



**CAN THE COVID-19 WORK AND CARE CRISIS BE TRANSFORMED
INTO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EQUALITY POLICIES?
A FEMINIST REFLECTION**

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On the celebration of International Women's Day 2021, I can't forget that a year ago I had the opportunity to participate in the historic march on the 8th March in Mexico City, where thousands of women joined together to demand justice in the face of the femicides that have ravaged not just Mexico but the whole of the Latin America region. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Madrid, with the slogan "With rights, without barriers, feminists without borders", thousands of women marched through the capital to continue their calls for freedom. A few days later, on the 14th March, I flew from Mexico to Barcelona and landed in a country that had recently adopted strict measures of confinement in order to try and stop the spread of a new virus. The rest is history. It seemed like it would be a couple of weeks of containment, but it became months, and today, almost a year after these measures began, humanity is far from returning to life as we knew it. If the 8th March 2020 saw feminist marches throughout the world, this time we will not be having them in

the same way. However, may this date serve to reflect on the way in which women and men, in all our diversity, have been affected by this pandemic that has sparked the worst health, economic and social crisis of modern times¹. It is true that, as the human race, we have overcome pandemics, ended world wars, made progress with disease control and we have even been able to visit the surface of other planets. But at no time has any phenomenon affected, directly or indirectly, such large numbers of people so interconnected by technology, transport systems, commerce and communication systems.

Countless analyses have been written about the pandemic in many disciplines, including in the natural and social sciences. We therefore have sufficient information about how the pandemic has affected the most important indicators of the economy, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates or the number of

¹ My reference to women and men includes, of course, trans, transvestite, non-binary and other categories of women and men.



jobs that have been lost. We also know that the pandemic has placed enormous pressure on health services, pushing their professionals into a state of physical and mental exhaustion. We even know that women have suffered more from the pandemic, since they carry the weight of care work and have faced increasing rates of domestic violence. However, having this information has not yet led us to propose public policies that can counteract the as yet unknown effects that the pandemic will have on society.

The pandemic has also shone a spotlight on the emotional problems caused by COVID-19, and it enables us to speak about mental health without it having to be synonymous with disease. Instead, it is about conditions of isolation, anxiety and uncertainty about the future that a vast proportion of the world's population share at present.

In this piece I hope to contribute to our thinking about the pandemic by addressing two fundamental aspects of human life: work and care. In doing this I will address two seminal questions that will guide part of my analysis: "who does what?" and "in exchange for what?". I will attempt to answer these questions from an affective dimension that is also needed in responses to COVID-19, and to therefore provide suggestions for public policies from a new angle.

However, why should we talk about an affective perspective? First, because humanity is going through a crisis on this level. People have had to face the death of their loved ones without being able to say goodbye or process their grief. How can we understand the suffering of someone who has left a parent at the hospital gates and a few days later has received in return only their ashes? Meanwhile millions of people have lost their jobs and are unsure whether they will find a new one when COVID-19 is epidemiologically controlled. Similarly, millions of people cannot entertain the idea of a romantic relationship simply because there is no chance of physical encounters. Moreover, people are separated from their loved ones because they cannot travel. In the current circumstances, borders are closed, it is almost impossible to travel by air and, in some instances, costs can be very high when, for example, people have to fulfil compulsory quarantine regulations in hotels that not everybody can afford.

The second reason is that if we as humanity, or at least as countries, really want to take advantage of this opportunity to rethink the model of inequality we suffer from that is so brutal (given that the pandemic, as we have seen, has clearly exacerbated the inequalities between those who have and do not have the resources to cope), we also need to take into account recovery from the

affective crisis. This is no small undertaking, but if we want the public policies for recovery to have an impact on quality of life it is essential that this dimension is taken into account.

I would also venture to say that the affective dimension is important above all for equality policies. The substantial changes in issues relating to equality have led to the need for profound transformations in the ways we act, think and feel, for example, in order to eliminate violence against women, to redistribute care work between men and women, or to effectively combat racism, xenophobia or homophobia.

However, we are faced with many difficulties: many people in the political, and even intellectual, spheres are afraid to include a psychological dimension in their reflections or proposals, since they consider that this refers to intimate issues linked to affect (Lamas, 2018). This resistance is a mistake. Second wave feminism quickly understood this subjective dimension of politics, establishing it in their famous slogan “the personal is political”.

Lamas notes that in the 1980s the sociologist and political scientist Norbert Lechner (2006: 475) understood that feelings are not a subject enclosed within the personal sphere, so he directed his analysis at the political potential of affect. Lechner

analysed the importance of subjective individuation processes for the advancement of democracy and developed a reflection on the link between daily sociability, affective arrangements and politics (Lechner, 1986; 1988; 2006). Analysing subjectivity in relation to the public sphere, Lechner proposed that subjectivity and politics are, as the title of one of his books indicates, *The interior patios of democracy* (1988).

