

WEBINAR REPORT

IS THIS TIME DIFFERENT? COVID-19,
INEQUALITIES AND THE PROSPECTS FOR
STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION



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IS THIS TIME DIFFERENT? COVID-19, INEQUALITIES AND THE PROSPECTS FOR STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION



RESEARCH & DATA SECTION

UN WOMEN

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WEBINAR ATTENDEES

Moderator:

- Hakima Abbas, Co-Executive Director of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)

Panelists:

- Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India.
- Ruth Nyambura, Founding member and the convener of the African Ecofeminists Collective
- Corina Rodriguez, Centro Interdisciplinario para Estudio de Politicas Publicas and Executive Committee Member of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

Expert advisory group:

- James Heintz, Andrew Glyn Professor of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amhurst
- Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Professor, Resource, Environment and Development (RE&D) Program, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University
- Juliana Martinez-Franzoni, Full Professor, University of Costa Rica
- Abena Oduro, Director of the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) and Associate Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Ghana, Legon
- Gita Sen, Director & Distinguished Professor, Ramalingaswami Centre on Equity and Social Determinants of Health (RCESDH), Public Health Foundation of India, Bangalore
- (Also advising this project, but unable to attend) Diane Elson, Emeritus Professor, University of Essex, UK

UN Women team:

- Laura Turquet, Policy Advisor
- Silke Staab, Research Specialist
- Constanza Tabbush, Research Specialist
- Anduriña Espinoza-Wasil, Coordinator
- Loui Williams, Research Assistant
- Jennifer Sands, ICT Support

The webinar opened with some introductory remarks from Laura Turquet, followed by a short contextualizing comment by the moderator, Hakima Abbas. Questions were then posed in turn to the panelists by the moderator, before opening to the expert advisors for short comments or further questions based on the responses of the panelists. The floor was then opened to questions from attendees. The webinar maintained a conversational style throughout, and this was reflected in the vibrant discussion taking place amongst attendees in the ‘chat’ function.

I. Opening remarks

Laura Turquet outlined the motivations behind the webinar from a UN Women perspective, and how the event marks the launch of a new project in collaboration with a team of expert advisors from academia and civil society, which aims to create ‘A Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice’. Laura emphasized that as policymakers, the UN and civil society scramble to respond to the immediate impacts of the COVID crisis, there is also an urgent need to search for longer-term solutions. With COVID-19, a breaking point has been reached, and economic systems and institutions need to be transformed to respond to the threat of multiple and recurrent crises – from pandemics and recessions, to care and climate change. Yet, previous experience shows that while hopes for using moments of crisis to engender structural transformation are often high, it is by no means guaranteed. UN Women will be convening a series of in-depth conversations over the next six months, with hopes that the resulting plan will guide policymakers and advocates in the creation of a more equal and sustainable world.

Hakima Abbas welcomed participants joining from all over the world. She pointed out that many on the call had in their personal lives experienced conflict, war, economic crisis and natural disasters, and some had experienced revolution and the overthrow of authoritarian governments. Hakima drew attention to the new and emerging social movements during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of which are youth-led, and how during this time we have seen people demanding that we never go back to what was once (but should never have been) considered normal. Furthermore, during this time we have seen the revitalization of conversations on police and prison abolition, and in some contexts we have seen health systems nationalized, even if temporarily. Hakima encouraged attendees not only to speak about feminist futures, but the existing practices that are the foundations of those

worlds. She laid out that it is in this context that we ask: how do we make this time different?

II. Main discussion with panelists

Jayati Ghosh spoke about the ways in which the COVID-19 crisis is different to past crises, in terms of its extent, spread, and severity. The COVID-19 crisis is more widespread and severe than anything in the recent past. It is taking place in a context where capitalism was already running out of steam and was hanging over us like a big shroud, compounded by climate challenges that are already happening. Jayati emphasized that the usual types of remedies to crisis will not work in this context, and that this time calls for being very bold and revolutionary in terms of demanding change. We have to do the things that change the ways the system works, because the current system does not allow people to demand their rights. It hollows out state abilities while encouraging states to give more and more to large capital, and plunder the environment in unsustainable ways. The green new deal has to be multicoloured. Necessary solutions mean immediately and dramatically increasing public spending on the care economy, social protection, and adaptations to climate challenges, accompanied by regulation of large capital and labour markets and redistribution. Jayati concluded by emphasizing that care is not just a feminist or women’s issue: it is an existential question for humankind.

