

COVID-19 and the Exacerbation of Gender Inequality: How the Pandemic Disproportionately Affected Women around the World

Jennifer Dikler Visiting Researcher, KIEP Visiting Scholars Program (jenniferdikler@gmail.com)

I. Introduction

The gender wage gap, or the idea that women have historically and consistently earned less than men, has been widely studied and accepted over the past few decades. This gender wage gap exists globally and serves as a powerful indicator of the gender inequality experienced by women. As of 2019, according to data amassed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), South Korea's gender wage gap among full-time employees is the largest among the countries that make up the OECD, coming in at 32.5%. Japan was second at 32.5%, followed by Mexico, the United States, and Canada at 18.8%, 18.5%, and 17.6%, respectively. Notably, in countries with higher levels of racial diversity, the gender wage gap is usually significantly exacerbated for women of color. Despite narrowing in recent years, the gender wage gap is extremely stubborn, and very much existent, as is the general

global gender inequality that it reflects.

In the past 18 months, the world's population and the global economy have been significantly upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus has affected virtually every country in the world, especially nations with fewer resources to help combat its spread. Studies are also beginning to confirm that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate economic effect on women in many countries, amplifying the gender inequality that persisted in the global economy even prior to the pandemic. For example, as outlined in a study published by McKinsey in July 2020, "Women make up 39 percent of global employment but account for 54 percent of overall [COVID-19- related] job losses" (Madgavkar et al. 2020). However, the widening of the gender gap during the pandemic has been far from universal, with some countries seeing the opposite results.

This brief seeks to provide an initial exploration, specifically highlighting how variably the pandemic has affected the United States, South Korea, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, the Honduras, Australia, the United Kingdom and Germany. When it comes to global gender equality, where progress is so essential and yet so slow, it is extremely important to explore the economic setbacks created by the pandemic. If not addressed properly, these setbacks might not only slow the fight toward gender equality, but could also slow down the global economy.

II. Women, Pandemics, and Gender Inequality: An Overview

Pandemic aside, the gender wage gap is usually a result of differences in the industries and jobs worked by the genders, differences in years of experience and amount of hours worked, and, lastly, of gender-based discrimination. First, gender norms and expectations encourage the funneling of women into what are stereotypically considered “women’s jobs,” which have historically offered lower pay and fewer benefits than “men’s jobs.” Once women are able to obtain jobs, they tend to work fewer hours in a day to accommodate for the unpaid care and domestic labor that society expects of them; if not, they might get pushed out altogether. As a result, they also tend to have fewer years of experience than men (Bleiweis 2020). These factors are all exacerbated by general gender discrimination,

which (although explicitly illegal in most countries) remains a common occurrence, particularly for women of color (Frye 2019).

When examining the effects that COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on gender equality, it is critical to look back at past crises and their gendered long-term effects. For example, researchers found that during the Ebola and Zika outbreaks, women faced multiple burdens of care and were subject to structural risks stemming from gender inequality (Davies and Bennett 2016). Past health crises, such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Zika, have also revealed that overwhelmed healthcare systems further increase the care burden carried by women who stay at home (Seck et al. 2021; Azcona, Bhatt and Kapto 2020).

The long-term gendered effects of the 2008 financial crisis offer another lens to examine the potential effects of COVID-19; though not a pandemic, it, too, had socioeconomic effects. In industrialized countries, where the most affected sectors largely overrepresented men, men actually suffered worse net job loss (Seck et al. 2021). In developing and transitioning countries, on the other hand, effects were more mixed, with women in Thailand experiencing worse job loss than men, and women and men in rural China experiencing relatively equal job loss (UN Women 2014; Zhi et al. 2013).

Overall, data on how past crises have affected the gender wage gap is sparse, possibly

due to the regional nature of some past epidemics and the lack of data surrounding others. Unlike past outbreaks, COVID-19 offers the possibility of exploring an outbreak's effects on gender equality on a global level, specifically through examining the pandemic's effects on the gender wage gap.

