannot stop thinking about Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and the memories of the others before them.

The reality is that the same reason many black men fall at the hands of police weapons is the same reason thousands of black patients from cities around the US fall to COVID-19. We must deal with implicit bias and its steppingstone of segregation, or there will always be some degree

of racial disparity. Every ounce of racial disparity is too much.

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COVID-19 Brings an Epidemic of "Othering"

Hariz Fauzan Othman
June 11, 2020

The mystery surrounding the novel coronavirus activates the fears and anxieties people have toward those seen as the "other."

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, health-care systems around the world are left strained. The outbreak continues to throttle the efficiency of many health-care sectors, pushing some to the brink. While deficiencies within public health systems are exposed, other viral enemies have come to the fore — racism, bigotry and xenophobia.

The spike in discrimination cases during the COVID-19 pandemic is derived from the process of "othering." This is described as the conscious or unconscious negative framing of a group of people that is perceived to threaten another group's existence. "Othering" marginalizes sectors of the population along dimensions such as race, ethnicity, skin tone, religion, gender or class. By labeling a selected group of people as the "other," the survival of the "imaginary" superior community is protected. It provides a fertile environment for dominant groups to exercise "othering" to affirm their identity and stigmatize less powerful groups.

Finding the Other

This process has been taking place throughout the current pandemic. Since its appearance in Wuhan, China, at the end of last year, the novel coronavirus has unleashed a wave of biased maneuvers against minorities. In the United States, East Asian and Southeast Asian communities have been subjected to virulent and hateful racial abuse ranging from verbal harassment to physical assault. Anti-Asian sentiments have been expressed even more freely online. According to Al Jazeera, more than 10,000 Twitter posts included the term kung flu — a derogatory, racialized descriptor — in March alone. Consequently, 1,497 discrimination complaints were filed to the Asian American and Pacific Islanders Hate Centre in the first month since the initiative launched in March.

In India, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to appropriate the virus and justify Islamophobic attacks on Muslim minority groups along religious lines. The mistreatment began when news emerged in New Delhi of an outbreak linked to a Tablighi Jamaat congregation. According to the Health Ministry, by mid-April, 30% of India's COVID-19 cases were linked to this gathering, contributing to the impression that the religious movement was the main culprit and that Muslims were potential virus carriers. Relatively lesser attention was drawn to other mass gatherings that also resulted in coronavirus infections.

Consequently, many Muslims in India now live in fear. In the village of Harewali, a 22-year-old Muslim man returning from a Tablighi Jamaat conference in Bhopal was beaten for allegedly spreading COVID-19. On Twitter, the #CoronaJihad hashtag was used to portray the virus as a political tool used by Muslims to wage an Islamic holy war in India. Though India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a statement in an attempt to calm the situation, discrimination still persists nationwide.

Elsewhere, prejudice on the basis of citizenship is on the rise. In Southeast Asia — where over 6.5 million migrants flock to Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand — migrant workers remain trapped and vulnerable to both COVID-19 infections and xenophobia in their

host countries. Due to transmission control measures, the livelihoods of migrant workers have been significantly disrupted as their mobility becomes restricted.

In Malaysia, a movement control order (MCO) was imposed to combat the rise in infections. Although a rational move to safeguard public health, the MCO has simultaneously allowed employers to lay off migrant workers, removing them from the stream of income they require to access essential goods and sustain family members in other countries that are also impacted by the crisis. Even with legal and fiscal protections designed to protect small local businesses and the welfare of low-wage workers, Malaysia's non-citizen workforce remains neglected on the periphery.

Ripple Effect

Thus far, national responses to the health crisis, or even to other crises of similar and lesser degrees, have not prioritized anti-discrimination measures. Despite efforts taken to tackle bias during previous crises, American federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Justice have been less responsive during the COVID-19 outbreak. Meanwhile, given India's history of tensions when it comes to its Muslim minority, little progress has been made to curb hate crimes besides issuing statements espousing fairness and equality.

In the Asia Pacific, government measures have produced unintended hostility against migrant workers. Citizens in the region have turned toward stereotyping the "poor hygiene" of migrant workers as a reason for the continued transmission of COVID-19. This xenophobic rhetoric is further intensified by government-led raids and detentions of those migrants who are forced to work illegally despite the lockdown.

