

Global Contestations of Social Reproduction

Compounding Crises and COVID-19

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1. Introduction

Securing and advancing socioeconomic gains in gender and women's rights has been put at risk by the emergence of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and how societies have addressed it. The COVID-19 pandemic has developed into a severe, multidimensional global crisis – causing illness and death, paralyzing the global economy, disrupting employment, income flows, education and routine healthcare procedures; exacerbating food deprivation and gender-based violence; and reversing poverty and equality advances made in recent decades (UN Women 2020a/d; EC 2021; ILO 2021a; IMF 2021a). Through these processes, the pandemic has exposed and aggravated the stark social inequalities resulting from complex relations of gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity, citizenship (and other axes of power) as well as from geopolitical systems of domination. The intersectional ramifications of the pandemic on wide-ranging dimensions of life have demanded a complex set of actions to contain the virus and handle its public health and socioeconomic impact in order to stabilize and secure societal survival. The unprecedented global pandemic has thus triggered equally unprecedented responses, crosscutting societies throughout the world.

The term 'crisis' is frequently manipulated to justify exclusionary measures, and, therefore, cannot be used uncritically. We conceptualize crisis as a shock-causing event requiring significant readjustments either to the new conditions, to restore stability, or to facilitate processes aimed at achieving wellbeing and social justice. The COVID-19 pandemic is a complex crisis because of the multiple ways in which it affects societies and because it follows on and co-exists with other crises, including economic, political, demographic and ecological crises. In this context, the pandemic has presented societies

with an enormous task and states have had to respond with a wide portfolio of policy measures to manage it. In its gendered impact, however, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a unique crisis. Since the 1980s, recurrent economic crises and policy responses to them have had multiple and long-lasting detrimental gendered effects because of worsening the already weaker position of women in society linked to unequal gendered norms, division of labor and access to material and power resources. These negative effects have been analyzed in the Latin American debt crisis, the Asian financial crisis, the global financial crisis and the debt crisis in Europe (Elson 2014). Financial crises, measured across 68 countries, have led to the reduction of women's participation in the formal labor market, in the parliament and in tertiary level education as well as to increased maternal mortality rates (Blanton/Blanton/Peksen 2019).

Crises intensify gender inequalities in social reproduction and production – two structurally interrelated spheres lying at the heart of survival of societies, where pervasive inequalities are generated and renegotiated. The deep-rooted global crisis of social reproduction, which is inherently linked to the contradictions and crises of capitalism, serves as the analytical focus through which we examine the gendered impact of the pandemic in this chapter. To this end, we ask the following three questions: How have different societies handled the COVID-19 crisis, underpinned by the global crisis of social reproduction? Have state policies responded in ways that recognize and address social reproduction needs? What might be the consequences of the way that the COVID-19 pandemic has been managed for gender and women's rights? We approach state responses to the locally experienced, but globally prevalent, COVID-19 crisis through a transnational perspective by analyzing trends and emerging research relevant to developments in select countries of the Global North and the Global South. Although the pandemic and responses to it are not the same across the globe, there is, nevertheless, a global dimension to the structurally upheld and exacerbated gender inequalities across public and private domains, to the capitalist mode of production, and to the pressures imposed on social reproduction. In what follows, we first present our theoretical framework highlighting the global crisis of social reproduction, to then outline the gendered key dimensions of COVID-19, and discuss how states have been responding to the pandemic. The resultant deepening of the global crisis of social reproduction is conceptualized as a central pattern of the contestation of gender and women's rights. Our concluding argument is that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way it has been managed so far, compounds the detrimental effects of crises by narrowing the scope for adequate resourcing

of social reproduction, and, in this vein, represents a contestation of gender and women's rights.

