

GENDER ASPECTS OF SECURITY RISKS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. The subject of the paper is focused on the facts that indicate that neither the COVID-19 virus, nor the measures against it has an equal impact on women and men. While analyzing the pandemic in the language of security, the focus must be on the fight against the virus from a human security-oriented point of view viewed through gender lenses. For example: women predominate in occupations where contact is inevitable, which increases the risk of infection, also there is a worrying increase in domestic and other forms of gender-based violence. In situations of stress and isolation at home while the availability of support services for victims of violence is reduced, women and children are exposed to increased mental, physical and sexual violence. The aim of this paper is to analyze the gender aspects of security risks, the importance of cooperation between the rule of law authorities and other actors providing protection services in order to reduce possible challenges, but also the need for violence prevention in every respect.

Keywords: pandemic, gender-based inequalities, jobs challenges, gender-based violence, human-oriented security, prevention

“The fight against coronavirus is gender marked.” (Ženske studije i istraživanja, 2020)

INTRODUCTION

The virus Covid -19 is one of the greatest natural disasters to ever hit the entire planet. A pandemic permeates all dimensions of life: health, political, social, economic, gender, security; the pandemic has shaken all of humanity, with unforeseeable consequences and challenges (Women in Black, 2020, May 20). We are now living in “risk society” as defined by Ulrich Beck (Beck, 2011), in the situation he described as loss of control, ignorance and uncertainty of the modern age. In the current situation,

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the term coined by him as “risk society” may be accompanied by the second term, “other modernity” when national perspectives, as predicted by him, are overthrown with a cosmopolitanism that recognizes the interconnectedness of the modern world. Namely, the pandemic has caused a global crisis and its distorting effects will last for years (European Feminist Working Group, 2020, May 5). The global context of growing inequality is analyzed because neither the infection nor the measures against it affect women and men equally.

We are all already well aware that this virus is anything but democratic and that we are not equal before it, meaning that some are again more equal than others. Pandemic does not affect equally women and men, the rich and the poor, the old and the young, or people of colour and white people. Instead, this pandemic magnifies all existing inequalities and severely impacts those who are already vulnerable and disadvantaged. People who live and work at society’s margins are exposed to the highest risk of infection and hardship, and are further stigmatized as a result. And in the near future, it is obvious that all social inequalities will deepen even more and that the powerful will come out of all this even more powerful and with even greater control in their hands. What is certain is that now, in a situation of general confusion and uncertainty, it is difficult to imagine any near future (Golubović Trebješanin, 2020, July 14).

We are also aware that a pandemic carries with it security risks and that they are also not the same for everyone, because different categories of people face different risks, and also risks of different intensity. Death rates are higher in low and middle-income countries (World Health Organization for European Region, 2020, May). The economic consequences are already largely visible. As the virus did not spare the world’s strongest economies, it means that not only the semi-periphery and periphery of the world capitalist system will suffer from the consequences of the pandemic, but its centre will also be solidly affected. The political consequences could be very severe. This primarily refers to the tendency to stifle democratic freedoms and institutions, which in some parts of the world and before the crisis peak did not stand quite well. Another political consequence that is closely related to the concentration of power in the hands of individuals during the peak of the crisis is an adequate response to the crisis and resistance to these tendencies. Therefore, the basic problems that lead us to be concerned and which the specter of corona virus has exposed to the end, could be divided into four basic groups: economic, political, cultural and socio-psychological (Drobnjak, 2020, May 13).

This division lacks a clearly separately defined gender aspect of the challenges, although in all four mentioned there could be identified gender as well. The pandemic faces us globally, regionally but also nationally, locally with all four mentioned, added by gender component. The problem is that if the gender elements of all aspects of the pandemic are not perceived and analyzed now, it is unlikely that the responses to today’s crisis will be gender-sensitive. And when achieving gender equality is not seen as essential to the effective functioning of society, it is a sign that democracy is failing.

Gender-coloured pandemic consequences are numerous but can be grouped in two basic categories of security character, gender specificities in socio-economic relations (mostly erosion of gender equality) and intensified gender-based violence, particularly the domestic violence. Both aspects are also much interconnected, conditioning and intensifying each other. The increase in gender-based violence threatens the economic situation of women, while the deterioration of their socio-economic position puts them in a situation of intensified risk of violence. The public health measures taken in response to the coronavirus pandemic, particularly lockdowns and in-place orders, have further highlighted the particular challenges women face in Serbia as well as in developed and developing countries alike, from domestic violence to gender imbalances in child care responsibilities (World Politics Review, 2020, July 13). The pandemic revealed how serious this human rights violation is and how still this



fragmentary, but illustrative fact is that only in the first week of the pandemic measures in Serbia, 31% of women who experienced violence lost their jobs, in the second week 55%, and in the fourth week, 92% were left without any income, according to the research by the “Athens” NGO (Dukić, 2020).³

GENDERED SOCIOECONOMIC RELATIONS

Any crisis situation is most likely to affect women, stated the Regional Association of Women Entrepreneurs Businesswomen, based on their members’ previous experiences. Every crisis affects women like a big wave that throws them back for decades. Everything that had been won in terms of gender equality disappeared the moment the crisis brought women back home and brought them double working hours and all obligations. And the longer-term impact of the crisis will continue to exacerbate and re-produce gendered inequalities across the globe.