These instances of discrimination are the ripple effect of COVID-19. The mystery surrounding this highly infectious virus also activates the fears and anxieties people have toward those seen as being "different." Because of the unknown nature of the virus and its unprecedented impacts, people have engaged in "othering" as a means of self-preservation or to better make sense of the crisis. It is neither the color of one's skin, nor one's religious affiliation or nationality that is the issue; rather, these attributes have been made more visible by the virus, becoming targets for those anxious about their own safety from COVID-19.

Anti-Asian, Islamophobic and xenophobic prejudice and discrimination need not occur when the world is already facing great challenges in the fight against COVID-19. Indeed, political leaders and the media play important roles in the narratives they perpetuate. However, people also hold equal responsibility in de-escalating these incidents by resisting the compulsion to succumb to fear, anxiety, anger and hate, and should instead move forward with empathy and compassion. Collective solidarity is the panacea we need during this viral pandemic.

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Getting an Education in the Age of COVID-19

Beau Peters
September 25, 2020

Getting an education in the age of COVID-19 inevitably amps up the stress and anxiety in what's already a stressful process.

In a matter of months, the novel coronavirus has swept across the globe and entirely up-ended our understanding of normality. Now, as the virus continues to rage and signs of a second surge are emerging even before the first has ended, we're rethinking everything we'd

assumed and hoped for at the start of the lockdowns. One of the bigger questions that educators, parents and students are having to face right now is how to return to school safely, if at all?

There's a lot at stake behind the decision to return to classes this fall, especially if you are a college student hoping a degree would promise a better career. For many students, especially first-generation college students and those from immigrant families, a degree is a ticket to a better life.

Having to put your education on hold simply may not be an option for those who are struggling to make ends meet and have limited resources, for whom a delay may easily become denial. Delays may mean that students won't be able to find the resources to finance their degree at a later date or that life's momentum will simply carry them further away from their dream of a college education. In fact, studies show that those who delay going to college by a year or more are 64% less likely to earn their degree.

And that can mean not only a loss of education but also a loss of a career. Fair or not, in an increasingly competitive job market, those college credentials might be the determining factor in getting the job that opens the door to the rest of your professional life. For instance, those wanting to score big bucks and land a career where demand is only predicted to grow in the coming years may well end up in the tech industry. Some of the most lucrative and prestigious careers in technology require advanced master's degrees.

But even at the entry level, they're not just handing out tech jobs on the street corner. Even if you don't complete a full undergraduate program, you're still going to need, at the very least, a good deal of training and, better still, a certification or two in software development, network administration, cybersecurity or a related field just to get your foot in the door.

What all this boils down to is that for a college student trying to weigh up the present health risks against hopes and dreams of a professional future, the question of whether or not to return to school this fall is far from straightforward.

A Question of Safety

As undeniably important as education is, health is even more so. After all, pursuing an education will mean very little if students contract the virus and have a bad outcome because of it. Studies are increasingly suggesting, for instance, that those who recover from more severe cases of COVID-19 may have significant long-term impacts, including cognitive and physical impairments that may linger or may even prove permanent. But because we simply don't know what the lasting effects of the virus may be, we also don't know how this might affect survivors' future academic or professional life.

There's no question that COVID-19 is a terrifying enemy. And the fear of the danger that it may pose to students, teachers and their families is leading many to wonder if campuses should continue to be shuttered, at least through the start of the fall session. However, we are learning rapidly about this new pathogen, including how to identify unexpected symptoms and what kind of hygiene, isolation and quarantine practices work best. When it comes to the question of school safety in the age of coronavirus, though many questions remain, we also have a lot of important answers.

First, there are many actions that we know can help slow or even prevent the spread of the virus in schools and on college campuses. That includes reducing class sizes to enable social distancing. It also involves rigorous cleaning and sanitizing of school grounds and meticulous hygiene for anyone coming and going. This includes not only frequent and vigorous hand washing and sanitizing, but also wearing face masks when at least six feet (or two meters) of distance can't be maintained.

That's also going to mean that schools, colleges and universities will need to have a plan in place to trigger a lockdown and swift transition to online learning if infections escalate to unsafe levels in the community or region. Currently,

some of the largest school districts in the US, particularly those in hard-hit areas such as Florida and New York, are beginning the fall semester online and plan to transition to in-person classes if and when infection rates fall.