2. Theorizing the global crisis of social reproduction

Drawing on Marxist feminist theorizing of social reproduction as a process integral of capitalist production, we start from the premise of an increasing contradiction between the global accumulation of capital and the conditions of social reproduction (cf. Dalla Costa/James 1972; Vogel 1983; Truong 1996; Elson 1998; Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017; Winders/Smith 2018; Bakker/Gill 2019; Plomien/Schwartz 2020). Social reproduction encompasses the daily and intergenerational work crucial to supporting life by meeting people's daily needs and reproducing the next generations. To a great extent, social reproduction takes place in households by drawing on the skills and resources of their members, particularly women. However, reproduction also combines resources and activities channeled via markets and via the public provision of services and benefits. Together, the combination of unpaid and paid work taking place across the household, the market, and the public sphere comprise social reproduction. In all these domains, social reproductive work is gendered and intersects with other axes of inequality, especially race and ethnicity, migrant and citizen status, as well as class and caste.

Social reproduction forms a nexus with capitalist production, characterized by an inherently necessary and contradictory relationship. The necessary aspect of this nexus concerns the social reproductive activities producing workers in a work-ready state. Production is not possible without reproduction, because workers must themselves be produced as biological and social beings (Nelson 1998). Without reproduction, entire social systems, including production systems, would disintegrate. This necessary task of producing workers and regenerating societies, however, does not follow the imperative of profit-maximization, especially when it is not commodified, and it rests on non-market relations of domestic labor (Vogel 1983). Social reproduction operates on a logic distinct from capitalist production, where goods and services are produced to realize surplus value for capital through exploitation of labor. It includes social practices, shaped by norms and embedded in power relations, which are not oriented towards capitalist accumulation. The specific organization of social reproduction itself shapes markets and the associated gender orders (cf. Bakker/Silvey 2008; Bhattacharya 2017).

Periodically, capitalist accumulation faces economic crises that require adaptations, including through the creation of new markets or market restructuring. The paradigm of growth and continual expansion of capitalism seeks to extract ever more value from labor power by intensifying work and cutting wages. This undermines conditions for social reproduction and highlights the contradictory aspects of the production/reproduction nexus (Vogel 1983; Fraser 2016). These contradictions are shaped by specific modes of both capitalist accumulation and social reproduction and thus vary across scales, locations and jurisdictions. They are “increasingly shaped by the power of capital in a global process of accumulation, that is, in turn, premised on the commodification of labor, society, and nature” (Bakker/Gill 2019: 2), whereby the exploitation of nature and the biosphere accompany the global crisis of social reproduction (Fraser 2016; Bakker/Gill 2019). This constitutes a progressing global crisis of social reproduction, based on asymmetric relationships between nation states, regions and differently impacting people depending on the intersections of their identities and structural locations.

The state, global institutions (such as the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the United Nations), transnational and local civil society movements and organizations, as well as private and individual actors, instigate, shape, and resist these developments. Following feminist materialist state theory, we understand the state as a political arena of contestation and transformation, a social field, embedded in gendered power relations, in which competing and conflicting interests struggle over outcomes (cf. Nowak 2017; Rai 2019; Sauer 2021). The state can and does intervene (Perrons/Plomien 2010) in moderating the contradiction between the productive and reproductive spheres and the process of exploiting and renewing labor power. Such interventions are not pre-determined but depend on context-specific modes of regulation of labor markets, families, gender, biopolitics, social policies, corporate institutions and civil society actors.

Over the last decades, global neoliberal restructuring processes have profoundly transformed the interrelated spheres of production and reproduction, with important differences in the various contexts, but along similarities of trends (Razavi/Hassim 2006). Growing commodification, privatization, informalization and precarization have diminished household capacities for social reproduction. This is especially acute in the Global South where the crisis-driven dynamics of neoliberal restructuring have destroyed the basis of livelihoods, shifting the “previously fluid boundaries between expanded household relations of social reproduction and care, food provisioning and

sustainability” (Bakker/Silvey 2008: 7). The commodification and privatization of assets such as water, land, seeds and increased urbanization lead to severe deprivation of means of subsistence and pose a threat to the existence of the poor, while informal paid and unpaid work arrangements intensify, particularly women’s productive and reproductive work in private households (Sproll 2022). Survival and securing social reproduction in the Global South and North are connected through an unprecedented mobilization of a global labor force, driven by multinational corporations in the context of global value chains. Following colonial power asymmetries, extraction of value from people and nature in the Global South reconstitute their labor markets (through Export Processing Zones, migration and remittances, urbanization) and discipline workers in the Global North (Rai 2019: 45).