III. COVID-19's Effects on Global Gender Inequality

In line with what theory suggests, COVID-19 has heightened the gender inequalities that have always existed even further. According to McKinsey, leading up to the pandemic, industries, and jobs continued to be significantly gender-specific. Subsequently, as a result of COVID-19, jobs held by women were 19% more at risk than jobs held by men because “women are disproportionately represented in sectors negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis” (Madgavkar et al. 2020). Some examples of these sectors globally include accommodations and food service, where women have 54% of the global jobs (compared to 39%, the share of women globally employed), and retail & wholesale trade, where women hold 43% of jobs. Notably, however, these global effects are not consistent within all countries.

Industry and job concentration aside, COVID-19 has also increased gender inequality by increasing the demands of unpaid care, an area in which women perform an average of 75% of the world's total work, including childcare, elderly care, cooking, and

cleaning (Madgavkar et al. 2020). By increasing, on average, the time that women spend on unpaid care, the pandemic has further increased the rate at which women drop out of the workforce. In addition, McKinsey also notes that COVID-19 disproportionately affected women's entrepreneurship, which in turn accounts for a significant share of the women's labor force participation in developing economies. As a result, according to McKinsey, “women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to [the pandemic] than men's jobs” as of July 2020 (Madgavkar et al. 2020).

IV. Case Studies: COVID-19's Effects on Local Gender Inequality

All the more fascinating is how the effects of the pandemic panned out for women in various countries around the world. In examining nations that vary in geography, income level, development level, incidence of COVID-19 infections, and strictness of lockdowns, it is unclear that women suffered economically more than men universally, though there are certainly places where such was and is the case. A look at the United States and South Korea, countries in Central America, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany, against a background of cross-country studies, paints a broad picture of COVID-19's widespread effects on gender inequality and highlights some of the nuances faced by women in various nations.

▪ Overall

According to the 2021 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, “[t]he COVID-19 pandemic has altered the lives of men and women, introducing new challenges for progress towards gender parity in employment and a longer double-shift of paid and unpaid work”. The report describes a widened global gender wage gap, but observes differences among countries of various economic and political backgrounds.

As observed by a 2021 six-country survey titled “Gender inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic: Income, expenditure, savings, and job loss,” as a result of the pandemic, women were 24% more likely to permanently lose their job than men and expect their labor income to fall by 50% more than men (Dang and Nguyen 2021). In line with the World Economic Forum and individual studies, scholars conducting the survey also observed wide heterogeneity when it came to all of these effects, discussed in further detail below.

The following individual country analyses are based off data from the World Bank and Ritchie (2021).

▪ United States

As of November 29, 2021, the United States, which has a population of 329.5 million people and an average GDP per capita of \$58,510.2, has had 48.44 million COVID-19 cases and 778,601 deaths.

In the United States, with the onset of the pandemic, scholars found that women were significantly more likely than men to either (1) transition to working from home, (2) experience a substantial reduction in weekly working hours of at least 10 hours, or (3) become unemployed between January and June 2020 (Reichelt, Makovi and Sargsyan 2021). These effects were largely a result of women’s employment status at the onset of the pandemic, i.e., they were more likely to be working part-time as opposed to full-time as of January 2020 (Reichelt, Makovi and Sargsyan 2021).

The effects of COVID-19 on the gender wage gap, however, have not been without its nuances. Some scholars have argued that in the United States, COVID-19 actually strengthened two counteracting forces that may promote gender equality as the world recovers from the pandemic. First, these scholars state that more flexible work arrangements may become the new standard in the United States following a return to “normalcy,” and second, they point to an increased likelihood of fathers assuming additional child care responsibilities even after the pandemic recedes (Kashen, Glynn and Novello 2020).

▪ South Korea

As of November 29, 2021, South Korea, which has a population of 51.8 million people and an average GDP per capita of \$31,264.9, has had 447,230 COVID-19 cases and 3,624 deaths.

In South Korea, scholars have found “no statistically significant differences in economic losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic between men and women,” and suggest that this may be due to the country’s generally low COVID-19 infection rates throughout the pandemic (Dang and Nguyen 2021).

In another paper, unique in that it observed COVID-19 employment losses even prior to the implementation of lockdowns, scholars found that the industries hit hardest by COVID-19 had a larger presence of women than men. However, scholars also found that the “within-industry effect was such that men were more exposed to a causal drop in employment from local outbreaks” (Aum, Lee and Shin 2021). In other words, though women were more likely to be in an industry negatively affected by COVID-19, men were actually more likely to lose their jobs.

