



International  
Labour  
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## Global challenges – Global solutions: COVID-19 and the Employment Policy Response

Q&A for:

### Build back better means build back fairer: Bringing gender equality to the core of employment recovery

#### Introduction by host:

The COVID 19 crisis has laid bare the entrenched gender inequalities that, compounded with other inequalities, plague labour markets. As the latest [ILO Monitor](#) has shown, the employment of women is relatively at greater risk than that of men, due to their overrepresentation in the service sectors severely impacted by the crisis.

In presenting the latest ILO monitor report, ILO Director-General Guy Ryder had this to say about the impact of the pandemic on women:

*We have in previous monitors focused on groups that have been very badly affected more than average by the pandemic, so we have given you an analysis of the informal economy last time, we did it for young workers. This time we're looking at the effect on women workers and here too we see that there is a disproportionate and damaging effect on women workers from the pandemic to such an extent that we fear that the modest progress in recent years runs the risk of being reversed.*

Here to expand on this topic today is Valeria Esquivel, Senior Employment Policies and Gender Officer, of the ILO EMPLOYMENT Policy Department.

We're going to discuss how the current crisis is different from previous crises in terms of its impact on women workers, and highlight some policy recommendations the ILO has to offer. Valeria, welcome to the podcast.

**In addition to the latest monitor report, the ILO has just published a policy brief that says women are relatively more at risk than men of losing their jobs. Can you explain why?**

The COVID-19 crisis is impacting women and men differently, depending on the sector they work in, the fragility of their employment situation, their access to labour and social protection, and their care responsibilities.

Like in previous crises, women are more at risk, in particular in the South, when they are more in informal employment, compared to men, as they lose their sources of income.

Women are typically the first to be laid-off and the last to return to employment, as the barriers to entering the labour market remain in place - in particular, lack of care services - and they are given lower priority as compared to men when new opportunities for employment arise.

**Patterns of sectoral segregation previously shielded women from the worst of the employment impacts in past crises.** That is to say, the sectors contracting where typically those where the majority of the employed are men, like manufacturing and construction.

This crisis is different. In this crisis, the hardest hit sectors are also those in which women are the majority of the employed. Almost half all women employed are at risk of losing their jobs and their incomes, while the proportion is 40 per cent for men.

#### **What are some of hardest hit sectors where workers are predominantly women?**

The service sectors most affected by lockdown measures, like food services, accommodation related to tourism, the trade sector, and domestic work. Also some labour-intensive manufacturing sectors, such as the garment sector where women dominate.

The risks we are mentioning are reflected in emerging employment data that shows women are losing their jobs at greater speed than men.

In addition, women make up the vast majority of workers in the health sector where they are more at risk of contagion in their daily work. And many women also continue to work in trying circumstances, like education that has moved online in many places and “essential” retail.

What is more, the closing of schools, and need to care for persons who become sick, have increased care demands within households to an unprecedented scale. New evidence shows these greater care obligations are forcing women who remain in employment to either [cut back on paid working hours or to extend total working hours \(paid and unpaid\) to unsustainable levels.](#)

#### **What lessons can we derive from past crises to deal with this one?**

Previous crises, at least in our lifetimes, were less severe than this one, but they offer some cautionary lessons. They illustrate that when jobs are scarce, women are denied economic opportunity and security relative to men. They also highlight that crises usually imply the erosion of labour protections and the long-lasting worsening of working conditions and that women are not only hit by the loss of jobs but also by expenditure cuts that contract public service provision, in particular, care services.

**So, what are some of the policy responses that the ILO would recommend be applied during the current crisis?**

We recommend that policies **put gender equality at the core of the emergency and recovery efforts**. This is to avoid long-term damages to women's job prospects and **to build back better and fairer**. From the analysis of the impact of the current crisis and lessons learned from previous crises, we identified several policy priorities for a gender-responsive emergency and recovery effort.

First of all, we need to prevent women from losing their jobs.