The Global North and South have occupied opposing poles of these exploitative structures, which enabled and constrained their respective state capacities and fiscal resources for adequate social infrastructure supporting social reproduction. Neoliberal restructuring has prompted a process of externalization of risks along structural asymmetries between the Global North and South (Saad-Filho/Ayers 2020). At the same time, this is disproportionately affecting those women in the Global South and North who (without public and household support) are unable to fit the mold of an autonomous and market-oriented subject.

Therefore, fighting deregulation and retrenchment on the one hand, and building a nation and a welfare state on the other, implies that women’s “battles are different and yet the same” (Rai 2019: 47). However, neoliberalism destroyed much of the considerable progress that has been made regarding women’s and gender rights in most countries of the world (UN Women 2020b). It fundamentally changed conditions for women’s and gender rights movements. The privatization of risks, which is central for the neoliberal doctrine, restricts capacities of individuals by increasing the burden of unpaid reproductive work. The corresponding change in forms of governance implies an increasing importance of non-state actors. This has a strong impact on political frameworks and power relations, also for feminist networks – Shirin Rai interprets the growing ‘NGOization’ of the women’s movement as a feminist expropriation (2019: 47). Furthermore, austerity policies and the increasing implementation of conditional social policy programs challenge the possibilities of developing and acting on values of solidarity since gendered, classist and racist distinctions are being reinforced and tend to question feminist policies (Dabrowski 2021). Such an argument plays an even bigger role in

postcolonial societies, where different feminisms always strongly intersected with class and race conflicts (Schild 2015: 65; Bargetz/Scheele/Schneider 2021). This, besides from “a shift towards greater social atomization accompanied by ideologies of self-help and self-reliance” (Gill 2008: 255), further complicates the mobilization of broad social movements challenging the global crisis of social reproduction (Littler/Rottenberg 2021).

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic has thus confronted societies all over the world weakened from intensification of complex inequalities and disinvestment in social infrastructure across all the domains underpinning social reproduction – demanding immense state effort to deal with the public health and socioeconomic consequences of this unprecedented crisis. Women do not only carry the main burden of this crisis but are also important actors for handling and buffering the consequences of the pandemic which has intensified the global crisis of social reproduction.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global crisis of social reproduction: deepening the crisis and contesting rights

3.1 The gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Three factors – the spread of the COVID-19 virus, mandated preventative restrictions on movement and social contact, and public policies to support livelihoods and economies – have affected whole populations, but in very unequal ways. Significant differences in vulnerability between different groups of women, stemming from existing global social inequalities (Sproll 2020), vary at the intersections of race and ethnicity, class and caste, migration and citizenship status, age, disability, and lone parenthood (Kesar et al. 2020; Desai/Deshmukh/Pramanik 2021). In countries as diverse as Brazil, India, the UK or the United States, the systems of discrimination and structural racism predating the pandemic resulted in above average infection, illness and death rates among Black and ethnic minorities and people in lower castes and classes (Gomes 2020; Gosh 2020; PHE 2020; CDC 2021). Gender has become a major axis along which the pandemic has made long-standing inequalities even more apparent and recent equality advancements even more fragile. The European Commission has warned that the pandemic is a “major challenge for gender equality” (European Commission 2021: 2) and UN Women (2020a: 1) has expressed concern with disproportionate effects of the

pandemic on women worldwide “across the board”, including loss of livelihoods, sharp increases in poverty, restricted access to sexual and reproductive health, escalation of violence, and increased burden of unpaid work and care.