The work crisis

To date much has been written about the devastating effects of the pandemic on the economy. In Spain the GDP fell by 11% in 2020, while in Latin America as a region it fell by 7.7%.

According to a recent study by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the rate of female participation in the labour market was 46% in 2020, while the male rate was 69% (in 2019 it was 52% and 73% respectively). In 2020, according to this study, there was a notable exit of women from the workforce, who, in addition to taking on the demands of care work in their homes, did not return to searching for paid employment. Consequently, the impact of the crisis is negatively affecting household income and it is estimated that about 118 million women in Latin America are now living in poverty, 23 million more than in 2019 (ECLAC, 2021).

Analysis by *The Economist* (2020) and Eurofund (European Parliament, 2021) confirm that this crisis differs from the “Great Recession of 2008”, when industry and construction were seriously affected, and job losses were greater among men. This time, the job losses are greater among women (CNBC, 2020). Since it is more likely that women work in the service sector, with frequent physical interaction with clients, consumers or children, during a time of social distancing and lockdown they run a greater risk of losing their jobs (except in the health sector where the phenomenon of “over-work” has predominated, with working hours and psychological strain multiplied).

Consequently, when analysing the effects of the pandemic it is not enough to just note the number of jobs lost, we also need to study what types of jobs have been lost, or gained, in recent months. COVID-19 has led to an increase in employment trends already addressed in reports such as “The future of work” (ILO, 2013) or “The fourth industrial revolution” (Schwab, 2016). These documents foresaw the blurring of the line between virtual and physical worlds, with the consequent creation or disappearance of jobs in both spaces. In addition to this, it is worth arguing that there is an intermediate space between these two worlds that

I call Atlas², a space occupied by tensions that cannot be resolved. One example of this tension is illustrated by the way in which we connect with loved ones in the virtual world by video, but without the physical possibility of touching each other, resulting in a recurring source of anxiety. Also, in the sphere of work, despite numerous virtual meetings, there is the wish to return to the office and interact physically with colleagues.

One of the worlds that has most morphed from physical into virtual is that of the on-line buying and selling of goods and services, a type of commerce that has increased exponentially. For example, participation in the on-line food market in the UK has increased in recent years by 14%, and the panorama of supermarkets is changing “for ever” around the world, after a year in which the pandemic forced many people to buy food on-line for the first time (BBC, 2021).

This brings us to the obligatory question of how a global health crisis coincides with multimillionaires becoming 27.5% richer (Neate, 2020), at a time when more than 120 million people have slipped into extreme poverty (Kharas, 2020).

² The Atlas is the first cervical vertebra which connects to the cranium. I therefore use the term to symbolise the union of the physical and virtual worlds.

On the other side of the coin there are the jobs characterised by the impossibility of being carried out online and that have been the most damaged by the crisis. One of these is paid domestic work. In 2019, before the pandemic, about 13 million people in Latin America were employed in paid domestic work sector, of whom 91.5% were women. In total, this sector employed 11.1% of women workers in the region. However, in the second quarter of 2020 the level of employment in paid domestic work fell by the following percentages: -24.7% in Brazil; -46.3% in Chile; -44.4% in Colombia; -45.5% in Costa Rica; -33.2% in Mexico; and -15.5% in Paraguay (ECLAC, 2021).

Although there were substantial job losses, the effect was not felt equally across the board, as we have seen sectors where employment rates have increased. A recent study by LinkedIn in various countries around the world, including Mexico and Spain, reveals that in the latter the three areas of employment that have grown most over the past 12 months are:

1. Education. In Spain, after the enforced closure of schools and other education providers, in-person education had to be transformed into distance education so that students and pupils' learning was not abandoned. As a result, education jobs with digital aptitudes have seen an

increase of 92% in 2020, and 61% of the new recruits have been women.

2. Specialist medical professionals. COVID-19 has generated huge demand for specialist medical professionals. Specifically, there has been a 55% increase in recruitment during 2020, of which 70% have been women with an average age of 27. The majority were jobs in nursing.

3. Personal medical support. While the demand for medical professionals has increased, there has also been a rise in the demand for health care and support services (62% more, specifically). For example, the posts of lab technician assistants and directors of clinical trials have been most in demand in order to assist with vaccine research. Among these jobs, 71% of recruitment has been female, with an average age of 27; a similar demographic therefore to that of the vacancies for specialist medical professionals.

In the case of Mexico, the three employment fields that have grown most of the past 12 months are:

1. Specialist medical professionals. The health crisis has generated a greater demand for specialist medical professionals, and this category grew by 91% in 2020. This was above all in the nursing sector, predominantly female, which saw a growth rate of 171% due to the surge in COVID-19 cases throughout the country.