The fact that they are employed in the formal sector, that sectoral segregation persists, that there are entrenched gender discriminatory norms in institutions and policies can leave women behind. It is therefore crucial to do "whatever it takes" to prevent women from losing their jobs, maintain women's attachment to the labour force, and establish mechanisms for women to re-enter employment as early as possible if they have lost their jobs. In the meantime, supporting women's livelihoods is essential to avoid further impoverishing them.

**Can you cite some of the ways that women's livelihoods can be supported, and give a few examples?**

The informal and casual employment of many women makes them ineligible for unemployment benefits or for job preservation subsidies in normal times, so it is important that countries adapt their policies to cater to this situation.

For example, in South Africa, women have access to a special Covid-19 distress grant

In Argentina women can benefit from a Universal Child Allowance which was topped up and an Emergency Family Income which is meant to reach families whose incomes come from informal activities;

Meanwhile, in Chile, there is a furlough scheme in which women maintain or keep their jobs, but their wages are paid by unemployment insurance, and in Malaysia unemployment insurance has been made more accessible to female workers. Those are a few examples I can think of.

**The ILO's new policy brief on gender-responsive employment recovery refers to the severe impact of what you call "premature fiscal consolidation". Can you explain what that is, and how to avoid it and its impact on women?**

In order to finance the stimulus packages put in place, some countries have seen their financial positions weakened, and some are running deficits, which they have increasing difficulty to finance, including via issuing new debt.

Fiscal consolidation is to revert this situation, via spending cuts and the withdrawal of fiscal relief measures put in place during emergencies. When this is done prematurely, the risk is deepening the crisis.

The problem is that spending cuts in public services have a disproportionate effect on women and children and worsen the working conditions of care workers. Prioritizing expenditures that support gender-egalitarian outcomes and avoiding premature fiscal consolidation become preconditions to sustaining recovery and avoiding inflicting further damage to women's employment prospects.

**The policy brief also calls for investment in care. How does this help women?**

Investments in care services have the potential to generate decent jobs, particularly for women (and indirectly for men as well). Public opinion has been awakened to the often difficult and undervalued work of care workers, whose contribution has been, and remains, essential to overcoming the pandemic.

Given 75 per cent of the care workforce (including domestic workers in it) are women, improving their working conditions also means improving women workers' overall working conditions.

It also contributes to breaking sectoral segregation by attracting more men to care jobs.

**Would you say that focusing on gender-responsive employment policies is probably the most important policy recommendation of the ILO? Can you give some examples of how this can be done?**

Yes, certainly. Measures governments will put in place to support a job-rich recovery need to explicitly address the gender-specific effects of the COVID-

19 crisis and create the conditions to support women's decent employment creation. I can't emphasize any more that this has to be explicit.

In the case of macroeconomic stimulus packages, they must continue boosting aggregate demand in ways that support employment retention and creation, as this will support women's employment and income prospects. On the financial side, debt relief initiatives are important, as are international coordination measures.

As mentioned before, on the fiscal side it is necessary to prioritize social expenditure.

Sectoral policies need to focus on hard-hit sectors that also employ a disproportionate share of women.

It is also crucial looking forward, to identify where decent employment opportunities for women will come from in new and growing sectors, adopt policies to close women's skill gaps and policies that also contribute to removing practical and legal barriers to entry for women.

Active labour market policies can also continue to play their role in supporting women's reintegration to productive employment, via for example public employment services and hiring subsidies that are targeting women.

And also I think we need to extend the coverage of labour market institutions, including minimum wages. The crisis should not be an opportunity to erode employment protection and social protection, and we must continue to respect fundamental principles and rights at work and

social dialogue because these are core to building resilience and paving the way for a speedy and hopefully gender responsive recovery.

**Moderator out:**

Thank you, Valeria, for putting into context how, within the current crisis, employment policies are important for putting gender equality at the core of recovery efforts to avoid long-term damages to women's job prospects and to build back better and fairer. You've certainly provided a highly interesting and comprehensive overview of the challenges women face, both before and during the pandemic.

I'm Tom Netter, and you've been listening to the ILO podcast series on global solutions to the COVID-19 employment challenge. Thank you for your time.