Women are overrepresented in services and jobs deemed essential, typically including health and other forms of care, cleaning, food provisioning, and retail, the visibility of which has increased. At the same time, gender is a crucial factor disadvantaging women in terms of exposure to contagion through work due to sectoral and occupational segregation, because women are less likely to be able to work remotely than men and their jobs involve close contact with others such as customers, patients or passengers (Lewandowski/Lipowska/Magda 2021; EIGE 2021: 61-64). Despite a large proportion of women working in such essential services, the pandemic has increased women’s job insecurity because of their employment in sectors that have been affected by lockdowns – childcare, secretarial, domestic, non-essential retail, hospitality and tourism work. Globally, and across all regions, women’s relative employment losses were higher than men’s in 2020, although men lost more jobs in absolute numbers (ILO 2021b). This development attests to women’s more tenuous labor market position, whether due to part-time, short-term or informal employment, which makes them especially vulnerable to economic contractions. Being in precarious and informal employment (predominant in most countries of the Global South), women are less protected by social security systems, do not receive adequate unemployment benefits or other ‘post-support labor income’ (ILO 2020 and 2021b: 2; Kesar et al. 2020) and shoulder the gendered responsibility for unpaid work.

Women everywhere undertake the majority of housework and care, performing 76% of the total unpaid care work or 3.2 times more than men (from 1.7 in the Americas to 4.7 in the Arab States) (ILO 2018; Blaskó/Papadimitriou/Manca 2020). The pandemic has increased the burden of housework and its intensity and the need to provide home-based care, with women and girls carrying the greater load of these increased demands (UN Women 2020c). Relatedly, closures of school and childcare facilities in many European and other high- and middle-income countries have prompted more women than men to reduce working hours or leave employment to provide childcare (EC 2021; UN Women 2020c), resulting in the widening of the gender care gap. Furthermore, the ‘stay at home’ orders put many women at risk of experiencing physical and psychological harm (Scheele 2021). All EU countries have reported an increase of domestic violence against women and children (EC

2021: 5), and UN Women has called the global increase in domestic violence a 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women 2020d).

Gendered and intersectional inequalities predating the COVID-19 pandemic were thus intensified by the emergence of the disease and by the ways in which states and international financial institutions responded to contain it. Initially, public policies tended to follow a similar pattern, although they differed in how quick and proactive or chaotic and negligent they have been. Faced with rising infections, an increasing number of people in need of hospitalization, and people dying from the coronavirus, governments focused on stopping the virus from spreading by imposing lockdowns, quarantines and curfews. Such disruptions restricted income-generating activities and many governments created programs to mitigate their economic and social consequences through new financial assistance instruments and by adapting already existing labor market or infrastructural projects. In the countries of the Global South, programs focusing on social assistance, direct aid programs and in-kind benefits were more common. These, partly supported by the World Bank, have ranged from direct cash transfers to food supplies and sanitary provision to prevent the complete loss of livelihood and starvation by the poor (World Bank 2021).

The fiscal stimulus responses by states and international institutions have reached unprecedented levels. At the international level, the IMF, which has historically championed neoliberal and austerity policies, has urged policymakers to address the new emergency "regardless of how much room a country may have in the budget" (IMF 2020: 13). Moderating the economic shock and its effects on businesses and people, the budgetary fiscal support has varied greatly across countries. As of June 2021, preliminary estimates of additional spending and forgone revenue dedicated to addressing the COVID-19 crisis put the United States at the top of the table with 25.4% of GDP, contrasting with Mexico, Myanmar and Niger at the opposite end, each with 0.7% of GDP (IMF 2021b). On average, advanced economies have allocated 17.31% of their GDP, compared with emerging economies at 4.1% and low-income countries at 2% (IMF 2021b). Geopolitical inequalities predating the pandemic have thus diverged further through differences in policy support and vaccine roll-out.

Policies to tackle the COVID-19 crises around the globe are not only vital, but given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women, need to be capable of redressing complex gender inequalities cutting through all aspects of socioeconomic life. Among the 3,112 measures spanning social protection,

labor market, fiscal and economic policy, and tackling violence against women and girls introduced in 219 countries or territories, 1,299 have been classified as gender-sensitive (UNDP/UN Women 2021). The majority of these (832 in 149 countries) focus on addressing violence. Of the globally adopted fiscal and economic measures to assist businesses, only 12% channel resources to women-dominated sectors, while of the social protection and labor market policies, only 11% address unpaid care and 13% prioritize women (UNDP/UN Women 2021). Such limited attention to strengthening women's economic security and resourcing unpaid care work further undermines women's attainment of economic autonomy and maintains their vulnerability to violence.