The Corona virus crisis has hit all Europeans hard. But its economic impact is hitting women harder than men. While at the beginning of the crisis women’s work in hospitals, childcare and supermarkets was appreciated with applause on the balconies and public declarations, they are still dramatically underpaid. Women are now losing their jobs at a much faster rate than men. Many of them work in “client-facing sectors” - tourism, events, hotels, restaurants, retail trade, care taking, different forms of therapy and many others which have been particularly affected by the crisis.

The burden of the corona epidemic virus and the measures taken in the state of emergency have been carried out to a much greater extent by women than men. They make up the majority in the sectors that were “at the forefront”: health, trade, hygiene, but at the same time in most cases they were burdened with housework, unpaid work, one in which they have been present for decades more than men and now with additional responsibilities for caring for family members, especially the elderly, children and their school obligations. In 70% of the cases these jobs are performed by women (Stevanović, 2020, May 15). Health and care sectors all over Europe are highly feminized. Women and those who take care of the elderly, children, and sick people in hospitals via the formal care sector—who also often occupy the lowest-paid roles in these sectors—have not stopped their duties. During the pandemic, their shifts and tasks have redoubled and they are under constant risk of infection.

Unpaid domestic work usually done by women becomes more demanding under such difficult conditions. As services are suspended and formal care responsibilities are pushed back to be done at home, this creates the danger of societies going back decades with regard to the gendered division of labour. Recognize that care and reproductive work are fundamental to producing social wealth, so value this work accordingly, both in social and monetary terms. Organizations representing women, LGBTIQ+ persons, and other minorities in particular have found their activities restricted during this time.

The UN Women stress that (UN Women, 2020, July 2) the current Covid-19 pandemic is further stressing and devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls⁴ that could reverse limited progress toward gender equality over the last 25 years (UNDP Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2021).⁵ Over 128 women’s organizations and activists from 17 countries in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia called on governments and development partners to engage in dialogue with

3 “Women’s social entrepreneurship is the right recipe for overcoming the consequences of this, but also all other crises.”

4 Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

5 Putting Women at the Forefront of Covid-19 Response in Europe and Central Asia.



civil society to bring women's needs to the decision making places in response to the Covid-19 crisis, such as during the recovery from the ensuing crisis. They point out the great connection and key role that individual and personal security, as well as human rights play in the broad picture called international security (The UN Women, 2020).

Central and East European Network for Gender Issues⁶ warned that above all this pandemic is a time for the progressive left social-democratic forces to recoup and revisit where they fell short in the protection of equitable socio-political systems, social justice and solidarity. They should assume the lead in launching ambitious and bold recovery plans and guide the strategic choices we make for the "new" post-Corona order at all levels. How to stimulate the economy and finance the recovery? How to rehabilitate the public health sector, how to deal with unemployment and poverty, how to use this unfortunate situation to make our countries and systems more socially sensitive, gender-sensitive, fair and just?

Those all are the questions which are to be responded as soon as possible. The pandemic has caused a global crisis and its distorting effects will last for years. While the fall out may appear to threaten the progress of feminism, it also offers an opportunity. Therefore, it is extremely important that the measures introduced now take into account the gender impact and this perspective must be used to find appropriate solutions to the current situation. Aiming at this, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Organized the European Feminist Working Group in May 2020, issued a feminist manifesto for confronting the corona crisis in Europe (Information NEWS, 2020, May 5).⁷ They stressed the need to defend the achievements of progressive movements against authoritarianism, and to resist the backlash against feminism and support struggles for dignity and social justice.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

World Society of Victimology issued the statement of victimological impact and consequences of Covid-19⁸ warning that we are confronted individually and collectively with an unprecedented health, humanitarian and socio-economic crisis. The WSV is aware of rising patterns of victimization including instances of abuse of power within the context of especially marginalized communities and vulnerable groups and individuals. Since the restrictions on mobility were imposed all over Europe, intimate, sexual and reproductive violence has been increasing, affecting women and children in their homes, as well as LGBTIQ+ persons living in homophobic households.