Corina Rodriguez also emphasized the key role of care in the COVID-19 crisis. She stressed that lockdowns are only possible because care and the daily reproduction of life are guaranteed primarily by women’s care work. As such, if we want to see this time as different, it is essential to locate care at the centre. Corina pointed out that the COVID-19 crisis has also made inequalities in care very visible. Not everyone can take care of themselves equally

and not everyone has the same chance of being cured if we get sick because of the virus. There are many people who cannot wash hands or social distance, because they do not have running water or live in crowded conditions. Access to quality health services has also been impacted by years of austerity cuts to health services. The pandemic should drive us to turn things on their head: instead of squeezing care into an economic system that prioritizes GDP growth, economic and social life should be organized around care; once care needs are covered, “reconciliation” with productive and distributive goals can start. All of this points to the importance of care policies, and the need for progressive tax reforms, expansion of public spending and the reclaiming of the state for the people. Public care services must be better linked with family and community care arrangements, to increase the flexibility of care systems in times of crisis. Community spaces where basic needs (such as food and care) are met must be made visible, and these community-based care arrangements must be articulated within public policies.

Ruth Nyambura drew attention to the structural roots of the COVID-19 crisis, and how we have not gone far enough in addressing these. She pointed to the deepening crisis around ecology, economy, and food. In particular, she drew attention to the grassroots movements in the global south who continue to speak about the ecologically and labour destructive impacts of industrialist capitalist agriculture, as well as to the murders of human rights defenders across the world, and to the ongoing colonial, ethnocentric responses to these crises whilst the north owes an ecological debt to the global south. In the face of these realities, we are at a period where we are seeing the almost complete destruction of multilateralism. Within the global governance space, we see the arrival of private interests lobbying the political class in the infamous revolving door process, and specifically within the UN we are seeing the rise in the power of philanthro-capitalist organisations. We are moving into a dystopic, techno-determinist paradigm. Given all of this, in this moment we are faced with two questions: is it even possible to reform capitalism? And can we reactivate utopian dreams of liberation? Even during the pandemic, when life has been so difficult for many, we have seen active resistance on the streets, and covert resistance of farmers, sex workers and so on. There are people moving to reclaim a radical politics of the commons, and to dismantle capitalism that is so incapable of sustaining life.

III. Interventions and questions from Expert Advisors

Juliana Martinez-Franzoni expressed a sense that this time is not all that different, and this is not because the money is not there, but rather because of the political economy of the way this crisis has been handled and the lack of empathy and cruelty in the development of policies. Given this, Juliana asked panelists how to build this ‘we’ of societal consensus for change in a way that does not exacerbate social inequality?

Abena Oduro emphasized the need to think about redistribution and what strategies are needed for the post-COVID period in the face of large fiscal deficits. What arguments can we make so that governments do not centre growth over distributional implications? Distributional issues should not be pushed into the medium or long-term, but are essential to consider now.

James Heintz expressed the need to situate this transformative agenda within the current political economy. He warned of the rise of xenophobic and racist anti-globalism within the broader neoliberal framework, as well as how the response to COVID-19 has often been very masculinist and hence has resulted in a large number of lives lost. This political environment does not seem conducive to the transformative agenda being put out by speakers within this webinar. In this context, James asked how we can address these key political challenges when advancing a transformative agenda?

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt highlighted the increasing tendency of states to get away with acts that would be more intensely scrutinized or resisted in ordinary times, including how some state heads have come down heavily on public protest and resistance. Additionally, Kuntala emphasized that this moment is time to re-envision what is meant by the economy, in ways that count the informal sector and all of the women within it.

Gita Sen noted that throughout the pandemic, pre-existing health systems that were functional have remained most resilient during the pandemic. Whatever system was in place before the crisis – whether the political system, care system, or the extent of inequality – is what prevails during crisis. Gita also emphasized that if we want to move our agendas forward, we should be looking for new allies. For example, small and medium enterprises have not benefitted from the explosion of inequality, and this is one group to consider forming new coalitions with. Not

every capitalist has benefitted from this pandemic and perhaps we need to start getting creative in terms of forming new alliances.

Jayati Ghosh responded that a lot of discussion had at its core questions of power and control, and how governments have used the power they have in this moment to establish further control, both in terms of capitalism and patriarchy. Increased rates of violence against women are symptomatic of this. She predicted that things are going to get worse before they get better, for example through increased deregulation and environmental degradation, the rise of fascism, and the probability of a generalized global economic depression. As such, we need to take a medium-term approach and continue to emphasize the fact that there are alternatives.

Corina Rodriguez spoke of how activists in Latin America have been pushing for care to be recognised as a social demand. Governments are pushing recovery through growth, but this is misled, and there is evidence to show this has not worked in the past. Instead, we need to connect the local with the global through bringing evidence from what is happening on the ground regards small-scale ways of organizing and what works, and build these into a strong narrative on larger scales.

Ruth Nyambura urged attendees to rethink: what are the alternatives? How do we ensure we do not dilute the freedom dreams that we have? What are the politics of coalitions? We cannot put ourselves in siloes and we have to have difficult conversations with people who may not see eye to eye with us.