▪ Central America

As of November 29, 2021, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, which have a combined population of 39.9 million people and an average GDP per capita of \$2,988.4, have had 1,132,435 COVID-19 cases and 30,321 deaths.

Scholars in Central America have found that gender segregation in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, as well as the uneven distribution of the effects of the pandemic on various sectors, have led to gendered economic effects of COVID-19 in these countries. Specifically, employment losses

were significantly higher for women (Webster, Khorana and Pastore. 2021).

▪ Australia

As of November 29, 2021, Australia, which has a population of 25.7 million people and an average GDP per capita of \$58,020.5, has had 210,238 COVID-19 cases and 2,006 deaths.

Scholars examining the effects of COVID-19 on the gender wage gap in Australia found mixed results. Though women took on the greater burden of unpaid work that arose as a result of the country’s lockdown during the pandemic, men adopted more childcare in relative terms (Craig and Churchill 2021). As a result, the gender gap in Australia actually narrowed during the pandemic.

▪ United Kingdom

As of November 29, 2021, the United Kingdom, which has a population of 67.2 million people and an average GDP per capita of \$41,811.4, has had 10.25 million COVID-19 cases and 145,253 deaths.

In the United Kingdom, similarly to Australia, scholars found that though both before and during the pandemic, women were largely responsible for childcare tasks, this proportion has slightly declined in relative terms with the onset of the pandemic (Chung et al. 2021). As such, specifically in terms of childcare, COVID-19 has contributed to the reduction of gender inequality in the United Kingdom.

▪ Germany

As of November 29, 2021, Germany, which has a population of 83.2 million people and an average GDP per capita of \$41,259.2 has had 5.85 million COVID-19 cases and 101,350 deaths.

Though relatively similar to the United Kingdom in terms of size, geographic location, and COVID-19 cases, scholars have found the opposite effects of the pandemic on the gender gap in Germany. Specifically, scholars found small increases in “the prevalence of fathers doing more than mothers or in splitting these tasks 50:50” (Jessen et al. 2021). Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of women who, despite having a partner, entirely or almost entirely shoulder the burden of care work (Jessen et al. 2021).

V. Conclusion and Future of Gender Inequality in a Post-Pandemic World

Though studies have suggested that the pandemic has worsened global gender inequality, it has also had far more disparate effects among various countries individually. A small sampling of national and local studies reveals that COVID-19 has had the ability to both narrow and widen the gender gap in nations with various income levels, geography, and prevalence levels of COVID-19. Even in the United Kingdom and Germany, for example, which are geographically proximate and

share comparable populations and GDP per capita, the pandemic has had opposite effects on the gender gap, as examined through unpaid work and childcare. As such, there does not seem to be a clear trend of how COVID-19 has affected the gender wage gap, and how it will continue to do so in the future.

It should be noted that sparse data and the relative recent onset of the pandemic have meant that researchers have had to use different methodologies and metrics to measure effects on the gender gap in various countries. It is also important to note that the pandemic is not over yet, with the Omicron variant of COVID-19 having been discovered in November 2021. As a result, the effects of the pandemic in general and, specifically, on the gender gap continue to play out. It will be critical to monitor these effects through the collection of data, so that future research, through a cross-country approach, can develop a better sense of not only how the pandemic has hurt the gender wage gap, but how it can have the power to help.

Just as the pandemic has expressed itself differently in all corners of the world and has exacerbated the gender wage gap at various levels, policy options for governments as we move toward a post-pandemic world will also differ. These will largely depend on countries’ respective economic development levels, government and healthcare systems, and other societal and cultural norms. Potential solutions to address pandemic-perpetuated gender inequality will include a mixture of

providing immediate relief in the form of government subsidies to the unemployed (especially in industries that have been most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic), establishing universal childcare policies, and mandating comprehensive employment policies

that take into account families' needs for caregiving. The implementation of these policies will be crucial to the mitigation of the negative effects caused by COVID-19 to women around the world, and its exacerbating effects on extant gender inequality. **KIEP**

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