Since the lockout measures of pandemic began, the police, women's shelters and NGOs have reported an increase in domestic violence, especially violence against women. People go out much less, many have lost their jobs, housing conditions are aggravated, multi-member, multi-generational families are cramped in small flats, there is a general feeling of frustration, insecurity, increased anxiety, which all leads to conflicts in relationships between partners and other relationships. Women, children, old parents are beaten.

The increase in violence against women should be given the most attention because women are more exposed to the risk of domestic violence. All regional and domestic women's organizations which were

6 Newsletter, COVID-19 APPLYING THE GENDER LENS 2st Quarter 2020.

7 This Feminist Manifesto was written by members of the European women's working groups Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung. We live and work throughout Europe, in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Spain, the United Kingdom and Ukraine.

8 Domestic violence concerns during lockdown. 2020, March 30th.



consulted were seriously concerned because social distance and limited movement raised an additional risk of domestic violence. Already at the very beginning of this great health crisis in the world, it was shown that pandemics, i.e. the taken measures, differently affect women and men. Domestic violence against women increases in times of crisis: women spend longer periods of time with violent partners at homes, so they are more exposed to violence. The home is not always a safe place for women, who are particularly at risk during restraint measures, as domestic abusers cannot be avoided and it is difficult, if not impossible, to call the police, the SOS phone, or anybody, to report the violence and ask for assistance due to the proximity of the abuser (UN Women, 2020). In short, the current situation is especially dangerous for women and children who share their home with a violent perpetrator (European Feminist Working Group, 2020). When the crisis is over, it will be even harder for them to leave the bully, due to the financial insecurity that will follow. In this case, relatives and neighbours can play a big role, they can report violence if they suspect that women are exposed to violence, especially if the woman is not able to call for help (FemPlatz, 2020, 3-4). Stressful situations, such as those being experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and economic instability, exacerbate the risk. Moreover, the current distancing measures in place in many countries make it harder for women and children to reach out to family, friends and health workers who could otherwise provide support and protection.

When it comes to security risks caused by gender-based violence, it should certainly be noted that many international organization, both governmental (non-territorial subjects of international law, as a permanent institutional form of cooperation between member states in achieving common goals)⁹ and nongovernmental (Danilović, 2019, 98),¹⁰ have reacted at the international level. It is important to mention this, because all international organizations usually have somewhat slow flows of bureaucratic, hierarchically strictly defined decision-making procedures. As a result of slow procedures, expressing a public stand, not to mention condemnations or warnings, usually takes a long time. But when it came to risks of gender-based violence, clear warnings came very quickly, already at the beginning of pandemic measures, really at the right time, and moreover from the highest positions. We emphasize the reaction of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which has been the source of reactions to gender-based violence since the beginning of April 2020.

The Organization for European Security and Cooperation was the first to respond concretely by press releases and especially by appeals to the governments of the member states (OSCE, 2020, April 2). Protection from domestic violence urgently needed for women and children under stay-at-home orders, a statement issued by the OSCE officials at the Vienna/ Copenhagen/ Warsaw meeting (OSCE, 2020, April 6). A warning was issued about the increase of gender-based violence, the competent government bodies were called upon to react, the media to inform about the possibilities of protection, as well as non-governmental organizations to stay available to provide assistance to those with experience of gender-based violence. "State of emergency might cause a rise in the number of domestic violence cases. We call upon all competent institutions to treat the calls related to domestic violence as their highest priority, and to take all measures to protect the victims. In these hard times, the media needs to intensify reporting about the risks of domestic violence, and highlight existing support services so that victims can learn where they can turn for help." "It is important for civil society organizations

9 It is necessary to notice that the founding act of international governmental organizations is a multilateral treaty and by it the member states transfer part of their sovereign powers to the international organization. At the same time, the founding agreement has the characteristics of a constitutional act of the organization and it prescribes, among other things: the goals of establishment, competencies of the organization, organization and rights and obligations of bodies, conditions for acquiring and losing membership, method of financing.

10 International non-governmental organizations are an institutional form of international cooperation whose subjects are not states, and the founders are individuals, groups, associations or institutions from different countries in various fields of human activity, with the aim of achieving common interests.



to remain available to potential victims, and for state institutions, including police and centres for social work, to work to reduce the risks of domestic violence by conducting information campaigns and keeping services open during the crisis.” “Women and children, but also other family members, are subjected to mental, physical and sexual violence. In situations of stress and home isolation, this can further escalate. The Government has increased the availability of services for victims around the country”, said the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Clemens Koja.

