

# Women's Oppression: the dual burden of the Corona-Heroines

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Internationally, women make up 70 percent of the staff in social and care professions. According to the German Institute for Economic Research, the proportion of women in the so-called systemically important occupational groups in Germany is just under 75 percent. In the following, we want to give an overview of how the burden on women from the working class has increased since the outbreak of the pandemic, what problems they are facing, and then look at the causes of oppression and the question of how to fight against it.

## Health

Due to the pandemic, the focus of the health system is on fighting the disease. This makes sense in itself, but since there is already a shortage of medical staff and facilities, it also leads to a lack of resources elsewhere. We are currently seeing an increase in maternal and child mortality in many countries.

Access to hygienic products and contraceptives is hampered by loss of earnings and production is partially suspended. In India, for example, sanitary towels were not considered essential during the first weeks of the lockdown. Girls had no access due to the closure of schools. NGOs and aid organisations estimate that in India alone at least 121 million women have no access to goods to satisfy their basic needs, with rural regions and small towns being particularly affected.

The already limited access to abortion is made more difficult. According to UN estimates, the corona crisis could lead to 7 million unwanted pregnancies. In Germany, only 1,149 clinics offer abortions, 900 fewer than in 2003. Since many places require costs to be personally guaranteed in advance and compulsory counselling, but at the same time many family planning centres and practices are reducing their services, they are becoming even more difficult, if not impossible. There is also often a lack of contraceptives. Coils, three-month injections cannot be administered in some cases, and prescriptions for the contraceptive pill are only available in limited quantities. Proceedings are underway in 8 US states as abortions have been placed on the list of "non-urgent" medical treatments.

## Short-time work and layoffs

Women are not only massively affected by changes in the health care system, however. The first major waves of redundancies mainly affected sectors in which women are over-represented, such as retail, hospitality and tourism.

A statistical survey from the USA shows that women are more affected by job losses in various sectors than men. In the leisure and hospitality sector, 52 percent of employees were women before the pandemic, but 54 percent of those made redundant are female. In education and health, women accounted for 77 percent of the workforce but 83 percent of those made redundant; in retail, 48 percent of the workforce but

61 percent of those made redundant; and finally, in local and state government, 58 percent of the workforce but 63 percent of those made redundant.

According to ILO figures (2018), 61 percent of the global labour force (2 billion people) earn their living in the informal economy, of which around 50 percent are women. This means that they have no enforceable employment contract, unemployment insurance or comparable protection.

Although women make up half of the people in the informal sector globally, they are over-represented there in the global South. In South Asia, for example, over 80 percent of all women outside agriculture work in the informal sector, 74 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, and 54 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Migrant workers are often particularly affected by the crisis. In India, for example, at least 40 million migrant workers lost their jobs and accommodation overnight. They had to travel as much as 1,000 kilometres back to their families, who they normally support financially. It is estimated that between 660,000 and 1.5 million migrants are housed in camps where they receive minimal food rations. There are no figures on how many have died on the way.

However, women are not only affected as over-exploited wage labourers. In many countries of the semi-colonial world they have often been recipients of so-called micro-credits in the course of "development aid". In Jordan, for example, around 70 percent of women received such loans. Under the conditions of Corona and the crisis, many are no longer able to repay their instalments, which in some countries is punishable by imprisonment.

We can see from these examples that working women are also particularly hard hit by the crisis in economic terms - and this will not subside any time soon.

#### Violence against women

At the same time, the situation of women in family and relationships is worsening. The UN Population Fund expects 31 million additional cases of domestic violence if the lockdown lasts six months. This is a global problem, not a regional one.

In France, the curfew has increased domestic violence by 30 percent. The French government also announced that up to 20,000 rooms in hotels would be reserved for victims, and 20 counselling centres have been set up in French shopping centres.

In the first two weeks of April alone, there was a 47 percent increase in calls to the Spanish domestic violence hotline compared to the same period last year. The number of women who contacted the support services, which the government considers essential, by e-mail or social media, is reported to have increased by up to 700 percent.