2. Jobs in business development and sales. Due to the pandemic, businesses were forced to find new ways of responding the customers' needs, so it is not surprising that jobs for business development managers and sales advisors were the most in demand in 2020. An interesting detail is that Dematic, a company that offers services in the automation of supply chains, was one of the highest recruiters, due to the need for increased efficiency during the COVID-19 outbreak.

3. Creative services. When remote working became the new normal, businesses took advantage of the opportunity and began to look for creative resources outside their offices. This in turn generated a boom among independents who aimed to benefit from this remote way of working. Specifically, the writing sector grew by 95% in 2020, since many businesses concentrated on generating more on-line content.

However, these changes demonstrate a clear gender bias. The study showed that during 2020 the category of mental health professionals represented the highest level of recruitment of women, who took up 73% of the vacancies. Meanwhile, the technology sector was the one that recruited men, who took up 78% of vacancies. Although the study did not examine incomes, it is not difficult to deduce that men continue to dominate professions most associat-

ed with new technologies and virtual worlds, which offer higher salaries. Conversely, women occupy a greater number of positions in jobs linked to care and with lower pay. This divide, far from shrinking, is likely to deepen the gender pay gap.

On a macro level, according to impact assessments carried out by ECLAC and the International Labour Organization, some sectors of the economy are at greater risk in terms of volume of production and employment as a result of the measures adopted to control infection rates. These assessments predict a major impact on the economic activity and employment levels of sectors with high levels of female participation, such as trade, manufacturing, tourism and domestic work.

The care crisis

One of the demands of the women's movement is for the recognition of care work as a central part of life. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, Gender Equality, includes as a specific target "Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family...". However, in the current context, in which COVID-19 has increased the need for care work, it seems that meeting this target is at risk.

As we well know, unpaid domestic and care work serves as a daily support to families and communities from one generation to the next, and it makes an important contribution to economic development given that it enables people to keep healthy and productive while preserving their capacity for learning and creativity.

However, this work remains invisible, undervalued and omitted from economic, social and public policy formation; additionally, it suffers from a highly unequal distribution. Throughout the world, women carry out three times more unpaid domestic and care work than men (UN Women, 2015; 2019).

The increase in demand for care in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, and the response to it, will probably deepen the gender inequalities that dominate the division of labour, leading to a disproportionate load to bear for women and girls. Until now, attention has been focused on health services and the overrepresentation of women employed in this sector. However, according to UN Women (2020), other less visible aspects of the care economy are under increasing pressure and are to a large extent being neglected.

Moreover, it is possible to find other narratives beyond those presented by UN Women. In different countries around the world, including Spain, millions of men have been forced to

spend time at home like never before, and there is evidence that this has produced a greater sharing of care tasks, above all among young couples. In many cases, it is the women who have been able to keep their jobs, relying on the men who stayed at home to look after the children and older people. In cases where men can stay at home and maintain an income (for example as happens in Spain with the furlough scheme / ERTE), we have seen an increase in their help with domestic and care work, and even satisfaction at spending more time with their children (Séiz, 2020).

These changes are by no means trivial although we rarely mention them. Not many men admit that they carry out more domestic work, due to social pressure that calls into question their masculinity. But if we really want profound changes in the distribution of care work, it is crucial that these small shifts are brought to light and valued in the social imaginary.

The mental and emotional health crisis

Since 1948 the World Health Organization has defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. The pandemic has brought to light mental health problems caused by anxiety, stress, depression, problems with concentration, loss of memory and fatigue. Anxiety and depression rep-

resent a cost of 23 million euros to the Spanish health system, so this needs to be taken very seriously when defining the recovery strategy for health beyond the purely physical level.

One of the areas where it is possible to assess the level of deterioration of mental health is the field of work. Although there is no official data on the psychological deterioration of people in work (since this type of pathology is not included in the catalogue of work-related illnesses and the drops it causes are accounted for within the compendium of common contingencies), there is no doubt that COVID-19 is affecting mental health in the workforce. According to Ana García de la Torre of Spain's General Union of Workers, there is "a clear correlation between this deterioration, brought on by the fear of infection, isolation, endless free time and the economic crisis, among others, and work-related health problems" (Sánchez -Silva, 2021). In Spain deaths related to heart attacks and strokes increased by 11% in 2020. In Mexico, Paulina Arenas (Professor of Psychology at UNAM) argues, "the increase in levels of anxiety and depression since the beginning of the health emergency were associated with the uncertainty of what it would be like and how long it would last. In the following months additional triggers have emerged, such as the loss of loved ones, bereavement processes, economic problems and exhaus-

tion" (Camhaji 2021); all this a year after the first case was detected in Mexico on the 28 February 2020.