A longer view towards a recovery has generated comprehensive and ambitious policy developments. For example, the EU's 'largest stimulus package ever' combines the EU's long-term budget with a temporary instrument, *NextGenerationEU*, to stimulate recovery (European Union 2021). Aiming at transforming economies and societies by making "Europe healthier, greener and more digital" (European Union 2021), the Recovery and Resilience plan prioritizes climate action (37% of expenditure) and digital transformation (20% of expenditure) (Tostado 2021). In itself, environmentally sustainable development is an urgent objective and is compatible with the pursuit of gender equality. Yet, the European Commission's proposal has been characterized as jeopardizing gender equality and increasing inequality, because of its gender-blind focus on the digital and green economy and because of its bias towards sectors that promote men's employment over feminized sectors, including care (Klatzer/Rinaldi 2020; Tostado 2021). The EU has thus not fulfilled its own obligation to mainstream gender into all policies at all stages of decision-making and has ignored the calls of the European Women's Lobby for gender budgeting in the short- and long-term financial frameworks (EWL 2020). This gender-blind stance has been corrected retrospectively, now requiring that national governments consider how their plans will contribute to gender equality, following a joint campaign by civil society and members of the European Parliament (Tostado 2021). The development demonstrates the importance of coalitions and democratic processes for bringing gender interests into public policy.

3.2 COVID-19 pandemic as a contestation of gender and women's rights

The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected all the spheres involved in reproducing life. The public sector domain has been put under an enormous strain, reshaping its provision of services and benefits, especially healthcare, childcare and social care. In the market domain, the restrictions and shut-downs of economic activities have rippled through formal and informal wage labor, directly impacting labor market participation and income. Finally, the domestic domain has experienced asymmetric outcomes. For many households, an increase of income poverty has come with an increase of time poverty, while others were able to continue drawing on their salaries and increase savings. Overall, these processes have further strained the conditions for social reproduction across the globe, although in a more dramatic way in many countries of the Global South. The influence of crises, however, is decisive not just in their immediate disruptions of daily socioeconomic activities, but because of a substantial reconfiguration of the institutions that make up the gendered political economy of a given context in the long term. Institutional reconfigurations and transfers of power and resources affect the state's willingness and capacity to resource social reproduction through provisioning of public goods and services, regulating markets, and supporting households.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to meaningful changes in both the willingness and capacity of states to resource social reproduction. In terms of governance, women are grossly underrepresented in COVID-19 decision-making bodies, as more than 85% of them (across 87 countries) are comprised mainly of men (van Daalen et al. 2020). The state of emergency has also been used as a justification to bypass transparency and weaken democracy. Governments resorted to exceptional powers to contain the pandemic, but in many cases, they included actions unrelated to crisis management. This was the case also in Europe – rated the second most democratic region in the world (Russack 2021). How governments collect and spend money is a major concern of democratic politics. Although transparency of state spending has been ensured in many countries from the start, external oversight has also come from civil society, the media and independent watchdog institutions tackling corruption (IMF 2021a). Public procurement regulations were violated in countries as diverse as Kenya, South Africa (IMF 2021a) and the UK, where the Good Law Project (2021) has revealed secret government channels giving priority access

to party donors and ministers' friends. Such funds have neither met the suddenly escalated healthcare and other needs, nor have they strengthened the future capacity of the healthcare system directly or indirectly. In fact, they may have limited the fiscal space for alternative, socially beneficial use and thus the prospects for reducing gender inequalities and strengthening social reproduction.

