[Catherine Rottenberg](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/catherine-rottenberg)

&

[SO](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/shani-orgad)

[Shani Orgad](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/shani-orgad)

November 25, 2020

**Making headlines**

We have repeatedly heard about how Covid-19 disproportionately affects women. While men are more likely to die from the virus, in many other respects, women are bearing the brunt of the pandemic’s impact.

The effects on women have been multiple: violence against women has increased, with incidents of domestic violence soaring. School closures, overburdened healthcare systems and social distancing measures have significantly increased many women’s unpaid care and domestic loads at home, which, in turn, has made them less able to balance these responsibilities with paid work.

More caring work at home has also meant that more women have been forced to scale down or leave the workforce. Simultaneously, women, and particularly women of colour, have been sacked or furloughed at a higher rate during the pandemic, stalling their careers and jeopardising their financial security. And the list goes on.

Media reports have continuously documented the pandemic’s devastating impact on gender equality. An article appearing in the Atlantic reads: “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism”, while a Financial Times article queries: “Is the coronavirus taking women back to the 1950s?”

Such headlines matter because they shape how we think about the issue. And today, more than ever, when people tend to consume news quickly, often on their phone screens, they are more likely to read the headline and scan the text, rather than read word for word. Yet, we have become so accustomed to these headlines that we rarely pause and challenge what should, in fact, be obvious: they get the causality all wrong.

The language used often implies that the pandemic itself is responsible for intensifying inequalities and for eroding women’s rights. In fact, blaming Covid-19 for women’s deteriorating material, economic, physical, and psychological conditions, has three striking effects.

First, it deflects accountability for growing inequality, locating it in “the pandemic”. Take the BBC News headline: “Five ways virus upheaval is hitting women in Asia”, or the Guardian’s subheading: “Just like every emergency, Covid-19 is racist, ageist, classist and sexist”. This kind of framing implies that the coronavirus has its own agency.

Second, blaming the virus produces and reinforces a sense of fatalism, intimating that the massive blow to women, the poor and the vulnerable in society is inevitable since it has been caused by a natural force beyond our control. Statements like “the pandemic will take women 10 years back” or “the pandemic is destroying women’s rights”, which have been repeated even in the most progressive media outlets, imply not only that increasing inequality is the pandemic’s “fault”, but that it has also been inevitable.

Third, headlines and statements like these create the false impression that before the pandemic women’s conditions were improving apace. They suggest that the pandemic has rapidly reversed decades of steady progress vis-à-vis gender equality – as if prior to March 2020 there have been few setbacks, let alone retrenchments. This obscures the fact that things were already profoundly unequal before the pandemic struck.

To be clear: the intention of many media reports is clearly to highlight the worsening of gender inequality and the urgency of addressing it. Yet their framing too often diffuses responsibility and reinforces a feeling of inevitability. And this needs to change.

Rather than blaming the “pandemic”, we need reporting – including headlines – that clearly identifies the root causes of gender inequality so that we can apportion responsibility where it truly belongs and mobilise to effect concrete change. The first step is to name the forces responsible for growing inequality.

For instance, rather than talking about the “pandemic” causing the dramatic rise in domestic violence, media statements can identify the lethal dynamic of poverty, women’s economic dependence alongside dominant norms around gender, all of which have been severely aggravated post-Covid, while highlighting the lack of appropriate resources for critical services like gender-based violence refuges, helplines, and routine health checks.

Instead of decrying how millions of women are forced to quit their jobs because of Covid-19, headlines need to underscore that women, and especially mothers, have been pushed out of the workforce because of the failures on the part of governments, institutions and workplaces to support them.

Second, we must situate the pandemic’s disastrous impact on women within the broader context of our contemporary crisis of care. What we are witnessing now is neither as sudden nor unexpected as these reports often imply. Prior to March 2020, women in the UK, for instance, were already more likely to be living in poverty, particularly as they make up the majority of single parents, single elderly people, and those with caring responsibilities, which then limit their time for paid work. Women were also over-represented in insecure, precarious employment and in the low-paid sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, such as hospitality, leisure, retail and tourism.

Thus, when we hear that “Millions of career women are considering giving up work due to the stress of juggling their jobs with childcare and household chores in lockdown,” it is crucial that we are reminded that before the pandemic, gender inequality in the workplace was rife in most countries. In the UK, for example, before the pandemic, the gender pay gap was already holding steady at 8.9 percent for those in full employment, and 17.3 percent for all employees.

Finally, we must urgently replace fatalistic sentiments with bold demands and swift action on a mass scale.

Excerpted: ‘Making headlines: COVID-19 and gender inequality’

Aljazeera.com