IV. Questions and comments by attendees

In the chat function of the webinar, attendees provided much additional food for thought, roughly grouped here in a non-exhaustive summary:

1. Attendees affirmed that Covid-19 has **exposed inequalities**, with the rich getting richer during the pandemic, while unemployment hits a record high and people are even more exposed to precarious working conditions or risks to their health and families in order to make ends meet.
2. Covid-19 has also exposed the **politics of hegemony, subjugation and imperialism**. Attendees drew attention to specific instances where states have used Covid-19 to consolidate power and further shrink civic spaces. One attendee stressed that “COVID 19 exposed once more the

lies of the ruling elite”. Other attendees pointed to the rise of ‘strong man’ governance in which Covid-19 has been treated as an issue of command and control, rather than public health.

3. Covid-19 has revealed the lack of gender perspective in the work of some **national and international NGOs** as they continue to collect data and plan strategies without an intersectional gender lens.

4. Questions were raised regarding how we are going to do this **cross-movement organizing work, including across generations**. Multiple attendees expressed how youth are now the torch-bearers of social and political change, especially given that older people are more likely to be vulnerable to the risks of Covid-19 which may prevent their full engagement in street organizing. One attendee expressed a need for the older generation to step back and open up space for younger people to bring their leadership to the fore.

5. Attendees expressed differing views on the **strategic approaches to the crisis**, and how to generate a movement strong enough to push back against the forces defending the status quo. Some attendees expressed that forms of organizing need to shift, including combining on-site, street activism, online and social media tools.

6. Attendees commented both on the need to address **unpaid care work and women’s paid employment**. How do we ensure decent work and decent wages for women in the new and different world that we envisage? Do we need to return to reconsider the ‘care diamond’? Are there lessons from the HIV/Aids crisis regarding community-based approaches to care? How do we ensure that recovery does not amplify the precarity of women’s work? How do we re-envision the informal sector? Where are the new jobs for the youth and what investments do we need to make to reduce the burden of care work and productive work for women smallholder farmers? Finally, how long can caregivers be expected to do multiple jobs at the same time?

7. Regarding increased rates of **gender-based violence** during the pandemic, attendees asked why it is the case that risks of violence against women have increased during this time, and what can be done to address this issue within the framework of addressing broader structural injustices?

8. Attendees raised the need for **changes at the global level**, not only the national. For example, regarding how highly indebted countries can find the money to respond to the pandemic and bring about the structural change needed. What changes are needed in the international financial architecture? What can UN Women do to drive a progressive feminist agenda forward?

V. Concluding thoughts from panelists

Ruth Nyambura wrapped up her thinking by emphasizing that the pandemic is a moment to pause, think and reflect on where we are, in a way we haven't since 2007 or 2008. In this time, we have to be very clear about our minimum 'non-negotiables' around certain issues. The crises we are experiencing are connected in many ways, emanating from the same structures, but with multiple manifestations. The supposed dichotomy between growth/development and ecology is false. Once more, Ruth encouraged attendees to reflect on the teachings of Black feminists and African women farmers in asking: what are the dreams we hold for ourselves?

Corina Rodriguez concluded her thinking by affirming the need to think in broad and diverse ways, building new allies while being clear about the non-negotiables. Differences and tensions are inevitable if we want to build resistance on a large scale and we need to learn how to deal with them. International cooperation is essential if we want to push progressive financing agendas—for example a Universal Basic Income – that goes beyond current cash transfer schemes – will only be possible with proper financing frameworks. And we need to rethink what is

meant by 'decent work for women' and whether this is possible within the framework of capitalism.

Jayati Ghosh reflected that when looking at alternatives, they will have to be country-specific and localized: the coalitions and the allies all depend on local conditions and possibilities. We have to look for allies in all kinds of areas and be willing to work with whoever is pushing the agenda we want to push. Regarding the international financial architecture, there is an urgent need to come up with a process for dealing with sovereign debt in progressive and democratic ways, for enabling countries to impose capital controls to prevent capital flight, and for the new issuance of special drawing rights of the IMF. Jayati emphasized that she would not have expected this, but the current head of the IMF has endorsed all three policy options, showing that the movement must be willing to collaborate with unlikely allies. Regarding what UN Women can do to support the movement, UN Women must continue 'telling it as it is' within the UN system, and resist falling for market-based solutions or public-private partnerships.

Hakima Abbas closed the webinar by thanking all speakers for a nourishing and thought-provoking conversation. She urged attendees to think about the bold and creative ways that we are in resistance, and how we have a strong narrative to show what hasn't worked, as well as to build on what is possible. People have survived and thrived, and this is the politics of regeneration. We are ready to build that rainbow new deal.

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DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL
CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN
WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON
MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



220 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017, USA

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