This development is, of course, also taking place in Germany, although the problem is not widely discussed. There has been a shortage of places in women's refuges for years. To date, there are around 6,800 places available, although Germany committed itself to creating at least 21,400 as early as 2017. In the short term, the use of empty housing and of hotels unused because of the pandemic and holiday homes could have provided some short-term relief - but this is not the case. In addition, social isolation and quarantine make the situation of women more difficult. If you are locked down with a violent partner, you cannot simply disappear and look after children who are themselves exposed to blatant violence.

#### Short-time work, working from home and unpaid domestic work

In principle, women still do far more unpaid domestic work than men. In the course of the pandemic,

schools and kindergartens have been closed, and care support in the home has often been eliminated or reduced.

In addition, working from home and childcare are difficult to reconcile. This is also reflected in the fact that 40 percent of people with children under the age of 14 consider working from home to be extremely or strongly burdensome compared to 28 percent of those without children. 1.5 million single parents ? 90 percent of whom are women - are even more affected.

Moreover, only those who have paid into unemployment insurance can claim short-time work benefits. However, this is often not the case for women's forms of employment.

Although women and men are affected by short-time work to about the same extent, women are less likely to receive short-time working benefits. "Part of these differences can probably also be traced back to differences in collective bargaining coverage", explains Bettina Kohlrausch (DGB), "it is well known that in companies subject to collective bargaining, pay is generally better and that women are more likely to work in smaller service companies without a collective bargaining agreement".

In recent months, noticeably more women (24 percent) than men (16 percent) have reduced working hours by other means.

What does all this mean in summary? Many women work in the care sector and in so-called system-relevant professions. They are often exposed to a higher risk of infection, but at the same time they are also most affected by redundancies.

This ties them closer to the family economically and makes them more vulnerable to domestic violence. In addition, the reproductive work that has to be done in the household is increasing, which increases the double burden on women. They are thus forced further into the classic, reactionary gender role under conditions of a capitalist crisis exacerbated by the pandemic. Even if the bans on contact are now relaxed, there will be no return to the already dubious "normality". On the contrary, the economic crisis threatens more redundancies and massive social cuts.

Why is that?

In order to change the current situation, it is essential to understand why the pandemic and the coming economic crisis increase women's oppression.

Let us first look at answers that have been given so far. First of all, there is no one ?feminism? or ?women's movement?, but different currents that have different theoretical approaches and propose different solutions. We cannot go into this in more detail here.

Rightly, many groups of bourgeois and radical feminism, as well as the reformist women's movement, refer to the gender pay gap, i.e. the gender-specific wage gap, which is particularly high in Germany with 20 percent (2019; Federal Statistical Office). This is an expression and, at the same time, a cause, of the systematic discrimination of women, i.e. the differences between men and women in terms of wages. But the question is: what does this have to do with women's oppression and capitalism?

Oppression of women existed long before capitalism and took on a systematic form in all class societies. It is, of course, typical of capitalism that the function of household and family for the oppressed class has changed in relation to earlier class societies. In feudalism, for example, the peasant family was a unit of production and reproduction. Under capitalism, production and reproduction are separated and, of course, the family/partnership has a different function for the working class and for the propertied classes. For the former, it serves primarily for the reproduction of the commodity labour power, while for capitalists it is essential for the inheritance of the means of production.

Of course, even if this "ideal" of the working class family often does not correspond to reality from a global perspective, capitalism adopts a pre-existing gendered division of labour, which is itself fixed and reproduced by setting the man's wage as the "family wage" while the woman only earns an "extra". The bourgeois family, which is also the norm for the working class, ideologically and repressively enforced against other forms, reproduces the gendered division of labour and this in turn consolidates the family as an apparently "natural" form of living together.

Why are women more affected?