This is in keeping with the Centers for Disease and Control (CDC) guidelines, which recommend that districts base their decision to open, and to remain open, on rates of community spread or on the regulations that have been put into place by state governors. But online learning doesn't mean learning less. It doesn't even mean having to struggle more with your courses. For some students, it is possible to thrive if you're studying remotely.

Overcoming Obstacles

For those who do struggle, the difficulties are significant, and it comes down, unfairly but likely not unsurprisingly, to socioeconomic factors. In Los Angeles, students in low-income districts may have been thriving pre-COVID, but once schools were shuttered and students went into quarantine, the lack of resources was immediately apparent. As documented in this Los Angeles Times story, Maria Viego did well in her classes, but once her campus closed, it took weeks for her to receive her district-issued computer. Once she did, the damage was already done. She was one of the children COVID-19 is leaving behind, although luckily not all districts in LA had the same experience.

Even the more affluent areas are finding it difficult to offer consistent access to online learning for students. In some cases, the sheer size of school districts leads to major technical issues. Server problems nationwide caused the online learning tool Blackboard to crash on the first day of distance learning for Idaho's largest school district, West Ada. Idaho is a perfect example of how much access differs among districts in a state despite a lack of physical distance.

In some cases, supporting distance learning is difficult because a household is run by a single parent who provides for the entire family. There is no time during the day to help with homework. Districts are also becoming much more acutely aware of how little parents may be involved in their children's schoolwork when they're at home. In this new era of full-time distance learning, this is highlighting the chasms in education.

To combat these issues and others, various education systems from around the world have adopted a number of models. Israel has created an online portal through which parents can access learning materials as well as data on their children. The national education system also broadcasts daily lessons for six hours a day in both Arabic and Hebrew. Estonian families receive all materials in both digital and hard copies, making it easier for families who struggle with tech or don't have it at all to support their young learners.

Getting an education in the age of COVID-19 inevitably amps up the stress and anxiety in what is already a stressful process, but no virus should rob young people of the future they deserve.

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Women Become Collateral Damage in COVID-19 Pandemic

Hans-Georg Betz
December 1, 2020

COVID-19 has set back the advancement of women, reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

Mao Zedong once stated that "Women hold up half the sky." This has been particularly true over the past months with COVID-19 wreaking havoc across the globe. In fact, it is legitimate to claim that during

the pandemic, women have held up significantly more than their share of the sky. Anyone who has regularly gone shopping in their local supermarket can attest to that. Even at the height of the pandemic in the spring of this year, women cashiers, women stocking the shelves, women at the information counter, women counting the number of customers entering and leaving the store continued to show up for work, assuring that a modicum of "normalcy" was maintained.

Add to that the myriad of women in health services and education, to mention only the most prominent sectors, and the Herculean effort women have made to alleviate the fallout of this crisis becomes glaringly obvious. And this does not even touch upon the too-often forgotten, because unremunerated, work women have done in the privacy of their homes, as wives and mothers guaranteeing the continued smooth running of the household. Or the fact that once schools closed, mothers took on the extra task of homeschooling their kids, countless of them having to make the choice of sacrificing their jobs in order to do so.

Short End of the Stick

More often than not, unfortunately, reality is not a romance novel — appreciation does not come easy. And often enough, good people end up getting the short end of the stick. COVID-19 has once again proved the point. Women have been among the most prominent victims of COVID-19, not necessarily as direct casualties — men have generally been more likely than women to die from coronavirus-related health problems — but as the objects of COVID-19's "collateral damage." In the process, the pandemic has dealt a significant setback to gender equality.

This is the tenor of a growing number of studies and reports by various national and international institutions. In general, COVID-19's economic impact has been significantly more pronounced for women than for men. Whereas "regular" economic downturns tend to affect men more severely than women — since men tend to work in sectors that closely tied to economic cycles, such as manufacturing and construction — in the case of COVID-19, the reverse has been the case, for a number of reasons. For one, as a recent academic study has shown, "the employment drop related to social distancing measures has a large impact on sectors with high female employment shares."

In general, women account for roughly 40% percent of the global workforce. Unfortunately, as a post on the website of the World Economic Forum has pointed out, "they are over-represented in three of the four most in-decline parts of the global economy" as a result of the pandemic: "accommodation and food services (54%); retail and wholesale trade (43%); and services such as arts, recreation and public administration (46%)."

