Why rethinking care work is crucial for a gender inclusive recovery

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/11/rethinking-care-work-crucial-for-gender-inclusive-recovery/>

Mother trying to work with kids at home.

It's time to encourage a healthier division of care work at home.

Women continue to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

They are more vulnerable to the negative socioeconomic impacts.

For an inclusive recovery we need to invest in women and rethink care work.

A year and a half since the start of the pandemic and women continue to be disproportionately impacted due to an inadequate gender responsive recovery from the health and socioeconomic crises.

In the labour market, more women than men were unemployed due to the pandemic. While men’s employment in 2021 is expected to recover to 2019 levels, women’s employment recovery is likely to fall short by 0.9% compared to 2019 levels. Additionally, only 43.2% of global working age women will be employed in 2021, compared to 68.6% of working age men. Put simply, more women are exiting the workforce.

The pandemic has also widened the global gender poverty gap. Poverty rates for women and girls are expected to rise to 12.5% in 2021 (11.7% in 2019) compared to 12.1% for men and boys (11.3% in 2019). By this year, for every 100 men aged 25 to 34 years old in extreme poverty, there will be a corresponding 118 women.

Why are women more vulnerable to the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic?

In mitigating the widening gender gap, it is pertinent to understand the underlying challenges women face compared to men. These include the burden of care work, unemployment statistics reporting, and disproportionate female representation in certain economic sectors.

Traditionally, women have carried the brunt of unpaid caregiving and domestic work within families. Even before the pandemic, women already did three times the amount of care work compared to men – or an additional 8.3 billion hours of unpaid work. With schools and childcare centres shut for most of the pandemic, the burden of unpaid childcare once again rested heavily on women’s shoulders. Last year, women took on 173 additional hours of unpaid childcare, compared to only 59 additional hours by men.

This increase in unpaid care work is a crucial factor in the declining women’s labour force participation rate, even as employment is indicating signs of recovery in several countries. However, the actual decline is often much larger than the reported figures. The unemployment data reporting obscures the declining numbers of women in the workforce by definition and construct, in both developed and developing countries.

The economic impact experienced by employed women in the manufacturing, services, and social sectors have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In fact, women account for [70% and 75%](https://blog-pfm.imf.org/pfmblog/2021/07/-gender-equality-and-covid-19-policies-and-institutions-for-mitigating-the-crisis-.html) of the health and care, and garment supply chain workforces, respectively. Some working age women are not even captured in employment data due to participation in the informal economy. With [63%](https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/changingworldofwork/en/index.html) of the informal economy workforce comprised of women, they are more vulnerable to precarious income and safety arrangements, and lack access to social protection.

**Putting women at the centre of recovery efforts**

For an inclusive recovery, we need to invest in women. Governments need to adopt gender responsive policies that are long overdue.

There needs to be a rethinking of care work. The care economy remains largely invisible and inadequately resourced. To reduce further gender gap losses, targeted fiscal spending should be channelled to improve care leave and welfare interventions. Specifically, it is crucial to expand the coverage of care policies for longer and more evenly designed maternity and paternity leaves, and for more flexible paid parental leaves.