Indeed, state capacity to adequately resource social reproduction remains the big question surrounding this pandemic, partly because it is still underway. This is a fiscal and a political question relevant to redistribution. Many countries have authorized large-scale fiscal packages in response to the COVID-19 crisis, including extraordinary spending for care (IMF 2021a; UN-ECE 2021). Argentina and the United States, for example, have integrated investments in health and childcare services in their recovery plans (ILO 2021a). However, public spending does not translate into social infrastructure investment or social reproduction resourcing by default (as in the case of the EU recovery plan discussed above) and in ways that ensure optimal provisioning rather than profit-oriented delivery. Public provision and investment into care and health care is more effective, efficient and equitable than market provision (Brennan et al 2012; Tynkkynen/Vrangbæk 2018; Assa/Calderon 2020). In addition to providing comparatively better care, the public sector is also a source of economic security for women in its capacity to provide decent work for women and promote workplace gender equality (Rubery 2013). Nevertheless, the pandemic has accelerated the trend of shifting public resources into the private sector. Future resourcing has also been jeopardized when public funds have been used in ways that do not ameliorate suddenly exacerbated needs but serve to protect and pursue vested interests. This has also been the case in the 2008 global financial crisis, when despite the global financial institutions (the World Bank and the IMF) stressing the need to secure safety nets for the vulnerable and protect both the economic and the social infrastructure, these have been suspected of justifying public support to private provision (Fine/Bayliss/Van Waeyenberge 2011). The vast expansion of state budgets and mounting public sector debt represents a further commodification and marketization instead of an alternative development model alleviating the global crisis of social reproduction. The numerous attempts at changing this agenda have yet to be taken seriously in the mainstream debates (cf. Foundational Economy Collective 2020).

However, as all fields of struggle, the increasing crisis of social reproduction is met with resistance. A prominent, if rare, example is the first feminist

economic recovery plan from the *Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women* (2020). This official US state agency document emphasizes the need to provide universal free childcare and long-term care for the elderly, paid family and sick leaves, improve working conditions in education and nursing, including pay, and enhance maternal health. Such initiatives can contribute towards re-sourcing all the domains involved in social reproduction. At the sub-national level, there are numerous examples of community responses to the pandemic in the North and South, guided by principles of justice and solidarity, and ranging from an emphasis on coping, through claiming rights and duties, to redressing multiple social needs stemming from inequality (Loewenson et al. 2021). Such community solidarities shape the relationship between citizens and the state and require support from the public and private sectors instead of extracting from communities to the point of social deficits (Loewenson et al. 2021) and depletion (Rai/Hoskyns/Thomas 2014). To date, the balance of the struggle has shifted further away from a scenario in which state power is used for redistributive and egalitarian projects and policies in order to attain gender social justice.

4. Conclusion: exacerbating and contesting gender and women's rights

As we have shown, the global COVID-19 pandemic has struck societies with already weakened, if varied, social infrastructure. The way it has been managed has tended to roll back, rather than reinforce, the many gender equality gains made over recent years. Focusing on social reproduction has allowed us to connect three interrelated spheres, the public sector, the market, and the household, and draw out their global implications for women's and gender rights. Two years since the beginning of the pandemic, many studies document that women's and gender rights around the world have been curtailed at the micro and the macroeconomic levels. Women's employment situation has become worse, women had to assume most of the increased household and care work, and they have experienced higher levels of violence. These inequalities were largely ignored when the majority of individual states and supra-national organizations, such as the EU, have developed their recovery strategies. Thus, the pandemic has brought old inequalities to light and exacerbated them, while states have not responded adequately.

In addition, we make three other points. *First*, in revealing varied levels of impact, the pandemic-triggered crisis underscores the inherent flaw in capitalism. The crisis of social reproduction already existed before the pandemic, and this contributed to the fact that the consequences of the pandemic could not be better absorbed. *Second*, the COVID-19 crisis points to a democratic deficit when it comes to dealing with its consequences. Women are under-represented in decision-making, and gender inequalities are not taken into account in the development of policies or financial programs – neither in the rich democracies of the Global North, nor in the poorer countries of the Global South. *Third*, the pandemic has once again limited the possibilities for alternative societal development. Solidarity projects, neighborhood help and the provision of basic necessities from below and alternative programs have been developed but have been limited by curfews, lockdowns, financial constraints and opposing public discourses. At the same time, states have further consolidated the logic of capitalism. To this end, fiscal stimulus and financial aid were provided at astounding levels. This has deepened the inherent contradictions between production and social reproduction and neither led to promoting gender equality at the micro-level, nor to a macro-level structural change compatible with feminist principles.

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