As a result, women have been disproportionately affected by layoffs. In Switzerland, for instance, 3% of the country's workforce lost their job as a result of the pandemic; 70% of them were women. In the United States, between March and early April, female employment dropped by 13%; among non-college-educated women, by 15%. On a global scale, the consulting firm McKinsey has estimated that job losses caused by the pandemic have been around 1.8 times higher for women than for men.

The impact of the pandemic has been particularly severe for women with children. The temporary closing of nurseries and schools in early spring meant a substantial increase in the time women spent on childcare, including homeschooling. All of this, of course, represents unpaid labor, done, at least in part, to allow men to continue to work in their higher-paying jobs. This, at least, is the conclusion derived from an Austrian study. In couples with at least one child, the study found, women spent on average nine and a half hours per day doing unpaid work, men around seven.

What this suggests is, as a recent Swiss study has shown, that COVID-19 has often resulted in a considerable "reduction of women's employment capacity." In Germany, for instance, in

households with at least one child age 14 or below, more than a quarter of women, but only around 15% of men, reduced the time they spent on the job in order to guarantee childcare.

Given the importance of uninterrupted work experience for advancement and promotion, this is not only likely to have a negative impact on women's future career chances and earnings potential, it is also likely to hamper, at least for the time being, further progress in narrowing the gender wage gap. Not for nothing, most of the recent publications that deal with this question conclude that COVID-19 has critically reversed years of progress for women and "worsened gender inequality." A recent McKinsey report warns that Covid-19 is likely to "set women back half a decade."

Dramatic Impact

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life chances of women has been dramatic across the globe, and so has its socio-psychological impact. The arguably most disastrous fallout of this health crisis has been an upsurge in domestic violence. CNN, for instance, has claimed that the pandemic has triggered an "explosion of domestic abuse on a global scale." UN Women has referred to violence against women in the context of COVID-19 as the "shadow pandemic." Data suggest, Un Women has charged, that "all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified."

In the UK, for instance, a BBC investigation found that two-thirds of women in abusive relationships suffered more violence from their partners during the pandemic. A large majority of the victims said that the lockdown had made it harder for them to escape their abusers. Unfortunately, reliable data are still rather sparse; empirical studies, if they exist, are preliminary. What they suggest, however, is that strict measures, such as lockdowns or quarantine, have tended to exacerbate interpersonal tensions and, with them, incidences of violence. In most cases, women have been the targets of violence and abuse, especially in low and middle-income countries.

In April, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence could be expected to occur if the lockdown were to continue for at least six months. "For every 3 months the lockdown continues, an additional 15 million extra cases of gender-based violence" were expected.

In most of these countries, COVID-19 has resulted in a significant disruption of sexual-health services and supply chains for contraception. In India, for instance, between December and March, "the distribution of contraceptive pills and condoms dropped by 15% and 23%, respectively," resulting in a rise in unwanted pregnancies. In its spring report, the UNFPA projected that pandemic-driven disruptions in access to contraception would potentially result in more than 47 million women losing access to contraception, "leading to 7 million unintended pregnancies in the coming months."

By now, there is overwhelming evidence that once again, women have been in the forefront of the struggle to maintain a modicum of normalcy in a very critical situation. At the same time, they have been its primary victims. COVID-19 has, once again, thrown into sharp relief the extent to which inequality, injustice and violence continue to inform the reality experienced by large parts of women in today's world. As has been pointed out on numerous occasions over the past few months, teachers and nurses are significantly underpaid with regard to their contribution to society.

The contribution women have made to the functioning of society more often than not continues to go unnoticed and unappreciated. And that despite the fact that without women's gainful employment, overall inequality would be even higher than it already is. In the United States, more than "40 percent of all mothers are either the sole or the primary breadwinners for their families, and 70 percent of couples are now dual earners." And yet, more often than not, their effort is dismissed.

It has become a worn-out trope that as a result of this pandemic, nothing will be the same as before. There is no return to the status quo ante. Forgive my skepticism. We have heard this before, most recently in the aftermath of the near-collapse of the global financial system in 2008. Yet if, for whatever reason, this time, things will be fundamentally different, one of the central items on the agenda must be gender equality. That means gender equality now, not within the next 100 years or more, as the most recent World Economic Gender Gap Report projects. Women cannot hold up half the sky if they are being pushed down by their male counterparts.

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