

## **The Pandemic Is Gendered - and so Is Recovery**

**Article by Rosa Martínez Rodríguez**

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The impacts of Covid-19 have been deep and multifaceted, with women all over finding themselves on the frontlines of the crisis. In Spain, the legacy of the lively feminist movement of recent years may be seen in the attention paid to gender issues in the government's crisis response and recovery plan. But the pandemic's fallout combined with increasing polarisation, a lull in mobilisation, and the silence on women's rights issues in the public debate put feminist gains at risk. To prevent a downward spiral, recovery must address fundamental gender inequalities.

From March to June 2020, Spain imposed one of the strictest, longest lockdowns in all Europe as infection rates soared and hospitals and care homes entered into crisis. In Spain as elsewhere, entrenched inequalities mean that women have been among those hardest hit by the pandemic, and a gender-sensitive analysis is necessary both to understand these impacts and design adequate responses. The findings of two reports published in 2020 – [one by the Spanish government](#), the [other by the Basque government](#) – offer important insights into how the first coronavirus lockdown impacted women in the country.

### **An unequal burden**

According to the data, more women than men have been infected with Covid-19 in Spain: by 15 July 2020, 55.7 per cent of cases were women. By 14 April 2021, the figure was 52 per cent. At both moments, women accounted for a large proportion of cases among those of working age. This corresponds to the fact that 66 per cent of health professionals (84 per cent in nursing) and 84 per cent of care home staff are women. Many of the key roles involving regular social contact are female-centric, such as supermarket staff, cleaners, and care workers (highly insecure jobs with little social recognition). This meant that women were on the frontlines of the first wave when the virus was poorly understood and protective equipment in scarce supply.

But the impact on women's health goes beyond a high number of cases. It is crucial to consider how delays in the diagnosis and treatment of other conditions resulting from the overburdened healthcare system have affected wellbeing, and women's wellbeing in particular. The toll on mental health must not be overlooked: a [study carried out by the University of the Basque Country](#) reports that women have experienced greater psychological distress than men during the pandemic.

The closure of care services such as nurseries, schools, and day centres put an even greater strain on families during lockdown. Studies have found that although men's participation in household chores rose slightly during lockdown, it was not nearly enough to make up for the additional workload which fell largely on women. The situation was even

more complicated for single-parent families, around 80 per cent of which are headed by women (more than 1.5 million homes).

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And if juggling housework, care duties, and educational support for children was not demanding enough, many women had to continue working, either in key roles or remotely, or deal with the pressures of having no steady income. The pandemic has worsened women's position in the job market. In Spain, the unemployment rate for women stood at 18.4 per cent (compared to 16.13 per cent for men) in April 2021, the second highest in Europe after Greece. While there are many women working in key sectors who are not at risk of losing their jobs, women also dominate some of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, such as hospitality, catering, retail, and tourism. In these sectors, jobs are often precarious and have insecure employment rights.

An issue particularly impacting women and girls that has been on the radar of both government and media is domestic violence and child abuse. Data shows that the number of police complaints dropped drastically during lockdown, while there was a significant rise in calls to helplines. The Spanish government and autonomous communities took exceptional measures here: a contingency plan that included, among other measures, categorising all victim support services as essential, creating support apps and WhatsApp groups, and implementing a code word - *maskarilla19* (mask19) - to make it easier to request help in pharmacies.

## **A gender-sensitive response?**

In September 2020, UN Women published a gender-based analysis of pandemic measures taken by governments worldwide. The results of the [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#) are not encouraging. Of a total 2,517 measures implemented in direct response to the pandemic, only 992 were gender sensitive. Of these, 704 related specifically to violence against women.

In Europe (including Russia), there was a total of 298 gender-sensitive measures, which were categorised to include 225 related to violence against women, 16 related to economic security, and 54 related to unpaid care work. Austria implemented the most gender-sensitive measures (17), followed by Spain (16), Greece (14), Portugal and Belgium (13), and the United Kingdom, France, and Romania (12). Only nine countries adopted measures across all three areas, with Spain among them.

Spain took many measures to facilitate care during lockdown, most likely due to the former relevance of care issues to the political agenda. In particular, pandemic response measures related to flexible working hours, shorter working days, leave to care for children and dependents, and incentivising distance work. In September 2020, these steps were complemented with a new framework to support people in quarantine, as well as a law to regulate remote work. On top of this, an incredible 300 million euros was granted to

improve care services for the elderly, dependents, and homeless people. The standout measure addressing economic security was the Minimum Living Income (IMV),<sup>[1]</sup> which – despite design flaws that impede access for those who need it – is an important first step in protecting the most vulnerable.

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Another noteworthy measure – and one which is arguably a direct result of Spain’s thriving feminist movement in recent years – is a substantial subsidy for domestic workers whose contracts have been suspended or terminated. According to Eurostat, Spain is the European country with the second highest number of domestic workers after Italy (the two countries account for more than half of Europe’s total domestic workers). Spain’s domestic workers, who are primarily migrant women, experienced real personal hardship during lockdown, with many barely scraping by or forced out onto the street.

Some feminist groups crowdfunded a strike fund, while other organisations covered the travel costs of migrant domestic workers who wanted to return to their country of origin upon finding themselves without a home or local support network. The subsidy’s impact was modest in quantitative terms because the domestic sector has one of the largest underground economies, making it hard to reach. Nonetheless, the measure had symbolic significance in that it shone a spotlight on a group in an incredibly precarious situation, with harsh working conditions and zero social recognition, and who very often experience abuse and exploitation.