Another approach to measuring the problem of mental health is the increase in the number of pharmaceutical drugs consumed to treat depression and anxiety. During lockdown, the consumption of psychotropic drugs in Spain increased by 20%. In Mexico demand doubled, according to the National Association of Pharmacies in Mexico.

Emotions and public policies

The current work, care and mental health crises compel us to propose at least two important reflections. The first is to recognise that emotions are important, they have effects that influence people's physical and mental health, and they affect our capacity to contribute to productive and creative activities as well as those based on compassion and solidarity. The second is related to the importance of no longer considering the element of emotions as relevant only to the private sphere, and of understanding its importance in politics and public policies. And while everyone finds it difficult to put feelings into words, for men it is even more difficult, since this undermines their idea of masculinity. Undoubtedly the difficulty men have in expressing their experiences of deprivation, pain or exploitation —frequently denied or experienced with shame— comes from the mandate of masculinity

(Lamas, 2018). But in public policies we need to discuss how this emotional dimension has concrete effects, specifically in equality policies. The silence around these emotions renders them invisible as part of the problem and solution, just as it has in the case of stigma around mental health.

Lauren Berlant (2011), referring to how the private sphere circulates in the production of politics, identifies a type of ideological operation in certain forms of affect that tends to endorse inequality and notes that, just as in some cases they may be transformative elements, in others they serve only to confirm the status quo. Berlant goes on to propose that feelings are key when the time comes to evaluate politics, thus emotions should be studied carefully from a critical perspective, taking into consideration the possibility that some of them may be conservative and others progressive.

Marta Lamas (2018) explains that, given that emotions that circulate in an affective economy have public consequences, it is important to shed light on the emotional economy that supports the distribution of work: how do men's emotions regarding care work serve to sustain their patriarchal privileges? It could be that these emotions include shame of being seen as a "sissy", or anger if they feel that their virility is being

diminished by carrying out these tasks.

But this is only half the problem. Ahmed (2004) similarly asserts that we should give thought to what happens with women's emotions, since culture mandates that they should be the carers. In addition to producing work-related discrimination, care work also produces immense psychological satisfaction. This provokes a profound ambivalence, since care work simultaneously confers gratification and loss of autonomy.

Lamas reminds us that in order to develop public policies for more egalitarian distribution we need to do more than just highlight the difficult working conditions women and men experience; crucially we also need to understand that the division of labour produces suffering and inequalities that are not reflected in the priorities of political agendas. Suffering at work exposes the depoliticising effects of symbolic violence³, and this explains the difficulties of conscious action (*agency*).

Any effort aimed at achieving greater work-related equality will entail designing effective mechanisms so that workers can express their feelings of frustration, anger or pain resulting from their situation at work.

³ Bourdieu (2000) calls symbolic violence the phenomenon by which people accept, against their better interests, schemes and values that oppress them.

Final considerations

Different governments have debated mechanisms for designing sustainable and long-term interventions that involve men. Kershaw (2006) summarises three principal reforms that have been proposed: i) ensure that care work is profitable for men; ii) grant widespread and non-transferable leave for paternity or filial care; and iii) a policy aimed at reforming the symbolic meaning of masculinity, connecting masculinity and care in a positive light.

In the context of COVID-19 it is worth mentioning the *MenCare* campaign, an initiative set up by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to promote the equal participation of men in care and domestic work. In this campaign, high-profile men, such as actors, writers, athletes and celebrities, share videos of themselves reading stories to children in an effort to encourage men to play a more active role in their families (UNFPA, 2020).

Now is the time to go further, to get to work on public policies and symbolic policies that erode inequality. In my opinion, the way in which the patriarchal system is organised resembles the international capitalist system. Just as there is no notion of shared responsibility for care work, there is no compassion in the face of poverty. We have even lost the language of the notion of the common good.

Henrietta Moore (2011) talks about the ethical imagination, encompassing hopes, dreams, satisfactions, affect, being and subjectivity. Understanding this dimension is fundamental, above all so that feelings of frustration, anger and pain can be channelled towards building personal and collective agency to put an end to injustice and inequality. But these emotions are not possible if we do not understand how an unjust world order has been internalised to such an extent that we accept it as natural.

The pandemic may leave millions of human beings with feelings of despair and paralysis, which may be accepted as fate, but this will not help us as a human species. Even if these groups receive a universal income, the cost in human suffering caused by not feeling useful to society will be terrible. We need to understand the injustice in this situation in order to transform it into political action and legitimate claims for redistribution directed at the State and big business. But this will not be possible unless we understand that material interventions in public policies are not enough and that symbolic ones are also necessary - interventions that help people convert their feelings of frustration, anger and pain into constructive political action. Today the crisis in emotional and mental health shows us that, as a society, we must continue the search for a solution.

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