This form of division of labour also means that women are often particularly affected by crises. It is precisely in such periods that reproductive work under capitalism is systematically forced into the private sphere. Costs for, above all, public child rearing, nursing and care for the elderly appear to be useless and unproductive because they do not create added value for capital. This does not mean that they are not useful work. But since they cannot be exploited on the same scale as others, for example in industry, care work in a public hospital or in a day-care centre does not generate profit for capitalists, they appear to them as costs that should be reduced or saved completely.

The same is true for the individual upbringing of children and care for the elderly in the family - and it is primarily women who educate and care for them. However, this operation can be contradictory because, under certain conditions, capital as a whole needs more female labour and then there is a partial socialisation of domestic work (e.g. through more kindergartens, better canteens, etc.).

In times of crisis, however, costs must be saved by reducing wages, extending working hours, redundancies, but also and above all by making cuts in the social sector as a whole. Women thus act as a "flexible" backup, a particularly easily moveable part of the industrial reserve army, who are the first to be forced into the private sphere to look after the family, but who can be deployed again easily, and with lower pay, when the economy improves.

So, we can also see here where the gender pay gap comes from. The man's wage is historically set as the family wage (which also includes the cost of reproduction to reproduce the family). The woman's work appears here only as a "subsidy", as "topping up". The whole thing forms a cycle of misery that reproduces itself to a certain extent: Based on the sexual division of labour, the man goes to work because he earns more - and because the man earns more, the woman stays at home. Thus, the gendered division of labour reproduces itself at the same time.

Struggles of the labour movement and the women's movement have achieved important improvements, but a real alignment could never be achieved because the different wages are rooted in the gendered division of labour and the private character of domestic work. It is precisely in crises that we repeatedly face the danger of a rollback.

What to do?

Building up resistance is urgently needed, because the situation will continue to deteriorate in the crisis. In many countries, attacks on the working class affect above all their women.

In the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, overtime rates will no longer be paid, all restrictions on working hours and breaks have been abolished, trade unions and strikes have been banned.

In Germany, too, CDU politicians and employers' associations are proposing to reduce the minimum wage and to make working hours more flexible. This will hit women particularly hard, as they are often precariously employed and work in professions that are poorly organised in trade unions.

It is therefore all the more important in Germany to break with the social partners and the policy of truce, to

support strikes like at Voith or actions in the care sector and to build up connections.

## Demands

Even if the living and working conditions of women in different countries and regions are very different, there are some common points that are of great importance for an international movement:

### Equal work, equal pay!

This also includes demands such as those for a minimum wage or for the abolition of all forms of informal, precarious work through collectively agreed wages and salaries, linked to the need for these measures to be monitored by committees of the working class, especially women wage earners.

### Self-determination over your own body!

It must respect the right to contraception, free, safe and freely accessible abortion. It also includes protection against domestic violence, divorce law, legal equality, the massive expansion of shelters such as women's refuges, and the establishment of self-defence committees against violence and assaults, which are supported by the workers' movement.

### Fight against dismissals, inclusion in working life!

The fight against dismissals must also be directed against those of women. All legal disadvantages, all forms of sexism and discrimination in working life must be fought offensively. The fight against redundancies must be combined with that for a massive reduction in working hours, so that work can be shared out among everyone, both men and women.

### No to social cuts and privatisation - socialisation of domestic work!

Instead of further cuts, we must advocate the expansion of schools, educational establishments, public hospitals, cultural institutions, etc. under the control of the working class. This is absolutely necessary to counteract further rollback and the increase in private housework. Ultimately, the task is to socialise all domestic work so that vital tasks such as bringing up children and caring for the old and sick no longer remain an individual burden for women but are tackled collectively.

### Against sexism and chauvinism!

Women and their demands must play a key role in building an anti-crisis movement. But their oppression in society is all too often continued in the reformist and bureaucratised workers' movement. Therefore, it is necessary that they are able to defend themselves against all forms of sexism and chauvinism in our class in an organised way and that they have the right to their own meetings (caucuses) like all other socially oppressed people in parties or trade unions. This is not an obstacle for the common struggle of men and women of the working class, but rather a precondition for a real, common struggle against women's oppression and capitalism.

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