## **High stakes for recovery**

Today the pandemic continues to negatively impact women, but the issue of gender equality has been largely absent from Spain’s political debate over the last year. Following the care crisis during the pandemic – the closure of schools and day centres, the collapse of the healthcare system, and the failure of the care home model – many hoped that the force of the feminist movement would be enough to push for an in-depth review of social care, and that this would become one of the main axes of economic recovery. This has not been the case. No space has been given to the care crisis as a whole, whether on an institutional level, on the political stage, or in the media.

Institutions are dialling back their intervention in the care sector and are instead increasing investments and making changes to social policies. This approach not only overlooks childcare, but also the daily care that we all need, regardless of age or health status [read more on [the politics of care](#)]. Housework and emotional labour are two areas that are never mentioned in the political debate, and that also fall largely on women.

In the [Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan](#) presented by the Spanish government to secure funding from Next Generation EU (the European Union’s coronavirus recovery fund), gender equality appears as one of the four key pillars alongside environment, digitalisation, and social cohesion. The plan acknowledges the disproportionate impact of

Covid-19 on women and the widening inequalities in the job market, as well as the shortage of women in areas of training that give access to the jobs which will be of key importance in future years, such as those in the digital and environmental sectors.

The plan sets out cross-cutting measures which include applying a gender lens to data collection and analysis, public procurement guidance, and ensuring women's participation in decision-making spaces. But most interesting of all are the measures targeted at closing the gender gap, such as the creation of educational spaces for children aged three or under, improved social services, the IMV, targeted investment in transport, and steps to tackle issues related to housing and energy poverty.

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However, economic and employment equality over the coming decades will depend on the success or failure of two measures in particular: the emergency plan for the care economy, and the plan for digital skills. The aim of the first plan is two-fold: on the one hand, to promote women's participation in the job market and, on the other hand, to improve working conditions for women in the care sector. The digital skills plan singles out the digital divide as an area in need of action, being one of the main drivers of inequality set to define the future job market.

This approach marks a big step forward for Spain's recovery plan. Above all, because it recognises the need to design policies that correct the fundamental gender imbalance and encourage professional development for women to ensure they will not be excluded as the economy transforms. Failure to take a gender-sensitive approach to the management of Next Generation EU funds will mean that the multi-billion-euro investment in the recovery and transformation of the European economy will not only block any progress on gender inequality, but actively undo it. It would exacerbate the pay gap, precarity, and the de-valuing of certain kinds of work. Resilient recovery cannot be reached while inequality still exists, and in this sense the emphasis on gender equality in the Spanish recovery plan is promising.

## **A movement in hibernation?**

Throughout the pandemic, countless protests and marches for a wide range of causes were held across Spain. The right to protest was never called into question, nor was the responsibility of organisers to comply with safety regulations – until International Women's Day on 8 March 2021. In the weeks prior, there was much debate over whether the protests were advisable, reinforcing the right-wing narrative which for months had blamed the 2020 feminist march for the severity of the first wave in the country. All this detracted from the real issue: the impact of the pandemic on the lives of women, and the policies being devised to address this.

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On the day itself, the Spanish media devoted special coverage to the movement and sought to illustrate the pandemic's impact on women with a range of testimonies and voices. However, it felt more like a tribute to women's heroism and selflessness as caregivers than a political analysis aimed at promoting change.

Neither the protests nor the momentary public attention on gender equality has managed to recover the centrality that women's rights enjoyed on the political agenda in the two years prior to the pandemic. The feminist momentum in Spain is either over, or in hibernation. In recent years, women of all generations have reached a common understanding with regards to the structural inequality they experience. While this has not been enough to keep equality on the public agenda throughout the pandemic, it should be enough to restore this focus in the not-too-distant future. That said, the current political climate presents a number of obstacles.

Firstly, there is discord within the government over the gender identity bill. This debate has also taken off on social media and proved divisive within the feminist movement. Secondly, Spanish politics are becoming polarised. Rowdy debates, lies, insults and the radicalisation of political positions are getting in the way of constructive debates over structural issues such as gender equality, though this is also true of the climate crisis and digitalisation. Within this trend of "anything goes", it is now not only the far right but also the President of the Community of Madrid and rising leader of the centre-right Popular Party Isabel Díaz Ayuso who openly questions gender-based violence, a consensus that once seemed untouchable.

Thirdly, the framing of the recovery plan and the investment of European funds leaves no room on the agenda for the care or equality debate. The plan has turned into something of a competition between businesses and regions, to see who can attract more and better investment. This runs the risk that Spain and its autonomous communities will get stuck in a public policy rut and undo any progress on gender equality made over recent years.

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Faced with increasing polarisation and a public agenda that has turned its back on equality, it is once again up to feminist changemakers to build alliances and strategies that put gender equality and a fair division of care duties at the heart of post-covid recovery. Otherwise, women will come out of the pandemic even more disadvantaged.

The groundwork laid in recent years has without doubt positively influenced some of the decisions and policies adopted in Spain since the start of the pandemic, particularly the gender considerations of the government's coronavirus recovery plan. But overall, it is fair to say that the feminist movement has not fared well in the pandemic. It is to be hoped that the long-awaited return to normality marks the return, among other things, of equality to the public agenda. Above all, it will be essential to monitor how recovery investments and transformation plans impact women, for better or worse.

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[1] Until the introduction of the Minimum Living Income (in Spanish, the *Ingreso Mínimo Vital*, or IMV), access to a non-contributory minimum income depended on the resident's autonomous community, resulting in strong discrepancies in the level of protection and poverty rates. The IMV seeks to plug the gap in the regional social protection systems.

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