Persistent gender inequality might worsen due to the impact of the pandemic caused by the corona virus if not properly addressed from the beginning. The participants emphasized the importance of collaboration between rule of law authorities and protection service providers, as well as the need to secure increased funding and support for local organizations providing support to victims of gender-based violence. Noting a troubling rise in domestic violence in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and self-isolation guidelines in many countries, the OSCE leaders called today for measures to be taken by governments to protect women and children. Home is not always a safe haven, women and children cannot live free of violence in times of families finding themselves in self-isolation. “Some governments are already taking measures to counter domestic violence during the lockdown, which we hope can serve as best practices for others”, (OSCE Secretariat, 2020, April 8).

The Council of Europe (FoNet, 2020, April 20), The Committee of the Council of Europe adopted the Declaration on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention during the corona virus pandemic. The importance of respecting all its standards and recommendations in activities during the corona virus pandemic has been emphasized. It has been observed that violence against women and domestic violence tend to increase in times of crisis and that new data show an alarming increase in the number of reported cases of certain types of such violence. The introduction of isolation measures has increased, as statistics from a large number of countries show, as well as the number of cases of domestic violence. Victims now have even fewer ways to turn to someone for help. The approach of those states that seek innovative ways to adapt their institutional responses to violence is welcomed. The approach to such violence is victim-centered and based on human rights.

The World Health Organization for Europe (WHO Europe Statement on Interpersonal violence during Covid-19) Copenhagen, Denmark (Kluge, 2020, May 7).¹¹ Violence remains preventable, not inevitable! Member States are reporting up to a 60% increase in emergency calls by women subjected to violence by their intimate partners in April this year, compared to last. Online enquiries to violence prevention support hotlines have increased up to 5 times.

The WHO Europe president sent 3 main messages: 1) to governments and local authorities: to make sure services to address violence are available and resourced, and expand hotlines and online services; 2) to communities and the public: stay in touch, contact and support your neighbors, acquaintances, families and friends. If you see something, say something; 3) to those experiencing violence: violence against you is never your fault. It is never your fault. Your home should be a secure place. Get in touch -safely- with family, friends, shelters or community groups that have your safety and security at heart.

The European Institute for Gender Equality - EIGE. Rapid action taken by several countries shows the understanding that violence at home is a problem which crises can exacerbate. The most wide-ranging measures to prevent domestic violence are laid out in the Istanbul Convention, which has been signed by all EU Member States and ratified by 21. Following this guidance remains the best way to protect women – in crisis times and beyond. Creativity and adaptability are key. Over the last few months, governments, support services and private companies have worked together to create digital tools that facilitate reporting and provide hotel rooms for those fleeing violence. Pharmacists and delivery per-

11 Statement to the press by Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe.



sonnel have been trained to assist victims. What did we get right and what will we need to do better to protect women from violence? EIGE will provide answers in a special study on Covid-19 and violence against women to be published later this year (EIGE, 2020, June 9).

FIFA, WHO and the European Commission have joined forces to launch the #SafeHome campaign to support women and children at risk of domestic violence. The campaign is a joint response from the three institutions to the recent spikes in reports of domestic violence as stay-at-home measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have put women and children experiencing abuse at greater risk. “Together with the World Health Organization and the European Commission, we are asking the football community to raise awareness to this intolerable situation that threatens particularly women and children in their own home, a place where they should feel happy, safe and secure,” said FIFA President Gianni Infantino. “We cannot stay silent on this issue that negatively affects so many people. Violence has no place in homes, just as it has no place in sports. Football has the power to relay important social messages, and through the #SafeHome campaign we want to ensure that those people experiencing violence have access to the necessary support services they need (FIFA, European Commission and World Health Organization, 2020, May 26).”¹²

CONCLUSION

The pandemic crisis is turning into an enormous crisis for women’s income, life-long earnings, pensions, overall participation and power in society. Due to this extra amount of extra work at home, women hardly have time to participate in the public debate anymore. Women have less time than ever to invest in their careers - while rising unemployment leaves companies ample choice in hiring among men. This will make women’s advancement to the higher echelons of decision-making even more difficult.

Now is the time to turn this moment into an opportunity for the advancement of gender equality. The crisis, which is both health and economic, political and human rights, offers a chance to think about the type of world we want to live in, in which people and solidarity would be priorities.

One of the ways towards the wishful gender-equal changes is offered by the campaign led by the members of the greens of European Parliament “the #halfofit”. It comprises the demand to half of the EU Corona funds will be dedicated for women. They urge the European Commission and the European Council to make sure that at least half of the volume of the Recovery and Resilience Instrument is spent on women’s jobs and the advancement of women’s rights as well as equality between women and men. It is the European institutions task to ensure the implementation of Art. 23 of the European Chart of Fundamental Rights: “Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and salaries.”



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